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Struggling with child domestic work: what can a postcolonial perspective offer?

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Keywords

child domestic work, child labour, employers, postcolonial, economic geography, ethic of care

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Struggling with child domestic work: what can a postcolonial perspective offer?

Abstract: Majority World working children's voices have attained some prominence in debates over their wellbeing. Many have defended their right to work, challenging Minority World understandings of children's 'best' interests. Yet employers' voices remain sidelined, raising questions over the extent to which the discursive and material spaces of children's work have been decolonised. A postcolonial perspective on children's work challenges suggestions that Majority World adults (and societies) need western guidance on how children *ought* to be raised. It also creates opportunities to look beyond western discourses of economic exploitation, to the potential for more-than-economic relationships between working children and their employers.

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Introduction

In 2003, while volunteering for a non-government organisation in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania, I experienced the fissure between Minority and Majority World understandings of children's rights firsthand. Before being deployed to various rural communities the volunteers received 'cultural awareness' training; including on children's rights in general, and child domestic work in particular. Child domestic workers 'work in other people's households doing domestic chores, caring for children, and running errands' (UNICEF 1999, p.2). They work for pay in cash or kind and typically live in their employers' homes (Kifle 2002). The volunteers were alarmed and morally outraged by the existence of such employment. When the children's rights activist facilitating the session admitted to employing a child in his own

home, we were overwhelmed with a sense of neocolonial moral superiority and deemed him complicit in their exploitation. How could anyone simultaneously advocate for children's rights and employ a child? Our (young, western) minds boggled and several of us decided, during the lunchbreak, to boycott the afternoon's training session. Before long, I began to question (and in turn feel mortified by) our ill-informed attempt at activism. This story provides a touchstone for my subsequent scholarly engagement with child domestic work. I spent three further years living in Tanzania as I sought (to the extent possible) to 'unlearn' my Minority World prejudices surrounding children's employment. Although this paper does not offer scope for the subalterns engaged in children's domestic work to speak for themselves (Spivak 1988), it strives to contribute to the ongoing project of decolonising the spaces of children's (domestic) work, by drawing attention to the complex employer-employee relationships that shape their working lives.

In this paper, I explain why a postcolonial perspective on children's employment necessitates engagement with the people who employ them. Using material from my Tanzanian case study, I demonstrate the complexity of employer-employee relationships, and highlight the need for greater dexterity and openness in scholarly interpretations of non-western employment arrangements. In the closing sections of the paper, I highlight what a postcolonial approach to childhood studies and postcolonial economic theories mean for advocacy and activism surrounding children's employment.

Postcolonial theory, development and children's (domestic) work

Postcolonial theorists seek to expose the hegemony of Minority World knowledge systems and their neocolonial imposition on Majority World lives, issues and spaces – for instance, via international law and development interventions (McEwan 2009). Spivak (1988), Guha

(1982) and Chakrabarty (2000), among others, have highlighted the problem of representation and the importance of ensuring that marginalised Majority World citizens with limited access to the means of representation have room to speak and be heard. The omission and/or misrepresentation of 'Other' interests and perspectives from Minority World knowledge systems lies in the 'unwillingness of the culturally dominant to listen', rather than the inability of the subaltern to speak (Said 1978, Spivak 1988, McEwan 2009, p. 330).

Here, I consider the rich insights that a postcolonial perspective can add to studies of Majority World children's work. The legitimacy of interventions framed by western children's rights agendas in the 'best' interests of Majority World children has been thoroughly scrutinised (Woodhead, 1999, Bromley and Mackie 2009). Efforts to decolonise 'international' children's rights agendas have recognised childhood as a socially constructed and contextually contingent phenomenon and insisted that Minority World expectations of work-free childhoods must not be idealised as a global standard (Woodhead 1999, Chant and Jones 2005, Bessell 2011). Participatory, child-focused research agendas have powerfully influenced this shift. When asked, working children have asserted their right to work and the importance of work to their survival and socialisation (Woodhead 1999, Bromley and Mackie 2009, Klocker 2011). Although children's work has evoked moral outrage and opprobrium in numerous accounts pushing for its eradication (Bequele and Boyden 1988, Janak 2000, ILO 2006, Blagbrough 2008); many other scholars and activists have acknowledged that abolition may result in greater harm (Woodhead 1999, Abebe 2008, van Blerk 2008, Bromley and Mackie 2009, Klocker 2011). Of course, working children have also voiced dramatic experiences of exploitation and abuse (UNICEF 1999, Kifle 2002, Jacquemin 2004, Blagbrough 2008, van Blerk 2008, Pinzon-Rondon et al. 2010, Klocker 2012a). It is thus crucial to advance nuanced understandings of (and responses to) children's work – which

neither deride it as morally reprehensible and unequivocally dangerous, nor romanticise its beneficial aspects and links to 'tradition'.

