Comfortable Others: The Process of Identity Niching among Private Employment Agencies, Employers and Migrant Domestic Workers

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Abstract

This thesis explores the process of "identity niching" in the domestic work sector by focusing on the role of and demand for the services of private employment agencies (PEAs) that specialise in placements in Cape Town. The thesis focuses on how Zimbabwean migrant domestic workers' (MDWs) identity as "comfortable others", which is associated with an ideal type of intimate work culture that employers and PEAs demand, is niched in recruitment and hiring practices. Using a qualitative research approach that included interviews with PEAs, MDWs and employers, and critical ethnography among MDWs, this thesis demonstrates how the demand for comfortable others is met through PEAs but also mobilized by MDWs to access "decent" work. The thesis draws on the cultural formations approach from the South and impression management theory to understand the relevance of intimacy and an intimate work culture in recruitment and hiring processes in post-apartheid South Africa.

This thesis argues it is through the agency of employers and PEAs trying to find comfortable others and a seemingly compliant labour force that MDWs are "niched" in relation to South Africans. Further, it is through the agency of MDWs that ethno-cultural preferences associated with an intimate work culture are mobilized to gain employment. Yet how MDWs exercise their agency when mobilizing their intimate work culture, as a defensive combination and through their cultural formation, captures their journey through the underbelly of the domestic sector. Therefore, the findings show that the type of employments paths MDWs choose between, and their domestic work choices, illustrate simultaneous processes of accommodation and agency that are made explicit through the lens of an intimate work culture. It is the practical but publicly informed knowledge gathered through a series of relational but intentional interactions that influence the process of identity niching to meet the demand for comfortable others. However, when examining the different types of domestic work MDWs choose between – and also aspire to – employers that use PEAs appear to be comfortable others too, because they are likely to be labour compliant.

Ultimately, the demand for comfortable others can be framed as a response to an "intimate workplace crisis" for PEAs (as employers too), and for employers and domestic workers. Further, the demand for comfortable others is context specific, arising from the particularities of a power-laden domestic employment relationship characterized by the tension between the public and private nature of the intimate workplace that domestic workers and employers experience. The analysis of the identity niching process reveals that the socio-legal context and experience of a “crisis of representation” and an “intimate workplace crisis” has given rise to the demand for PEAs in South Africa’s post-apartheid domestic sector. The crisis of representation refers to employers’ demand for support services in their mostly newfound role as labour compliant employers of domestic workers. For domestic workers, the crisis of representation is symbolic of the atomized nature of domestic work, the rise in underemployment and flexible work arrangements, and low trade union representation.

This thesis contributes to making visible PEAs that specialize in placements, a notable departure from research that focuses on PEAs that offer housecleaning services. In addition, this thesis contributes to theorizing intimate work in the domestic sector and examining MDWs’ cultural formations as a tool for mobilizing for decent work. The theoretical argument and the findings have potential for understanding the demand for different types and forms of intermediaries in the domestic sector in the context of fostering a culture of legal compliance that benefits domestic workers. The thesis concludes that intimacy is a distinct organizing principle of recruitment and hiring trends that informs the social construction of comfortable others among PEAs, MDWs and employers, and explains the fluid nature of hiring and recruitment patterns in the contemporary intimate workplace.

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List of Abbreviations

BCEA	Basic Conditions of Employment Act
BWEA	British Women's Emigration Association for Assistance
CCMA	Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration
CRUs	Community Residential Units [former hostels]
DEL	Department of Employment and Labour
DOL	Department of Labour
DZP	Dispensation of Zimbabweans Project
ESAP	Economic Structural Adjustment Programme
FIFMI	Forward in Faith Mission International
ILO	International Labour Organization
LPT	Labour process theory
MDW	Migrant domestic worker
MMDW	Male migrant domestic worker
PEA	Private employment agency
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADSAWU	The South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
SD7	Sectoral Determination 7
SERI	The Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa
UIF	Unemployment Insurance Fund
ZEP	Zimbabwean Exemption Permit
ZSP	Zimbabwean Special Permit

Chapter 1. The Demand for "Comfortable Others"

1.1. Introduction

Intermediaries or "agencies" that match domestic workers with employers have a long but mostly invisible history in South Africa. A close reading of South African research reveals while informal hiring patterns (word of mouth recruitment) were and remain commonplace in the domestic work sector[1], intermediaries have always been part of the landscape, playing a crucial role in meeting the demands of households during the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid era (Cock, 1980; Fish, 2006b). With an emphasis on employment relationships, scholars mainly focus on the direct employment and payment of one or more workers or the outsourcing of domestic work through intermediaries (Mendez, 1998; Ally, 2010; Du Toit 2021). Consequently, studies on existing employment relationships rarely scrutinize the recruitment and hiring histories of domestic workers and employers – making invisible the role intermediaries play in the matching of domestic workers with employers. It is therefore unsurprising that despite the long history of intermediaries in South Africa's domestic sector, and the norm of recruiting and hiring informally or outsourcing cleaning, less is known about the role of and the demand for the services of intermediaries specializing in permanent placements in the post-apartheid era.[2] My research contributes to making visible PEAs that specialize in placements, recognizing domestic workers' employment rights, theorizing an intimate work culture and examining domestic workers' cultural formations for mobilizing for decent work.

In their edited book, *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care,* Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2010:2-5) explain that intimate labour "encompasses a range of activities" that include domestic work. Intimate labour is described further as "the bodily and household upkeep, personal and family maintenance … [it] entails touch, whether of children or customers; bodily or emotional closeness or personal familiarity" (Boris & Parreñas, 2010:2-5). Sensibly, intimacy is a necessary consideration when domestic work is commodified given that it characterises the social relations that underlie the nature of domestic employment. Further, recruitment and hiring histories provide insights into the meaning-making process informed by the power-laden nature of the domestic employment relationship – not only because of racial, class, and gender inequalities, but also because of intimacy. Exploring how intermediaries reconfigure paid domestic work and the complex considerations related to recruitment and hiring practices among domestic workers and employers requires a critical engagement with intimacy and its interplay with the demand for an ideal type of domestic worker in contemporary sociologies of work and in labour studies.[3]

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[1] Hereafter referred to as "domestic sector", which is not used here in reference to the internal domestic market of the country (see similar usage of the term in reference to domestic work by D'Souza, 2010, and Du Toit, 2013).

[2] When referring to the main data set for this study, I refer to "PEAs or agents/agencies". However, I use the term "intermediaries" occasionally to draw attention to the various type of services that intermediaries (formal or informal) may offer clients. In addition, I use the term "intermediaries" given that platform companies specializing in domestic work cleaning services, such as SweepSouth, do not identify as an "agency" as per the ILO's framework for private employment agencies. SweepSouth describes itself as a communication platform (Heavy Chef, 2017).

This study enters the research landscape by focusing on formal or registered intermediaries referred to as private employment agencies (PEAs) that specialise in placing domestic workers in middle and upper-middle class households in Cape Town (International Labour Organization [ILO], 1994; ILO, 1997). Throughout this thesis I attempt to develop an argument about the demand for ideal type domestic workers – what I refer to as "comfortable others" – because of the intimate nature of domestic work.[4] The underlying rationale of this study is that by shifting attention to the role of intimacy in the intimate workplace (the private household where domestic workers' employment rights are likely recognised), a closer examination is possible into not only why employers and jobseekers are approaching PEAs, but also what services PEAs provide and who they place in private households.[5]

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[3] The use of 'ideal type' or typologies is viewed critically by some scholars since it suggests a rigid understanding of social phenomenon (See Standing, 2011). Lan (2003) proposes a social distancing typology to understand the complex relationship between employers and domestic workers, noting that one must be mindful that when domestic workers and employers engage in boundary work, their interaction forms part of a continuum where "individual employers lean toward one or more approaches of boundary work in shifting contexts" (Lan, 2003:530). In agreement with Lan's (2003) point and being mindful of employers' changing needs or personality types, when I refer to "comfortable others" as an ideal type of domestic worker, I am framing this concept in relation to the domestic-work labour process and employers demand for "honest, reliable, hardworking" domestic workers because of issues of control and consent (see Chapters Two and Three).

[4] In the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997 (BCEA), domestic work is defined as work that is performed "in the home of his or her employer and includes – (a) a gardener; (b) a person employed by a household as driver of a motor vehicle; and (c) a person who takes care of children, the aged, the sick, the frail or the disabled, but does not include a farm worker" (see Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1997). However, throughout this study I refer to domestic work according to the "three C's, cooking, cleaning and caring" (Anderson, 2000, quoted by Lutz, 2008:49). See also ILO (2018).

1.2. An Intimate Work Culture

In this study, intimacy and, in particular, the demand for an "intimate" work culture are central to understanding my argument regarding comfortable others as ideal-type domestic workers. However, it is important to distinguish at the outset between the intimate work culture that employers and PEAs demand and the intimate work culture that emerges from the domestic workers' side. For example, the domestic work literature describes or alludes to an intimate work culture in two ways: from the perspective of employers/PEAs, and from the perspective of domestic workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Cheng, 2006; Ally, 2010). Amongst general workers, "work culture" is understood as a set of beliefs, practices, customs, values, norms and rituals that govern the way individuals go about doing their work (Burawoy, 1979; Benson, 1983; Sitas, 1983; Volti, 2012). In other words, work culture describes the way a worker works (their social behaviour) and their identity because of their work culture (Benson, 1983; Sitas, 1983). However, unlike factory workplaces, domestic workers' intimate work culture is a direct response to the atomized nature of their workplaces and their vulnerable status in an asymmetrical employment relationship. Shireen Ally (2010) therefore describes domestic workers' intimate work culture as "inventive" because it represents their attempts to socially control their working conditions in the employment relationship, particularly when faced with unrealistic workloads and unrealized employment rights. Other examples of domestic workers' responses to the domestic work labour process may include deserting work, stealing, or challenging the boundaries that employers attempt to exercise in the intimate workplace by using the "ambiguities of intimacy" (Ally, 2010) that employers also manipulate to control domestic workers (Cock, 1980; Fish, 2006b; Nyamnjoh, 2006).

Writing on Zimbabwean domestic workers in Botswana and South Africa, Nyamnjoh (2005:187) elaborates on the discomfort employers experience when domestic workers exercise their autonomy through their intimate work culture in the labour process, as follows:

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[5] Certain sections of this PhD were published in Tame (2018).

> Although employers are assumed to be in positions of power, exploiting rather than being exploited, their reality is often more nuanced and prone to constant negotiation with and concessions to maids. At one level, their own preoccupation with avoiding uncertainties by maintaining whatever advantages they can cultivate implies that vis-à-vis their maids, employers cannot afford to enjoy the benefits of being in control. […] employers may find themselves cooking their own food, baby-sitting their own children, and ironing their own clothes even with maids employed to take care of these things. Maids are far from being a permanent asset, and employers' real experiences with them suggests they are quite often a liability. Employers are not at ease, even when maids were employed precisely to make it possible for them to a life a life of comfort.

Nyamnjoh's (2005) excerpt illustrates the power dynamic between domestic workers and employers in the employment relationship as one that is constantly negotiated. At the same time, Nyamnjoh (2005) reveals how domestic workers' responses to the labour process can often become uncomfortable liabilities, disrupting the many notions of ideal domestic workers as "good", "desirable", "trustworthy", "loyal", "obedient", "docile" or "productive". It is these notions of suitable domestic workers that depict the identity or intimate work culture employers demand and that describe the way workers are expected to perform intimate labour (de Casanova, 2019). Castro (1989) argues it is not merely the domestic workers' labour power that employers demand but their identity as domestic workers too. Therefore, there is an apparent tension between the identity employers demand and domestic workers' expressions of autonomy, because of the power-laden nature of the domestic employment relationship. The tension suggests that neither domestic workers' "inventive" intimate work culture nor the intimate work culture employers demand of "comfortable others" are unrelated. In fact, both perspectives of an intimate work culture form part of the intimate labour process of domestic work and are an inherent feature of the power-laden employment relationship.

This study draws on both perspectives on an intimate work culture to explore the notion of "comfortable others" by focusing on how the identity of domestic workers associated with an intimate work culture that employers demand are embedded or niched in recruitment and hiring practices through PEAs. Throughout this study I will show how the demand for comfortable others through PEAs holds critical value for making sense of and theorizing the socio-legal context of domestic work in post-apartheid South Africa. The demand for comfortable others also reveals the hopes and concerns of employers and domestic workers, and its implication for processes of inclusion and exclusion linked to the recruitment and hiring process for domestic work.

1.3. Research problem and rationale

While there is a constant interplay amongst domestic workers, employers and PEAs, and varying hiring and recruitment strategies, my research journey began with Zimbabwean migrant domestic workers. When I arrived in Cape Town a decade ago, I was struck by the number of employers who gushed about their excellent part-time or full-time Zimbabwean domestic workers because they were "hardworking, honest, and reliable" and how much they were willing to pay for "good help". I overheard conversations at the train station, on the bus, in tutorials among students, at baby showers, seminars and social gatherings. I also noticed aggressive marketing of Zimbabweans and Malawians handing out narrow slips of paper at traffic lights with a handwritten or typed note claiming their good work ethic – "hardworking, honest, and reliable". Almost every day I found similar slips of paper in the post-box too. According to what I heard and saw, Zimbabwean nationals, in particular, appeared to have developed a niche in the domestic sector.

Besides my overall perception, the literature revealed an increasing interest in South Africa as a significant employer of foreign nationals in mining, construction, agriculture, security, hospitality, and the domestic sector since the 1990s. The devastating effect of ecological disasters, changes in the labour market, economic and political upheavals sparked by structural adjustment programmes attracted migrants from across the African continent to South Africa because of its "regional powerhouse" status in the continent (Segatti, 2011; Batisai, 2022). Although South Africa offered access to work, migrants experienced disposability and precarious working conditions across these various sectors because of their citizenship status.

Access to "decent work" – that is, quality work with full employment, socio-economic security, employment rights and opportunities for strengthening social dialogue – were absent for the many that sought refuge and livelihood opportunities in South Africa (ILO, 1999). These socio-economic injustices appeared in studies that had already begun tracking "flexible mobilities" in the Southern African region (Nyamnjoh, 2006). The employment of transnational migrants from the rest of Southern Africa in the domestic sector was by no means a new phenomenon (see Miles, 1993; Cockerton, 1997; Simelane, 2004) but research showed that "regional care chains" not "global care chains" (see Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002) were noticeable, and included women from Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi and Zambia (Peberdy & Dinat, 2005; Rugunanan & Smit 2018; Vanroyo, 2019; Jinnah, 2020; Baison, 2021). Further, these studies pointed to “a pervasive feeling” that the flow of transnational migrant domestic workers (MDWs) to South Africa had intensified despite the challenge of accurately gathering statistics on migrant workers due to their undocumented status (Ally, 2009:18).

I was curious about Zimbabwean MDWs since several studies pointed to their precarious conditions of employment in the domestic sector that was seemingly at odds with what I was observing in Cape Town. Despite domestic work being covered by labour legislation and South Africa ratifying the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on Domestic Workers, 2011 (No. 189), an overwhelming number of studies reported that Zimbabwean women fall victim to non-compliant employers in a sector that has not yet lost its informal or undervalued status (Du Toit, 2013; Jinnah, 2020). Zimbabwean MDWs also constitute the largest group of domestic workers from other parts of Africa in South Africa, thus coinciding with my observations in Cape Town (Baison, 2021; Jinnah, 2020; Vanroyo, 2019). I puzzled about who the MDWs were in the middle and upper-middle class suburbs of Cape Town, whether it was possible for them to access “decent work”, and, if so, how?

My point of departure was to explore these questions by focusing on PEAs – this was my attempt to contain the project. There were three distinct research themes on “agencies” in South Africa’s domestic sector. Informal or “rogue” agencies were complicit in labour abuses including trafficking children and women, particularly in the Western Cape (Hartley, 2004; Joubert, 2006; Khoisan, 2004; Fish 2006b; Bamu, 2013; Budlender, 2013). Other agencies were actively servicing households that opted to outsource domestic cleaning services by directly hiring domestic workers to clean for clients (Du Toit, 2021). In relation to my thesis, direct employment of domestic workers by employers through agencies was still in demand, contrary to research that suggested an increase in the demand for flexible outsourced cleaning (Budlender, 2013; Baison, 2021; Jinnah, 2020). However, these different research themes and agency types revealed a continuum of recruitment and hiring practices that pointed to the entanglement of formal and informal hiring practices.

In a report on PEAs across South Africa’s various sectors, Budlender (2013:11) observed that “[t]he number of domestic work agencies in the country is unknown, as is the number of those that make permanent placements and those that operate as TES”.[6] While Budlender (2013:11) suggests PEAs operation in the domestic sector “probably merits a separate study”, there has been no comprehensive research on PEAs specializing in placing domestic workers in households to date. The data regarding placement PEAs which this study draws on is dated but nonetheless relevant for making sense of PEAs’ emergence in the post-apartheid dispensation and for understanding why they remain prevalent for meeting middle and upper-middle class households’ domestic needs, irrespective of the service they provide (see Chapter Eight). Apart from Du Toit’s (2013, 2020a, 2021) research on domestic cleaning agencies, which offers crucial insight into the demand for a triangular employment relationship where the agent employs the domestic worker, there is no sociological analysis regarding what is driving recruitment and hiring changes in the context of PEAs more broadly, and in relation to placements specifically, nor its implications for domestic workers in the post-apartheid dispensation. At best, “agencies” are referred to briefly but rarely discussed as key stakeholders for potentially championing domestic workers’ employment rights, including Zimbabwean nationals’ (Fish, 2005, 2013, 2017; Ally, 2010; Budlender, 2013; Du Toit, 2013; Baison, 2021).

My starting point was to determine to what extent Zimbabwean nationals had developed a niche in the domestic sector through placement PEAs. My approach was influenced by migration scholarship from the North and the recruitment patterns in the global domestic-work PEA industry (see Chapter Two). The pilot phase of the study confirmed that PEAs were placing half or more of Zimbabwean nationals in private households, coinciding with the perceived trend that MDWs had gained a foothold in the “formal” domestic sector. However, unlike the vast number of studies that focused on undocumented Zimbabweans as “disposable” and precarious workers (Hlatshwayo, 2019; Hungwe, 2020; Jinnah, 2020; Baison, 2021), registered PEAs claimed they recruited and placed documented Zimbabwean nationals in private households, suggesting potential access to “decent work” in middle and upper-middle class households (see also Vanyoro, 2019; Baison, 2021).

The existing scholarship on Zimbabwean migrants was useful in so far as it offered insights into why, aside from their “denizen” status, Zimbabweans were considered “suitable” for South

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[6] TES refers to temporary employment services.

Africa's labour market.[7] However, there was a persistent theme of victimhood and MDWs agency (silence and invisibility) within employment relationships (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Hlatshwayo, 2019; Jinnah, 2020). Therefore, how, and in what ways, were Zimbabwean MDWs, with poor trade union representation and in isolated workplaces, mobilizing their intimate work culture to access formal work through PEAs?

In linking the suggestion that Zimbabwean MDWs had gained a foothold in the formalized domestic sector with PEAs, this thesis explores intimacy as an organizing principle of recruitment and hiring trends in the intimate workplace. My contribution to contemporary labour studies and migration scholarship, however, is not to essentialize the migrant status of domestic workers because of their nationality but rather to theorise and critically engage with the fluid nature of recruitment and hiring trends that result from intimacy in the intimate workplace that PEAs, domestic workers and employers are participating in.

My contribution to theorizing intimate work is informed by Jacklyn Cock's (1980) archival research in the seminal *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation*, which not only pointed to a diverse domestic-worker workforce in terms of nationality, race and gender in South Africa, but also the historical transitions where one group of domestic workers were distinguished from the other as the most suitable for domestic work because of employers' preferences (see Chapter Two). Further, my contribution is informed by Nyamnjoh's (2006) research that signals the micropolitics of the intimate workplace, noting uncertainties and tensions between the Zimbabwean maid and the madam that challenge the assumption that all Zimbabweans were "hardworking, honest, and reliable" (see also Du Toit, 2016). Therefore, while I focus on Zimbabwean MDWs, my assumption is that the underlying logic of boundaries in recruitment and hiring is likely consistent because of the demand for comfortable others in the intimate workplace, but who is considered comfortable others for domestic work is not. The intellectual puzzle is, therefore, how can we make sense of these connecting themes in relation to the demand for comfortable others and PEAs' services?

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[7] Standing (2010) describes migrants as part of the global growth of the precariat. Standing (2010) describes migrants as "denizens" because they lack entitlements associated with industrial citizenship rights which ultimately affect the type of work they access and their disposability in the workforce.

1.4. Key Concepts and Theoretical Approach

Before outlining my research questions and objectives, it is necessary to reiterate my working concepts – "comfortable others" and "identity niching" – which form part of my research assumptions as well as my contribution to theorizing intimate work in the domestic sector. These concepts are informed by my methodological approach and the theoretical framework I use to interpret the findings. First, I propose the concept comfortable others to describe notions of an ideal type of domestic worker, by considering the demand for an intimate work culture. Using "comfortable" draws attention to the intimate nature of domestic work. "Othering", or "other", "describes processes of social exclusion and discrimination on the basis of social background, ethnicity, race, skin colour, culture and gender" and "involves social boundary-setting for the establishment of social positioning" (Lutz, 2011:204). As such, the link between MDWs' "ethnicity" and intimate work culture, depicted through stereotyping that is often conveyed in the identification (or self-identification) of those who are "hardworking, honest, and reliable", offers insight into the positioning of comfortable others in the domestic sector.

Hall (1997:258) argues that "stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes difference" and "[i]t symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong". In this study, the stereotypes associated with certain work-related behaviours are relevant because they form part of the socially constructed intimate work identity and work culture that underpins notions of "comfortable others". Further, the literature on global domestic worker recruitment and hiring practices, which highlight the international and racial division of reproductive labour, informs this conceptualization of "comfortable others" (Glenn, 1992; Parreñas, 2001). This literature raises important questions about who performs domestic work and for whom, and the affordability of MDWs' paid reproductive labour.

Second, I propose the concept "identity niching" to explain how MDWs mobilize their intimate work culture to access work in the domestic sector. I use the concept identity niching as opposed to "ethnic niching", which features prominently in the migration scholarship to describe an association that develops between certain migrant groups and the work they undertake (Waldinger, 2000; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003; Schrover, Van de Leun & Quispel, 2007). I argue instead that identity niching is crucial for emphasizing the intimate work culture of a domestic worker rather than merely their nationality.

In this thesis, I emphasise the interplay between the intimate work culture that employers' demand and domestic workers' intimate work culture to illustrate that the cultural formations that arise among workers under oppressive conditions are autonomous and irreducible to the relations of production (Sitas, 1983). The cultural-formations approach critically questions workers' adaptation to imposed social roles within workplaces. The cultural-formations approach is a useful framework for challenging scholars to think beyond MDWs "sticking it out" (that is, consent or a sociology of adjustment) to how they mobilize against high unemployment and precarious working conditions to access employment through PEAs (Sitas, 1983). This study does not deny that MDWs engage in practical coping strategies, but shifts attention to how their coping strategies give rise to cultural formations to mobilize against the human indignities they encounter in the domestic sector. The contribution to understanding cultural formations by Ari Sitas and other scholars from the South informs my conceptualization of identity niching and comfortable others (Bhengu, 2014; Garba, 2017; Xulu-Gama, 2017). Moreover, the concepts identity niching and comfortable others signal difference and occur through the "us vs. them" narrative that underpins the symbolic interaction among workers that is typical of cultural formations. The narrative of "us vs. them" is an expression of MDWs' collective undertaking. Their cultural formation is informed by social interactions that call for considering interactions within and outside of the atomized intimate workplace. In other words, by focusing on the lived realities of workers in relation to their social milieu, "workers cease to be seen as only acted upon by the imperatives of production; they become agents who marshal a set of resources from their cultural universe to cope, resist and subvert" (Garba, 2017:27).

This study shows how identity niching occurs through "backstage" and "frontstage" (Goffman, 1959) performances – the performance of certain roles to create favourable impressions – and how those impressions are conveyed individually but always in relation to others because it forms part of the micro-social interactions among PEAs, MDWs and employers. I draw on Irvin Goffman's theory of impression management because it's a relevant framework for understanding the recognisable *way* a worker works rather than the content of their work (Goffman, 1959; Sitas, 1983). I argue that since an intimate work culture is socially constructed through multiple micro-interactions, the process of identity niching to meet the demand for comfortable others captures PEAs, MDWs and employers' expression of agency in recruitment and hiring practices and the favourable impressions that arise because of intimacy. It is worth noting at the onset, too, that throughout this study I emphasise the interplay between comfortable others and identity niching through the cultural formations approach and impression management theory to explore how identity niching among MDWs, PEAs and employers occurs in recruitment and hiring practices through PEAs.

1.5. Research Questions and Objectives

This research focussed on the perceived trend in recruitment and hiring of black African Zimbabwean female migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Cape Town to illustrate empirically the demand for and supply of "comfortable others" through PEAs.

The central research questions are:

1. What context specific issues have given rise to the use of PEAs in South Africa?
2. How do MDWs, PEAs and employers engage in the process of identity niching to meet the demand and supply for "comfortable others" in the domestic sector?

In terms of contributing to the practical and theoretical significance of this study, my research objectives are as follows:

1. To demonstrate key transformations in South Africa's domestic work in relation to the "intimate workplace" (namely, recognizing domestic workers' employment rights and the need for labour compliance), the perceived proliferation of PEAs as intermediaries between employers and domestic workers for placements, and the employment of MDWs.
2. To illustrate how MDWs and employers experience PEAs and the possibilities for upward mobility for MDWs in the domestic sector.
3. To determine the factors that contribute to the process of identity niching in South Africa's domestic sector from multiple vantage points as expressions of agency among MDWs, PEAs and employers.
4. To theorise and critically engage with the notion of "comfortable others", which characterises the power-laden nature of the domestic employment relationship in the public (intimate workplace) and private household.
5. To contribute to "migration hub" scholarship by developing theoretical and empirical literature on how MDWs mobilize their intimate work culture to access work through PEAs.

The following section explains the qualitative research design which focuses on PEAs, Zimbabwean MDWs and employers in Cape Town's domestic sector.

1.6. Research Design and Methods

An intimate work culture arises from social interactions that form part of the intimate nature of domestic work (Goffman, 1959; Sitas, 1983; Ally, 2010). Since my epistemological assumption concerns uncovering how each of the actors makes sense of *their* situation in the domestic sector based on *their* own understanding and interpretation of the domestic employment relationship, the research design was qualitative with a social constructionist and interpretivist approach (Thomas, 1993; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I used two methods to collect data. These were in-depth interviews with all participants, including key informants, and participant observation with PEAs and MDWs. The methods focused on the interplay between "comfortable others" and identity niching to uncover how PEAs, MDWs and employers experience and interpret their situation in the recruitment and hiring process. However, the depth of the interviews was insufficient to understand how MDWs mobilize their intimate work culture. Therefore, I used a critical ethnographic approach that included participant observation at a church where MDWs met regularly on Sundays. I tracked the highs and lows of MDWs employment histories and their efforts to access "decent work" through multiple interactions in the field. In doing so, I could understand how the seemingly mundane activities were anything but mundane. Instead, sermons, prayers, testimonials and ad hoc informal group discussions provided insight into the inner working of MDWs cultural formation as an expression of their autonomy. I coded data manually for familiarity and later through NVivo 11 software (see Chapter Four). I analysed data thematically to explore the context related factors for recruitment and hiring trends and the interplay between notions of comfortable others and the process of identity niching from the perspectives of PEAs, MDWs and employers.

1.7. Outline of the Thesis

Chapter Two contextualises differentiation in recruitment and hiring patterns (the hiring queue) among intermediaries to highlight the micropolitics of the domestic employment relationship on the basis of preferences for suitable domestic workers. The chapter discusses the inherent tension between the intimate work culture that employers demand, and the intimate work culture that arises from domestic workers as a response to labour control in the domestic work labour process and legal context. I draw on debates that conceptualise the intimate workplace as a public and private space to make sense of the boundary work that occurs in the unequal domestic employment relationship. I argue that while race, gender, class and ethnicity remain significant for understanding the politics of exploitation, the issue of intimacy and the unique context of recognizing households as intimate *workplaces* (where employment rights apply) also underpins the debates about the profiling and differentiation PEAs participate in when they commodify domestic work. Further, Chapter Two situates the research focus of the study by critically engaging with literature that presents MDWs as denizens who engage in resistance or coping strategies within employment relationships and effectively self-discipline themselves rather than exercise their right to better work.

Chapter Three discusses the theoretical framework, which focuses on impression management theory and the cultural formations approach from the Global South literature and introduces key guiding concepts for the study. I offer a close reading of the recurring theme of consent and resistance within the paid domestic work labour process, to question how MDWs collectively organise informally against exploitation with and through their cultural formation. I argue that “degendering”, which emerges as a distinct pressure migrants experience, is a useful conceptual tool whose analytical potential was neglected in South Africa’s literature on cultural formation, especially in relation to explaining the burden of care many domestic workers experienced during apartheid and as African migrants from afar. I extend the concept degendering to include “fragmented families”, to reiterate the far-reaching consequences of MDWs’ experiences as “distant mothers” (Parreñas, 2001) and the potential implications for the formations that arise from this distinct experience. In linking the cultural formations approach and impression management theory, I argue that the presentation of self is relevant for understanding how work identities are acted upon and performed across different settings because of moral codes conveyed in the “us vs. them” interplay which arises from cultural formations, to explain how MDWs mobilize their intimate work culture as an expression of autonomy. In relation to the migration scholarship, I argue the conceptualization of ethnic niching does little to make explicit intimacy and the intimate work culture of comfortable others. I therefore maintain that identity niching, which entails the performance of a work culture (embodied labour) and that forms part of the “us vs. them” distinction between workers in the hiring queue, explains how MDWs mobilize their intimate work culture informally against marginalization in the domestic sector.

Chapter Four describes my approach to the field, epistemological and ontological assumptions that informed the research design, and methods chosen for the study. This study used a qualitative approach to explore how the notion of comfortable others is socially constructed among PEAs, MDWs and employers, based on their understanding and experiences of domestic work. The main data set was supplemented by interviews with key experts to provide context for the PEA industry and by workshops with multiple stakeholders involved with domestic work. I describe the advantage of interviews, participant observation and the need for a critical ethnographic approach to uncover the cultural formation that arises among MDWs mobilizing informally for decent work. This chapter discusses the advantage of thematic analysis, significant issues such as research ethics and the limitations of the study.

Chapter Five is the first of three research findings chapters. Although there is an interplay among PEAs, MDWs and employers, I intentionally begin with PEAs' insights regarding their entry into the domestic sector after 1994, and their overall impression of the demand for their services among employers and domestic workers. This chapter demonstrates that there is a demand for PEAs' services because the household has become an intimate workplace and because of the overall experience of employers and domestic workers of what I term an "intimate workplace crisis". The intimate workplace crisis refers to managerial issues related to regulatory non-compliance and domestic workers challenging responses to the domestic employment relationship. I argue that PEAs institutionalise notions of comfortable others through their gatekeeping practices, which in turn has a disciplinary logic over domestic workers' intimate work culture, owing to the inherent codes of appropriate conduct linked to perceptions of quality candidates because of intimacy. From the perspective of PEAs (as employers too), I explore how domestic workers aspire to access middle and upper-middle class clients as potentially labour compliant comfortable others, and for an intermediary to represent their employment rights and bargain for market-related salaries rather than the minimum wage on their behalf, for professional status, and for the recognition of their value as comfortable others. I conclude the chapter by discussing PEAs' experiences of the fluid nature of recruitment and hiring trends that inform my argument regarding the significance of intimacy and the practice of identity niching to meet the demand for comfortable others.

Chapter Six shifts attention to employers, their hiring histories, and their reasons for approaching PEAs. This chapter uncovers employers' experience of the complex domestic employment relationship, and how their former employment relationships influence their decision-making strategy in the recruitment and hiring process and their resolve to address the intimate workplace crisis. I explore how employers' account of the candidate they select provides context and insight into the process of identity niching, as depicted through "employer talk", domestic workers' narratives of self and work performances. I argue that employers' hiring history, personal networks, PEAs' expert advice and their impressions of candidates' performance and narratives of self underlie the significance of intimacy and the demand for comfortable others, even though primary constructions of difference such as race, gender and nationality are explicit in their narrative of who they perceive as comfortable others. Further, employers experience of PEAs suggests there is a demand for stakeholder representation to achieve regulatory labour compliance for domestic work. Last, contrary to international literature on PEAs that "make the match" between employers and domestic workers, I highlight that employers have a direct role in "making the right choice" among the candidates that PEAs provide them with during the recruitment process. This chapter reveals that an employer's decision to use the services of PEAs and their consideration regarding who is the most suitable candidate for their household reiterates the significance of intimacy in the recruitment and hiring process.

Chapter Seven explores Zimbabwean MDWs' employment paths in the domestic sector to showcase their experience of informality because of their migrant status and poor regulatory governance in the sector. This chapter draws on domestic workers' experiences to explain why and how they struggle to access work from PEAs. Their narratives reveal three significant points about the commodification of an intimate work culture: first, how they must demonstrate their intimate work culture, despite poor working conditions, to earn their status as comfortable others. Second, how they hope for and work towards achieving credentials that prove their status as comfortable others. Third, that by simultaneously consenting and resisting within and outside of the employment relationship, MDWs assert and articulate their identities as comfortable others by "doing difference". Collectively, these points illustrate that, through identity niching and their cultural formation, MDWs express their autonomy and agency in the domestic sector. I argue that while MDWs claim their employment rights through PEAs, their claim to "decent work" represents their upward mobility in the domestic sector because of their recognisable status as comfortable others. Identity niching therefore is not simply a coping strategy. Instead, by engaging in identity niching, MDWs develop a long-term strategy to resist the limits of informal hiring practices even if PEAs fall short of representing domestic workers' interests fully. MDWs mobilize their intimate work culture because it arises from their struggle against precarity, and it forms part of an institutionalized requirement established by PEAs attempting to meet the demands of clients and employers searching for comfortable others.

Chapter Eight returns to the central research question, engaging with the context-related factors that have given rise to the demand for the services of PEAs and comfortable others from the perspective of PEAs, MDWs and employers' experience of the recruitment and hiring process. I discuss the main findings by problematizing a "culture of compliance" from a regulatory perspective and the disciplining effect of the commodification of comfortable others. By doing so, I explain the underlying logic of intimacy, how MDWs mobilize their intimate work culture, and the identity niching process.

Chapter Nine revisits the central research question, reiterates my argument, and identifies the contributions of this thesis in relation to the intermediary landscape, literature on migration and domestic work and theorizing intimate work. I conclude the chapter on limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

1.8. Conclusion

This thesis explores the role of and the demand for the services of PEAs in South Africa's domestic sector that specialise in placements by focusing on the relevance of intimacy and an intimate work culture. I propose that intimacy is an organizing principle of recruitment and hiring trends and informs the social construction of comfortable others among PEAs, MDWs and employers. I explore the demand for comfortable others by engaging the interplay between PEAs, MDWs and employers to gain insights into the identity niching process of comfortable others as an expression of their agency in the recruitment and hiring process. Using the concept comfortable others, this thesis focuses on the relational dynamic between employers and domestic workers in the labour process, and hence on the work-based identity that MDWs' mobilize through their cultural formation to potentially access better work and labour compliant employers through PEAs.

Chapter 2. The Hiring Queue in the Domestic Work Sector

2.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on historical and contemporary debates regarding the role of intermediaries in the domestic sector globally and in the South African context. I argue that historical and contemporary debates regarding intermediaries point to the inefficiencies of informal hiring practices, the underlying demand for a “culture of servitude” or compliance that consequently informs the commodification of domestic work, and profiling of domestic workers because of intimacy and control over the labour process. The underlying theme throughout this chapter is the nature of the hiring queue in the domestic sector more broadly and specifically in relation to the role of intermediaries. The chapter begins by discussing the “servant problem” and how the state and intermediaries set out to supply and meet the demand for suitable servants in South Africa, at a time when employers had sovereignty over domestic workers. Second, the intimate workplace and domestic work labour process is discussed using the sociological concept “boundary work” to provide context for understanding employers’ hiring choices in the PEA industry because of the micropolitics between employers and domestic workers. Third, past and present continuities regarding domestic workers’ employment rights are framed in relation to PEAs’ services and the socio-legal context in which they operate. I focus on debates concerning Zimbabwean MDWs’ positionality in South Africa’s migration policy context and the socio-political and economic crises that have given rise to regional care chains in the South and that reorder the hiring queue among domestic workers. I conclude the chapter by discussing why these intersecting themes are relevant for situating my argument regarding the demand, in the post-apartheid context, for “comfortable others” through PEAs that specialise in placements.

2.2. Hiring and Recruitment Trends

2.2.1. Demographic Profile of SA’s Domestic Sector

Jacklyn Cock (1980:) describes domestic service as a “social” and “kaleidoscopic institution” because domestic workers of all race groups and both sexes were employed, “perhaps side by side, at various times” in South Africa (Gaitskell et al., 1983:93). Studies that trace employment patterns in the domestic sector reveal that throughout history, one group was favoured for domestic service over others. In a brief schematic of employment patterns (discussed further next), white British immigrant women were preferred in the mid to late 19th and early 20th centuries among middle and upper-middle class households, followed closely – but in increments – by African men and later African women. Various factors contributed to the entry of African women into paid domestic work. Each of these factors is briefly outlined below, with an emphasis on the role of intermediaries that set out to meet the demand for what were deemed 'suitable' servants. However, it is important to note that, currently, the majority of domestic workers in South Africa are African women (Fish, 2006a, Du Toit, Du Toit, 2010; 2020a). Since 2017, the number of domestic workers has declined dramatically owing to South Africa's economic climate, changes to wage regulations and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas in 2017 there were approximately a million domestic workers, there are currently an estimated 797 000 domestic workers (Stats SA, 2023). Despite the decline in employment, the domestic sector remains a major employer of African women from within South Africa as well as from neighbouring countries. The following section provides a brief account of employment trends in South Africa's domestic sector, emphasizing the nature of the "servant problem" in a particular historical context. While this section is mostly descriptive, it helps me situate issues of control over servants and notions of ideal-type domestic servants because of race, class and power dynamics in the domestic sector.

2.2.2. The Servant Problem

While black men, women and children were employed in various regions in South Africa, they were not as sought after as white servants.[8] From the 1840s to the late 1800s, the majority of South Africa's domestic workforce was made up of white female British immigrants, and prior to 1841, enslaved or "indigenous people" (Boddington, 1983). White women were preferred for domestic service among British settlers. When the British began to settle in South Africa, they brought their servants with them, as well as children through the Children's Friends Society (CFS) and single immigrant women through colony funded initiatives and private schemes (Swaisland, 1993). Historical accounts of the changing employment patterns in South Africa reveal that intermediaries were important actors in the recruitment and hiring of domestic servants. These intermediaries were commonly referred to as "agents", "labour recruiters", "middlemen" or "registry offices" and operated through "labour bureaus" and state-led initiatives. In other words, South Africa has a long history of intermediaries that match employers with servants. Yet the role of intermediaries was often described in response to the "servant problem" (Cock, 1980; Van Onselen, 1982; Strobel, 1991; Swaisland, 1993). In an opinion piece first published in the Cape Argus, a Richmond writer laments the "servant problem":

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[8] During apartheid, the Population Registration Act (No 30. of 1950) classified groups as "white"; African (belonging to indigenous or native origin); coloured (mixed race); or Indian (of Indian or Pakistani descent). See Posel (2001).

> Considering what an intolerable nuisance our native servants are, and how the lives of our wives are rendered a wearisome burden and soul-tormenting existence, can we not, by combining and acting in co-operation, devise a means of getting ourselves supplied with servants of that class, and get rid of what is becoming daily more and more a bane and poison to our domestic enjoyment? Is it possible that we can be so supine as to bemoan our wretched plight, and, with folded hands, stolid indifference, and unmanly resignation, submit to our fate while the opportunity presents itself to release ourselves from the thraldom of dependence on our Coloured population, to which we are at present subject? (Cited in The Natal Witness, June 29th, 1880).

The servant problem was characterized by the shortage of white immigrant women, who were required to support British immigrants in the manner they were accustomed to in their home country. The quote above illustrates a plea to address the labour shortage of white women and employers' dissatisfaction with "native" servants. As noted in the opinion piece, the "native servant", and their lack of domestic servitude skills all contributed to the experience of the servant problem. In terms of context, the immigration of white women was restricted before 1843 because colonial funds could not be used for migration initiatives due to the financial crisis (Swaisland, 1993). Instead of relying on market forces, those willing to pay a fee for "domestic enjoyment" turned to registry offices and, later, the British Women's Emigration Association for Assistance (BWEA). The BWEA was instrumental in organizing migration to South Africa, Canada and Australia as a result of ideological and demographic changes in the colonies (Strobel, 1991; Swaisland, 1993). Despite being founded in the 1880s, the BWEA did not gain traction until the 1890s when demand was high because of the servant problem. After reflecting on previous initiatives, the BWEA sought to improve their training and selection process of potential candidates for recruitment purposes. Prospective employers, for example, had to pay a registration fee of 5s and £6 to the agent in Cape Town. The £6 was sent to the Cape immigration officials to guarantee the servant's assisted passage. The final judgment on the choice of the most qualified candidate was then left to the Organizing Referee. In addition to the registration and placement fee, the employer was also responsible for covering half of the servant's travel costs if they were ineligible for aided passage (Swaisland, 1993).

According to Swaisland (1993:89), the selection process for immigrants was stringent but challenging since "societies had as much trouble in satisfying the needs of colonial housewives as British employers had of satisfying theirs". Some of the strategies used to entice women to migrate included the use of titles such as "home helps", "lady helps", and "companion helps", as well as the promise of higher wages than in British factories for domestic service (Strobel 1991:26). Despite up-titling servant work and promising higher wages, many women chose to marry or seek alternative forms of work soon after their placement. By 1911, nearly a third of South African Colonization Society (SACS) migrants had deserted domestic service through marriage (Cock, 1980; Strobel, 1991). Elizabeth Tyler's article in *The Rand Daily Mail* in 1909 discusses the servant problem by describing the poor working conditions white immigrant women experienced. She observed:

> But domestics, even in the most considerate households, are denied this freedom; and factory-girls, shop-girls, and other workers, from the proud eminence of their comparative freedom, look down upon domestic service as a form of slavery. (Tyler, 1909)

The slave-like conditions that white immigrant women experienced influenced their perceptions of domestic service in South Africa and explained why they were likely to leave this type of employment as soon as alternative opportunities became available. It is not surprising, then, that white women sought freedom through alternative forms of employment or marriage. Their defiance against domestic service, however, manifested as behavioural deviance among those seeking suitable servants. According to Van Onselen's (1982:5) research on domestic service in the Witwatersrand, white women came to be regarded with suspicion because "[t]hey drifted in and out of domestic service between jobs as tea-room waitresses, barmaids, or prostitutes". Lady Hely-Hutchinson described the women who arrived in South Africa as "flighty, self-asserting, purposeless, ignorant, lazy and inefficient" (cited in Swaisland, 1993:89) while "Companion Helps" were viewed with disdain – "British women are...hard to please and hard to place; they seem to think too much of the Companion and not enough of the Help" (BWEA Report, 1894:10, cited in Swaisland, 1993:91).

By the late 1880s, there were more employers looking for domestic servants (especially men and boys) than the number of white domestic servants available (Van Onselen, 1982). The gradual change in hiring practices in terms of race and gender profile was linked to the unreliable pool of available white servants but also two other important factors that affected recruitment and hiring trends. These were the demand for labour on the mines and the "Black Peril". First, as attention shifted to the black population, the demand for cheap labour in the mining industry played an influential role in challenging the existing job segregation in the domestic sector – that is, the preference for African men or boys ("houseboys") over African women. African men also lost favour among middle class households because they had grown accustomed to and demanded higher wages. African women's employment in domestic service subsequently increased dramatically (Gaitskell et al., 1983; Van Onselen, 1982).

Second, the moral panic caused by the "Black Peril" was another impetus that solidified African women's employment in the domestic sector. Sitas (2014:4) describes a moral panic as an "amplified and angered reaction to individuals, groups and ensembles ... deemed to be a threat to values and escalating to demands for more and more social control". The Black Peril captured the imagination of the white population by sowing fear of African men as sexual deviants threatening the safety of white women and girls. This panic began in 1902 and lasted until 1912. It sparked widespread hysteria among the white community and was fuelled for a decade by the media, particularly through letters to the press and government officials. Although inquiries were made into the "rape scares" there was no substantial empirical evidence to support the sensational panic that the media had generated (Evans, 2013; Graham, 2012). Scholars have since concluded that the Black Peril was part of a political agenda, serving to entrench control mechanisms over the black population in urban areas and prevent the mixing of races. In the case of the Black Peril, the media recycled a few incidents to create moral panic for a decade (Hebdige, 1979).

While the Black Peril projected behavioural deviance, it also portrayed African men as existential deviants. Regardless of what they did or said to challenge the hysteria, they were still labelled deviants simply because they were black men (Sitas, 2014). The Black Peril's aftermath revealed how stereotyping African men as deviant negatively affected their occupational status in the domestic sector, inevitably shifting attention to African women. This watershed moment cemented the demand for "suitable" African women servants as a long-term strategy (see Van Onselen, 1982), bringing to the fore issues of intimacy, gender, racial stereotyping and paranoia about household security.

While state-led migratory initiatives during the colonial era declined and were widely regarded as failures, a steady supply of "native girls" was also made possible by "registry offices" and missionary schools. Missionary schools, for example, were established in the Eastern Cape and Transkei to train young African girls to work as domestic servants (Cock, 1990). The Lovedale Girls' School was the most well-known institution in Southern Africa. The school, which opened in 1871, educated African girls to work as domestic servants or seamstresses. The aim was to prepare "the girls for domestic life in their own community and prepar[e] them for domestic service in white homes" (Shepard, 1940:475 cited in Cock, 1990:90). By the peak of the 19th century between 600 and 800 Africans girls had attended Lovedale Girls' School (Cock, 1990). These initiatives were designed to promote a steady supply of adequately trained servants in response to colonial wives complaints about the "native" population (Swaisland, 1993). It was also a countermeasure to white women's poor work ethic which was deemed unsuitable for servitude.

The excerpts below are advertisements for lodging "native girls" seeking work and where servants could be recruited from:

Native Girls’ Hostel & Club,
14, Sherwell Street, Doornfontein

The Superintendent will be glad to receive friendless girls and help them to find work. Sleeping accommodation is provided at a ticky a night, or 7/-a month. The Club-room is open to all girls from 2pm to 8.30pm. Tea can be had at a small charge. Books and newspapers. Music and games

Source: Pamphlet. Collection Number: AD1715, SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS (SAIRR), 1892-1974

Missionary Bureau for the REGISTRATION of NATIVE GIRLS

Mistresses desiring native women for domestic service, or sleeping accommodation for them, should apply to:

(1) The English Church Hostel for Native Girls
14, Sherwell Street, Doornfontein. (CENT: 1551.)

(2) The Helping Hand Club for Native Girls
76, Hans Street, Fairview. (Jeppe 172.)

Every care will be taken to procure suitable women on the payment of a booking fee of 5/- to cover a period of three months.
Source: Reprinted from the South African Outlook, 1932. Collection Number: AD1715 SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS (SAIRR), 1892-1974

The advertisements show that churches and/or hostels, as well as the Missionary Bureau for the Registration of Native Girls, facilitated the process of supplying and meeting the demand for suitable domestic servants. Further, promises were made to procure suitable women, with an emphasis on their single or “friendless” status. The Native Girls’ Hostel and Club was set up to accommodate live-out servants too. Therefore, a variety of actors were involved in the recruitment and hiring of domestic servants – in terms of providing accommodation, domestic education and screening candidates’ suitability for middle and upper-middle class households. African women gradually gained a foothold in the domestic sector; however, they received lower wages than men and white women, and were ranked at the bottom of the hierarchy of servants (Gaitskell et al., 1983).

Although there is extensive literature on how black African women gained access to the domestic sector, there is no single study that adequately explores the role of and demand for the services of intermediaries from the perspective of employers and servants. The use of archival research (for example, Boddington, 1983; Cock, 1980, Van Onselen,1982), is useful insofar as it helps frame the supply and demand debates that arose from the 'servant problem' but the subjective experiences of agents and employers or "servants" who used intermediaries are absent. A similar gap is evident in contemporary literature on formal and informal intermediaries that I discuss later. Despite this gap, it is important to understand the context in which intermediaries operated to illustrate the consequences of labour control which have had a lasting effect on the marginalization of black African women in the domestic sector.

2.2.3. Labour Control

During the colonial and apartheid eras, policy measures were in place to control black labour. In the colonial era, the 1841 Masters and Servants Act "heralded new forms of labour control after the abolition of slavery" while the Vagrancy Act of 1879 forced people into wage labour to ensure a steady supply of labour (Boddington, 1983:7, 154). These measures had a devastating effect on domestic workers and became stricter during apartheid with the implementation of pass and influx control laws to regulate the movement of black people in urban areas. Cock (1981:69) argues black women were bound to their employers through labour contracts and influx control laws, and these instruments of state control ultimately placed servants in a legal vacuum. This legal vacuum meant that:

> They are not protected by any legislation; there are no laws stipulating the minimum wages, hours of work, or other conditions of service. The lack of disability and unemployment insurance, maternity benefits and paid sick leave, imply that they are an extremely insecure group of workers. They are vulnerable to instant dismissal by their employers who often fail to observe the common law provisions. (Cock, 1981:69)

At the same time, with limited work opportunities available in urban areas and high levels of unemployment, African women were not only "trapped" in domestic work but were also part of a "disposable labour force" (Cock, 1981:67; Cock, 1988). Instead of legislation offering women any form of protection, the Section 10(1)(d) of the 1945 Black (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act established a system that allowed for contracts to be renewed provided servants remained in the same job (Cock, 1981). Such measures of control promote what Anderson (2010) refers to as "institutional uncertainty" and simultaneously produces precarious workers under precarious employment conditions. In South Africa, domestic servants feared instant dismissal, had no recourse to the state, and were coerced into a culture of obedience that cemented their status as subordinates (Ally, 2010). African servants were vulnerable not only because of their race, gender and class position but also because they lacked any form of legal protection, coercing them into depending on employers. In other words, "madams" could fire domestic servants instantly for not meeting their expectations and continue to deprive them of a "negotiated wage, of reasonable working hours and of family and social life…favourable working conditions, respectful treatment and any acknowledgement of the dignity of their labour", subjected to "ultra-exploitation" because of what they were denied (Cock, 1980:6). Nevertheless, while the white "madam's" and black domestic servant's social locations were within the patriarchal structures of capitalism, and the household was a site of intimate contact, employers had a sense of superiority because of their race and class privilege which undermined the feminist struggle (Cock, 1980; 1981). Ally (2010:2) critically notes the irony of the apartheid regime because, while it enforced and separated different race groups through labour controls, it also paired black women with white households where intimacy and dependency also characterized control in the domestic labour process. Therefore, in the following sections I problematize the household as an intimate workplace since it informs the way I analyse an intimate work culture in the post-apartheid context.

2.3. An Intimate Workplace

In light of the above theme on labour control, when the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997 (BCEA) was extended to domestic workers, it was regarded as a major step forward under the new democratic regime (Republic of South Africa, 1997; Fish, 2006b). Domestic workers were given the same employment rights as workers in other sectors. This was a significant departure from the history of exploitation during the colonial and apartheid era (Fish, 2006b; Ally, 2010). Domestic workers were granted the right to an employment contract detailing working hours, conditions of accommodation, and leave (Jacobs, Manicom & Durrheim, 2013). Despite the shift from "servant" to domestic worker status (Ally, 2010), many scholars insist that domestic work is unlike any other form of work because of the intimacy that develops and is maintained in the employment relationship (Lutz, 2008; Ally, 2010). Lutz (2008:1) elaborates:

> …there are reasons to argue that domestic work is not just another labour market, but that it is marked by the following aspects: the intimate character of the social sphere where the work is performed; the social construction of this work as a female gendered area; the special relationship between employer and employee which is highly emotional, personalized and characterized by mutual dependency; and the logic of care work which is clearly different from that of other employment areas.

By recognizing the private household as a workplace rather than merely employers' private space, issues regarding emotions, personal preferences, and mutual dependency through personalism, that are inherent in the domestic employment relationship, reveal the power dynamic between employers and domestic workers and why interpersonal tensions are likely to occur. For this reason, Fish (2006b:219) argues the household is a political space, but one where gender and class imbalances prevail in South Africa, including among the "newly elite" black employers (see also Dilata, 2009; Bayane, 2021). However, as I noted earlier in this chapter, irrespective of the race of employers, black African women constitute the majority of domestic workers in South Africa (Ally, 2010) which has serious implications for measures of "redress" (Bosch and McLeod, 2015) in the intimate workplace.

Focusing on how domestic workers work with and against the law, Blackett (2019:11) refers to the domestic employment relationship as an "asymmetrical, unequal, and largely invisible law of the household workplace". Therefore, tensions are inevitable when the private household becomes a public workplace. I use the term "intimate workplace" intentionally throughout this thesis to signal the context-specific nature of domestic work in South Africa, where domestic workers have employment rights that both PEAs and employers are required to uphold. Describing the private household as an intimate workplace also signals the imminent tug-of-war dynamic between employers and domestic workers in pursuit of regulatory compliance. Here, the particularities of the intimate nature of the domestic work employment relationship stand out as a challenge for achieving regulatory compliance because of the longstanding power dynamic in the relationship because of race, class and gender. A case in point is how employers are often described in post-apartheid research as "madams" (Bonnin & Dawood, 2013; Bosch & McLeod, 2015). These descriptions are unsurprising since the usage of "madams" (or "maids") in contemporary research conveys the exploitative domestic employment relationship that remains rooted in power differentials despite efforts to recognize the household as an intimate workplace. How, if at all, do employers of domestic workers become labour compliant employers, instead of "madams"? How, and in what ways, do PEAs attempt to facilitate an employment relation that is inherently intimate? In the following sections, I draw on literature that helps me frame the challenges that arise in the domestic work labour process by focusing on the public-private boundary in the household specifically. The literature on the household as a workplace is useful because it grounds my approach for problematizing the demand for comfortable others as an ideal type of domestic worker in the post-apartheid context.

2.3.1. Public and Private Space in the Household

Feminist scholars have critically engaged with notions of the private and public distinction in the "home" in relation to the social construction of the house as a workplace (Bonnin & Dawood, 2013; Fernandez & de Regt, 2014; Triandafyllidou & Marchetti, 2015). One commonality in their conceptualization of the home as a workplace is that they adopt Doreen Massey's (1994) problematization of "space" and "place". Place is associated with a specific location in which social interactions occur between employers and workers (Marchetti, 2022). However, the practical and metaphorical encounters represent the "structure of the social space" (Fernandez & de Regt, 2014:5), with actors occupying different positions on the basis of power relations (Bonnin & Dawood, 2013).

Bonnin and Dawood (2013:56) argue that, since spaces are filled with meanings, "the home presents a contradictory space as it is both the private space of the employer as well as the workplace of the domestic worker". As such, the dynamic of the private-public boundary-making process in the intimate workplace necessitates efforts from both domestic workers and employers to engage in social distancing or "negotiate social boundaries and distance from one another on a daily basis" (Lan, 2003:525). According to Westphal and Khanna (2003:364) social distancing, a form of social sanctioning, serves as a control mechanism "to counteract deviant tendencies". Social distancing is practiced through a range of behaviours or can simply take on the form of withdrawing certain behaviour in the workplace. This boundary making process inevitably gives rise to forms of inclusion and exclusion in the workplace not only because of the power differentials in the employment relationship but also because intimacy evokes feelings of discomfort when transgressions occur.

Bonnin and Dawood's (2013) research offers a unique entry point to the debate regarding the nature of the employment relationship between the domestic worker and "madam" because of religion, Islam specifically. Their research focuses on how religion informs the construction of the workplace according to three key elements – work duties, religious belief systems that distinguish between private and public spaces, and the feelings Muslim "madams" have that construct workplaces as emotional spaces. While not framed from the perspective of an intimate work culture nor the socio-legal context of the intimate workplace which my research emphasizes, their findings show that religion plays a crucial role in the construction of the workplace and therefore the way domestic work is performed. In the boundary making process of the employment relationship, religion and feeling comfortable with how and where work is performed influences perceptions of who is a suitable domestic worker. For example, Bonnin and Dawood (2013) argue that although Muslim "madams"' expectations vary, they ultimately converge because of religious beliefs in terms of who an ideal domestic worker is. For example, domestic workers must be amenable to learning and practicing cleanliness and complying with modest dress codes and halaal food regulations according to Islamic beliefs; implicit here is the control or power "madams" have over domestic workers' bodies and work organization (Bonnin and Dawood, 2013).[9]

However, while domestic workers are described as employees, there is no critical engagement regarding Bonnin and Dawood's (2013) conceptualization of the workplace in a manner that shifts attention away from the binary of "madams" to employers of domestic workers. Their emphasis on religion alone does little to explain how religion and the recognition of the household as an intimate workplace converge to influence notions of ideal type of domestic workers. For example, fear of stealing is closely related to "madams"' constructions of private spaces within the workplace, with restrictions placed on bedrooms (Bonnin and Dawood, 2013). Yet, the link between religion and an intimate work culture in relation to "madams" fear of stealing neglects the socio-legal context that informs the household as a workplace. My research therefore responds to this gap by focusing on employers of domestic workers and what their status as employers reveals regarding their perceptions of who is a suitable domestic worker (see Chapter Five and Chapter Six). Overall, what is noteworthy about Bonnin and Dawood's (2013) research, from the perspective of this study and regarding the private-public boundary, is the interplay between social, physical and emotional distance that ultimately influences domestic workers' intimate work culture and, as they also note, feelings of discomfort too.

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[9] Bonnin and Dawood (2013:60) define halaal as "permissible food".

The private-public divide for MDWs plays out in very specific ways too. According to Fernandez and de Regt (2014), migrant status, live-in status and their location-based work status in the home have different implications for how MDWs in the Middle East negotiate the private-public boundary. The mobility of MDWs in the Middle East is organized by PEAs that operate through labour-broker states. While pre-departure contracts signed in source countries are not legally binding in destination countries, the *kefala* system (a sponsorship system that legally binds a MDW to an employer who is a citizen in the host country) serves as a "powerful mechanism of control" (Fernandez & de Regt, 2014:9). Not only is the state granted an effective strategy for monitoring migration, but sponsors often confiscate passports, rendering MDWs vulnerable to undocumented status if they run away. The outcome of this illegal practice has serious implications for how MDWs experience the private-public divide as live-in domestics. For example, where domestic workers' rights are not recognized, or there is no or poor regulation, the privacy of the employers' homes supersedes the rights of MDWs. As a result, MDWs' privacy in their place of work is often disregarded, and they are enslaved to being on call 24/7 even under the guise of being like "one of the family" (Fernandez & de Regt, 2014:12).

Given the location-based nature of their work, efforts to seek privacy or home away from home shift from private to public spaces outside of the home (Cheng, 2006; Fernandez & de Regt, 2014). To free themselves from the workplace, MDWs seek refuge in public spaces that include parks, churches and shopping malls which offer temporary relief for those who are able to access this opportunity (Yeoh & Huang, 1998). More importantly, these public spaces can become sites for cultural formations among domestic workers as expressions of agency in response to their conditions of employment because of the intimate labour process, discussed in Chapter Three.

