

# **Towards an interpretation of the experiences of Migrant Domestic Workers: A Cultural Psychology approach**

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## **1. Abstract**

Migrant domestic workers constitute a transnational group united in their employment as domestic labour in their employers' households. Through the application of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998) this study explores the experiences of three Indonesian, two Sinhalese Sri Lankan and one Filipina migrant domestic workers (MDWs). This study provides evidence that MDWs share a characteristic purpose for migration as well as experiences of unnecessary risk and trauma during their employment. Because of these commonalities of experience this study suggests that MDWs could be recognised as a distinct transnational culture and on this basis frameworks for their psychological support and ultimately political protection can be justified.

## **2. Introduction**

Anderson, a sociologist, is a key source of thought on migrant domestic work globally. In her experience, and despite the efforts by governments and international bodies (such as the International Labour Organisation) to perform the contrary, she finds attempts at defining Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) to be an impossible pursuit. Essentially Anderson suggests that, besides from their functional collective title, MDWs must only be definable on the basis of their very lack of job description and by the ambiguity of their lack of "status and authority within the house...to set limits to her own tasks", she suggests most graphically that for the household in which they are employed MDWs are most easily defined as the "doer of 'dirty' work" (Anderson 2000, p25-6).

Anderson explains that this ambiguity in role can be traced to a theoretical conundrum, to do so she uses sociological parlance. "The domestic worker is selling not only her 'labour power' (the property of the person), but also her personhood" (Anderson 2000, p3 after Locke 1993). This suggests that, based on the Marxist principles outlined by Locke in his

Two Treatise of Government (1689), that MDWs are not only required to sell something that is rightly theirs', their labour, but also something that is not, something that deserves to be protected, namely their very being. This explanation provides a theoretical lens for viewing the existential reality for MDWs and enables parallels with other groups similarly involved in people trafficking, the sex trade for example. As a result of this existential confusion MDWs have gone undefined and underrepresented and, like sex workers, they are greatly at risk from exploitation and abuse by the people who make use of their services.

It was not until 1984 that the Commission for Filipino Migrant Workers (CFMW) made the connection between the high frequency of reported abuse among Filipina MDWs and their lack of protection under UK immigration law (Anderson 2000, p92). As a result Kalayaan (*freedom* in the Filipino Tagalog dialect) was founded in 1987, but it was not until 1998, after eleven years of campaigning, that the Labour government modified immigration laws to give MDWs the right to pursue new employment upon leaving an abusive employer. Ten years on the government is debating the removal of this protection, the repercussions of which are discussed in detail elsewhere. This cultural detail provides an important background for a very topical discussion of psychology of this group.

As a sociologist Anderson's work provides a compelling reading into the psychological life of MDWs, but avoids the application of psychological ideas. This is characteristic of the approaches to this topic made by representatives of Sociology, Anthropology, Gender Studies, Analytical Politics and Political Geography. Thus aside from providing context these disciplines have been found to offer little assistance here. Indeed Psychology itself can offer little in the specific study of MDWs, this is perhaps indicative of the very issue of MDWs legitimacy in the UK.

It is therefore necessary to consider what wider Psychology and related disciplines can offer. The psychological study of migration and the allied study of psychological and psychiatric disorders relating to migration are topics that have been widely studied. Littlewood & Lipsedge (1989), in their initial work on Social Psychiatry, offer a comprehensive understanding of migration as a social phenomenon. They conclude that complex psychological and psychiatric difficulties associated primarily with alienation upon migration fundamentally require cultural considerations. Other studies in the perspective of psychological medicine, such as that by the Aesop study group, have identified cross-cultural

differences in the morbidity rate of psychoses, but despite such large scale reports as the Ethnic Minority Psychiatric Illness Rates in the Community (EMPIRIC) (2002), and as Bhugra & Mastrogianni (2004) identify, other common mental disorders (CMDs) have not been studied nearly as widely among minority migrant groups.

Interestingly for any study of migrant groups and congruent with the ideas raised by Littlewood & Lipsedge (1989), Bhugra & Mastrogianni (2004) suggest that globalization “is likely to influence both idioms of distress and pathways to care” (Bhugra & Mastrogianni 2004, p18). As Anderson (2000) has been keen to indicate, MDWs could be considered both facilitators of globalization, through the affordance they offer for others to promote their own productivity through diminishing their own domestic commitments, and conversely as migrants are potential victims of it, as Bhugra & Mastrogianni (2004) highlight.

