

Domestic-Sector Work in the UK: Locating Men in the Configuration of Gendered Care and Migration Regimes

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Research on the processes underpinning the contemporary growth in the commoditisation of domestic labour focuses on feminised areas of work, such as cleaning and care. Yet research examining trends in domestic outsourcing highlights how men's, as well as women's, household work is subject to increased commoditisation. Through a qualitative enquiry of households which outsource stereotypically male domestic chores – essentially, household and garden repair and maintenance – and men who do such work for pay, we seek to understand the processes underpinning its outsourcing. In doing so, we adopt a framework which treats the paid domestic-work sector as a critical nexus at which gendered care and migration regimes intersect. The focus on male domestic chores, however, requires that we broaden that framework in ways which can more fully illuminate men's positions within it.

Introduction

There is a substantial body of UK and international research on the processes underpinning the contemporary growth of waged domestic labour.¹ Within that research, domestic work is treated as synonymous with women's work (Kilkey and Perrons, 2010).² Yet, a related body of research on trends in domestic outsourcing – 'replacing unpaid household production with market substitutes' (Bittman *et al.*, 1999: 249) – adopts a broader definition, one which incorporates both stereotypically male (e.g. household and garden maintenance and repair) and female (e.g. cleaning, care-giving and cooking) domestic responsibilities (e.g. de Ruijter and van der Lippe, 2009).³ Interestingly, that research suggests that not only is the contemporary growth in outsourcing apparent for both male- and female-typed tasks (Cancedda, 2001), but that in some situations outsourcing is as prevalent (Kilkey and Perrons, 2010), if not more so (Bittman *et al.*, 1999), in the case of male domestic chores. While questions of what accounts for the growth in the outsourcing of male domestic chores and who then performs them once commoditised are beginning to be addressed in other contexts (see Cox (2008) on New Zealand; and Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2009) on the USA), with the exception of Kilkey and Perrons (2010), the phenomenon remains largely unexplored in relation to the UK.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to addressing that gap. The paper focuses on the outsourcing of male domestic chores among households with dependent children and a resident father, drawing on a qualitative study of such households and the workers to whom they outsource. While this household type is among those most likely in the UK to outsource male domestic chores (Kilkey and Perrons, 2010), it is important to

acknowledge that our focus will yield a partial account of the phenomenon. This is because the patterns and rationale of outsourcing are dynamic, shifting as households move through the domestic lifecycle (Pahl, 1984).

Drawing on the insights of Williams and Gavanas (2008) and Lutz (2008a), our analysis is situated within a framework that treats the paid domestic-work sector as a critical nexus at which gendered care and migration regimes intersect. We seek to develop the framework, however, by including exploration of the shifting configurations of men's, and more specifically fathers', work–life patterns and the social policies framing these, and by examining how the UK's 'managed migration strategy' contributes to the constitution of an appropriate migrant *male* domestic-sector workforce, as well as divisions within it.

The study⁴

During 2008/09, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with 24 households containing dependent children and a resident father, which repeatedly outsource male domestic chores. In each household, a separate interview was sought with the father, and, if one existed, the partner. In practice, mothers were usually the initial recruits to the research, and fathers' participation was negotiated subsequently. We succeeded in securing a father interview in most households, yielding a total of 45 individual interviews.⁵ The households were mostly professional heterosexual couples, with household incomes in the top quintile of UK household disposable income. The majority were dual-income earners, with men employed full-time and women employed either full- or part-time. In some cases, women were on maternity leave, while in still others they had withdrawn from the labour market to raise children.

Additionally, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with 29 men and one woman working for pay in private households undertaking a range of male domestic chores, including: landscaping and lawn care, assembling garden sheds, paving driveways, repairing fences, changing locks, replacing taps, fixing leaks, mounting shelves, hanging pictures and mirrors, attaching fixtures and painting and decorating.⁶ We term the workers 'handymen' to denote the lack of specialisation in their job. In colloquial terms, their distinguishing feature was that they could 'turn their hand to anything'. Five of the handymen were white British and 25 were recent migrants to the UK. The majority of the latter were migrant workers from Poland, but a few were asylum seekers from Iran. We also conducted interviews with four agencies, which supply handyman services to households. The majority of interviews were undertaken in and around London, but some were conducted in other areas of England (mostly North Eastern England).