2.3.2. The Intimate Labour Process

Chapters One and Three describe and discuss an intimate workplace culture as a set of beliefs, practices, customs, values, norms and rituals that govern the way individuals go about doing their work (Burawoy, 1979; Benson, 1983; Sitas, 1983; Volti, 2012). An intimate work culture is a response to employers' managerial role in the workplace and is often associated with Marxist conceptions of the labour process and surplus value.

While labour process theory (LPT) has focused largely on traditional workplaces, the issue of control and consent remain relevant for understanding the nature of domestic work in the context of the public-private divide in households. However, it is important to note that LPT has been fraught with debate, especially in relation to its relevance towards a re-invigorated sociology of work and its silence on gender (Davies, 2000; Thompson & Smith, 2009). Yet, feminists writing on domestic work have made explicit reference to Michael Burawoy's contribution to LPT, highlighting the complexity of control and consent that is implicit in how domestic workers negotiate their relationship with employers in overt and covert ways (see for example Constable, 2007; Ally, 2010). By doing so, they draw on issues related to the subjective experiences of workers to understand how they influence the labour process. Here scholars emphasize processes of resistance and agency, drawing attention to the emotional and personal nature of the "contact zone" through domestic workers' work culture. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in service-related work such as domestic work, "emotional labour" that involves the management of feeling and the body is crucial for understanding the intimate labour process (Hochschild, 1983). Further, skill and professional status/identity in the labour process highlight how work is organized and differentiated (valued or devalued) among domestic workers too (Meagher, 1997).

Citing Adesina (1990:118), Burja (2000:134-135) argues that "while workers are adapting to work, they are also adapting the work to themselves". In terms of LPT, this is significant for understanding the micropolitics of the home as a workplace, but also workers "stratagems to resist and manipulate the relationship to their advantage". Therefore as an extension of how I have conceptualised an intimate workplace, I rely on Lan's (2003) theoretical contribution regarding boundary work because it allows me to explore the interplay between the employer and domestic worker and explain how control in the public-private zone inform notions of suitable domestic workers and hence changes to the hiring queue in the domestic sector.

2.3.3. Boundary Work and Micropolitics in the Intimate Workplace

Boundary work describes the process of establishing and maintaining social boundaries in the intimate workplace. Lan (2003) examines how socio-categorical boundaries (class, nationality/ethnicity) and socio-spatial boundaries (the workspace as public vs. employers' private space) intersect on a daily basis when employers and domestic workers negotiate social boundaries and distance. Lan's (2003) findings show that the interactions between employers and live-in MDWs vary depending on the context. Employers, for example, can use maternalism or dependence as a social distancing strategy that highlights the socio-categorical boundaries between the employer and MDW – producing and reinforcing an inferior status in the employment relationship through a form of pseudo-inclusion. Others may use "strategic personalism" to foster inclusion in the family but with the intention of safeguarding the quality of care provided (Mendez, 1998; Näre, 2011).

Domestic workers also use strategic personalism by exaggerating their material poverty to seek patronage from employers (Lan, 2003:540). Typically, this involves crying or displaying envy or guilt to gain sympathy from employers for bonuses, loans, goods and gifts.[10] Writing on the "ambiguities of intimacy" that describe domestic workers' intimate work culture, Ally (2009:107) explains that dependence is a tactic of control and occurs when emotions are used to manipulate feeling. This is clearly captured by a South African domestic worker, Esther Dhlamini, who said, "And it's a good thing to keep them thinking that without their job you will be really finished. You even cry to remind her. You tell her about how you are struggling and your children are suffering. How can she tell you to go if she feels for you?" (Ally, 2010:107). Whereas these examples highlight material or fringe rewards, others engage strategic personalism to solicit emotional rewards by transforming their work "into a labour of love" rather than merely commodified work. According to Ally (2010:100) "being treated 'like one of the family', which is a myth, is equated to being treated like a person", but allows workers an opportunity to control their conditions of work. This type of strategic personalism, as noted by Lan (2003), can be detrimental to them because employers may take advantage of their position within the family, despite the fact that domestic workers may use their "status" within the family as a bargaining chip to obtain emotional and material benefits.

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[10] While employers enforce dependence through gift-giving practices, treating domestic employment as a form of charity not only obscures the waged work element but also acts as a control strategy used by employers. As Cock (1980:101) explains, "the gifts given by employers to their domestic servants help to cement their loyalty and reinforce the hierarchical nature of the relationship between them. This is not to deny the often sincere generosity of employers. It is simply to focus on the status-enhancing properties of such gifts which operate to secure the loyalty of the servant within an extremely hierarchical, unequal relationship".

Employers who prefer to keep a family boundary or have limited interaction in the employment relationship may employ MDWs instead of local domestic workers to protect their family's privacy and reputation because MDWs are unfamiliar with the host country or culture. Because the nationalities of the employer and domestic worker differ, distant hierarchy is possible, and it can be established further through physical and social distance among employers with larger homes. According to Lan (2003:532), employers frequently replace local domestic workers with foreign nationals because it is "much easier to request deferential performance from foreign maids" and because they have experienced poor work ethic from local maids who object to orders and expectations from employers. What this suggests is that boundary maintenance in the employment relation is also about control and consent and the suitability of a domestic worker because of her ethnicity (the ability to manage a domestic worker). Like employers, domestic workers also exercise their boundaries when they choose to keep their distance, such as not eating with the family or participating in family activities to avoid "extracurricular work".

Lan (2003) discovered that depersonalism through business relationships was preferred by the majority of dual income households. Employers achieved this by establishing rational rules for supervising and managing their domestic workers in order to respect "the worker's private space" and "avoid the interference of personal ties with job performance" (Lan, 2003:537). However, she observes that, due to linguistic and cultural barriers, middle-class employers found it easier to maintain business relationships with MDWs than with locals. Even if this type of relationship is not possible for domestic workers, they maintain their privacy in other ways too (Lan, 2003). Domestic workers' public-private boundary, for example, extends to what they choose not to disclose to their employers about their pasts and their whereabouts on their days off. Lan's (2003) findings revealed that, in order to protect their self-identity and dignity, domestic workers chose to conceal their previous class status or their maid appearance when going to church or the disco. This type of boundary work depicts Goffman's (1959) distinction between the back and front stage performance to maintain the public-private boundary (Lan, 2003). Other MDWs, however, challenge employers' assumption that "maids" are ignorant by sharing their educational and middle-class status, to emphasize their similarities rather than differences in an attempt to address the power imbalance in the employment relationship (Lan, 2003; Lan, 2006; Constable, 2007).

The concept of boundary work is an important theoretical tool because it allows for a close examination of the micropolitics of the employment relationship, and the social construction of the "intimate Other" (Lan, 2003). The structural and subjective positions of employers and MDWs illustrate each other's agency along a continuum of possible ways they negotiate social boundaries in private zones. Lan (2003:547) concludes that:

> [i]ntimate actions across ethnic and national divides have not stopped people from drawing distinctions between 'us' and 'them'. More often, such encounters exacerbate the process of Otherization, when the privileged groups feel urged to fortify the social boundaries in the visible presence of outsiders.

Chapters Six and Seven return to this theme to examine the practical and emotional responses to boundary work through the lens of an intimate work culture. Here, I am most concerned with how the socio-legal context reconfigures the nature of the employment relationship and influences profiling and differentiation among domestic workers that PEAs partake in.

2.4. Private Employment Agencies' Services

PEAs are defined as "any natural or legal person, independent of the public authorities" that offers three distinct services based on their business objectives and relationship with clients (ILO, 1997). The ILO categorizes PEAs according to three specific type of services. The first type of service, which this study focuses on, relates to matching job seekers with employment, but without the PEA becoming an employer of the job seeker. In the matching process, Mazza (2016:25) identifies further services, such as core services related to creating a database or "job bank" to allow for the matching of job seekers with clients seeking placements; facilitating job searches and placements through counselling; or, for example, "making a phone call to an employer who would never open their door to a stranger". Core functions therefore facilitate the process of a successful placement and target both job seekers and employers. In addition, PEAs also prioritize "intermediation plus" or "extended services" as an incentive for creating placement opportunities or facilitating access to the labour market for job seekers (Mazza, 2016:28). Targeted training or learnerships for job seekers is the most common service provided in the domestic sector (Scrinzi, 2011; Budlender, 2013).

PEAs may also aid both internal and external migrants in the recruitment and hiring process. Fernandez (2014), for example, investigates how intermediaries facilitate the employment of female Ethiopian MDWs in Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon, Kuwait, and Saudi

Arabia. Typical services include obtaining visas, providing some level of accountability to women who end up in abusive employment situations, contract oversight, payment, and supervising their return once a contract has ended (Constable, 2007; Fernandez, 2014; Mazza, 2016). The placement process incorporates assistance for employers such as private screening of candidates if necessary, setting up and conducting interviews with applicants, and determining whether candidates are suitable for employment. These services can "build confidence" with employers or "enable a service to develop a market in specific types of employment…that need specialized screening" (Mazza, 2016:30).

The second type of service PEAs offer includes directly employing job seekers for specific tasks that they supervise, but which are outsourced to a third party (ILO, 1997). This type of intermediary is aptly described as part of the "rent-a-maid" phenomenon or for-profit commercial companies that offer cleaning services to households (Mendez, 1998; Du Toit, 2013). Because of capitalism, these flexible employment arrangements have been on the rise globally and across various employment sectors as a cost-cutting strategy (Sanyal & Bhattacharya, 2009; Standing, 2011; Webster, 2011). In South Africa, this type of agency and service type, commonly referred to as "labour brokers" or temporary employment services, sparked widespread national debate, with COSATU campaigning for them to be banned. While the call for banning labour brokers was lost, COSATU nevertheless drew attention to their unscrupulous practices, unaccountability to workers' employment rights, and the need for regulation (Budlender, 2013; Bischoff and Tame, 2017).

The third service is sharing information related to job seeking based on the PEA's knowledge of the sector's demands, but where agencies do not play any role in offering employment (ILO, 1997). These services may include social, labour, and economic support services as well as the dissemination of market trends in the form of "labour market information" to job seekers and employers when required (Mazza, 2016). In reality, however, PEAs may engage in one or all of the services outlined above. Mazza (2016:28) suggests that PEAs are likely to have multiple core functions because it may lead to placement openings and provide job seekers with an opportunity to access the labour market. Yet most literature on PEAs focus on either placements or outsourced cleaning companies which are distinguishable from each other because of the direct or indirect employment relationship offered (Mendez, 1998; Baison, 2021; Du Toit, 2021). I do not find this distinction particularly useful given that PEAs are attempting to commodify an intimate work culture for different clients. By focusing on PEAs that specialize on one core service over another, there is a failure to comprehensively capture why PEAs have proliferated in South Africa. Therefore, while this thesis focuses on placements, I argue that it is important to understand the different types of services PEAs provide because, irrespective of the various services available to clients, employers and jobseekers, intimacy and the socio-legal context has given rise to the demand for PEAs in post-apartheid South Africa (see Chapter Six and Chapter Eight).

2.4.1. The Global Spread of PEAs

The ILO (2021) estimates that before the COVID-19 pandemic there were approximately 75.6 million male and female domestic workers employed globally, signalling the importance of domestic work for maintaining households and job creation. In Africa alone, domestic workers represent 7.3% of the global workforce, with a significant number located in the Southern African region (ILO, 2021). However, in the past few decades, researchers have shifted away from studying the traditional direct domestic employment relationship through informal recruitment channels to the matching and placing of domestic workers through PEAs, housecleaning services and more recently the gig economy (SweepSouth, 2022). Feminists argue that studying PEAs reveals how domestic work is being reconfigured (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Mendez, 1998; Romero, 1988), the intersection of race, class and gender hierarchies in the process of establishing identity-based niches within global and regional care chains (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Parreñas, 2001; Lan, 2003; Constable, 2007; Lutz, 2011; Scrinzi, 2011), efforts to make visible the ongoing challenge of professionalizing and achieving decent working conditions for domestic workers (Mendez, 1998; Fudge, 2011; Scrinzi, 2011; ILO, 2021).

A substantial body of research on PEAs that operate in the domestic sector in the Global North highlights the nature of the care crisis (the privatization of domestic work and the state's retreat from providing care) in relation to the corresponding emergence of global and regional care chains to meet employers' demands. A central theme is the distinction made between states that act as "labour brokers" through PEAs, such as the Philippines (Lan, 2003; Cheng, 2006; Tomei & Belser, 2011), compared to PEAs that are location based – the focus of this study (Tsikata, 2011; Du Toit, 2013). Farris (2020) argues that the proliferation of PEAs has occurred because of the commodification and marketization of care and domestic work (Anderson, 2003; Abrantes, 2014; Farris, 2020). In relation to cleaning services, Ehrenreich (2000) argues that intermediaries transform the home into capitalist-style workplaces. Nicole Constable (2009:50) aptly describes this global phenomenon as the "commodification of intimacy" which refers to:

> …the ways in which intimacy or intimate relations can be treated, understood, or thought of as if they have entered the market: are bought or sold; packaged and advertised; fetishized, commercialized, or objectified; consumed or assigned values and prices; and linked in many cases to transnational mobility and migration, echoing a global capitalist flow of goods.

In light of the above quote, a cross cutting theme in the diverse literature on PEAs operating in the domestic sector, is what motivates employers and domestic workers to use PEAs, irrespective of the service, and the extent to which PEAs can play a role in transforming the domestic sector by promoting decent work and regulatory labour compliance.[11] In African countries, PEAs appear to operate as location-based businesses rather than labour exporters, but, like other types of PEAs, play an important role in providing services to match job seekers with jobs (Tsikata, 2011; Budlender, 2013; Du Toit, 2013). Mazza (2016:19) identifies three main labour market objectives when matching job seekers with available jobs:

> (1) reducing the time it takes to find a job (good for both the worker and the employer); (2) increasing the percentage of workers obtaining a job; and (3) enabling a better fit between the worker (their skills) and the job they are doing.

The objectives outlined above highlight the advantage of PEAs that provide an administrative solution to common recruitment challenges. Employers often experience the recruitment and hiring of domestic workers as tedious and time-consuming while workers are eager to access the labour market as soon as possible (Cheng, 2006; Du Toit, 2013). According to Martinez (1976) and others, employers and job seekers depend on PEAs, either to find the most suitable candidate for their home or to find stable employment with better wages (Mendez, 1998; Scrinzi, 2011 Du Toit, 2013). In terms of workers, internal, cross-border and more distant international migration has been on the rise because of economic crises and rising unemployment in sending countries (ILO, 2021). Chang (2016) argues that the condition for "disposable" domestics is, in many instances, an outcome of structural adjustment programmes imposed on Third World countries by First World countries, in addition to restrictive immigration policies that force migrants into low-paid work. Their access to contract labour and the urgency of supporting their families through remittances exacerbates their precarious situation, making them seemingly “pliable” to a particular policy context and the extractive nature of exporting their services (Chang, 2016:117). I return to this theme in the last section of the chapter, and critiques of this view in Chapter Three.

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[11] The debates regarding the global proliferation of PEAs are multifaceted. PEAs operating in the domestic sector have proliferated partly because little start-up capital is needed to enter the market (Martinez, 1976; Mendez, 1998; Tyner, 1999). Typically, most PEAs are run by one person, usually a woman who works from her home, but competition is fierce between franchises and smaller agencies which compete for the same clients (Mendez, 1998).

Triandafyllidou and Marchetti (2015) and Souralová (2015) adopt a sympathetic approach to employers, arguing that employers of domestic workers are unlike other employers because of the micropolitics of the workplace. Triandafyllidou and Marchetti (2015) observe that not all employers are trained to manage workers and may lack experience, which PEAs can address by providing insight and expert knowledge and the most suitable candidate. Regarding my earlier comments concerning questions that speak more directly to imagining a shift from “madams” to employer status, I find their approach useful because it emphasizes the complexity of the intimate employment relationship from the perspective of the employer. Some scholars therefore advocate that PEAs are important because they prepare and educate clients on matters related to domestic work (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Tsikata, 2011). For example, Cheng’s (2006) research found that PEAs can intervene to mediate conflicts between the employer and worker when workplace grievances arise.

Despite the benefits of the matching process, many have criticized PEAs ability to improve domestic workers working conditions given that there are limited regulatory structures in place to curb labour abuses (Tsikata, 2011; Budlender, 2013). The most common abuse, which has been widely documented globally, relates to charging job seekers placement fees. Efforts to curb this practice are evident in the guidelines stipulated by the ILO convention and the Skills Development Act No. 97 of 1998 (ILO, 1997; Mazza, 2016:26). According to the guidelines, PEAs that charge applicants a placement fee are engaging in an illegal practice. This practice is usually linked to informal PEAs but also “regulatory failure” when “states and international agencies frequently fail to achieve their objectives in the regulation of intermediaries of migration” (Fernandez, 2014:814, 817).

Writing on PEAs that specialize in permanent placements in Ghana, Tsikata (2011) discusses two reservations regarding the transformative potential of PEAs. First, PEAs only recruit and place a small proportion of domestic workers and therefore their ability to transform the domestic sector is limited in scope. Second, without regulation, Tsikata (2011) argues formal PEAs can and do institutionalize informality because they play a minimal role in promoting decent work when the prospective employer and job seeker are left to negotiate working conditions between themselves. Neetha's (2009:500) exposé of placement agencies in India that are location-based but target migrants points to a similar pattern, where agencies "often take no responsibility for the workers", are disinterested in their working conditions and offer no support when they fall ill or require accommodation. Awumbila et al. (2019) argue that while Ghanian domestics gain some opportunities through PEAs, brokers continue to perpetuate practices which are typical of the status quo associated with precarity in the informal sector. Consequently, PEAs arguably do little to deter non-compliance, especially where is no regulatory framework or enforcement of domestic workers' employment rights. Therefore, researchers contend, there is an obvious need to consider how labour legislation and monitoring practices can be better applied to PEAs to ensure domestic workers' employment rights (Du Toit, 2013; Fudge and Hobden, 2018).

In relation to my research, it is important to be cognizant of these debates especially when making claims about the role of and the demand for the services of formal PEAs in South Africa. I draw attention to these debates since I focus on formal PEAs which assumes regulatory compliance. Yet, as I show in Chapter Five, Seven and Eight, black African MDWs experience precariousness because of PEAs' gatekeeping role whereby they restrict access to the labour market on the basis of an intimate work culture employers' demand. Therefore, establishing a link between an intimate work culture, PEAs' gatekeeping practices and the profiling and differentiation of domestic workers in the hiring queue cannot be overstated.

2.4.2. Profiling and Differentiation

A major outcome of the commodification of intimacy is the export of affordable labour from the Global South for the Global North (Chang, 2016). The commodification of intimacy has produced what Grover (2022) refers to as identity-based niches in the domestic sector. Mendez (1998:14) predicts that the "emergence of household service agencies poses new questions and issues for researchers concerned with the intersections of gender, race, and class within the domain of paid domestic work". This scholarly inquiry has given rise to many contributions that illustrate the different ways PEAs act as gatekeepers in the domestic sector, to meet the demand for idealized domestic workers (Tyner, 1999; Cheng, 2006; Moras, 2010). Bakan and

Stasiulis (1995:318-319) note that the ideological stereotyping of MDWs are of "a fictive, universal non-white female, non-citizen Other whose biological and ostensibly natural makeup ascribe as inherently appropriate for private domestic sector". PEAs are therefore criticized for responding to employers' demands, which often reinforce racist stereotypes and create domestic worker hierarchies among different nationalities that ultimately affect their access to the labour market, the type of work they are hired for and their earning potential.

PEAs play a strategic role in controlling and influencing employment practices and access to domestic workers (Tyner, 1999; Cheng, 2006; Scrinzi, 2011). Awumbila et al.'s (2019:2669) study on brokers in Ghana that place domestic workers in Accra and abroad found that domestic workers from rural villages are trained to conform to "a subservient, polite, docile class in urban areas" by suppressing their own identities. Regarding training, Scrinzi (2011:153) argues that PEAs "endorse essentialist constructions of cultural difference" among workers, based on gender, race and ethnicity.[12] From a labour process perspective, which is concerned with the execution of work, issues such as skill, control and work organization have also been linked to the professional identity of domestic workers that PEAs market for sale (Meagher, 1997). These studies are useful because researchers provide insight into the various ways PEAs act as gatekeepers. However, these studies fail to locate or frame the nature of profiling and differentiation among domestic workers in relation to an intimate work culture, as discussed and conceptualized in Chapters One and Two, including the socio-legal context of the PEA framework and the ILO's Convention on Domestic Workers (2011, No. 189), if applicable. As I argue throughout this thesis, it is crucial to situate a discussion on formal PEAs in relation to an intimate work culture and the socio-legal context to better understand the context specific factors that have given rise to the use of PEAs. Further, it is important to consider how these factors may inform the process of identify niching to meet the demand and supply of "comfortable others".

While feminists reject the notion that domestic work is unskilled work, the different forms of domestic work are ranked according to skills and tasks with some domestic workers refusing general housework in favour of specialized domestic work such as expert cook or caregiver (Kousher, 1994 cited in Meagher, 1997). In addition to studies on “producing” professional domestic workers, other studies on PEAs that specialize in outsourced domestic work argue that training programmes are exercises of control because they are designed to maximize productivity by standardizing tasks to promote efficiency (Meagher, 1997; Mendez, 1998). The choice of domestic work, however, is not only about status but also its earning potential in a historically devalued occupation. What is notable about the two main PEA service models is that the earning potential for outsourced cleaning services is not as lucrative as placements. The former is more likely to be flexible, influenced by client demand, whereas the latter is a long-term employment relationship with one employer and a job description that is not limited to cleaning.

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[12] In Ally's (2010) discussion on the shift from "servants to workers", she outlines the "professionalization of domestic work" in terms of workers' right to a minimum wage, unemployment insurance and contracts of employment as guided by the legal framework. In addition, she also refers to government sponsored professionalization programmes.

In the profiling and differentiation of domestic workers, PEAs also influence recruitment and hiring patterns according to linguistic preferences. For example, those who have a good command of English are favoured as nannies in the United States, while women from Latin American countries are hired for domestic work (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Moras, 2010). Theys et al.’s (2020) research on domestic service in Brussels shows that employers prefer housekeepers who speak their home language, but discriminatory tastes align with ethnic preferences. Their findings show that Flemish and Polish domestic workers are favoured over Maghreb descendants. They reason that PEAs are pressured to discriminate against workers because of employers’ demands and suggest that linguistic preferences are likely because of the “personal sphere” and regular interactions in the workplace (Theys et al., 2020). Nonetheless, PEAs price domestic workers into the market based on stereotypes and linguistic preferences based on national and professional status (Abrantes, 2014), hence emphasizing the commodification of intimate work. The commodification of intimate work has serious implications for domestic workers seeking better earning potential, given that research shows PEAs respond to stereotypes in the matching and placement process.

At the core of debates regarding what or who is commodified, are questions about how the state and PEAs ‘manufacture’ competent or docile maids as “intimate Others” and professionals who serve to maintain the subordination of domestic workers (Lan, 2003; Cheng, 2006; Constable, 2007). These social constructions of domestic workers create what migration scholars’ term ‘ethnic sectors’ or ‘ethnic niches’ (Tyner, 1999; Cheng, 2010). However, it also points to what PEAs commodify aside from intimacy – the national identity of domestic workers associated with idealized notions of MDWs and intimacy and therefore “quality” or professional candidates (Goffman, 1959; Tyner, 1999). Focusing on transnational recruitment agencies involved in exporting labour, Marchetti, Geymonat, and Di Bartolomeo (2022:3906) document activists’, trade unionists’ and academics’ concern that agencies also reproduce precarity among MDWs because of the “temporariness of migration” that restricts their mobility in the labour market. These studies report that employers’ demands are largely tied to issues of control and consent in the employment relationship and that I argue, attempt to stifle domestic workers’ intimate work culture in favour of employers’ efforts at boundary maintenance.

In relation to my research, South Africa therefore provides a useful case study to illustrate how labour legislation serves as a control mechanism and social distancing tool – one that is linked to the social construction of idealized domestic workers but also the micropolitics of the intimate workplace. Some of the major contributions related to PEAs’ appeal among clients because of labour legislation and boundary work are outlined below.

2.4.3. South African PEAs and the Legal Context

The decent work agenda remains a central theme in the PEA context. Immigration policies in receiving countries, the *kefala* system, the regulation of PEAs, and the local specificities of monitoring and regulating labour compliance in countries with deeply rooted traditional informal hiring methods affect the transformative potential of PEAs to support domestic workers’ employment rights. The issue of labour compliance, monitoring and regulation is no different in South Africa. Despite an upward trend in providing domestic workers with employment contracts and minimum wages, various surveys have identified limitations in measuring and enforcing labour compliance (Matjeke, Viljoen and Blaauw, 2012; Du Toit, 2010; Du Toit, 2013). This includes labour inspectors’ restrictions when employers prevent them from entering private households and the shortage of labour inspectors to monitor and investigate abuses reported by domestic workers and “rogue” agencies (Du Toit, 2013; ILO, 2016).

Unlike international studies, South Africa’s socio-legal context shifts attention to employers’ perceptions and responses to labour regulation in the domestic sector and reveals how this factor influences the type of PEA services used. Research on PEAs in South Africa remains scant, but PEAs are alluded to or discussed briefly in some of the key contributions regarding developments in post-apartheid domestic work (Fish, 2006b; Ally, 2010). However, media and research reports have focused primarily on informal or rogue agencies that outsource cleaning services or syndicates involved in trafficking women from rural to urban areas in Cape Town, rather than PEAs that specialize in placements (Merten, 2001; Fish, 2006b; Budlender, 2013). Du Toit (2013:199) suggests that "[t]he lack of attention paid to these agencies at a policy and administrative level creates the impression that they are beyond the reach of the law and can act with impunity". At the same time, placement PEAs are made invisible, with no comprehensive focus on their developments in post-apartheid South Africa. I draw attention to these type of agencies since they nonetheless form part of domestic workers' recruitment strategy to access work.

For example, a close reading of recent studies shows domestic workers use placement PEAs and informal agencies as a recruitment strategy in South Africa. In these studies, managers or directors of agencies are identified as key informants who describe the persistent issue of informality and employers' non-compliant status (Baison, 2021; Jinnah, 2020). Baison (2021) and Jinnah's (2020) research focused on Zimbabwean MDWs' experiences of domestic work in Pretoria and Johannesburg and the different recruitment methods available to them. Jinnah (2020) refers to three agencies – one informal, and the others appear to be formal, yet this is not made explicit in the research article. Baison's (2021) research included four agencies, three of which were privately owned businesses and the other an "informal" church-based agency.

Neither Jinnah (2020) nor Baison (2021) frame their research within the context of the PEA framework (ILO, 1997) which has implications for investigating, more broadly, the transformative potential of PEAs to support domestic workers' employment rights. However, their research is useful for understanding the diverse recruitment and hiring methods domestic workers use and MDWs' experiences of domestic work within the migratory and regional care chains framework. Jinnah (2020:221) reports that one of the agencies "noted that far too many employers in their data bases (in total, among four agencies, 1500 employers were recorded) offered less than minimum wages and did not recognize the need to ensure that employees have a written contract". Consequently, Jinnah's (2020) findings reiterate the point raised earlier that the transformative potential of PEAs is absent if employers and domestic workers are left to negotiate the terms of the employment relationship after a placement. Furthermore, Jinnah's (2020) findings suggest that PEAs are not labour compliant. Therefore, the extent to which agencies play an active role in assuring better domestic work is unclear, given that PEAs are not the unit of analysis in current research. This study, however, attempts to engage with this research gap.

David Du Toit's research on housecleaning service companies is a notable exception to the limited in-depth research on PEAs in South Africa. Du Toit's (2013; 2021) research offers a critical appraisal regarding the proliferation of outsourced cleaning services, from the perspective of employers and domestic workers (2013; 2021). Du Toit's (2013; 2020; 2021) research locates outsourced cleaning services in the context of the shift from direct to indirect employment arrangements. Like Baison (2021) and Jinnah (2020), private employment agencies are not framed within the context of the literature on PEAs nor the guiding framework regarding their practices (ILO, 2011). Nevertheless, these studies offer critical insights into the socio-legal context for understanding clients' or employers' motivation to use PEAs. I identify two main themes that inform how I have approached my study on PEAs that specialize in placements.

First, in terms of context, by the late 1990s domestic workers were afforded the same rights as workers employed across other sectors through the BCEA. Since the domestic sector is recognized as a vulnerable sector – where there are insufficient possibilities for collective bargaining to reach minimum wage agreements between employers and employees – minimum wages were determined through Sectoral Determination 7 (SD7) in 2002 (Republic of South Africa, 2002). Solomon (2013), a labour and business adviser, comments:

> South Africans who employ domestic workers have learned to their cost that employing these workers requires them to follow the procedures and requirements of the labour laws as laid out in the Basic Conditions of Employment and Labour Relations Acts (LRA). As such, they are subject to the same legal constraints as the CEO of a large company would be.

In mapping labour compliance and decent work for domestic workers, Du Toit (2013) argues that employers have reacted to restructuring from above (that is, the state's role in implementing labour legislation to protect domestic workers) with "indifference or resistance".[13] The KwaZulu-Natal Domestic Workers' Trade Union, for instance, declared that since the onset of labour legislation there has been a proliferation of PEAs offering former employers an opportunity to engage in part-time work arrangements through them to avoid the minimum wage and the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) if labour disputes were lodged by disgruntled employees (Naude, 2003). From this viewpoint, the boom in PEAs, particularly outsourced cleaning services, is depicted as a response to employers' knee-jerk reaction to state-led labour regulatory intervention in the domestic sector.[14]

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[13] See Webster and Von Holdt (2005) for South African case studies on workplace restructuring in South Africa.

Second, both labour legislation and the "labour broker model" is constructed as an employment arrangement that denies the relevance of intimacy in work that is inherently intimate.[15] This is largely the case because PEAs employ domestic workers and clients benefit from the triangular employment relationship. Research shows that clients generally favour outsourcing cleaning services because of the efficient, rational, impersonal employment arrangement (Mendez, 1998; Du Toit, 2013). At a superficial level this employment arrangement signals well-maintained boundaries within the private household because a service is purchased from a third party. However, as Zelizer (2002:27) argues, "intimate social transactions coexist with monetary transactions", irrespective of the employment arrangement under review. In other words, when domestic workers enter private households, they gain access to knowledge that a PEA may not have access to and intimate details about the client's life. Therefore, while outsourcing cleaning services may marginally limit intimacy in different ways, the service bought remains intimate even if the client is absent or the domestic worker is supervised by the agent (Mendez, 1998; Du Toit, 2013).

The issue of intimacy and employers' experience of boundary work is arguably one the main reasons clients and former employers outsource cleaning services to intermediaries. Du Toit's (2021) research found that clients or former employers outsource "trust, control and power relations". Du Toit's (2021) findings indicate that clients or former employers of domestic workers turn to PEAs because of theft, which affects the interpersonal relationship. Fish

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[14] See Hartley (2004), Khoisan (2004). Bell (2007), and Jooste (2009).

[15] There is no data available on the number of private employment agencies operating in South Africa which offer services that include permanent placements or temporary employment services such as the rent-a-maid option. See, for example, comments on this issue by Budlender (2013), Fish (2006b) and Ally (2010): "The number of domestic work agencies in the country is unknown, as is the number of those that make permanent placements and those that operate as TES" (Budlender, 2013:11).

(2006b:111) explains that trustworthiness is an important attribute of domestic workers and that employers feel concerned when trust is not established in a relationship, fearing a "threat to their personal property and belongings". One of Fish's (2006) participants shared her fear regarding substantial threats: "What if you come back and there's absolutely nothing in your flat…it happened a couple of times, they cleaned out…they stole most of my stuff" (Fish, 2006b:111). When using a PEA, clients benefit from PEAs supervising domestic workers but also attending to disciplinary matters related to theft, if it occurs. Du Toit's (2013) research on housecleaning service companies in Stellenbosch reveals that clients felt liberated from making UIF, medical aid and pension payments, since it became the agency's responsibility. Overall, clients "expressed great relief at avoiding these responsibilities and interpersonal relations, which were described as 'a schlep', 'a painful process' and 'very difficult' (Du Toit, 2013:106). Du Toit (2013:98) infers that perhaps labour regulation has indeed led to a growth in housecleaning service companies. My research attempts to explore this particular line of reasoning in relation to formal PEAs that specialize in placements.

Clients favour the triangular employment relationship because they can distance themselves, through the PEA, from managing or controlling a domestic worker. By doing so, they also attempt to bypass the power dynamic between "maid and madam". Yet some clients reported frustration with this arrangement, since they lose control over what tasks domestic workers can do, and cannot request additional tasks because of the pay-by-task model typical of intermediaries' work organization, including platform domestic work companies (Mendez, 1998; Ally, 2010; Du Toit, 2021). Further, Du Toit (2021) found that some clients feel uncomfortable when different workers come into their home, revealing that the impersonal relationship can also be challenging because a "stranger" is in their home. Du Toit (2021) concludes that employers' decisions to use outsourced cleaning services are therefore complex. In sum, feeling uncomfortable with strangers cleaning their homes, not having control over the labour process, and changing family and household needs (Du Toit 2020; 2021) can also explain why clients opt for placements with PEAs. I agree with Du Toit's (2021) assertion regarding the complex factors at play when employers' decide to use a PEA. However, to reiterate my earlier concern, I caution against a singular approach to exploring the proliferation of PEAs in South Africa on the basis of focusing only one core service. Further, I disagree with the literature that falls short of acknowledging the intimate nature of domestic work, even if it domestic work is outsourced.

2.5. Migration and the hiring queue

The proliferation of PEAs that offer outsourced cleaning forms part of the national debate about the impact of the 1997 BCEA on employment practices in vulnerable sectors in South Africa (Ewart & Du Toit, 2005; Johnston, 2007). Ewart and Du Toit (2005) observe how the state's effort to improve working conditions for farm workers through labour legislation prompted farmers to impose casualization, externalization, and contractualization as a means of retaining autonomy. Johnston (2007:494) reported similar patterns in the eastern part of the Free State, finding that farmers "preference for migrant workers is not just a simple issue of reducing labour costs" but rather a strategy to avoid legal obligations to South African workers. Research therefore demonstrates that employers have devised strategies such as casualization and employing foreign nationals to avoid transformation in the labour market under the guise that migrants are "docile" compared to locals who are likely to engage in union activity (Johnston, 2007; Hall, 2013). Johnston (2007) argues that employers are complicit in structuring migration opportunities for migrant workers, but to their own benefit. Consequently, employers' motivation – to evade workers' employment rights – impacts recruitment trends and gives rise to a hiring queue that orders jobseekers according to race, gender and ethnicity (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003). At a national level, employers' responses and the consequences of the state's "restructuring from above" initiative have unintentionally demobilized trade unions and their potential to represent a growing pool of casual workers (Ally, 2010; Grossman & Ngwane, 2011). Sitas (2008; 2010) has referred to trade unions' inability to represent workers' interests because of neoliberal capitalism as a "crisis of representation", one that has had serious consequences on households too.

Like the agriculture sector, employers' tactics in the domestic sector include ad hoc employment arrangements, outsourced cleaning services, the use of informal agencies as labour brokers and employing undocumented migrant workers to retain autonomy (Ally, 2009; Baison, 2021; Du Toit, 2021). What follows, then, is a discussion of the enabling and constraining circumstances that affect Zimbabwean MDWs' opportunities in South-South regional care chains because of socio-political and economic crises. These debates are critical for locating MDWs' agency in the domestic sector more broadly, thus shifting away from the narrative of victimhood and agency within employment relationships.

2.5.1. Zimbabwean Migration

Since the 1990s, Zimbabweans have migrated to South Africa to escape poverty that intensified with the introduction of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) introduced in 1991. Hadebe (2022:40, 49) argues that ESAP was one of the main causes for the "exodus" of Zimbabweans, setting in motion deindustrialization and consequently massive jobs losses that subjected them to "super-exploitation, casualization and precarity", to the benefit of South African employers and the Zimbabwean government that "instituted mechanisms to siphon as much as possible from remittances". While ESAP was considered a major turning point for migration, other factors such as the 2007 food shortage, political violence linked to Operation Murambatsvina in 2005 and the 2008 elections have all contributed to Zimbabwe's sustained status as a "sending country" (Crush & Tevera, 2010). It is widely documented too, that women were marginalized from policy developments but also severely affected by structural adjustment programmes (Kanyenze & Kondo, 2011; Jinnah, 2020). Cross border migration and engaging in informal work in the labour market emerged as crucial survival strategies that Zimbabwean women adopted to sustain their households (Crush & Tevera, 2010; Hadebe, 2022). Cross-border migration also gave rise to Southern African regional care chains, similar to the patterns discussed earlier on the export of MDWs from the Global South to the Global North because of SAPs (Chang, 2016). With the advent of job losses and hyperinflation, Zimbabwean women sought domestic work in Botswana and South Africa because of its low barriers to access (Nyamnjoh, 2006). From secretaries to teachers, many experienced deskilling and downward status mobility as they took up domestic work to support their families (Moorhouse & Cunningham, 2010).

Academics have lamented the difficulty of determining the number of migrants entering and living in the country because of insufficient data and the difficulty of capturing undocumented migrant workers. The conservative estimation is that there are between one and one and a half million Zimbabweans in South Africa, while elsewhere, estimates are as high as two or three million, and more recently five million (Kgosana and Plessis, 2010; Hlatshwayo, 2019; Chabalala, 2022). Trimikliniotis, Gordon and Zondo (2008) describe these estimates as "guestimates". There is no consensus on how many Zimbabweans live and work in South Africa. Yet these "guestimates" have fuelled institutional xenophobia, xenophobic attacks against migrants and, consequently, South African migration policy developments to regularize migration that perpetuate insecure citizenship status and precarious working conditions among Zimbabwean nationals.

2.5.2. Migration Policy

Zimbabweans' migration to South Africa ranges from risky border crossings to short-term 90-day tourist visiting visas established through the SADC regional protocol, temporary asylum permits renewed monthly or every 90 days, asylum and special work permits (Republic of South Africa, 1998; Baison, 2021). Given the high number of asylum applications and deportations due to undocumented status, various policy measures were implemented to regularize Zimbabwean migration. There were three iterations of the work permit initiative. The first permits, under the Dispensation of Zimbabwean Project (DZP), were granted from 2010 to 2014. The second, the Zimbabwean Special Permit (ZSP) was offered from 2015 to 2017, followed thereafter by the third iteration, the Zimbabwean Exemption Permit (ZEP) which took effect from 2018 to 2021.

These measures received mixed reviews. On the one hand, the special permits were praised for offering Zimbabweans opportunities to work legally, albeit with temporary restrictions and no access to permanent residency thereafter, but on the other, it was criticized for being born out of institutional xenophobia designed to "safeguard" South Africa's labour market and ease the xenophobic tensions that deny migrants' human dignity (Vanyoro, 2019; Hungwe, 2020; Baison, 2021). Nyakabawu (2021) describes waiting for permits as legal violence that creates a system of perpetual renewal and "liminal legality" which threatens their livelihoods and personhood. Nyakabawu (2021) adds that the Department of Home Affairs' perception that the permit system was a success was questionable, given that an estimated one and a half million Zimbabweans were undocumented. The DZP was first granted to 275 000 Zimbabweans and then to 250 000 Zimbabweans. The ZSP and ZEP, however, were only granted to 178 000 Zimbabweans (Chabalala, 2022). Aside from stringent application assessments that favour skilled migrants, these permits are unaffordable to many.

Since very few Zimbabweans benefited from these initiatives, Vanyoro (2019) argues that South Africa's immigration policies perpetuated precarity and uncertainty, leaving many undocumented. As such, migration policy has entrenched social inequalities in the labour market, institutionalizing insecurity that ultimately places Zimbabwean migrants at the top of the hiring queue because of their migrant status but renders them vulnerable to the whims of employers as they search for better work opportunities (Nyamnjoh, 2006; Hungwe, 2020; Hadebe, 2022, Lorgat, 2024).

Having established a brief overview of the policy context, next I focus on how researchers describe Zimbabwean MDWs and MDWs responses to precarity because of their citizenship status.

2.5.3. Zimbabwean MDWs

There is a growing interest in Zimbabwean MDWs in South Africa's domestic sector because they constitute the largest group of domestic workers compared to other African nationals that make up regional care chains (Rugunanan & Smit 2018; Vanyoro, 2019; Jinnah, 2020; Baison, 2021). Despite domestic work being covered by labour legislation and South Africa ratifying the ILO's Convention on Domestic Workers (2011, No. 189), an overwhelming number of studies report that Zimbabwean women fall victim to non-compliant employers in a sector that has not lost its informal and undervalued status (Du Toit, 2013; Rugunanan & Smit, 2018; Jinnah, 2020). Their positionality in South Africa's domestic sector, alongside their agency or everyday coping strategies, have given rise to what Batisai (2022) calls for – theorizing from the South. Important theoretical concepts have emerged to explain the implication of migrants' denizen status – that is, lacking the entitlements associated with industrial citizenship rights and the decent work agenda (Standing, 2011).

Jinnah (2020:2010) proposes "negotiated precarity" as an analytical tool to define transactions that provide survival opportunities but at the same time "render people vulnerable", drawing attention to the complexities between (il)legality and (in)formality that marginalizes or excludes MDWs because of their insecure citizenship status. Like Hlatshwayo (2019), Jinnah (2020) argues that migrants' agency is intertwined with their interactions with various systems, including informal agencies. Hlatshwayo (2019) refers to MDWs' condition as "precarious resistance", emphasizing the duality of precarious working conditions and resistance as a form of individual and isolated agency to improve their situation in whatever ways possible. Zimbabwean MDWs ability to negotiate precarity is informed and influenced by their established networks that they rely on in the absence of trade union representation (Nyamnjoh, 2006; Hlatshwayo, 2018; Jinnah, 2020; Lorgat, 2024). However, as I discuss in Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight, networks are more than instrumental information banks, but rather represent the rational formation of solidarity among informally organized MDWs through their cultural formations as an alternative form of mobilization.

Aside from experiences related to informality, the issue of who is a "suitable" worker is a cross-cutting theme in South Africa's vulnerable sectors. However, it is important to note that informality and "suitability" are presented as interrelated themes to describe the situation of MDWs yet there is inadequate reference to, or theorizing of, an intimate work culture. Drawing on various studies on Zimbabwean migrants, "suitability" can be summarized according to four main themes.

First, Zimbabwean nationals are characterized as "different" to South Africans because of their work ethic. Citing Ngwena (2017), Hlatshwayo (2019) argues that the profiling and differentiation of Zimbabwean MDWs is tied to their status as economic migrants – their sole purpose is to work. Second, Machinya's (2022:232) study on Zimbabwean men who wait for construction or "handyman" type work on the side of the road notes that, because of their undocumented status, they go the extra mile to perform their "willingness to be an obedient, flexible, and hardworking workforce". Third, Hungwe (2020:63) proposes that Zimbabweans perceived their favourable status among employers to be because they were "hard-working, intelligent, could speak fluent English, [were] respectful and they maintained consistency in terms of coming to work and executing their tasks". Jinnah (2020) illustrates similar findings from the perspective of employers, who regard Zimbabweans MDWs favourably because of their work ethic and linguistic capital. However, in addition to being reliable and hardworking, the issue of criminality and working in people's homes stands out as a significant marker of difference, where the perception that Zimbabweans are trustworthy is equally important in terms of their work ethic (Jinnah, 2020; Machinya, 2022).

Nyamnjoh's (2005; 2006) research challenges many of the stereotypes outlined above regarding Zimbabwean MDWs who take up employment in South-South regional care chains, specifically Botswana. Nyamnjoh (2005) argues that, in response to poor working conditions, Zimbabwean MDWs are perceived as thieves, stealing employers' belongings, including the madam's husband. In addition, Nyamnjoh (2005:187) notes that "[a]lthough employers are assumed to be in positions of power, exploiting rather than being exploited, their reality is often more nuanced and prone to constant negotiation with and concessions to maids". In other words, "madams" are likely to feel uneasy and taken advantage of by domestic workers' intimate work culture, which reiterates that they are not passive in the employment relation and can and do exercise their agency in different ways, including paying themselves because of need, desperation and exploitation by indifferent employers (Nyamnjoh, 2005).

Nyamnjoh's (2005) contribution, therefore, signals the micropolitics in the intimate workplace that produce uncertainties and tensions between domestic workers and employers that I outlined earlier. By locking fridges, not giving domestic workers keys to the house, only allowing them to work when the children are home, and choosing to clean their own bedrooms, employers engage in boundary work to exercise control and maintain distance for fear of theft or pilfering (Nyamnjoh, 2005). Overall, the profiling and differentiation of domestic workers in South-South care chains shows that African domestic workers are stereotyped on the basis of their nationality and their "inventive" intimate work culture. In profiling domestic workers, employers construct stereotypes that point to the fluid nature of recruitment and hiring patterns too. Ultimately, the issue of intimacy and feeling "comfortable" or in control of the employment relationship also explains why the hiring queue shifts in favour of some candidates over others.

Fourth, considering the above, employers prefer "'cooperative' to 'combative' and deferential over rebellious employees" (Hungwe 2020:56-57). Although MDWs have access to employment rights despite the likelihood of being undocumented, they are either fearful or ignorant of the institutional mechanism (the CCMA) available to challenge labour abuses in the domestic sector, more so than South African domestic workers (Ally, 2009; Vanyoro, 2019; Jinnah, 2020). In reality however, MDWs fear deportation and are therefore highly dependent on their employers to earn a living, with employers having further means of control over them and their work ethic (Baison, 2021). Labour laws are perceived as "not employer friendly", especially among those who have paid hefty fines after losing cases at the CCMA despite feeling that they had followed the necessary labour procedures with relevant documentation (citing David Du Toit as a key informant, Vanyoro, 2019:26). Unsurprisingly, an overwhelming number of studies indicate that MDWs are preferred over locals because of employers' perception that they are less likely to be rebellious (Vanyoro, 2019).

These studies offer important insights regarding how and why Zimbabwean migrant workers develop a niche in low-waged sectors in South Africa. However, given the research focus there is scant reference to Zimbabwean migrant workers' work ethic in relation to the literature on workers' work culture, and in particular an intimate work culture because of the nature of domestic work. Machinya's (2022) research is a notable exception, although his focus is on Zimbabwean male day labourers. In relation to how undocumented migrants work culture arises, Machinya's (2022:232) argues that they "inadvertently discipline themselves, thus actively contributing to their own exploitation" (Machinya, 2022:232). Similar arguments can be traced in the domestic work scholarship. This thesis, however, extends this line of reasoning by problematizing victimhood and compliance in Chapter Three and Chapter Eight, focussing on how MDWs mobilize their intimate work culture through their cultural formation as an expression of their autonomy rather than merely disciplining themselves. In other words, how, and in what ways, are Zimbabwean MDWs, with poor trade union representation and in atomized workplaces, mobilizing their intimate work culture to access formal work through PEAs? Therefore, in my reading of the rich literature from the South, what is absent in the hiring queue debates is the interplay between formal PEAs that place domestic workers in the intimate workplace before and after recruiting domestic workers. This thesis questions the stereotypes, informality and exploitation narrative in South Africa's specific legal context by critically engaging with the interplay between what employers' demand and domestic workers' cultural formation.

2.6. Conclusion

This chapter mapped the complex nature of the domestic employment relationship because of the micropolitics between employers and domestic workers. The chapter shows that the hiring queue in domestic work continues to be raced, classed, gendered and ethnicized because of a system of capitalism that devalues the status of domestic work in a poorly regulated sector. The persistent demand for ideal type domestic workers risks essentializing domestic workers as victims and resisters within employment relationships, thereby neglecting their strategies to exercise their autonomy against vulnerability more broadly. Rather than assume that MDWs' status as "comfortable others" is based primarily on their denizen status, this chapter lays the foundation for critically engaging with how MDWs mobilize their intimate culture through their cultural formations to exercise their right to better work, discussed next.

Chapter 3. Theorizing Cultural Formations among Domestic Workers

3.1. Introduction

The underlying premise of this study is that the sphere of intimate labour presents a complex set of issues that must be understood primarily as expressions of agency among domestic workers, employers, and PEAs. The previous chapter framed recruitment and hiring choices as an interactive process, but one that is located in systems of inequality. In this chapter I argue for a cultural formations approach to focus on MDWs' rational collective undertaking, which demonstrates their agency when they mobilize their intimate work culture informally. By focusing on the cultural formations approach, my aim is to shift away from essentializing MDWs as victims who merely discipline themselves in domestic work relations. The chapter begins by outlining the cultural formations approach, its main developments for labour studies and its applicability to MDWs. Second, I discuss an intimate work culture and identity as social behaviour using the dramaturgical model of social life and impression management which is necessary for situating MDWs' "idealized" collective representation as comfortable others. In relation to the cultural formations approach, I argue that the presentation of self is important for understanding how MDWs construct their identity as comfortable others through interactions and workplace practices with employers and agencies. Third, I define and explain ethnic niche formation, given its significance in migration studies regarding how and why recruitment and hiring patterns favour one national group over others. However, I propose the concept "identity niching" as an analytic tool so that an intimate work culture remains central to understanding the situational context of recruitment and hiring trends beyond a domestic worker's ethnicity.

3.2. Cultural Formations

There is rich literature on cultural formations across different disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, history, politics and diaspora studies. Ong (1997:324) argues that cultural formations, including diasporas, "are grounded in internal hegemonies and systems of inequalities". In research on social movements, Salman and Assies (2017:62) describe cultural formations as complex sites of contested meanings that inform an individuals' social and political reconfigurations. Despite different research settings and foci, studies on cultural formations have focused on the cultural logic of identity politics within capitalist regimes. In these studies, there are three cross-cutting themes.

First, drawing on E.P. Thompson's seminal work on *The Making of the English Working Class* and the moral economy, culture is integral to understanding class formations as a social and historical process (Thompson, 1971; Ong, 1991; Batzel et al., 2015). Second, cultural formations are framed from the vantage point of understanding working class struggle against control and power relations in systems of capitalist exploitation (Ong, 1991; Batzel et al., 2015). Third, and related to the former point, the issue of resistance and accommodation is integral to understanding how cultural formations arise in systems of inequality through material and discursive practices. Regarding the latter point, and at the intersection of understanding identity politics in specific contexts, Raymond Williams' notion of cultural formations as the lived and felt reality of working-class struggles is paramount for understanding social reality and the dynamic of social change (Ong, 1991; Clarissa & Teresa, 2001). These cross-cutting themes can be traced in migration scholarship and in South African labour studies, with which this study is concerned.

In the sociology of work and labour studies, cultural formation-based research has almost exclusively focused on worker militancy or the prototypical male factory worker in the manufacturing sector (Sitas, 1983; Bhengu, 2014). Later studies shifted attention to the gendered nature of precarious forms of labour and livelihood opportunities (Garba, 2017; Xulu-Gama, 2017). What is noteworthy about this growing body of scholarship is that African scholars have made a concerted effort to theorize from below, drawing on empirical data that is context specific, producing theoretical extensions and concepts inductively from an analytic approach Sitas (1983) coined "the analysis of culture and working life" (Webster, 1991; Keim, 2011; Keim, 2016; Webster, 2018). The central theory that I adopt for this study is the culture and working life analysis approach (the cultural formations approach) and its various extensions and different foci to theorize from below, using ethnography to explain social change.

The cultural formations approach draws attention to the gains ordinary people make when faced with incomprehensible struggles and human indignities in their workplaces. More specifically, this approach focuses on how workers mobilize their work culture to exercise control over their working conditions. Sitas' (1983, 2009) research, like that of other scholars engaging in South

African labour studies, forms part of what Keim (2011:130) refers to as “counterhegemonic currents” because it represents “original, autonomous sociologies at the periphery”, which this study aims to adopt.[16]

Webster (2018:164) argues that Sitas’ (1983, 2009) approach was novel because, unlike other labour research clusters in South Africa and beyond, “it was necessary to follow workers into their rooms…” to avoid the hegemonic influence of the “economism of the dominant labour process approach” from the North that had gotten a hold on South African labour studies too. In other words, the Marxist labour process theory was limited for explaining why African migrant workers mobilized militant trade unions (Keim, 2016). Further, black workers’ culture was neither disabling nor a reflection of their “perceived inadequacies in the modern workplace” (Webster, 2018:164). Rather, by going beyond the workplace to understand collective mobilization and make sense of workers’ lived realities in relation to their social milieu, Sitas (1983) took seriously the many pressures migrant workers encountered and collectively resisted through their supportive associational networks under racist capitalist regimes of control. In the various extensions of the cultural formations approach, scholars have attempted to link the micro to the macro, bridge the perceived separation between the rural and urban and reproductive and productive work, and address the persistent marginalization of black women’s informal mobilization in community-based struggles (Bhengu, 2014; Xulu-Gama, 2017). What follows is an overview of the cultural formations approach, its development as a tool of analysis and its relevance for understanding how domestic workers mobilize against exploitation despite the atomized nature of their intimate work and significantly low trade union representation in the domestic sector.

3.2.1. Overview of the Cultural Formations Approach

Cultural formations describe a collective undertaking among groups, networks and informal associations in response to their experience of marginalization and oppression in society under industrial or global capitalism.[17] Sitas (1996) argues that this form of mobilization (militant or otherwise) must be understood in the broad context of migrant workers' resistance against marginalization (Sitas, 1983; 1996:235). In his study on the working lives of African migrant workers on the East Rand, Sitas (1983) uncovered how the way a worker works emerges as a response to the everyday social pressures they encountered under apartheid. By using culture as a category of analysis, and more importantly focusing on the form of the activity or the way one behaves, a deeper understanding of the nature and causes of discontent (in his study, worker militancy) could be furthered by challenging common interpretations of worker militancy (Sitas, 1983:22-23). By doing so, Sitas (1983) situated culture within the context of capitalist society during the apartheid era. More importantly, Sitas shifted attention to the interconnections between the productive and reproductive spheres of life. By doing so, this approach allowed for an exploration of how workers' exercised control over their conditions of life within and outside of production instead of seemingly adapting to alienation and control (Sitas, 1983; Sitas, 1985). As such, Sitas (1983) considered the "private" and "backstage" spaces (Goffman, 1959) that were often absent in labour studies in the 1980s, which focused almost exclusively on factory workplaces. Using this approach, Sitas (1983) made important links between the private (hostels that accommodated workers, and also the rural-urban linkages among migrants) and their work experiences (male metalworkers) to explain the nature and causes of discontent among the African working class.

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[16] Scott’s (1985) “everyday forms of resistance”, which has generated much attention despite not focusing on “working class resistance”, discusses similar themes regarding resistance and peasants forming “collectives” to improve their conditions of work to consider the interplay between power and capital. In this thesis, I have engaged with South African based scholarship in addition to influential texts related to domestic work, with the aim of recognising, celebrating and extending theories from the periphery.

Sitas (2009:376) explains that when workers migrate, they encounter four specific pressures: alienation (feeling "indifferent to the priorities of capital" because workers are "alienated from the product of their labour and the work process itself"); disvaluation (challenges to existing normative patterns and mutual relationships that give rise to new efforts to establish binding norms and values and systems of socialization); disoralia (new forms of expression because former modes of communication, language and its meaning-generating capacities are challenged in new locations); and degendering (when gender roles are unsettled because of capitalism's new spaces and demands) (see also Sitas, 1985:2, 38-39). Each of these pressures disrupt the lives of working-class migrants abruptly, bringing about a sense of feeling disrupted from the familiar. It is these multiple pressures that give rise to cultural formations. Cultural formations, therefore, occur when people recoil from these pressures "and in that process group together with others to refract their force and create communities of meaning and practices that regulate everyday life" (Sitas, 2009:376).

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[17] Sitas (1983) explains that the notion of cultural formations initially emerged in South African scholarship on black consciousness. However, in his critique of this body of scholarship he makes an astute observation on the usage of culture. First, Sitas (1983:37) argues that "'culture' became [a] synonym of the totality of black experience". Second, in relation to this observation, it gave rise to an ambiguous usage of the term that did not lend itself to explaining certain subject-matters sociologically. Instead, "whenever economic relationships, processes of political struggle, artistic forms of expression and modes of behaviour or working-class norms were referred to, culture became their definitive source" (Sitas, 1983:37).

The cultural formation approach is an invitation to understand processes of accommodation and resistance within the workplace, with a greater emphasis on the cultural logic of the formation that allows workers to mobilize and thus explain social change in society. The outcome of deflecting certain pressures that are experienced in everyday life can emerge incrementally rather than immediately – thus signifying the everyday struggles of workers. Some typical outcomes documented in labour studies include strikes and trade union mobilization (Bonnin, 1987; Bhengu, 2014). However, these efforts to mobilize need not be trade-union based. Instead, they can appear in practical ways, through what Sitas (2009:375) refers to as "defensive combinations" to regulate work rhythms, social interactions and relationships "to authority and power". Here, workers bear the everyday pain and despair of their situation, but with the hope and aspiration for bringing about significant change in their lives and/or for the collective's interest. In its simplest form, significant change for the individual may include adopting resilience-based strategies to get a better paid job or to "stick it out"; for the collective, striking to improve wages or working conditions. Either of these strategies, however, are attempts to mobilize struggles into concrete actions and thus are not strategies that on the surface appear to be merely accommodating of the conditions that marginalize workers. Sitas (2009) argues that while defensive combinations need not lead to a cultural formation, they can when characterized by associational ties and redistributive networks which cement the autonomy of the cultural formation among migrant workers. This point is elaborated on further in the following sections.

3.2.2. Developments in the Cultural Formation Approach

Various scholars have applied or extended the cultural formations approach in their research since the 1980s, to analyse culture and working life in South Africa and beyond (Bonnin, 1987;

Mapadimeng, 2007; Bhengu, 2014; Garba, 2017; Xulu-Gama, 2017). A few researchers have engaged closely with certain theoretical concepts that form part of the cultural formation framework and others have extended the cultural formation approach to describe additional pressures that migrants encounter. Xulu-Gama (2017), for example, applies the cultural formation approach to recent developments in the post-apartheid "hostel" (now referred to as Community Residential Units, CRUs). Moving away from an emphasis on wage labour (Sitas's focus in the 1980s) Xulu-Gama (2017:173) extends her approach to livelihood strategies to illustrate the "different kinds of relations, processes and feelings involved in livelihood procurement" as unemployment continues to rise in South Africa. This creates a much-needed opportunity to explore the uneven development taking place in society and the ways in which households and communities come together or fracture during difficult times (Mosoetsa, 2012). Drawing on Sassen's (2000) argument regarding the "feminization of survival" and patterns of migration, Fakier and Cock (2009:362) argue that there is a "crisis of social reproduction" in South African households, arising from deepening unemployment wherein women shoulder immense responsibilities, including unpaid reproductive labour. In the context of the hostel and community, Xulu-Gama (2017:173) argues that spatial and political dimensions are important additions to the cultural formations framework because "formations converge and divert as much as they are formations and deformations of culture". The strain on households or CRUs is an important consideration since it draws attention to the fluid nature of culture and changes and tensions that emerge over time because of migration, and uneven economic development as households struggle with economic uncertainty. These processes of change contribute to our understanding of the interconnections among various types of formations because of conflict and power, which exemplify the nature of discontent associated with everyday struggles across a variety of spaces.