What Littlewood & Lipsedge (1989) make reference to and what contemporary cultural psychiatry potentially misses may be enlightened by Hines’ (1996) comments directed more exclusively at psychology. Hines (1996) suggests that whilst Cross-cultural psychology is purely interested in cultural differences, and that Trans-cultural psychology “is concerned with ensuring that psychological theories and findings have *trans*-cultural application” (Hines 1996, p4), it is only a truly Cultural psychology that can recognise the relevance of both of these goals and simultaneously promote the importance of the primary processes that underlie the role that culture plays in all psychological phenomenon. “In this respect, Cultural Psychology... must be seen to occupy a central position in the discipline, concerned with theories of the role that culture plays in the meaning-making process, and all aspects of human behaviour and experience” (Hines 1996, p4).

Anderson (2000) highlights that during the campaigning period of the 80s and 90s she was surprised by the “forging of a common identity in spite of national, religious and ethnic differences is based first and foremost on type of employment and immigration status - working as a migrant domestic worker...despite national, ethnic and religious differences” (Anderson 2001, p673-83), this she referred to as Transnationalism. It is suggested here that this transnational identity may be the basis of a unique culture characteristic to MDWs in this age of globalization, and it is the aim of this study to attempt to develop a novel understanding of this culture and to interpret any collective features that may add context to it.

### 2.1. The Research Question

Do the commonalities of meaning-making amongst a sample of this transnational group present the components of a culture, and how might the results of this study assist our understanding and support of migrant domestic workers?

### **3. Methodology**

Despite Anderson's reference to the analysis of "psychobiography" as "messy" (Anderson 2000, p6-7), the methods of the qualitative paradigm have been selected for this study to enable the uncovering of "the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods" (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p11). This is considered to be a plausible method for two reasons. First of all the scarcity of psychological literature on the topic demands a method that is exploratory by design and leads to the creation of theory and questions for further research. Second, as an attempt at pursuing a cultural psychological perspective, this study will need to consider the collective meaning to be found within the group of interest which by definition makes Grounded Theory the favoured method.

Qualitative research has three components; data, procedure (coding, memos and sampling) and reporting (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with MDWs, this provides the utility of a prepared list of topics which can be adapted over time to pursue new avenues of enquiry whilst ensuring that the researcher can maximise the coverage of relevant detail within the duration of the interview. Because of this semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility for values, beliefs and other concepts to be fully explored. The procedures used are based on those dictated by Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998) which includes open and axial coding, conceptualizing and theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is the process of simultaneous data collection, coding, and analysis, which in turn permits the process of data collection to respond to the ongoing process of emerging theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Finally regarding reporting, the Analysis

section below will consider in isolation the theoretical categories, subcategories and concepts that develop out of the data, whilst the Discussion section below will summarise these findings in light of previous studies.

### 3.1. Participants

After preliminary discussions with Kalayaan it was understood that the number of potential participants was likely to be limited to 6-10 individuals, the selection process was performed by Kalayaan staff on the basis of likelihood to disclose and English ability. As a result all participants were also students on an English as a second language (ESOL) course run by the organisation. By the time that data collection had commenced a total of 6 participants had been recruited. Each participant, on completion of an informed consent form, took part in a semi-structured interview which lasted from between 45 minutes and 1 ½ hours. The 6 participants all were female, three were Indonesian Muslims, two Sri Lankan (Sinhalese) Buddhists and a Catholic Filipina.

### 3.2. Materials

Materials present during the data collection process included an analogue microcassette recorder, one list of semi-structured interview topics printed and written in clear English for to support the participants (all of whom were speakers of English as a second language), and a comprehensive informed consent form, the additional detail of which assisted in the briefing and debriefing stages of the interview.

### 3.3. Procedure

To become more familiar with clients and to explain the purpose of the study the researcher attended Kalayaan's centre on several occasions prior to commencing data collection. Prior to the interview the participants were given a copy of the comprehensive informed consent form, written in unambiguous English to ensure participants' complete understanding of the parameters and their rights to anonymity, confidentiality and control over their data. At the end of the interview a full debriefing was given, this included a reminder of the support available to them should they feel any emotional distress after revisiting experiences.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

According to the rigour of analysis by Grounded Theory the semi-structured interview topics underwent some modification as a feature of the process of theoretical sampling and as a result of simultaneous analysis via open and axial coding.