While the scholarly trends described above have done much to destabilise the authority of western children's rights discourses, they have developed mostly out of child-focused and participatory research agendas, not postcolonial theory. Such research has (justifiably) been preoccupied with working children themselves. An explicitly postcolonial approach to childhood studies is relatively new (see Nieuwenhuys 2009, Khan et al. 2010, Jeffrey 2011, Martins 2011, Sircar and Dutta 2011), but has the potential to further decolonise understandings of children's work by demanding wider interrogation of *who* has been silenced by Minority World knowledge systems (McEwan 2009). The addition of a postcolonial perspective to the mix encourages attentiveness to a broader array of Majority World subjects (Spivak 1988, Simon 2006). It does not compel researchers to overlook children but rather, look *beyond* them. A postcolonial approach to childhood studies undermines suggestions that Majority World children need rescuing (by 'white' men and women¹) from their adult compatriots (Nieuwenhuys 2009, Khan et al. 2010). It also provides scope to look beyond discourses of exploitation formulated around western economic theories and notions of appropriate employment arrangements, to the potential for ethics of care and more-than-economic² relationships in children's working lives (Gibson-Graham 2008, Lerner 2011). And – perhaps most fundamentally – such a perspective foregrounds the West's complicity in (re)producing the 'stunted choices and deprived conditions' faced by Majority World residents (Nieuwenhuys 2009, p.150). It thus shifts attention away from the 'deviant' behaviours of Majority World adults, and onto the inequity of global economic

¹A reference to Spivak's (1988, pp. 93–4) condemnation of neocolonial engagements in the Majority World framed around the perceived need for white men and women to 'sav[e] brown women from brown men'.

²Borrowed and adapted from Whatmore's (2002) 'more-than-human' geographies.

relationships that obstruct opportunities for Majority World residents – adult *and* child – to earn a living wage (Khan et al. 2007).

Looking beyond children: Majority World employers and child (domestic) work

Child domestic workers' diverse perspectives have now been recorded by scholars and activists across several countries (Camacho 1999, Kifle 2002, Phlainoi 2002, Jacquemin 2004, Rubenson et al. 2004, Klocker 2007, 2011, 2012a, Blagbrough 2008, Bourdillon 2009, Munene and Ruto 2010, Wasiuzzaman and Wells 2010). Unlike the children they employ, employers' motives and experiences have rarely been documented and their reputations have taken a battering – particularly in studies likening child domestic work to slavery (Janak 2000, Blagbrough 2008, Derby 2009). In less overtly disparaging accounts, employers are cast in a negative light by omission. It is now commonplace for research on working children's lives (including my own) to conclude that children must be permitted to continue working, *albeit under more protected conditions* (Camacho 1999, Woodhead 1999, Klocker 2011). What remains implicit in such assertions is that working children need protection because Majority World adults cannot be trusted to have their best interests in mind.

Children's domestic work is the most common occupation for teenage girls throughout the Majority World, employing 20 to 60 per cent of this cohort in some countries (ILO 2004). In Tanzania – where child domestic work is ubiquitous – many employers are not members of a privileged class, they are not violating cultural or social norms, nor (depending on the age of the child) are they breaking the law³. These employers exist across socio-economic strata and employ children for diverse reasons; whether nefarious, benign, functional or altruistic. Like their young employees, most employers are excluded from the machinations of the

³In Tanzania (in keeping with 'international' children's rights instruments) children's employment is permitted at 14 and above under the 2004 *Employment and Labour Relations Act*.

mainstream capitalist economy and from global systems of knowledge and power. They too are bound up in neocolonial global economic structures that perpetuate poverty in the Majority World and limit the alternatives available to them. Given the well-documented power imbalances inherent to domestic employment relationships (Pratt 1999, Anderson 2000), it seems counterintuitive to frame employers within discourses of subalternity. There are, however, important reasons for doing so. Employers can do little to challenge the (neocolonial) knowledges that circulate around them and their employment practices, positioning them as ruthless, abusive and exploitative. Child domestic work incorporates millions of individuals globally, thus the complex values, norms, moralities and strictures acting upon both of the key stakeholder groups involved deserve thorough consideration.

A few studies have asked employers to reflect on children's experiences of domestic employment (Jacquemin 2004, Munene and Ruto 2010, Wasizzaman and Wells 2010), but I have found only one that explicitly asked employers what child domestic work meant to *them* and how it affected *their* lives (Phlainoi 2002). This paper neither seeks to deny the existence of exploitative and abusive employers, nor to provide a sanitised version of their conduct. Rather, it aims to complicate scholarly and activist understandings of child (domestic) work by exploring employers' unique and silenced perspectives; and by interpreting these employment relationships through the lens of postcolonial economic theory (Connell 2006, Gibson-Graham 2008, Pollard et al. 2009, Lerner 2011). Using empirical material drawn from a Tanzanian case study, this paper describes how employers' practices are driven by a suite of financial, cultural and social imperatives, and (in some cases) also by an ethic of care, responsibility and guardianship. Furthermore, while child domestic workers are often cast as innocent victims, it is important to acknowledge their agency – including their capacity to make employers' lives difficult. Admittedly, these are not comfortable or popular arguments

to make. There is an inherent risk that this paper will be *misinterpreted* as condoning the exploitation and abuse of children, by breaking the taboo of speaking ‘against the innocence’ of (at risk) children. But this is necessary in order to ‘deconstruct the ‘single story’ that may be erasing these children’s many stories’ (Martins 2011, pp. 434-6). It is also necessary because any decisions made about the future of child (domestic) work should surely be informed by accounts that are open to complexity, and which do not funnel all working children’s experiences through the innocent victim mould.