In response to Sitas' (1983; 1996) attention to masculinity in hostels during the apartheid era, Xulu-Gama (2017) critically interrogated the description of "degendering" and its applicability to CRUs.[18] By drawing attention to women in CRUs, she argues that the complexity and dynamics of gender, space and livelihood procurement are interwoven. Xulu-Gama's (2017) findings reveal the interconnections between rural and urban areas, productive and reproductive labour, employed and unemployed people, and the gendered aspects of lived experiences that sustain a culture of solidarity among migrant workers. Despite the different research contexts, including the temporal nature of their studies, "degendering" features as a serious and impactful pressure that migrant workers experience. In the context of this study, "degendering" is crucial for understanding the solidarity that emerges among MDWs because of the "burden of care" (Walker, 2018) and "mothering from a distance" (Parreñas, 2001). In what follows, I explain the applicability of "degendering" to the specificities of this study by extending the concept further – based on Hall and Posel's (2019) notion of "fragmenting the family" – to what I refer to as fragmented families, typical of migration flows that are internal and cross-border because of global capitalism.

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[18] It is important to note, too, that much of the labour studies scholarship in South Africa has focused extensively on male worker militancy. Feminist scholars have shifted attention to the invisibility of African women's mobilisation through community-based struggles (see Bonnin, 2007) and within trade unions (see Tshoaedi, 2012). This body of literature has made a critical contribution to debunking the myth that African women were passive in South Africa's struggle around workplace grievances and the apartheid state. Earlier

In my reading of the various studies that use the cultural formation approach, fragmented families are implied but not made explicit. This might be because research has concentrated on specific workplaces, organizational cultures and hostels, and their consequences for rural-urban links or certain kinds of mobilization at the community or workplace level (see for example, Mapadimeng, 2007; Sitas 2009; Bhengu, 2014; Xulu-Gama, 2017). The consequence is that, while both unpaid and paid reproductive labour are mentioned as significant, they are overshadowed by the focus placed on waged work or livelihood procurement among specific cohorts of "workers" and workplaces. Yet workers who are involved in rural-urban-international migration movements most often parent from a distance since they have few or no options to maintain the family unit. Remittances are crucial for the rural-urban or transnational linkages that academics have discovered through their research. However, because families are geographically dispersed, remittances do more than just link the rural to the urban or the transnational to support households—they also provide for the possibility of parenting from a distance.

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research on internal migration and the reasons African women migrated to urban centres also pointedly referred to their agency and unmasked how they creatively and independently tapped into their own networks to access domestic work and transform their lives independently through their social networks (see Bozzoli and Nkotsoe, 1991).

The concept “fragmented families” refers to the ways in which mothering and fathering from a distance is made possible because of industrialization and migration flows under capitalism. Fragmented *families,* therefore, can and should be viewed as a response to an additional pressure that migrant workers encounter and deflect. Yet neither Sitas (1983, 2009) nor Xulu-Gama (2017) link fragmented families (typical of hostels/CRUs and the long history of migration among the African working-class during apartheid and the post-apartheid era) to the pressure of degendering – at least not explicitly. Budlender and Lund (2011) refer to this issue as the legacy of a state-orchestrated destruction of family life, one that no doubt has had a strong bearing on the burden of care, particular among women. Although the experience of fragmented families and degendering can be distinct dimensions of cultural formations – because not all workers bear the burden of childcare as parents – both pressures can easily be linked, because degendering occurs when the gendered roles and responsibilities of *parents* are thrown into disarray because alternative arrangements must be made to accommodate this disruption.

The link between fragmented families and degendering is evident among studies that reveal the far-reaching consequences of rural-urban migration during the apartheid and post-apartheid era. For example, during the apartheid era many African women were relegated to backyard dwellings as live-in domestics in urban areas. One dire consequence of this form of employment was that domestic workers were unable to fulfil their roles as mothers, often leaving their children in the care of others (Cock, 1980; Bozzoli & Nkotsoe 1991; Ally, 2010). Similarly, in the transnational migration literature that focuses on domestic workers, scholars have noted how mothering takes place from a distance – an outcome of the effects of global migration and capitalism on families (Parreñas, 2001, 2015). As such, I argue that there is a need to extend the concept “degendering” further by considering the “hidden abode” of reproductive labour, both paid and unpaid among MDWs. I make this proposal and argument because several studies reveal that due to the nature of their work and socioeconomic situations, women who migrate domestically or across borders without their children continue to bear a disproportionate share of the caregiving responsibilities when “mothering from a distance” (Parreñas, 2001). Thus, when we examine degendering and its applicability to MDWs, for example, the nature and implications of the experience of degendering are crucial for understanding the interconnections between the burden of care and the cultural formations that are likely to emerge (see Chapter Seven).

Capitalism’s new spaces unquestionably devalue the symbolic capital of migrant workers – what Sitas (2009) refers to as disoralia – by challenging longstanding communication, language and its meaning-generating capacities. Importantly, when migrants’ symbolic capital is devalued, their sense of belonging is at stake, and therefore to deflect this pressure, new communities of meaning are created. These new forms of expression sustain linkages to one’s rural or national identity but at the same time acknowledge the newfound, and oftentimes sustained, urban or transnational identities that emerge. Xulu-Gama (2017) argues that these new expressions, which form part of cultural formations, cannot be seen merely as distinct rural or urban identities but instead embrace aspects of both identities among workers in their new locations. Recognizing how disoralia disrupts but also gives rise to new forms of expression is important because it reiterates the issue of identity and belonging that migrant communities must constantly contend with in their organizational and civic life (Sitas, 2009).

Disvaluation, like alienation, degendering and disoralia – typical pressures that migrants encounter – describes how ordinary people create “binding norms and values and systems of socialization” as a response to the challenges they face in new locations that negatively affect normative patterns and reciprocal relationships (Sitas, 1996:237). Therefore, efforts are made to recreate new meanings of belonging when “homegirl” or “homeboy” networks or spaces of spirituality are invoked in novel ways, whether in the hostel or elsewhere. Garba’s (2017) ethnographic study of African migrants at the Frankfurt African Muslim Association (AMA), in Germany, serves as an example of how new meanings of belonging emerge. Garba (2017) expands on the pressure of disoralia and disvaluation that workers experience and deflect through the concept “performed homes”. Garba (2017) argues that this concept is crucial for understanding the ways in which people recreate new norms that include and extend everyday practices typical of “home” in combination with their lived experiences in Germany. According to Garba (2017:123), performed home is an “attempt to fill a vacuum created by the distancing of workers from their places of usual residence under dire conditions”, and is evident in the everyday. The typical examples he discusses include supportive and reciprocal relationships that cement the autonomy of the cultural formation, as well as seemingly mundane activities such as eating African food or praying at the AMA.

Both Garba (2017) and Xulu-Gama (2017) examine religion or spirituality within cultural formations to emphasis belonging and thus the ties that bind. Their findings suggest that, far from being merely religious gathering places for migrant communities, churches and mosques can become sites of struggle and solidarity due to their "meaning generating capacities" (Sitas, 1996:237). In other words, moral sanctions that encourage remittances and reciprocating by providing and maintaining support systems or safety nets for those in need, capture the essence of a culture of solidarity characteristic of cultural formations (Garba, 2017; Sitas, 2009; Xulu-Gama, 2017). The autonomy of the cultural formation among migrant workers is therefore cemented by these associational ties and redistributive networks (Sitas, 2009).

3.2.3. Cultural Formations among Migrant Domestic Workers

There are no studies to date that apply the cultural formations approach to domestic workers. Yet several studies describe and discuss the typical pressures MDWs encounter in the Global North and South when domestic workers enter new locations and contend with the political and spatial pressure of the intimate workplace (Cock, 1980; Parreñas, 2001, 2015; Cheng, 2006; Ally, 2010). In addition, a vast body of literature engages the topic of domestic workers' resistance and agency to demonstrate the ways in which they consent or respond to their conditions of employment. For example, Nicole Constable (1997:2007) argues that "domestic workers both actively resist and willingly participate in their own "oppression," in different ways and to different degrees. Yet they are also subject to, and participate in, more covert and insidious forms of self-discipline that can undermine and restrict their ability to create fundamental social change". Similarly, Pande's (2014) critical review of domestic work research observes that even though these studies are powerful they generally conclude that the varying individual acts of resistance "seldom transform structures of subordination".[19] Pande (2014) adds that when MDWs engage in meso-level forms of resistance – for instance through strategic dyads and informal communities – such strategies emerge as coping strategies. Nevertheless, Pande (2014) notes that the significance of these strategies is that they have an impact on work-based practices when domestic workers have few support systems and little union representation. What Pande (2013) describes, therefore, are the practical ways or defensive combinations domestic workers adopt. But if one is to take seriously the cultural formations of domestic workers, one needs to interrogate the ways in which these practical coping strategies can give rise to cultural formations, and how. This study turns its attention to this question.

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[19] Neethi (2012) makes a similar argument in relation to workers' responses to labour control regimes exercised by the church in the electronics manufacturing sector in India.

Cultural formations are complex sites of struggle. The cultural logic that underpins cultural formations lies in the varying ways workers' behaviours can be regulated through norms and practices typical of the moral economy. Sayer (2007:262) describes the moral economy as "the moral norms and sentiments that structure and influence economic practices, both formal and informal, and the way in which these are reinforced, compromised or overridden by economic pressures". Ong (2006:199), on the other hand, draws attention to how the moral economy refers to unequal relational exchanges "based on a morality of reciprocity, mutual obligation, and protection". In the context of cultural formations, the regulation of behaviour fosters a sense of belonging and the construction of shared identity. Cultural formations, therefore, illustrate how a common identity is constructed and regulated among those with similar and shared experiences that enable new modes of mobilization or comradeship in response to those experiences (Sitas, 1983; Bhengu, 2014).

Cheng's (2006) research on Filipina domestic workers and the politics of identity in Taiwan, for example, offers a rich account of how the church represents "home away from home" but also a site of belonging and resistance. Cheng's (2006) study is one of many that account for how MDWs congregate spiritually but also network for social and religious justice on Sundays, when they discuss their employment conditions, migration experience and resistance tactics, and lean into each other for spiritual and network support (Yeoh and Huang, 1998; Constable, 2007; Fernandez, 2014). According to Cheng (2006:215) "[i]t is often the church that has enabled Filipina domestics to grasp their shared structural inferiority and to produce discourses that engender collective consciousness". While the church provides a sense of belonging and a forum for expressing shared grievances, Cheng (2006) identifies hidden scripts that influence work behaviour, such as obedience to employers through the language of God, but also the self-policing of gender and sexual conduct to instil personal dignity and the national pride of "serving the nation" as domestic workers. Similarly, Damodaran (2013:189) documents how Christian institutions have exercised labour control by producing a "sacralised work ethic" among migrant nurses from Kerala, hence partaking in the process of encouraging and supplying nurses in India.

In an electronics manufacturing company in Kerala, Neethi (2012) provides a fascinating account of how the church steps in as recruiter, supplier and disciplinarian of workers when the state retreats. The symbiotic arrangement between the church and the manufacturing firm ensures that the firm is not directly involved in the establishment of a flexible female workforce nor the management of workers. Instead, the priest plays a mediator role between the family, job seeker and the firm. Neethi (2012) exposes the link between the mundane everyday work and religious practices and how workers take part in the complex process of self-reproduction despite the labour control regimes at play. Workers' tactics include gaining favour with the church so that should the occasion arise for discipline, they avoid the full might of disciplinary action. Workers eager to keep in the church's good books may spy on other workers – letting the church know who the productive and unproductive workers are. Drawing on Bayat's (1997) notion of "quiet encroachment", Neethi (2012:1256) describes these forms of resistance as a patient strategy, yet significant because it is an expression of workers' responses to particular workplace constraints. Overall, these sector-based studies show that the church informs and influences labour control regimes in different ways that give rise to cultural formations among workers.

Sitas (2009; 2010) notes that race, ethnicity, gender and class are inscribed within people's cultural formation and therefore can be fraught with contestations and contradictions. Bhengu (2014) observes, however, that "workers are not oblivious to contestations and contradictions in worker formations". In Cheng's (2006) study, explicit reference is made to class and gender-based tensions among domestic workers in the church. The church therefore is a complex site "with both empowering and oppressive meanings to the Filipina labour diaspora" even though it allows for collective identities to be constructed based on their shared racial and national identities (Cheng, 2006:234). Similarly, Garba's (2017) research highlights class-based tensions among African Muslim men at the Mosque despite their shared experiences as precarious migrant workers in Germany. Therefore an important feature of cultural formations is identity formation and, by implication, identity politics.

According to Sitas (1983), identity formation occurs through symbolic and rational discourses when migrants formulate a collective moral behaviour by distinguishing "us" vs "them". Typical distinctions include hostel migrants vs. township people or local vs. foreign nationals. Here, cultural formations call attention to identity and belonging among those responding to marginalization (Sitas, 1983). This form of boundary making occurs through mechanisms such as stereotyping and self-identification. In fact, Sitas (1983:377) argues, such distinctions are not only expressions of their autonomy but "must be understood within a framework of a profound degree of alienation arising both within their objective location in society and their concrete experiences as individual workers". Sitas (1983:41) concludes that this "way of life governed by distinct codes of behaviour" allows workers to "defensively exercise some control over the conditions of life within and outside work relations". These codes of behaviour create meaningful opportunities for workers to, for example, challenge the status quo or gain access to better employment.

This study applies the boundary making mechanisms depicted by the distinct moral codes that are typical of cultural formations to analyse how Zimbabwean MDWs mobilize their identity as comfortable others in their struggle for "decent" work through PEAs. In doing so, I question the ways in which practical coping strategies (defensive combinations) can and do give rise to cultural formations among MDWs. The cultural formations approach is therefore useful in that a concerted effort is placed on understanding how workers, in a seemingly isolated intimate workplace, are closely connected to far-flung networks that cross households and borders but are also rooted in transnational spaces, such as churches, that regulate their behaviour. In Chapter Seven, I discuss the work behaviour that is regulated, encouraged and practiced as MDWs struggle for "decent" work through PEAs. By focusing on MDWs' employment paths, specifically the types of domestic work they are choosing among in the domestic sector, "their strategies become comprehensible" rather than opaque (Salzinger, 1991:142). Ultimately, this study aims to understand "the real gains that ordinary people make" amidst incomprehensible struggle to alleviate the human indignities they encounter in the domestic sector (Sitas, 2009:381).

3.3. Linking an Intimate Work Culture to The Presentation Self

3.3.1. Work Culture and Work Identity

Work culture is an "ideology and practice with which workers stake out a relatively autonomous sphere of action on the job" (Benson, 1983:185). Drawing on the cultural formations approach, Sitas (1983:39) distinguishes between the content and form of work culture by arguing "it is not that he works, but the *way* he works" that is important. Since "[c]ulture is about forms of social behaviour" (Sitas, 1983:39), work culture therefore needs to be understood in terms of worker identity and the agency of workers (and employers) in social relations (Hacking, 2006). According to Dickie (2003), worker identity includes one's personal construction of the self that is associated with the purpose and meaning of work. The "self" and "identity" are interrelated concepts that, when collapsed, allow one to consider the personal sense of being a worker in relation to their socially negotiated and experienced identity. This inter-related process is important because, as Goffman (1959) argues, social relations give rise to the self. The identity labels that arise influence individuals' behaviour and how they respond to what their identity conveys and what is expected of them (Appiah, 2005). Bhengu (2014) argues that workplaces are not bounded spaces because of the relational dynamics of individuals in multiple sites, and among different actors, that inform the construction of workplace orders and cultural formations in everyday life.

Both Benson (1983) and Sitas (1983) emphasize the reactive nature of work culture to workplace oppression, regimes of control or structural constraints. Sitas (1983) describes cultural formations among urban African metalworkers in the historical context of an exploitative capitalist system under apartheid rule, where workers lacked industrial citizenship rights. Instead, African workers were relegated to semi-skilled or, mostly, unskilled work, and expected to be productive for low wages under a racially repressive capitalist system. Whether hidden or overt, the work culture strategies that were adopted captured some of the typical examples of how workers responded to the labour process. For example, African metalworkers "viewed factory and metalwork as slavery" and responded to these conditions by engaging in a work culture that included "restricting output, absenteeism, dodging work and trying to gain as much as possible from the world of slavery" (Sitas, 1983:303). The point here is that the *form* of work culture is illustrated through the *way* a worker works. But the *way* the metalworker works is explained as a response to slave-like conditions – that is, workplace oppression through managerial control and structural constraints.

Sitas' primary objective in his analysis of culture and working life was to move away from depicting culture as a disabling force among black workers that explained their shortcomings in the workplace and instead consider how culture could become a "way of empowering and mobilizing workers" (Webster, 2018:164). In other words, there was an intentional shift away from essentializing workers' identity and work culture negatively. The outcome of this approach was twofold. First, by re-examining culture and working life from this perspective, Webster (2018) argues that the supportive networks that informed and regulated workers' behaviours stood out as an enabling force for different modes of resistance. Secondly, workers' responses were far from mere reflexes – not "a mechanical adaptation to the changing world of work" but instead, as argued by Sitas (1983), a rational response that occurs within and through cultural formations (Webster, 2018:165).

The following section examines selected literature to highlight domestic workers' "inventive" intimate work culture. However, there is a tension between the intimate work culture employers perceive as problematic and the intimate work culture they demand. As I argue later, MDWs rational response to what employers want exemplifies how an intimate work culture can be used to empower and mobilize workers in their struggle for "decent" work through PEAs.

3.3.2. An "Inventive" Work Culture

An intimate work culture is often described in relation to the themes of vulnerability, victimhood and everyday forms of resistance as experienced and exercised by domestic workers defying oppressive working conditions (Pande, 2013). Such responses are not surprising given that domestic work has a long history of falling outside of the status of paid and productive labour. Feminist scholars have provided important insight into employers' demands on workers and, especially, worker's responses to control and unrealistic workloads where labour related protections are absent or unrealized (Cock, 1983; Mendez, 1998; Ally, 2010; Du Toit, 2010). In general, however, feminist scholars acknowledge that domestic employment relationships "operate with rules and values different to other jobs" (Meagher, 1997:2; see also Dill, 1998; Cock, 1983; Romero, 2002; Ally, 2010). Intimacy, and thus an intimate work culture, is a defining feature of the domestic employment relationship and informs recruitment and hiring choices among domestic workers and employers.

Drawing on the moral economy as a lens to understand domestic and care labour in Italy, Näre (2011:401) argues that "when household becomes a locus of paid labour, a labour contract is accompanied by a moral contract. A moral contract is based on normative notions of good and bad, reciprocity, shared duties and responsibilities". Importantly, Näre (2011) examines these notions from the perspective of employers and MDWs – highlighting not only who are the "good" workers, but also who are the "good" employers. While focusing on the personalized nature of the employment relationship, she deconstructs the meaning attached to good madam or family (*brava signora* or *brava famiglia*) and good worker (*brava persona*) through the common expression *brava* (meaning good) and its direct link to maternalism/paternalism. Her research suggests that employers value personality traits and consider work-related stereotypes to be associated with different national groups, while MDWs value feeling respected and treated humanely. In defining a good employer or worker, Näre (2011) notes that mutual affection and love are emphasized rather than better pay or economic necessity. The findings expose the weighted decision domestic workers make when pursing their well-being in the workplace over earning potential (Ashforth et al., 2007). The finding suggests the premium placed on establishing a good employment relationship, especially for MDWs. Näre (2011) does not make explicit reference to an intimate work culture. Instead, Näre (2011) describes the importance of the way a worker works (embodied labour) to illustrate what employers consider makes "good" workers. In doing so, employers place greater emphasis on the way the worker works and how feelings and emotions are used in the exchange of labour in the employment relationship to further both party's interests (Näre, 2011).

In Shireen Ally's (2010) study, *From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State*, explicit reference is made to an *intimate* work culture. Ally (2010:116) argues that before the post-apartheid era, servants derived their power from the ambiguities of intimacy which "allowed them to informally regulate the conditions of their work". The ambiguities of intimacy refer to how workers mobilize intimacy against servitude so that they can exercise control over their work. According to Ally (2010), workers' exercise their agency within the employment relationship by using the very forms of labour control mechanisms that employers rely on as practices of power. This includes maternalism, deploying the myth of "one of the family" and cultivating personalism and dependence in the employment relationship. Ally (2006; 2010) describes these tactics as a "manipulation of intimacy" and as an "inventive" work culture. Furthermore, she explains that the state's efforts to depersonalize the employment relationship by treating domestic workers like any other worker represented a form of state paternalism that workers rejected. While, on the one hand, workers preferred a formal contractual employment relationship that potentially tackled employers' practices of power, on the other they rejected the state's attempts to formalize domestic work because it denied their historically cultivated work culture by assuming that they were passive and thus vulnerable (see Chapter Five and Chapter Six regarding bureaucratic efforts to depersonalize employment as a measure of control in the intimate workplace). Yet, as argued by others too, workers' informal work culture, either overt or covert, is important in the absence of labour protection because it challenges the unreasonable demands employers make (Fish, 2006; Nyamnjoh, 2006).

This study, however, draws on the theoretical conceptualization of the "inventive" intimate work culture to explain some of the coping or resistance strategies workers engage in that negatively affect employers. While the inventive work culture may be an attempt by domestic workers to exercise control over their working conditions, employers frequently perceive it as a form of behavioural deviance. Workers' actions or work performance, in other words, gives rise to "a sense of bother about what people [do], as opposed to who they [are]" (Sitas, 2014:24). The issue of discomfort is therefore inevitable when both employers and domestic workers manipulate intimacy to challenge the power dynamic in the employment relationship. But for employers, this sense of bother stems from feeling a loss of control in the domestic employment relationship too – what I refer to in Chapter Six as "an intimate workplace crisis". What this means, and which is critical for this study, is that the inventive work culture typical of domestic workers' coping strategies is at odds with the intimate work culture employers demand. This study therefore grapples with the tension between the intimate work culture employers demand, and the "inventive" intimate work culture domestic workers often engage in as a response to the domestic work labour process.

The sphere of intimate labour, therefore, presents a complex set of issues that must be understood primarily as expressions of agency among domestic workers, employers and PEAs. As Ally (2009:98) notes "[w]hile domestic workers share an intimacy with their employers, it can be a deeply uncomfortable one, and employers (as well as workers) manage it through various forms of social distancing". This study engages with two specific examples of social distancing in the context of the private employment industry in the domestic sector. First, it considers how employers set out to use PEAs and the various services they offer to find their ideal type of domestic worker – what I refer to as comfortable others – and secondly, how they exercise social distancing by learning how to depersonalize the employment relationship or outsource domestic employment to PEAs. These examples of social distancing with and through PEAs are important because of emotions – the feeling of comfort or discomfort that often arises within the employment relationship because of the tension between worker's "inventive" work culture and the intimate work culture employers demand. The feeling of comfort is directly linked to the intimate work culture that employers demand and workers resist. Thus, in either of the social distancing scenarios offered through PEAs, issues of managerial control over work and the "other" are explicit in the labour process of intimate work.

3.3.3. The Presentation of Self

In the sections above, work culture and the inventive work culture were described as reactive to slave-like conditions, typical of domestic workers' experiences too. However, work culture is also characterized by workers' sense of self-satisfaction associated with the meaning and the purpose of their work. Work culture therefore can also be about "celebrat[ing] the skill it demands and the rewards it brings" (Benson, 1983:186). The "self-feeling" that emerges as a result of the social interaction with various actors, within and outside the workplace, can give way to a sense of pride or shame (Goffman, 1959). In this study, I focus primarily on narratives of self or the presentation of self that conveys pride – for example, the pride that domestic workers feel because of their recognisable intimate work culture and when they invoke this feeling because of their perceived identity as comfortable others compared to others. I also consider how "narratives of self" inform the decision-making process employers engage in before selecting a candidate they consider to be a comfortable other. I draw on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model of social life or social interaction and Arlie Hochschild's (1983) notion of "emotional labour" to focus on impressionable workplace performances that workers engage in that PEAs and employers view favourably and also demand.

For Goffman (1959), the presentation of "self" is like a theatrical performance. In his theory, the worker is an actor, who presents him/herself in different "settings" or locations that have a relational component when interacting with and being observed by others. In any setting, an audience observes the way the self is presented or performed. Incidentally, the self entails imagining how the worker's appearance is perceived by, for example, the PEA recruiter or employer. There are different ways in which a worker's appearance can be observed in what Goffman (1959) refers to as the "front region". Here, appearance can refer to the social status of the individual and how, through different "stage props" such as CVs, interviews, trial work period or probation, their occupational status, migrant status, race, gender, work experience or culture is displayed (see Chapter Five). However, the "self" is also informed by imagining how the employer or recruiter constructs an impression based on the worker's appearance and manner.

The worker's display of "self", as perceived by the various audience members, usually projects a manner and an appearance that must be congruent with each other. The manner of the worker, displayed in, for example, a trial work period, must demonstrate to the recruiter or employer how the worker embodies and plays their respective roles in a specific context. Of equal importance, their performance should indicate whether their manner matches the role they wish to take on or may be chosen for. In this regard, Arlie Hochschild's (1983) concept "emotional labour" points to an important link between the intimate work culture that employers demand of comfortable others and their presentation of self in work-related settings. In light of Näre's (2011) findings, which make explicit the value associated with how emotions are used in the exchange of labour but also the employment relation to the benefit of employers (Beck, 2018) reiterates that workers are observed for their capacity to manage and produce a feeling that suits employer's demands (see also Fish, 2006).

How do performances or narratives of self, particularly among a geographically dispersed group of domestic workers rendered as the invisible workforce of paid reproductive labour, give rise to a collective representation as comfortable others? This process can be explained by exploring how the construction of work identity and an intimate work culture associated with comfortable others gives rise to the self. The "self" emerges from the social interactions that occur in various settings with different audience members. The notion of comfortable others, particularly among agency recruited workers, can be identified and analysed by delving into the front and back regions (or stages) of performances of MDWs to illustrate how and why impression management is important. As I suggested earlier and argue later, MDWs' sense of self is not simply an individual tactic but tied to their cultural formation. Therefore, through the narratives of domestic workers specifically, the dramaturgical model of social life is useful for explaining how the collective representation of comfortable others among a particular national group, as "honest, trustworthy and reliable", "constitutes *the way* in which a performance is socialized, moulded and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented" (Goffman, 1959:34-35). But the challenge put forward by Sitas (1983:12) is that, while the dramaturgy of everyday life furthers analysis in a way that stresses "social texts and social processes human actors are involved in", must also concern itself with "dynamic changes and their explanation".

3.4. Ethnic Niching among Migrant Workers

Across a wide range of research topics such as xenophobia and everyday forms of discrimination, migrants' survival strategies in the informal sector, immigration policy, human rights and citizenship, and the association of certain labour market sectors with specific ethnic groups (see Crush, 1999; Crush & McDonald, 2001; Petkou, 2005; Peberdy, 2009; Davis, 2009 Hall, 2013). Zimbabwean nationals are often associated with the agriculture, gig work and the domestic sector (Davis, 2009; Mkhize, 2012; Ally, 2016; Chinguno, 2019; Hlatshwayo, 2019). In the international literature, this phenomenon is described as ethnic niching, defined broadly by Schrover, Van de Leun and Quispel (2007:535) as "…a process whereby an association develops between a certain economic sector and an ethnic group". Ethnic groups may have one or more of the following characteristics: "shared beliefs, language, religion, race, common origin, a common name and attachment to a common homeland" (Wokabi & Owino, 2008:158). For the purpose of this study, ethnic groups are used to refer to the nationality of migrants – that is, sharing an attachment to a common land. However, although this study uses the narrow definition of ethnicity in terms of nationality, it is important to point out that by focusing on the international approach, home country differences such as Shona and Ndebele ethnic groups are often absent when national groups are niched as Zimbabweans (see Hall, 2013). In other words, associations between certain national groups and specific sectors are based first and foremost on primary constructions of difference such as nationality in the same way as migration literature describes the collective identity of Mexican and Cuban migrants in the US, a point I return to later.

3.4.1. Conceptualizing Ethnic Niching

There is little consensus regarding the definition of ethnic niching among academics, who have struggled for multiple decades to decide on what the defining criterion should be (Moya, 2007). The conceptual dilemma arises when researchers consider whether ethnic niches service co-ethnics, "only outsiders, or other possible combinations" (Moya, 2007:570-571). The conceptual differences also arise from distinctions between "entrepreneurial", "occupational" or "ethnic enclave economies". Nevertheless, Schrover, Van de Leun and Quispel (2007) provide a useful starting point for conceptualizing ethnic niching by highlighting the common thread in the literature which emphasizes primary constructions of difference, such as race or nationality, that describe the collective identity of those who occupy a niche.

Alternative identity markers that affect employment patterns, such as migrant status, work ethic, culture, language or skills, are always linked to primary constructions of social difference but remain secondary when describing the visible other and niche livelihood strategy. However, to understand how hiring queues emerge or change, the alternative identity markers are as important as the primary constructions of difference (Waldinger, 2000). Similarly, as discussed in the previous chapter, the socio-legal context matters. Therefore, in this study, I focus on MDWs' work culture (their body work, work performance and narrative of self) to understand how they mobilize their intimate work culture (Wolkowitz, 2006; Näre, 2014).

3.4.2. Ethnic Niche Formation

Although there are different conceptualizations of ethnic niching, there is extensive research on how niches are formed. Waldinger (1999:21) explains that there are several factors that give rise to ethnic niches. In the first stage of the process, the "phase of specialization" (that is, how placements in the labour market may take place), "the skills level, language proficiency or migrants' predispositions to certain kinds of work help determine where they are absorbed or placed".[20] The second phase, referred to as "occupational closure", means that "once the initial settlers have established a beachhead, subsequent arrivals tend to follow behind, preferring an environment in which at least some faces are familiar and discovering that personal contacts prove the most efficient means of finding a job" (Waldinger & Der Martirosian, 2001:236). The role that social networks play in ethnic niche formation is therefore of great consequence. Lui (2011:119) argues that the links between migrant social networks (crucial for sharing information about jobs and resources – what Sitas (1983) describes as "public class knowledge") and employer networks are equally important in facilitating access to employment in the labour market (see also Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Waldinger, 2000; Light, 2006). Scholars argue that, through the network hiring process, a relatively homogenous workforce or notable concentration of migrants in an employment sector emerges (Waldinger, 2000; Light, 2006).

While network explanations of migrant employment patterns are compelling, Ellis (2007) argues that the role of space or one's location in relation to industries is also significant. However, in addition to this perspective, employment practices may also arise from positive or racial discrimination that favours other groups over residents. Kasinitz and Rosenberg (1996:185), for example, note that "discrimination against local residents is multifaceted, including a combination of racial, class and locational preferences, [and] fear of crime…”. Further, they add that local residents’ inability to network often blocks access to job opportunities but gives rise to opportunities for those who have stronger networks. These different explanations for why and how ethnic niche formations occur are important for understanding the different factors that influence recruitment and hiring trends. Also, these factors underlie how cultural formations among diaspora communities, as I argued earlier by drawing on the cultural formations approach, are often linked to a migrant workers’ identities through differentiation.

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[20] Petkou's (2005) research on West African immigrants in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, confirms that these challenges "push" migrants towards setting up their own small businesses in the informal economy or engaging in illegal activities.

3.4.3. Identity Niching

While there seems to be no study that examines ethnic niching in the domestic sector in South Africa, there are a few that engage with Global North literature on ethnic niching more generally or a specific conceptual approach (Hungwe, 2020). For example, Petkou’s (2005) study focuses on the formation of “ethnic minorities” among Nigerians and Cameroonians in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, who engage in “entrepreneurial niching” as an enclave economy. Petkou’s (2005) research explores the pull and push factors that cause West Africans to immigrate to South Africa, as well as the impact that marginalization or contact with locals has on the construction of self-identity. Petkou (2005) argues that discrimination is the main reason West Africans create ethnic enclaves. However, by focusing exclusively on connecting nationality with Nigerians’ and Cameroonians’ entrepreneurialism, Petkou (2005) does not address the conceptual conundrum in the ethnic niching literature that includes identity markers that move beyond notions of informality or illegal activities. Nevertheless, the experience of discrimination, and therefore the opportunities and constraints that one’s identity has on access to work opportunities, is crucial for understanding why certain groups are predisposed to certain types of economic activity in the labour market.

Using an econometric approach, Hofmeyr (2010) examined the role of social networks and ethnic niching in the manufacturing sector. Hofmeyr (2010) argues that there are limited analyses in South Africa of the impact that social networks have on employment, and criticizes previous research which limits social networks to members of a household. Instead, using language as a proxy for race, gender or religion, Hofmeyr (2010) applies ethnic niching to the South African population, *not* immigrants, to test whether ethnic niching is occurring in the manufacturing sector. What is of particular interest from the study is that it appears to be the first comprehensive attempt (at least in respect of the ethnic niching literature) to engage with the process of ethnic niching in South Africa. However, based on Hofmeyr's (2010) application of the concept, it calls into question what we understand by "ethnic group" and the need to clarify how this concept is used. For example, Rex (2010:213) describes ethnic groups as "communities of migrant origin who settle in urban environments...", whereas others painstakingly debate what constitutes "ethnicity or ethnic groups" (see Ratcliffe, 2004; Yang, 2000). As mentioned previously, ethnic niching research in the US and even in the European context typically focuses on migrant workers' national identities, despite their home country differences.

In the South African context, particularly with the history of the migrant labour system on the mines, research on ethnic groups was not limited to a worker's national identity. In Moodie's (1992) account of "ethnic violence" in the gold mines among different South African ethnic groups, "Bhaca" workers are described as "bucket latrine cleaners"; "Mpondo" as well-paid drillers; and the "Shangaans" as boss-boys. Thabane and Guy (1988) note that in the gold mining industry, Basotho workers (that is, a nationality) were known as the shaft sinkers (because of their "good" teamwork skills). These studies describe the type of work typically associated with different ethnic groups, but, at the same time, call into question the usage of the term "ethnic group" and its potential implications for understanding social phenomenon.

Across the diverse and broad literature on ethnic niching and migration, other useful theoretical concepts are evident that help advance our understanding of how ethnic identities are constructed in the process of niche and cultural formations, such as "ethnicity at work" (Wallman, 1979) and "situational identity" (Cohen, 2006). These concepts are applicable to some of the core ideas discussed previously on cultural formations which focus on issues of belonging and identity. Wallman (1979:3) explains that "[e]thnicity is the recognition of significant difference between 'them' and 'us'". These differences are often contained in nation, religion, race or culture. What is key is how these differences are constructed through the boundary process. In other words, the differences between two collective groups will be *objective* "to the extent that an outsider can list items that mark it, but it is inevitably *subjective* to the extent that none of these markers has any necessary or precise significance outside the perception of the actors" (Wallman, 1979:5). Cohen (2006:98-99), drawing on Barth's (1969) notion of ethnic boundaries, explains that these markers can include "territory, history, language, economic considerations, or symbolic identifications of one kind or another".

Rather than confining identity to a particular category or ethnic affiliation (for example, gender, race, religion, or nationality), Cohen (2006) employs the concept situational identity in response to data that documents the multiple competing affiliations individuals have (Cohen, 2006:101). Situational identity suggests that an individual can display any potential social identity based on the scenario they find themselves in. From this vantage point, situational identity is useful for exploring how and why ethnicity can be viewed or experienced as a resource (Wallman, 1979; Jenkins, 1988; Waldinger, 2000). Yet situational identity also provides a unique opportunity to shift attention to the process of "identity niching". Here, I acknowledge that the situation or context where the identity is evoked is important. Lamont and Molnár (2002:169) explain that social boundaries are "manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities". Therefore, the process of identity niching (niching also suggests a specific place/space) is an attempt to shift attention to how symbolic markers or even secondary constructions of difference (typical of cultural formations) are developed, maintained and deployed by social actors to understand why hiring patterns unfold in particular ways. These identity markers are important because, as Lamont and Molnár (2002:169) argue, "[s]ocial boundaries are objectified forms of social differences".

According to international research, the niching phenomenon is intricately tied to the social networks of both migrants and employers (Waldinger, 2000; Wilson, 2003; Castles & Miller, 2009). Therefore, the relationships between MDWs, PEAs, and employers must be considered when studying the process of identity niching among domestic workers as a defensive combination that gives rise to a cultural formation. In addition, noting that ethnicity is situational (because certain markers of identity can be adopted and exploited based on specific situations) (Cohen, 2006; Eriksen, 2010) and relational (because ethnic groups are compared or understood in terms of "them" and "us") (Sitas, 1983; Wallman, 1979; Eriksen, 2010), these conceptual tools lend themselves to viewing nationality as an ethnic resource that is often ranked when PEAs and employers make comparisons between workers. This study therefore considers how a "sense of group identity is embedded in stable networks and patterns of hiring, recruitment, and mobility" (Waldinger, 2000:30) to understand identity as a resource. To this end, I focus on the symbolic and practical ways in which an intimate work culture is performed over and above essentializing the nationality of a worker.

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter identified and explained the guiding concepts used in this study to understand interactions and experiences within the domestic employment relationship that emphasise an intimate work culture and work identity. I argued that the cultural formation approach is relevant for exploring the significance of a worker's informal work culture but also the social interactions and broader context that influence how they work. While this approach acknowledges processes of accommodation and resistance within the domestic work labour process, it also explains how workers mobilize their work culture to affect change in their individual capacity and as a rational collective undertaking. Further, considering hiring patterns are not fixed, I argued that an ideological or cultural shift is embedded in hiring practices and is made possible through the logic of cultural formations. By extension, this calls for an analysis of how MDWs practice identity niching (*not* ethnic niching) to gain agency-recruited status among employers and PEAs by mobilizing their intimate work culture, as comfortable others, to secure better paid work through PEAs. The findings chapters therefore examine the demand for comfortable others from the perspectives of PEAs, MDWs and employers, and their interplay with the process of identity niching. Next, however, I describe the research design for exploring cultural formations among MDWs.

Chapter 4. Methodology: Exploring Cultural Formations Through Ethnography

4.1. Introduction

The purpose of this research was to understand how the process of identity niching occurs through micro interactions and experiences among employers, MDWs and PEAs in the domestic sector. Since identity formation is central to this study and underpins the nature (and commodification) of an intimate work culture, the experience of being recognized as comfortable others and the experience of comfortable others concerns inclusion and exclusion criteria embedded in the recruitment and hiring process. This study therefore focused on the subjective experiences of employers, MDWs and PEAs in the recruitment and hiring process using a qualitative research design. The primary data collection method included 57 in-depth interviews with PEAs, employers, MDWs and key informants working with domestic workers. Regarding how MDWs mobilized their intimate work culture in the PEA industry through identity niching, an interpretive (critical) ethnographic approach was used. This chapter begins by explaining the research design adopted, followed by an outline of the sampling strategy and sample size, research sites, the main data collection techniques, data analysis approach, research ethics and finally the limitations of the study.

4.2. Research Design

The nature of the domestic employment relationship informs notions of an identity associated with comfortable others. As such, this study adopted a qualitative research design to understand how identity niching takes place by situating the process in relation to the experience of the domestic employment relationship, for all actors concerned, because of the recruitment and hiring process. It is therefore imperative to understand how each of the actors involved in the recruitment and hiring process experiences and makes sense of the intimate work culture, in the context of a highly charged public-private intimate workplace, which is often informed by their former employment relationships. The underlying assumption in this study is that to understand employers', MDWs' and PEAs' experiences requires understanding their individual situations and "patterned human activity" in relation to one another, in the domestic sector as a "pre-given social structure and institutions that confront them" (Thomas, 1993:8). This study is based on the premise that micro-interactions that form part of an intimate work culture are socially constructed within a particular context that informs the nature and experience of a domestic employment relationship. Accordingly, the constructivist approach posits that "meaning-making/sense-making attributional activities that shape action (or inaction)" and notions of truth or agreements regarding "valid knowledge" arise from "the relationship between members of some stake-holding community" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:197, 204). In other words, my epistemological assumption is concerned with uncovering how each of the actors make sense of *their* situation (the historical and cultural dynamics) in the domestic sector based on *their* own understanding and interpretation of the domestic employment relationship.

The research design is therefore located within an interpretivist paradigm with an emphasis on the subjective views of the participants' lived experiences and behavioural codes and assigned meanings that shape their social practice (Thomas, 1993; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). An interpretivist ethnography considers people's "interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings" as primary data, which can be supported through interview methods to determine "individual and collective understandings, reasoning processes [and], social norms" (Mason, 2002:56). Unlike the modernist positivism that assumes individuals' knowledge is objective, interpretivism holds that knowledge is not objective or fixed and is instead a "reconstructed understanding of the social world", rooted in Max Weber's notion of "verstehen" which means understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:184). Practically, researchers can uncover participants' experiences and interpretations of their context by observing their interactions in particular settings and through interviews to uncover the multiple meanings that each actor provides regarding the collective representation of comfortable others as ideal type workers (Goffman, 1959; Mason, 2002).

The critical branch of ethnography departs from conventional ethnography, "which assumes the status quo, affirms assumed meanings when others might exist" (Thomas, 1993:5) to "offer vantage points for generating new understandings" in "power-laden processes" that are relevant to workplaces too (Hart, 2006:982). As I discuss in Chapter Three, social behaviours are associated with culture and (intimate) workplaces are not bounded spaces because interactions occur across a multiplicity of places that inform social and work-based practices. These underlying assumptions and approaches to the field resonate with other ethnographic studies that have explored cultural formations among migrant communities in different settings too (Bhengu, 2014; Xulu, 2017).

Based on the above epistemological and ontological positioning, this study was framed using an interpretivist critical ethnographic approach to understand how MDWs mobilize their intimate work culture – the rational and symbolic interactions that form part of the practice of identity niching in a particular context. Thomas (1993:9) explains that the mundane events (everyday work practices or the way the worker works) are reproduced to expose the "broader social processes of control, taming, power imbalance, and the symbolic mechanisms that impose one set of preferred meanings or behaviours over others". Critical ethnographers conceive of culture "as a complex circuit of production that includes myriad dialectically initiating and mutually informing sets of activities such as routines, rituals, action conditions, systems of intelligibility and meaning making conventions of interpretations, system relations, and conditions both external and internal to the social actor" (Carspeken, 1996, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:329). The critical ethnographers' conception of culture is pertinent for a study that focuses on an intimate work culture, because the underlying research objective was to understand the expressions of agency among domestic workers, employers and PEAs specific to the recruitment and hiring process that inform the collective representation and identity niching of comfortable others.

4.3. Data Collection Overview and Methods

Table 1 below summarizes the various and mostly overlapping research phases that took place from September 2012 until January 2014 in Cape Town.[21] The aim of the different research phases was to understand the context-specific nature related to PEAs in the domestic sector from multiple stakeholders' perspectives given that, to date, there remains a dearth of research on PEAs in South Africa (Du Toit, 2020a). The table outlines the research method, total number of interviews or contact sessions and the main objective of each research phase.

The sections highlighted by shading show the main data collection methods, while the rest outline meetings or workshops with key stakeholders concerning regulation and compliance in the domestic sector that included employers or PEAs or both. The meetings or workshops were important for identifying developments and trends in the domestic sector, amongst key informants and in PEAs. The last row describes an unplanned, unpaid, pilot customer satisfaction survey (with prospective employers) that an agency requested assistance with to determine how their service could be improved regarding the recruitment and hiring process. The survey was useful insofar as it offered insights into employers' reasons for using a PEA, approaching competitor PEAs, and issues they may have encountered during the registration and recruitment process, thus highlighting what employers demanded of PEAs' services. The following section, however, focusses on the main data collection methods with MDWs, PEAs and employers.

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[21] I took an extended leave of absence due to personal reasons.

Table 1: Summary of research techniques, contact sessions and objectives of each fieldwork stage.

Research method	Research stage	Number of contact sessions	Objective
Semi-structured interviews	Pilot	13	Test interview schedule: identify relevant themes and potential research sites to visit.
	Fieldwork	57	Understand context specific issues that influence the demand for the services of PEAs – interviews with key informants (5), MDWs (24), PEAs (12) and employers (16).
Participant observation	Fieldwork visits on Sundays and at PEAs' offices	32 + 6	Gain access to agency recruited domestic workers by building rapport at the main church site each Sunday (with an average site visit lasting 7 hours); "hang out" to understand their networking strategies and maintain ongoing contact after an interview. Visiting and observing daily interactions between PEAs and domestic workers at PEAs' place of business.
Stakeholder meetings/workshops	Fieldwork by invitation	2	Network with PEAs, DoL officials, trade union officials; gain an understanding of key issues under discussion that relate to PEAs; learn about current research in the domestic sector.
Domestic Forum meeting	Fieldwork by invitation	2	Network with PEAs, DoL officials, trade union officials, researchers; gain an understanding of key issues under discussion that relate to PEAs.
Free seminar for employers of domestic workers	Fieldwork	1	Gain access to employers; learn about employers' main grievances and concerns

Customer satisfaction survey (employers)	Fieldwork - request by an agency for a national customer satisfaction survey, pilot study	31	Unplanned. Conducted customer satisfaction survey. Gained greater clarity regarding the demand for the services PEAs offer clients at a national level; client profile and overview of the PEA industry based on their experiences.

4.3.1. In-depth Interviews

Data was collected from employers, MDWs, PEAs and key informants using in-depth interviews based on a semi-structured interview guide. In-depth interviews are "founded on the notion that delving into the subject's 'deeper self' produces more authentic data" (Marvasti, 2004:21). In keeping with an interpretivist critical ethnography approach, in-depth interviews allow for "experiences, perspectives, and histories" to be investigated and interpreted (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003:3). This data collection technique allowed for the context-specific meanings and social practices that influence recruitment and hiring practices to be explored.

The interview schedule was designed as questions arranged around specific themes, so that participants could explain and elaborate on issues without restraint and without selecting answers from predetermined categories as is typical of structured interviews. Interviews were structured in this manner to ensure that the participants' perspectives about a particular phenomenon unfolded as they viewed it (Marshall & Rossman, 1999:108) and not as, I, the researcher, view the issue. One of the advantages of interviews is that a large amount of data can be gained quickly and when combined with observation, it can assist in understanding the meanings that people have regarding their everyday activities (Marshall & Rossman, 1999:110). The disadvantage, however, is that since it involves personal interaction, cooperation from the participant is essential and likely to be hindered when the subject matter is sensitive; the interviewer asks questions that do not prompt long narratives; or there are language barriers that affect the understanding of research prompts or answers obtained (Marshall and Rossman, 1999:110). In relation to my study, these disadvantages were limited because the research subject in its general sense (hiring and recruitment practices) was not overly sensitive to affect data collection. All interviews were conducted in English, recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed. In almost all instances, employers, owners or agents of PEAs and key informants were first language English speakers. Given that Zimbabwean nationals are well-known for their "linguistic capital" because of their good command of English, no language were barriers experienced. However, as I outline later, I could not understand or engage in private conversations with MDWs when they spoke their mother tongue. Nevertheless, through the use of snowball sampling, ongoing interaction with the Zimbabwean community to build rapport made data collection possible.

I used a combination of face-to-face interviews and telephonic interviews. This was partly due to time constraints, travel costs and safety concerns. For example, with the exception of three, employers were interviewed telephonically since this was their preferred choice due to family or work commitments. By collecting data telephonically, I did not have to concern myself with visiting strangers in their homes or elsewhere. Due to domestic workers' time constraints because of work, and their only day off work being spent at the church, sometimes there was limited opportunity to conduct a complete interview comfortably. Telephonic interviews were convenient, and the only viable option given that I could not conduct interviews at domestic workers' workplaces.

There are two competing views regarding face-to-face interviews and telephonic interviews. First is that face-to-face interviews are more suited for capturing contextual data or "interview ambience" that includes observing body language and facial cues that convey important information about reactions and responses to questions, and that these benefits are absent with telephonic interviews (Opdenakker, 2006:5; Novick, 2008). However, others argue that while these forms of data are absent, telephonic interviews can be effective because one can easily capture notes without interruption and listen attentively (Farooq & de Villiers, 2017).

To ensure the interviews went smoothly, a pre-call was conducted to explain the nature of the questions and purpose of the research, in an effort to establish some form of rapport with the participant before settling on a date for the interview. Farooq and de Villiers (2017) suggest that "breaking the ice" is useful for putting participants' minds at ease during the interview. The majority of MDWs were interviewed in the quietest corner at church or in a nearby park. Others were interviewed telephonically in the evening or during their lunch break because they had to rush back "home". A few of these interviews were broken up into sections, so that I accommodated their schedule and "private" time as live-in domestic workers and could sustain ongoing communication as opposed to a once off call. These were efforts to avoid short interviews which may be a typical outcome of telephonic interviews (Shuy, 2003). Since I interacted with almost all of the MDWs at the main church site, there were no issues with telephonic interviews other than the occasional network challenge.

Except for two agents, all PEA owners, agents and key informants were interviewed face-to-face at their "home office" or business premises. Two agencies operated their businesses from their homes. I met family members who assisted with the business or the administrator who handled day-to-day queries. The remainder of the agencies had offices in prime locations (close to public transport nodes and close to middle or middle-upper-class suburbs). Offices were open plan. During interviews, it was common for the owner or agent being interviewed to shout across the room for their input or to elaborate on an incident related to employers or domestic workers.

The length of the interviews varied. All interviews with PEA owners, agents and key informants ranged from an hour and a half or lasted as long as three hours. The average length of the interviews with employers or domestic workers was 45 minutes. However, interactions or "informal conversations" with most of the domestic workers occurred on a number of occasions because we met weekly during the fieldwork period or discussed work related matters or good news telephonically in the evenings.[22] These conversations were initiated by the domestic workers, signalling the extent to which rapport was successfully established. These informal conversations centred on some themes discussed during the interviews but were also important for "tracking" developments related to work-related issues, new jobs, and "new" agencies they had discovered with promising results. Learning about which PEA they preferred or recommended to others was beneficial since it allowed me to concentrate on PEAs that were more popular with workers. I participated in impromptu group talks led by former research participants. I listened and, where applicable, responded to queries on their rights as domestic workers. These sessions represented their "shop floor", and in some ways represented the "experiential mosaic" of ethnography because of the multiple public and private narratives, often driven by MDWs themselves, that formed part of the fieldwork experience too (Sitas, 2010). By engaging collectively on similar concerns, MDWs had an opportunity to move away from the "atomized character" of domestic work and offer moral and spiritual support to one another about work-related issues (Cock, 1988; Chang, 2016). I was well positioned to track employment changes during the year as well as ongoing communication with MDWs, an important component of ethnography, due to regular church attendance (Sampson, 2004).

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[22] In these casual encounters, women would tell me about new job opportunities, the latest success in salary negotiations or their delight when their leave requests were granted.

The study assumed that "ethnic niching" was occurring in South Africa's domestic sector through PEAs, what Thomas (1993:32) describes as "a broad notion of a problem-laden domain", but with a need to be flexible and open to the field. My assumption regarding ethnic niching stemmed from existing literature on migration-related trends in the domestic sector but was not related to the PEA industry specializing in domestic work (Ally, 2010). Given the limited published material on PEAs at the time of the study and currently, the initial pilot with PEAs was an exercise undertaken to confirm the extent to which "ethnic niching" was occurring. During the pilot phase, 15 PEAs were randomly identified from an online directory and telephonically contacted for a brief survey of their recruitment and hiring patterns. Only nine PEAs responded. All nine agents confirmed they were placing as many as 50% or 60% of placements from amongst Zimbabwean nationals due to supply and demand factors. The pilot was important because it confirmed the research problem identified for the study. Further, as an exploratory and small-scale mapping exercise, potential research sites and themes related to recruitment and hiring trends were also identified (but in a superficial way that lacked depth and that could only be addressed further through in-depth interviews and immersing myself in the field).

Only two employers and two MDWs were interviewed during the pilot phase – this was a direct attempt to test the semi-structured interview schedule, identify PEAs to conduct in-depth interviews with, and identify potential research sites to access MDWs. Neither the pilot survey with PEAs mor the interviews with the employers and MDWs formed part of the final sample size because there were gaps in the interview schedule design and the data collected. However, the main aim of the pilot was to test the interview schedule and modify the questions accordingly. Bazeley (2013) suggests the pilot phase offers a useful opportunity for ideas and thoughts about the study that can be tested. For example, the interview schedule with domestic workers was initially lengthy, with some long-winded questions that were not easy to understand. When the interview guide is poorly planned, the conversation can be filled with long pauses that disrupt the natural flow of the conversation. I discovered that, while the semi-structured interview guide was useful, asking domestic workers to "tell me their story about their work experiences in the domestic sector and how they found employment through a PEA" was better suited for beginning the interview in a simple but effective way. The same was applicable to employers regarding their hiring history and decisions to use PEAs. Morse et al. (2002) describe the pilot process as an example of rigour in qualitative research which enables to researcher to verify different data collection strategies and revise accordingly. The end goal is to ensure that reliability and validity are achieved for the analysis.

4.3.2. Participant Observation

Participant observation aims to understand "the nature of phenomenon" and adopts a wide range of methods that include living or spending extended time in a research site, participating in mundane activities related to the routine of the research community, participating in events, "hanging out", "using everyday conversation as an interview technique" and, importantly, systematically collecting data, often through field notes for analysis (De Walt & De Walt, 2011:3-5). The main sites for participant observation included domestic employer workshops and meetings, PEAs' offices and MDWs attending church services. While interviews with MDWs were important, regular interactions and observations (that is, "hanging out") were crucial for making sense of the many possible ways in which the process of identity niching occurs. De Walt and De Walt (2011) argue that participant observation as a method and tool of analysis is important for enhancing data quality and interpretation because differences and similarities can be contextualized to determine patterns across individual perspectives and shared understandings that formed part of the research focus. Chapter Eight elaborates on specific examples. In addition, following on from Thomas (1993), the researcher is able to be flexible in the field, meaning that the formulation of the research problem or analysis of data can be revised based on "on-the-scene observation" (De Walt & De Walt, 2011:10). Field notes are typical data capturing methods for ethnographic studies. Field notes allow the researcher to document, learn and critically reflect on the research process (Burkholder and Thompson, 2020).[23] For example, my initial emphasis on "ethnic niching" rather than "identity niching" was limited, because the key contribution of this study was not to essentialize trends related to the national identity of domestic workers. Instead, the aim of the study was to focus on the commodification of an intimate work culture and identity markers related to an intimate work culture that revealed what meaning employers, MDWs and PEAs had regarding the recruitment and hiring process.

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[23] My field notes were comprehensive in that I documented interactions, the social setting, informal conversations, my personal reactions to reflect on what I had observed, and events relevant to the study (see Wolfinger, 2002:89).

4.3.3. Church as a Research Site

Despite my efforts to access MDWs through a variety of sources (mainly churches and informal networks), I settled on one research site – a charismatic church with a large community of Zimbabwean nationals – to access potential participants. Established in Zimbabwe, the Forward in Faith Mission International (FIFMI), also known as Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA), has branches in many towns around South Africa and in the Western Cape, as well as a global presence, being part of a large diaspora Zimbabwean community.

I settled on one site for six reasons. First, MDWs were unlikely to be affiliated with a trade union (Myrtle Witbooi, interview, 22 May 2013, and Department of Labour (DOL) official, interview, 31 May 2013). Second, due to their fear of losing their jobs, interviews had to be conducted where they were more likely to feel comfortable and were easily available.[24] As per the sample profile, most women were live-in domestic workers and their only "free" day was Sunday.[25] Third, I gained access to the church through a friend who was an active member and had a partner employed as a domestic worker (a non-agency recruited worker). Both could vouch for me as a visible outsider, a South African citizen. Access through "networks of trust" was crucial for building rapport with a close-knit community (Ally, 2010). I openly declared my research intention to the elders and pastor of the church and requested access to members. The pastor responded, "[i]t's not a problem" to conduct interviews at the church but "you can do so as long as you agree with the ladies involved".[26] In other words, the leadership of the church were aware of my intentions, but participation was voluntary.

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[24] The first interview was postponed twice and then cancelled. The MDW explained her husband thought it was too risky to participate in the study for fear of losing her job.

[25] There were three opportunities to interact briefly with members at church. The first was in the morning, since many people arrived after 9am. The period between 8am and 9am offered an opportunity to greet those who had arrived before they began praying individually before the church service began. Second were brief conversations with the person sitting next to you. Third was while standing in the queue outside the toilet. Other opportunities to interact more meaningfully included after the church service in the marketplace.

[26] E-mail communication with pastor, 13 March 2013.

Fourth, I was informed that there were many domestic workers at the church – with one participant declaring, “The whole church is full of domestic workers” (Wendy, interview, 28 April 2013). I realized soon that it was better to immerse myself at one site rather than move between many other church sites. In addition, the church had a well-established membership base of Zimbabwean nationals because of its link to Zimbabwe.

Fifth, the church “is a space that is both place centred, in that it is embedded in particular and strategic sites, and also transterritorial, because it connects sites that are not geographically proximate yet are intensely connected to each other” (Sassen, 1999:142). With multiple branches across South Africa and a “home base” in Zimbabwe, this church represents an important transnational social space, with regional, continental and international links, forming part of the African diaspora. Basch, Schiller and Blanc (1995:8) define “transnationalism” as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. They call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. Some of the everyday activities that migrants may engage in are, for example, “reciprocity and solidarity within kinship networks, political participation not only in the country of emigration but also of immigration, small-scale entrepreneurship of migrants across borders and the transfer and re-transfer of cultural customs and practices” (Faist, 2010:11). According to Castles (2002:1160) “individuals and groups develop transnational linkages because these provide the best ways of dealing with the social situations and opportunity structures they encounter in the context of globalization.” In the migration literature, transnational links include the global movement of people, money, goods and ideas (Gamburd, 2000). As such, the church, as a research site, was crucial for exploring the circulation of ideas that provided insight into work-related behaviours: the public and private manifestations of the cultural formations among MDWs, and the transition from informal to formal domestic work through PEAs as part of tracking their employment paths.

Last, the main medium of communication during the church service was English. As a non-Shona/Ndebele-speaking South African, I was able to understand and participate in church activities unhindered by language barriers. During the praise and worship segments of the service, however, English, Shona and Ndebele songs were sung.

In the initial stages of fieldwork, the church moved three times because their lease had expired, or rental costs had risen. I moved with the church and developed a history that would later serve me well in terms of building rapport with its members. I realized that, given the large membership of the church and the service structure (approximately 200 members and with a service that averaged seven hours with no intervals in-between), regular attendance was necessary to develop relationships and put those who were uncertain about my research agenda at ease.[27] I tried to conduct interviews as soon as I entered the field, but this was not possible. I was an outsider and MDWs were uncertain about my intentions. While I had no challenges gaining entry to the church because of personal networks and the Pastor's permission to conduct interviews, I was sensitive to the fact that MDWs are a vulnerable group. It also takes time to build rapport which can be advantageous for conducting in-depth interviews. Further, the church was MDWs' space, their "home away from home" (Cheng, 2006). Given the length of the church service and that most MDWs did not work on a Sunday, it was unsurprising that they were eager to meet up with their family and friends as soon as the service ended rather than avail themselves for a long interview.

