Conducting sensitive research in the present and past tense: recounting the stories of current and former child domestic workers

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Keywords

Disciplines

Life Sciences | Physical Sciences and Mathematics | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

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Conducting sensitive research in the present and past tense: recounting the stories of *current* and *former* child domestic workers

1. Introduction and background

Child domestic workers are children who '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, are employed by adults who are not their parents, and typically live in their employers' homes (Kifle, 2002). Child domestic work is a highly (although not exclusively) feminized occupation and is the most common form of employment for teenage girls in the Majority (developing) World (ILO-IPEC, 2004). The existing literature draws attention to child domestic work as a largely hidden, informal and poorly regulated field of employment in which children's treatment is contingent upon employers' goodwill (Black, 1997; Blagbrough, 2008; Fyfe, 1989; UNICEF, 1999). Studies in a range of countries have documented child domestic workers' experiences of physical, sexual and psychological abuse, neglect and economic exploitation (Camacho, 1999; Forrester-Kibuga, 2000; Godoy, 2002; Jacquemin 2004, 2006; Kannangara et al., 2003; Kifle, 2002; Rubenson et al., 2004). This paper is formulated around a participatory and action-oriented study of child domestic work conducted in Iringa, a small town in the southern highlands of Tanzania (Klocker, 2011; 2012). Current and former employees were asked to describe their experiences of child domestic work – the accounts provided by the two groups differed strikingly. This dissonance provides the foundation for this paper.

This is *not* a paper about the ethical challenges of conducting research with child domestic workers. Rather, my intent is to prompt researchers to think differently about the impact of research participant selection on interview performances – particularly when conducting research on sensitive issues[1]. I use perspectives from the literatures (both geographical and otherwise) on

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[1]The Economic and Social Research Council's *Framework for Research Ethics* describes sensitive research topics as involving: 'participants' sexual behaviour, their illegal or political behaviour, their experience of violence, their abuse or exploitation, their mental health, or their gender or ethnic status'.

memory, identity, representation and performance to unravel the causes, meanings and significance of the discordant data provided by current and former child domestic workers in this study. The empirical data underscore that attentiveness to the temporal dimensions, implications and limitations of research encounters is paramount. The research findings provide grounds for challenging the privileging of contemporary experiences over remembered ones – a trend readily apparent in the literature on children's work (including by children's geographers) as revealed by an extensive literature review conducted for this paper. The paper concludes that research on sensitive issues may benefit from incorporating the contemporary accounts of individuals still enmeshed in the situation under analysis *and* the remembered accounts of those who have moved on. By doing so, researchers can acquire more nuanced and complex perspectives of the issue under investigation. The findings presented here have important implications for the conduct of research on children's work, and for the action-oriented recommendations that scholars and activists make on the basis of research findings. They are of particular relevance to geographers, who have been at the forefront of scholarly efforts to actively engage children and young people[2] in research (Jones, 2001; Matthews et al., 1998; Pain and Francis, 2003; Punch, 2000; Robson, 2004a). Of course, these observations are drawn from just one empirical study and their broader applicability requires testing.

1.1 Research with (working) children

The 'participatory turn' is now well-established in children's geographies. Proponents of children's participation have sought to invert constructions of the 'incompetent' child, arguing that children are invaluable informants on their own lives (Halfacree, 2004; Jones, 2001; Robson, 2001). There has been a pervasive shift away from research conducted (only) with adult gatekeepers, towards research approaches that deal directly with children as active research subjects (Holloway and

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[2]The categories of 'child' and 'young person' are partially overlapping social constructs. 'Child' typically refers to a person under 18 years of age, but this is a shifting and fluid boundary, dependant upon socio-cultural, economic and political contexts. 'Young person' is an even more amorphous term, often used to refer to children in their teenage years and 'adults' up until (at least) their mid-20s.

Valentine, 2000; Hopkins et al., 2011; Jones, 2001; Matthews et al., 1998; Pain and Francis, 2003; Robson, 2004a; Young, 2004). Proponents have argued that children's participation unsettles the power imbalances inherent to decision-making processes and promotes programs and policies appropriate to children's needs and desires (Ludbrook, 2000; Mayo, 2001; Young and Barrett, 2001). Such claims are of particular relevance to studies of children's work, as vast discrepancies have been observed between the opinions, choices and feelings of working children and those of adult policymakers (Woodhead, 1999).