### 3.5. Ethical Issues

After an initial research proposal had been presented to Kalayaan a revised proposal was submitted appended to a mutually negotiated ethical approval form. The ethical issues of this study were entirely informed by the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society and were agreed with the researcher's supervisor. It was agreed that interviews would be carried out at the Kalayaan centre during hours when a representative of Kalayaan could be present. To avoid language difficulties and associated ethical issues it was ensured that participants were selected from the Kalayaan clients on their ESOL course. To ensure clarity on their rights, the purpose of the study and likely questions = participants were given a copy of their own consent form and a list of topics for the semi-structured interviews, both written in unambiguous English. To enhance trust the researcher made himself visible in the centre regularly prior to the commencement of the study, this allowed for introductions by Kalayaan staff which, it is hoped, assisted in the legitimacy of the researchers presence. In the interests of improving in the perceptions of potential participants the researcher also attempted to adhere to Rew, Betchel, and Sapp's (1993) attributes of qualitative researchers, namely "appropriateness, authenticity, credibility, intuitiveness, receptivity, reciprocity and sensitivity" (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p6)

## 4. Analysis

The analysis of the six transcripts revealed three categories, each with two subcategories. These three categories help us to understand the common and contested concepts which construct the psychological life of our participants, these concepts are supported by verbatim quotations and are presented in Table 1 below. (Further details of the Analysis section can be found in the Appendix below).

**Table I : Categories and Subcategories**

Category		Subcategory
1	It takes autonomy to sacrifice it	A - Autonomy, dependents and responsibility
		B - Help-giving & sacrifice
2	The outcome of their sacrifice	C - Employers & Employment
		D - Personal impact of abuse
3	Recovering control, rediscovering happiness	E - Safe patronage back to control
		F - Conditions for happiness; the other side of a duality

## **5. Discussion**

The aim of this section is to consider how the evidence provided in the categories identified by this study might support or refute previous findings, and therefore to set out to what extent we might be able to provide a novel explanation of the psychology of MDWs.

### 5.1. Category 1:

#### It takes autonomy to sacrifice it

In the first subcategory key concepts included the autonomy to make the decision to migrate, the relevant socio-economic complications involved in this decision, help-giving behaviour and the resultant sense of sacrifice. Evidence from this study suggests that cultural and economic factors mediated the need for this decision to be made, this finding is supported by Tarcoll (1996) in Lan's (2003) study of Filipina MDWs. This finding was further developed by this study which suggests that, despite evidence of cultural and socio-economic pressures, participants additionally claim a sense of autonomy and individual agency over this decision-making process, above and beyond other pressures including those of family members. It was also found that in making this decision the participants assumed responsibilities and roles that could not be performed adequately by alternative and naturally preferred relatives, this assertion is also supported in previous work by Lindio-McGovern (2004). This study suggests that there is therefore a potential cultural explanation for psychological phenomena intrinsic to the psychological experience of MDWs. The explanation offered for this is that, as the meritocratic principles widely associated with the advances of globalisation spread, the formerly staid social strata typical of participants' home countries retreat. The effect is one

of increased social fluidity and increased aspiration for younger generations. The result of this is an increased socio-economic burden that must be supported by the household, which in instance of the absence of stronger candidate falls to responsibility of our participants.

In this category a second subcategory was identified based on the *in vivo* concept of the sacrifice, this was defined above as a loss of contact with loved ones in order to provide for them. This assertion is also supported by Lindio-McGovern who in a transnational study of Filipina MDWs identified the culturally bound concept of *kapit sa patalim* or ‘hanging on a double-edged sword’. For Filipina MDWs this concept had a cultural bound meaning, that they “would prefer to be close to their families but if they stayed home they would not be able to provide for their needs” (Lindio-McGovern 2004, p220-221). It is suggested by this study that, because of evidence of a similar concept across the participants representing a minimum of three identifiably distinct cultural groups, that this concept may be a construct shared purely across the our transnational group of MDWs.

## 5.2. Category 2:

### The outcome of their sacrifice

The second category sought to explain the lasting impact of this sacrifice by considering the experiences MDWs are thereafter subjected to and the self reported effects that the inevitable exploitation and abuse have had on them. Participants provided clear evidence that employers are typically averse to the construction of temporal and functional boundaries for their employees. It has been predicted by Anderson (2000) that this lack of definition would have an effect on the wellbeing of MDWs, and this study has found evidence to support this claim. Put more precisely a lack of definition of role allied with maltreatment by employers has a combination of effects from persistent sensations of fear, feelings of pain in the ‘heart and mind’, a sense of impotence and a loss of agency, these are all concepts reported in this study. The reports of such treatment and effects have a resonance *a propos* psychological health. Work by Zimmerman, Hossain, Yun, Roche, Morrison & Watts (2006) on the implications of the trafficking of people on their Physical and Psychological health supports the assertion that this evidence is indicative of poor psychological health. Zimmerman et al (2006) found, for their sample of European females and adolescents that have been subject to people trafficking for sex and labour exploitation, high proportions of responses relating to depression such as responses of “depression/feeling very sad”, “feelings of worthlessness”,



and responses relating to anxiety such as “nervousness and fearfulness” (Zimmerman et al 2006, p18).