For the first few months, I set about initiating contact with "elders" and domestic workers and familiarizing myself with the church. I observed how information was disseminated, who disseminated information and what information was publicly shared regarding employment opportunities. The seemingly mundane activities that are typical of the church format, but which provide data-rich encounters, included listening attentively to women's testimonials or announcements at the beginning or end of the church service, and reading announcements on PowerPoint slides related to permit applications, accommodation and employment opportunities.[28] In private interactions such as birthday celebrations or baby showers after the church service, I observed how newcomers were "combined" the moment they entered the church – this was most obvious when members from other branches were invited to joint services or when a new member arrived in Cape Town and needed help finding employment

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[27] This is a conservative estimate. It was very difficult counting the number of members present. On one occasion I counted 250 members, yet there were many others standing outside the church too. However, in comparison to the other churches I visited, my main fieldwork site was much smaller than the other church I considered as a potential research site.

[28] Not all employment opportunities were advertised on PowerPoint. Others were discussed among women outside the church informally.

(Sitas, 1985). Typical examples included sharing agencies' telephone numbers and information about work permits and where they were likely to access employment quickly because "that agent, she is good". On many occasions, I would turn around from the row I was sitting in and observe women exchanging contact information and discussing "new" agents to register with.[29]

I followed workers into their community space, where networking and the sharing of "public class knowledge" took place on the stage, through prayers and testimonials, and outside the church in the parking lot which became a lively social space immediately after the church service ended. The smell of delicious meat cooking on braai stands, car-boot sales with fresh vegetables such as kovo (a type of spinach), fresh fish, dry fish and Mopani worms, and individuals walking around selling muffins, chips, sweets or clothing items were typical of this pop-up market. The sale of goods was tied to church fund-raising activities (known as "talents") and were not necessarily for individual gain. I observed "shop-floor discussions" in action, engaged in unplanned group discussions and more importantly tracked developments (their mobility in the domestic sector) that were not always possible to track during once-off interviews that took place within the church in the quietest corner I could find.

Importantly, interviews with MDWs revealed part of the answer to how they practiced identity niching. However, through ongoing interaction and conversations with MDWs, I could better understand the various "stages" they partook in that were linked to identity niching – for example, narratives of what happened in parks, queues outside PEA offices, public spaces such as train stations, PEA offices where initial screening or interviews were conducted, and the homes of prospective employers interviewing jobseekers or monitoring them during a trial work period. I therefore collected data about a wider set of "stages" that revealed the complex nature of domestic workers' cultural formations. The following themes emerged: identity and belonging, defiance, resistance and autonomy, performances and narratives of self – that is, the "impression management" linked to identity niching, with and through the church, but almost always in conversation with each through a web of social networks that enabled MDWs to exercise their autonomy. By the time I had completed all interviews with MDWs, I had spent 13 months in the field, having attended 32 church services for a total of 224 hours, from 2012 to 2013.

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[29] Most of the women carried simple (not smart) cellphones that were only used for sending SMS's or making calls. Many could not afford to purchase phones with WhatsApp compatibility. They used certain networks with free minutes (in fact many had multiple sim cards because each network provider offered free minutes at different times of the day). If they had a smart phone, they left it at "home" because it was a security risk travelling with an expensive phone.

4.3.4. PEA's Offices as a Research Site

There were limited opportunities to observe the everyday work practices at PEAs' offices. This was partly because some agents arranged to meet outside of their office at a nearby coffee shop. If their business was home based, they screened candidates' CVs over email and met with them in public spaces such as a nearby garage close to their home. For others, interviews were arranged when business was "quiet" at their home office or business premises. I arrived at interviews 20 to 30 minutes early. As such, a minor portion of my fieldwork included participant observation at PEAs' offices before interviews commenced. For example, while waiting for an interview to take place, I could overhear the agents communicating with employers or domestic workers about their services or general queries.

At the established agencies with open plan offices, I witnessed jobseekers sitting in the queue waiting to consult a recruitment agent. I observed the initial screening process with potential candidates. The format was as follows: the agent read out loud the CV and reference letter of the candidate, asked questions about their work history, and accepted their application if they met the basic criteria or rejected it. Observing these processes and the typical queries PEAs attended to was useful for making sense of how employers and domestic workers experienced some of the many steps involved in the recruitment and hiring process. At the same time, "incidents" such an applicant's rejection or "ridiculously low salary" or a "nuisance" employer served as typical examples, such as referred to during the interview, of what PEAs had to "put up with daily" in the domestic sector. Three of the PEAs' owners whom I interviewed were eager to share as much information with me as possible – asking their agents to chat with me after I had interviewed them, and giving me an opportunity to linger and observe activities. By spending additional time with agencies, I could better understand the complex and dynamic process of recruitment and hiring practices and use these observed moments as an entry point when probing the narratives of employers and MDWs about their experiences.

4.4. Sample Strategy, Size and Profile

My main recruitment strategy was opportunistic and non-probabilistic snowball sampling to identify participants for this study. With opportunistic sampling, the researcher follows new leads and takes advantage of unexpected opportunities (Miles & Huberman, 1994:28). With snowball sampling, the researcher, "identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich" (Miles & Huberman, 1994:28). Table 2 below summarizes the main data set. A total of 57 in-depth interviews were conducted with agency owners and agents, employers, Zimbabwean MDWs and key informants.[30] Table 2 summarizes the final sample size, which is followed by an explanation of the sampling strategy and an overview of the recruitment strategy and participant profile.

Table 2: List of sample size for PEAs, MDWs, employers and key informants

Participants	Number of interviews
PEAs' owners and agents	12
Employers	16
Zimbabwean migrant domestic workers	24
Key informants	5
Total	57

Table 2 above excludes the interviews and informal conversations conducted during the pilot phase, although these formed an important archival source for making sense of my entry into the field and of the data collected. In addition, as highlighted in Table 1, the customer satisfaction survey was also excluded from the main data set even though the survey offered an opportunity to understand customer preferences *nationally,* and what employers expected from PEAs as service providers. All these different sets of data (especially the informal conversations, participant observation and customer satisfaction survey) were captured and tracked through typed or handwritten field notes.

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[30] In addition to these interviews, my research results are informed by data I gathered from a pilot employer customer satisfaction survey that I conducted for a PEA towards the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014. The PEA had different branches in South Africa. Former clients and those who registered with the PEA but did not find a placement through the PEA were surveyed. The survey was simple in design since the PEA was primarily interested in finding out ways in which they could improve their client reach and services. I provided input on the survey questionnaire, conducted the survey telephonically and captured the data for the PEA.

Despite having initial sample targets for each actor (15 PEAs, 25 employers and 25 MDWs), I stopped collecting data once I was convinced that I had reached data saturation, which was the end of September 2013 for MDWs, mid-December 2013 for employers and the end of January 2014 for PEAs (see Appendix D). Fusch and Ness (2015) explain that, while it is useful to obtain both rich (quality) and thick (quantity) data, it is important to focus on the depth of the data collected to determine when one arrives at data saturation. Data saturation is not based on obtaining a large or a small sample size but rather is reached when the researcher notes that no new data or themes emerge from the various methods used to collect data (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Data triangulation – the use of multiple sources of data – is important for testing the reliability of results and attaining data saturation. While there are different strategies proposed for data triangulation, this study focused on different data sets among the main actors in the recruitment and hiring process, thus allowing for data to be analysed from multiple viewpoints with the objective of extrapolating the inherent meaning underlying the commodification of intimate labour and the identity niching process (Denzin, 2012; Fusch & Ness, 2015). The advantage of the pilot phase, customer satisfaction survey, and in-depth interviews with the main participants of the study, as well as the lengthy period of ethnography among MDWs, offered rich context and various vantage points for data analysis.

4.4.1. Migrant Domestic Workers

By the end of 2013, 24 in-depth interviews had been conducted with Zimbabwean women who had attained "agency recruited status" through a PEA in Cape Town. Only one of the participants was part of a triangular employment relationship at the time of the interview. A few others had experienced this form of employment relationship before finding a permanent placement through a PEA. Almost all the MDWs belonged to the main research site. I did not recruit MDWs via employers or PEAs because I wanted to enter an interview without them feeling obligated to participate in the study or withhold information because of my knowledge of their employer or PEA. While the majority of participants attended FIFMI regularly, I interviewed four participants from other churches. I accessed these participants through snowball sampling from the main research site. Two of the four participants had attended

FIFMI previously.[31] All MDWs were employed permanently, but as Chapter Eight reports, a few started off as domestic cleaners for agencies before finding a permanent placement.

Only three of the MDWs I interviewed, who were domestic workers at the time of the interview, had used an "informal" agency. This related to confusion during snowball sampling, because MDWs understood "agency recruited" to include informal and formal agencies. Initially I excluded all three participants from my sample because my aim was to gain a relatively homogenous sample of workers who fit the selection criteria of the study (DiCocco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). However, since two of the participants were trying to find employment through a PEA – they had passed the screening process and had gone for interviews but were yet to find a placement – and later found a permanent placement, I included them in the sample with an updated interview after some time had passed in their new employment position.[32] But, as I elaborate in Chapter Eight, with all MDWs' employment pathways in the domestic sector, most of them had experience with the hiring and placement practices of informal agencies prior to gaining "agency recruited status" with a formal PEA.

The majority of women interviewed were between the ages of 28 and 40. The youngest was 23 years old and the oldest was 57 years old. All the women were African Zimbabwean nationals and none of them belonged to a trade union. Almost all the women described themselves as "single ladies", a term commonly used at church to describe women with children who were either unmarried, divorced or widowed. In terms of occupational background, a few had worked as domestic workers in their home country or Botswana, but the remainder had professional or low skilled white-collar jobs before migrating to Cape Town from Zimbabwe. Most were teachers, and others had dabbled with small business ventures or had been employed as administrators or shop assistants, for example. Their educational qualifications ranged from having achieved their O- or A-levels to tertiary level qualifications for a few.[33]

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[31] The reason they were no longer attending FIFMI was due to the lengthy church service or that they had found a church closer to where they worked.

[32] Of the three MDWs who had found employment through an informal agency, only two secured a permanent placement through a PEA later in the year. (Nyasha and Clarence – see Chapter Eight).

[33] Zimbabwe's education system distinguishes between O (Ordinary) education and A (Advanced)-level education. A-level education is equivalent to Grade 12, matriculating from the final year of secondary school and therefore becoming eligible for tertiary education. This is based on the British model that Zimbabwe inherited during colonialism.

4.4.2. PEA Owners and Agents

I interviewed owners or agents from a total of 12 PEAs' operating in Cape Town. All but two PEAs were owned by white women. One was owned by a Coloured woman and the other a white man. Their clients belonged to predominantly white middle and upper-middle income households. These households were described as having mostly dual income earners. PEAs reported in recent years that there has been an increase in Coloured, Indian and African middle and upper-middle income clients. Two PEAs operated nationally, with franchises located in major cities in South Africa. These PEAs' offices were located in affluent suburbs or close to transportation hubs (taxi ranks or train stations), while the smaller PEAs were home-based operations located in affluent or middle-income suburbs. Almost all of the PEAs started off, and continued to operate, as family run businesses. A few were typically "a one-man band" agency engaging in all aspects of the recruitment and placement process.[34] These characteristics – female and often family run – are typical of PEAs operating internationally too (Bakan & Stasiulis 1995; Mendez, 1998). Larger PEAs, however, employ family members, have a labour lawyer on call and offer franchising opportunities for new members in various locations across the country. Since this study focused on placements, all the PEAs were chosen to have a placement component to their business model. Some PEAs offered training or employed domestic workers to clean for clients too (See Chapter Five). The gender, race and class profile of placement PEAs is important because it shows their social position in relation to their clients as employers and the demographic profile of domestic workers, who are predominately black women.

4.4.3. Employers

I interviewed a total of 16 female employers (see Appendix F). All employers had used a PEA to secure a domestic worker either for cleaning services or for cleaning and care work. Of the 16 employers interviewed, only three were black (one Coloured, one Indian and one African). The remainder were white. All employers were married. Their ages ranged from 30 to late-fifties. Almost all the employers were mothers, educated at tertiary level and part of a dual income household – running a business from home or working full-time as professionals. None of the employers were housewives, but the data collected indicated that they were the main point of contact with PEA owners or agents and job candidates during the recruitment process – highlighting the gendered nature of “madam’s” role in maintaining the household.[35]

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[34] I was least successful with gaining access to the "one man band" agencies that offer placements or cleaning services. This was likely because of their busy schedule, their possible status as unregistered PEAs and general unwillingness to participate in the study.

There were two possible points of access to employers: either through PEAs or informal networking. I was initially reluctant to rely on PEAs because they were likely to recommend “ideal type” clients. However, my attempts to recruit employers through friends’ and colleagues’ networks, intending to use snowball sampling thereafter, resulted in access to only four participants. Those who assisted with finding employers to interview insisted that I keep their identity confidential – they did not wish to be associated with the “madams”. I found this rather telling of the sensitivities around issues of race, class and gender that remain pronounced in South African society (see Chapter Eight). Elsewhere, scholars have noted employers’ discomfort regarding the nature of the domestic employment relationship because of their awareness of inequality and their positions of privilege (Fish, 2006b; Archer, 2011; Du Toit, 2021). Since my interactions with employers were fleeting, I relied on others (agencies) to introduce me to employers – an ice breaker before delving into the complexities of recruitment and hiring practices.

I attempted to recruit employers through churches, but while a few were willing to allow me to put up a notice on their notice boards, others were reluctant. Also, most PEAs were hesitant to refer me to their clients – they too questioned my research intentions. After attending workshops with PEAs, and interviewing them, I soon discovered that they were reluctant to share their client list with me due to the highly competitive nature of the PEA industry (see Chapter Two). Two established PEAs, however, assisted by recommending clients (but some of the leads did not pan out because employers were busy or unwilling to participant). One PEA shared a list of “new” clients with me so that there was less interference or influence from them when I randomly selected participants to interview.[36]

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[35] Only two employers mentioned that they discussed their selection criteria with their husbands prior to selecting a candidate for placement.

[36] The Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act) (RSA, 2013) now forms a key consideration regarding the research ethics process within higher education institutions. At the time of my fieldwork, I was guided by the Faculty of Humanities research ethics framework which emphasized data protection and obtaining consent from

4.4.4. Key Informants

Five key informants were interviewed. All five informants were actively involved in the domestic sector, frequently attending public meetings and workshops related to domestic workers' employment rights. The key informants included a senior officer at the DoL[37], closely involved in the monitoring of labour compliance in the domestic sector; three trade union officials at various levels of the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU); and a labour lawyer who actively participated in education related forums for employers of domestic workers. Aside from describing some of the key transformations that were taking place in the domestic sector, the key informants suggested possible PEAs to interview based on their knowledge of the sector. Their suggestions were helpful since I was denied access to the database of registered PEAs by a DoL official because the information was confidential. Instead, I relied on key informants, recommendations from PEAs, employers and domestic workers, and scanning online directories and magazines to recruit PEAs for interviews. Interviews with key informants were more than an hour long.[38]

4.5. Data Analysis

While Marshall and Rossman (1999) note that analysing data gathered from interviews is time consuming, computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) can help make the process more manageable. To assist with data analysis, QSR (2011) NVivo software was used to organize data into codes and later refined into themes arising from thematic analysis. The aim was to code in a structured manner. Debunking the perspective that qualitative research is often considered "ad hoc, intuitive and unsystematic", De Wet and Erasmus (2005:27) argue that software such as NVivo can contribute to systematic and rigorous practice in qualitative studies. Here, rigour in qualitative research refers to "the conscious use of procedures to

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participants regarding their participation in research. The data I received was not shared with any third party. In addition, the data was stored safely, and access was password protected. Further, the PEAs that assisted me, informed their clients that I might contact them.

[37] The Department of Labour was renamed Department of Employment and Labour (DEL) in 2019.

[38] With a labour consultant, I had multiple informal interactions. I also engaged with SADSAWU informally after the interview at workshops. On one occasion I discussed my research updates with Mytrle Witbooi and her colleague while walking up to the main road to take a taxi because there was no Sunday train. We continued our discussion on the taxi. I was on my way to a church service for fieldwork and they were going to the SADSAWU offices for a meeting.

organize a mass of data methodically so that all the parts fit into a broader, structured whole" (De Wet & Erasmus, 2005:28).

The data analysis occurred in four main phases. Each phase formed part of the broader aim of constructing a systematic pattern based on various codes and also across the different data sets. The coding phase was iterative. Following each interview, I would read through my field notes and highlight specific themes. During the transcribing process, I made a note of recurring themes. Once the interviews were fully transcribed, I read through each several times, making a note of new themes or questions that emerged as I worked through the data manually. De Wet and Erasmus (2005:30) consider the repeat and close reading of transcripts during the first level of coding as necessary on account that it "guards against a mechanistic application of procedures". Bazeley (2009:7) argues that "reading and interpretation are the starting points for meaningful analysis".

Initially I began the first level of coding through Nvivo, but switched to coding manually to avoid feeling like I was coding mechanistically. I found it useful to code manually instead, creating a visual post-it type framework that allowed me to see patterns related to hiring histories and type of agencies used (see Hai-Jew, 2015).[39] The coding process and themes I focuses on were guided by my central research questions, sub-questions and the semi-structured interviews that were specific to the research aims and the theory I used for my analysis. Once I had a framework of codes or categories (see Bazeley, 2009) to work with, I began second level coding, revising the codes hierarchically, and discarding those that were marginal. For example, in relation to how I arrived at the theme "an intimate workplace crisis", the first level coding focused on the employment relationship before using a PEA and after using a PEA. Using the lens of an intimate work culture and hence notions of boundary work, there were several codes related to examples of tensions in the employment relationship and a particular context that gave rise to an "issue". Bazeley (2009:10) proposes a three-step formula,

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[39] Although NVivo has a word cloud and modelling feature I preferred using post-its so that I could move themes around with greater ease but also see the overlapping links among all three actors. Personally, I did not find the word cloud or modelling feature helpful because I had to carefully sift through hiring and employment histories to distinguish between informal and formal agencies. Similar to the messiness of field notes, the interview data was laden with diverse hiring and employment histories that had to be carefully catalogued to understand patterns of similarity and difference.

"describe, compare, relate". Describing what was emerging from the data was useful for providing context and for considering interrelationships between PEAs, MDWs and employers – in other words, identifying how participants describe a situation or employment relationship and paying attention to what they included in their descriptions (for example, theft, etiquette, social distancing and social issues). Taken further, Bazeley (2009:10) suggests probing themes comparatively to determine "who, what, why, when?" The last step of the formula, "relate", entails questioning the conditions that give rise to a category or theme. Bazeley (2009) explains determining relations between different codes or categories helps structure the data, eventually giving rise to a complex picture that informs the theory/thesis that emerges. Bazeley (2009:10) argues further, that "[y]our analysis, then, will come together around an integrating idea, with arguments to support it drawn from across your completed (interim) analyses". I demonstrate the complex picture in Chapter Eight.

The coding process in NVivo was more focussed, whereas the earlier phase served the function of developing an understanding of the context and developing a framework that could be refined. Saldaña (2009:6), citing Hatch (2002), recommends that coding for patterns should not be considered as stable regularities but rather as varying in form. For example, patterns may be characterized by similarity, frequency, difference, sequence or causation (Saldaña, 2009:6). I took these considerations into account during the coding phase.

4.6. Research Ethics

Fieldwork commenced once research ethics clearance was granted by the Department of Sociology at the University of Cape Town. Every effort was made to ensure that the code of conduct for research was adhered to. Some of the considerations included composing a consent form that outlined the purpose of the study; emphasizing that participation in the study was voluntary; explaining that withdrawal from the study was an option and that anonymity would be provided should a participant request this (Bailey, 1996). Information about the research objectives and research process was communicated prior to the interview with all participants via email, telephonically or on site. Since it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that vulnerable groups are protected, certain information was altered (for example where MDWs work). The same applied to employers who had high status occupations and requested that this information not be disclosed. Pseudonyms have been used for all employers, MDWs and PEAs, with the exception of some key informants, based on their choice. Although most PEAs had no issue with disclosing their name, a few preferred to remain anonymous. As such, I opted for a generic reference for all PEAs to avoid revealing any information that may easily be identifiable with the PEAs that wished to remain anonymous.

I sought informed consent from all participants verbally or through the signing of a consent form. None of the MDWs signed the consent form. Instead, they opted for verbal consent that was recorded using a digital recorder. Their reluctance to sign the consent form may have been cautionary, to protect their identity. I was aware that MDWs needed assurance that their employment was not at risk. To avoid discomfort, no forms were signed with MDWs. Similarly, with telephone interviews, consent was recorded verbally. All transcripts and digital records were stored safely following the UCT Data Management Plan (DMP) guide. Only I have access to this data, which is password protected too. In addition to providing all participants with the necessary information about the study, I also had on hand details of trade union organizations (flyers that offered information about their services as part of their recruitment drive) and contact information for NGOs that focused on migration-related challenges or offered support services to those in need.

I offered no financial remuneration to workers as an incentive to participate in the study. Roller and Lavrakas (2015) note that very few studies have critically explored monetary incentives offered in qualitative research. Unless forbidden by regulation authorities, this strategy is commonplace among researchers aiming to study hard-to-research populations. I thought this practice could easily be misinterpreted as a way of attracting MDWs to participate because of compensation, and opted to avoid a scenario where workers may have shared information based on what they thought I wanted to hear (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Although my consent form explicitly stated that “there will be no monetary benefits for participating in this research”, I offered a token of appreciation based on what I could afford at the time (airtime voucher, a favourite food item from the local market at church, or a snack I had made) after an interview was conducted.[40]

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[40] I also reimbursed those who travelled to meet me at a particular site; assisted those who were desperate to help family members find work or wanted additional part-time work by posting adverts on Gumtree on their behalf because they had no internet access; arranged career advice for some of their children or friends’ children at UCT; assisted a MDW with a study guide for matric; and shared information about alternative PEAs that their friends could consider during the job search. After spending time in the field, I could offer newcomers advice on

Debates about best practice or ethical issues were frequently discussed among students who formed part of a PhD collective at UCT. For example, soon after entering the field, two domestic workers asked me for a reference letter, one for a friend and the other for themselves. The intention was to use the reference letter to access work through an agency. I side-stepped these requests in a teasing manner and explained I could not give them a reference letter because I had not employed them. This issue signalled the possibility of domestic workers gaining the wrong impression of the research exchange, but also at the same time their immediate need to seek better opportunities in the domestic sector.[41] In addition to the PhD student collective's regular engagement, the Department of Sociology hosted annual research ethics workshops. This meant that research ethics was an ongoing reflective exercise rather than completing an application before fieldwork commenced.

4.7. Limitations

A defining feature of the research process is the interactive nature between the researcher and participant. The researcher's and the participant's identities play a crucial role in terms of affecting access, the quality of data collected and how the researcher's positionality influences the analysis process. Throughout this chapter I alluded to some of these challenges and the necessary steps taken to mitigate against undue bias during the research process. However, it is important to acknowledge and identify that age, race, class and nationality can affect successful participation and the interpretation of data. As a visible outsider (at church) for example, the slow pace of gaining access to interviews was not surprising. In addition, I was not privy to the private ("backstage") conversations among MDWs because of language barriers. At best, I could inquire "what is happening?" but at no point could I probe or participate in these interactions unless the conversation switched to English, if appropriate. A Zimbabwean researcher may have had better access and perhaps greater insight because of a

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finding employment through PEAs. Some PEAs were considered notoriously rude and arrogant towards workers, whereas others were viewed as genuinely concerned about their well-being. This advice was welcomed and in one instance resulted in a friend of a church member finding employment.

[41] It was only much later that I realized the weight of reference letters (see Chapter Five and Chapter Eight). Vanyoro (2019:28) discusses how undocumented Zimbabwean MDWs who do not have access to "straight papers" use "other people's identity documents and banking details to get onto the system. This tactic presented a risk of being found out but also of wages being appropriated by the original account owners". The structural barriers to access work are severely intensified by not having work experience and documented status.

shared identity and language to interpret the meanings associated with the many aspects directly and indirectly linked to recruitment and hiring experiences.

The link between religion and cultural formations is apparent in ethnographic studies that have explored cultural formations among migrant communities outside of workplaces. For example, both Garba (2017) and Xulu-Gama (2017) had a shared religious identity with the communities they researched. Their shared identity was an advantage for access but also interpreting the many interrelated aspects related to their research. I cannot make any claim to a fully-fledged understanding of Christianity nor charismatic churches. Having grown up in a working-class household with parents from different race and religious backgrounds (and who at different times in their lives were domestic "servants"/workers), my upbringing was not rooted in religion but rather an awareness of and openness to embrace difference. As a member of an economically depressed community, the youth were actively recruited into surrounding church organizations to "keep us out of trouble". My familiarity with Christianity is therefore based on what I learnt at school and the youth services I attended regularly until I completed high school. I am familiar with many of the gospel songs that are sung at charismatic churches and could participate in church activities because of this. My efforts to explore and understand religion and cultural formations were mostly guided by a close reading of other research, peer review discussions in the PhD student collective, interview data and my field notes from church services.

The domestic employment relationship remains a sensitive subject for employers because it often brings to the fore the blatant power imbalances that are pronounced because of race, class and gender differences (Fish, 2006b; Archer, 2011).[42] Employers are aware of these contradictions which naturally informs the details they share about their hiring history and employment practices. Overall, I did not feel like my positionality as a black middle class woman affected my access to PEAs or white employers. It is possible that I was not considered a threat because of my student status, which was useful for accessing accounts from PEAs, employers and MDWs too.[43] However, it is likely that when I conducted interviews, PEAs and employers withheld information because of their feelings of "discomfort" regarding power imbalances in the employment relationship.

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[42] I have not directly employed a domestic worker. When I was an undergraduate student, I lived with a couple who had a full-time domestic worker. It was my first experience witnessing a formal domestic work employment relationship where there was an employment contract, leave arrangements and a retirement savings account set up by the employer for the domestic worker. When I arrived in Cape Town, I lived in a house-share arrangement where the landlord and caretaker insisted that a char clean once a week, to which we contributed payment. The relationship was informal, and later formalized with an employment contract. I therefore have relatable insider experience regarding the intimate nature of domestic work and some of the scenarios because of individuals' demands/needs. In terms of the power dynamics in my interactions with PEAs and employers, it is likely they spoke candidly about their experiences when I conducted telephonic interviews. I have a "model C accent" which is typically associated with white South African and middle class status. My "model C accent" conveys my privileged educational background and my middle class status. Some participants may have perceived me to be white. With email and telephone interactions, my race was unknown and because of this data

The retrospective aspect of the study – focusing on hiring and employment histories – can potentially result in silences or problematic recollection of past and current events (applicable to all participants). One particular example that stood out during the interviews were two employers' poor recollection of some of the agencies they had used previously.[44] Determining whether they had a history of using PEAs or informal agencies during their hiring history was somewhat difficult because they provided vague details and, when I probed for detail, they seemed to genuinely struggle to recall even the name of the agencies. However, given the nature of the sample criteria and accessing employers via PEAs, every effort was made to ensure that the sample reflected the sample criteria. Similarly, the concern regarding "legitimate agencies" (PEAs) were equally applicable to MDWs and PEAs too. Eliminating interviews that did not fit my sample criteria, tracking employment paths during the year and cross-referencing PEAs with what I learnt among key informants, MDWs and employers were active attempts to ensure the sample criteria was met. As I discuss in Chapter Seven and Eight, tracking these details (the "messiness" of research, or what Kabeer (1994) refers to as the "noise" in the field) were important for extrapolating the role and services of PEAs and the complex patterns of recruitment and hiring practices within the historical context of informal employment arrangements. It is these finer details – the depth of the data – that offer important insights into cultural formations and the context-specific nature of the study.

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collection technique, participants may have felt like their anonymity increases when they shared information with me during the interviews (see Farooq & de Villiers, 2017).

[43] I was a full-time student at the time of fieldwork.

[44] There were two participants who had a long history of using 'agencies' compared to most employer participants.

4.8. Conclusion

I argued in this chapter that, in order to extrapolate an understanding of the complex nature of recruitment and hiring practices, the context-specific nature of the significant transformations in the domestic sector warrant attention to better understand the role of and demand for the services of PEAs. Further, a situated understanding of employers and MDWs' fears, hopes and aspirations that are embedded in recruitment and hiring practices are best understood as expressions of agency and identity niching which, at its core, is underpinned by intimacy and an intimate work culture. For these reasons, the research design and methods outlined in this chapter, with an emphasis placed on obtaining multiple perspectives from the key actors involved in the recruitment and hiring process, offer a much-needed vantage point to understand the process of identity niching. This study therefore aimed to uncover how each of the actors understand, experience and interpret the domestic employment relationship – an interpretivist constructivist approach – in ways that inform recruitment and hiring patterns as a social practice through identity niching. The following three chapters shift attention to the overall research aim, starting first with an overview of PEAs' understanding of their role and of demand for their services, followed by employers' and MDWs' recruitment and hiring histories, which illuminate the process of identity niching in the domestic sector.

Chapter 5. The Demand for Private Employment Agencies' Services

5.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the role of and demand for the services of PEAs from the perspective of PEA owners and agents. As a background to the chapters following, this chapter provides the context necessary for understanding the main developments in the domestic sector that have influenced recruitment and hiring practices, an overview of the laborious recruitment and placement process and, lastly, the fluid nature of recruitment and hiring patterns in the PEA industry for domestic work. The findings show that the main role of PEAs, as intermediaries in the domestic sector, is a response to an intimate workplace that recognises the employment rights of domestic workers. As such, PEAs represent domestic workers' interests by matching them with ideal types of employers who are potentially labour compliant and thus comfortable others. At the same time, PEAs respond to the demand for comfortable others – an ideal type of domestic worker – and, as a result, commodify an intimate work culture that employers demand through various gatekeeping practices. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to document PEA's gatekeeping practices that affect an intimate work culture and also inform the process of identity niching among workers and employers, which is discussed in depth in the following chapters. The contextual overview provides important insights into how group identities associated with an intimate work culture are embedded or niched in recruitment and hiring practices.

5.2. Profiling PEAs

This section outlines the profile of PEAs in terms of their core business model and target market, before discussing the role of and demand for PEAs' services. This overview is necessary to make sense of the argument regarding the notion of comfortable others, but also for understanding how the profiling of PEAs relates to specific context related factors that agencies respond to. Further, it is important to state from the outset that each of the PEAs that formed part of the sample reported that they were licensed to operate as intermediaries in the domestic sector. Many of these well-established PEAs were known to the Department of Employment and Labour (DEL) and SADSAWU officials, and some also actively participated in government-led workshops related to the regulation of domestic workers' employment rights.

5.2.1. Demographic Profile and Length of Service

Table 3 below offers a summary of the key features of the sample of PEAs in this study, which is discussed in further detail in the sections following. Except for Agency G, all PEAs had operated in the domestic sector for more than a decade. Agencies A, C and H entered the domestic sector soon after the BCEA came into effect. Agency D was the longest running agency from the sample, having operated during the apartheid and post-apartheid era for almost three decades.

In terms of ownership profile, almost all PEAs were owned by white women except for Agency G, which was relatively new and owned by a Coloured woman. Agency E was the only white-male-owned agency in the sample. Two PEAs (agencies A and B) had a national reach through franchises. Some of their franchises were owned by black women but they were not included in the sample because they were based in other provinces. Where possible, the agency owner and a recruitment agent were interviewed for the larger, franchise-based PEAs. All agents that were interviewed were white women. These agents were interviewed to gain a better understanding of the day-to-day encounters that owners were not necessarily in the best position to comment on. Other PEAs, such as agencies D, F and G, typically fit the "one man band agency" model described in the international literature, in that they managed all aspects of the business and operated from their homes (Mendez, 1998). In other words, they did not employ staff to assist them with the day-to-day running of their businesses. Typically, the other PEAs employed two or three staff, had offices located in the suburbs and had a labour lawyer or consultant on retainer. While agents or agency owners were reluctant to disclose their business reach in terms of clients, many declared that in a good month, they could place three or four domestic workers in private households each week. Those that specialized in cleaning services had a regular client base to keep their business afloat, with 15 to 20 full-time domestic workers, and part-time domestic workers on standby for seasonal changes.

Table 3: PEA profile and core business model in Cape Town

PEA		Interviewee	Number of years operating in the PEA industry	Type of PEA	Core business
Agency A	1	Franchisee owner	More than 15 years	Franchisee	Placements and cleaning services; char teams
	2	Agent			
	3	Franchisee owner			
Agency B	4	Franchisee owner	More than 10 years	Franchisee	Placements of domestic workers, domestic nannies and training
	5	Agent			
Agency C	6	Owner	More than 15 years	Small business	Placements of domestic workers and domestic nannies
	7	Agent			
Agency D	8	Owner	More than 25 years	Small business	Placements of domestic workers, domestic nannies, and au pairs
Agency E	9	Owner	More than 10 years	Small business	Cleaning services and char teams, occasional placements
Agency F	10	Agent	More than 10 years	Small business	Placements of domestic workers, domestic nannies, au pairs
Agency G	11	Owner	Less than 5 years	Small business	Cleaning services or char teams, for private households and businesses
Agency H	12	Agent	More than 15 years	Small business	Placement of care workers and "light" domestic work

5.2.2. The Core Services of PEAs

In general, PEAs may specialize in one core service: placements, outsourced cleaning or support services such as labour-related information or training. In most academic scholarship however, studies focus either on placement agencies or those that specialize in outsourced cleaning (Mendez, 1998; Budlender, 2013; Du Toit, 2020a, 2021). While this study was primarily interested in placements, the sample of PEAs summarized in Table 3 shows a distinct pattern in which almost all PEAs offered a combination of core services to clients (employers, domestic workers and jobseekers) rather than one core service. The main services offered were direct placements (with a higher degree of personalism between the employer and domestic worker) or directly employing domestic workers for cleaning services (with a lower level of personalism because emphasis is placed on service provision, and the agent oversees the management of the domestic worker). What is distinct about the different employment arrangements is that, with direct placements, the prospective employer accepts their status as the employer of a domestic worker, whereas those who seek cleaning services through a triangular employment arrangement reject the status of employer. Clients therefore pay for the cleaning service but outsource the responsibility of managing the employment relationship to the PEA (Du Toit, 2013).

In the niche market of care work, direct employment through placements is typical. PEAs that specialize in placements provided care workers for the aged or disabled, au pairs, nannies, domestic nannies and domestic cleaners on a full-time or part-time basis to employers. Agencies A, B, C, D and E developed a niche by supplying mainly what they referred to as "domestic nannies". Unlike nannies whose job description only includes childcare, domestic nannies provide care to new-borns or young children and are responsible for general or "light" cleaning related tasks. Some households typically employed a "domestic nanny" in addition to a part-time domestic worker (or char) who focused on cleaning their homes once a week or more, depending on their needs. From the sample, only Agency H specialized in placing care givers for the aged in private households.

Agencies A, E and G adopted the "rent a maid" model that offers a triangular employment relationship to clients. However, only Agency G focused exclusively on this core service. In the scenario of service provision, PEAs employed a team of domestic workers to clean multiple houses per day – usually for three to four hours per house. Workers who clean multiple houses a day, individually or as part of a team, are commonly referred to as char workers in Cape Town.[45] These cleaning arrangements occur on a weekly, bi-weekly or monthly basis depending on the client’s needs. Some clients could hire an individual domestic worker (a char) on a similar arrangement, but on an ad-hoc basis or once a week.

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[45] The term "char" or "charwoman" is an English word meaning "domestic odd jobbing […] [a] charwoman picks up domestic work and puts it down again" (Bayley, 2010:17).

Based on Table 3, the least offered service was training provision. However, it is important to note that there are PEAs that specialize in training provision such as doing laundry, elderly care, childcare (which includes cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), child stimulation activities and cooking nutritious meals for babies) or domestic cleaning and cooking services suitable for the hospitality industry too. Only agencies B and H offered specialized training in addition to placements. Three PEAs (agencies A, C and D) had abandoned this service due to the high cost of training and because it was less lucrative than placements (see section 5.3.3). Therefore, based on the sample, it was uncommon for PEAs to specialize in only providing training.

Although the two common core services are distinguished by the different employment arrangements, it is important to note that the recruitment process for job seekers is the same. For example, all job seekers undergo a similar screening process before being hired or placed in private households. As section 5.4 will highlight, the primary objective of the recruitment process is to ensure that “quality candidates” are found. One could also argue that PEAs that offer or specialize in training provision aim to create a pool of quality candidates suitable for employment and thus for the intimate workplace. In the context of PEAs, quality candidates are synonymous with professional domestic workers and thus fit the notion of the “comfortable others” ideal type of domestic worker, suited to the intimate work culture employers and clients demand.

5.2.3. Target Market

PEAs that had a longer history in the domestic sector explained that they initially advertised in magazines, shopping malls, libraries and local newspapers to recruit domestic workers and attract middle and upper middle-class clients or employers who could afford their services and market-related salaries. Gradually, however, it was no longer necessary to advertise on these platforms for domestic workers because of the high unemployment rate in South Africa and the successful informal referral system described as the “nanny or domestic worker network” (see Chapter Seven). However, all PEAs continued to advertise their services on various social media platforms and local newspapers or magazines to attract clients/employers. In terms of racial profile, all PEAs reported that most of their clients were white. However, they also noted an increased demand for their services among black middle and upper middle-class households.

In terms of the racial and gender profile of domestic workers, mostly African (isiXhosa) South Africans and to a lesser extent Coloured South Africans were recruited. This gender and racial profile typically coincides with the demographic profile of domestic workers in the Western Cape. In addition to recruiting South African domestic workers, PEAs recruited mostly female foreign nationals from other African countries, namely Zimbabwe and Malawi. In the sample, only two agencies (Agency A and Agency H) recruited and placed male domestic workers, especially men from Malawi. Agency A, for example placed male domestic workers who specialized in either indoor or outdoor domestic work, as well as "housemen" who were employed for both types of domestic work (see section 5.5.1 and Chapter Six). Agency H, on the other hand, hired male caregivers for the elderly. While the racial, gender and national profiles of domestic workers relate in part to the demographic profile of domestic workers in Cape Town and to migration trends, the following sections and chapters will show that fluid recruitment and hiring trends are often based on subjective stereotypes regarding who (not necessarily what) a comfortable other is.

5.3. Representing Clients' Interests

Although PEAs have a long history in South Africa, their role in the domestic sector changed significantly following the recognition of domestic workers employment rights. As outlined in Chapter Two, the shift from servant to worker status and the transformation of the private household into an intimate workplace had serious implications for both employers and domestic workers in terms of their respective interests being met, but within the context of promoting a culture of labour compliance among employers and for domestic workers (Ally, 2010; Du Toit, 2013, 2021). One could argue, as other studies have noted too, that PEAs can play a crucial transformative role in the domestic sector by serving the interests of the state to meet the objective of being and promoting being labour compliant. However, as Du Toit (2010) argues, employers in South Africa have mostly reacted to the state's role in implementing labour legislation to protect domestic workers' employment rights with "indifference or resistance". These reactions continue to have dire consequences for domestic workers struggling to access stable and decent work in the domestic sector, thus challenging the drive towards formalizing domestic work. The following section captures PEA's observation of the main developments in the domestic sector as well as how they have responded to the recognition of domestic workers employment rights and positioned themselves to meet their client's interests.

5.3.1. Response to Labour Legislation

There was widespread agreement among PEA owners and agents that the introduction of the minimum wage (SD7) and other protections for domestic workers gave rise to the demand for their core services. All PEA owners and agents acknowledged that the demand for their services increased due to what they perceived as employers' "fear of the law" and their ignorance of how to apply the law to the employment relationship. Agency A3 explained:

> But people have a perception that the law is in the employees' favour and yes, it is quite pro-employee but not dismissive of an employer at all if you use it correctly. And I think that's what people are scared off – "Oh my God the law, the law!" It's there, but it's there for a reason. (Agency A3, interview, 29 July 2013)

Agency E, the only male-owned intermediary in the sample, argued that there was strong link between more employers shifting to cleaning services because of the "employment protections" for domestic workers. He explained that employers "end up looking for gaps to beat the system or they look at avoiding it". He added that it had "a lot to do with what was brought in with the CCMA" which made it "very difficult to get rid of staff today whether they are domestic staff or other". Similarly, the owner of Agency D, who has operated as a placement agent for almost three decades, explained how and why her role had changed as an intermediary:

> I give them all the labour relations papers. I give them everything so they can't just fire somebody like they used to do in the old days. "Get out!" you know, "Pack your bags and go!" They've got to prove a theft. They've got to write three letters. They've got to do the right thing otherwise they're in big trouble. (Agency D, interview, 8 August 2013)

Agency owner A3 bemoaned that:

> I sit on the phone for hours talking to people who want to know or understand better. That's all free advice that we give – how to deal with disciplinary action and what it means. (Agency A3, interview, 29 July 2013)

The quotes above highlight two main issues. The first is the issue of non-compliance and what labour compliance entails. Second, related to the first point, is employers' uncertainty of how to manage intimate workers who have breached their employment contract. As Agency D noted, "firing at whim", which was a common practice in the past, has serious consequences.

Agency E made the point that domestic workers could take their grievances to the CCMA for arbitration and if the employer is found guilty, they face financial penalties. To avoid getting into "big trouble", employers rely on PEAs for guidance on how to best manage the employment relationship without being non-compliant. As Agency A3 explained above, this includes learning how to apply the law appropriately when responding to grievances or issues such as theft. Support services offered by PEAs may include mediation between the employer and domestic worker, terminating a contract and, if the employer is not the client of a PEA, assistance with creating and signing employment contracts.

Triangular employment relationship

Some clients, however, avoid the direct employment relationship by using PEAs that offer a cleaning service. Agency E explained that there was a demand for his cleaning teams (or char teams) because:

> I think it's like convenience stores, your shops in the garages. Your Woolworths are generally thriving even with high prices because people's time is important. So, people are paying to have it done – what they don't want to do. One of our slogans is actually, "We clean so you can live life". (Agency E, interview, 28 January 2014)

The convenience of engaging a PEA that offers a cleaning service is multiple. While the quote above emphasises that clients save time because they don't have to do household chores, they also profit from the service because they outsource the management responsibility to a PEA (both the emotion work of management and the administrative role). Firstly, managing an employee entails "emotion work" because feelings and emotions need to be managed in the employment relationship. Emotion work and the management of emotions are critical in the intimate workplace to foster healthy and productive relationships. When discomfort and potential conflict emerge because of grievances for both parties, this can have a serious impact on both employers and domestic workers who struggle to manage the emotions that are inherent in the relationship because of the nature of intimate work. Secondly, the administrative role that employers must oversee is directly linked to labour compliance requirements. PEAs that offer the triangular employment relationship take on the administrative role as employers by issuing payslips and employment contracts, paying UIF, processing leave requests and handling disciplinary matters.

Agency E revealed that, while his clients were willing to pay handsomely for a convenient service, they said: “One of my [chars[46]] does more in a day than a full-time domestic worker does in a week”. This reiterates the point that, if possible, clients “end up looking for gaps to beat the system or they look at avoiding it”. The triangular employment relationship can be seen as an example of defying the system while also avoiding it. Clients “beat” the system by hiring the services of a PEA that takes on the role of employer, and avoid the system of managing an unproductive worker and the process of applying the law effectively to address uncomfortable encounters that may arise. This, in part, reflects how the high degree of personalism inherent in a direct employment relationship, combined with the employer’s unwillingness to comply with the law or “fear of the law”, drives the demand for the triangular employment arrangement in the domestic sector.

Direct employment relationship

While some clients can avoid the direct employment relationship, others have specific needs, such as care work, that require full-time or part-time domestic workers. PEAs reported that most prospective employers approached them with the intention of being labour compliant and finding a suitable domestic worker to manage. However, they also reported that they frequently interacted with clients who demonstrated not only ignorance, but also dismay and a general sense of “indifference and resistance” to labour-compliance requirements. Agency owner A3 identified some of the typical reactions and responses employers had in response to labour legislation for domestic workers below:

> I still work out a UIF payment for one client who has had a lady for seven years ... because “My maths is so bad.” Your maths is non-existent if you can’t work out a UIF payment! I’m sorry! And I mean she's lovely and it’s good that she does what's right, but you know this is what we deal with. And then someone goes, “But I did this and this and this for my maid and this and this. And I pay her a great salary, but she works this and this hours”. And I’m like, “Hang on, it doesn't matter what you pay her unless you made 45 hours your working week and the rest over time. Whatever you are paying her now, you add over time onto it because that’s what you required to do”. “Oh but, but, but”. “I'm not telling you what you have to do, I’m telling you what the law says, and you can get into trouble”. (Agency A3, interview, 29 July 2013)
>
> Some people will listen, and some people won't. I have a person in Bishopscourt who took out, *on my contract*, the public holidays because he refused to pay for them. So, I said to him, “*Sir*, just because you take it out doesn't mean the law doesn’t apply”. (Agency A3, interview, 29 July 2013)

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[46] The name of the business was redacted here.

Agency C, which offers placements, described a typical encounter with clients who seemed ignorant about minimum wages and basic working conditions:

> I mean we do get clients that phone or who e-mail: “I'm looking for a nanny to work from 6:30am in the morning until 7:00pm at night and we can only afford to pay R2000”. And I say, “I'm sorry we don’t have any nannies that fit that category”. (Agency C6, interview, 25 November 2013)

The quotes above reveal employers’ “indifference and resistance” to the state’s effort to promote decent working conditions for domestic workers. As intermediaries, PEAs therefore challenge domestic work as unskilled low-paid work by refusing to take on clients who are unwilling to pay “market related salaries”. When PEAs coach candidates and reject clients’ unreasonable and non-compliant demands, they act as educators but also promote domestic workers’ employment rights and access to potentially labour compliant employers.

5.3.2. Promoting a Culture of Labour Compliance

Bargaining power

Like employers, PEAs are also monitored by the Department of Employment and Labour (DEL). DoL inspectors use a checklist to ensure that PEAs fulfil their roles as licenced intermediaries and thus are labour compliant, but also promote labour compliance in the domestic sector. When monitoring PEAs, the DoL requires are that a visible sign is displayed on the business property which informs job seekers that there is “no charge to candidates”. In addition, PEAs’ records (payslips and employment contracts) are scrutinized to determine whether they are labour compliant. Based on the regulatory context, PEAs argued that all clients found their services appealing because they offered job-related advice, information that educates about and promotes worker and employer rights, and a sense of security through various processes to promote labour compliance. As mentioned earlier, this includes providing an employment contract, discussing, and agreeing to working conditions and the domestic workers’ salary, and thereafter signing the contract before employment commences. These services are often absent when using informal recruitment and hiring processes and, as the following chapters will show, are evident among employers’ and domestic workers’ hiring histories prior to approaching a PEA.

An agent explained the merits of using a PEA from a worker’s perspective:

> It’s generally sort of a security thing. They feel that they will get a contract. It’s very important. A contract is such a huge security blanket for the domestic nanny. It means that the client is

> committing to this employment. It's not just verbal and it's not just going to fall away in six months' time. This person is committing to this relationship, and I think that's what you get more going through an agency than not. The nanny that was here when you arrived on Monday – … her previous employer had put her on Gumtree, and this had been seen by a client of mine. And she said to the client after the interview, "I'm very happy to come and trial for you and all of that but you need to work through [my agency] because that's where I'm registered". (Agency B5, interview, 14 November 2013]

What is apparent from the scenario outlined above is that the candidate and client could have bypassed the PEA, even though they had both registered with the same agency. This was possible because a separate recruitment and hiring process was at play when the candidate's former employer posted an online advert on Gumtree (a free advertising platform) which the candidate and client responded too. If the candidate had accepted the client's (prospective employer's) job offer without engaging the services of the PEA, the client/employer would have gained an immediate benefit by saving approximately R4200 in placement fees (in this example, calculated at 10% of the domestic workers' annual salary, which must not be deducted from the domestic worker's earnings).[47]

There are two important points about the scenario the agent describes above. Firstly, both the candidate and client used two different recruitments methods simultaneously. This not only points to prospective employers keeping open recruitment options that are affordable, but also that jobseekers use multiple platforms to find employment as soon as possible. Secondly, the candidate chose to accept the job offer *providing* the PEA processed her placement. The advantage of using a PEA is that the candidate relied on their services as an intermediary to formalize the employment relationship with a contract and thus receive a market related salary. As agent B5 explains, they coach candidates to not respond to clients with, "I'll take whatever I can get", and instead encourage them to say, "The salary I require is X. And there are no ifs, buts or maybes". While neither of the recruitment methods (online advertising platforms or PEAs) guarantees the protection and realization of domestic workers' employment rights, the example outlined above suggests that domestic workers are aware of the potential benefits of using a PEA. In other words, PEAs have the potential to foster a culture of compliance among employers and meet domestic workers' interests by formalizing the employment relationship, achieving market related salaries instead of minimum wages (Bamu, 2013).

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[47] Placement fees can range from 10% to 14% of a domestic workers' annual salary.

Minimum wages vs. market related salaries

In the PEA industry, wages ranged from R2000 to R2600 a month in 2013 and 2014 for regular full-time domestic cleaning services. Those employed directly by employers as domestic workers, domestic nannies or nannies could secure higher wages.[48] Their wages ranged from R3000 to R4500 a month. In contrast, the monthly minimum wage for a 45-hour week set by the SD7 from 1 December 2012 to 30 November 2013 for full time employment in urban areas was a mere R1746. From 1 December 2013 to 30 November 2014, the monthly minimum wage had only increased to R1877.70.[49] The quotes below capture the wages for different types of employment offered through PEAs in 2013-2014.

In reference to domestic workers employed for cleaning services,

> At the moment, anything less than R2000 isn't considered decent even though it's slightly higher than the minimum wage. (Agency A3, interview, 29 July 2013)
>
> I would say if somebody is working a five-day week, they could possibly earn in the region of R2200 to R2600. (Agency E, interview, 28 January 2013)
>
> It's not a full chip. We pay R2200. We deliver them. They get lunch. They get motivation. They get prizes. They get lucky draws. I do what I can. If I paid more, I'm out of business. So, 800 people across the country we employ. But we can't pay any more. [...] (Agency A1, interview, 11 June 2013)

In the niche market for full-time nannies (what agencies describe as 'domestic nannies'):

> There's a limit at which we can get a job for somebody. I mean, R3000 seems to be [the norm]. R3500 if people are a little bit wealthier. (Agency C6, interview, 25 November 2013)
>
> Let's just say R3500 on average but it could be R3200 up to R4500. But R3500 is what we like to put out there. We don't really want a nanny to be earning less than R3500. (Agency B4, interview, 12 November 2013)

Another agent elaborated on the salary ranges for part-time and full-time domestic nannies:

> For a part-time nanny – two or three days a week there is a set rate which is now I think R2500 plus transport. The permanent placement which is 8:00am to 5:00pm a week is nothing less than R3500

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[48] See Appendices E and F.

[49] See RSA (2014). Eight years later, the National Minimum Wage Commission recommended that the widely debated National Minimum Wage Act be extended fully to domestic workers. As of 1 March 2022, the minimum wage for a 45-hour week for domestic workers is R4174.20 per month (RSA, 2023).

> and that is dependent on transport, whether it's live-in or live-out. And then the working hours, it can't be longer than the 45-hour week. So, if the nanny is staying one taxi route away a lot of the parents will start the nanny on a R3500 salary and potentially review after three months. We place nothing under R3500.
>
> Now we are still getting nannies calling in who are earning R2800 for full-time work, R2500 for full-time work. So those are the nannies we try and sort of help so they can get into the market where they need to be earning a sort of liveable salary. But at the moment the trend is sort of at the R4000 placement. It's ranging a lot toward R3800 to R4000 now, as opposed to the R3500. (Agency B5, interview, 14 November 2013)

The salary range for direct and indirect employment arrangements through PEAs highlights wage differentials based on job descriptions, skills level and work experience, which aligns with the domestic work hierarchy. In other words, the skills level and type of domestic work is recognized through differential wage levels. As outlined above, the earning potential for domestic workers hired directly by PEAs and for cleaning services is significantly low compared to the earning potential for full-time domestic workers and "domestic nannies" placed in private households. However, irrespective of the employment arrangement, access to domestic work through PEAs suggests that domestic workers could earn above minimum wages and potentially access stable formal employment too. As established in Chapter Two, this was absent in the SD7, which legislated a single minimum wage thereby failing to recognize the varying levels of skills and work experience associated with different forms of domestic work (Bamu, 2013). Bamu (2013) argues that this was a major shortcoming in the regulation of minimum wages because it detracts from the developmental objectives of the decent work agenda. These objectives specifically call for the recognition of domestic work as "socially valuable labour ... that is fundamentally no different from other forms of such labour" (Du Toit, 2013:6).

Access to stable employment and above-minimum wages is important for domestic workers. Despite the vast academic literature on domestic workers hired directly by PEAs for cleaning services, the impact of the triangular employment relationship on domestic workers remains contested. On the one hand, and as confirmed in this study too, cleaning services are often low paid, repetitive and labour intensive, because of the nature of the work (cleaning multiple houses per day individually or as part of a team using standardized cleaning routines to promote efficiency (Mendez, 1998; Du Toit, 2013). On the other hand, despite the lower earning potential compared to other types of domestic work, some studies have showed that domestic workers prefer regular domestic work and teamwork compared to working in isolation and under the direct employment of employers who tend to make unreasonable and excessive demands (Du Toit, 2013). Since PEAs operate in a highly competitive market, various strategies are used to retain and incentivize domestic workers to be productive and offer quality services (Mendez, 1998; Du Toit, 2013). For example, Agency A explains that her workers receive “added perks” such as lucky draws and prizes for the best domestic worker of the month. These incentives encourage worker morale but also ensure productivity – what Agency E’s clients find most appealing about the triangular employment arrangement, because a team or individual char can do more work in a day compared to a full-time domestic worker. However, in contrast to the triangular employment arrangement, the earning potential for a full-time domestic worker through placements is more appealing because “market related salaries” are a more “liveable salary”.

So far, it is evident that, from the perspective of PEA owners and agents, they are potentially an integral part of the regulatory regime because they play an important role in realizing domestic workers’ employment rights, particularly in terms of securing above-minimum wages. It is important to note, however, that PEAs are in the business of making money, which they accomplish by encouraging market-related salaries that guarantee high placement fees or by charging high fees for cleaning services.

5.3.3. Professionalizing Domestic Work

Creating a pool of quality candidates

An underlying theme among PEAs is that their domestic workers or pool of candidates are professionally trained. As mentioned earlier, while not every PEA in the sample provided training, when seeking a permanent placement, clients often “come to the agency and ask are they all trained” (Agency B4, interview, 12 November 2013). In the PEA industry, PEAs reported a proliferation of private training courses from various service providers that aimed to promote professional domestic work, and that they often recommended to clients if the agency did not provide training. According to a few PEA owners, private training addressed the shortcomings of state-run initiatives aiming to promote skills development in the domestic sector (agencies A, B and C). Some of these training initiatives prepared job seekers not only for domestic work, but also for other fields such as the hospitality industry (Bamu, 2013; Agency A1, interview, 11 June 2013). While all PEAs agreed that there was a demand for “quality” or professional candidates, they explained that training was not as profitable as permanent placements. The owner of Agency B, who had multiple franchises in the Western

Cape and South Africa, provided training. She explained (below) that her core services included placements, but that those placements were more profitable than training services:

> When we look at our business, if training brings in 30%, the placement side is bringing in 70%. And you can see that there was a much bigger demand for recruiting nannies [...]. When you look at the training, it costs you R1700. A placement is costing R4200. (Agency B4, interview, 12 November 2013]

According to Agency B, courses were designed to meet the skills gap in the domestic sector and in response to their knowledge of clients' (employers') demands. These points were reiterated by agencies A, C, D and H. Agency B's training programme was in high demand from, mainly, first-time mothers who wanted to ensure that their domestic nanny had the skills set necessary for childcare. They also attracted job seekers and domestic workers who wanted to improve their employment and earning potential in the domestic sector. Although the programme was not accredited, it appealed to clients (employers and job seekers) owing to the way it was marketed and the fact that it was associated with a well-known brand in the PEA industry.

The issue of professionalizing domestic work is a contentious issue, and for various reasons. Concerns arise regarding who provides training and the quality of their training initiatives (for example the private or public sector), the extent to which professionalizing domestic work can be matched with better earning potential and the gender and racial stereotypes about domestic work that are embedded in the curriculum design (Ally, 2010; Scrinzi, 2011). Although there are PEAs that specialize in skills development for the domestic sector, PEAs in this study expressed concerns about clients prioritizing skills development over work-related practices (an intimate work culture) and personality, which they considered essential for the intimate workplace. As can be expected, clients were frequently advised to avoid prioritizing skills-related competencies and instead to focus on work-related practices associated with a professional service for placements. For example,

> It doesn't matter how well you cook, how well you clean, how beautifully you do laundry - honesty above everything, having a good attitude, reliability, punctuality, are the four things that are more important than your skills. (Agency A1, interview, 11 June 2013]

Another agent explained that, when making placements, personality and work experience are important considerations because of the nature of the employment relationship:

> The problem is it's a personality match as much as an experience match. So, we try and sort of really dig deep and say several times, find a nanny that fits your family's personality values – the things that are important to your family. You can train a skill; you can't train a characteristic. (Agency B5, interview, 14 November 2013)

In previous chapters, I discussed how workplace practices are part of the intimate work culture because of the way a worker works or performs their tasks. An intimate work culture is also about interaction between the domestic worker and employer. This relational interaction, which will be discussed further in later chapters, signals the importance of the character of the employer and domestic worker, which affects the employment relationship when personalism and interaction are high. These considerations highlight what many other scholars have noted about the complex relational dynamic of the domestic employment relationship. According to Agency A, honesty, a positive attitude, reliability and punctuality are more important than skills. These characteristics emphasize the importance of the way a domestic worker works. The statement "you can train a skill; you can't train a characteristic" relates to the debate regarding professionalizing domestic work but also the work identity that is commodified. On the one hand, PEAs advance the demand for professional skills in domestic service provision not only because it is what clients want, but also because it challenges the perception that domestic work is inherently unskilled and thus undervalued. By offering or recommending training, PEAs promote domestic work as a skilled occupation like any other. On the other hand, PEAs recognize the distinct nature of the intimate workplace when they emphasise that the candidate's personality matters. This consideration relates to the interpersonal relationship typical of a direct employment relationship and what scholars have noted regarding professionalizing domestic work – that, while it includes skills development and worker empowerment, professionalism of domestic work is also an attitude (Guevarra, 2009; Scrinzi, 2011; Lutz, 2011; Bamu, 2013; Souralová, 2015). In terms of the role of and demand for the services of PEAs, the findings above suggest that PEAs attempt to educate and provide prospective employers with an ideal type of domestic worker according to their personal preferences too.

Promoting employability and professional status

Professionalizing domestic work is important because it promotes the employability of domestic workers. Efforts to professionalize domestic work can take place in three different ways. First is through the recruitment process, wherein agencies ensure that all job seekers are screened so that only quality candidates with work experience are provided for placements or triangular employment arrangements. Second is through training programmes that either focus on basic skills or higher end competencies related to household management and care work (Bamu, 2013). Third is through on-the-job training, particularly for workers employed through triangular employment relationships. To a lesser extent, PEAs may encourage the performance of professionalism by offering advice to candidates before an interview takes place and a placement is made.