Working children in the Majority World have often been sidelined in debates over their appropriate relationships to work (Invernizzi and Milne, 2002; Miljeteig, 2000). The abolitionist perspectives favored by many (adult) activists, and bolstered by international treaties relating to children's work, are based on Minority World constructions of childhood as a period of play, education and innocence. These views hold minimal relevance in Majority World contexts where work is both essential to survival and a culturally accepted form of socialization (Klocker, 2011; Letuka, 1998; Rodgers and Standing, 1981; Woodhead, 1999). Research incorporating working children's perspectives has generally argued in favor of their right to work, and sought improvements to working conditions rather than removal from the workforce (Camacho, 1999; Invernizzi and Milne, 2002; Klocker, 2011; Miljeteig, 2000; Robson, 2004b; Woodhead, 1999). However, in this paper, I observe (with some concern) that arguments made in favor of children's 'right' to work, and highlighting the benefits of such work, have relied almost exclusively on the accounts of children employed at the time of data collection. These perspectives offer only a partial (and perhaps unrealistically optimistic) insight into the occupations of which they are part. My concern stems from the gap that I observed between the predominantly positive and beneficial versions of child domestic work recounted by the current employees involved in this study, and the largely negative and harmful portrayals of that occupation provided by former employees. This dissonance within the empirical data raised important questions about how the passage of time influences individuals'

accounts of an issue or experience. Thus, although this did not set out to be a study of 'memory', the social scientific literatures on memory, oral history and retrospective interviewing provided a crucial frame of reference within which to better understand the data collected, and hence, child domestic work. In this paper, I seek to understand something of the character of memory, the implications of retrospectivity for research data, and the scope to meaningfully consider retrospective and contemporary data side-by-side.

1.2 Memory, representation and geography

Geographers have regularly focused on the mutually constitutive link between memory and place, and the centrality of particular landscapes and monuments to group and national identities (Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004; Johnson and Pratt, 2009; Legg, 2007; Leyshon and Bull, 2011; Lowenthal, 1975; Till, 2003). Geographical research is attuned to the inherently political role of memory and has often sought to record the experiences of marginalized groups absent from formal historical records (Bosco, 2004; Drozdzewski, 2007). Geographers have also explored the daily dimensions of individual memory in the realm of domestic spaces and material cultures (Blunt, 2003; Tolia-Kelly, 2004). The performative dimensions of memory – linked to the non-material 'sites' of everyday acts, rituals and ceremonies – have also garnered some limited attention (Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004; Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000). In recent times, non-representational geographies – typically characterized by a sense of 'presentism' – have begun to reflect upon the central role of memory in shaping the performative moment (Jones, 2011, p.876). Children's geographers' engagements with memory have explored the relationship between adulthood and childhood and, more specifically, adults' memories of childhood (Jones, 2001; 2003; Philo, 2003). Debates have focused on the irretrievability (or otherwise) of childhood from the perspective of adulthood (Aitken, 1994; Jones, 2001; Philo, 2003), prompting Leyshon and Bull (2011) to call for greater understanding of the role of memory in the lives of young people. This paper is situated within this gap.

The unique significance of memory in shaping children and young people's accounts of their lives is central to this paper, but the reputation of memory has been thoroughly scrutinized (Legg, 2007). Retrospective data have been labeled 'imprecise, indeterminate' and 'reconstructed or reinvented' (Eyal, 2004, p. 6; see also McAdams, 2001; Thompson et al., 1996), prompting questions over memory's reliability (Onyx and Small, 2001, p.780). Memory has been cast as 'fantasy, subjectivity, invention...representation and fragmentation' (Radstone, 2000, p.6); and as inaccurate - 'always shadowed by forgetting' (Johnson and Pratt, 2009, p.454). The relationship between past events and our memories of them is not an 'imitative' one, the past is always (and unavoidably) 'rewritten [and] revised through memory' (Kuhn, 2000, p.184). Other scholars have drawn attention to the limits of retrospective data in offering a window into the past because memories are 'heavily influenced by the present status of the interviewee' and by their (sub)conscious acts of selective self-representation (Ursin, 2011, p.225). Thus for Halbwachs (1992), the past is a social construction largely shaped by the concerns of the present.