Methods

A participatory and action-oriented investigation into child domestic work was conducted in Iringa, Tanzania, from 2005 to 2007 (Klocker 2011, 2012b). Data were collected from current and former child domestic workers, their employers, street chairpeople⁴, local government councilors, NGO staff and rural communities. This paper is primarily restricted to employers’ interview narratives. Child domestic workers’ experiences have been documented in detail elsewhere (Klocker 2011, 2012a). Fifty-seven employers were interviewed in their homes by Tanzanian members of the research team including: former child domestic workers Faidha Mlossi, Vaileth Mvena and Amina Haule⁵, and adult Tanzanian research assistants Esther Malifedha and Paul Mbenna. My absence was a strategic decision to allow employers to discuss child domestic work without the potentially obtrusive presence of a foreigner. Sensitive questions relating to child domestic workers’ treatment were asked in the third person to avoid alienation. The majority of employers interviewed were female (68 per cent), and most (64 per cent) were between 20 and 40 years of age with dependent children. Forty-four per cent of employers lived in a wealthy part of Iringa, and the remainder in socio-economically disadvantaged areas.

⁴Street chairpeople are elected representatives who live on the ‘street’ for which they are responsible (usually several streets, but a small enough area for them to be very familiar with the other residents).

⁵Amina Haule is a pseudonym as this young researcher did not want her real name published.

The remainder of this paper explores employers' motives for employing children in their homes and their experiences of doing so. Many were at pains to explain that child domestic work is not an unequivocally beneficial enterprise from their perspective. An ethic of care was also abundantly evident. Of course, it is highly likely that self-justification infused employers' accounts, and that they omitted unflattering information. However, this is equally true of all interview narratives. As I have argued in detail elsewhere (when comparing current and former child domestic workers' divergent accounts of their occupation), all interviews are performances and can only offer partial insights into lived experience (Goffman 1971, Nunkoosing 2005, Klocker 2012a). It is thus particularly important to bring diverse perspectives to bear in research investigating contentious issues such as children's employment. The data presented here offer a particular 'version' of child domestic work, in a particular context – but add complexity and depth to existing understandings of employers' encounters with the children who live and work in their homes.

Employers: needing help, being helped and giving help

Employers in Iringa claimed that their primary motive for employing child domestic workers was a perceived lack of time for domestic chores – particularly among female employers who were employed outside of the home, oftentimes out of economic necessity. Difficulties balancing a 'double-day' exist throughout the world, but the struggle may be even greater in Majority World households where labour-saving appliances are scarce (Jacquemin 2004). In Iringa, household tasks are time-intensive; few homes are equipped with washing machines and electric or gas cookers; and many are not connected to mains water or electricity supplies. Childcare needs were also paramount. Single-parent households and those depending on a dual-income had few alternatives in a context where childcare facilities are

scarce: ‘Day-care centres for small children – there are none. But if they were to exist, we wouldn’t need housegirls⁶’ (Employer#53; Male). Thus, a combination of socio-economic imperatives, a lack of infrastructure, and the persistence of patriarchal norms – that continue to assign the bulk of domestic responsibilities to women and girls – generated demand for assistance with domestic workloads. This need could have been fulfilled by adult workers, but a range of attributes made children (more) desirable employees.

Docile domestics: children make submissive and malleable workers

Employers expressed a preference for *child* domestic workers because of their perceived pliability: ‘When you get a small girl...you will be able to direct [her]...more than if you get a girl who is big and has her decisions herself in her head about what she should do’ (Employer#12; Female). Children’s perceived submissiveness and flexibility also facilitated live-in employment arrangements. Employers noted that adult domestic workers were more likely to have their own families and would thus be unwilling to live-in, while children were perceived as having no external commitments. Live-in arrangements ensured access to the unfettered labour of domestic workers, who were available to complete chores and run errands at all hours, and to respond to employers’ every whim: ‘She is a person for...being told ‘Bring this’ and she goes’ (Employer#14; Female). Some employers also used employees’ live-in status to justify wage-dampening (or non-payment) as they were provided with room and board (Pratt 1999, Anderson 2000, Klocker 2011).

While the employers involved in this study undoubtedly benefited from child domestic work, they also reported facing assorted challenges – muddying existing understandings of employer-employee relationships. For instance, because ‘being helped’ was so crucial to

⁶Many Tanzanians use the colloquialism ‘housegirl’ to refer to child domestic workers, even when speaking in Kiswahili.

orchestrating the balancing act of paid and domestic workloads, female employers were left in a precarious position when child domestic workers quit without notice.