Private training initiatives, however, have been criticized for potentially excluding most job seekers because of the costs of the courses (Bamu, 2013). Depending on the course, a domestic worker or job seeker would pay between R300 and R2000 for a short course that is a few hours long or offered for one or two days. The more career-related and specialized courses can cost as much as R6500.[50] Although private training has cost implications, Du Toit (2013:330) advocates "that professional training for domestic workers is critical because workers' career prospects are enhanced both within and outside the domestic sector". Further, Bamu (2013:200) argues that professionalizing domestic work "reduc[es] the inequality between worker and employer" by challenging the notion that domestic workers are "lesser beings". In the PEA industry, because of domestic workers' professional status, agents and workers can and do challenge the normative assumptions that render workers as "lesser beings" by insisting on market-related salaries that match their skills and work experience because, as Agent B5 (interview, 14 November 2013) explained, "You get what you pay for!" Therefore, private training initiatives have the potential to be transformative when domestic workers skills and work experience are recognized through market related salaries.

While PEAs represent clients' interests by professionalizing domestic work in response to the demand for quality candidates, they also represent clients' needs due to the complexities of the domestic work employment relationship by taking personality matches, as well as the intimate work culture employers' demand, into account. The section that follows discusses how the trend toward professionalizing domestic work and promoting labour compliance aligns with the gatekeeping processes of the PEAs in recruiting and selecting the ideal type of domestic workers – comfortable others. As the following section will demonstrate, PEA gatekeeping processes encourage the commodification of an intimate work culture that employers demand, demonstrating the disciplinary logic of the demand for “comfortable others” as well.

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[50] See, for example, training courses on offer by well-known providers such as Chilton and Super Nannies.

5.4. Recruiting and Selecting Comfortable Others

All PEAs have processes in place to guide the recruitment and hiring of domestic workers. The primary objective of the recruitment and hiring process is to ensure that quality candidates are sought and placed in private households. Each stage of the recruitment and hiring process reveals important aspects about the commodification of an intimate work culture and the typical strategies used to ensure gatekeeping in the domestic sector. Table 4 and Table 5 in Appendix C provide a summary of the stages involved in the recruitment and hiring process for all involved (clients, prospective employers, job seekers and candidates). Each stage of the process is explained in further detail in the following sub-sections.

5.4.1. Registration Process

Prospective employers and clients

Prospective employers and clients (those seeking cleaning services) often register with one or more PEAs to gain access to a pool of quality candidates, especially where placements are required (see Chapter Six). This is common knowledge in the PEA industry but also points to the highly competitive market for quality services and candidates. The registration fee varies among the different PEAs, but it is usually a non-refundable fee and less than R300. The registration process includes filling out a form that requests information about the clients’ cleaning service and placement requirements. The registration form is designed to determine what salary clients can afford to pay; the size of the house and number of family members; the type of domestic worker needed (nanny, domestic nanny, caregiver, domestic cleaner); and the age, skills and general attributes of a worker wanted. Criteria such as language, racial and national preferences are also requested on the registration form. This information is usually referred to as “personal preferences”. Agency A3 (interview, 29 July 2013) explained why questions related to personal preferences were important:

> We actually ask them, culturally, do you have a preference? Not because I really care but because if I’m going to take you three Coloured ladies, three Zim[babwean] ladies and you don't want to employ any of them, what’s the damn point, you know?! It’s more wasting time.

While clients can call the agent directly to initiate the recruitment and hiring process – many do – most established PEAs have streamlined their registration process via their website and rely on email communication to verify household and personal requirements. This is a cost-efficient strategy for PEAs because they save on telephone costs. It is also convenient for working clients who prefer to complete forms electronically and respond to emails. However, the strategies used to determine client's needs may vary across PEAs and may not always be limited to completing a registration form. For example, a few PEAs explained that they did site visits to determine clients' needs while others verified their client's needs if they were asked to assist with interviews at the client's home. These practices ensured that correct fees were charged for cleaning services and that realistic salaries were set for permanent placements with large and oftentimes demanding household's needs.

Job seekers

Unlike clients, PEAs are legally forbidden from charging job seekers a registration or job placement fee (ILO, 1997, No. 181). Job seekers register with multiple PEAs to increase their chances of finding work. Typically, job seekers provide PEAs with the following documents: a recent CV, a reference letter, a copy of identity document for South African citizens, copy of passport and work permit for foreign citizens and a police clearance certificate if requested. All documents are scrutinized during the screening process before a job seeker is considered. The screening process sets PEAs apart from informal agencies, which are unlikely to consider the work history of a job seeker. There is, therefore, a critical point to be made about how PEAs operate in the domestic sector, and more especially the domestic worker identity that is commodified. The screening process is a systematic process they execute to ensure that quality candidates (commodifying an intimate work culture that employers demand) are selected for private households.

5.4.2. Screening Process

PEAs require job seekers to provide a reference letter that clearly outlines details of their former employer, the address where they worked, the reason for the termination of their contract and information related to their previous work experience in the domestic sector. PEAs carefully scrutinize reference letters to ensure that the information provided is correct. The main objective of the screening process is to ensure quality candidates are selected and that intimate workers are honest, reliable and skilled – but also have the right attitude for the workplace.

This criterion is synonymous with the professional identity of domestic workers described earlier and epitomises one of the fundamental gatekeeping practices PEAs engage in. The screening process demonstrates not only what PEAs search for, but also their expertise in the commodification of intimate workers (Hochschild, 2012; Souralová, 2015). As Agency D (interview, 8 August 2013) explained, reference checking is expensive but an ethical responsibility:

> You have to verify every reference and that costs money too. But it doesn't matter because that's what you need to do. It's the honest thing to do. You can't just dump people into jobs that are going to plummet.

The screening process is important in the PEA industry because many job seekers submit fake reference letters and are thus rejected. In addition, PEAs do not assume that domestic work is inherently women's work, nor that it is "easy work" that everyone can do well. PEAs verify reference letters by cross examining job seekers and former employers. Agency A3 (interview, 29 July 2013) explained why and how they verify reference letters:

> The work seekers phone in and I'll say I need a reference in writing, and I need your ID [identity document] and permission to work in South Africa. [...] We get a lot of fake references and I'm not willing to entertain that! Why? Of course not, I'm an agent! Why would you entertain something that was false? But secondly, if I can't see the area where someone's worked, the way the reference is written, you know there are things in writing: a) I can question the domestic worker on them and b) I can question the employer on them. [...] A lot of fake references! You'll ask somebody, "Oh so what was the address?" And they'll give you a completely different address that wasn't even on the reference letter!

The main challenge PEAs experience is finding quality candidates. Job seekers are frequently turned away because they do not pass the initial screening stage, owing to dishonesty. This could happen if job applicants submit a forged reference letter or if agents discover that they were suspected of pilfering by previous employers and this was not disclosed in the reference letter. PEAs explained that they invest time and money phoning previous employers and impersonating future employers *with young children*. This emotional tactic is successful in eliciting information about the former employment relationship that is not disclosed on the reference letter. PEAs have observed that employers retrench domestic workers under false pretences to end an employment relationship when they suspect their domestic worker was pilfering or stealing items from their home or when they were dissatisfied with their work performance. Employers, however, rarely report theft to the police because they lack evidence to substantiate their suspicion and may not be labour compliant (see Chapter Six). Rather than having uncomfortable conversations with their domestic worker, issuing letters of warnings or firing a domestic worker who may challenge their reason for dismal through the CCMA, a non-confrontational approach is taken. In Chapter Six, this theme is discussed further from the perspective of employers.

One of the main reasons clients approach PEAs is to ensure that they avoid hiring someone with a criminal record. Perceptions of or personal experiences with domestics who have stolen or are part of gang-related syndicates that "clean out" houses circulate in the media, among PEAs and around worker and employer networks. With these concerns in mind, employers eagerly, but sometimes grudgingly, pay pricey placement fees for peace of mind (approximately 10% to 14% of the domestic worker's annual salary). However, as many PEAs caution clients, there is no guarantee that reference checking is a fool-proof strategy.

A few PEAs have created databases that are shared with other franchisees, documenting job seekers with criminal records and employees who have behaved badly or dishonestly (Agency A1, interview, 11 June 2013; Agency B, interview, 12 November 2013). Others have begun encouraging clients who prioritize "honesty" to conduct a polygraph test, especially since purchasing reference letters was widespread in the domestic sector. Polygraph tests, however, are a separate cost for the client. Super Nannies, for example, has responded to the demand for high-quality intimate workers by investing in cutting-edge technology to screen job applicants for criminal backgrounds. On their website, they inform prospective clients that "we run our criminal checks using an Ideco Automated Fingerprint Identification System AFISwitch digital fingerprint scanner. The scanner takes digital fingerprints which are then electronically submitted through software to the South African police" (Super Nannies, 2022). The AFIS has a turnaround time of approximately 48 hours. With such measures in place, the initial screening process is designed to ensure suitable domestic workers are identified, with a particular emphasis on honesty.

The emphasis placed on the screening and recruiting process suggests that PEAs act as a "human technology" of control in the domestic sector. Human technologies include the following characteristics: they are controlled by people, have an institutionalizing effect, serve specific goals such as education, production, or adjustment, and try to change human behaviour through knowledge and varied strategies (Rose, 1996). Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the impact that reference letters play in establishing and promoting discipline as a technique for shaping and influencing human behaviour. Part of the reason for this is that job seekers are frequently new recruits to paid domestic work, owing to "labour brokering" countries and agencies that send workers to other countries (Constable, 1997; Guevarra, 2009). For example, instead of submitting reference letters, they submit letter-formatted essays. These "essays", addressed to prospective employers, inform them of their economic desperation, hardworking capabilities and willingness to be "honest and obedient" with every intention of fulfilling a two-year contract (Constable, 1997). Unless there are state-sanctioned flexibilities in place, some recruitment agencies insist on two years' work experience from applicants (Constable, 1997).

Reference letters not only provide insight into domestic workers' intimate work culture but also the identity that PEAs attempt to commodify. More specifically, reference letters reveal work related behaviours considered essential for the intimate workplace. These work-related behaviours, being honest, reliable, hardworking, skilled and with the right attitude for the workplace, emerge as the key features of the intimate work culture employers demand. PEAs therefore set out to determine who a "comfortable other" is through their gatekeeping practices, so that clients feel comfortable *managing* a domestic worker in *their* intimate space. Like the sponsorship system (see Anderson, 2010; Pande, 2013), reference letters have a disciplining effect because domestic workers depend on their employers for "good" reference letters to secure better or new employment opportunities.

Generally, PEAs require that job seekers have a minimum of two years' work experience in the domestic sector. While job seekers without a reference letter are often turned away, PEAs can and do exercise discretion during the screening process. For example, Agency E (interview, 28 January 2014) explains below:

> I only take people ideally that have references. Sometimes with the foreign nationals you've got to make exceptions. But then I would have them working at my house and my partner's house and even some good customers from time to time or ... I say to somebody, "Can I send someone else, and will you give me feedback? Also, I use new people sometimes in what I would call a team clean. [...] Depending on the size of the place, we could use four to eight people in one house – I'm talking about some of the big houses. But then I also see what they are doing and also get feedback from my more experienced members.

The example above illustrates the importance of on-the-job training for inexperienced workers and foreign nationals who may not have work experience in South Africa's domestic sector. Working in a "char team" allows agents to monitor their progress and prepare them for domestic work. With placements, PEAs may consider candidates who have at least a year's work experience or experience as mothers and have completed a recognized domestic work course. These opportunities are available provided job seekers pass the initial screening process and, if required by a client, a polygraph test. These limitations and opportunities to access work not only have a disciplining effect on workers but also promote the identity that PEAs commodify – comfortable others.

5.4.3. Selection Process among Clients (Employers)

Once PEAs determine clients' needs, they respond by sending out domestic workers' CVs or abbreviated profiles that include the contactable details of former employers. This process is applicable for part-time and permanent placements. Clients can contact former employers to verify that the information provided is accurate. Clients review the information provided and select whom they want to interview – usually three candidates. Thereafter, PEAs facilitate interaction between the client and candidates for an interview. Clients therefore decide whom they want to interview and employ. It is standard practice for the PEA to arrange interviews with at least three candidates for the client. As Agent A2 (interview, 11 June 2013) explained:

> But I will not take one person unless I'm 100% sure that one person is perfect for the job. Well not perfect, but the most suitable for that job. Otherwise, I will present the client with the possibility of three candidates because it's the client's choice of who she would like to employ. I would present them with the CVs, and I would then sit and conduct the interviews with them.

If the client is unsatisfied with the initial set of candidates provided, further options are presented to the client for consideration. Clients often request to meet with more candidates if they are unsatisfied with the "quality of candidates" or do not find "the right fit for their family" (see Chapter Six). The amount of face-to-face interaction between the candidate, client and PEA varies depending on the type of service a PEA offers. Interviews are arranged at either the PEA's office (often with an experienced agent present) or at the prospective employer's home (sometimes with an experienced agent present, as indicated in the quote above). For example, some PEAs conduct most of their communication and interview arrangements via e-mail or telephone – this includes sending out and receiving signed agreements and employment contracts from clients. Clients who use agencies that adopt this approach often meet candidates without an agent and in their homes. In this scenario, PEAs advise clients to provide candidates with their transport fare (usually R40 to R50) after the interview has been completed. Agents usually suggest interview questions and provide advice on what to look out for during the interview or trial work period before a client makes their final decision on who they want to employ.

Similarly, candidates benefit from PEAs' expert knowledge of employers' demands and the challenges they face as employers of intimate workers.[51] Candidates may receive advice on how to present themselves during an interview and during a trial work period. For instance, some of the typical suggestions made by an agent are to make sure you communicate with your employer or interviewer if you are running late; SMS if you cannot work or make an appointment; and inform your employer if you need to extend your leave. Job seekers or candidates can also learn about interview etiquette and work performance from online videos and training courses designed to "educate" workers on the expectations of the industry.

After the interview process, clients usually select one or more candidates for a trial work period. The trial period is like a competency test. It is not a probation period. The trial period ranges from a day to at least a week. The length of the trial period depends on the client's needs or is based on the advice provided by the PEA. During the trial period, clients are advised to pay a daily wage and cover the candidate's travel costs. Once a trial is complete, clients decide on whom they prefer to employ. PEAs encourage this practice to ensure that both the employer and the candidate are satisfied with the placement process. Candidates are not obligated to agree to a trial period and nor are they obliged to accept a placement offer. They too make informed decisions on who is the most suitable employer for them (see Chapter Seven).

Other PEAs prefer face-to-face interaction with their clients and candidates. Here a more intimate "hands-on approach" is adopted. Recruitment agents act as "facilitators" in the interview phase between their clients and candidates. The value of this approach stands out as one of the most advantageous reasons for using certain PEAs compared to others – from a both clients' and candidates' perspectives. In these "sit down sessions", agents ensure that both the client and the candidate understand their role in the intimate workplace and in the context of labour compliance. Specific issues that often result in misunderstandings are discussed in these sessions before signing an employment contract. These topics usually relate to working hours, payment for working overtime, discussing the leave application process and how to register a worker for the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) through the DEL. More importantly, with this business approach, a recruitment agent is present when the employment contract between the client and candidate is signed. The signing of the employment contract finalises the placement process.

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[51] This relates specifically to one of the themes I address in the following chapter on the management crisis in the intimate workplace.

Agent C6 (interview, 25 November 2013) elaborated on how she coached both candidates and employers during the final phase of the placement process:

> So, this is something that I emphasise, and I say to them, when you go on holiday whether it's to Zimbabwe or the Eastern Cape, when you arrive there buy your return ticket because then first of all you know you've got enough money to get home. Second of all you've got a ticket, a place to get on the bus or whatever to come home because the easiest way to lose a job is to just not return "home" after a holiday.
>
> [...]
>
> For example, I tell them that if they are sick in the morning, we work out a time that they've got to let the employer know. And I say, don't just send an SMS and then go back to sleep. You must wait for the employer to call you back and if she hasn't called you back within five minutes, try again. Otherwise, call her husband and keep calling one or the other of them. And then I say to the employer, you must call her back because first of all you need to let her know that you got the message, because she can't relax until she knows you got the message in time […] and second of all […] you need to know what's wrong with her, vice versa. (Agency C6, interview, 25 November 2013)

Agency C6's advice was based on her expert knowledge of both domestic workers' and employers' frustrations when an employment relationship is strained because of poor communication and work behaviour that calls into question a domestic worker's reliability. In the quote above, two typical examples stand out. First is not having money to return to work after a holiday. Second is failing to communicate with an employer when ill and unable to work. The agent provides recommendations that benefit both the client and the candidate. The candidate learns how to engage with clients or employers during the trial period and when employment commences. The agent, however, does not assume that the onus of maintaining the employment relationship is solely the responsibility of the domestic worker. Instead, in the presence of the employer, she informs the employer of her responsibility to communicate with her domestic worker when situations arise. She appeals to the employer to understand the situation from the worker's perspective: "she can't relax until she knows you got the message in time". The advice shared in the last phase of the recruitment process is meant to ensure a stable and healthy employment relationship. It pre-empts challenges that often arise in the employment relationship that may result in a disciplinary warning or loss of employment. It also highlights the “hands on approach” PEAs play in “linking together, shaping, channelling and utilizing the forces of individuals and groups in pursuit of certain objectives” (Rose, 1996:121).

The recruitment and hiring process has multiple steps and measures to ensure that the best candidate is found. More importantly, PEAs include clients in the decision-making process. This process sets established PEAs apart from informal agencies, but also those that operate internationally. In Souralová’s (2015:162) study on placement agencies operating in the Czech Republic that specialize in the provision of qualified and professional childcare services, she explains that clients do not “question, explore or monitor the process of professional screening: they are not interested in how and what is screened, they trust in the expertise of agencies’ competencies to select what is important and relevant for a professional nanny”.

In South Africa’s PEA industry, clients are given the opportunity to contact the candidates’ former employers before or after an interview takes place. They can also “investigate” reference letters if they feel the need to do so or request a polygraph test to ensure that they secure an “honest” worker. Since all these measures are not fool-proof, PEAs also offer clients and candidates a three-month replacement or probation guarantee. This means that if the client is not satisfied with the domestic worker, they can begin the recruitment process again without paying additional fees. Similarly, candidates are informed that if they are unhappy with the employer, they can request to be placed elsewhere (see Chapter Eight). In short, the recruitment and hiring process is labour intensive for agents and time consuming for clients and candidates. Clients and candidates are determined to make the right choice the first time and agents are determined to facilitate the process to ensure that neither the client nor the domestic worker request a replacement.[52] Therefore, PEAs engage in multiple strategies to ensure clients “make the right match”. The strategies discussed so far have included selecting candidates from a pool of screened job seekers, ensuring that clients engage in multiple interviews, and observing candidates for a trial period.[53] The different encounters among the agency, candidate and client highlight the role of and the demand for the services of PEAs that aim to provide a steady supply of comfortable others.

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[52] I discovered clients were not always happy with the “quality of candidates” that established PEAs offered. From the customer satisfaction survey I conducted for a PEA that operates nationally, many clients explained that they registered with a number of PEAs to ensure that: 1) they received an immediate reply from a PEA and 2) a suitable candidate that met their criteria. This is not surprising, given that the placement fee is a significant investment in a long-term relationship.

So far, this chapter has provided evidence that suggests that the notion of comfortable others emphasises an intimate work culture – specifically the way a domestic worker works. An intimate work culture is therefore about a domestic workers performance – their self-presentation, impression management and attitude to the intimate workplace. “Comfortable others” as a conceptual tool, therefore, refers to the identity markers of intimate workers that PEAs supply in the domestic sector, irrespective of the core service provided. However, “comfortable others” also refers to what and who clients perceive as suitable domestic workers, and this is based on their demands, which PEAs respond to. While having the necessary skills for domestic work is a requirement of the PEA and the client, the various measures that depict PEAs’ gatekeeping practices in the domestic sector highlight the importance of quality candidates. To ensure that quality candidates are in supply, job seekers are carefully screened to determine that they are committed to domestic work and have the relevant work experience and, if necessary, skills set, and that they are reliable and, more importantly, are honest. At this point, identity markers such as age, race, gender, class or ethnicity do not feature as the primary identity commodified or marketed by a PEA. Instead, the identity commodified is that of a comfortable other – a domestic worker who is professional and can be managed with ease because of their intimate work culture.

5.5. The Fluid Nature of Recruitment and Hiring patterns

5.5.1. A Case of “Ethnic Niching”

One of the most striking trends that PEAs discussed was the shift towards employing and placing foreign nationals in the domestic sector. In a period of five to ten years, agents and agency owners explained, 50% or more of those they had either hired or placed in private households were Zimbabwean nationals. These trends coincided with migration patterns during the early 2000s related specifically to the socio-economic crisis in Zimbabwe and South Africa's migratory policies to support asylum and economic/political refugees. The quotes below captured hiring and placement ratios between Zimbabwean and South African domestic workers among PEAs.

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[53] Informal agencies tend to employ or place domestic workers who do not have reference letters and are desperate to find work (Agency A1, interview, 11 June 2013; SADSAWU official a, interview, 16 September 2013; DEL, interview, 31 May 2013). Once-off placement fees with informal agencies are generally less than R400 but vary depending on the agency’s business model. In the case of “informal taxi agencies” operating in the Western Cape, women are promised work in the CBD but are not informed of the cost of the taxi fare. After a placement is arranged between the employer, the taxi agent is made to deduct the taxi fare (R600) from the domestic worker’s first salary. This kind of practice places the worker in a form of debt bondage.

> That has varied from time to time because I actually do get a fair amount of staff through people that are working through me. When I just bought the company, it was just locals. I then most probably ended […] employing some Zim ladies […] and getting other staff through them. That went up to as much as 80% Zim. At this stage I would say it's most probably – this is a thumb suck – 60% Zim, 40% local. (Agency E, interview, 28 January 2014)
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> I try 50-50 but I'm definitely more South African at the moment. I'm about 60 [South African] - 40 [Zimbabwean] at the moment. (Agency A3, interview, 29 July 2013)
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> I know that I mostly placed, in the last three years, I've mostly placed Zimbabweans. [...] I like the Zim girls very much. Some of them have got Educare certificates and first aid certificates and a lot of my local girls who have come to my classes got all that. (Agency D, interview, 8 August 2013)

There was consensus among all agencies that employer networks and "employer talk" had a direct impact on recruitment patterns. For example:

> "My friends have a Malawian nanny" or "My friends have a Zimbabwean nanny. I want to sort of look at that because the work ethic is so much higher". (Agency D, interview, 8 August 2013)
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> Well, a lot of them do say I want somebody between 30 and 40. I want a Zimbabwean lady. She must be fun. She must have lots of experience with babies. [...] They say, "Oh my friend has employed a Zimbabwean nanny and she's wonderful. She's absolutely fantastic. So, I definitely want a Zimbabwean lady or you know or Malawian. I've heard that they are the best". Agency C6, interview, 25 November 2013)
>
> ...people are coming to us and saying, you know, "My friend has a nanny and she's Zimbabwean or she's Malawian and I really sort of see the dynamic and how well it works". [...] I would probably say 40% referral of, you know, "My friend has" or "My friend got this nanny through you and she's Zimbabwean and she's fantastic". And you know, "Can you find me one like her?" And I'm thinking, *you and your friend are so different*. (Agency B5, interview, 14 November 2013)
>
> But you also have trends anywhere. House men one month or for six months everyone wants a house man. Fabulous! I can understand that because I have a house man and I think they're fabulous. Then all of a sudden, "No, the men are bad. They steal the cars. They eat the food. They have women on their property. I don't want a house man anymore I want a South African. Oh no South Africans have a shit attitude I want a Zimbabwean lady!" And you will see those trends, that if I place a really nice man in Constantia, which I have recently, all of a sudden, I get three specs on my desk for men and because of the little bit of word of mouth, "Oh I got Adam and he's amazing and I got him from Agency A". And they all think I can clone Adam of course [laughing], which I clearly can't! (Agency A3, interview, 29 July 2013)

The extracts above show how and why employers make a direct link between a worker's national identity and the factors that give the impression of a well-functioning employment "dynamic" in the intimate workplace. Often, and as will be further discussed in the following chapter, the positive and negative experiences that clients/employers had with previous domestic workers, and which circulate among employer networks, reinforce positive scripts and identity markers associated with who is a comfortable other. These positive impressions inform perceptions of who a comfortable other is rather than merely what defines a comfortable other. Typically, the identity markers associated with comfortable others emphasize work experience, skills, work performance or work ethic and attitude. Moreover, through employer talk, employers learn where to find comfortable others too, and the positive scripts of who is a comfortable other steers clients to candidates based on either their gender or their nationality. In other words, notions of comfortable others are almost always informed by primary constructions of difference such as nationality, race or gender, rather than only the core features of an intimate work culture. When Agent B5 (interview, 14 November 2013) added, "And I'm thinking, you and your friend are so different", she draws attention to the complex nature of the employment relationship because of intimacy, which implies that the request, "Can you find me one like her?" (an emphasis on the nationality of a domestic worker rather than their intimate work culture) is simply illogical. However, although PEAs are aware that linking nationality and the features of an intimate work culture are nonsensical, they respond to these demands which, in turn, influence hiring patterns in the domestic sector.

5.5.2. Factors that Influence Hiring Trends

Considerations such as age and live-in or live-out status also influence recruitment and hiring patterns. In terms of age, all PEAs stated that they prefer to hire applicants who are 28 years old or older. Issues such as reliability because of family responsibilities or having the wrong attitude towards domestic work were the main reasons for the minimum age requirement in the industry. Agent H (interview, 28 January 2014) explained that "it's very rare if we take a 20 or 21-year-old. It's usually the daughter of somebody who works for us for a long time". A candidate in "their mid-twenties is the youngest we like to take because we work primarily with the elderly and we don't feel that, as a whole, a young person has the maturity to cope with those difficulties" (Agency H, interview, 28 January 2014). Similarly, Agency E found older Xhosa women to be more mature and notes that "the young ones quite often are unreliable from a point, the slightest things happen, and they don't come to work". Agency E acknowledged that, usually, younger domestic workers had legitimate reasons for not arriving at work on time because of family responsibilities such as childcare, whereas older domestic workers were less likely to arrive at work late or request Saturdays off to be with their children if they have older children. In addition, young South Africans were not considered suitable because they had a poor perception of domestic work due to the stigma associated with doing the "dirty work", which was likely to affect how they worked (Agency A1, interview, 11 June 2013; Agency C6, interview, 25 November 2013). PEAs' perceptions of young South Africans was based on their own experiences working with young domestic workers or their extensive knowledge of employers' complaints about young domestic workers.

Age, live-in or live-out status, and migration trends play an influential role in determining who is considered a suitable domestic worker. For example, Agent B5, interview, 14 November 2013) described the profile of the candidates they have on their database that are typical of other PEAs too:

> So, they in that sort of 28 to 40 age group [referring to Zimbabwean nationals] whereas *our* nannies are sort of probably 35 to 50. So, the age group is different. The Zimbabweans are generally younger. But [...] our starting point is at about 28 and up. […] I'd probably say that 65% are in the younger age group at the moment and then 35% moving in that sort of 40, 40+ age. So definitely younger on the Zim nannies as opposed to the South African.
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> […]
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> At the end of 2010, beginning of 2011, because now if you look at the database, the trends of sort of live-in and live-out nannies [...] from that perspective, probably 80, 85% of our clients are looking for a live-out nanny. So, they come in at 8am and leave at 5pm. Generally, that kind of time set. But then we sort of have the moms that need the live-in side. They've either got two kids, or they start work early or they finish late and with the public transport being what it is, to send a nanny home after 6pm is criminal. So, they then opt for the live-in side. And the trend is that mostly Zimbabwean nannies are here on their own. You know they can live-in without a stretch, without a strain.

The link between migration and hiring trends in the domestic sector is closely connected to the type of employment arrangement domestic workers choose because of personal circumstances. As Agent B5 explained, Zimbabwean domestic workers were more likely to choose live-in employment arrangements because they do not migrate with their family. This implies that if they have children, they are likely to be distant mothers because their children are in the care of family members in Zimbabwe or attend boarding schools in Zimbabwe. They also tend to be better suited for clients who want live-out employment arrangements that demand early arrival or overtime, because they are not burdened with childcare responsibilities that could jeopardize their reliability. However, PEAs reported that clients' preferences based on age and nationality varied. Agency D, for example, confirmed that most of her clients preferred hiring a young domestic worker (based on the minimum age requirement discussed above) but others specifically requested an older South African. Agency D explained that this means that, “My older girls have got a chance”. She elaborated further:

> I mean I placed one already. She’s 54. The younger employers wouldn't look at her. [...] but this lady wanted an older nanny. [...] She wanted a South African nanny like in the old days. I’ve found [that] some people have definitely said they much prefer to have a local person because they think that their loyalty should be to our people. (Agency D, interview, 8 August 2013)

The main reason older South African domestic workers appear less employable, according to Agency D, is that “My older ladies suffer because they don’t know what a CV is. And they get someone to mock up some paperwork that I try to fix up on the e-mail for them. They are just a little bit beyond getting with the programme”. As outlined earlier in the chapter, PEAs have a structured approach for recruiting and hiring domestic workers that is unlike informal hiring practices which rely on word-of-mouth references compared to CVs, reference letters, security checks and other gatekeeping practices typical of the PEA industry. As a result, older South African domestic workers’ employability through PEAs can be limited compared to young domestic workers, who are likely to be technologically savvy. Like Agency D, others provided support to counter this challenge through training and by editing their CVs so that they are presentable to clients.

Agency D evoked the theme of “loyalty” when describing pro-South African clients, and her approach to ensuring South African domestic workers have access to the labour market:

> I always send a mix. I’ll always send a local for interviews together with Zimbabweans because I think it’s only fair, you know, our people are being kept out of jobs because of the foreign nationals... (Agency D, interview, 8 August 2013)

The placement or hiring ratios mentioned previously, as well as the mix of candidates sent to clients, were a recurring theme reported by almost all PEAs. Agency D’s candid remarks about loyalty and fairness must be contextualized according to the pool of suitable candidates available for placement. For example, as noted previously, agents respond to clients’ criteria and preferences to avoid a lengthy placement process. They are also restricted in terms of the screening process used to determine suitability for intimate work. Other factors, such as age and willingness to take up domestic work have an impact on the pool of candidates available for hiring or placements. Therefore, while Agent D reports that she only sends a local (singular) and Zimbabwean candidates (plural) to clients for consideration, the mix of candidates in favour of Zimbabweans has a direct influence on hiring trends in the domestic sector (a theme returned to in Chapter Six from the perspective of prospective employers). Overall, the data revealed that PEAs (1) had several Zimbabwean candidates on their databases that they could hire or place; (2) always sent a mix of candidates to clients for interviews; and (3), often that ratio consisted of at least two Zimbabwean candidates and one South African candidate.

5.5.3. A Sense of Entitlement

Since PEAs are often employers (either because of their business model or to meet their personal needs) and are in the business of understanding and responding to clients' demands, their perceptions of ideal candidates also changes and has a direct bearing on hiring patterns too. For example, PEAs reported that clients experienced discomfort with their Zimbabwean domestic workers because, "they [are] a bit more forceful when it comes to salary negotiations"; "a sulky nanny…who does not like to be reprimanded"; "a new sense of entitlement", and:

> We find quite often, with some of our best Zimbabwean ladies, they are what we call "madams". They don't want to dirty their fingers. They are very happy to look after a child but they are not prepared to do housework. They are not prepared to sweep the *stoep* [veranda], for example, which sometimes an employer's asks them to do. They are very fussy about everything […] when it comes to working. And, they are not as flexible. And, I'm not saying that an employer is right. She'll be able to take advantage. I'm not saying that at all. But we often have employers who bend over backwards to help the employee – that they are wonderful, they buy them things, they take them with them here and there, they let their children stay with them and all sorts of things. And the nannies just take advantage. (Agency C6, interview, 25 November 2013)

Agency C identified examples of tensions that arose in the employment relationship that helped to problematize the demand for a comfortable other and that explained the fluid nature of hiring trends in the domestic sector according to nationality. These tensions relate to power dynamics (and the class status of the domestic worker too) in the intimate workplace and the possible forms of resistance that domestic workers engage in that challenge employers' expectations of them. Firstly, the description of certain domestic workers, specifically Zimbabwean women, as "madams" relates to the domestic work hierarchy that distinguishes between different types of domestic work and skills levels. On the one hand, "madams" refers to what domestic workers perceive to be part of their job description or their disdain for certain types of domestic work (only a nanny rather than a domestic nanny) that are non-negotiable. On the other hand, the idea of domestic workers being "madams" suggests that this is an attempt to maintain workplace boundaries in an elastic employment relationship with or without a fixed job description because of intimacy. Even though Agency C acknowledged that it was commonplace for employers to take advantage of their employees, she showed empathy towards employers (who "bend over backwards") rather than domestic workers who stand their ground by being unaccommodating of employers who use personalism (maternalism) in the employment relationship to justify specific demands. These examples reveal the tension between the intimate work culture that employers demand of comfortable others and the inventive intimate work culture of domestic workers that challenges or defies workplace exploitation (see Chapter Six).

Agency A3 (interview, 29 July 2013) reported that 60% of placements are South Africans compared to 40% Zimbabweans *"at the moment"*. In comparison to previous years, this signals a shift in hiring patterns. Below she elaborated on her main observations about factors in the domestic sector that affect hiring trends:

> It's quite funny that because the Zims are asking for so much money and have a sort of new sense of entitlement, "Because I'm Zim I can get more money" or "I'm better than", a lot of people are coming back to ask for South Africans when about five years ago everyone was only asking for Zimbabweans. Now it's sort of reversed a little bit. It's really weird. […] So, I have 22-year-olds come in and they left their jobs because they couldn't get an increase. They were earning R2700, and they want to earn R4500. That's not going to happen! Not in my sector, you know. I mean this year we had nice high salaries. I think I've done two at R5000 – both those ladies drive. Both of them sleep in and both cook a meal every single night that are they on duty. People will pay for that. But they won't pay because you are 22 years old and Zimbabwean. (Agency A3, interview, 29 July 2013)

When Zimbabwean domestic workers demand higher wages, they are perceived as entitled, especially if they justify their demand on the work ethic of their national group. Here the identity of a comfortable other, as a Zimbabwean national, draws attention to the relational, social, and symbolic markings typical of representational systems. In other words, young Zimbabwean domestic workers respond to their perceptions of who is included or excluded in hiring and placement processes among PEAs based on client/employer demands. The symbolic markings in this scenario refer to how they make sense of who is a comfortable other based on social relations and practices. The work ethic typically associated with an ideal type of intimate work culture is the basis for the classification of difference that demonstrates how difference is lived out (or performed) in the intimate workplace – a theme I refer to as the practice of identity niching (see Chapter Eight). However, as Agency A3 notes above, there is a narrow understanding of the market among young Zimbabwean domestic workers regarding the intimate work culture that PEAs attempt to commodify. For example, Agency A3 suggests that there is a misperception that employers are merely paying for their national identity and hence perceived status as “comfortable others”. Instead, as discussed, employers also pay for work experience, skills, and the right attitude to domestic work. The assertion, “Not in my sector”, illustrates that there is a limit to market related salaries unless a domestic worker offers multiple higher end services (driving and cooking meals regularly) that employers can afford and are willing to pay for. Yet, as history reminds us, the fluid nature of hiring trends in the domestic sector has been influenced by the perception of “entitlement” among domestic workers who have demanded higher wages and, as a result, lost favour with employers (Van Onselen, 1982; Cock, 1980; see also Chapter Two). Therefore, when wage increases are demanded (forcefully) from unwilling employers, the hiring queue shifts in favour of workers who are more likely to accept lower salaries *without* contention in a competitive and typically low-paid sector.

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter shows that when the household becomes an intimate workplace, and when domestic workers’ employment rights are recognised, PEAs’ services are appealing for both employers and domestic workers. PEAs’ services, however, are inextricably linked to providing comfortable others – workers with a suitable intimate work culture for the intimate workplace irrespective of the core service offered (that is, placements or cleaning services) and employers who are potentially labour compliant. With an emphasis on employers’ needs, when searching for or deciding on a comfortable other, value is placed on the way a domestic worker performs their tasks – for example, honestly, reliably, professionally and with the right attitude for domestic work. The trend of professionalizing domestic workers, promoting a culture of compliance and engaging in a lengthy process to recruit and select a comfortable other are attempts to ensure an ideal type of domestic worker is sought – one who is employable in an intimate workplace. PEAs’ various gatekeeping practices, therefore, are attempts to promote the commodification of an intimate work culture and thus notions of a comfortable other. Despite PEAs meticulous processes to supply comfortable others to households, the fluid nature of recruitment and hiring trends in the domestic sector captures clients’ changing associations of comfortable others according to race, gender, and nationality, yet the core principles of an intimate work culture remain unchanged. The findings also reveal that, while PEAs play an integral role in promoting employability through skills development and act as intermediaries in support of the labour regulatory regime in favour of worker’s employment rights, their gatekeeping practices have a disciplinary logic over domestic workers intimate work culture because of the inherent codes of appropriate conduct that are linked to perceptions of quality candidates. Put differently, access to employment through PEAs is limited unless there is evidence of suitability based on the outcome of a strict screening process of reference letters, passing the interview and a trial work period, as well as police clearance or a polygraph test.

Chapter 6. Making the *Right* Choice

6.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that PEAs represent domestic workers' and employers' interests, as gatekeepers and champions of regulatory labour compliance in the domestic sector. By doing so, they influence the process of identity niching because specific identity markers associated with the intimate work culture that employers demand are marketed through bureaucratic practices. This chapter focuses on employers' hiring histories and reasons for using PEAs. I focus on their interaction with PEAs and their decisions as they search for a comfortable other. I argue that, by placing emphasis on the private household as an intimate workplace – which acknowledges domestic workers' employment rights – choosing the right candidate is crucial for avoiding what I refer to as an "intimate workplace crisis". Employers experiences of an intimate workplace crisis refers to the issue of regulatory non-compliance and their rejection of domestic workers' "inventive" intimate work culture; hence the notion of comfortable others as ideal-type domestic workers. This chapter shows that when employers strategically select candidates who perform and narrate a self that coincides with *their* idea of a desirable intimate work culture, they inevitably influence the process of identity niching in the domestic sector through differentiation because of subjective work-related stereotypes associated with specific racial or national groups. To explain this argument, this chapter begins by discussing, first, employers' recruitment and hiring histories; second, employers' key encounters associated with an intimate workplace crisis; third, the role of and demand for the services of PEAs as employers confront their responsibility to regulatory labour compliance; and last, how employers' former experiences and "employer talk" inform the secondary constructions of difference associated with an intimate work culture that employers demand. The chapter concludes by providing insight into employers' decision-making process when they scrutinize domestic workers' narratives of self and their associated work performances to make the right choice.

6.2. Employers' Recruitment and Hiring Histories

All employers had a history of hiring paid domestic workers informally. Employers used a diverse set of informal recruitment strategies before approaching a PEA. Most employers resorted to one or more recruitment methods over the years. The most widely cited recruitment method was the word-of-mouth hiring strategy. Employers found domestic workers through employer or domestic worker networks. Employer networks consisted of family members or friends. If an employment relationship ended on good terms, employers found new recruits from their former domestic worker's network. A few employers resorted to posting online requests on platforms such as Facebook to widen their search among the employer community. Others used free online advertisement platforms such as Gumtree by strategically focussing on adverts posted by former employers of job seekers. Two employers explained that they inherited a domestic worker when they occupied a new home. This meant that the property owner or former tenant encouraged them to take on their domestic worker. Only one employer found a domestic worker searching for work outside her home (that is, knocking on doors). Three employers resorted to hiring domestic workers through informal agencies – a practice that was typical among most employers in their neighbourhood and linked to the employer network of the area.

The strategies used to recruit a domestic worker for a range of services and with different employment arrangements (nannies, domestic cleaners, part-time or for long-term employment) were typically informal in nature. This meant that formal processes such as accessing reference letters and CVs were absent. Instead, prospective employers placed greater emphasis on the work and character references provided by former or current employers or clients/employers using informal agencies. Except for two employers, none of the employers had been labour compliant. Typically of the informal sector, the job description, conditions of employment and remuneration were discussed and agreed to verbally. Formal employment contracts were absent, and employers had not arranged for UIF contributions. However, none of the employers paid minimum or below-minimum wages. Instead, they paid the "going rate" commonplace in their neighbourhoods (middle or upper middle-income households) or among their personal networks.

All employers had a history of hiring female domestic workers who were mainly South African Xhosa women and Coloured women. This profile is typical of the Western Cape demographics in the domestic sector. Depending on their income, household size and accommodation type, some employers had two to three domestic workers simultaneously, with different job descriptions. For example, they hired a male domestic worker for gardening services (either in a part-time or full-time employment arrangement) and female domestic workers – a "char" cleaner on a part-time arrangement, and a full-time domestic nanny responsible for minor cleaning tasks but with a primary focus on care work. With a few exceptions, the gendered division of domestic work remains, such that men are often hired for outside work (gardening services or "handyman" type tasks) while women are hired for inside work (care work or cleaning related tasks). Typically, the most common domestic service among smaller households with older or no children included the hiring of a female "char" worker to clean the house once or twice a week. Households with young children often employed a full-time domestic worker for cleaning, cooking and caring.

There were two striking similarities regarding employers' recruitment and hiring histories that reiterate the demand for PEAs' services. First was their ignorance of labour compliance related norms, such as having an employment contract in place, registering their domestic worker for UIF or dismissing a worker fairly. Second, although a few employers reminisced of at least one domestic worker who was "wonderful", "fantastic", "amazing" or "worked like a Trojan", almost all who eventually approached a PEA were mostly unsatisfied with the domestic workers they found informally, because of challenges related to their inadequate intimate work culture and, hence, managing the employment relationship. The following section engages with each of these themes further.

6.3. Resolving an Intimate Workplace Crisis

Managing the domestic employment relationship is an ongoing process that involves both the employer and the employee "promoting mutual trust and respect" (Socio-economic Rights Institute (SERI), 2021). For the employer, it involves being labour compliant in terms of administrative responsibilities that are fair and just to domestic workers. It also involves engaging in emotion work to maintain a collegial and productive work environment. If the domestic employment relationship is not managed fairly, the tug of war dynamic in the employment relationship due to power and intimacy between the employer and the domestic worker can strain the employment relationship. The next section elaborates on specific encounters that employers identified as unsettling in their previous employment relationship or after approaching a PEA with poor-quality candidates. These encounters affected their role as employers of domestic workers, pointing to an intimate workplace crisis that they set out to resolve with and through PEAs. Employers described four encounters related to the domestic work labour process and the intimate nature of working in private households. These were theft or pilfering; a poor work ethic or workplace etiquette; the absence of regulatory labour compliance alongside their inexperience of managing domestic workers; and the challenge of managing boundaries in the employment relationship. Each encounter reveals the complex nature of the employment relationship and the implications when a breakdown in trust and control over workplace issues occurs.

6.3.1. Theft or Pilfering

The most common challenge employers encountered during their hiring history were incidents of theft or pilfering. These incidents called into question domestic workers' trustworthiness. Extreme cases included the theft of family heirlooms, jewellery, cell phones, laptops, money and furniture. These items were allegedly stolen while employers were at work or on vacation. Only two employers reported the incidents to the police, one of which resulted in an arrest; in the other case, no arrest was made because the domestic worker could not be found. If there were obvious instances of theft, as described in the example below, domestic workers were dismissed immediately.

> It became very apparent to me that she was stealing. So that relationship ended there and then. In fact, I heard the mugs clinking in her bag. ... I don't know what else she stole. I mean there was definitely some clothing of mine that disappeared. But I was like, there were mugs clinking in her bag as she was walking out the door! (Mrs Harley, interview, 17 October 2013)

Mrs Harley describes a brazen case of theft in disbelief, and yet for most employers the issue of pilfering was equally troubling once they discovered it was happening. Employers felt uncomfortable with pilfering. They grappled with how to respond to cases of pilfering food items, cleaning detergents and toilet paper. They felt conflicted with cases of pilfering because there was a breach of trust in the employment relationship. Elsewhere, Fish (2006b:210) has explained that employers understood that this form of theft was a survival strategy to "deal with massive economic inequality" in South Africa. All employers who experienced a case of pilfering were undecided on how to address the matter. Mrs Hogan (interview, 4 October 2013) said, "It was hard to know what to do with that", because she liked the worker: they "got along well". Mrs Marriott (interview, 13 December 2013) admitted that, despite having legal training and therefore knowing "how to have the conversation from a legal perspective, from a human perspective it's a hard conversation to have". Burdened with a sense of discomfort, and the fear of a more serious theft occurring, most employers chose a non-confrontational approach. This approach was appealing because often employers had no proof to substantiate their suspicion.

Most employers were also reluctant to openly question and reprimand their domestic workers because of the imminent tension or awkward silence that was likely to occur in the employment relationship. Employers typically adopted a non-confrontational approach which included “retrenching” their domestic worker for any of the following reasons: “Because we needed to get a nanny”; “I didn’t want someone in my home five days a week”; “we didn’t need childcare in the same way... my children were at school for longer”. Therefore, almost all employers, when describing the appeal of using PEAs, stated that they wanted to avoid theft or pilfering and understood that “professionally screened candidate” was synonymous with work experience and a record of trustworthiness.

6.3.2. Work Ethic, Workplace Etiquette and Managing Boundaries

The theme of reliability and not fulfilling a job description was a common issue employers experienced in their hiring history. Employers cited many examples of what they perceived as unprofessional conduct. These examples illustrated a poor work ethic or lack of workplace etiquette that made employers question their domestic worker’s reliability and productivity. The most common issues were arriving late; not notifying an employer when ill and unable to work; resigning without notice; making unreasonable excuses for not working or fulfilling their job description; using the employer’s landline to make private calls; and being invasive in spaces considered private and off-limits. I return to some of these themes later in the chapter to avoid repetition.

It was common practice for employers to describe their experiences by comparing former domestic workers to their current domestic worker. Mrs Elgar (interview, 8 October 2013), for instance, compared the work ethic of her former South African Coloured male domestic worker, Pete (responsible only for outdoor work) to her current “utterly professional” African Malawian male domestic worker (responsible for outdoor and indoor work), Mark. Pete was recruited through informal channels, while Mark was found through an informal Malawian-run agency that targeted affluent households. According to Mrs Elgar, Pete never came to work when it rained. She tried addressing the issue but to no avail: “I said, ‘Pete you live in Cape Town. It rains more than half the year. It’s called getting a raincoat and you have a raincoat’”. Using this as a point of comparison, she described Mark as having a “different attitude to his job” because of his work etiquette. Below, Mrs Elgar drew attention to Mark’s attitude to domestic work by highlighting his punctuality and work etiquette:

> I don’t mean to sound patronizing, but it is a pleasure to have somebody who is never late. He lives so far away, and he walks in at quarter past eight. […] in the four, five months that he’s worked for us, he’s never been late, except once. And, he phoned and said the train stopped in the middle of nowhere and they are all sitting.

While the excerpt describes a successful placement through an informal agency, it is important to note that employers discussed the lack of reliability among their initial hires through informal channels and PEAs, thus pointing to the challenge of finding suitable domestic workers using different recruitment strategies. The pattern of finding poor quality candidates points to a larger issue regarding employers’ experiences of PEAs’ services, and the nature of the intimate workplace crisis too.

The data showed that it was common practice for employers to sign-up with multiple PEAs to secure the best candidate for their household needs. Unlike informal recruitment strategies, however, there was an advantage of using a PEA because employers were entitled to a three-month probation or guarantee period. Mrs Conradie (interview, 3 December 2013) explained that the first candidate she chose from an agency, who she described as a young South African woman, “started coming late from about the third day of work and she had missed a few days of work after working for us for about three weeks”. She added later that, as a working mother, she needed “someone who’s going to be reliable”. Similarly, Mrs Field (interview, 17 October 2013) initially chose a South African domestic worker from a PEA. Like Mrs Conradie, Mrs Field requested a replacement before her three-month guarantee with the PEA expired. She explained that her first hire “actually spent more time sitting in the house than being around my kids. And I didn’t feel totally comfortable leaving my children with her”. These encounters illustrate that while employers sought the services of PEAs for quality candidates, there was no guarantee they would make the right choice from among the three candidates they interviewed or trialled. Therefore, the benefit of having a three-month guarantee was appealing because it ensured that employers had an opportunity to make the right choice, if not on the first attempt, then on the second attempt, and with the assistance of a PEA.

Although the intimate workplace is a public space for domestic workers, the private-public boundary between the domestic worker and employer can play out in ways that escalate discomfort among employers when they feel that their intimate spaces are encroached on unnecessarily. Some employers reported that they felt uncomfortable, disrespected and uneasy when their domestic worker “rearrang[ed] all our cupboards in our bedroom without asking”.54 This “felt a bit invasive”. Employers interpreted this behaviour suspiciously – for example, “she’s looking to see what we’ve got” – thereby highlighting their anxiety about theft or pilfering. Mrs Pillay (interview, 7 November 2013), however, interpreted her domestic worker’s actions differently. In Mrs Pillay opinion, rearranging personal items was a conscious strategy to “manage everyone at home” and foster their dependence on her because only “she would know where your stuff was”. Nevertheless, any infringement on the household’s private-public sphere was experienced as a sign of poor workplace etiquette. When domestic workers ventured into employers’ private spaces, some employers were uncomfortable about addressing the issue with their domestic worker. In other words, how could employers address the blurring of boundaries in domestic workers’ intimate workplace without offending their domestic worker? Like handling cases of suspected theft or pilfering, most employers were uneasy tackling the issue. They felt uncomfortable questioning their domestic worker’s trustworthiness or intentions because of the possibility of an unpleasant tension festering in the employment relationship. For some employers, this type of encounter was viewed suspiciously and as a potentially problematic employment relationship. If the employment relationship was already strained, it was easier to retrench or replace the worker – another example of a non-confrontational approach to avoid uncomfortable situations.

Although employers were aware that the women they employed were from economically depressed communities or countries, most did not want to know, deal with, or be reminded of their everyday economic or family troubles – their social issues. The extract below captures an employer’s annoyance with a recently employed South African domestic worker who she found through an agency:

> She was a single mom with one child, a son, and she struggled. It was so hard. [...] We have a room where our previous nanny lived and there’s a lot of stuff in there like a broken microwave. And this is the second day she was working for us, and she said, “What are you doing with that old microwave? Are you going to sell it?” I replied, “Well actually I think it’s broken”. And she said, “It’s so hard to heat my child’s food” and gave this whole sob story. So, I said, “Look, if it’s working you can take it, but I think it’s broken”. (Mrs Field, interview, 17 October 2013)

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[54] Fish (2006b:100) reports a similar finding where employers discover their domestic worker has used their personal creams.

Sympathetic employers explained that they tried to help "with whatever we could: funerals, her family, with some additional food, with some additional clothes" (Mrs Chapman, interview, 9 December 2013). However, for the most part, being too familiar with their domestic workers' personal situations challenged their role as employers because the professional and personal relationship blurred. For Mrs Field, "asking for stuff" and hearing about her "sob story" was at odds with the professionalism she expected in the employment relationship. While it was unavoidable to depersonalize the employment relationship, a common pattern that emerged in the data is that employers set out to engage the services of a PEA to avoid "these kinds of relationships" – where the private and public division blurred because of the intimate nature of domestic work.

The meaning of professionalism in the intimate workplace, as an expectation and work-based practice, exposed the complexity inherent in employment relationships because of personalism and domestic workers' economic situation. For example, a common issue that troubled employers was the "question of borrowing money". Mrs Elgar (interview, 8 October 2013), for example, implies that borrowing money is unprofessional behaviour when she compares her current domestic worker, Mark, to her former domestic worker, Pete (both introduced earlier) in the following way: "He's utterly professional about what he's doing. His salary gets paid in and there never is a sense of, "Oh you know, it's nearly the end of the month. I haven't got any money left". While Mrs Elgar implies that her former domestic worker was irresponsible with his salary, other employers understood that borrowing money was a reminder of the burden of care domestic workers faced because many family members were dependent on their income. Mrs Bevis (interview, 4 December 2013) describes borrowing money as "an absolute minefield". She explains that the question is inevitable "and you must be prepared for it" to avoid "being caught off guard". Her use of the metaphor "minefield" illustrates the anxiety many employers felt about whether to lend money and the potential aftermath if they said no to a short-term loan – a negative mood that caused tension in *their* home. Although employers described instances where they provided short-term loans or "salary advances", lending money, like giving clothes and food, was perceived as encouraging dependence, which employers preferred to limit or avoid.

Reflecting on her hiring history, Mrs Bevis (interview, 4 December 2013) notes that, initially, it's difficult to find a suitable domestic worker "because you just don't have the skills required to make it work". Her point resonates with the sympathetic approach regarding employers' unfamiliarity with being an employer in a household (Triandafyllidou & Marchetti, 2015). Mrs Bevis' observation implies that employers learn how to manage the relationship through previous experiences. In other words, they learn "how not to be caught off guard" and develop strategies to maintain boundaries in the employment relationship. Mrs Field declares that her husband and her "were a lot more ignorant then about what we wanted". After a few negative encounters, they had a better understanding of what they wanted from the employment relationship, their management style and the type of worker they thought they could manage. Almost all employers, especially those who were fairly new to employing domestic workers, reported that they found PEAs' guidance on how to manage boundaries in the relationship useful.

Some employers, such as Mrs Harley (interview, 17 October 2013), eventually opted for a cleaning service instead of a permanent placement. I argued in the previous chapter that, irrespective of the core service offered by PEAs, intimacy and hence the commodification of an intimate work culture remains a core feature of PEAs' services. Prospective employers', or clients', underlying assumption of the role that PEAs play in the domestic sector, is that all candidates are screened beforehand to ensure that they have the relevant skills and experience, the right attitude for domestic work, and are trustworthy. Mrs Harley, introduced earlier, employed several char workers and full-time domestic workers or nannies throughout her hiring history – sometimes at the same time and from multiple agencies. A few domestic workers were recruited informally, and others were found through PEAs. After several experiences of theft, Mrs. Harley explained, "We decided to get proof by setting up a webcam in the room. We got it on film that she was stealing". After confronting their domestic worker, Mrs Harley declared, exasperated, "…of course she denied it!"

Since Mrs Harley no longer required childcare and was frustrated with her previous domestic workers, she opted to use a "char team" popular in her neighbourhood, nicknamed the "SWAT team" by her circle of friends. Here, a group of four to six women wearing uniforms entered her home weekly and tactically approach their cleaning tasks for a few hours. Although the owner was present while the SWAT team worked, and claimed that all candidates were professionally screened, she was asked to lock away valuable items before their arrival because there was no guarantee against theft. Elsewhere, similar practices have been noted regarding outsourced cleaning companies and the issue regarding theft (see Du Toit, 2013; Du Toit, 2021).

Mrs Harley (interview, 17 October 2013) maintained that the SWAT team "works better for me" even though she was unsatisfied with the service. She described the issues she experienced with the triangular (labour broker) employment relationship:

> One of the things they tend to do is put things into piles - just to make things look neat. But then it sometimes causes more chaos. And my husband hates that and says, "No, I must be there, and I must make sure they put it in the right place". But that's not me. I could never be the madam! I could never!

Mrs Harley's outright rejection of being the "madam" stems from the fact that her previous employment relationships were an utter failure because of the intimate workplace crisis. She chose the SWAT team because she had also failed to find quality candidates (informally and also through agencies). She also disliked confrontation and preferred avoiding "the strong power imbalance" in the employment relationship. In the excerpt above, she ignored her husband's request to oversee the char team because she firmly believed that she pays for this service, and it is the responsibility of the PEA. Her use of the SWAT team, therefore, allowed her to divert the "madam" role to the agency. More importantly, this service allowed her to reclaim her home – a private space – soon after the team leaves. As a result, her solution to the intimate workplace crisis was resolved by her hands-off approach to managing a domestic worker or domestic workers. The advantage of this service clearly outweighed the neat piles that her husband hates.

While Mrs Harley outsourced the administrative and employer responsibility to a PEA because of the triangular employment arrangement, other employers were primarily concerned with gaining access to professionally screened candidates. Mrs Johnson (interview, 10 December 2013) was a case in point. Unlike most employers who felt challenged or inexperienced as "madams", she approached a PEA to find a professionally screened candidate. Mrs Johnson adopted a structured approach to managing her domestic worker by drawing on her managerial experience in the corporate sector. She argues adamantly "[y]ou should treat these people not like they are just an extension of your family but also like they are earning money to do a job". Here, she acknowledged intimacy but also the professionalism associated with domestic work. She elaborated further by stating that, to recognise domestic workers as any other worker:

> You must have objectives and you must have a job specification. I think that's very important so that your employee understands what is expected from them and what their boundaries are. The mistake you make is when you don't explain to them what they need to do [...] that's similar with a

> normal job. [...] because when you do their performance review you can’t say you didn’t do this or that because they didn’t know they were supposed to do it. And I do this thing where I actually sit down with her. We work on an incentive basis, so your bonus depends on your performance. We apply that in our house, so they are incentivised to continue working well. [...] I mean not everybody can afford to do that. [...] But even if it’s something small make them work towards it. I feel that that’s the key.

Mrs Johnson disclosed the practices of power embedded in her strategy to manage her domestic worker in the excerpt above. Much of her strategy coincided with how PEAs attempt to establish professionalism in the domestic sector. Mrs Johnson’s use of the terms “employee”, “normal job”, “job specifications” and “performance review” was a conscious attempt to prevent the fuzziness and elastic relationship typical between maid and madam, thereby encouraging a “business type” employment relation (Lan, 2006). To establish boundaries within this framework of management, Mrs Johnson explained, “I actually sit down with her” and communicated her role and responsibilities so that there were no misunderstandings. Unlike Mrs Harley or other employers who actively sought this form of intermediary service, Mrs Johnson confidently approached her role as employer. Further, she incentivized her domestic worker with the promise of a performance bonus to maintain and promote productivity and therefore the intimate work culture she demanded.