Outsourcing of male domestic chores as a strategy to help men reconcile work and family life

In examining households' rationales for the outsourcing of male domestic chores, we find strong parallels with a key theme to have emerged from research exploring the commoditisation of female areas of domestic labour. Thus, the outsourcing of male domestic chores is identified by men and women as playing an important role in household strategies for reconciling work and family life. More specifically, we find that outsourcing is in large part a response to the time pressures experienced by *men* attempting to balance work and family.

While it is recognised that reconciling paid work and family life has long been a practice of women, there has been less concern about whether and how men might employ strategies to help combine the two. This is because the UK's male breadwinner model, which defined men's family responsibilities almost exclusively in economic terms, was assumed to negate work–family conflict for men. In recent years however, there has been a range of shifts bound up with post-industrial social and economic transformations, which change the terrain on which men (and women) must practise work and family. One shift is the growing expectation for more active, involved and hands-on fathering, particularly as it relates to middle-class families (Dermott, 2008). As is evidenced in time-use surveys, UK fathers spend more time caring for their children than previously; for fathers with children under five years, absolute involvement in child-related activities is up from an average of 15 minutes a day in the mid-1970s to two hours a day in the late 1990s. The data indicate, though, that father-time still lags behind that of mothers even when both are in full-time paid work, such that among dual full-time earner couples with dependent children father-time amounts to only 75 per cent of mother-time on weekdays (O'Brien, 2005: 13). This broad pattern held for the households we interviewed. Although mothers maintained the bulk of the responsibility for the care of children, most of the fathers were actively involved in everyday child care tasks, such as taking children to school, preparing meals for them, or giving them baths and putting them to bed, and they felt more involved with their own children than their fathers had been with them. For most of the fathers, however, child-time had to be accommodated within a largely unaltered breadwinning pattern of paid work. As one father commented:

generally I try and see them, even if it means working in the evenings more, or working before they get up, so sometimes I'll start the day at sort of 4:30, 5 in the mornings, so that I can see the boys when they wake up at 7, spend some time with them, come in, work, go home, see the kids, have their bath, work again. . . (Household_03_Father)

Other fathers could be described as 'weekend dads'; paid work required a long daily commute or being away from home during the week, and weekends were the only opportunity to perform active fathering, and tended to be ring-fenced for this purpose. In the UK, connection to the labour market remains an important marker of male identity (Seidler, 1997). Consistent with the data on the impact of parenthood on employment (Dermott, 2008; EC, 2009a), there was little evidence among the fathers interviewed of any scaling back of hours devoted to paid work, and indeed, for some, becoming fathers had strengthened their commitment to careers.

The expectation, internalised for many (although not without ambivalences), of active and involved fathering in the context of little or no adjustment to the volume of paid work, created time pressures for the fathers we interviewed. In common with what has been found in respect of how women balance work and care (Everingham, 2002), fathers, therefore, developed strategies to 'make' time. Outsourcing of male domestic chores was one strategy adopted by the fathers:

I mean, before the kids arrived, all of these things [male domestic chores] I did in our house . . . but now, we pretty much get someone in to do everything, other than the very basic . . . and it's largely a time constraint issue. Because during the week, I'm working. During the weekend,

I'm with the kids. And I'd rather somebody else did the jobs that would otherwise take me away from the kids and I spend time with the kids. [Household_15_Father]

There is also evidence from the study that men are doubly 'let off the hook', since a common outcome of outsourcing male domestic chores is that responsibility for its management falls to female partners. Often it was women who initiated the organisation of handyman work by drawing up lists of tasks needing attention, contacting and selecting appropriate handymen, negotiating payments and overseeing the completion of jobs. They did so because they were at home more, because their work was deemed more flexible, or because it was more important to them than their partners that the jobs got done.