'Flighty' employees, domineering employers

Employers regularly constructed their young employees as uncommitted: 'They normally do not settle down...they don't stay' (Employer#10; Female). Invoking constructions of familial loyalty, one employer asserted that her young employee should 'not just consider herself like any other person who can just leave' (Employer#10; Female). Employers' complaints of child domestic workers' flightiness were corroborated by some young interviewees' remarks: 'I was just wanting to see how [Dar es Salaam] is, that's all...that's why I just stayed for three months' (Former child domestic worker#13). At other times, children's lack of 'loyalty' was an expression of agency – a response to poor treatment or low wages: 'Children...they're switched on...if you annoy her she'll tell you 'Tomorrow, I am leaving'' (Employer#10; Female).

Some employers were so dependant on their young employees that they did not permit holidays. Negotiating leave was particularly challenging when employers' own jobs did not grant annual leave – as was the case for many who were themselves employed in the informal sector. Others were worried that their child domestic workers would abscond if given leave: 'Some [employers]...do not want to permit the children to go [on holidays] because...she might just leave for good' (Employer#19; Male). One young interviewee recounted how her employer had made her leave her clothing behind when going on holidays 'so that I would come back' (Former child domestic worker#21). My purpose here is not to suggest that child domestic workers should be denied holidays – but the inflexibility of some employers' own working conditions complicates simplistic interpretations of their motives. Employers who

relied on child domestic workers to cope struggled greatly when left alone: 'If your child domestic worker tells you, 'Mama, right now I am tired of working'...what will you do while your whole family was in her hands?' (Employer#28; Female). Such employers felt a sense of crisis, exacerbated by the lack of alternative care options for their young children (Arnado 2003). Furthermore, although utterly dependant on child domestic workers for childcare, many employers were simultaneously anxious about their children's treatment.

Child domestic work: in the best interests of employers' children?

Employers were worried about their own children's wellbeing in the informal and unregulated context of child domestic work. A particular concern was whether their children would receive sufficient food:

They [child domestic workers] want everything to be theirs. For example food, if it is meat, she wants to eat it herself...and her fellow children [the employer's children]...only eat a little...I had a girl...I was growing cabbages, she was cooking those cabbages and eating half of the dish before the children had returned from school...One day their father found the children crying, they had not eaten (Employer#25; Female).

Other employers were anxious about physical harm. During the research period, considerable nation-wide media attention developed around a small number of cases in which child domestic workers had been accused of killing employers' young children. Some employers' perceptions of child domestic workers' child-caring roles were set within a framework of such moral panics: 'You might employ a person, she works well for you, but she burns the

child, she kills him/her⁷! (Employer#33; Female). Less extreme instances of abuse were also remarked upon: 'When you go to work...she pinches the children' (Employer#47; Female). These claims countered stereotypes of 'innocent' and 'submissive' child workers, as did complaints of disobedience and theft.

Lazy, disobedient and thieving child domestic workers

Employers regularly complained that their young employees did not follow orders: 'You bring her here and raise her...then even if you tell her [to do] something she doesn't understand who you are!' (Employer#47; Female). Some of our young interviewees made similar criticisms of their peers: 'Often these children have arrogance – everything which they are told to do, they don't want to do it' (Child domestic worker#7). Employers also criticised child domestic workers for being lazy and slow: '...by the time she has mopped the house it might have reached 11 o'clock!' (Employer#33; Female). They expected child domestic workers to be self-motivated and hardworking and expressed frustration when this did not occur: 'If she [the female boss]...comes home and finds you have not even cooked the food, do you think she will be happy?' (Employer#6; Male). Female employers left to complete unfinished work complained: 'This is what causes people to pay a small wage because...she still has to do the work which the domestic worker was supposed to do' (Employer#9; Female). What employers neglected to note was that, in some instances, a perceived lack of work ethic may be a form of resistance – an active attempt to delimit workloads in a context where too much is being demanded, or too little is being paid (Cohen 1991). The risk of theft is also great in such circumstances, and theft has been recognised as a 'levelling mechanism' in studies of migrant domestic work (Gill 1990, Cohen 1991, p.208).

⁷In Kiswahili, verb prefixes do not denote gender, thus 's/he' and 'him/her' are used in all translations unless gender is explicit in the narrative.

Although employers identified household security as a key benefit of live-in arrangements, because the ‘house does not remain by itself’ (Employer#9; Female), they remained anxious about theft. One former child domestic worker articulated this conundrum; ‘These bosses might look for a housegirl so that [the house] doesn’t get robbed then afterwards that girl is the one who comes to be the thief’ (#26). Employers reported actual and hypothetical cases of theft: ‘On this street, recently...one [employer]...was robbed, the housegirl left with his/her money and...clothes’ (Employer#16; Male), or: ‘You might be in the bedroom and she steals things from the lounge room and she leaves’ (Employer#56; Female). Employers often associated theft with child domestic workers’ friends, and felt uncomfortable when their young employees spent time with other young people in the neighbourhood: ‘...there are friends who are tricking her, one day you come [and] you find she stole everything’ (Employer#18; Male). Boyfriends raised particular concerns: ‘Those boys will come and steal from you...while she thinks that those youths perhaps want to get engaged to her’ (Employer#17; Female). As a result, some employers actively discouraged their young employees from having (boy)friends and this was a source of great isolation and loneliness. But female employers were not only concerned that their young employees would steal material belongings – they were also concerned about their husbands.