6.3.3. Regulatory Labour Compliance and Practices of Control

One striking similarity that almost all employers voiced was that becoming labour compliant started at the agency. Several employers explained that they turned to PEAs for their “expert knowledge” and services that made labour compliance straightforward. They viewed PEAs as educators on key aspects related to regulatory labour compliance and managing domestic workers. Below are two of the most cited reasons employers provided for approaching a PEA:

> I wanted to have a proper contract and I wanted to do the whole UIF thing. (Mrs Elliot, interview, 10 December 2013)

> The people I employed previously I found it a bit of a hassle – the whole contract thing. What goes in, what doesn’t, and it’s just really confusing and can be very difficult. So that was actually one of the reasons I did go with an agency – to get support with all of that. [...] They send you a template contract and you just kind of tailor it to fit your needs and off you go. So that was [a] very positive plus of going through an agency. (Mrs Bevis, interview, 4 December 2013)

Others made specific reference to how PEAs offered guidance on aspects related to the BCEA and support services (legal aid) when issues arose. For example:

> It’s nice to try and work out exactly the kinds of work [and] how many hours of work they need to do a week. And then sick days are also in there. At least you can keep a record of it. Leave days are also in that, which is nice. (Mrs Norton, interview, 3 December 2013)

> One is that they do guide you and give you some benchmarks and salaries, they give you benchmarks on skills, on kind of what is on the market, on people available, the quality of people available, what you can expect plus some of the agencies give you the questions for the interview… So they give you a kind of a template. They help you with contracts, they help you with legal things, so I was discussing literally with their lawyer on a few things, when I had a problem with my recent nanny, they actually said, look, if you are starting to search for a new nanny, you can still call our lawyer and get some advice. So, it was really, really brilliant. (Mrs Chapman, interview, 9 December 2013)

From the perspective of employers, PEAs assist employers with formalizing the employment relationship and therefore promote regulatory labour compliance. Their role, as intermediaries, can be viewed as aiding the establishment of formal boundaries in a bureaucratic manner, like practices undertaken in formal organizations. Even though there is an active attempt to promote and recognize domestic workers’ employment rights, employers learn and establish their role within these parameters but also based on their understanding of their role as employers. Mrs Hogan (interview, 4 October 2013) praised one of the two agencies she approached by noting that: “I felt that Agency C was facilitating our working relationship... because she was so clearly committed to both of our sets of interests. I experienced her facilitation that was respectful of Thandeka and respectful of me”. She later reflected on her employment needs and what could be described as principles of fairness despite the power imbalance in the relationship:

> And it’s taken me a long time because I’ve grown up. I didn’t feel comfortable about being an employer at all, but I realized that there is a way to be an employer that is affirming and respectful and not just repeating a kind of racist patterning but also you know with good management practices, and I think if people are not managed it’s not great for anyone.
> For me to make peace with the idea of becoming this madam in the context of South Africa enables me, [it] is feeling that my employees are experiencing it positively, that they are feeling well respected, well treated, that they are getting paid correctly. That they have the security of the contract. I also don’t like it if I’m being taken for granted, taken for a ride. I think that is part of what enabled me finally to end with Thandeka, was realizing that actually I also have a bottom line in this – that I’m not a push over at all and that it’s okay to hold my employees to a standard. I articulated clearly so that they can be empowered to respond, but it’s not a charity and actually it doesn’t work for me if I feel like my end of the bargain is not meant and, sorry, their end of bargain is not being met. What I mean, it’s okay to hold them accountable.

Mrs Hogan (interview, 4 October 2013) pointed to the different approaches PEAs adopt as intermediaries. Agency C6 (introduced in the previous chapter) facilitates the hiring process between both parties to ensure mutual understanding of the roles and expectations in the employment relationship. However, other employers described the technical nature of using

PEAs in that employment contracts are tailored according to their needs, with job descriptions that outline the services required as well as important aspects such as calculating the number of hours of work per week and annual and sick leave. Despite the different approaches, PEAs represent employers' interests by explaining how to manage the employment relationship through contracts and clearly defined job descriptions. For example, PEAs encourage employers to treat domestic workers like any other worker by formally monitoring absenteeism – "keeping a record" of sick days – by supplying templates to aid record keeping practices. Mrs Chapman (interview, 9 December 2013) reports that her PEA encouraged her to ask her domestic worker to write down the names of her "closest family members so that if there's a funeral or something they can only go to the funeral if they have mentioned any family members before that". Mrs Chapman considered this tip "helpful" and "kind of interesting... nice to start off with". These management tips are intentional in that, if implemented, issues that are likely to arise and negatively affect the domestic employment relationship are addressed at the outset before signing an employment contract. These examples also illustrate that PEAs are sensitive to what Ally (2010) refers to as the "ambiguities of intimacy" within the domestic employment labour process.

The practice of guiding employers on how to manage the employment relationship highlights the dichotomy between workers' "inventive" intimate work culture and the intimate work culture associated with a comfortable other. This distinction is glaring when drawing on Ally's (2009) argument regarding the unintentional consequence of the state-led initiative to formalize the employment relationship in the domestic sector. Ally (2010:96) argues that workers recognized regulatory labour compliance as detrimental to their "historically cultivated practices of power" and used their intimate work culture to regulate their working conditions socially and informally. Similarly, Fish (2006b:210) notes that domestic workers use "emotions and personal power through knowledge of [the] intimate lives of employers" to express their individual agency when engaging in the intimate labour process. These emotional tactics, however, relate to some employers' experiences of an intimate workplace crisis.

While Ally (2010) argues that the unintended consequence of formalizing the employment relationship delegitimized domestic workers' ability to manipulate the "power imbalances" in the employment relationship to their benefit, it is important to note that "power imbalances" remain intact but are managed within the context of regulatory compliance and, for some, principles of fairness that recognize domestic workers' rights to better work. What this section shows, therefore, is that PEAs facilitate and advocate for certain measures to encourage employers to be “like other employers” (Triandafyllidou & Marchetti, 2015), and negotiate their role so that they can mitigate tensions or manage their domestic worker better.

6.4. The Employer Network

Chapter Five established that there are several encounters between the client and the PEA. This includes registering with one or more PEAs; gaining access to candidates’ profiles or CVs to review; selecting candidates to interview; undertaking a trial work period; and, finally, selecting a candidate for employment. This section draws on employers’ considerations during the decision-making process for making the *right* choice and the way PEAs and “employer talk” inform their selection criteria.

6.4.1. PEA’s Influential Role

Mrs Roy inherited Lilly, a Coloured woman, when she bought a house in Cape Town. Lilly was employed for a few years but retired at the age of 60 when her husband fell ill. After several disappointing experiences with a “couple of ladies”, Mrs Roy explained she “eventually cracked” and decided to approach an agency. Mrs Roy (interview, 9 November 2013) described the registration phase, her engagement with the PEA and her impression of the domestic worker she settled on employing.

> [...] you give them the criteria of what you want, age and salary [...]. And one of the things I said was, “I definitely would like a Coloured lady” and [she] actually came back to me and she said, “Why specifically a Coloured lady?” And I explained to her my only other experience with a cleaner other than Mavis in Durban had been this elderly lady who was truly remarkable. And she was easy to speak to because I can’t speak isiXhosa and I can speak Afrikaans. And she was Afrikaans and it all worked well. And that’s what I wanted.
> And she [the agent] said, “Well you know they do. The younger ones are a bit of a problem because they take alcohol and all sorts of things”. So, I said, “Oh gosh, definitely not them! But what else do you suggest?” Then she actually said to me, “The Zimbabwean women currently” – now remember this was nine years ago – “the Zimbabwean women are amazing. There are great results with the Zimbabwean women”. And I said, “Well if she wants to bring some Zimbabwean ladies, I’ll interview them”. And honestly, she [her former domestic worker] did stand out. And the reason why she stood out – she was an African lady, but her English was impeccable.

Mrs Roy provided insight into her decision-making process before approaching a PEA and during the main encounters with the agency. She reflected on her positive and negative experiences with her former domestic workers before settling on specific criteria such as race (primary construction of difference), age and language (secondary constructions of difference).

Because of her positive experience with Lilly, a Coloured woman, and the fact that she spoke Afrikaans, Mrs Roy only requested Coloured candidates to interview. In addition, she requested a young worker because she wanted a long-term employment relationship. However, Mrs Roy's request was not met. Instead, the PEA steered her towards what they deemed to be suitable candidates because of successful results. They influenced her selection criteria by highlighting the stereotypes associated with young Coloured women as problematic domestic workers because they purportedly abused alcohol, compared to Zimbabwean women who performed exceptionally well as domestic workers. As experts in the domestic sector, this example illustrates how PEAs commodify workers according to race and nationality and hence influence differentiation and the process of identity niching in the domestic sector. These hiring patterns are widely document in the PEA industry which specialises in placing domestic workers (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Tyner, 1999; Scrinzi, 2011).

Further, as noted previously, clients receive three candidates to interview and the ratio of candidates was 2:1, in favour of Zimbabwean nationals. Most employers noted this pattern when they received CVs to review. Mrs Nkutha (interview, 6 December 2013) explained that agencies "feed you more Zimbabwean CVs, more than anything else". She added that she did not "think people go out of their way to say, 'I don't want a South African nanny, I want a Zimbabwean nanny'". Like most employers, factors such as age, language, geographic location and availability for live-in positions also influenced hiring choices and the supply of domestic workers too. For Mrs Hogan (interview, 4 October 2013), professionalism, honesty and good communication were important because, as she stated firmly, "For me I employ a person rather than a nationality". Mrs Chapman (interview, 9 December 2013) reasoned that: "Obviously most of them are foreign, either on a work permit or sometimes they already have residence. [...] So that is what they were sending". Mrs Chapman's reasoning however, glosses over the underlying factors that inform employers' choices and ideas about who a comfortable other is. These considerations are made explicit below.

6.4.2. Employer Talk and Backstage Performances

While the previous section noted that employers feel like PEAs market certain candidates more than others, Mrs Bevis (interview, 4 December 2013) suggested that there was a code for requesting a foreign national. These codes circulate among employer networks. She explained:

> Before I went to this agency, I spoke to a friend of mine who employs vast numbers of domestic staff. [..] And I asked her for tips on what to ask from the agency – how to describe the person you are looking for. And she basically said something that I found very interesting which was, “You must ask them for someone who’s English is as good as yours”. And that’s like code for being sent a foreigner, which I find fascinating. Somehow the foreigners are seen as more desirable but at the same time you’re aware that you didn’t ask for them.

Mrs Bevis’s account illustrates the influential role of employer talk. This suggests that, in addition to drawing on their former experiences, information from personal networks influences employers’ decision-making strategy too. Mrs Bevis (interview, 4 December 2013) implied that English fluency is the code for requesting a foreign national. Thus, when employers specify criteria such as “language” or “must have a valid passport” they are knowingly referring to the race or nationality of the candidate they want. For domestic service in predominantly English-speaking households, English fluency is a key criterion for two main reasons: first, to avoid communication challenges in the workplace, and second because language development is important for childcare services. As noted previously by Mrs Roy, employers were impressed with Zimbabwean women’s “impeccable” English.

However, employers also make stereotyped judgements based on what they observe, and these stereotypes circulate among employer networks too (See Chapter Five). For example, before approaching a PEA, Mrs Vermaak (interview, 10 December 2013) explained that “I spent a lot of time at the park with the other nannies and I had a chance to observe”. She noticed that most Xhosa women were “super overweight”. Even though she stated that “I know that’s a generalization and that’s maybe incorrect”, she proceeded to link “body type” with work performance and work ethic. She elaborated that Xhosa domestic workers “would just sit on the blanket and watch the children”, unlike Zimbabwean domestic workers who ran after children or played alongside them on the jungle gym in a protective manner. She declared that “I needed somebody to do that. Kids can get into trouble really quickly”. Based on her own observation, Mrs Vermaak approached the PEA with a positive impression of Zimbabwean women as potentially ideal candidates for domestic care work.

6.5. Narratives of Self and Work Performances

This section examines employers’ descriptions of the interview and trial work period to demonstrate the key factors they consider when selecting a candidate. These two encounters are critical because employers, not agencies, decide who to hire. PEAs, employer talk and employers’ experiences with paid domestic workers all influence their selection criteria.

However, as previously stated, employers make the final decision on who they consider to be a comfortable other, a notable difference compared to international studies that suggest PEAs "make the match" (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Souralová, 2015). I focus on the personal narratives that candidates presented to employers and the specific work performances that employers found impressive. In doing so, some aspects of the identity niching process are revealed.

6.5.1. Selection Criteria and Testing Candidates

According to the findings, there are two typical types of employers: those who know what they want because of experience, and those who lack confidence because they are inexperienced or struggle to manage others. Regardless of this distinction, all employers agreed that choosing the correct candidate was challenging due to the complexities of the domestic employment relationship. Inexperienced employers reported that agencies provided useful advice on how to conduct the interview, especially if they were uncertain on how "make the right choice" amongst three candidates. Despite receiving advice from agencies, Mrs Conradie (interview, 3 December 2013) noted that "at that time, I didn't really ask enough because you are not really sure what to ask". Her remark illustrates employers' evolving understanding of their own needs and management capabilities in an intimate workplace. Mrs Chapman remarked, "it feels like a very easy interview because it's housekeeping, it's not a marketing director that you are hiring". She claimed that the job's assumed simplicity "makes it more difficult in a way". Yet Mrs. Hogan (interview, 4 October 2013) expressed explicitly the difficulty employers face because of intimacy:

> Lives are entwined in a way that one has to choose really wisely because the relationship is ongoing. Its intimate and it involves a long-term commitment for a number of reasons. I mean, because when one is beginning to feel disappointed or disheartened or let down, an employer can't just chop and change. Employment law protects the employees, as it should. And there's relationships, relationships with my children. So, it felt worthwhile actually just biting the bullet and making that financial commitment and asking an agency.

Mrs Hogan's explanation highlights the complex nature of the long-term employment relationship that extends beyond the employer to include family members. She also explains that employers invest in an expensive and time-consuming recruitment and hiring process *because* of the intimate nature of the employment relationship. Put simply, PEAs are viewed as experts that have the potential to provide employers with the necessary services and resources to make the right choice for their household.

While some employers felt insecure about the hiring process, others approached the interview confidently with carefully thought-out tactics to ensure that they made the right choice:

> Well, firstly, I was a bit sneaky, and it was quite difficult to find our house. So, I gave very specific directions on how they were to get here to come to the interview. And Amanda was the only one who read them properly and managed to find her way here. So, I know that was a bit of a sneaky one, but I was interested to see who would be able to follow the directions. Also, she was very friendly and outgoing. (Mrs Bevis, interview, 4 December 2013)
>
> I had my son with me for the first day of interviews and you can immediately see whether they are good with children. (Mrs Elliot, interview, 10 December 2013)
>
> Like for example, you ask her what would you do if the baby fell and was bleeding? So, like examples of problem solving, the appropriate steps to take. (Mrs Nkhuta, interview, 6 December 2013)

The quotes above describe the type of strategies or questions employers thought about before the interview. Typically, employers tested candidates' ability to read and follow instructions accurately, and their technical know-how of safety related procedures for childcare, and paid close attention to the interactions between their child and the candidate during the interview. Other less typical strategies included having a domestic nanny present when interviewing a candidate for cleaning services. The employer stated she needed a second opinion to ensure the new employee would get along with her domestic nanny. In as much as these "sneaky" or tactical approaches test the competency of a domestic worker, these examples also emphasized employers' attempts to find somebody who was manageable. Thus following instructions accurately, a friendly demeanour and the potential to solve challenges independently appear favourable to employers who need to fulfil their administrative roles and manage emotions in the intimate workplace. Importantly, each example cited above illustrates considerations instrumental to employers because of the weight of making the right choice for a long-term intimate employment relationship, which is also a time-consuming process (See Chapter Five).

The legacy of apartheid's residential geography and transportation system remains intact and negatively affects workers' opportunities in the labour market. Aside from a poor transportation system, commuting is expensive and a long journey for many workers residing in urban townships (Crankshaw, 2014). Unsurprisingly, PEAs advise employers to consider transportation costs and the residential location of candidates for live-out positions. This advice has a direct bearing on recruitment trends. For example, it was common practice for employers to select one candidate over others by considering where they lived. Most employers deliberately chose a candidate who lived close to them. Mrs Bevis explains that she opted for a Zimbabwean who lived in Wynberg because the other candidate she interviewed “lived in Khayelitsha, very far away from her home”. In other words, employers were unlikely to consider a candidate who lived “very far” because arriving at work promptly and being reliable were essential for households that required childcare.

Employers who required childcare services reported that they intentionally chose candidates with older children or children who did not live with them. This selection criterion was pragmatic but also motivated by guilt. For example, employers with limited or no family support for work emergencies did not consider favourably candidates who had young children and were unavailable to work overtime. Mrs Elliot explained, “I didn’t want to steal someone else’s mother”. In the end, she chose a candidate who had a teenager, which, she explained, “was kind of my cut off”. Other employers, who belonged to a dual income household and were likely to arrive late from work, listened attentively to whether a candidate had younger or older children, where their children resided and if they were likely to work overtime. The findings suggest that Zimbabwean candidates appeared to have a comparative advantage over South African candidates living with young children in Cape Town because they were more likely to be distant mothers. Zimbabwean MDWs had either left their children in the care of family members in Zimbabwe, or their children were attending boarding schools in Zimbabwe. As a result of mothering from a distance, Zimbabwean candidates were more likely to take up live-in placements or consider working overtime if they were live-out domestic workers.

6.5.2. Social Issues – Professional Relationships

Mrs Bevis chose a Zimbabwean national over “someone more kind of local” because of where she lived. At first glance, this appears to be a purely pragmatic consideration because the demand for a punctual and reliable domestic worker is linked to where a domestic worker resides. However, later in the interview, Mrs Bevis (interview, 4 December 2013) elaborated further on other considerations based on her former experience with a South African domestic worker:

> ... I’ve employed a South African who lived in Khayelitsha, who was very much a Xhosa lady – very traditional living arrangements. She looked after the grandchildren. The whole set up was quite traditional even to the point where she supported her daughter who was a single mother, and her son was always in trouble with the law. I mean it was a very typical South African set up. And then

> compared to the arrangement I have now with Mary who lives down the road, [...] I'm much more familiar with the way Mary lives her life than I am with that South African arrangement.
> [...] I just remember talking to her. [...] she would tell me how her son had been put in prison over the weekend and he needed bail, and he didn't have any money and I would kind of go, "Are you asking to borrow money?" And she was, "No, just leave him there". [...] I just couldn't, we didn't talk to each other, and we couldn't communicate really properly. I didn't understand what she wanted out of her situation. And if you don't understand that then you don't know how you can help. It was very, very tricky. And I think that unconsciously that was a fact in not choosing someone more kind of local.

Mrs Bevis described her discomfort with the "very traditional living arrangement" because of the social issues her former domestic worker shared with her and that affected the domestic employment relationship. Mrs Bevis thought her relationship with her previous domestic worker was "very tricky" because she could not understand her lived reality or communicate with her properly. Although she claims she unconsciously chose a Zimbabwean candidate, her former experience influenced her decision-making criteria. This is made clear when Mrs Bevis admits that she specifically chose a Zimbabwean candidate because her living arrangement sounded familiar. In other words, she was unlikely to encounter social issues that would affect the employment relationship or become an "emotional burden". Like Mrs Bevis, Mrs Vermaak (interview, 4 December 2013) also focused on a candidate that did not present "any personal issues" during the interview. She described her overall impression of the candidate she chose:

> She was well mannered, and she could communicate properly. She was just a well-rounded person. She wasn't very loud and imposing or anything like that. And she has four daughters of her own. But they don't live with her. They live in Zimbabwe. And also, it just sounded, her family life to me sounded "sound" – you know what I mean. There weren't any personal issues. She's got a husband who has a steady job. She herself has four children who she's managed to look after and provide for. And she's very Christian – not that we [are] super Christian – but I do find those kinds of values are important.

Besides good communication skills and the candidate's demeanour (not loud or imposing), Mrs Vermaak explained that she selected her current domestic worker because of her "sound" family life and similar religious values. What was striking about having a "sound" family life – which is not "sound" given that she is away from her children – is that she did not present the possibility of dependence on the employer. Noting her domestic worker's capability of raising her children in addition to having a husband who works suggests an already existing support system. Mrs Norton (interview, 3 December 2013) selected a Zimbabwean candidate for the same reason. She explains, "She also has a stable family life. She's got children at university and a husband and it's just normal, not too many social issues surrounding her".

Mrs Johnson (interview, 10 December 2013) listed several factors that impressed her about her Zimbabwean domestic worker:

> She'd just been trained. But there was something about her. She came across very professional, very neat. And on the day, I said to her can you help me with some domestic work because obviously I had two kids to deal with and the house was a bit untidy, and I just want to sort of see. I said, "Just half day, help me with some domestic work". […] And then she did. And she worked very well. And I thought okay. She also lived very close to me. She said that her kids and her husband live with her, and I thought well stability you know […] She has a husband and a daughter, so she has a balance in her own home.

Mrs Johnson highlighted her domestic worker's professionalism and skills, her location close to her employer's house, her work performance during the trial period and, like other employers, her stable family background. Like other employers, Mrs Johnson listened attentively to candidates during the interview. Any hint of "personal issues" or "personal baggage" often resulted in candidates being disregarded in favour of those who presented a "normal" manner that aligned with their expectations of professionalism in the employment relationship (Goffman, 1959). However, these observed differences, and therefore preferences for one candidate over another, point to employer's concerns regarding boundary work in the employment relationship and the likelihood of personalism and dependence giving rise to an uncomfortable liability they wanted to distance themselves from.

6.5.3. Work Performances

Much of the earlier sections in this chapter alluded to typical work-related performances that impressed employers. Clear examples included arriving on time for an interview or arriving at work on time, notifying an employer if they would be late for work and performing their work duties consistently. These examples emphasised their intimate work culture as comfortable others. Yet, at the start of the recruitment process, the interview and trial work period are critical moments for candidates because they involve first impressions – their front stage performance. Employers carefully scrutinize the work performance of domestic workers from the moment an interview begins, and especially during the trial work period. For example, when asked what made her choose her current domestic nanny over the other two candidates she interviewed, Mrs Nkhuta (interview, 6 December 2013) explained:

> Well, the first thing she did when she walked into the house was wash her hands, which people seem to not think is important with an infant. [...] So I was like, tick box, she understands it's essential when you around an infant. Secondly, she was very keen to like, "May I hold him, may I

> play with him? So, he was very happy to play with her. It was more the comfort she had with the baby immediately that made her stick out and be the favourite candidate.

Mrs Johnson (interview, 10 December 2013) was impressed with the following:

> She seemed safety conscious - just been trained in April. So, she was quite aware of the safety thing, first aid and those things. She had a book she had bought herself on baby development and what games to play with them and stuff like… And I was quite impressed. She was still trialling. She came in the one day – my son was into dinosaurs, he just started getting into dinosaurs. And she came to work, and she had her son draw a dinosaur and cut it out and she brought him this cardboard dinosaur. [...] She obviously had really taken note of what she learnt in her training and everything else.

Mrs Nkhuta was impressed with her domestic worker's professional know-how regarding hygiene and infant care. From the moment her domestic worker walked into her home, she performed her role as an experienced caregiver. She also showed a keen interest in Mrs Nkhuta's child by demonstrating that she was invested in childcare. In other words, she had the relevant skills and the right attitude to her work. She detailed later how her domestic worker took initiative and the importance of professionalism and communication:

> She is brilliant. I just think I got lucky with her because she communicates beautifully. She will send me SMS's if she needs something or is she's running late because she comes back on Sundays and she's usually home by quarter to – six o clock. If she's running a bit late, she'll phone or SMS saying I'm running a bit late. Don't worry I'm on my way. If she needs a day off, she'll let me know a week ahead of time so I can organise my diary as well. She's actually managing the house. For example, she's got a list on the fridge with the things the baby needs. I don't see what he eats. I'm not bathing him every day. I'm not feeding him every day. I don't know what runs out, what's there. I don't know what he likes. I don't know what he doesn't like anymore. So, she actually keeps me involved by telling, this is what we did today. Here's a list of things like, he needs more shoes, or he needs a hat or sunscreen, that kind of thing. (Mrs Nkhuta, interview, 6 December 2013)

Similarly, Mrs Johnson was awestruck by her domestic worker's attention to detail and that she applied what she had learnt in her interaction with her son. These performances are not accidental – agencies and training providers encourage workers to demonstrate their knowledge during these encounters (Lan, 2016; Scrinzi, 2010). These work-based practices influence the process of identity whereby some domestic workers are distinguished from others because of their professional status.

The most striking reaction employers reflected on and acted upon were workers' inventive work cultures that were likely to challenge their role in the intimate workplace. Employers were reluctant to embark on a long-term employment relationship with a candidate who presented social issues that suggested the possibility of personalism and the ambiguities of intimacy. Put differently, employers did not want to accommodate their workers' personal situation on an ongoing basis. Any tell-tale signs of social issues resulted in employers opting for another candidate – one who met their criteria of a comfortable other. These considerations emerged as a clear example of social distancing and thus the rejection of workers' inventive work culture. Making the right choice after the interview and trial work period was not simply about selecting a candidate according to their national identity (primary constructions of difference) but instead, employers chose candidates based on secondary constructions of difference related to a "professional" intimate work culture. Therefore, employers instinctively took note of workers' narratives and work-related performances to ensure it aligned with their expectations of a comfortable other.

6.6. Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated what employers try to accomplish through and with PEAs, given the nature of the domestic employment relationship. While most employers use PEAs to become legally compliant or avoid regulatory labour compliance altogether, their primary goal is to seek representation and services in response to an intimate workplace crisis that they experienced. The intimate workplace crisis describes employers' rejection of domestic workers' inventive intimate culture and employers' social distancing tactics through PEAs to avoid a legally administrative and emotional burden in the employment relationship. The intimate workplace crisis therefore appears to be a key determinant for choosing the right one with PEAs' assistance. However, while some employers may have legitimate concerns for ensuring a fair employment relationship, some employers nonetheless differentiate among domestic workers based on subjective work-related stereotypes and secondary constructions of difference. The findings suggests that the secondary constructions of difference (language and professional status) generate widespread perceptions of who the *other* is. Therefore, the recruitment and hiring process is not neutral because it is influenced by hiring histories, employer networks, PEAs and the socio-legal context specific to the domestic sector. The following chapter examines MDWs' experiences with PEAs and employers as comfortable others, and how they mobilize an intimate work culture through identity niching to gain agency recruited status.

Chapter 7. Identity Niching: A “Defensive Combination” in Response to Precarity in the Domestic Sector

7.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on MDWs’ experiences of domestic work and their employment paths in the sector before gaining agency-recruited status as comfortable others. I argue that MDWs respond to the commodification of intimate work by practicing identity niching through impression management to meet the demand for comfortable others. I describe their responses as a “defensive combination” and a struggle for better work that arises from their cultural formation because of precarious and informal domestic work conditions. The chapter begins by, first, mapping MDWs’ employment paths and aspirations for better work. Second, I discuss how their work experiences serve as a rite of passage because of the disciplining logic of PEAs’ gatekeeping practices, which promote an intimate work culture employers demand and that MDWs mobilize rationally because of their moral economy. Their cultural formation arises from struggle, perseverance and differentiation through a system of socialization and the regulation of their intimate work culture based on norms, values and symbolic markers. Third, I discuss their scripts of “us” vs. “them”, which illustrate why MDWs identify as comfortable others, to provide concrete examples of the identity niching process. Last, the chapter concludes with MDWs’ experiences as agency recruited workers by noting their access to “decent” working conditions among labour compliant employers, *as* comfortable others, and that show PEAs’ potential for representing domestic workers’ interests too.

7.2. Profile of Domestic Workers

Appendix E summarizes MDWs’ demographic profile, employment arrangement and salary earned from the job they found through a PEA. Most participants fit the age category PEAs preferred to work with, had one or more children, O level education, identified as a ‘single lady’, had a live-in position as a domestic nanny and earned a market-related salary which was well above the prescribed minimum wage for domestic workers. Domestic workers who were married and living in Cape Town with their husband and children were more likely to have a live-out position. The following sections focus on the key themes that emerged from the data regarding access to domestic work and their experiences of domestic work before securing employment through a PEA.

7.2.1. Work Opportunities and Aspirations

Employment trajectories are shaped by multiple factors. Often networks and personal dispositions play a key role in channelling workers to certain sectors in the labour market. This section examines the migratory status, skills status and job-seeking strategies of newcomers in South Africa, as well as how these factors influence their employment paths. The purpose of this section is to report some of the most prevalent barriers to entry that women face when attempting to find domestic work, and especially through PEAs.

7.2.2. In Search of Work: Barriers, Constraints and Networking

Most women entered South Africa with the objective of finding domestic work. However, there were a few who tried to find employment in their respective fields, namely as receptionists, teachers or businesswomen. For this cohort, domestic work was not their first choice of employment. Instead, they turned to domestic work as a means of survival because of structural constraints such as language – specifically Afrikaans – and the challenge of valorising their qualifications in South Africa. Patricia, a single mother aged 40, arrived in Cape Town in 2009. She explained that she lost many job opportunities because "everywhere I applied they would want somebody who speaks Afrikaans... I'd never spoken Afrikaans" (Patricia, interview, 24 March 2013). Unlike Patricia, Fiona a qualified social worker and professional caregiver aged 57, who arrived in Cape Town in 2007, faced a different challenge that others encountered too. She explained that her employment options were initially limited because she did not have asylum status. Before securing a position as a caregiver through a PEA, Fiona worked on a farm. On her bus journey to Cape Town, she met a Zimbabwean woman who:

> ...could not speak English or any South African language. [...] she had a relative staying and working in the Western Cape. She asked me to accompany her to her relative and see if I would like working in the area. I stayed there for one and half weeks and I could not cope working on the farm. (Fiona, interview, 3 June 2013)

In Fiona's case, not having a work permit or asylum status meant she was more likely to find employment in a sector that absorbs undocumented workers – the agriculture sector. Her employment path shows that social networks, either ad-hoc or kin based, play an important role in channelling workers towards certain sectors. Waldinger (1999:21) explains that employment patterns, such as the one described by Fiona, emerge in certain sectors because of migrants' "predispositions to certain kinds of work". Yet, like other women who found their first job on the farms in the Western Cape, farm labour was considered a less desirable work option than domestic work. The main reason women chose domestic work over farm work was because farm work was physically challenging and notorious for poor working conditions and low wages. Fiona explained:

> I then moved to Cape Town where I first stayed in one of the backpackers in a dorm paying R70 per night. This proved costly. I was not employed and the little money I had been paid working on the farm was running out. I moved out of the hotel and stayed with a Xhosa lady that I had met at one of the employment agencies looking for work. I was not paying rent but buying food. I stayed with the young lady for three months.
>
> During this period, I did sewing for other Zimbabwean ladies who had a contract with a white lady ... who had offices in Salt River. The ladies sew pieces of materials to make teddy bears. They could get different pieces and sew different stitches [sort of designing]. These pieces the lady [...] would look [at] them and charge any fee that she saw fit or appropriate. As someone out of employment, I could not complain or choose but just accept what was available. Sewing is not easy. It is hard work but that was means of survival and I had to do just that. [...] The locals were not too keen to do the job. [...]The piece work was not beneficiary [beneficial]. I was contracted by other foreign nationals from my own country, who too were exploiting their peers taking advantage of the situation in SA. I did not have a work permit to be legally employed. Because of that I was subject to exploitation by my peers who had sought the asylum documents. (Fiona, interview, 3 June 2013)

Fiona's employment path highlights the importance of social networks but also the limitations of her undocumented status, which channelled her towards poorly paid work. While social networks are described as instrumental for finding work (Nyamnjoh, 2005), MDWs' experiences challenge the celebratory outcome of transnational social formations that occur in a receiving country and between the receiving and sending country by exposing the complex migratory process. As Fiona revealed, she was prone to exploitation from her fellow nationals too. Desperate to begin work immediately after arriving in South Africa, many MDWs depended on any opportunities available to them, even poorly paid work. Similar experiences were echoed by others who entered domestic work through informal networks or informal agencies managed by co-nationals.

7.2.3. Mobile Maids and Far-flung Networks

While most MDWs migrated to South Africa directly, the starting point of four women's journeys was Botswana, not Cape Town. These women's employment path illustrates regional migration patterns and the issue of migrant status, and the limits of not having a work permit that influenced their employment path. For example, unemployed and desperate to support their families, women travelled from Zimbabwe to Botswana and finally arrived in South Africa to pursue better work opportunities in the domestic sector. They represent the "mobile maid" phenomenon and illustrate the importance of social networks for finding employment. Margaret, aged 39, and who arrived in Cape Town in 2009, compared her experiences in Botswana and South Africa:

> They say, "South Africa is better than Botswana" [referring to her aunts living in South Africa]. Then I decided to come to South Africa. And I come here. And I was staying there in the farms. [...] Botswana is different from South Africa. You have to go door to door looking for a job. In Botswana there's like, they don't want you to stay for a long time. They only want you to stay for three months. So, it's like staying there for three months. So here in South Africa we come here we can just stay free. No one's going to ask what are you doing here? In Botswana if they see a Zimbabwean they ask, "Where are your papers?" They want the papers. In Botswana it's different to South Africa. You just go to Home Affairs and get your asylum papers. Then you are good. (Margaret, interview, 21 April 2013)

Like others, Margaret raised an important point about the reason she migrated to South Africa. She explained that she decided to leave Botswana because her aunts told her South Africa was better. But she elaborated on what made South Africa a better location based on her personal experience as a domestic worker in both countries. First, she described the limited options available for finding employment in Botswana. Margaret described "knocking on doors" as a typical job-seeking strategy. In fact, all the women who worked in Botswana explained that this is how they searched for domestic work. Second, she noted that, unlike Botswana, she was free from harassment and had the opportunity to apply for and be granted asylum status. Importantly, Margaret arrived in Cape Town in 2009, which coincided with the special dispensation that allowed Zimbabweans to enter South Africa to "live, study, and start businesses" without applying for a work visa (Rowan, 2010). Margaret's account of domestic work in Botswana, and the advice received from her aunts in South Africa, reveals how workers are channelled into specific sectors (initially, she stayed at the farm) and countries because of the transnational flow of ideas and information.

7.2.4. Common Job-seeking Strategies for Domestic Work

Everyone described diverse job-seeking strategies in South Africa's domestic sector. These strategies ranged from relying on "homegirl" or church networks (Bozzoli & Nkotsoe, 1983), employer networks, online platforms such as Gumtree and the use of informal or formal agencies. None of the women referred to "knocking on doors" in Cape Town. These wide-ranging job-seeking strategies were encouraged by family, friends and church members who had generated a wealth of "public class knowledge" (Sitas, 1983) on how to navigate the labour market and be self-reliant. Patricia (interview, 24 March 2013) reiterated how essential networking was for finding better work:

> We are human beings. We always meet and sometimes we are in trouble, and you always meet someone, and you say where I am working, how it is through discussing. [...] It's all about networking. So, come on guys, where I am working, I am not happy. Or you are just complaining and some of the people are happy [...] it's not like all of us are complaining. Some of us are fine. And they are like, "Oh, hey sister, you are being paid R2000! [...] Why can't you try this agent? And so that's how we have so many agents' numbers.

Patricia suggested that agencies are essential for navigating the labour market and accessing better work and pay in the domestic sector. Patricia implied that not all domestic workers experienced poor working conditions and low wages. She also suggested that workers were genuinely concerned about each other's working conditions and were eager to share advice with each other to improve their situations. However, because of the urgency of finding work immediately, and their deep-seated activism to help others escape unemployment or precarious working conditions, MDWs were resourced with a databank of agencies' contact details, including those of informal agencies.

7.3. Work Experiences in the Domestic Sector's Underbelly

Prior to accessing work through a PEA, every MDW had engaged in informal domestic work, sometimes on a part-time or permanent basis. They moved from precarious "job work" or "char work" to stable but usually poorly paid domestic work. They complained about long work hours, poor working conditions and low wages, reiterating the experiences documented in other studies (Nyamnjoh, 2006; Ally, 2009; Griffin, 2011). At a national level, the DOL inspectors and SADSAWU described the mushrooming of "rogue agencies" as a major concern because they undermined efforts to recognize domestic workers' employment rights. In reference to a South African Muslim-run "one-man band agency" where a domestic worker died, the former general secretary of SADSAWU, Myrtle Witbooi, described what she saw:

> We went there, [after] the worker died in the garage; the Department of Labour decides to give money to bury the worker. She [the agent] just went to the next street; she opened the agency there again. Last year we went there with *The Voice* [a Cape Town radio station], ten Zimbabwean domestic women are in the yard, some with babies in a little hut in the yard, sleeping there. They were too scared to speak to us because they will be sent back, they didn't have official papers. (Witbooi, interview, 22 May 2013)

I draw on Nyasha's experience to describe her employment path in the domestic sector because it was typical of the experiences of many MDWs who accessed work through an informal

Zimbabwean-run agency operating in Cape Town. Nyasha initially agreed to an interview, but I discovered during the interview that she was not an agency recruited domestic worker. I proceeded, however, because she wanted to talk and shared that she was trying to secure work through a PEA but was waiting for feedback. I realized I had an opportunity to follow her employment path as she set about trying to break away from informal domestic work and recruitment strategies. This unexpected turn of events (an advantage of tracking participants employment paths over a sustained period of time through ethnography) generated rich data that exposed the underbelly of South Africa's domestic sector. Nyasha's journey revealed what decisions MDWs were making and explained MDWs' preferences for PEAs. A month later, Nyasha called to share good news. She had found a permanent live-out position using what she referred to as "white people's agencies".

Nyasha, aged 23, found her first job as a domestic worker in Cape Town through a friend. She was informally employed as a full-time live-in caregiver for an elderly woman. She worked seven days a week and earned R1500 per month. After three months of changing diapers, cooking and cleaning, she decided to look for another job. Like most newcomers, she sought work through an informal agency to fast-track her access to employment. She described her job-seeking strategies, including her preference for "white people's agencies", and explained her frustration with the labour broker model associated with rogue agencies:

> Nyasha: Where I was doing the live-in job there was a friend of mine who told me about the agency. She said she knows someone who can find a job for me. She gave me the contact numbers and then I called the person. She said I must register with R200. She said she will get me a job in a week, but the week turned [out] to be, it was about four months.
> Bianca: So, what were you doing in those four months?
> Nyasha: I just looked for another job, but [through] Gumtree.
> Bianca: Okay. So, you found something?
> Nyasha: Yes, I found something. But then she called me saying that if I want a job from her, I have to go to see her every day. So, I wanted a good job with a better salary. So, I had to leave that job, the one I got on Gumtree. And I started going to her every day until she found me three days. First Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. And then I worked for two weeks, Monday, Wednesday and Friday. And then she got another two days, Tuesday and Thursday. So, it was a complete week.
> Bianca: How does it work out? How much are they paying you per day?
> Nyasha: It's like for an agency, she charges like R180 a day and if I work for that R180 I get R120 and the R60 she takes it.
> Bianca: Okay. I find it interesting that they charged you R200, because most agencies don't charge you. They find you a job. They charge the employers.
> Nyasha: And even my other employer, she told me when she called the agency, the agent charged her R350 for them to get me.
> Bianca: So, she got R200 from you and R350 from two employers?
> Nyasha: Plus, R60 every day from me!
> Bianca: Why did you use the agency?

> Nyasha: It's like you know, nowadays, even the employers, they are now going to agencies. They are not picking people from Gumtree because some of them, you know, their behaviours and something. As for my agency, when it comes to my agency, I would say no! I would advise them to go to other agencies, the white people agencies.
> Bianca: Oh, so the agency you use is not owned by white people?
> Nyasha: It is a black person. She is Zimbabwean. (Nyasha, interview, 7 September 2013)

Nyasha's employment path reiterates the experience shared by all the women who found informal work in the domestic sector – none of them were satisfied with the domestic work they secured through personal networks, the free online advertising platform, Gumtree, or informal agencies. Low wages, no employment contracts and poor working conditions were the norm, thus signalling domestic workers' experiences of an intimate workplace crisis where regulatory non-compliance was the norm. Nyasha described the typical "rent-a-maid agency model" that offers char work or job work to clients. Unsurprisingly, MDWs sought this form of employment arrangement as a last resort, because employers took advantage of them, expecting them to complete various tasks in a full working day. The demanding nature of this form of work has been noted elsewhere among outsourced cleaning companies too (Mendez, 1998; Du Toit, 2013). Further, as reported in Chapter Five, the earning potential of being rented out is not as lucrative as a permanent placement. However, MDWs revealed that access to this form of domestic work was a short-term strategy because they needed work immediately and to gain work experience before approaching a PEA.

While Nyasha earned more – on average R2400 a month – than at her previous job, she was bitter about the nature of the employment arrangement. In her description of her relationship with the intermediary, it was apparent she secured employment through an informal agency because she was charged a fee. Nyasha did not undergo the screening process typical of PEAs. However, her account suggests that the agent may have tested her determination to find a job and her reliability by asking her to visit her daily before she found her a client. It's also possible that the agent received positive feedback from the first client, thereby giving her access to a full working week once the agent found her another client. Even though Nyasha earned more than the minimum wage stipulated under SD7 for 2013, she revealed that she had no employment contract, and was answerable to the agent on whom she depended to access work. Further, Nyasha expressed her frustration because the agent deducted R60 from her daily wage, which was collected from the clients who ultimately bypass regulatory labour compliance. As Nyasha reasoned, employers are wary of using Gumtree because they are worried about finding domestic workers with a challenging intimate work culture (workers' "behaviours"). As such, she was more likely to find work through an informal agent.

There are two possible reasons Nyasha struggled to access work through a PEA: her age, and her limited work experience in the domestic sector. Regarding the first reason, Chapter Five reported that PEAs are reluctant to employ women who are younger than 28 years old because they are considered unreliable and uncommitted to domestic work. However, some PEAs keep an open mind by considering the job seeker's work experience and whether they have a valid reference letter. The second reason relates to an earlier point regarding the significance of reference letters, discussed further below. Nyasha knew that the PEA would turn her away if she did not have a reference letter, and therefore she was bound to her employers to earn her status as a comfortable other. The general pattern that emerged in the data is that many newcomers gain access to low wages and informal domestic work to earn a reference letter before approaching "white people's agencies". Therefore, when MDWs constantly check in with each other, learn about each other's earning potential and develop their own databank of agencies' contact details, they mobilize to access better work through PEAs.

7.3.1. Work Identity as a Rite of Passage

The previous section highlighted workers' struggles for decent work. The aim of this section is to show the significance of this stage in the identity niching process that gives rise to the collective identity associated with "comfortable others". Overall, the findings show that many women experienced precarious work as a "rite of passage" to permanent employment through PEAs. During the precarious period of their employment history, they set out to access asylum status or a work permit, worked informally to gain domestic work experience for a reference letter, and, if possible, save money to register for a domestic work course to improve their employability in the sector. During this period, many MDWs discussed the societal pressure of finding work as soon as possible. The urgency of finding work was prevalent among single mothers who had migrated to support their children. Although some of MDWs mentioned they had family members living in Cape Town, they shared that they felt they could not rely on their support because their relatives also had to send remittances home. The finding show that, while it was acceptable to rely on kin networks for ad-hoc support or information, they felt the social pressure of not being a "burden" to another. MDWs resorted to seizing low-paying jobs as quickly as they could because "it is better to have something than nothing" (Prudence, interview, 16 June 2013); “If you don’t work for a month, honestly, no one will take care of you” (Patricia, interview, 24 March 2013); “People who were home, they told us that if you get something you better stay there, because here things are worse than you think” (Alice, interview, 5 May); and “If you don’t have bread on your table then you usually don’t complain” (Esther, interview, 28 April 2013).

Odette claims that since MDWs have few social networks compared to South Africans they accept low-paying jobs:

> You know when you are South African you have accommodation, you have relatives around you. So even if you lose a job today you are in your comfort zone. You get what I mean? But when it comes to foreigners, when they get the job, they cling to it. They do it wholeheartedly because they know they don't have anywhere to lean on. (Odette, interview, 14 September 2013)

Odette described a recurrent theme among MDWs, the act of clinging to a job wholeheartedly. This theme suggests there is a shared understanding of the prescribed rules of clinging to domestic work by being “hard working, honest, and reliable”. Odette implied that MDWs had to do something exceptional to keep their jobs, despite the poor conditions they faced and the violation of their employment rights. By working reliably, productively and honestly (identity niching), they were more likely to earn a reference letter. For many, not having a reference letter was a source of great frustration. Patricia (interview, 24 March 2013) elaborated:

> ...normally agencies, they always want people with references here in Cape Town. And you see, if you are here in Cape Town and say I have been working in Jo’burg, [...] someone says, “No, I want somebody who has got the experience here in Cape Town”. So, because I don’t have the reference, you end up going for this Gumtree thing.

Patricia reiterated the point that many domestic workers resort to informal domestic work because they do not have a reference letter or work experience in Cape Town. Reference letters had to convey the intimate work culture employers demanded. To secure a reference letter, workers had to succeed in their impression management by persevering despite difficult work conditions to display their professional status as comfortable others. Unsurprisingly, domestic workers described their search for employment through PEAs as a “terrible struggle”, since not having a reference letter was a reminder of the hardships they had to endure to become agency recruited workers. For almost all MDWs, reference letters were symbolic of their struggle for “decent” work, but also, once earned, served as a rite of passage for better domestic work with PEAs.

7.3.2. Cultural Formations and Defensive Combinations

For MDWs, the church represented “home away from home”. Their church was a site for networking and, as Cheng (2006) describes, a site for congregating for social justice. The church also represented MDWs’ moral universe as they “defensively attempt[ed] to control their conditions of life… through which cultural formations proliferate” (Sitas, 1983:46). While MDWs experienced various pressures because of their status as migrants, including the social pressure to find work immediately, almost all of them identified as “single ladies” or distant mothers. In this study, MDWs’ budgets were painstakingly calculated with worry for the year: boarding fees for their children, a trip home (maybe next year), clothing and airtime to stay connected, Malaicha fees[55] for groceries and for those caring for their children. The commonality of degendering – parenting from a distance – influenced their bond and support for each other and also cemented the autonomy of their cultural formation. The act of helping each other to travel to church by taxi or train, or sharing a portion of their tithes with another who did not have money that month, fostered a sense of belonging in response to their need to retreat from loneliness and economic despair.

When asked why they thought employers preferred employing Zimbabweans, many said it was because of their belief in God. Prudence (interview, 16 June 2013) declared, “I think God is my reference” to explain why she found employment through a PEA. Yet a closer analysis of these answers revealed the depth of these statements because of the content of the church services and how those who gathered after services to share their good news or troubles regulated their “behaviour within defined social spaces” (Sitas, 1996:237). For example, at many of the services I attended, the scriptures taught were about how to be a “professional Christian” and thus obedient and faithful to God, and included teachings related to everyday being in terms of family values (parenting), being a better husband or wife in South Africa (faithfulness) and how to conduct oneself as a Christian by encouraging self-reliance through entrepreneurial activities or finding employment. The sermons the pastors or elders shared were relevant to migrant workers’ current socio-economic context and related to the various “pressures” members experienced and were encouraged to retract from through their cultural formations. On 24 March, 2013, Elder A stood in for the pastor:

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[55] Malaicha.com is an app that allows users to send goods and groceries to Zimbabwe and Somalia.

> Elder A paced along the stage in an excitable manner. It was a hot day. He had his notes in one hand and a handkerchief in the other, ready to wipe the sweat of his forehead. I was uncomfortable, distracted and not paying attention to what he was saying. I kept looking around rather than paying close attention to what he was saying. The ceiling fans were on maximum capacity. I could only feel hot air circulating in the jam-packed room. Those who arrived late stood in rows at the back and on either side of the church while the rest of us sat next to each other, almost shoulder to shoulder. The ladies sitting in the row ahead of me had make-shift paper fans. Like me, their eyes followed Elder A from one end of the stage to the other, as he preached. Suddenly, I sat up. I heard him say Kaizen! He proceeded to explain that Kaizen was a process of continuous improvement and then asked us, "How does one go about as a 'group' in different places and times, to create a presence that is attractive to others? What does that consist of? How do others see you? How do you improve?" After asking these questions he explained, "Some people have thorns. It is about focusing on strengths…what are you doing as individuals for other people to benefit? Other people see weakness, but others actually see your strength". He chastised those with bad body odour and poor dress style. I could hear some women say, "Amen!" and others chuckle uncomfortably because it was a hot, sweaty day!

On 16 June, a visiting elder's core message was to encourage faithfulness to God and a positive attitude despite their conditions of life. He shouted, "Walk like a rich man! Walk like a man who has a house! Stop saying you are poor! Don't worry about the devil. Plan for your life. As long as you are faithful to God, you will become stronger". From both field note excerpts, work behaviour and the impression that one creates, not only as a Christian but also as a worker, is made explicit. In other words, continuous improvement was for all facets of life. Studies that acknowledge the diversity and variation among Pentecostal churches have noted similar doctrines whereby Christianity is viewed as "a silent revolution", promoting and encouraging socio-economic development or self-reliance among congregants, which is typically referred to as "Prosperity Gospel" (Maxwell, 1998; Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE), 2012). While not the same as the Protestant ethic, others have noted parallels with the Protestant ethic, in that a work ethic, education and family values are encouraged rather than idleness. However, the notion of a Pentecostal ethic is arguably distinct from the Weberian Protestant ethic model because of the interpretation of Christianity, the longstanding history of capitalism and the context specificities of African Christianity that encourages "unashamed" prosperity rather than deferred gratification (Gifford & Nogueira-Godsey, 2011; CDE, 2012). Nevertheless, MDWs' interpretations of what set them apart from others was closely linked to their identities as faithful Christians and the moral codes they subscribed to in all facets of their lives.

The findings show that there were intermittent reminders at church of individuals who had successfully transitioned from insecure employment to agency recruited status. These reminders were shared during "single ladies" gatherings and occasionally announced to the entire congregation through testimonies. During the Sunday service, it was customary for individuals to share testimonials of how God had blessed their lives. When the master of ceremonies announced that it was time for testimonials, several church members would line up in front of the stage – in a queue too long to accommodate everyone during the service – and wait patiently for their turn at the microphone. Some members shared their testimonials on overcoming an illness, graduating, the birth of a child, surviving a taxi or bus accident when journeying to Zimbabwe, finding new employment, and receiving a salary increase; or they would simply sing a song about being blessed.

As an outsider, I was not privy to church members' occupations unless I knew them. Nor was I privy to the importance of some of the testimonials shared by MDWs until much later. For example, I recall Thandeka standing on the stage sharing her testimonial – her "wonderful boss" bought her a plane ticket to visit her family. She was ecstatic. She kept thanking God for her blessing and told everyone she had not been home in many years (a shared pain that most MDWs recounted when discussing their sacrifices as mothers and their yearning for home). At the time, I did not know that Thandeka was an agency recruited worker. I had already interviewed Wendy and she promised to connect me to three other agency recruited workers for interviews. When I approached her, Wendy informed me, "Ah, you can talk to Thandeka, that lady whose boss got her a ticket". These success stories served as reminders of the possible benefits of using a PEA – a generous employer, and one who honoured their commitment to annual leave arrangements (a comfortable other or "good employer" because of their labour compliant status). The sharing of testimonials was symbolic of those who had "made it" and typical of a family oriented transnational church that was "home" to the "single ladies" mothering from a distance.

When MDWs congregated after church, they shared their news and frustrations amongst themselves. Those who had found "good" employment through a PEA were asked several questions. In these gatherings those struggling or wanting to further their earning potential would ask: what is your boss like? How much do you earn? Where do you work? What work do you do? How did you find your job? Which agency did you use? Can I have that contact number? On several occasions I witnessed women huddled together at the end of a service swapping phone numbers of agencies and uttering the names of the "good" agents who were kind and who to avoid. In these interactions, workers shared information with newcomers and those who earned relatively well but wanted to earn as much as the most successful agency recruited MDWs in their circle. Returning to Elder A's advice regarding creating a positive impression to help others too, MDWs promoted the cardinal rules for being successful in the intimate workplace. Newcomers in particular, were advised:

> Everyone would say, if you want to keep your job, be honest, be punctual, be very, very open to your boss or to each other. That is the number one thing that they will tell you. (Alice, interview, 5 May 2013)

Those who were desperate to break away from insecure employment were reminded that their daily work performance was critical not only for keeping their jobs, but also for gaining a reference letter that would allow them to access employment through PEAs. Jackie (interview, 14 September 2013) explained she worked with a team of six women, but she was constantly working with different people from various countries. She added that, since she persevered and demonstrated she was reliable, punctual, productive and honest in spite of her poor working conditions, she was promoted to a permanent placement a few months later. She stressed that the agent would only retain the most productive workers and if an opening for a permanent placement came up, the most productive worker would receive that placement.

Another regular theme among those who resigned or considered leaving their current employer because they needed to earn more was: "[b]ut I gave her a months' notice" (Brenda, interview, 14 September 2013) or "I will give her notice" (Patricia, interview, 24 March 2013). This practice emphasized professionalism and their "reliability". This form of professional etiquette was also often encouraged by PEAs before they re-entered the market for employment. Incidentally, workers were mindful that these practices were necessary when employers confirmed their reference letters.

The findings show that, through their associational ties, MDWs encouraged each other to practice identity niching as a defensive combination in response to the limits of informal hiring practices. By engaging the process of identity niching, MDWs demonstrated the reactive nature of *their* work culture in contrast to the "inventive" intimate work culture discussed in the previous chapter. The defensive combination among domestic workers – practical strategies that intentionally operate within the context of ultra-exploitation – reveals that MDWs were simultaneously engaging in and resisting poor working conditions because they had a long-term goal in mind – to escape the underbelly of the domestic sector. Agency recruited workers' successful experiences motivated newcomers to comply with deplorable working conditions.

Their vulnerable status (and seemingly docility to the whims of employers) were part of their impression management strategy to establish a recognisable intimate work culture for better work.

7.3.3. Comfortable Others: “Doing Difference”, Scripts of “us versus them”

Zimbabwean women perceived that they were favoured for domestic work compared to others because of exploitation, cultural or religious differences, and their educational backgrounds. Overall, their perception of how they were viewed and why they were favoured for domestic work informed their status as comfortable others, as depicted through scripts of “us versus them”. In this section, I focus on these scripts to elaborate on the importance of “doing difference” to access better work opportunities in the domestic sector. I begin with Juliet, who offered the following concise summary:

> Some like the foreigners for good things but some like [them] for exploitation. So, it’s both. It depends [on] the employers. Most employers, they like the foreigners. I will start maybe with a good note. They say they work very hard; most of them are very honest. Most of them they say they don’t complain [...]. What I have seen, they like the foreigners because they know that we are not locals. So, we don’t have a choice. Whatever we are asked to do we do because what we are here for is money. We need to survive so in most cases most foreigners also they don’t know [...] the labour laws that govern us. Most of the people are ignorant of that. So, it’s like the employer is happy because if I ask her to work, she can work for many hours. But for the locals, they know that if there is a stipulated time, they can work for the stipulated time. And they want also their break. They want their lunch.
> [...]
> What I’ve also noticed is like maybe our educational background is different. So, some of them you hear that when they are having the locals, [...] they say sometimes the reason they have misunderstandings [is] in an instruction. The way they understand and the way the foreigners understand is different. And some of the things that they say, foreigners, they quickly understand. [...] I think it’s also the cultural differences. [...] the way they were trained, the way they were brought up, the way they tackled things, the way they approached issues and things, it’s different from the locals. (Juliet, interview, 18 June 2013)

Juliet provided a detailed and diplomatic response; however, like others, she emphasised the social differences between locals and foreign nationals, based on her own experiences and her knowledge of what she “heard” during her social interactions. Her account of the exploitative nature of working as a MDW reaffirms prior comments about migrant workers’ vulnerability, which arises from their migrant status and their lack of knowledge about their employment rights, especially as newcomers (see also Ally, 2009 and Fish, 2013). Juliet reiterated that domestic workers felt like they did not have a choice regarding employment conditions because they were economic migrants. She explained that they did whatever was requested of them because they are here to make money.

Victoria, like Juliet, mentioned perceived cultural distinctions between Zimbabweans and South Africans. For her, these cultural differences related to their upbringing:

> I think we are hard working. What makes us hard working is that the environment in Zimbabwe where we grew up, you know in Zimbabwe we don't normally go to the market to buy veggies. You grow them on your own, in your yard. We are hardworking and if you are in town, you do that when we go to our rural areas – we farm. We do the ploughing. [...] it's hard work. If I can take you there, you [would] say, "No, not for me". We just do it like its normal. So, when you guys tell us that we work hard, to us we don't. To me especially I don't see it as hard work because I know I can work much harder than what I am doing. And it's just my job. (Victoria, interview, 11 August 2013)

Victoria evoked subsistence farming as a life skill and thus preparation for difficult work. In comparison to earning salaries to cover basic household requirements, she viewed depending on the land as a difficult way of life. Compared to being a domestic worker, this lifestyle required more effort. Victoria claimed she did not believe she worked particularly hard as a domestic worker compared to ploughing fields back home.

Other identity-related markers of difference (hence my argument for identity niching rather than ethnic niching), that influence employers' perceptions of who a comfortable other is, are explained by the educational distinctions indicated in the remarks above. While employers find their migrant status or ethnicity (as Zimbabweans) appealing, they also find Zimbabwean's "linguistic capital" (Lan, 2006) and educational standing appealing. Furthermore, linguistic capital alludes to the importance of comprehension of tasks and following instructions. As noted in Chapter Six, some employers expressed dissatisfaction when their instructions were not understood or if they felt someone "didn't actually comprehend English." Domestic tasks such as cleaning and, in particular, childcare require ongoing communication between the employer and the employee. Clarence (interview, 11 August 2013) shared that repeating instructions irritated employers. Her advice to newcomers was to "[b]e confident and try not to say, 'I beg your pardon?'. They don't like that. When you are looking after a baby and when you have instructions you must just follow the instructions properly", she explained.

In the previous chapters, I discussed how "employer talk" and the information PEAs provided their clients helped employers form opinions about who is best suited for domestic employment. Being recognized as hardworking, honest and reliable gave workers a sense of pride and personal satisfaction. Some MDWs expressed their pride as comfortable others, citing examples of employer talk to emphasize the extent to which their employers trusted them. For example:

> She said, "Where are you from"? I told her, "Zimbabwe". She said, "No problem. I've got friends with Zimbabweans, and I know Zimbabweans are hard workers and they cope well with us. So, if I take you, I will with a mind that I am staying with my own mother yes". [...] If you take a Zimbabwean woman, you are rest assured your problems will be over, that's what she told me. (Alice, interview, 5 May 2013)

As mentioned already Patricia (interview, 24 March 2013) cynically observed that employers informed them about their previous encounters so that they were made aware of what they expected of them:

> ...because they want you to work as hard as you can, they always tell you, "I had a nice girl here. She worked for five years. And you know when she left, she went to the father, the parents passed away or – she just tells you nice things about the previous maids. [...] And normally what they do, [they say] like "I have chased her away because she wasn't good. She used to take my things. She was a thief" or something like that. That is what they always do – that's most of them. Even where I have worked, especially at Mandy's [employer], ... "The maid was working here, she used to drink beer and she used to steal my stuff".

MDWs frequently cited house-sitting for long periods of time, being allowed to exhibit independence in childcare-related tasks, and their achievements as caregivers as examples of employers' trust in them. Prudence, provides the following example that demonstrates her trustworthiness:

> They travelled to China. They left me with everything, and their kids and they left me in the house. But where does this trust come from? I think, okay, maybe from God; do you understand what I am saying? My! Everyone to go out! To leave you with the keys and kids and everything! They just went away for almost a week and a half. Then they come back. So, they find that everything is in there – everything is up to date. The kids are happy.

Prudence (interview, 16 June 2013) elaborated on her professional identity, which was founded on honesty and dependability, when she declared proudly, "so they find that everything is in there — everything is up to date". Prudence refers to her work ethic by explaining that she fulfilled her responsibilities even when her employer was absent. She also emphasised that "everything is in there", referencing her honesty. These examples imply that domestic workers create a positive work identity by employing "social weighting methods", which are informed by attractive assumptions about themselves gleaned from selective comparisons employers make (Ashforth et al., 2007).