Situating the outsourcing of male domestic chores within the UK gendered care regime

The outsourcing of male domestic chores as a private strategy to ease men's work/family conflict, is related to the particular policy framework around the reconciliation of work and family life to have emerged in the UK over the last decade or so. Since 1997, New Labour has gone a considerable way in reversing the non-interventionist orthodoxy dominant in liberal/male breadwinner welfare regimes, and has introduced a range of policies designed to help families reconcile paid work and family life. Despite considerable rhetoric about the importance of father-involvement in care particularly for child development, mothers have been the main target of policies. In terms of 'care-leaves' for example, the emphasis has been on extending maternity leave, rather than parental leave (Lewis, 2009). The provisions that have been introduced to allow fathers time off to care have been described as 'little more than tokenistic' (Lister, 2006: 319), attaching, in particular, poor levels of wage replacement, such that 45 per cent of fathers fail to take-up paternity leave, with most saying they do not because they cannot afford to (EHRC, 2009). While the UK labour market is one of the most flexible in the EU (Eurostat, 2009), regulation to shift the balance of power from employers to workers in the determination of working patterns has remained weak. Flexible working rights in the UK award only the right to *request* to work flexibly, and have been taken up overwhelmingly by women (Bell and Bryson, 2005). Undoubtedly for some categories of male workers the high levels of (employer-determined) atypical working patterns, such as shift working, are facilitating more father-time (Lewis, 2009).⁷ For professional and managerial men, however, this does not seem to be the case. When compared with their intermediate and manual level counterparts, such men have access to better employer-provided entitlements around the reconciliation of work and family life and have greater time-autonomy in their workplace (Crompton and Lyonette, 2008; Fagan *et al.*, 2008). However, evidence suggests (*ibid.*; EHRC, 2009) that they do not feel able to take advantage of the opportunities, and experience (as do their female counterparts) higher levels of work-life conflict. In part, this is because as Fagan *et al.* (2008: 200) note 'flexibility and discretion can go hand-in-hand with a sense of obligation to work long hours when required to cover variable or persistently heavy workloads'. It is also because they have career and promotion aspirations, which are associated with increased levels of work intensity (Crompton and Lyonette, 2008).

Policies in the UK, therefore, have done little to alter fathers' working patterns. By contrast, the expectation that women adjust paid work to fit around raising children, at least in the early years, has been reinforced. This helps to explain our finding that

the outsourcing of male domestic chores often leads to a transfer of responsibility for getting them done from men to women, and has implications for gender equality in terms of domestic workloads. Outsourcing is also likely to have classed implications for the ability to conform to expectations of the 'good father', since among the households we interviewed affordability was a prerequisite for employing handymen. As one father put it when explaining how he came to outsource: 'it's when time becomes precious and we've got the kind of disposable income to pay somebody else to do it' [Household_11_Father]. For this household, the wife's shift from part-time to full-time work once the children started school provided the additional income for outsourcing. For others, however, affordability rested on an increasing differential between their income and the cost of employing handymen, a trend related to rising income inequalities in the UK, and London in particular, and was reinforced by the use of *migrant* handymen (see Perrons *et al.*, 2010 for a fuller discussion).

UK migration policy: the constitution of an appropriate *migrant* handyman workforce

For reasons similar to those relating to commoditised female areas of domestic labour (see Cox, 2006), our interviews with households and handymen reveal a tendency for much commoditised male domestic labour to occur within the grey economy; a feature that contributes to rendering the establishment of reliable data on the number and characteristics of handymen a difficult task. Bearing that in mind, Kilkey and Perrons (2010), utilising the UK Labour Force Survey, and situating their analysis within a broader examination of the profile of the domestic-sector workforce, have examined the scale and characteristics of the handyman sector. They found for the period 2004–07 that while 'foreign-born'⁸ were over-represented among domestic-sector workers in the UK, constituting 16 per cent of such workers compared with 10 per cent of all workers, handyman-type work was less migrant-dense than female areas of domestic-work; a finding Kilkey and Perrons suggest may be related to gendered constructions of 'skill', which in turn impact on pay and conditions of employment, and ultimately on the constitution of appropriate workforces. However, compared with the profile of the domestic-sector workforce some ten years previously, Kilkey and Perrons observed that 'foreign-born' men's presence in handyman-type work has been increasing and has been doing so at a faster rate than UK-born men's. They also demonstrate that 'migrantisation' of the domestic-sector workforce is greatest in London, where 57 per cent are 'foreign-born'; this compares with 45 per cent some ten years previously. Data limitations did not allow Kilkey and Perrons to undertake an examination of handymen by geography. Evidence gathered from the current study's interviews with households, handymen and agencies, though, suggests that migrant handymen are more common in London, where such work has come to be associated in the popular imagination with migrants and, in particular, Central and Eastern European, especially Polish, migrants (see also Garapich, 2008). As one householder in the North East of England observed with some envy:

But, you know, London is much easier. Everyone seems to have their house renovated by Polish builders in London. [Household_07_Father]

A8-country migration to the UK and the handyman sector

The UK, along with Ireland and Sweden, was in a minority among EU states in allowing workers from the accession countries of Central and Eastern Europe (A8-countries) immediate and relatively unconditional access to its labour market on 1 May 2004.⁹ Although in the context of the economic crisis which hit the UK in late 2007 there is evidence of a slow-down since the beginning of 2008 (UK Border Agency, 2009), following accession the UK has been the main destination country, receiving almost one-third of the estimated two million A8-nationals to have migrated to the old member states (EC, 2009b). A slight majority (56 per cent) of those registering with the Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) – the sole condition of labour market access – to work in the UK have been men, and in terms of nationality, the vast majority (66%) have been Polish (UK Border Agency, 2009).¹⁰ It is worth noting that accession-state nationals had been allowed to enter the UK labour market some years ahead of EU enlargement, but only on a so-called ‘self-employed’ visa. Garapich (2008) reports that Polish nationals in particular had taken advantage of this migration route in the years leading up to 2004.

Kilkey and Perrons’ (2010) analysis of WRS registrations up to March 2008 found that just under 1 per cent of A8-nationals registering to work in the UK registered as ‘handymen’ and ‘gardeners’, with Polish nationals slightly over-represented among handymen. Our interviews with migrants working as handymen, however, suggest that this figure is likely to be an underestimate. Apart from the fact that some were self-employed and therefore not required to register, and others had switched to handyman work after initially registering for other jobs, many of those we interviewed had multiple jobs. Handyman work in the domestic sector was often done in evenings and weekends on top of other jobs, many of which were located in the construction and building sector more generally; a sector which accounted for an estimated 5 per cent of WRS registrations up to March 2008. This is not much less than the 8 per cent registering for jobs in the cleaning and care sectors in the same period.¹¹

Paralleling the evidence of ethnic stereotyping in the hiring of migrant female domestic workers (e.g. Anderson, 2007), the current study found evidence among householders of a preference for Polish handymen. This was based in part on the perceived qualities of them as migrants in terms of their relative cheapness and strong work ethic; characteristics which Waldinger and Lichter (2003: 9) argue result from migrants’ ‘dual frame of reference’, that is their tendency to judge ‘conditions “here” by the standards “back” home’. National stereotyping was also at play in constructing the Polish as particularly appropriate for handyman work. As one householder commented about his neighbours’ use of Polish labour:

they had sort of selectively chosen people, either on the basis of kind of price or a notion of kind of, Eastern European, attention to detail, you know, myth, mythological ideas about still having apprenticeships and, skills guilds and so on. (Household_04_Father)

While McDowell (2008) suggests that the coding of A8 migrants as ‘white’ has given them an advantage in the UK labour market over ‘non-white’ migrant workers, such a pattern of racialisation was not explicit in the householders’ accounts of why Polish handymen were preferred. Rather, and in line with Haylett’s (2001) observations on how the British middle-class construct their white working-class co-nationals, some

householders were more likely to employ classed and gendered notions of 'white' British men and to deem them less desirable for handyman work, which, after all, has to be conducted within the 'habitus' of middle-class homes (Lutz, 2008b). It was not that migrant handymen were middle-class; in contrast to what research has revealed about female domestic workers (e.g. Parreñas, 2001), occupational downward mobility was not a common feature of handymen's migration trajectory. Rather, it was that their 'foreignness' obscured their class position; a resource not available to British handymen.