There are however a number of disparities between the two studies. Zimmerman (2006) suggests that such experiences are “likely to inhibit women from re-engaging in normal daily activities such as caring for family, employment, or education” (Zimmerman et al 2006, p17), this assertion cannot be supported by this study. This could be an issue of sampling, Zimmerman et al’s (2006) sample has a higher proportion of those trafficked for the sex trade. And this difference may be related to the fact that, again because of the lack of role definition, MDWs occupy a position within the household that does not permit disengagement. A final disparity between the two studies exists due to very presence of episodes of trauma recollected above, this study cannot support Zimmerman et al’s (2006) assertion of a link between trauma and memory inhibition (Zimmerman et al. 2006, p22), however this may require further investigation into, for example, into time lapse since the episode of trauma.

### 5.3. Category 3:

#### Recovering control, rediscovering happiness

The third category sought to explain the relevance of two forms of patronage on the recovery of control or agency, and finally attempted to provide an understanding what cost these experiences may have on future happiness. As suggested above, the involvement of this sample in this study is informative in itself, their disclosure says something of the changes they have endured. It is suggested above that the return of meaning to the Filipina’s concept of the *double edged sword* (Lindio-McGovern 2004) and the associated refreshment of purpose marks the regrowth of autonomy and control. And that fundamentally it is the involvement of a third party that often assisted in MDWs escape from maltreatment. This is an interesting trend and may be explained by an analogy with the basis of Frankl’s logotherapy (1989) and the Humanism of Rogers (1961). However, rather than the therapist as a conduit for growth in the present instance, it is an individual brought into contact with the participant that has given the context for escape and latterly growth. The second element was based upon a prevalence of discussions of god and fate and particularly evident in comments relating to the supernatural’s involvement in the exceptional experiences of the participants. Findings in a study by Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi & McMillan (2000) support the

idea that openness to contemplation of the higher significance of traumatic events can be a predictor of greater recovery rather than simply habitual religious participation. (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi & McMillan 2000, p525-6). There may therefore be a need further research into a general sense of spirituality amongst MDWs and their post traumatic growth.

The final subcategory summarises participants' conditions for happiness. After the consideration of such concepts sacrifice, abuse, pain, fear and dehumanisation, to discuss happiness is to create a duality within participants' existence. Participants' conditions for happiness included a need for regularized leisure time and communication with family. Work by Lindo-McGovern (2004) also provides examples of two strategies utilised by Filipina MDWs to combat familial alienation, to improve happiness. The first involves the "distant-mothering role" (Lindio-McGovern 2004, p221) whereby the MDW attains some satisfaction in connection with her children at home, this is certainly evident in this study. The second strategy of "surrogate mothering—caring for their employers' children as if they were their own" (Lindio-McGovern 2004, p221), was less evident. Lindio-McGovern (2004) cites Nelson (1990) & Wrigley (1995) in suggesting that either of these strategies may be counter-productive, serving to "intensify their pain of separation" (Nelson 1990; Wrigley 1995 in Lindio-McGovern 2004, p221), and this of course an addition to the concepts uncovered above.

## **6. Summary**

As stated at the outset the aim of this study was to determine if a transnational group, considered indefinable by sociologists (Anderson 2000, p25), forged through equally liberating and restricting forces of globalization, might be re-definable as a cultural group in its own right on the basis of cultural psychological analysis. It is asserted here that this present study strongly supports this prediction, based on the evidence presented above which is inherently grounded in the accounts of migrant domestic workers themselves. However what has been made apparent throughout the analysis of the accounts of experiences of MDWs is that theirs' is no ordinary culture with peculiar customs, rituals and fetishes. Rather the transnational culture of migrant domestic workers is constructed upon the shared psychological experiences of exploitation, migration, abuse and familial alienation.

This study has utilized the ideals of Lipsedge & Littlewood (1989) and of Hines (1996) in attempting to elaborate on the work of theorists in other fields, such as Anderson (2000, 2001). In doing so this study has first of all provided evidence to support the prediction of Bhugra & Mastrogianni (2004) that globalization is an “influencing of both idioms of distress and pathways to care” (Bhugra & Mastrogianni 2004, p18) and has made an attempted to outline a culture that is unique in its distressingly suitability for their investigation.

This pilot study presents a qualitatively different theoretical understanding of migrant domestic workers, and suggests but continued research into this line of enquiry may provide further grounds for adapted and novel frameworks for the psychological support of this marginalised and neglected group through suitable legislative intervention.

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## **8. Appendices**

Appendices, Analysis & Qualitative Reflexive all available upon request from the author: [mattcliffspencer@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mattcliffspencer@yahoo.co.uk)