The following extract from Wendy, a 45-year-old domestic worker, further illustrated the point about social weighting methods and identity niching:

> Wendy: This white people, they are looking for Zimbabwean ladies to work for them because Zimbabweans, we are hard workers. We work and the Xhosa, if she finish at four o'clock, when she put the mop at what, at three o'clock, that is why they don't like Xhosa people. And the Zimbabweans, we wait for four o'clock. Or it's half past four. That is exactly when you start making yourself so that you are preparing yourself so that you are going. That is why they do not like Xhosa. They want Zimbabweans. We are hardworking and we can work. And we don't steal. They know that because Xhosa people they carry big bags to work. [Laughs and looks away]
> Bianca: So you have a small bag?
> Wendy: Yes! I've got a small bag [laughs] because the Xhosa people they know that today [she] is not going to buy meat. She's going to take from the fridge. Washing powder, they don't buy, Sta-Soft, everything, they don't buy. Even soap, soap they don't buy. We Zimbabwean ladies, we say, "Hai, I can't do this because I've got children to look after to home. She can fire me because of salt and washing powder." What is that? Hai, we don't do that. (Wendy, interview, 28 April 2013)

The previous chapters revealed that employers and PEAs tend to prefer ethnic groups who have gained status in the labour market, primarily because of the value ascribed to identity markers associated with comfortable others. MDWs frequently discussed their work culture as Zimbabweans in comparison to South Africans. Specific markers of identity spread among employers, PEAs, and workers through social networks. These markers of difference arose because of the manner and appearance of an ideal domestic worker (Goffman, 1959) and their situational identity (Cohen, 2006). Goffman's (1959) impression management theory reveals how domestic workers adapt to societal expectations by exercising "situational identity" (Cohen, 2006) and that these patterns of work behaviour are almost always based on notions of the "other".

Wendy's interpretation of what PEAs want from intimate workers was based on her knowledge of what employers don't want and, inevitably, who they don't want. She described characteristics of a "comfortable other" through differentiation. She depicted an "us vs. them" dichotomy through everyday workplace practices to describe a comfortable other — an ideal of an intimate worker. For example, she began by stating that "white employers" want Zimbabwean women because "we are hard workers". She then drew a distinction between Zimbabwean women's work behaviour, by describing who leaves work early and who works until the end of the day. Wendy conjured the collective portrayal of Zimbabweans' appearance and manner as hardworking in comparison to Xhosa women by providing the example of who puts the mop down at the right time. Wendy believed that putting the mop down at the appropriate time showed a hard worker – a productive worker – rather than a lazy worker, as she argued. Therefore, ethnic groups were differentiated in this example based on day-to-day work-related behaviours. In other words, women engage impression management when practicing identity niching. These type of workplace practices form an intrinsic part of their work identity and hence intimate work culture, because employers' demands are met through consistent acts such as being punctual and productive and leaving work at the end of the working day.

Wendy added the qualifier, "and we don't steal." The weight employers placed on "trust," and consequently the collective image of Zimbabwean nationals as "honest" workers, was a recurring feature in agency recruited workers' descriptions of their work culture. Workers often highlighted the significance of trust in relational terms – differentiating between "us" and "them" – as an essential component of what constituted a "comfortable other". "Xhosa people they carry big bags to work," Wendy said, contrasting this with "I have a small bag". In this excerpt, Wendy drew attention to who was likely to be dishonest. Having a large bag suggested the possibility of pilfering items. Wendy further illustrated the collective depiction of Xhosa domestic workers as pilferers by outlining the various objects they may take from the household. She described her work identity in individual terms but also stated, "We don't do that," thus referring to Zimbabweans as a preferred group of intimate workers because of honesty. She also made the point that such actions were not worth losing a job over.

Wendy's point, that it's not worth pilfering items that may result in job loss, is significant considering the advice women provided and received – cling to your job with all your might. This shows that, in addition to persisting through difficult work conditions to develop a recognisable work identity – to advance to agency recruited status – women also had to exercise situational identity to cement their standing as comfortable others by being honest. As domestic workers, women were not only "doing gender and ethnicity", but they were also "doing difference" (Lutz, 2011). By "doing difference", their work culture embodied the *way* they worked *as* intimate workers (Sitas, 1983). Wendy's self-concept of her work ethic as an intimate worker was implicit in her statement: "I have a small bag." This was based on her socially derived understanding of what defines a comfortable other, which was influenced by her encounters with other workers, employers, and PEAs. The scripts of "us versus them", therefore, illustrate how and why Zimbabwean domestic workers identify themselves as comfortable others. These scripts also provide insight into how work-based practices, in addition to public class knowledge, influence the process of identity niching in the domestic sector.

7.4. Advantages and Disadvantages of PEAs

The main reasons domestic workers sought access to employment through PEAs were for professional status, access to fair pay and working conditions, an employment contract, and access to an intermediary who represents their interests before and after an employment arrangement is finalised. An important outcome for MDWs was that they were likely to access labour compliant employers – comfortable others too. While fair working conditions were not always guaranteed, MDWs felt they an opportunity to be recognized as professional domestic workers through PEAs. The recognition of their professional status was linked to the recognition of their skills, experience and earning potential. The following section reports on what MDWs experienced as positive about access to work through PEAs. In addition, I discuss examples of the advice they received from others to improve their access to better work. Finally, I discuss two specific examples regarding their dissatisfaction with PEAs. These examples draw attention to workers' resentment of the commodification of their identity and the inadequate after-sales service some workers experienced when placed with challenging employers.

7.4.1. Professional Status Through Certification

Newcomers were urged to enrol in courses specializing in domestic or care work to advance their professional status. A few MDWs reported they found a permanent placement shortly after completing a course. Brenda, a domestic nanny, described how she accessed work through a PEA:

> For me it was easy through the grace of God because I am a Christian. I think God led me to have a job. So, it was not too hard. And I also advise friends to go for the course for education – Educare – and *then* to go for agents. (Brenda, interview, 21 April 2013)

Similarly, Alice described the easiest method for getting work as a nanny based on the advice she received and steps she took to secure stable employment:

> I came to this church. This is my church from home. So, I chatted with others, and they said, "No the easiest job that you can get is nanny work here". And I saw Brenda and I was chatting with her and her sister. "Alice, I know of a lady who does the courses [...]. It did prolong. It was getting to my nerves and when we contacted the lady, she kept on postponing and finally the fees were up to about R1000. I phoned my son in Jo'burg. He came here. He assisted me. He gave me something

> like R2000. He said, “You can go to the courses”. 2012, last year, is only when I contacted the lady who trained us. And she said, “You can come and have the course”. And I came to the course. It was a one-week course. It was marvellous! It was good. After a week she made contact with some of her clients, and I went for an interview, and I got the job. For me it was a bit simpler. I got the job after a week. (Alice, interview, 5 May 2013)

Desiree added:

> When you want something that you see, especially to me, I think it is working. Because considering what I am getting now [salary], I don’t think it was pointless. It was worthwhile. (Desiree, interview, 1 August 2013)

Brenda and Alice discussed the importance of their church networks in light of the advice they received from agency recruited workers on how to easily access work through a PEA. Despite their limited work experience in the sector, their immediate access to placements reveals that certain agencies exercised discretion when recruiting candidates for placements. While some women found work immediately after receiving a certificate, others struggled for a reference letter because of their meagre earnings and the price of the course. Unlike Alice, whose son supported her, it took Desiree a year to save R1300 for a four-day course which included CPR and nanny training. Even though parting with this sum of money was difficult, Desiree recognized that it was a worthwhile sacrifice because it allowed her to obtain better-paying employment through a PEA. These cases show how certification can improve domestic worker’s employability and thus financial independence. They reveal the significance of public class knowledge in networks with agency recruited workers for newcomers trying to access work immediately.

7.4.2. “I Have Rights”

All domestic workers cited employment rights and higher wages as one of the main benefits of using a PEA. “I have rights”; “I am treated like a professional”; “Now I am smiling”; “I cannot complain” were some of the typical statements they made. Access to employment rights and market-related pay was frequently associated with their professional standing and the role PEAs played in realizing those benefits. Most MDWs believed that PEAs and their employers regarded them as professionals. The benefit of finding employment through a PEA is that, often, they gain access to middle and upper middle-income households (the targeted clientele of PEAs or specifically “white people’s agencies”) that can afford market related salaries that are well above the minimum wage prescribed by the state. Everyone who found employment through a PEA, for example, earned at least R3000 or more per month. Other benefits included earning overtime for additional hours worked, receiving a bonus at the end of the year and having an employment contract that they could hold employers accountable to when negotiating changes in their employment conditions. For example, “So, I’m getting R3400 then *plus overtime”*, explained Victoria (interview, 11 August 2013). Pearl (interview, 8 September 2013) added: “They also give me my leave and bonuses. They do. They follow everything which is written in the contract”. Similarly, Clarence (interview, 11 August 2013) explained, “The agencies are very good because you have to sign a contract, then you are secured. Everything’s on paper. It’s written down unlike on Gumtree”. Odette added, “The agency will make sure the contracts are signed. The contract is abiding [by] the labour laws”.

These success stories, however, were contingent on PEAs and employers recognizing and promoting employment rights. The option to negotiate with an agent rather than dealing directly with an employer was an additional benefit too. Domestic workers believed that if their employers breached their employment contract, they could be held accountable. The realization of their rights gave them the impression that they were being treated like professionals. Alice (interview, 5 May 2013) elaborated:

> If I had known that time that agencies are better, I would have joined the agents long ago. It is easier. Because an agency, they have got their clients. They have got the connections. If you have an agent already the advertisement of the agent is better than going looking for a job or putting myself on Gumtree.
>
> [...]
>
> The pay, you can negotiate with your agent. Yes. Working conditions, you can negotiate again with your agent rather than just talking one on one [with the employer] ... And you can argue if you have a contract [...] Even if I won’t leave work now, I can produce my contract and say no, this is the terms and conditions of what we agreed and you are not applying them, so I have to leave. It’s easier that way.

Below Desiree added further details about the benefits of using a PEA:

> What I was realizing, because where I am right now, I am living-in. But the conditions that I am living in, is wonderful! So nice! And I am treated like a professional and they know that I have got rights. So, everything, you know, it’s organised, unlike when you go to find a job and you are a foreigner. Sometimes they take advantage of you but here, where I am, I have rights. I am working six months; I am enjoying what I am doing. And what they promised, they are keeping it. (Desiree, interview, 1 August 2013)

Employers valued the ability to change a domestic worker if they were dissatisfied with their performance before the three-month guarantee term expired, as described in the preceding chapter. Domestic workers too, could also enjoy the benefits of the three-month guarantee or probation period. Some employees cited this as a significant benefit and noted that it was not limited to a three-month period. For example, Desiree added:

> You know you have got a South African person in that agent and if anything goes wrong, she will tell you, “Come back to me”. And, if you don’t like the place that you are working, they will re-place you somewhere else. You are guaranteed that. So, to me, I think that it is worth it. (Desiree, interview, 1 August 2013)

For four years, Agatha worked for a demanding employer she found through a PEA. She explained that the placement process was simple and went smoothly because she had an excellent CV and reference letter from her previous employer. She did, however, believe that all employers were challenging, and that she had no choice but to keep her job, which she appreciated. She earned a decent salary but did not feel respected by her employer, whom she described as demanding, frequently expecting her to work late and to complete tasks that had not been agreed to when she signed her employment contract. Her friends encouraged her to contact the agency and explain her situation in order to be placed elsewhere. They encouraged her to register with other PEAs to increase her chances of finding work sooner. She listened to their advice and reported that the PEA had agreed to re-place her. Agatha was also advised by the PEA to give her employer one month’s notice, which she did. In addition, she registered with another PEA which found her a suitable live-in position first. Agatha explained her current employment conditions as follows:

> Now I am smiling. Now, here I am starting at 8am and then I am finishing at 4pm. I am having 30 minutes teatime and then one hour lunch. [...] In fact they [the agent] came personally to ask me, “Agatha, are you happy here?” And I said, “Yes, I am happy”. (Agatha, interview, 14 April 2013)

Some domestic workers felt that some PEAs were invested in their well-being and represented their interests both before and after a contract was signed, and if something went wrong later in the employment arrangement. For example, after Agatha’s second placement was completed, the PEA followed up with her to see if she was satisfied with her new employer. While Agatha’s experience shows that a PEA does not guarantee decent work or a fair employer, the replacement guarantee provides workers with a safety net if they encounter a challenging employer. PEAs benefit too, because re-placing a good candidate means securing another generous placement fee.

Even though MDWs believed their employers were generally labour compliant, there were instances when employers took advantage of them or were reluctant to agree on salary increases or annual leave arrangements. Some domestic workers claimed to be assertive with their employers and knowledgeable of their employment rights, confidently approaching employers about leave, pay, job description changes, and overtime payments. “As for me, I stand my ground. As for me I just tell them, like, “No!”, explained Victoria (interview, 11 August 2013).

When I shared the point about domestic workers’ assertiveness with my peers, one of them dismissed this finding and remarked, “It’s just talk.” However, from time to time, examples of negotiations or their assertiveness with employers surfaced in after-church conversations or group discussions I was privy too. Why were they assertive? Most newcomers lacked bargaining power, whereas agency recruited workers did not. They ticked all the required criteria on PEAs’ lists. They were documented migrant workers with at least two years of domestic work experience, had a CV detailing their work history, had a reference letter, were aware of their employment rights and, in some cases, had certificates for domestic or care work. Their confidence could be interpreted as an outcome of their “trials and tribulations” in the domestic sector. They did not belong to a trade union. Instead, they belonged to an informal church-based association that represented their interests while they journeyed through the domestic sector in search of better work. It’s only logical, therefore, that some MDWs felt confident negotiating with their employers. Consequently, some of them had the confidence to remind employers of what they were promised, refuse certain job requirements employers tried to impose on them, and negotiate salary increases. In other words, they recognized their value in the domestic sector and wanted their work to be recognized like any other work. Yet, as discussed in Chapter Five, being “too assertive” was a point of discomfort among employers and viewed unfavourably, because Zimbabweans were perceived as having “a sense of entitlement”. Therefore, while PEAs were representing domestic workers’ employment rights and setting market-related salaries, there was a ceiling to what could be earned, too.

7.4.3. Dissatisfaction With PEAs

While employers choose who they want to hire, domestic workers can choose who they want to work for by accepting or rejecting an offer. Victoria (interview, 11 August 2013) stated, “the first interview, I didn’t like the people”. Like Victoria, other MDWs disclosed that they drew on their personal or public class knowledge to make an informed decision when choosing an employer. Judgements based on racial or religious biases regarding employers informed their choices too. The findings show that MDWs were more likely to choose white employers over black employers because of their former experiences or perceptions of Indian or Coloured employers as exploitative (see Fish, 2006b; Ally, 2010). Unlike newcomers who take the first job available, agency recruited workers reported that they carefully evaluated their options. They considered the size of the house, the number of children, pet-care requirements, the employer's consideration of their annual leave, and whether they were expected to work extra hours.

Like employers, domestic workers sometimes choose the wrong employer. Clarence (interview, 11 August 2013) explained that, with her first agency, "I thought I was choosing the right person, but it wasn't the right person". The employer communicated with the agent but "the agent never communicated with me". Clarence felt the agent favoured the employer and was unwilling to understand the employment situation from her perspective. She concluded that "the important person to them, is the one who is going to pay [placement fees] and I don't pay anything". Others also reported that some PEAs did not follow up with them once a placement was made. Domestic workers, therefore, don't always have access to the intermediary services PEAs claim to offer workers. Those who expressed issues about working conditions with some of the agencies were advised to "be strong" or "communicate their grievances with their employer". This suggests an indifferent and hands-off approach by certain agencies once a placement is made (Tsikata, 2011). Therefore, despite the possibility of being re-placed by a PEA, workers reported they were selective even if the employer chose them over other candidates. This finding is unsurprising given the demand for stable long-term employment and MDWs earning their right to better work.

Victoria, a 39-year-old married woman, with two children living in Zimbabwe, had mixed feelings about PEAs. In exasperation she said, "They didn't train me, but you know how much they sell me? R5800!" (Victoria, interview, 11 August 2013). She disclosed her dissatisfaction regarding the amount the agency made for placing her with an employer, while she earned R3400 per month as a live-in domestic worker. Myrtle Witbooi, however, cynically discussed the inherent contradiction between promoting regulatory compliance and commodification by referring her ongoing interaction with a well-known PEA:

> Now we come to Marvellous Maids, *they are very marvellous*. I even sit down with Kate. I had tea with Kate because Kate is not exploiting. Kate has got premises in Sea Point. She bought a premises in Wynberg. She bought premises in at Somerset West. Now if Kate is not exploiting, then what is Kate doing? How does she get rich? So, what happens with Kate? Kate, yes, I will also say to you one thing with Kate, if I have a fantastic domestic worker, that is out of this world and I phone Kate, she will give a fantastic job with a fantastic salary to that person. But then there's also the other side

> of Kate now. Kate now also went in, picking up women, and having them as chars and then paying them R120 nowadays they say [per day] and then Kate get R350. […] She wants to keep above the law. Yes, it's fine. But she's still exploiting the worker because she gets about [R]200 more for that worker and she pays the worker what the law say. But sometimes that worker is cleaning two houses per day... (Witbooi, interview, 22 May 2013)

Witbooi described the dual business model some PEAs have. She observed the success of the PEA, with operations in multiple branches in Cape Town and the niche market they have access to that allows them to provide fantastic work opportunities for domestic workers. However, in the excerpt above, the commodification through placements and outsourced cleaning services is juxtaposed as a crude representation of the exploitative nature of the "human marketplace" for domestic services that black women depend on for survival, to the benefit of others – employers, families and successful PEAs (Martinez, 1976; Du Toit, 2020b).

A closer analysis of Victoria's dissatisfaction revealed that she felt "sold" and "bought" for a large sum of money that told a tale of MDWs struggle for agency recruited status. The placement fee was symbolic of her hardships in Cape Town and the domestic worker identity commodified by the PEA. Unlike most of the women I interviewed (who were single mothers), Victoria's husband arrived first and secured her a job at his workplace as a cleaner. She was paid R70 a day for the days she was needed. After receiving her asylum documentation, she found two other char work positions to supplement her weekly earnings. She then decided to start her own business selling sandwiches in the city centre. For a while she enjoyed moderate success, until her main client moved their business to another location. Using an informal agency first, which charged her husband and her a placement fee, they found live-in domestic work with the same employer. They each earned R2500 per month. Her husband was employed as a driver and gardener, while she cleaned the house and took care of two young children. Victoria (interview, 11 August 2013) described her long and elastic work hours as follows: "I had to start work at 6:15am and I had to finish 7pm, 8pm. I had to play with the kids until the kids went to bed". Although she was impressed that the agency found them a job immediately after they registered, she noted the following:

> She wasn't there to see that we had the contract. We didn't have the contract. The contract was not signed. We just worked and then this guy [referring to the employer's husband] just walks up and said, "I no longer want you on my property!" Just like that you have to vacate. Where are we going?

Victoria was unaware of why the employer wanted them off the property immediately. Victoria's experience highlights some of the key challenges workers face in the domestic sector, especially through informal agencies. Although they sometimes earned more than the minimum wage, they were vulnerable due to their live-in, migrant and employment status. It is apparent from Victoria's work experience that her former employer was non-compliant. She was never paid for the additional hours worked and the agency failed to ensure an employment contract was signed after the placement was finalised.

Victoria's comment that she wasn't trained but sold for R5800 by the PEA she later registered with relates, in part, to her understanding of the commodification of intimate work through PEAs. She gained access to decent work through a PEA because of factors other than her skill-set. In her opinion, she did not meet all the criteria for finding employment through a PEA. For example, she only had one reference letter and no nanny work experience. Yet, because she searched for a job through a PEA, she concluded that agencies are "making money with you like you are their person now". In other words, workers are identified and commodified as branded products – "agency recruited workers" – that PEAs market to clients. Victoria's comment that she was sold for R5800 reiterates the demand for domestic workers through agencies and consequently the value attached to their status as comfortable others.

7.5. Conclusion

This chapter described the difficult transition from informal domestic work to formal domestic work through PEAs. The underlying theme for earning their status as comfortable others exposes the intimate workplace crisis that domestic workers experienced because of non-regulatory compliance among employers and the persistence of ultra-exploitation due to their denizen status. Insofar as PEAs lock domestic workers into a bureaucratic system of servitude, this chapter documented their rational approach to mobilizing their intimate work culture as a defensive combination to disrupt the cycle of precarious domestic work. While MDWs regulate each other's behaviour and draw on their "centres of knowledge generation", they practice identity niching by "doing difference" through impression management, because of the logic of their moral economy and the marginalization they encounter. Yet their cultural formation and experiences of PEAs suggests an alternative approach to escape precarity, with and through PEAs that have the potential to represent domestic workers' interests when they foster a culture of regulatory compliance in households. Therefore MDWs are more likely, as the findings suggest, to access employers as comfortable other too.

Chapter 8. Discussion: A Culture of "Compliance"?

8.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the context-related factors that explain the role of and demand for PEAs as placement intermediaries, and answers the question about how PEAs, MDWs and employers influence the process of identity niching to meet the demand for comfortable others. I argue the demand for comfortable others arises from an intimate workplace crisis which is both a crisis of representation and a crisis of management for employers and domestic workers in South Africa's post-apartheid domestic sector. I examine the findings in relation to literature and theory that advocates for a culture of regulatory compliance and the implications of labour compliance that account for how MDWs mobilize their intimate work culture through their cultural formations. The chapter begins with a summary of my arguments from the preceding chapters. Second, I discuss how we can make sense of the role of PEAs because of employers' and domestic workers' experiences of an intimate workplace crisis and crisis of representation. Third, I discuss the process and implications of identity niching as an expression of each actor's agency, and the significance of intimacy and an intimate work culture in recruitment and hiring practices. I conclude the chapter by discussing MDWs' cultural formations as a collective undertaking in response to their experiences of marginalization, which suggests PEAs are fostering a culture of regulatory compliance for domestic work.

8.2. Summary of Key Findings

The data suggests that PEAs entered the domestic sector at an opportune time to meet the demand for comfortable others because of the inefficiencies of informal recruitment strategies and South Africa's efforts to formalize domestic work through labour legislation. At a more intimate level (the home as an intimate workplace), making sense of PEAs' intermediary role lies in understanding the complex domestic employment relationship and the tension between domestic workers' intimate work culture as a form of resistance and the intimate work culture employers' demand as a form of labour compliance. Therefore, the inefficiencies of informal recruitment strategies and the socio-legal context related to employers' experiences of domestic workers' unsuitable intimate work culture explain the demand for PEAs' services in post-apartheid South Africa.

However, in relation to domestic workers, access to "decent" domestic work remains a challenge, with many experiencing underemployment, poor working conditions and perpetual insecurity because of regulatory non-compliance among employers. While there are multiple recruitment strategies, including the use of informal agencies, the recurring theme in this study and others is that domestic workers are struggling to escape precarious working conditions and to access their employment rights and labour complaint employers (Bamu, 2013; Baison, 2021). The findings suggest MDWs have access to better work opportunities, which suggests the demand for PEAs' services includes matching them with employers and fostering a culture of regulatory compliance in South Africa. Therefore, while employers are seeking comfortable others, domestic workers are also seeking employers as comfortable others to escape precarity in the domestic sector. Ultimately, the demand for comfortable others can be framed as a response to an intimate workplace crisis for employers and domestic workers, and a crisis of representation regarding their respective interests in a particular socio-legal context. However, the process of inclusion and exclusion depicted through PEAs' screening process markets and selects candidates who work "honestly, reliably, professionally and have the right attitude for domestic work" – that is, comfortable others. Therefore, when MDWs earn their status as comfortable others and hence mobilize their intimate work culture by regulating each other's behaviour, they engage in the process of identity niching to meet the demand for comfortable others. While the disciplinary logic of PEAs' gatekeeping practices suggests that MDWs are being disciplined or are disciplining themselves, a closer examination of their strategy suggests that their struggle to access better work through their cultural formations is an expression of their autonomy and resistance to marginalization. The following sections unpack the key findings in relation to the central argument of this thesis.

8.3. Making Sense of Intermediaries' Role in the Domestic Sector

As a qualitative exploration, and through an ethnographic approach, the findings showed that hiring and employment histories were deeply entangled with a culture of regulatory non-compliance. In all the different employment scenarios employers recounted, they were left with the task of fulfilling their labour-related administrative responsibilities, which all but two employers did. The findings suggest, therefore, that the main crux of the issue was sustaining long-term employment relationships that were inherently intimate and located in an intimate workplace. In other words, the issue of managing domestic workers and SA's progressive labour legislation are inseparable from each other, especially when ongoing or sudden issues associated with domestic workers' inventive intimate work culture arose.

8.3.1. An Intimate Workplace Crisis and a Crisis of Representation?

Scholars have noted that "madams" lost the sovereignty they once possessed in the private household after domestic workers gained access to employment rights (Fish, 2006b; Ally, 2010; Jacobs, Manicom & Durrheim, 2013). The command, "Pack your bags and go!", discussed in Chapter Six, revealed employers' power in the private household but also domestic workers' labour insecurity in the absence of employment rights. Dismissing a worker without warning was commonplace under the colonial and apartheid era, with employers accustomed to a cheap "disposable" workforce because of labour control measures implemented by the state (Cock, 1980). Here, employers could act with freedom and had immense control over domestic workers. The shift from servant to worker status, and its implications for employers, was captured in Chapter Five, when the owner of the "one-man band" agency explained that employers are not allowed to dismiss a worker without warnings if they are unsatisfied with their work performance or a troubling issue had arisen.

From the perspective of PEAs, Chapter Five reported on employers' demand for professional domestic workers, and technical know-how on how to manage the employment relationship arose from their perception that the law is pro-employee rather than pro-employer. Employers' anxieties correlated with earlier research, which showed domestic workers felt protected by the state against instant dismissal, which in turn restored their sense of dignity (Ally, 2010:73). Ally (2010:75) explains that domestic workers felt empowered because of the CCMA, in that "where constitutional rights to equality and dignity have been violated, domestic workers have creatively and strategically utilized the CCMA for realizing these rights of citizenship". Du Toit and Huysamen (2013:93) report that from 1 January 2008 to 31 December 2012, "[o]ut of a total of 65 535 awards in matters referred by domestic workers, 81.4 per cent were in favour of the worker and only 18.6 per cent in favour of the employer". They add that many of these cases were related to unfair dismissals (Du Toit & Huysamen, 2013). The pattern of unfair dismissals among domestic workers, and their use of the CCMA to challenge unfair dismissals, remains unchanged (Blackett & Tiemeni, 2018; SweepSouth, 2022). Therefore, the recognition of domestic workers' employment rights – whether reluctantly, based on their fear of the law or as a matter of social justice – was a key factor that influenced employers' decisions to approach PEAs for comfortable others. Yet this key motivator is inextricably linked to employers' desire to avoid *managing* uncomfortable employment relationships too. Using the lens of an intimate work culture, I framed these issues as an intimate workplace crisis.

Representing employers' interests

Employers' experiences of an intimate workplace crisis is twofold and offers insights into why and how PEAs have positioned themselves in the domestic sector as intermediaries. First, Chapter Six described encounters that challenged the employer's role in the intimate workplace and fractured an employment relationship. The most common issues employers cited were theft or pilfering; a poor work ethic and workplace etiquette; and the absence of regulatory labour compliance, alongside their inexperience in or discomfort with managing domestic workers because of boundary work issues in the employment relationship. These encounters exposed the tension between what Ally (2010) refers to as domestic workers' "inventive" intimate work culture and the intimate work culture employers demand. These encounters also signalled the complex nature of the employment relationship when there is a breakdown in what Du Toit (2022) refers to as trust and control over workplace issues, which also explain why clients or employers outsource domestic cleaning rather than engaging in direct employment arrangements. This study demonstrated that, to avoid challenging employment relationships, employers often adopted a non-confrontational approach disguised as retrenchment because of their alleged changing household needs. PEAs' awareness of this "retrenchment strategy" exposed the intimate workplace crisis that employers were experiencing and hence the extent to which there was a demand for comfortable others.

Second, while the intimate workplace crisis revealed what employers wanted from domestic workers and needed as employers *or* clients, the appeal of PEAs' role and services as gatekeepers explained how the demand for comfortable others is commodified. Various international studies have documented the commodification of intimate work through PEAs by referring to the "making" of maids as a disciplinary exercise aimed at controlling the presentation of their bodies and personhood (Tyner, 2004; Constable, 2009 Chang, 2016). Chapter Five reported a systematic but laborious set of gatekeeping practices to illustrate how PEAs recruit and supply comfortable others. All the screening steps emphasized the demand for "trustworthy" domestic workers and obtaining evidence confirming their professional and embodied intimate work culture performance. PEAs' services extended beyond screening too.

Some PEAs participated in the interview process directly or indirectly, or facilitated discussions related to labour regulatory compliance, sharing their expert knowledge of the employment relationship before finalizing employment contracts.

What stood out from the entire recruitment and hiring process was that, unlike PEAs operating through labour brokering states or those that operate in Europe, the onus was on employers, not the PEA, to make the right choice among a set of three candidates for placement. Here, yet another set of processes were in place that PEAs facilitated. These steps include reviewing candidates' profiles or CVs with the option to contact former employers; selecting candidates to interview; undertaking a trial work period to determine if the candidate was suitable for the employer; and finally, selecting a candidate for employment. While the entire process was designed to ensure an ideal type of candidate was selected, PEAs recognized there was no fool-proof strategy for finding a comfortable other, and therefore offered employers a three-month guarantee which was equivalent to a probation period for domestic workers. Unsatisfied employers could engage in the process again, without paying registration or placement fees – a typical provision in the PEA industry globally (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Cheng, 2006). In the South African context, the data suggested that employers reject informal recruitment and hiring strategies, and need PEAs' support services to manage the probation period and hence for boundary work with and through PEAs to ensure their demand for comfortable others. Overall, PEAs' interactive and intermediary role as pseudo-human resource managers suggests they were responding to employers' demands on the basis that they are unlike other employers too (Triandafyllidou & Marchetti, 2015).

The findings also showed that the well-established PEAs positioned themselves in the domestic sector to offer both permanent placements *and* cleaning services through a triangular employment relationship. With the outsourced cleaning model, PEAs strategically positioned themselves to target a lucrative niche market of middle and upper-middle class households. There are two critical points regarding the dual business model that is often described or studied as a distinct approach to the intermediary landscape in the domestic sector (see for example, Fish, 2006b; Du Toit, 2013; Du Toit, 2021; Du Toit & Heinecken, 2021). First, irrespective of the core service offered (placements or cleaning services), PEAs were still responding to an intimate workplace crisis. Therefore, the rigorous process described for permanent placements was equally applicable to PEAs that employed a core team of domestic workers to service private households individually or as part of a cleaning team.

Second, the dual business model signalled the contentious nature of the intimate workplace – one that is inseparable from the recognition of domestic workers' employment rights or the need to be labour compliant. As Du Toit (2013, 2021) argues, outsourced cleaning appeals to former employers because PEAs become the employer, and therefore managing an employment relationship is outsourced too. Unsurprisingly, PEAs gain favour with clients (former employers, employers, and jobseekers) because they respond to specific behavioural changes, thereby cementing their foothold in domestic service provision. Further, the various stages in the recruitment and hiring process suggest PEAs (as intermediaries and employers) and employers go to great lengths to ensure they find comfortable others. The cost implication for clients and employers is commensurate with the value attached to finding comfortable others to service households – one that is not impossible to achieve in the niche market of middle and upper-middle class households, as evidenced through service fees, placement fees and market related salaries. The findings therefore support Du Toit's (2020a, 2021) comprehensive research on why clients find outsourced cleaning services appealing, but shift attention to why employers use PEAs' placement services for direct employment arrangements too.

Representing domestic workers' interests

While the laborious recruitment process indicate that PEAs respond to an intimate workplace crisis, the data suggests PEAs represent employers' and workers' interests through the dual business model and their associated services. Unlike Du Toit's (2013, 2021) research, which argues employers want to avoid regulatory admin, chapters Five and Six found that there are employers who want to better understand labour legislation and learn how to be labour compliant. Similarly, Chapter Seven revealed that jobseekers and MDWs without union representation were accessing services that included skills development, information about their employment rights, mediation services, market related salaries, signed employment contracts and, therefore, employers who could potentially be considered comfortable others too. This line of reasoning was supported by data that showed that, while MDWs could easily find work in the domestic sector, these opportunities were far from "decent".

Like employers' hiring histories, MDWs' experiences of paid domestic work was deeply entangled with a culture of non-compliant employers and the use of rogue agencies run by

South Africans and co-ethnics. Ally (2010) notes that while democratic statecraft implemented progressive legal apparatuses to support domestic workers in the post-apartheid era, the extent to which they could access those rights was questionable. Du Toit's (2013) edited collection illustrates the persistent challenge for realizing domestic workers' rights as they continue to be "exploited and undervalued" despite their essential status for maintaining the well-being of others. In this study, any domestic worker aspiring for access to employment through PEAs (directly or indirectly), was, as the findings suggest, likely to access work that potentially recognized their "value" and employment rights. Du Toit's (2013) earlier research on outsourced cleaning companies operating in Stellenbosch, South Africa, points to similar findings, noting that while the work is standardized and emphasises the professional status of domestic workers as cleaners, they have job security and earn above the minimum wages with supervisors engaging directly with homeowners.

8.3.2. What do PEAs Commodify?

One consequence of PEAs' gatekeeping practices is that they have a disciplining effect on workers aspiring to access the niche market of middle and upper middle-class households – a view widely documented in other studies regarding placement agencies (ILO, 2004; Tyner, 2004; Constable, 2008). The standardized gatekeeping process determines *who* is suitable for domestic work and how the domestic worker identity is commodified. A large body of literature on PEAs operating in the domestic sector answers the question of *who* is suitable for domestic work, and thus the desirable identity of a domestic worker. Data shows that there is a deep-seated correlation between notions of an ideal type of domestic worker and identity markers such as race, gender or ethnic stereotypes (Tyner, 2004; Constable, 2008; Scrinzi, 2011). These identity markers extend to perceptions of how certain national groups are better suited for different types of domestic work based on notions of femininity, docility, subordination, and linguistic capital (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Tyner, 2004; Constable, 2008). In fact, it is almost impossible to find a study that does not note PEAs' and employers' subjective stereotypes despite their allegedly rational and standardized gatekeeping practices.

Commodifying an Intimate Work Culture

The question that remains is: what do employers want? What do PEAs commodify? The most illuminating discussion regarding what employers want are by Bridget Anderson (2000) and Garcia Castro (1989). Both agree that employers want domestic workers' labour power.

However, Anderson (2000) argues that employers want a domestic worker's personhood to command. This framing is directly linked to a Marxist feminist understanding of employers' control in the domestic employment relationship, rather than principles of fair management. Anderson's (1998:207-208) critical assessment of employment contracts extends to the point that "[f]or the employer an employment contract maintains the fiction of consent, while also providing a psychological, if not in the final instance a legal means of enforcing requirements beneficial to the employer such as a minimal period of notice for example". Yet this perspective falls short of acknowledging what domestic workers want and in what ways their aspirations relate to a particular context where the absence of employment rights or workers' ability to challenge the "fiction of consent" come into play.

In the intermediary landscape, PEAs noted that the legal means to "get rid of" – not discipline – workers was a major preoccupation among employers who perceived the law as pro-employee, especially when they were non-compliant. But the issue of subordination typical of control or consent in the domestic employment relationship had to be mitigated by considering the intimate workplace (that is, recognizing domestic workers' employment rights). Could employers command domestic workers? Could employers fire at whim? The findings suggest that employers could and did, but in moments of crisis, often chose a non-confrontational approach because of their fear of the law or need to be labour compliant. The question then is what exactly were PEAs marketing and selling, besides human beings and services? Further, how could employers be labour compliant in the best possible way? The answer lies in understanding that, for most employers, disciplining or managing a domestic worker had to be avoided – in other words, they had to minimize or avoid the administrative burden of being labour complaint.

The issue of personhood concerns the identity of the worker (Anderson, 2000). Indeed, many studies link personal national or gender preferences to the imagery of docility or subordination among "good" workers in the context of an exploitative migratory care economy. But, as others note, there are "good" employers, those who prefer to avoid "commanding", handing over the management of household affairs to their domestic worker who knows best (Fish, 2006b; Näre, 2011). While noting that a harmonious employment relationship is unlikely because of the unequal nature of the relationship, Garcia Castro (1989:122) advances that "[w]hat is bought and sold in domestic service is not simply the labor power of an *empleada* [employee] or her productive work and energy; it is her identity as a person. This is the most specific feature of domestic service".

As a starting point, these theoretical insights are useful for answering the question of what and who employers want. However, one never gets a clear sense of what that identity is outside of the Marxist frame of labour power and associated stereotypes linked to domestic workers' identity, unless, perhaps, one extends this line of reasoning to the nature of the intimate labour process of intimate workers. This extension centres on acknowledging the intimate work culture employers demand and that PEAs attempt to commodify through systematic processes. When using the lens of an intimate work culture, the tension and relational dynamics as expressions of agency regarding the labour process (by *both* employers and workers) explicitly reveal issues of boundary work in the intimate workplace. While both employers and domestic workers have the potential to resist and accommodate each other in different ways, PEAs are, as argued elsewhere, commodifying a compliant labour force too (Lan, 2003; Cheng, 2006).

Hierarchies of difference

South Africa's colonial and historical legacy had a devastating impact on the status of black domestic workers, devaluing their labour through a racially exploitative form of capitalism. Domestic workers' undervalued status persists and extends to regional care chains because of the nature of capitalism and its marginalizing effect on households. Scholars have noted that persistent race, class, gender and ethnic divisions continue to characterize the unequal nature of domestic work in South Africa (Fish, 2006a; Ally, 2009; Vanyoro, 2019; Du Toit, 2020a). However, as this thesis shows, the commodification of comfortable others is conflated with stereotypes based on behavioural changes that challenge employers' control and produce hierarchies of difference associated with domestic workers' intimate work culture.

Du Toit (2021:1) argues, as confirmed in Chapter Six, that the employment relationship fractures because of issues of "trust, control and power relations". In the absence of "hardworking, honest, and reliable" domestic workers, feelings of mild or intense discomfort arise. The systematic gatekeeping of domestic workers is a concerted effort to identify specific encounters associated with domestic workers' behavioural deviance. This is by and large an exercise in social and physical distancing in a particular socio-legal context in which PEAs operate.

PEAs' gatekeeping practices have a disciplining effect on workers aspiring to access employment because those who fail the initial screening process – "spoiled identity" (Goffman, 2009) – are disqualified from accessing the niche market of middle and upper middle-class households. Nyamnjoh (2006) argues there are "hierarchies of citizenship" that allow employers to overwork and underpay domestic workers such that South African and Zimbabwean domestic workers can be silenced into "zombie-like compliance" because of their need for employment. The disciplinary operational logic of PEAs gatekeeping practices therefore points to how PEAs are complicit in perpetuating precariousness in the domestic sector and hence the domination of MDWs as they struggle to earn their status as comfortable others.

Significantly, hierarchies of difference are part of processes of capital accumulation that foster a culture of compliance among domestic workers and are rooted in a system of servitude (Ally, 2010; Cock, 2011). Therefore, PEAs position themselves in the domestic sector to commodify an identity associated with comfortable others, which unavoidably produces hierarchies of difference based on employers' demands. Personal preferences and stereotyping persist and are sometimes blatant or disguised through racial or ethnic codes associated with intimacy (see Chapter Six and section below). At a broader level, and because of the working of capitalism, the demographic profile of domestic workers maintains "a distinct racial, gender, class and even age bias" (Du Toit, 2020a:213). These patterns of social inequality were documented in this study and are consistent with other studies including Du Toit's (2020a:213-215) recent research which illustrates that PEAs reinforce race, gender and class distinctions that perpetuate power imbalances when domestic services are transferred to those in lower status positions.

8.4. Explaining the Identity Niching Process

So far, I have demonstrated why (context related factors) and how (through systematic bureaucratic processes) PEAs attempt to commodify an identity associated with an intimate work culture employers demand. I have also argued the following: first, despite the rational process to determine comfortable others, stereotypes linked to identity markers such as race, gender and nationality are intertwined with the intimate work culture of a domestic worker, and second, PEAs' gatekeeping has a disciplining effect on MDWs aspiring to access "good employers", who, in turn, can be considered as comfortable others because of their potentially regulatory labour compliant status. The following section extends these points to explain how the identity associated with an intimate work culture is embedded or niched in recruitment and hiring practices. I situate the identity niching process in relation to the cultural formations that arise among domestic workers but are relational to PEAs and employers' demand for comfortable others.

8.4.1. Employers – Working With and Through PEAs

While PEAs set out to create a pool of candidates suitable for the intimate workplace through a rigorous screening process, employers settled on who a comfortable other is. Chapter Six revealed that, although the onus is on employers to select who they perceive to be a comfortable other, PEAs influence their decisions in specific ways. The first is by steering prospective employers to certain candidates based on "good results" because of client feedback or their own experiences. These findings are consistent with international studies that document PEAs' responses to employers' demands based on gender, race and ethnic stereotypes and how professionalizing domestic work serves as a tool of control (Guevarra, 2009; Scrinzi, 2011). PEAs' role in the domestic work sector signals the nature of the interrelated relationship between clients and PEAs and the income-generating business of intermediaries as gatekeepers.

Second, PEAs steered employers to a set of three candidates with a ratio of two to one in favour of Zimbabwean MDWs. The comparative element is intentional in that it reflects the demographic pool of candidates available after the screening process. The ratio of candidates is also based on the employers' preferences or codes for who they want when they register with PEAs (for example, "very good English"; "English as good as yours" and "must have a valid passport" was understood as the code for requesting Zimbabwean MDWs). Similar to Du Toit's (2020a) argument regarding how agencies reproduce race, gender and class differences in the domestic employment relationship, Moras (2010:233) argues that employers use cultural, linguistic and national origin as markers of difference to "replace explicit racial terminology". As Chapter Five showed, it was commonplace for agencies to receive specific requests for MDWs soon after a successful placement was made because of the advice they received from their employer network. However, based on PEA's reactions to clients' requests and employers' recollection of how PEAs attempted to steer them towards certain candidates, the results show conflicting perspectives of who influences who in the recruitment and hiring process. There are a few reasons for this conflicting data.

For example, the data reveals the temporal element of recruitment and hiring histories from both employers and PEAs. During the early 2000s, vast numbers of Zimbabweans formed part of the third wave of migration. This wave was fuelled by an economic crisis that caused political tensions and extreme hyperinflation. With low barriers to entry, the domestic work sector became a refuge for many desperate to support their families. Employers and PEAs alike viewed Zimbabwean nationals favourably because of their education and linguistic capital (Nyamnjoh, 2006; Hungwe, 2020). Therefore, in terms of employment trends in the domestic sector and through PEAs, the pool of MDWs available for employment coincided with South Africa's attempt to regularize the migration of Zimbabweans (People Against Suffering, Oppression and Poverty (PASSOP), 2011; Baison, 2021). It is therefore unsurprising that documented Zimbabwean nationals had access to middle and upper middle-class households through PEAs.

The migratory trend is widely documented as an outcome of the socio-economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe (Bolt, 2015; Hungwe, 2020). The state-led policies (structural adjustment programmes in Zimbabwe and the migration policy landscape in South Africa) influenced what scholars refer to as regional or South-South migration flows (Crush & Tevera, 2010; Baison, 2021). These broad contextual factors, furthermore, coincided with the formation of ethnic niches in that, as Chapter Five showed, PEAs were responding to "good results" favourably by tapping into Zimbabwean networks, either for placements or direct employment. However, some PEAs seemed to have adopted a cautionary or defensive approach regarding "good results" based on their experiences in the sector. Their concerns aligned with research that cautions against stereotypes related to who is honest and who is not (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Du Toit, 2016), and hence my argument for identity niching rather than ethnic niching. While the findings showed slippages in terms of who (not what) was considered a comfortable other, some PEAs were adamant that the standardized processes in place were about ascertaining if a domestic worker worked "honestly, reliably, professionally and had the right attitude for domestic work". Consequently, "cloning" candidates or responding to personal preferences based on race, nationality or gender were scoffed at by some of the leading agencies as they reflected on their recruitment history in the domestic sector (a theme I return to later).

It is important to note that there is a risk of over-stating the notion of an 'ideal type' because employers' preferences are complex and oftentimes character dependent, especially when their preferences are linked to stereotypes, different management styles and intentions or changing household needs (see Du Toit, 2020a). However, as I argued, PEAs were responding to the demand for an identity associated with an intimate work culture verified through a rigorous screening process. The identity demanded related to the intimate workplace crisis employers experienced. The issue of managerial control in the domestic work labour process is therefore critical for understanding the demand for comfortable others.

Given that the data for this study was collected a decade ago and reflected recruitment trends spanning ten or more years before the fieldwork commenced, similar patterns in the domestic work hiring queue can be traced in recent studies too (Baison, 2021; SweepSouth, 2022). For example, SweepSouth's survey of 5700 domestic workers in South Africa (primarily from Gauteng, Western Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal), which included an undisclosed number of platform domestic workers from their database and those outside of platform domestic work, confirmed that 55.54% were Zimbabwean nationals and 3.47% identified as other nationals, compared to 40.99% South African domestic workers (SweepSouth 2022). While SweepSouth has declared they are not an "agency" and instead a communication platform involved in matching households with what they call SweepStars for cleaning services (that is, platform domestic workers), they engage in screening processes similar to PEAs' (SweepSouth, 2023). SweepSouth declares, "[w]hen it comes to your home, SweepStars give their best to provide top quality work. All the SweepStars are experienced, trained, background checked, and in-person interviewed", and they describe their business as "[t]he most trusted in home services" (SweepSouth, 2023). Therefore, despite the data being dated, a case can still be made for what I describes as an intimate workplace crisis and a crisis of representation that has given rise to the demand for comfortable others, irrespective of the employment arrangement demanded.

Depersonalizing or professionalizing domestic work

A recurring theme among employers and PEAs was the link between a professional domestic worker and their attempt to depersonalize the employment relationship through and with the aid of PEAs. In direct employment relationships, depersonalization is difficult to achieve because of the relational aspect of intimate work. As confirmed by multiple studies and this research, former employers can outsource the relational component of the relationship to PEAs that offer cleaning services (Budlender, 2013; Du Toit, 2013; Du Toit & Heinecken, 2021). Nevertheless, studies have exposed a link between formalizing domestic work through labour legislation and depersonalization in direct employment relationships (Mendez, 2008; Ally, 2010). Ally (2010), for example, argues the paradox of "regulation for protection" by the state is that it unintentionally "empowered and disciplined" domestic workers. Domestic workers experienced empowerment when exercising their rights as workers through state apparatuses such as the "CCMA, the UIF, and state sponsored training" … but simultaneously experienced discipline as subjects of the state when the "state positioned itself as the only active agent in the sector" – thereby "identifying what domestic workers' collective interests were" (Ally, 2010:74, 88-89).

In relation to this thesis, the extent to which domestic workers could access their employment rights substantively remains questionable. Many studies continue to highlight precarious working conditions among South African and migrant domestic workers and through informal agencies (Fish, 2005; Nyamnjoh, 2006; Ally, 2010; Budlender, 2013; Du Toit, 2013; Baison, 2021). Similarly, Ally (2010) reports that domestic workers lamented their dissatisfaction with their working conditions and the general lack of regard for their dignity because employers demonstrated their unwillingness to change. My point here is that, in the extensive literature on domestic work, forms of resistance and accommodation in the domestic work labour process co-exist, even in the context of an intimate workplace.

Ally's (2010) rich accounts of domestic workers' experiences in the post-apartheid era captures how an intimate work culture, despite state-imposed legislation, continues to characterize the employment relationship. Hazel Sondolo, a participant in Ally's (2010) study, surmised that the domestic employment relationship is "about compromise. It's about feelings" as she bargained her right to three months paid maternity leave instead of four, unpaid, with a reluctant employer who had hinted at not accommodating her right to maternity leave and discontinuing her employment (Ally, 2010:186). In a fascinating account of boundary work, Ally (2010:186) describes Hazel Sondolo's emotion work and creative informal tactics to negotiate with her employer, who, as she notes, was willing to concede to three months paid maternity leave for fear of losing "a trusted, reliable employee". My interest in connecting these themes is that PEAs (with a bias to employers because they pay service fees) were responding to these complex issues – namely, the dilemma of regulatory non-compliance and the likelihood of an intimate workplace crisis without a comfortable other.

Chapter Six reported that employers sought the services of PEAs to access professionally screened candidates and listened attentively to domestic workers' narratives and workplace performance to confirm their suitability for employment. The aim of this exercise – orchestrated encounters through interviews and interactions with the candidate during the trail work period – was to determine if there were any red flags linked to domestic workers' "inventive" intimate work culture compared to the intimate work culture employers demanded. To mitigate against the likelihood of a domestic worker not attending work regularly or not arriving at work on time (their reliability), employers considered the geographic location of candidates and the age of their children, especially for live-out domestic work. For live-in domestic work, employers considered the age of the worker's children or whether their children were in the care of family members elsewhere. The merits of these considerations were calculated. These considerations were directly related to employers' former experiences with domestic workers who had become an "uncomfortable liability" because of their use of personalism to negotiate working conditions, and their inappropriate work culture (Lan, 2003; Nyamnjoh, 2005).

The data also showed the extent to which employers influenced the demand for comfortable others in their efforts to counter personalism in the employment relationship. In interviews, employers paid attention to candidates' descriptions of their lives to detect if there were any tell-tale signs of social issues that could potentially affect the employment relationship. In Chapter Six, typical examples of social issues included being a single mother, having many financial dependents and limited or no family support. In stark contrast, comfortable others came across as "well rounded", sometimes with supportive husbands or adult children who were financially independent. Although domestic workers were from impoverished backgrounds (South Africans and MDWs alike), successful candidates gave the impression they were unlikely to be excessively dependent on employers compared to their experiences with former domestic workers. These depictions of how MDWs presented themselves and therefore what employers viewed favourably revealed the identity markers employers associated with comfortable others and were aiming to find through PEAs.

Nicole Constable's research on agency-recruited Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong points to similar findings about narratives of self that signal the preferences of either agencies or employers and influence the demand for certain identity markers. Constable (2008:72), explains that some agencies informed her that, "[a]lthough economic hardships can be mentioned, the applicant should not sound as though she would be working solely for the money". This point is contextualized according to how economic necessity goes hand in hand with MDWs' willingness ("promise") to work hard and obediently to support family goals such as education. Apart from this reasoning, Constable (2008) does not offer other explanations. However, this makes sense given the nature of the labour brokering states that market and export first time domestic workers with no paid history of domestic work.

Unlike Constable's (2008) findings, Chapter Six, showed that employers' experience of an intimate workplace crisis stemmed from how domestic workers' economic hardships and therefore needs (salary advances or loans) were integrally connected to the nature of the employment relationship. When money issues arose, the relationship grew uncomfortable, and boundaries blurred and often became difficult to maintain. For prospective employers, economic hardships were not simply a case of borrowing money. Economic hardships signalled the likelihood of personalism – an exchange of personal information that played on the "ambiguities of intimacy" (Ally, 2010) and class inequality when domestic workers deployed emotion work. Drawing on their former experiences, the findings showed employers were consciously attempting to prevent the fuzziness and elastic relationship typical between the employer and domestic worker (Lan, 2006). When employers reported or reflected on their former domestic workers who shared their personal anxieties with them, class-based and economic inequality were glaring and, for some, a source of deep discomfort. In these scenarios, employers evoked the language of professionalism to denote what Lan (2003) refers to as "boundary maintenance" in the employment relationship. As such, PEAs were in the business of supplying professional domestic workers as evidenced through their screening and training efforts and employers' evaluation of candidates.

Returning to the example of economic hardship, for employers, an emphasis on economic hardship or even single motherhood status signalled discomfort because it immediately compromised the interpersonal relationship (see Chapter Six, "sob stories"). Hochschild's (1983) question about what is required from service workers is critical here. When assessing reference letters, interviewing candidates, and observing them through trial work periods, employers were evaluating domestic workers' ability to perform professionalism, or what can be better described as "emotional professionalism", as part of their intimate work culture. Therefore, "emotional labour" is another critical element regarding the demand for comfortable others and the link between professionalizing domestic work and depersonalizing the employment relationship. Emotional labour is understood as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value" (Hochschild, 1983:7). By focusing on PEAs' and employers' experiences of the employment relationship, this study showed employers' response to overt and covert forms of domestic workers' intimate work culture.

There are three points worth noting here. First, MDWs' intimate work culture was not simply the content of their work but also their bodily effort in the intimate labour process through emotion management in interpersonal exchanges to the benefit of employers (Wolkowitz, 2006). Second, emotion management was not simply a case of having a "friendly demeanour" but also, and crucially, about how they presented or managed their histories, everyday experiences and personal anxieties (their personal identity and hence personhood) in interpersonal exchanges. In this regard, the findings show employers were evaluating candidates based on their ability to exercise professional or social distance. At the same time, the demand for performing "emotional professionalism" constrains domestic workers' inventive intimate work culture too. In other words, the "use value" of domestic workers' emotion work, that which is unpaid and based on personalism to exercise control over the intimate labour process, was not part of employers' demand for comfortable others (Hochschild, 1983; Ally, 2010). In the absence of what they perceived to be "professional distance"; employers interpreted the sharing of one's economic hardship defensively because "boundary maintenance" was unlikely to be maintained.[56]

The findings show that the extent to which depersonalization/formalization was achieved or managed by the state is questionable from the perspective of employers and domestic workers. Effectively, what employers were attempting to control against, with and through PEAs, was any effort to discipline or engage in the administrative process related to being labour compliant (such as documenting late arrival, issuing warnings and, as a last resort, dismissing a domestic worker). Therefore the proliferation of PEAs in the post-apartheid era predictably coincided with the state-imposed "restructuring from above" initiative, as employers faced their own crisis of representation.

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[56] In reference to the importance of "emotional professionalism" and maintaining a culture of servitude discussed earlier, Fish (2006) notes that many domestic workers in her study described how they had to assess their employers' emotions to ensure an optimal work environment.

Demobilization of trade unions

The state's initiative to restructure work from above also coincided with another unintentional consequence of state-led policies – the demobilization of trade unions (Grossman & Ngwane, 2011). According to Ally (2010:275), "the CCMA, made state agencies the primary spaces for workers to claim their rights in ways that redefined the role of the union as the advocate of workers' rights". Blackett and Tiemeni (2018:207) argue however, that the CCMA plays "a crucial mediating role" albeit on a case-by-case system to address disputes in an asymmetrical relationship and influence "broader public consciousness". However, for domestic workers, neither the state nor trade unions could ensure substantive access to "decent" work as they journeyed through the underbelly of the domestic sector in search of comfortable others.

By turning the household (private space) into an intimate workplace (a public space for domestic workers), the demand for PEAs' services pointed to the contradictory meaning of a culture of compliance. On the one hand, the demand for PEAs' services revealed potentially labour compliant employers and their role in fostering a culture of regulatory labour compliance in a legally transformed although poorly regulated sector. On the other, PEAs' and employers' screening process to meet the demand for comfortable others, as a form of social distancing embedded in recruitment and hiring processes, ensured "comfortable" control over the "other". At this point, the commodification of an intimate work culture gives rise to a compliant labour force that is rooted in a system of inequality.

Bakan and Stasiulis (1995:64) argue "[p]rivate domestic placement agencies are one of the most important enforcers of the government's domestic worker policy in the receiving country". By implication, the role of and demand for the services of PEAs is another unintentional empowering and disciplining exercise over domestic workers. Yet Baison's (2021:81) critical review of MDWs' recruitment strategies which include agencies points to the systemic challenge of the strict migratory labour regimes that view unskilled care/domestic labour unfavourably and whereby "the migration of Zimbabwean women to South Africa is 'informalized' and not regulated". Therefore, while MDWs mobilize their intimate work culture informally to access better work, many are excluded because of their undocumented status too (Vanyoro, 2019; Jinnah, 2020; Baison, 2021). However, drawing on intersectionality theory and citing Yuval-Davis (2006), Vanyoro (2019) argues that it is crucial to recognize the social positioning of MDWs because of their (illegal) citizenship status (nationality), which presents a unique set of challenges that perpetuate their experience of vulnerability.

The migratory policy context raises fundamental questions regarding the reach of PEAs in fostering a culture of regulatory compliance for domestic workers, given that it functions in a system of informality which it also benefits from. Furthermore, while this study focused on placement PEAs that formalize domestic work (not temporary employment services or the labour broker agency), the findings and literature show domestic workers rely on these rogue agencies to broker access to work, although they do not adhere to or foster a culture of regulatory compliance. The ongoing activities and poor regulation of agencies operating clandestinely points to the larger debate regarding challenges faced by trade unions in representing precarious workers and building solidarity as a result of diverse employment arrangements and a lack of progressive immigration policy (Benjamin, 2013; Vanyoro, 2019; Runciman and Hlungwani, 2022). In relation to identity niching, PEAs reproduce notions of ideal type of domestic workers because of the demand for comfortable others. By doing so, the process of identity niching that PEAs facilitate, hinders solidarity among workers – similar to the colonial “divide and rule” logic which reorders the hiring queue because of labour control regimes associated with capitalism and regional inequalities (Ally, 2009).

8.4.2. MDWs and Their Cultural Formations

The disruptive nature of migration and displacement sheds light on how the various pressures encountered by MDWs coalesce into cultural formations. MDWs’ experiences of alienation, disvaluation, disoralia and degendering are rooted in the context of precarious working conditions and their migrant or denizen status (Standing, 2011). Hall (2013) refers to a “typology of situations” to describe the different ways migrants are situated in South Africa’s agriculture sector but also their future aspirations. I draw on one, “recent first-time migrants in distress”, since it was most applicable to MDWs’ exposure to a country they did not know, their desperation to find employment as soon as possible, and the many hardships they were exposed to (Hall, 2013:191).

When explaining the nature and relevance of cultural formations, Sitas (1983) describes how newcomers were immediately combined the moment they entered the hostel. As "recent first-time migrants in distress", this moment of combination occurred in distinct ways. For example, the findings showed that through established informal networks, some MDWs arrived in South Africa with access to live-in domestic work. Their accounts of prison-like workplaces negotiated by their families, who had no accommodation for them, challenged the celebratory claims of how transnational families operate. Similarly, Garba (2017) found that, upon arrival in Germany, calls to family members for assistance were unanswered. Abandoned and alone, African migrants sought refuge at a mosque that "combined" them into a supportive network because of a shared identity as Africans. In the context of this study, these moments of being combined suggest there is understanding and an urgency to reciprocate, alongside the lived reality of the urgency to be employed and independent through the support of others, because *everyone was struggling*.

MDWs described how they could find domestic work in less than a week – work that was far from "decent" but "better than nothing". Yet again, these moments of being brought into the fold rather tellingly showed how idleness (as a social pressure) was unacceptable. In distress, even among family networks, MDWs took any employment available and thus their employment histories were deeply entangled with what can be best described as the underbelly of the domestic sector. Their desperation to find work exposed their disposability, precarious working conditions and utter despair when faced with displacement in South Africa. Nyamnjoh (2005:182) describes maids in Africa as "labour zombies" who "are often treated as if their humanity were deliberately frozen for zombification with impunity". However, like many others, Nyamnjoh (2005) describes their coping strategies and agency through *their* intimate work culture *within* domestic work (Jinnah, 2020). The church is rendered as merely a space of solidarity and used instrumentally for tapping into networks. However, through their analysis of migrants' situation using the cultural formation approach, Garba (2017) and Xulu-Gama (2017) suggest otherwise. The church or mosque is where migrants retreat from the various pressures they encounter to generate a sense of belonging as they mobilize informally.[57]

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[57] Xulu-Gama (2017:194) discusses how "[b]oth men and women creatively and strategically apply and practice culture and religion in ways that are supportive and beneficial to them at particular points in time" but at the same time "play controversial and contradictory roles…as points of oppression for women". Using the example of manyanos ("separate women's Christian organisations"), she discusses how other scholars have found that

Many MDWs "came to church", thereby having direct access to public class knowledge on how to be and where to be and access to a network of agencies informally run by co-ethnics. Sitas (1985:35) argues that public class knowledge is "knowledge of comparative working conditions, wages, employment opportunities, courses of action to avoid 'trouble', of contacts to 'bribe', of where to get what, of who is dangerous…". The findings showed MDWs who had access to domestic work through co-ethnic-run agencies received life lessons on hierarchies of status between permit holders and non-permit holders, and prayed earnestly for better days.