There was also evidence, however, as other studies have observed (McDowell *et al.*, 2007), of migrants recognising and endorsing the naming and categorising of themselves and others:

I think that Polish workers are nicer . . . English workers think that they simply have to do the job. It doesn't matter whether the customers would be happy about it or not. The most important thing is that they have been paid for the job. . . Polish always try to do the job well and that, what it's most important, to have good reputation. [Handyman_Migrant_08]

Garapich (2005: 4) suggests that it is through such a process of what McDowell *et al.* (2007) term 'interpellation' that recent Polish migrants to the UK, rather than being passive recipients of host society stereotypes, have 'renegotiated, redefined and dialectically modified' them to further their own strategic interests. Thus, while Polish handymen reported having experienced exploitation and discrimination in the UK, our study also found evidence of success on the part of many Polish handymen, particularly when it came to finding work and improving their rates of pay. Most of the Polish handymen reported earnings close to the male median and five were in the top decile. The latter tended to have taken advantage of good English language capacity and/or the ability to come prior to 2004, to establish themselves as co-ordinators and ultimately employers of other Poles labour.

Divisions among migrants: asylum-seeking handymen

The asylum-seeker handymen we interviewed did not experience such success, underlining how migration policy differentially situates migrants in relation to the labour market. The UK government has attempted to adopt a 'managed migration strategy' designed to plug labour market gaps (Flynn, 2005). While A8 migrants have been constructed as instrumental for the UK economy, asylum seekers have not, and since the mid-1990s a series of legislative measures has eroded their welfare and labour market rights. Most asylum seekers are not allowed to do paid work, and the level of welfare entitlement is below that of Income Support rates. Most of those who are refused asylum have no entitlement to welfare, and this, in combination with harsher decision-making practices, has produced growing numbers of destitute asylum seekers (Brown, 2008). For the asylum-seeker men we interviewed, the formal labour market was officially closed to them, and, as one participant explained, there was only a short window of opportunity for working irregularly within it:

Oh, many times, many times I tried, for bread factory, chocolate factory, pizza factory, flour factory. Majority of time when you go after three months they said, 'bring your passport', no passport, out, very easy, believe me . . . [Handyman_Migrant_06]

Moreover, there was a perception that even such limited opportunities for irregular work in the formal labour market had become tighter, as a result of both tougher legislation and the arrival of A8 workers:

now everything change, law is change. They said you have to show them first passport, if you not a passport they no give you any more job in the factory. Especial after all European, East European comes you have to show them passport, without passport is quite hard. [Handyman_Migrant_06]

It was in this context that the asylum-seeker men we interviewed came to be working as handymen, directly selling their work to households, or being employed irregularly by a handyman company, or operating in both ways. Working in a domestic setting provided greater opportunity of avoiding the increased state surveillance of their labour market and migration status. Yet, our research suggests that this lack of choice made them more vulnerable to exploitation, with reports of rates of pay significantly below those received by Polish handymen, and well below the national minimum wage.

Conclusion

There are some strong parallels between the migrant handyman phenomenon and the growth in migrant female domestic/care work. Thus, the labour of handymen plays an important role in contributing to middle-class professional men's ability to conform to normative expectations around involved fatherhood in the context of minimal structural change to labour market and welfare regimes, and minimal change in gendered norms and practices in relation to paid work. Paralleling the contemporary commoditisation of female domestic labour, the outsourcing of male domestic chores has implications for gender inequalities in the distribution of labour within households too. Thus, men seem to be doubly 'let of the hook', transferring the doing of their domestic labour to the market, and the organising and managing of it to their partners.