Sexual relationships and pregnant domestic workers

Discourses of sexuality commonly surround domestic work because of the intimate work entailed (Anderson 2000). Female employers in Iringa were concerned that adult domestic workers would have affairs with their husbands, thus motivating them to recruit children. However, several of the former child domestic workers interviewed reported devastating experiences of sexual abuse in past employers’ households, usually by male employers (Klocker 2011, 2012a). A number of interviewees (adult and child) also recounted stories of

‘consensual’⁸ sexual relationships; albeit usually in the third person. Either way, employing children did not always provide the protection that female employers sought. Some accused child domestic workers of seducing husbands: ‘There are some girls...parading [themselves] in front of the father of the house. There are girls who steal the marriages of their employers...instead of being your housegirl she becomes your fellow wife!’ (Employer#55; Female). The idea of ‘husband stealing’ is common in the literature on (adult) domestic work, which has identified sexual jealousy as a major point of tension (Anderson 2000). In this study, child domestic workers were regularly portrayed as sexual ‘predators’; a particularly disturbing depiction in situations of sexual abuse. Female employers were understandably devastated at the prospect of sexual encounters (‘consensual’ or abusive) between their husbands and young employees, and expressed additional concerns about pregnancy: ‘You might have employed a child to do domestic work...and that father of the house might...have sex with her, and that child gets pregnant’ (Employer#10; Female).

One street chairperson summarised the practical concerns of employers when a child domestic worker becomes pregnant: ‘You can’t care for another load and she will not be able to work as usual because of that pregnancy’. Of course, he was referring to situations where child domestic workers become pregnant as a result of relationships external to their employing households. Nonetheless, the intuitive response to such comments from a Minority World perspective – where legislation should prevent workplace discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy and childbearing, and where employees and their newborns are unlikely to live in their employers’ homes – is moral outrage. Although the prospect of firing a pregnant employee is intuitively abhorrent, if this issue is considered in relation to its social, cultural and economic context, complex questions arise. For instance, if a child

⁸The term ‘consensual’ is troubled here because consent is clearly a fraught concept in contexts of vast power differentials, as in employer-employee relationships.

domestic worker becomes pregnant to someone *external* to the employing household, might it be too much to expect an employer to live with (and financially support) a newborn child? It is beyond the scope of this paper to answer this question, but it is one that needs to be asked.

Employers were not only concerned with the ‘inconvenience’ and financial burden of a baby, they also worried about the moral upbringing of child domestic workers and feared being blamed by the surrounding community and the child’s parents. The theme of ‘guardianship’ was thus crucial: ‘If you have employed a child...[who] gets pregnant...all of the blame finishes with you’ (Employer#40; Female). One employer described how he restricted his child domestic worker’s movements: ‘Every time she leaves [the house] she must tell me, because if I leave her alone she will be ruined, I must use every means in order to restrict another person’s child, she should not be ruined in my hands’ (Employer#18, Male). My intent here is neither to suggest that pregnant child domestic workers are undeserving of support; nor to promote the exercise of control over domestic workers’ bodies in order to prevent pregnancy (Huang and Yeoh 1996). Rather, I seek to highlight the complexities of such scenarios and of employers’ motives. The theme of guardianship was also apparent in employers’ concerns over their young employees’ health.

Death or illness of a child domestic worker

Employers were fearful that child domestic workers would become ill or even die under their care – a realistic prospect in a context where malaria and HIV/AIDS are prevalent. In part, they were concerned about the cost of medical bills, which may overwhelm the resources of low-income households. But they were particularly worried about not being able to inform their young employees’ family members: ‘if the child lied about where she comes from...[then] gets sick...or she might die suddenly, the [employer] fails to know where to

bring the child' (Employer#28; Female). One employer recounted the concern she felt when her child domestic worker failed to return after going to visit a relative:

I was very anxious to look for her...the police told us that we should go to the morgue, we arrived at the morgue and [they] started to reveal every corpse...that girl has epilepsy, I thought perhaps...she fell over on the way and was hit by a car...We were anxious until night time (Employer#12; Female).

The girl in the above story returned unharmed soon after, but her employer's genuine concern was palpable and countered stereotypes of ruthlessness. An ethic of care was also abundantly evident in interviews with employers who insisted that a moral duty to help impoverished rural children had prompted them to hire a child domestic worker in the first place.

An ethic of care: doing it for the kids?