When MDWs recoiled from the various pressures they faced, and sought refuge and home in the church, their everyday life regulation had already begun, even among co-ethnic agencies that hired them. In unison, they chanted, "I am blessed"; "We are hard workers"; "We are honest"; "We are reliable"; *"We are Zimbabwean"*. Similarly, Hall (2013:190) notes that Zimbabwean farmworkers experienced "the stripping of the multidimensionality of identity"

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manyanos (associated with mothers and motherhood) can be understood as sites for expressing grievances and resolving issues but can also be embraced or abandoned depending on their use value (citing Bozzoli, 1983). Similarly, Ally (2009) discusses manyanos as associational spaces among "married" women with children – the weekly manyanos meetings were spaces autonomous from work, but also spaces where alienation, loneliness and the pain of disrupted family life was shared and grieved collectively among many who were also domestic workers. There was a strong link between "good Christian women" and the reconstruction of the meanings of motherhood in a "coercive economy of care". Aside from "wailing" and sharing pain, I don't get a strong sense from either Xulu-Gama (2017) or Ally (2009) of manyanos as spaces for anything other than reconstructing their personhood against patriarchy or employers. Ally (2009:183) suggests that domestic workers viewed manyanos as apolitical spaces – where they "attempt to reconstruct their worth" as mother workers. Ally (2009:182) says, "[c]learly, while the manyanos make legible domestic workers' location as compromised mothers and dehumanized workers, the response offered arguably retards their collective mobilization publicly and as workers". Manyanos are presented as "private politics" separate from the public, and as such "does not activate workers towards change and, in fact, militates against it" (Ally, 2009:182). Effectively, manyanos are seen as depicting "powerlessness" (similar to Gaitskell's (1990) interpretation of manyanos). Yet, if we take into consideration how the infrastructure of cultural formations – public class knowledge and defensive combinations among the "Single Ladies" at church – are used to retreat from and mobilize an intimate work culture ("good workers" based on Christian principles of being obedient to employers – see also Cheng's (2006) discussion of "hidden scripts" at church that influence workers' productive obedient behaviour), the single ladies' meeting at church and after church shows how both public and private can and does give rise to resistance against the human indignities they encounter as mothers and MDWs in South Africa who are aspiring to employment through PEAs. In other words, identity formation occurs through symbolic and rational discourses when migrants formulate a collective moral behaviour by distinguishing between "us" vs. "them" (Sitas, 1983). This collective moral behaviour is exercised in the way they work but is also informed by their meaning-generating capacities, and knowledge of what employers' demand based on their anxieties about the intimate workplace crisis regarding the *other*.

as a “product of how communities received the new migrants, in either accommodating or repelling ways”. Instead of organizing around ethnicity (Shona or Ndebele ethnic groups), a homogenizing experience of national identity took effect such that co-ethnics were not interested in newcomers’ class status or qualifications but that “We must all be the same here. We are only Zimbabweans…” (Herbert, 2008: personal communication, cited in Hall, 2013:190). Writing on Zulu-ness, Sitas (2016:213) argues that there is a “negotiated identity between ordinary people’s attempts to create effective and reciprocal social bonds … and the political ideologies that seek to mobilize them in non-class ways…”.

Degendering and single mother status

Most MDWs were single mothers or distant mothers or both. It was therefore not uncommon for them to take up live-in domestic work. Their experiences as distant and single mothers is a distinct feature of their identity, corresponding with the literature that documents the link between live-in domestic workers and their children who are left in the care of family members, and that which divides families (Cock, 1980; Fish, 2005; Ally, 2010). Xulu-Gama’s (2022) relational comparison of rural-urban South African and other African immigrants points to their shared social class as working-class women, their aspirations as they journey through cities carrying the burden of care and their concern for their children’s upbringing.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the working of capitalism, migration and state policy planning (that is, limited public care facilities and therefore dependence on privatized care or unpaid reproductive labour) has a long history of throwing gender roles into disarray – degendering. In the Global South, uneven development has had a devastating impact on households, giving rise to what Fakier and Cock (2009) describe as a crisis of social reproduction. In relation to these developments and MDWs’ experiences, I argued that the issue of parenting or raising children because of degendering did not feature strongly in Sitas’ (1983; 1985; 2009) nor Xulu-Gama’s (2017) research, nor as a specific pressure that shows how mothering from a distance gives rise to cultural formations among women. As “distant mothers”, the experience of degendering formed part of the burden of care they shared and that fuelled their urgency to find any work or better work. Their dreams were for their children’s futures. Their sacrifices were for their children’s futures. Their dream was to return home to the houses they had built or were building. They hoped for something better, and in so doing, the “possibilities of the future" (Grossman, 2009) were exactly where they had to "stick it out" – the domestic sector (Sitas, 1983).

In the context of domestic work, focusing on mothering from a distance because of fragmented or divided families is a critical extension and application of the concept of degendering to domestic workers' situation. During apartheid, restrictions on African women's mobility and live-in domestic work via backyard dwellings formed part of the "state-orchestrated destruction of family life" (Budlender & Lund, 2011), and served employers' interests too (Cock, 1980).. Writing on South African black domestic workers, Cock (1988:245) argues that they were "trapped workers" simply because there were few alternatives based on "the denial of family and social life, or reasonable wages and working conditions, of job satisfaction and security". The same can be argued for the "institutional insecurity" (Anderson, 2010) that South Africa's strict migration policy perpetuates when MDWs seek domestic work in South Africa (Fish, 2013; Baison, 2021). Whatever their motivations – for example not wanting to take away a mother from a young child, or to mitigate against absenteeism or late arrivals because of childcare responsibilities and poor public transport – employers benefit from MDWs as distant mothers, especially to meet employers' care needs. It is not coincidental, therefore, that through PEAs, the value of live-in domestic workers matched domestic nannies' higher earning potential compared to live-out domestic workers. It is unsurprising too that MDWs were sought after for live-in domestic work, given South African domestic workers' preferences for live-out domestic work (Ally, 2010). With limited options and urgency to find work, these types of constraints and employer preferences also influence the domestic work hiring queue.

Sites of mobilizing and public class knowledge

In churches – what Cheng (2006) refers to as an "embraced home" – there were always questions on how to improve their situation. The sharing of public testimonials and "good news" among the single ladies who met after church suggested that some were not doing badly. They had "good" employers and were earning "well" too. There was hope, but how? Where? The answer was through PEAs, but not those run by their co-ethnics. Placements were highly sought after among "white people's agencies", which were white owned and with white and black middle-upper middle-class employers. Chapter Seven discussed how MDWs had to earn their status to access the niche market of middle and upper middle-class households through PEAs. The process of earning their status as comfortable others was made explicit when those who had "agency recruited status" described their employment paths and the practice of identity niching. For almost all MDWs, the devil was in the detail – earning reference letters that PEAs demanded.

Like work permits and the sponsorship system, reference letters can either hinder or allow a worker's movement in the labour market (Pande, 2013). Anderson (2010:310) argues "employers are provided extra tools of control" over workers whose residency can easily be jeopardized by employers who feel that their workers are underperforming. Retaining labour is obviously advantageous and a way to exert control over workers who need reference letters to apply for jobs. Yet access to employment through PEAs was contingent on reference letters and often at least two years' domestic work experience. Earning reference letters encouraged a "culture of servitude". For those attempting to fast-track access to employment through PEAs, a few experienced moderate success after receiving "professional" training offered by PEAs too. Collectively, these tools of control influence identity niching so that impression management and the "idealization" of comfortable others prevails (Goffman, 1959; Goffman, 1963:22).

A key argument that Sitas (1983; 1985) made regarding cultural formations is that African workers' culture was a rational response to the world of work and not merely a consequence of the disciplining effect of the state or PEAs actions. Their work culture was not a game to offset boredom, nor was it simply a process of accommodation (Burawoy, 1979). Instead, their culture was a struggle for human dignity. Chapter Seven documented how MDWs earned their status as comfortable others as a rational response within and through cultural formations. In this regard, public class knowledge is crucial for understanding how supportive networks informed and regulated MDWs' intimate work culture as a mode of resistance against informality, depicted through the process of identity niching. Some of the typical examples included how to make their employer happy, which employers to avoid, what employers found impressive, so that they could earn their reference letter. They learnt which PEAs were likely to protect their interests, give them access to "good employers" and offer skills development. For others, there were potentially riskier and expensive shortcuts such as where to purchase reference letters or how to fast track access to work (see Vanyoro, 2019). However, the main lesson MDWs learnt was the intimate work culture that PEAs and employers demanded – even through informal agencies run by co-ethnics that played a moral disciplinary role by regulating their behaviour.

Public class knowledge was not common-sense knowledge but the accumulated knowledge or "collective memories" and concrete experiences "of survival struggle in the cities" (Sitas, 1985:35). Writing on South African domestic workers, Grossman (2009:208, 218) makes a similar argument about the need for alternative "ways of seeing and hearing" workers' accounts and recognizing "centres of knowledge generation, production and sharing". In the absence of unions, MDWs' cultural formations, as "intellectual centres" of concrete experiences were anything but instrumental – it was rational and informed by symbolic discourses of the other. In the same way that employers were listening attentively to how MDWs portrayed themselves and performed their tasks in the home, MDWs listened attentively to employers' acclamations about Zimbabwean nationals compared to others – *cynically,* but with national pride too.

Constable (2008) describes how MDWs often "played along" with the self-imposed packaging of maids to the extent that they lied about their ages, marital status and the ages of their children, and projected confidence about childcare in the Philippines if they had children in the care of family. This data did not surface in the field. While agencies preferred married women because it suggested stability and economic need, Constable (2008:73) found that some MDWs claimed they were unmarried and without children because "they believed that most employers preferred to hire women without too many responsibilities back home", a view shared by some employers too. Constable's (2008) findings point to information flows among agency workers and how this knowledge links to perceptions of employer's preferences too (see Chapter Six and Chapter Seven). In brief, MDWs' accumulated wisdom encouraged each other to work hard, be honest, and in so doing, earn their status as comfortable others.

It is important to note that the term "comfortable others" concerns the perception and construction of the other – South African domestic workers. Chapter Seven detailed the act of doing difference that expose the scripts of "us versus them", using ethnicity as a resource, and focusing on the situation at hand (Sitas, 1983; Cohen, 2006; Lutz, 2008). In this regard, MDWs mobilized their intimate work culture by leaning into employers' anxieties and drawing on the moral economy of work depicted through the symbolic discourse of "us vs. them" (Näre, 2011). The boundary making mechanisms that emerged within and through their practical coping strategies (defensive combinations) captured MDWs' distinct moral codes and hence struggle to escape informal working conditions in the domestic sector. MDWs were "compliant" in so far as their intimate work culture was in stark contrast to that of South African domestic workers. But, as I argue in this thesis, MDWs compliance was rationale. It was their attempt to mobilize their intimate work culture to access better work through PEAs. MDWs were not simply victims or “zombies” because of their “accommodating” or self-disciplining intimate work culture (Nymamjoh, 2005; Machinya, 2022). Rather, earning their status as comfortable others was a “long-term strategy” to escape the underbelly of the domestic sector. Therefore, to reiterate Sitas’s (2009:374-375) point, defensive combinations have the potential to give rise to a cultural formation where “the regulation of everyday life is underpinned by reciprocal norms, values and symbolic markers, and belonging to a group is not only driven by practical and instrumental considerations”.

8.5. Conclusion

This study revealed the interplay amongst PEAs’ gatekeeping practices, what employers want, and how MDWs mobilize an intimate work culture through identity niching in the domestic sector. For employers, PEAs’ services offer the best possible solution for avoiding or minimizing the administrative burden of being labour complaint. For MDWs, access to better domestic work and employment rights among employers is a significant win compared to their past experiences where they were underpaid and exploited. PEAs therefore potentially foster a culture of regulatory compliance which is crucial for recognizing the household as an intimate workplace to achieve decent work. Yet MDWs’ employment paths and cultural formations continue to depict the lived reality of working-class struggles against social inequality. Nevertheless, the findings show that PEAs fostering a culture of regulatory compliance is a significant step towards “bringing democracy home” (Fish, 2006b).

Chapter 9. Conclusion: Making PEAs Visible

9.1. Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I summarize my research focus, approach and argument, reiterating the significance of intimacy for understanding the demand for comfortable others and making PEAs that specialize in placements visible in the domestic sector. Further, I focus on the contribution of this thesis and the implications of the research for the intermediary landscape in South Africa concerning the future of domestic work. I discuss the research limitations and suggest recommendations for future research regarding theorizing intimate work and cultural formations among domestic workers.

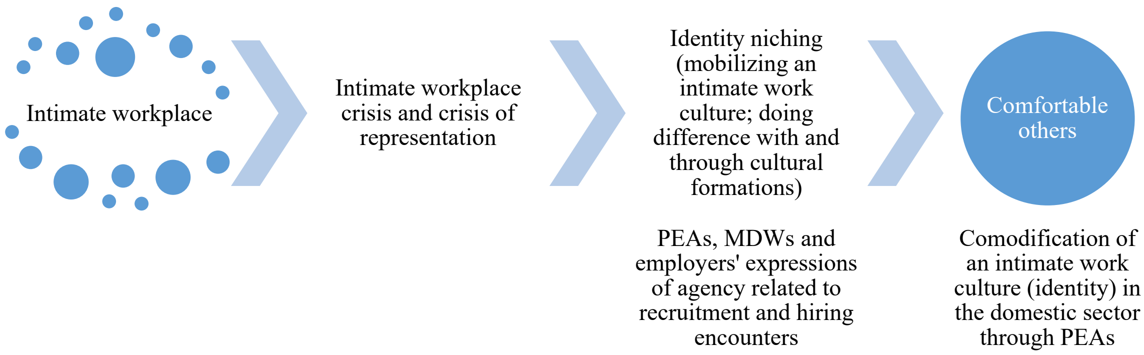
9.2. Summary of Research Focus, Approach and Argument

This thesis focused on MDWs', PEAs' and employers' expressions of agency in the recruitment and hiring process to illustrate how the identity of comfortable others is socially constructed to meet the demand for an ideal type of domestic worker. My approach emphasises intimacy and therefore an intimate work culture in the domestic work labour process and its significance in relation to the power-laden nature of the intimate workplace. By locating PEAs in relation to the intimate workplace, I shifted attention to the public and private tension typical of the domestic work labour process and the recognition of domestic workers' employment rights. By focusing on PEAs that make placements in private households and formalize domestic work, I aimed to move beyond the typical though serious issues of precarity linked to the "restructuring from above" debate and xenophobia or other everyday forms of discrimination which present MDWs as victims limited to resistance strategies in the employment relationship, in the growing body of labour and migration scholarship in South Africa.

To make sense of the "idealized" notion of comfortable others, I drew on Goffman's (1959) impression management theory. I also adopted the cultural formations approach as an analytic tool which forms part of the counterhegemonic currents in South African labour studies (Keim, 2011). Using a qualitative research approach that included interviews, participant observation and critical ethnography directed at a transnational church, I explored how an intimate work culture is socially constructed and commodified to meet the demand for comfortable others through PEAs, and mobilized by MDWs through their cultural formation to access "decent" work. I gathered data from Cape Town, which is home to some of the leading intermediaries with franchise reach in South Africa, including the headquarters of SweepSouth, a digital platform company specializing in cleaning services.

While the study is small in scope, understanding the experiences of PEAs, MDWs and employers offers critical insight into the complex dynamic of recruitment and hiring practices in post-apartheid South Africa. The central research questions were therefore concerned with exploring the context related factors concerning the use of PEAs and how PEAs, MDWs and employers influence the process of identity niching to meet the demand for an ideal type of domestic worker – what I refer to as comfortable others. Figure 1 summarizes the comfortable others and identity niching approach that I developed from the data.

Figure 1: Summary of the comfortable others and identity niching approach


Intimate workplace
Intimate workplace crisis and crisis of representation
Identity niching (mobilizing an intimate work culture; doing difference with and through cultural formations)
PEAs, MDWs and employers' expressions of agency related to recruitment and hiring encounters
Comfortable others
Comodification of an intimate work culture (identity) in the domestic sector through PEAs

I argue that it is through the agency of employers and PEAs trying to find comfortable others and a seemingly compliant labour force that MDWs are "niched" in relation to South Africans. Further, it is through the agency of MDWs that ethno-cultural preferences associated with an intimate work culture are mobilized to gain employment. Yet how MDWs exercise their agency when mobilizing their intimate work culture, as a defensive combination and through their cultural formation, captures their journeys through the underbelly of the domestic sector. Therefore, the findings show the type of employment paths MDWs choose between, and how their domestic work choices illustrate simultaneous processes of accommodation and agency is made explicit through the lens of an intimate work culture. It is the practical but publicly informed knowledge gathered through a series of relational and intentional interactions that influence the process of identity niching to meet the demand for comfortable others. However, when examining the different types of domestic work MDWs choose between, and aspire to, employers who use PEAs appear to be comfortable others too, because they are likely to be labour compliant.

Ultimately, the demand for comfortable others can be framed as a response to an ‘intimate workplace crisis’ for PEAs (as employers too), employers, and domestic workers. Further, the demand for comfortable others is context specific, arising from the particularities of the power-laden domestic employment relationship characterized by the tension between the public and private nature of the intimate workplace domestic workers and employers experience. The analysis of the identity niching process reveals that the socio-legal context and experience of a “crisis of representation” and an “intimate workplace crisis” has given rise to the demand for PEAs in South Africa’s post-apartheid domestic sector. The crisis of representation refers to employers’ demand for support services in their mostly newfound role as labour compliant employers of domestic workers. For domestic workers, the crisis of representation is symbolic of the atomized nature of domestic work, the rise in underemployment and flexible work arrangements, and low trade union representation. Despite narratives of difference based on stereotypes related to race or nationality, intimacy is a distinct organizing principle of recruitment and hiring trends that informs the social construction of comfortable others and explains the fluid nature of hiring and recruitment patterns in the contemporary intimate workplace.

9.3. Contribution of the Thesis

This thesis contributes to making visible PEAs that specialize in placements as a significant transformation in post-apartheid South Africa in the context of a series of transformations which have had devastating consequences on the many women who rely on domestic work as a livelihood strategy. There are three notable consequences: the devastating decline of domestic work, which is estimated at 797 000 jobs; the rise of mostly informal part-time domestic work as households shift from full-time to part-time employment arrangements; and a proliferation of formal and informal intermediaries catering to the demand for placements or outsourced domestic cleaning services due to their convenience, flexibility and affordability (Du Toit, 2022; SweepSouth, 2022; StatsSA 2023). The persistent issue of informality paints a grim picture about the state of domestic work in South Africa and access to “decent work”. Recent research suggests that PEAs specializing in outsourcing domestic work have thrived, receiving noteworthy attention in the media and among scholars concerning the trend towards flexible domestic work arrangements (Du Toit, 2022; Sibiya & Du Toit, 2022; SweepSouth, 2022). Similarly, intermediaries such as the platform companies SweepSouth and GetTod have entered the intermediary landscape, gaining appeal among technology-savvy middle and upper-middle class households that prefer accessing cleaning services indirectly (Sibiya & Du Toit, 2022). However, a recurring theme is that domestic workers experience work intensification, underemployment and consequent income insecurity even if minimum wages are set for domestic workers. The growing concern regarding indirect employment through intermediaries has meant direct employment through PEAs has received marginal critical attention and yet they form part of South Africa's domestic sector and intermediary landscape. This thesis contributes to filling this gap.

The question remains: why focus on PEAs that make placements among middle and upper-middle class households? The significance of this research relates to analysing what employers want in the context of an intimate workplace. It sharpens our focus on the potentially transformative role PEAs play as intermediaries representing domestic workers' and employers' interests in long-term employment relationships. It allows for the persistent new forms of domestic work that undermine transformation in the domestic sector in the intermediary landscape to be scrutinised. To this end, by focusing on PEAs and tracing their entry into the domestic sector, the often ignored but simultaneous trend towards direct and indirect employment arrangements through PEAs is made visible empirically.

Unexpectedly, this study found that some PEAs engage in a dual business model that includes indirect and direct employment arrangements. While I focused on placements, my argument concerning the demand for comfortable others is relevant for understanding direct and indirect hiring patterns in South Africa because of the changing nature of domestic work and insights concerning what employers want. Therefore, understanding recruitment and hiring patterns through the lens of intimacy and an intimate work culture reveals the context-specific factors influencing recruitment and hiring trends in the PEA domestic sector more broadly. In other words, my conceptual and theoretical emphasis on intimacy and the intimate workplace is relevant for explaining why employers choose to outsource cleaning or directly employ domestic workers too – that is, because of an intimate workplace crisis and a crisis of representation in the intimate workplace.

I frame my contribution regarding the role of and demand for PEAs' services as a "crisis of representation" for domestic workers and employers of domestic workers. This framing is located within the socio-legal context of the post-apartheid intimate workplace. The crisis of representation refers to how South African trade unions have struggled to represent and protect workers across all sectors of employment, including the domestic sector, as employers adopt workplace restructuring strategies to save on labour costs because of capitalism and the expense of full-time labour (Sitas, 2010) and which effectively undermine trade unions' reach (Ally, 2010; Ngwane & Grossman, 2011). Others have framed trade unions' role and relationship with the state as one that perpetuates "worker demobilization" because, under the new democratic dispensation, labour laws have had a disciplining effect, stifling worker militancy on the shop floor or in the intimate workplace (Theron, 2005; Ally, 2010; Ngwane and Grossman, 2011). Similar arguments can be traced in South Africa's domestic sector too. Given the intimate nature of domestic work, I do not agree that domestic workers' intimate work culture is absent in the intimate workplace nor fully depersonalized because of labour regulation. Instead, I show that, in the context of state intervention, employers' and domestic workers' struggles for representation persist because of the atomized and unequal nature of domestic work.

I extend the crisis of representation concept to include employers, but for different reasons. The domestic employment relationship is complex because of intimacy. The role of and demand for PEAs services shows they recognize the complex relationship and do not assume employers can manage domestic workers with relative ease nor by being labour compliant without advice and support. The findings suggest PEAs have positioned themselves in the domestic sector at an opportune moment – capitalizing on employers' fear and uncertainty in response to South Africa's progressive approach to recognize and protect domestic workers' employment rights. Therefore, PEAs' entry into the domestic sector is not coincidental. Instead, PEAs represent the interests of employers who assume labour legislation is pro-employee, and domestic workers who are desperate for labour compliant employers who recognize their value and right to "decent work" in a historically vulnerable sector.

While I emphasize MDWs as comfortable others, this study also contributes to an understanding of employers as comfortable others too – employers who are likely to offer favourable and fair working conditions to domestic workers as a "choice" and through PEAs support. In the same way that we learn what employers want, this study contributes to an understanding of what MDWs and other domestic workers aspire to and hope for too. In relation to the crisis of representation for domestic workers, the role of and demand for PEAs services is significant because of low trade union membership among domestic workers, the atomized nature of domestic work, the poor regulation and monitoring of domestic workers' employment rights by the state and the ineffectiveness of individual agency for cementing access to decent working conditions. By making PEAs visible, this thesis contributes to recognizing their potential role as stakeholders for realizing domestic workers' employment rights. It is crucial, therefore, that we explore alternative employment arrangements to understand potential "decent work" opportunities that exist for domestic workers. It is equally important to not lose sight of the conditions under which these opportunities are made possible. Focusing on alternatives, or alternative recruitment strategies, is a significant contribution of this thesis, especially when domestic work is in decline and domestic workers experience deepening underemployment and precarity because of their longstanding vulnerable status in the domestic sector.

For domestic workers, the thesis shows PEAs create much needed opportunities for access to job and income security among middle and upper-middle class households unwilling to rely on inefficient informal recruitment strategies. It is crucial, therefore, to not lose sight of this parallel development because domestic workers have potential access to full-time employment through gatekeepers. As this study demonstrates, domestic workers' struggle for "decent work" because of non-traditional hiring practices or indirect employment and part-time domestic work rarely results in better employment opportunities in the sector. However, as I have shown throughout this thesis, intimacy and an intimate work culture is the organizing principle of hiring and recruitment trends in the PEA industry, one that has serious implications for fostering a culture of regulatory compliance and hence a labour compliant workforce.

By focusing on "the intimate workplace", this study contributes to an understanding of labour compliance from a regulatory perspective and the demand for a compliant workforce because of the inherent logic of the labour process of domestic work, which emphasises autonomy, control and consent. I therefore note the constant interplay between domestic workers and employers in an unequal employment relationship. However, unlike previous studies that focus on coping strategies within the employment relationship because of intimacy, I argue that, with and through their cultural formations, MDWs mobilize their intimate work culture to access decent work as an expression of their autonomy.

By delving into recruitment and hiring histories, and conducting an ethnography, I could track MDWs' employment histories, their concerns and hopes, and importantly, how cultural formations emerge in response to the many pressures they encounter in the domestic sector. MDWs' struggle, in particular, occurs because of low union representation, a rigid migratory policy environment, the tension between the intimate work culture employers demand and domestic workers' intimate work culture, and the context of recognizing domestic workers' employment rights. Therefore, the demand for placement services through PEAs warranted scrutiny because it highlights a particular context (the household as an intimate workplace) and insights into PEAs' role as intermediary between domestic workers and employers. This focus is a notable departure from the existing scholarship, which examines intermediaries that employ domestic workers because of their outsourcing domestic work model, or the new form of platform domestic work intermediary that identifies itself as a "communication platform", where neither the platform company nor client employs the domestic worker (Heavy Chef, 2017; Du Toit, 2020a).

Regarding the former point about cultural formations among MDWs, this is the first study that shifts attention to the intimate workplace using an analysis of culture and working life (the cultural formation approach) to examine South Africa's recruitment and hiring trends in the domestic sector and its implication for worker mobilization. My choice of theory is a response to calls to theorize inductively, consider context, and develop conceptual tools for understanding the major transformations occurring in the domestic sector. My approach extends the "research turn" in labour studies in South Africa and new developments in South African (and African) migration scholarship (Keim, 2016; Garba, 2017; Batisai, 2022). In Chapter One, I identified and defined my working concepts: comfortable others and identity niching. I argued for the household to be conceptualized as an intimate workplace, therefore recognizing not only the public-private dynamic of domestic work and the domestic employment relationship but also to take seriously domestic workers' employment rights. Given MDWs' status as "distant mothers", and drawing on Budlender and Lund's (2011) argument regarding fragmenting the family, I extended the concept degendering to "fragmented families", to illustrate the commonality among most of the MDWs who sought their "home church" in South Africa, retreating from loneliness and caring from a distance by clinging to their jobs wholeheartedly despite low wages.

I demonstrated that MDWs mobilize the identity that PEAs and employers demand of comfortable others. Yet their apparent consent to the whims of employers unmasks their precarious employment pathways in the domestic sector that hold domestic workers ransom to earning reference letters to affirm their comfortable others status. Reference letters not only confirm MDWs' status as comfortable others but also form an integral part of PEAs' orchestrated gatekeeping and disciplining tactics in the domestic sector that influence the process of identity niching to meet the demand for comfortable others. The findings suggest MDWs exercise their autonomy by tapping into their collective public class knowledge and "doing difference" through identity niching as a "defensive combination" to earn their status as comfortable others with PEAs and employers. Their claim as comfortable others is earned through individual and collective actions. Their claim is, as is their action, a rational decision to resist the underbelly of the domestic sector with and through their cultural formations that target PEAs.

While my conceptual contribution to theorizing comfortable others is context specific because of its emphasis on South Africa, my attempt to theorize intimate work may be useful for others working on domestic work because of the socio-legal context. I suggest possible avenues of research that can take forward notions of comfortable others as a theory of intimate work and cultural formations among domestic workers next.

9.4. Research Limitations

There are a few notable limitations of this study. First, given the research focus, there are no accounts of male or female South African domestic workers' perceptions and experiences of PEAs, nor that of male migrant domestic workers (MMDWs). Yet the research findings point to employers' diverse hiring histories that include employing black South African male and female domestic workers and MMDWs from other African countries. Here it is important to note that I contained my research focus by focusing on female Zimbabwean MDWs as the largest group of African MDWs when I conceptualized the research problem. Further, my choice of Zimbabwean MDWs participants was informed by the feasibility of accessing this group for data collection and the ethnic niching scholarship that I critique in Chapter Three.

Second, the employer profile does not adequately reflect accounts among black employers, and yet the findings related to PEAs' clientele point to black South African women using their services. In terms of understanding recruitment and hiring trends, this limitation is noteworthy, considering research on the growing black middle class and black families hiring family members for domestic cleaning and care work (Dilata, 2009; Bayane, 2021). Furthermore, as the research findings suggest and other studies document, class and race inequalities continue to affect domestic workers' access to decent working conditions among black employers too (Fish, 2006b; Bayane, 2021). However, my attempts to access black employers through networks and PEAs did not yield solid results. It is likely that my sampling strategy is skewed because white employers were more likely to use the services of PEAs. Third, this study does not offer a systematic interrogation into the meaning of decent work through PEAs because I had placed greater emphasis on understanding the process of identity niching among PEAs, employers and domestic workers. Instead, this study focused on what MDW experienced as "decent" compared to their employment history as domestic workers.

9.5. Recommendations for Future Research

Considering the limitations outlined above, a more comprehensive understanding of recruitment and hiring trends with and through PEAs can potentially offer further critical insights into the social construction of comfortable others based on race, class and gender. A longitudinal study that tracks recruitment and hiring trends through PEAs may yield a better understanding of employers' changing needs, and domestic workers' demand for access to stable but decent work. A more systematic and comprehensive overview of working conditions among PEAs could benefit from an analysis that adopts a decent indicator framework (see Sefalafala & Webster, 2013; Sibiya & Du Toit, 2022). At a policy and governance level, such a study could inform better employment practices and foster a culture of regulatory compliance that benefits both domestic workers and employers.

It is short-sighted to not monitor PEAs' activities or assume their activities are pro-employee. Any endeavour to transform domestic work must include regular monitoring of PEAs to foster cooperative practices and alternative approaches for recognizing domestic workers' value in society. SweepSouth's (2022) annual surveys serve as a useful example of how PEAs can participate in and become accountable by tracking developments and "decent" work in the PEA industry. An initiative similar to the Fairwork project which tracks "principles of fairness" in the gig economy among platform companies according to pay, contracts, working conditions, management practices and representation could be a useful exercise, fostering best practices in placement PEAs that continue to remain invisible in research on the domestic sector (Fairwork, 2021, 2022). Tracking recruitment and hiring trends and working conditions will be especially important as households and PEAs adjust to immigration policy uncertainty and the National Minimum Wage, which will have serious implications for domestic workers and MDWs access to domestic work and job and income security.

Future research could explore notions of comfortable others in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and hiring practices through PEAs or the intimate workplace. The lockdown levels disrupted employment practices and affected domestic workers' working conditions and employment relationship because of intimacy and social (physical) distancing. This context-specific "moral panic" may generate new insights regarding recruitment and hiring practices as a gatekeeping exercise and the associated implications for the domestic work labour process.

Last, there is greater scope for researchers to explore South Africa's intermediary landscape and its diversity in terms of recruitment and hiring practices and the future of work. One particular development that stands out is how and in what ways platform companies fit into the intermediary landscape as a new form of "agent" that matches households with domestic workers. In relation to this specific theme, the applicability of the comfortable others approach can potentially generate new ways of understanding individual and collective action among domestic workers with and through technology, as the space and place of mobilizing includes online communities. Focusing on informal worker mobilization and identity niching has implications for understanding and theorizing service-related platform work and the gig economy's labour process.

9.6. Concluding remarks

The socio-legal context within which PEAs' newfound role has emerged indicates they play a potentially significant role in transforming the domestic sector in the post-apartheid context by recognizing the household as an intimate workplace. Although PEAs are in the business of making money through the commodification of comfortable others, their most notable role includes championing domestic workers' employment rights, creating opportunities for skills development, and challenging the minimum wage despite their sympathetic approach to employers' demands. The demand for PEAs' services – indirect or direct employment arrangements – points to intermediaries bridging the gap between the state, employer and domestic worker in the absence of trade union representation because of the atomized nature of domestic work. However, their intermediary role only carries weight if it operates within the framework of addressing the inefficiencies related to implementing regulatory labour compliance and South Africa's immigration policy context, to effectively realize the employment rights of all domestic workers. Fostering a culture of regulatory compliance ultimately requires advocating for public awareness to uphold the rights of those who engage in essential work that sustains households, families and society. PEAs' efforts to champion domestic workers' employment rights are, however, rooted in systems of oppression that rank workers based on stereotypes and citizenship status. Nevertheless, MDWs diverse recruitment strategies show the significance of their cultural formations as they challenge the human indignities they encounter when they mobilize their work culture to access the intimate workplace where PEAs foster a culture of regulatory compliance. In unison, they sing, "There's an army rising up"; "To break every chain, break every chain, break every chain"; "The chains are broken" and "I hear the chains falling", as they sing and pray earnestly for a better life (Cobb, 2013 *Break Every Chain*).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview schedules

Interview Schedule for PEAs:

Historical overview of private employment agencies in the Western Cape/South Africa

- Elaborate on the context – can you set the scene regarding your entry into the sector (prompts: when did you start as an agency? Describe your business model? Who are your clients?)
- What are your main services?
- Describe a typical day or week of your work as an agent?
- PEAs as a niche business (Prompts: Describe the market demand; what were clients' needs/concerns/hopes?)
- How and where do you market your services (for employers/clients and domestic workers)?

Provide an overview of the different types of agencies in the Western Cape

- Prompt related to other agencies - competition, size, services provided, other?

What role do agencies play in the domestic sector?

- Describe the key trends/developments that have emerged while you have been in business and related to the domestic sector? What are the main trends according to your experience? (Prompt: recruitment and hiring practices)
- If not mentioned, elaborate on MDWs and their accessibility to work through agencies?
- Comment on trends related to the gender of domestic workers?
- Comment on skills development in the PEA domestic sector industry? (Prompt: do you offer training? Describe your training programme?)
- Comment on formalising domestic work / clients response to labour legislation?

Describe the recruitment and hiring process (prompt for details)

- Recruiting process / Screening process (what do you screen for? What checks and balances are in place to meet clients demands?)
- Candidate selection for clients (probe regarding personal preferences and how they respond to requests)
- Interview process (prompt: what support do you provide clients (employers/domestic workers? Do you facilitate the interviews? Where do the interviews take place?)
- Elaborate on the placement process – the employment contract (where does the contract get signed, how is the employment contract managed?)
- Elaborate on the guarantee offered to clients for re-placements.

Overall, what are the benefits of using agencies for clients and/or domestic workers?

What are the main challenges you encounter working in the domestic sector?

Do you have any general comments/and or concerns/observations to share regarding your work and/or role in the domestic sector?

Interview Schedule for employers:

1. Please tell me about yourself?
Prompts: Age, occupation, where are you originally from; how long have you lived in Cape Town; are you married, do you have children?

2. Briefly describe your experience with domestic workers over the years (positive experiences and negative)? (Prompts: How did you recruit them? How many domestic workers have you employed over the years; what was their job description; what was the employment arrangement; what were their reasons for leaving; what was their nationality/race/age/gender; did they live-in or live-out; where they formally employed, elaborate)

3. What were the main reason for using an agency to find a domestic worker? (Prompts: Tell me the 'story'; how did you find out about the agency; if through a friend or family member, why did they recommend that you use an agency; how many agencies did you approach; which

agency did you decide on and why; how many times have you used an agency to find a domestic worker?)

4. Describe your overall experience using an agency/agencies? (Prompts: What were the steps involved from the beginning until the end of the placement process? In your opinion, what were the key moments during your interaction with the agency/agencies; what services did you find useful and why? If you approached multiple agencies, what was your experience with those agencies and their service)?

5. Candidate review and interview process:

a. When you approached the agency, did you have an idea of what you wanted/were looking for? (Prompts: for example, job description, skills level, specific attributes? Can you describe what/who you were looking for, what did you ask the agency for?; Did you receive advice regarding agencies and their services and if so, what advice and from whom?)

b. Describe the review and interview process with the candidates. Was your partner involved and if so, what was their role? How many candidate profiles did you review? Describe the candidate profile? Which candidate did you select to interview and why? How many interviews did you conduct? Where were the interviews conducted? What questions did you ask? Did you "trial" the worker? If so, how many days did the trial last and how many candidates did you trial before deciding on your placement? Who made the best impression and why? Elaborate on the decision-making process regarding your choice – for example what did you consider when choosing a candidate for employment)?

c. Describe the person you decided to employ and explain why? (Prompts: nationality, gender, race, age, skills set, experience, live-in or live-out, other?)

6. What was/is your domestic worker's job description? (Prompts: How many days per week does she work? How much do you pay her per month? Does she earn overtime, and if so, how much? What are the leave arrangements with your domestic worker? Do you use the agency for a replacement or make alternative arrangements when she goes on leave? What are those arrangements?)

7. In your opinion, what are the benefits of using an ‘agency’ to find a domestic worker? (Prompts: What did you finding most interesting about the recruitment and hiring experience? What was the most beneficial service from the entire process? Are there any disadvantages or issues you encountered? If so, elaborate. Would you recommend others to use an agency and if so, why?

8. Describe the work performance of your domestic worker after the placement? (Prompts: Focus on the employment period and if there were any notable changes or not; Was a replacement sought? If applicable, elaborate on reason for seeking a replacement? Explain the process of finding a replacement with the agency? Where there any notable differences in your decision-making process regarding new candidates and after the interviews? Elaborate)

9. Do you have any final comments to share, or questions for me?

Interview Schedule for MDWs:

Questions related to employment trajectories, livelihoods, social mobility, push-pull factors (general questions)-

- Can you tell me your country of origin?
- Have you lived in other countries before moving to South Africa?
- Did you come to South Africa alone, or with family, relatives, friends or were you recruited by an agency? Did you know anyone before moving here? (Social networks - Did you have family living here (cousins/aunt/uncle etc.)? Do you have family who lived/worked in SA?)
- Which local networks (church, shelters, NGOs, Trade Unions, etc) if any, have you relied on? How have these networks/the absence of a network furthered/hindered the process of finding a place to stay/ work?
- How long have you lived in South Africa? Have you lived in various cities/towns? What made you decide to stay in Cape Town?
- Can you tell me the reason for leaving your country and for relocating to SA?
- What was your occupation in your home country?

- re you married or single? Do you have children? (Prompt: Number of children, age, where they are living etc).

Questions related to the SA experience - work trajectory/networks/agency

- In terms of trajectory/employment path - what was your first job in the country; how long did it take you to find this job; how did you find this job? If not related to first job, please explain the story of how you ended up finding a job as a domestic worker?
- Before you started working in South Africa as a domestic worker, did you have any ideas about what domestic work is like in South Africa? How did your friends/family members describe domestic work to you?
- -How many domestic work employers have you had in South Africa? (Prompts: Describe the employment relationship, conditions of work, wages, live-in or live-out? Why did the job end?)
- How did you learn about agencies? (Prompt: What advice did you get? Please provide examples. What advice did you find most useful and why?)
- With reference to your job as a domestic worker/nanny/care worker, can you tell me which agency you used, what type of service did the agency offer clients, where you part of a char team or placed in household (prompts: part-time or full-time, live-in or live-out)?
- How many agencies did you initiate contact with? Have you used other agencies in the past? If yes, which ones and why did you choose those agencies?
- How did you find out about the agency that placed you in your current job?
- What were your reasons for using an agency? (Prompts: Did you use other recruitment methods? (Prompts: Gumtree or advertising in the newspaper if not mentioned earlier)?
- Would you recommend others to use an agency to find employment in the domestic sector? If yes, why? If no, why? (Probe: what are the benefits of using an agency to find work?)
- In your opinion and based on your experience, what are the challenges related to using an agency to find employment?

Questions related to PEAs and access to work:

- Describe your overall experience using an agency to find a job?
- Describe the recruitment and hiring process (from the beginning of the process until the end). Prompts: What documents did they ask you for? What were the typical questions the agency asked you?
- Did you undergo any form of training through the agency? If not through the agency, what training did you complete and where?
    - Briefly describe the content of the course.
    - Prompts: Why did you enrol for the course? Was the course helpful and in what ways? If yes/no, please explain.
    - How much did you pay for the training course? - Who was the training provider? *[if not through the agency]
- What support or advice did you receive from the agency during the recruitment process or placement process?
- How many interviews did the agency arrange for you with potential clients?
- Briefly describe the interview process with the clients/potential employers? (Prompts: Was the agent present? Where did the interview take place? What where the common questions they asked you? How did you describe yourself during the interview?)
- Did you have questions for the employer? If so, what questions did you ask? Please elaborate.
- What was your general impression of the potential clients/employers?
- Where you asked for a “trial”? (Prompt: How many trials have you had?)
- -Briefly describe your trial work period? (Prompts: What work were you asked to complete? How many days did you “trail” for?)
- Why do you think you were chosen for a trial? (Prompt: why do you think you were chosen for employment?)
- Who did you decide to work for and why?
- Briefly describe your current working conditions and your job description? (Prompts: Are you satisfied with your current work? Do you have an employment contract? How many days do you work? Are you paid for overtime? What are your working hours? What is your salary? How would you describe your employment relationship with your current employer?)
- -What advice would you give to a domestic worker trying to find better work in South Africa?

- In your opinion, why do you think employers prefer using agencies to find domestic workers?
- In your opinion, why do you think employers prefer Zimbabwean domestic workers?
- Do you have any final comments about “agencies”?

- Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B: Consent form

University of Cape Town
Faculty of Humanities

Title of research project:

Comfortable Others: The Process of Identity Niching among Private Employment Agencies, Employers and Migrant Domestic Workers

Names of principal researcher:

Bianca Tame

Department address:

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Ari.Sitas@uct.ac.za (Supervisor)

Name of participant:

Nature of the research/aim:

The overall aim of my research project is to demonstrate the key changes in the domestic work sector in South Africa in the past 10 years and the perceived trend in recruitment and hiring of black African Zimbabwean female migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Cape Town to illustrate empirically the demand for and supply of "comfortable others" through PEAs.

Participant's involvement:

Your involvement in this research entails the following:

- Making yourself available for an interview that may take approximately one hour of your time
- Allowing the researcher to digitally record the interview (note, only the researcher will have access to this digital recording, however, if you are uncomfortable, you may request that your interview is not digitally recorded); The recorded data as well as the transcript will kept in a safe location and will not be shared with anyone else
- The content of your interview will be used in the PhD thesis, conference papers and journal articles
- There will be no monetary benefits for participating this research
- Your participation in the study is voluntary
- You may stop the interview if you feel uncomfortable.
- If you wish to withdraw from the study, this option is available to you (the necessary contact details are listed above);
- Anonymity will be provided should you request to remain anonymous
- There are no known risks to you if you participate in this study.

I agree to participate in this research project.

I have read this consent form and the information it contains and had the opportunity to ask questions about them.

I agree to my responses being used for education and research on condition my privacy is respected, subject to the following:

I understand that if I do not want my personal details used in the research report, anonymity will be provided

I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in this project.

I understand I have the right to withdraw from this project at any stage.

Signature of Participant / Guardian (if under 18): ____________________________

Name of Participant / Guardian: ____

Signature of person who sought consent: ___________________________________

Name of person who sought consent: _______________________________________

Date: ______________________________

Appendix C: Summary of recruitment and hiring process

Table 4: Summary of client's interaction with PEAs and candidates

Clients's register with PEA

- Pay a registration fee and complete a registration form
- Specify household needs
  - Household size
  - Full-time or part-time domestic nanny/worker
  - Salary client is willing to offer
  - Required skills - for example cooking or care related
  - Cultural preferences

PEA initiates contact with client to verify information

- Once information is verifed, CV's or profiles of three candidate's are e-mailed to clients

Client's review and select candidates

- Review CV's and decide if the candidates should be interviewed
- Request further CV's or candidate profiles if unsatisfied with candidates provided
- Confirm three candidates to interview

PEAs arranges interviews

- PEAs arrange interviews at clients homes or at their offices
- Agents may/may not participate in the interview
- PEA provides information on what to ask or look out for during the interview

Interviews

- Interviews are conducted at the client's home or PEA office
- Clients provide candidates with their travel fare to the client's home
- Clients request further candidates if not satifisfied with the candidates interviewed
- If satsified with the candidates interviewed, clients select one or more candidates to a trial
- PEA are informed of the client's choice of candidate
- Scheduling arrangements are made for a trial work period

Trial work period

- Trial lasts for one or more days, depending on the client
- If unsatisfied with the candidates during the trial work period, further candidates are requested for interviews
- Transport fees and daily wage paid by the client during the trial work period

Select candidate

- Client's may speak to former employer/s listed on the candidate's reference letter
- Client's decide on a candidate that meets their requirements
- PEA informs the candidate they have been selected
- Candidate confirms their availability
- Client may request a polygraph test before finalising their decision
- If a candidate confirms their availability, passes polygraph test (if requested), PEA begin the paper work process

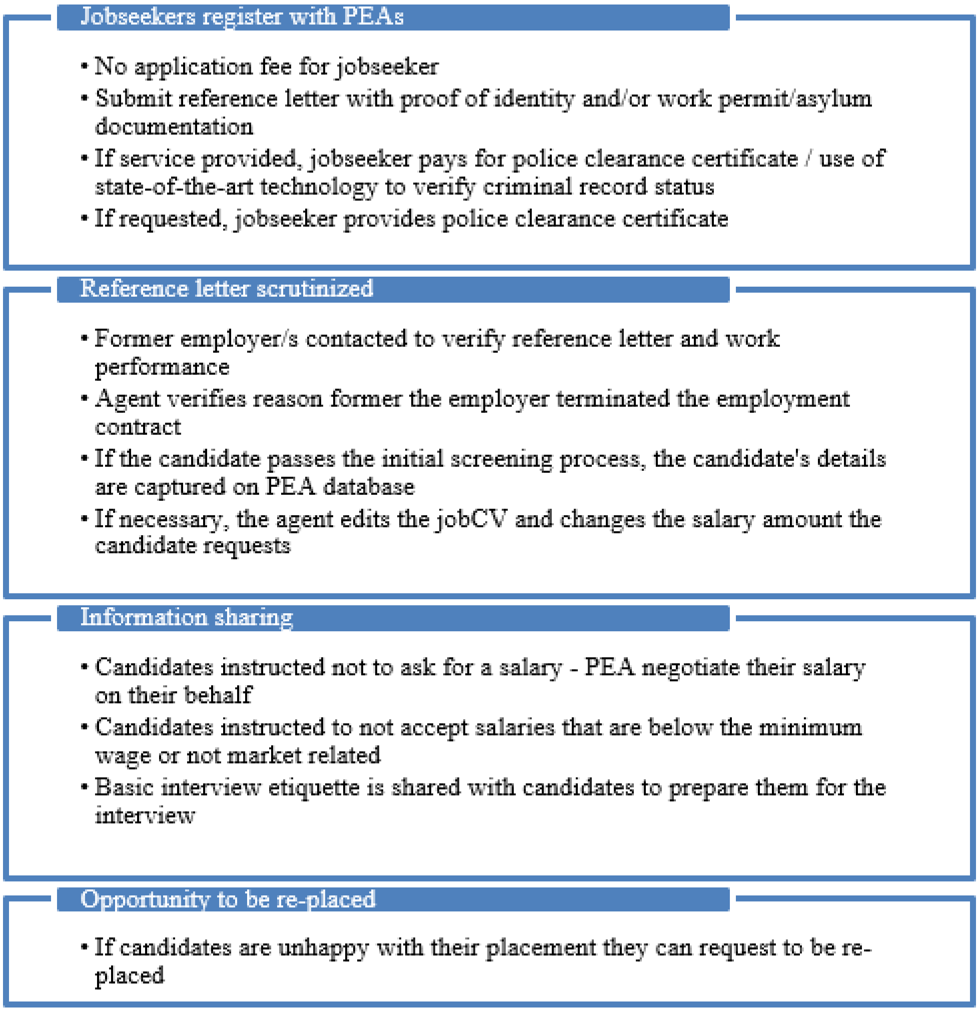
Contract and placement fee

- An employment contract is drawn up or template is sent to prospective employer to complete
- The salary is agreed to - the salary is used to determine the placement fee
- A contract signed between the agent and client is signed, an employment contract may be signed in the presence of the agent and domestic worker or signed and then e-mailed to the PEA

Three month guarentee

- If clients are unhappy with their selection they can request a replacement before the three month guarantee period expires without incurring additional charges (registration and placement fee)
- Clients may change their selection criteria
- Clients begin the review, interview, selection and trial work process

Table 5: Summary of jobseeker or candidates' interaction with PEA



Jobseekers register with PEAs

- No application fee for jobseeker
- Submit reference letter with proof of identity and/or work permit/asylum documentation
- If service provided, jobseeker pays for police clearance certificate / use of state-of-the-art technology to verify criminal record status
- If requested, jobseeker provides police clearance certificate

Reference letter scrutinized

- Former employer/s contacted to verify reference letter and work performance
- Agent verifies reason former the employer terminated the employment contract
- If the candidate passes the initial screening process, the candidate's details are captured on PEA database
- If necessary, the agent edits the jobCV and changes the salary amount the candidate requests

Information sharing

- Candidates instructed not to ask for a salary - PEA negotiate their salary on their behalf
- Candidates instructed to not accept salaries that are below the minimum wage or not market related
- Basic interview etiquette is shared with candidates to prepare them for the interview

Opportunity to be re-placed

- If candidates are unhappy with their placement they can request to be re-placed

Appendix D: List of completed interviews

List of interviews with agency owners and agents

Number	Name	Date of interview
1	Agency A Owner	11.06.2013
2	Agency A Agent	11.06.2013
3	Agency A Franchisee Owner	29.07.2013
4	Agency B Owner	12.11.2013
5	Agency B Agent	14.11.2013
6	Agency C Owner	25.11.2013
7	Agency C Agent	25.11.2013
8	Agency D Owner	08.08.2013
9	Agency E Owner	28.01.2014
10	Agency F Agent	26.07.2012
11	Agency G Owner	17.01.2014
12	Agency H Agent	28.01.2014

List of interviews with employers

Number	Name	Date of interview
1	Mrs Hogan	04.10.2013
2	Mrs Elgar	08.10.2013
3	Mrs Field	17.10.2013
4	Mrs Harley	17.10.2013
5	Mrs Pillay	7.11.2013
6	Mrs Roy	9.11.2013
7	Mrs Norton	03.12.2013
8	Mrs Lehy	10.12.2013
9	Mrs Conradie	03.12.2013
10	Mrs Bevis	04.12.2013
11	Mrs Nkhuta	06.12.2013
12	Mrs Chapman	09.12.2013
13	Mrs Elliot	10.12.2013
14	Mrs Vermaak	10.12.2013
15	Mrs Johnson	10.12.2013
16	Mrs Marriott	13.12.2013

List of interviews with migrant domestic workers

Number	Name	Date of interview
1	Patricia	24.03.2013
2	Agatha	14.04.2013
3	Shuvai	20.04.2013
4	Brenda	21.04.2013
5	Margaret	21.04.2013
6	Esther	28.04.2013
7	Wendy	28.04.2013
8	Fiona	15.04.2013; 3.06.2013; 14.06.2013; 26.06.2013
9	Flora	5.05.2013
10	Alice	5.05.2013
11	Trish	2.06.2013
12	Prudence	16.06.2013
13	Juliet	18.06.2013
14	Desiree	01.08.2013
15	Petunia	08.08.2013
16	Tinashe	04.08.2013
17	Garai	05.08.2013
18	Victoria	11.08.2013
19	Clarence	11.08.2013; 12.08.2013
20	Annie	31.08.2013
21	Nyasha	07.09.2013
22	Pearl	08.09.2013
23	Odette	14.09.2013
24	Jackie	14.09.2013

List of interviews with key informants

Number	Name	Date of interview
1	Department of Labour official	31.05.2013
2	Mrytle Witbooi, SADSAWU	22.05.2013
3	Labour consultant	11.04.2013; 8.08.2013
4	SADSAWU official a	16.09.2013
5	SADSAWU official b	16.09.2013

Appendix E: Table outlining MDWs' demographic profiles, employment arrangements and salaries earned

Table 6: Migrant domestic workers' demographic profile, employment arrangement and salary earned

Name	Age	Marital Status	Education	Number of children	Children's Location	Job description	Live-in/out status	Salary
Patricia	38	Single	O levels	1	Zimbabwe	Domestic worker (cleaning only)	Live-in	R4 000
Agatha	37	Single/Widow	O levels	1	SA/Zimbabwe	Domestic worker (working with older children but mainly cleaning related tasks)	Live-in	R3 000
Shuvai	40	Single	O levels	1	Zimbabwe	Domestic worker (primarily cleaning, older children)	Live-in	R3 000
Brenda	57	Single - husband ran off with another woman	O levels	5	Zimbabwe and South Africa	Domestic worker (cleaning only)	Live-in (but rents a room she shares with another domestic worker from another church to stay at on the weekend)	R2 800
Margaret	39	Single	O levels	1	Zimbabwe	Domestic nanny	Live-in	R2 500
Esther	37	Single	O levels	2	Zimbabwe	Domestic nanny	Live-in	R3000* (could

								earn more from overtime)
Wendy	45	Single	O levels	2	Zimbabwe	Domestic worker (cleaning only)	Live out	Not disclosed
Fiona	50s	Single	A levels; degree	2	Zimbabwe	Domestic nanny	Live out	R2 700
Flora	43	Single	O levels	0	Not applicable	Domestic nanny	Live-in	R 3 500
Alice	55	Married	O levels; ballet training; diplomas	2	Adults 1 in Zim	Domestic nanny	Live-in	R3 000
Trish	43	Separated/'Single'	A levels	3	SA	Domestic nanny	Live out	R3 400
Prudence	40	Single	O levels	4	Zimbabwe	Domestic nanny	Live-in	R4 200
Juliet	44	Married but 'Single', (husband left her for another woman)	A levels	2	Zimbabwe	Domestic nanny	Live-out	R4 000
Desiree	38	Married	O levels	2	Zimbabwe	Domestic nanny	Live-in	Satisfied' with amount but not disclosed
Petunia	40	Married	A levels	0	Not applicable	Domestic nanny	Live-in	R3 200

Tinashe	34	Married	O levels	2	South Africa	Domestic worker (mainly cleaning but cares for older children)	Live-out	Not disclosed
Garai	43	Single	O levels	1	SA	Domestic nanny	Live-in	R3 000
Victoria	39	Married	O levels	2	Zimbabwe	Domestic nanny	Live-out	R 3 400
Clarence	38	Single / Divorced	A levels	4	Zimbabwe	Domestic nanny	Live-in	R3 200
Annie	32	Single	O levels	1	Zimbabwe	Domestic nanny	Live-in	R3 000
Nyasha	23	Single	O levels	0	Not applicable	Domestic nanny	Live-out	R3 200
Pearl	29	Single	Enrolled for Matric (distant learning)	2	Zimbabwe	Domestic nanny	Live-in	R3 500
Odette	43	Single	O levels/management diploma	0	Not applicable	Domestic nanny	Live out	R 3 800
Jackie	40s	Married	O levels	3	Zimbabwe/South Africa	Domestic worker (cleaning only)	Live out	R2 200

Appendix F: Table outlining employers' demographic profile, brief description of domestic worker/s employed, and salary paid.

Table 7: Employers' demographic profile, brief description of domestic worker/s employed, and salary paid.

Name of employer	Age	Race	Employment	Marital Status	Kids	No of DWs	Type of domestic worker and profile at the time of the interview	Live-in /Live-out status of full-time domestic worker/nanny	Salary, if disclosed
Mrs Hogan	44	W	Professional	M	2	2	Formerly Zimbabwean domestic worker, currently South African domestic nanny (full-time) Domestic worker (gardening, part-time)	Live-out	R4200 for domestic nanny
Mrs Elgar	57	W	Professional	M	Non	3	Malawian male domestic worker, part-time (cleaning, housekeeping, gardening). South African Coloured female part-time domestic worker, once a week (cleaning)	Live-out	MDW through agency = R400 X3 days a week; Domestic worker: R320 for half a day once a week

Mrs Field	38	W	Professional, consultant	M	2	1	Zimbabwean domestic nanny (full-time)	Live-in (with her son)	R3500 a month
Mrs Harley	46	W	Full time parent but assists husband with private work	M	2	2	Babysitter; SWAT team	Live-out	R58 per hr; R 45 @ night = for a babysitter found through an agency; R 170 per hour for SWAT team, 4-6 women in team
Mrs Pillay	52	I	Business management, assists husband from home	M	2	1	South African Coloured domestic worker (cleaning, full-time)	Live-in	Not disclosed
Mrs Roy	49	W	Professional, own business	M	2	1	Formerly Zimbabwean domestic worker (cleaning, full-time), currently South African African domestic worker (cleaning, full-time)	Live-in	Started off with R1800, hovering around R4000 a month now
Mrs Norton	40	W	Manager	M	3	3	Zimbabwean domestic nanny (full-time); South African African domestic worker (cleaning, part-time); South African African gardener (part-time)	Live-in	R4000, but varies because of overtime

Mrs Lehy	32	W	Works part-time, tourism sector	M	1	2	Zimbabwean domestic nanny (full-time); South African African domestic worker (cleaning, part-time)	Live-out	Domestic nanny works 6 hours per day, earns R3000 a month. Domestic worker paid R250 for one day a week
Mrs Conradie	34	W	Professional, but left work to take care of children	M	2	1	Zimbabwean domestic nanny (full-time)	Live-out	R3200
Mrs Bevis	35	W	Professional	M	1	1	Zimbabwean domestic nanny (full-time)	Live-out	R4000 but R900 deducted for rent (employer bought her a flat)
Mrs Nkhuta	30	A	Professional, Full-time, corporate sector	M	1	1	Zimbabwean domestic nanny (full-time); South African African domestic worker (cleaning, part-time)	Live-out	Domestic nanny earns R5500 Domestic worker earns R2000 a month for 2 days a week
Mrs Chapman	36	W	Professional, Marketing Manager	M	1	1	Zimbabwean domestic nanny (full-time)	Live-in	R4000, but R5000 a month because of overtime. Employer works from 8am - 6pm

Mrs Elliot	30	W	Professional, part-time	M	1	1	Zimbabwean domestic nanny (full-time)	Live-in	R4000 a month but with overtime salary ranges between R4000- R4800
Mrs Vermaak	32	W	No longer works, stay at home mother	M	2	1	Zimbabwean domestic nanny (full-time)	Live-out	R3900 a month
Mrs Johnson	37	C	Management, corporate sector		2	1	Zimbabwean domestic nanny (full-time)	Live-out	R4000 a month
Mrs Marriott	37	W	Professional, own consultancy business	M	2	1	Zimbabwean domestic nanny (full-time)	Live-out	Basic salary is R4500/5000 but monthly salary often R7000, because of overtime with work hours ranging from 7am-10pm