As with stereotypically female areas of domestic work in the UK, although not necessarily elsewhere, outsourcing as a strategy to meet the challenge of reconciling work and family life is highly contingent on class and income inequalities. In the context of globalisation and migration, the relational net of inequalities in the realm of paid domestic work has extended across borders, and handyman work shows evidence of 'migrantisation'. However, in the UK, the density of migrants in handyman work remains lower than for cleaning and care. This may be related to differences in the meanings and values attached to male and female areas of domestic work, such that the former is constructed as 'skilled' as opposed to 'natural', and as such attracts higher rates of remuneration, rendering it appropriate work for working-class British men. Differences in the valuing of male and female domestic work, therefore, signal discontinuity between migrant handymen and migrant carers and cleaners, and have implications for differentiation among migrant handymen, such that there is potential for incomes which approach those of their labour-using households. Such sharp differentiation is unlikely to be a feature, or at least as common a feature, among migrant female domestic workers. The different values attached to male and female domestic work may have implications for the gendering of the experience of being a domestic worker in ways other than pay

rates. For example, it is possible that the construction of male domestic chores as skilled relative to female chores disrupts the power dynamic between householders and workers that is commonly documented in studies of female domestic workers. Further research comparing the experience of both sets of domestic workers, however, is required to examine this possibility more fully.

Through a focus on the outsourcing of male domestic chores, we have attempted to broaden the analytical framework which examines commoditised domestic work through the lens of gendered care and migration regimes. Thus, we have situated an understanding of the outsourcing of male domestic work within the context of the shifting gender regime in the UK, particularly as it relates to paid work and care, but in such a way that recognises explicitly that men, as well as women, are the objects of normative prescriptions and policy interventions about the appropriate relationship to paid work and care. Widening the lens to include fathers also brings more sharply into frame another dimension – children’s positioning in welfare regimes. Lister (2006) has suggested that recent policy developments in the UK can be analysed through the concept of a ‘child-centred social investment state’. Underpinning much of the rhetoric for involved fathering in the UK is a concern for children’s well-being, which in turn is bound up with the intensification of parenting in Western societies more generally (Wajcman, 2008). Further analyses that take account of shifting expectations regarding children’s welfare and parental responsibilities when examining ‘care regimes’ and ‘care cultures’ may contribute to our understanding of the growth in commoditised household services, both male and female.

Likewise, through a focus on handymen we have examined how the UK’s ‘managed migration strategy’ contributes to the constitution of an appropriate *male* migrant domestic-sector workforce. We have also observed, however, how inequalities in the labour market, and welfare rights attached to different groups of migrants in the UK, contribute to divisions within the domestic-sector workforce. This is an important reminder that the migration regime does not situate all migrants similarly in relation to domestic work, with the institutional framework offering some greater capacity for agency than others.

Notes

1 E.g. Cox (2006) on the UK; Lutz (ed.) (2008) on European countries; Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) on the USA; Anderson (2000), Cancedda (2001), Lister *et al.* (2007), Parreñas (2001) and Sarti (2006) on cross-national comparisons.

2 Although there is an emerging body of work on migrant *men* working as domestic cleaners and carers (Kilkey and Perrons, 2010).

3 Time Use Survey data show a gendered division of labour in the distribution of household tasks with men more likely to do gardening, household repairs and maintenance and women more likely to do food preparation, laundry, ironing, cleaning and childcare (Aliaga, 2006: Table 2).

4 The study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, grant RES-000-22-2590. It was conducted with Diane Perrons and Ania Plomien, and I should like to acknowledge their contribution to the project, while noting that they are not responsible for the arguments in this paper. I am very grateful to all those who participated in the research, and to two anonymous referees for their comments.

5 In two cases fathers refused to participate due to time constraints, and in another, the household consisted of a single gay father.

- 6 The woman was part of a Polish husband and wife 'handyman' team.
- 7 This arrangement is unlikely to be costless in other aspects of life, for example partner-relations, since it is often associated with shift parenting.
- 8 The category 'foreign-born' refers to those born outside the UK, and does not equate strictly with 'migrant'.
- 9 The A8-countries are Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.
- 10 WRS data do not capture all A8 migration to the UK, excluding the self-employed who are not required to register, and those who while required to, do not register.
- 11 Data based on a Freedom of Information request to UK Border Agency.

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