For socio-economically disadvantaged rural children with limited educational opportunities and few employment alternatives, child domestic work is envisaged as an escape-route from poverty (Camacho 1999, Kifle 2002, Phlainoi 2002, Jacquemin 2004, Klocker 2007). Given the lack of alternatives, employers are filling a gap: 'Their parents do not have the means to send them to [secondary] school...they must beg a person [for] work' (Employer#25; Female). In some cases, parents reportedly approached employers telling them: 'This child of mine is in a difficult environment...if she lived here at your place, she could live in a good environment rather than roaming the streets' (Employer#12; Female). Some employers felt pressured (by rural kin or acquaintances) to provide children with a place to live and several insisted that they employed children for altruistic reasons: 'You might go to the village, you see the way which the children live, you ask: 'What can I do? I should live with her''

(Employer#10; Female). Employers stressed the poverty of rural Tanzania, and felt that providing a home for poor children was a moral imperative: 'We are forced to do this to help each other...you have a difficult life...if I fail to help you I will have been cruel to you

(Employer#11; Male). Employers also expressed sympathy for children's difficult family circumstances: 'There is one girl...she was explaining the reality of their home to me, the way her father was beating her mother...when she came here she begged us to take her'

(Employer#25; Female). Employers' concern over rural children's circumstances signifies an ethic of care that unsettles stereotypes of ruthlessness. Of course, it is impossible to ascertain the extent to which employers' concerns were genuine, or performed in the context of an interview encounter. The data likely reflect both of these potentialities. Employers also saved money by employing children, and the question of exploitation versus care requires further unpacking.

Exploitation or care? Children as low cost employees

Many of Iringa's current and former child domestic workers reported underpayment, delayed payment or non-payment (Klocker 2011, 2012a). Employers acknowledged this issue, but distanced themselves from such practices: 'The benefit which *they* [other employers] get is to have the work done for them and they benefit twice because they don't have to pay the wages' (Employer#51; Female, emphasis added). Our interviewees conceded that children's submissiveness and inexperience made it possible for unscrupulous employers to withhold wages: 'an adult...it's not easy to put her off. But a child...she can't demand her wage, she will just stay quiet' (Employer#51; Female). A number of employers not only benefited from the low cost of children's labour, but also by putting them to work in additional income-generating activities. One employer even referred to any child who only performs domestic work as: 'A housegirl who results in a loss' (Employer#53; Male). The use of child domestic

workers in income-generating activities – such as farming, shopkeeping and cooking food for sale – was common. Many were required to perform multiple jobs for one (small) salary. But employers and employees often saw children's involvement in income-generating activities as an opportunity to learn additional skills. For employers who themselves earned low wages, the financial burdens of employing and housing a child domestic worker were substantial, and this was one mechanism that allowed them to cope.

For low-income employers, having an extra mouth to feed (not to mention wages to pay) was a struggle. Several spoke openly about their financial problems:

My job is digging ditches, the daily wage is 1,000⁹ Shillings... food [costs] 2,000 or 1,500...with our small incomes...we fail to pay them wages. What amount...can we manage to give them and still live with them? (Employer#53; Male)

Some employers were overwhelmed by the financial responsibilities of having a child domestic worker in their home: 'She first needs you to pay her, she needs to eat, if she is sick...all the responsibilities are yours' (Employer#10; Female); and one insisted that she would be 'grateful' if her child domestic workers got married because '...they will have gone from my hands' (Employer#17; Female). A handful of employers even claimed to be financially worse-off than their young employees: 'When the month ends...you don't have a thing [left over], or you have debts...she has money because you promised her' (Employer#35; Female). Others blamed their own financial struggles – and hence their inability to pay (large/any) wages – on Tanzania's economic position: 'Even if I ask you...I don't know if you would be able to pay her a sufficient wage. The government *itself* fails to

⁹At the time of the research 1000 Tanzanian Shillings equated to less than U.S.\$1 per day.

pay people a sufficient wage' (Employer #18, Male; original emphasis). While some young interviewees were sympathetic towards employers' financial circumstances, others were critical: 'Why did s/he place a domestic worker in the house if s/he has no means to pay her?' (Child domestic worker#22). While it is likely that some employers are intentionally exploitative, more complex motives also seem to exist. As already discussed, some employers reported being pressured by rural kin or acquaintances to take children as domestic workers. Many felt that providing food and shelter (even in lieu of a wage) was preferable to abandoning impoverished children altogether. From a Minority World perspective, non-payment (or low payment) is straightforwardly equated with exploitation. The significance of reciprocity and mutual 'helping' is readily overlooked; as is the enormous relief of simply surviving. The importance of non-economic (or, perhaps, more-than-economic) relationships was abundantly clear in employers' and employees' accounts.

More-than-economic relationships in children's domestic work?

In recent times, economic geographers have asserted the importance of bringing postcolonial theories to bear on understandings of economic relationships (Gibson-Graham 2008, Larner 2011). In this section, I consider children's (domestic) work through the lens of non-western economic theorising. While much economic theory continues to assume that economic relationships 'can and should be theorised solely from the perspective of the formal spaces of western economies', a postcolonial approach reminds us that such (purportedly 'universal') theories are blinkered to 'vivid, complex and embodied accounts' of non-western lives and livelihoods (Connell 2006, Pollard et al. 2009, p.138). For postcolonial economic theorists, economic geographies are 'situated knowledges', thus it is not 'good enough to simply study 'here' using the analytical tools of 'there'' (Larner 2011, p.89). Rather, we must explore diverse economies and economic relations and 'theorize back from the 'South'' (McEwan

2009, p.333). A postcolonial approach to economic theorising seeks to recover economic relationships that have been rendered 'non-credible' (or cast as inferior or lacking) by dominant capitalocentric ways of thinking (Santos 2004, p.238). Gibson-Graham's (2008, p.613) efforts to 'bring marginalized, hidden and alternative economic activities to light' are enormously helpful in this regard. Their work criticised western economic theorists' focus on neoliberal capitalist globalisation, for interfering with and making 'non-credible' or 'deny[ing] legitimacy to' diverse economies (Gibson-Graham 2008, pp.619-20). Gibson-Graham (2008, p.615) argued powerfully for the importance of documenting the plurality of capitalist and non-capitalist transactions and relationships that 'contribute to social well-being worldwide, in both positive and unsavoury ways'. In the process of engaging with postcolonial economic theory, it is possible to acknowledge the benefits that may be associated with 'helping' relationships in which little (or no) money changes hands. This statement is not intended to deny the vast scope for child domestic workers to be exploited, and I have articulated my concern about this potential elsewhere (Klocker 2011). It does, however, question whether exploitation is the only possible interpretation of their circumstances.

Obligations to extended family members and more distant kin remain an important survival strategy for rural Tanzanians: 'You know in our families we must raise each other's children, no?' (Employer#12; Female). One employer pointed toward the reciprocity of child domestic working arrangements: 'It is like we are helping each other, she is helping me and I am helping her' (Employer#47; Female). Another alleged that although she paid her child domestic worker, this was not the expectation of the girl's own parents: '...her parents told me I should just live with her' (Employer#40; Female). Numerous employers in Iringa (whether genuinely or expediently) conceived of domestic work as a 'labour of love',

founded upon familial relationships – not as an employment scenario: ‘This girl, is like my own child who I have given birth to...there is no difference’ (Employer#8; Male). These sentiments did not depend upon ‘blood’ ties: ‘at my place, when a girl comes...I don’t want her to be called ‘housegirl’ nor should anyone know that she is a housegirl because she has no difference to the children of the house’ (Employer#12; Female). For some, treating a child like a member of the family was a moral imperative: ‘We should not treat them like domestic workers...really, [if we do] that we are breaking the laws of humanity’ (Employer#11; Male). Some employers explained that their child domestic workers slept in the same room, and in beds, like their own children; and described how they ate meals together as a family, shared chores and spent leisure time together: ‘Last year was my daughter’s wedding – while we were sewing the gowns, we sewed one for her as well – like a child of the house’ (Employer#25; Female). Not all of the current and former child domestic workers interviewed agreed that they received treatment on par with their employers’ children, although many did: ‘I felt like their child...she [the employer] might tell you, ‘Stop working, you should also sit and rest’’ (Former child domestic worker#12; see also Klocker 2012a). One former child domestic worker explicitly pointed out that her female employer ‘sat with me in the kitchen and gave me advice about life’ (Former child domestic worker; 21.6.2005). Although it is easy to downplay these basic acts of humanity, they matter because the children involved *valued* being treated in this way. As Parr et al. (2004, p.40) have noted, ‘mundane acts of caring’, such as these, are crucial to people’s sense of belonging and ‘demonstrate the reality of inclusion’.

Tellingly, when our interviewees were asked what obligations employers should have toward their young domestic employees, the most frequently mentioned responses (by employers *and* employees alike) were ‘to love and care for them’ and ‘to treat them like their own children’.

Questions of children's rights, wages and working conditions were mentioned at just a fraction of the frequency of these more affective concerns. This may be indicative of an ingrained culture of exploitation. But it may also suggest that the needs and priorities of these individuals do not meld neatly with Minority World expectations of employment relationships. In order to grasp the meaning and nature of child domestic working relationships, economic theories need to move beyond a focus on rational economic individualism, and to be open to the role of 'more-than-economic' relationships – that is, to the presence of 'care ethics', emotions and affective relations in employment scenarios.

Of course, there are dangers inherent to the notion that child domestic workers are 'one of the family': their work becomes embedded in notions of familial responsibility rather than employment, which can help to legitimate their exploitation. These concerns have been widely documented, including by myself (Anderson 2000, Arnado 2003, Jacquemin 2004, Klocker 2011). However, academic analyses should at least be open to the potential for 'helping' relationships to be mutually beneficial, rather than singularly exploitative. While not paying high (or any) wages, some employers claimed to worry about their child domestic workers' needs and future prospects, and sought to secure opportunities for them to build productive lives. A sense of guardianship and care was fundamental to such acts, which included providing access to educational opportunities: 'I had one child here...I saw she was very bright, I helped her and she entered Standard V...now she is a teacher' (Employer#1; Male). Several employers recounted examples of child domestic workers who had studied as tailors, and thus learned a practical income-generating skill: 'There is one girl, I lived with her for a long time...I told her I would look for another girl and send her...[to] learn to sew...I was looking for a way to empower her' (Employer#12; Female). Others, reported presenting child domestic workers with gifts such as clothing and sewing machines (either in

lieu of or addition to wages), in appreciation of their efforts. In some instances, smaller (but valuable) gifts like flour, sugar or fabric were given to child domestic workers to take home when visiting their families. Approaching economic geography in a postcolonial vein reminds us to be alert to the possibility for meaningful transactions to take place via gift-giving mechanisms, and also via relationships of care and reciprocity (Lawson 2007, Gibson-Graham 2008). These observations highlight that child domestic work is not a simple or one-sided issue. The young employees are not universally exploited, and the adults responsible for employing them are not singularly exploitative – although some undoubtedly are. The complexity of these relationships is easily lost when analysing their lives from the perspective of western economic theories. At the same time, it is important to avoid romanticising non-economic relationships in situations where exploitation or abuse is occurring, as was the case for some young employees in this study (Klocker 2011, 2012a).

Concluding remarks

By airing employers' experiences of child domestic work, this paper has documented perspectives that have thus far received scant attention. It has sought to unsettle and complicate understandings of employers as universally exploitative, abusive and ruthless. Of course, this is not to deny that such employers exist. Several employers in Iringa decried their peers' treatment of child domestic workers: 'The humanity has gone, you find a girl is made to work...not like a human being' (Employer#7; Female). They readily acknowledged the taciturn nature of child domestic work and that, depending on the nature of the employer, a child could be exposed to substantial benefits or harm. But, employers' experiences of this occupation were similarly dependant on the nature of the children they employed.

The intent of this paper is not to suggest that efforts to improve the circumstances of child domestic workers are unnecessary – indeed the research project behind this paper was conceived with that objective in mind (Klocker 2011). However, it is critical to work with all of the stakeholders involved (not just working children) to ‘find ways of changing what *they* wish to change’ (Gibson-Graham 2008, p.628, my emphasis); rather than assuming that western academics and activists better understand the needs of Majority World children, than their adult compatriots do. The vast majority of employers interviewed agreed that more needs to be done to protect child domestic workers from the vagaries of this employment relationship. However, both employers and employees were adamant that the prohibition of child domestic work must be avoided.

The arguments and empirical evidence presented in this paper are significant not only because they attempt to further decolonise scholarly understandings of children’s (domestic) employment, but because they hold strategic potential. A deeper insight into employers’ perspectives and experiences is a tactical necessity for those seeking to improve child domestic workers’ circumstances (Klocker 2011). Disparaging discourses surrounding the individuals who employ child domestic workers – particularly those likening them to slave masters – close off the potential to engage in productive dialogue over the future of this employment sector. Given the intensely personal and individualised nature of domestic working arrangements, dialogue is crucial. The insights into employers’ motives and experiences provided in this paper reveal possibilities and strategic opportunities to negotiate over the future of this employment relationship (Klocker 2011).

The employers involved in this study had mixed experiences of child domestic work: although they undoubtedly benefited from having access to the unfettered and cheap labour

of their young employees, they also faced a range of challenges. Not all child domestic workers are innocent victims, incapable of even the slightest misdemeanour. While it feels counterintuitive (from a Minority World perspective) to depict child domestic workers in a negative, devious or destructive light; a failure to do so obfuscates the complexity of this employment relationship and the individuals comprising it. Importantly, this paper has shown that employers' motives are usually more complex than a simple desire to exploit or otherwise harm their young employees. Many are themselves negotiating a range of financial strains and practical struggles, as well as social pressures and cultural obligations to make room for disadvantaged rural children in their homes. A postcolonial approach thus reminds us of the broader contexts in which children's (domestic) employment takes place, and the myopia of interpretations that seek to demonise children's employers whilst sidelining the global economic inequities that undermine the economic security of most Majority World residents: adult and child.

Although some of the evidence presented throughout this paper does not portray employers in a flattering light, it does reveal the complex array of values and needs behind their choices and behaviours. There are some employers who are undeniably cruel and even abusive, but there are many who wish to assist impoverished rural children within their own (often limited) means. This paper has sought to draw attention to the complexity of children's (domestic) work in the Majority World, and to destabilise the dichotomous positioning of child worker as innocent 'victim' and employer as ruthless (or clueless) 'perpetrator'. Greater consideration of the mutually beneficial potential of 'more-than-economic' relationships between Majority World employers and their young employees is necessary, if more thoroughly decolonised understandings of children's employment are to emerge. Existing understandings of children's (domestic) employment – and development interventions

designed to protect working children – have remained tethered to western economic and social theories. Although this paper has focused on child domestic work, postcolonial approaches to childhood studies and economic theory undoubtedly have a great deal to offer broader research agendas on children's work in the Majority World. By drawing attention to the exigencies of day-to-day life that characterise children's employment in the domestic sphere, I hope this paper has gone some way towards articulating (and respecting) alternative frames of reference for non-western employment scenarios.

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