However, these limitations are not unique to memory. Concerns about the broader inability of representation to reflect human experience have been a key driving factor behind the non-representational (or more-than-representational) turn in human geography. Perceptions of contemporary experiences and recollections of the past are both 'phenomena of representation' and equally constructed (Bergson, 1913, p.194; see also Radstone, 2000), thus all interview materials are similarly 'fragmentary, subjective and selective' (Ursin, 2011, p.226). Following Goffman (1971, p. 28), interviews are performances in which the interviewee may be 'moved' (consciously or not) to 'guide the conviction' of audiences 'as a means to other ends'. Thus, the interviewee presents a 'front' which defines the situation for the interviewer (Goffman, 1971; Tseëlon, 1992). The manner in which individuals perform in the dialogic moment of the interview encounter provides a partial and highly contingent insight into their lived experiences – no matter whether the

event being narrated occurred five minutes, five years or fifty years ago. As all (self-) representations have the same limitations, the binary of 'inaccurate' memories and 'reliable' contemporary accounts comes unstuck. This observation is crucial for the purposes of this paper because it means that analyses of current and former child domestic workers' dissonant accounts can occur on a level playing field, with neither temporality occupying a privileged status in relation to reliability or truth. However, these observations raise unavoidable questions about the value of representation in research – particularly in light of non-representational critiques. In this paper, I adopt the position that non-representational theories need not undermine the utility of (self-) representation. Rather, insights into the limits of representation can be usefully deployed to add richness and complexity to analyses, by reminding researchers to be relentlessly attuned to the performative elements and emotional drivers of the present moment of practice that is the research encounter. These perspectives add a 'liveliness' and unpredictability to the way we think about representation 'as a verb – rather than as a thing' (Cresswell, 2012, p. 100). Whilst there is no unassailable 'truth' to be uncovered by research (whether retrospective or contemporary), there is an abundance of material to be 'mined for its meanings and its possibilities' (Kuhn, 2000, p.186). This is particularly crucial in the case of action-oriented research projects (such as the study of child domestic work being reported upon here) as the meaning and significance imbued upon interviewees' accounts shapes how researchers then feel compelled to act upon the world.

2. Research methods

This paper is based on two datasets: the first relates to the aforementioned investigation of child domestic work in Tanzania, and the second to an extensive review of recent academic literature on children's work in the Majority World conducted to ascertain the extent to which existing scholarship has incorporated the perspectives of both current and former child workers.

2.1 Investigating child domestic work in Iringa, Tanzania

A participatory and action-oriented study of child domestic work was conducted from 2005 to 2007 (Klocker, 2011, 2012). Its aims were to explore the issues facing child domestic workers and to determine contextually appropriate pathways for improving their circumstances (Klocker, 2011). Three former child domestic workers were trained and employed as co-researchers. Faidha Mlossi, Vaileth Mvena and Amina Haule were aged 17, 15 and 14 at the commencement of the research[3]. Former child domestic workers were chosen for this role because current employees' working hours greatly limit their ability to commit time to research. The research team also included Esther Malifedha (an adult Tanzanian research assistant) and Paul Mbenna (a Tanzanian musician and children's rights activist). A participatory, youth-led and action-oriented approach was adopted on the premise that it was unethical to conduct research on marginalized children's lives without endeavoring to improve their circumstances, but that it was important to do so in a manner that minimized the imposition of Minority World values onto Majority World childhoods (Klocker, 2011). Data were collected from various stakeholders: current and former child domestic workers, their employers, local community leaders and councilors, NGO staff and rural school children. This paper is primarily restricted to data collected from interviews with 30 current and 34 former child domestic workers. Of course, 'current' and 'former' are not fixed categories; there is considerable fluidity as children often leave work only to recommence at a later date (Evans, 2006). For the purposes of this research, 'former' child domestic workers were those not employed at the time of interview. The current and former child domestic workers interviewed had all commenced domestic employment before 18 years of age, although some were over 18 at the time of interview.

Child domestic workers are a notoriously difficult group to access for research purposes because of the 'hidden' location of their work in domestic relationships and spaces and the high degree of control exerted over their movements by some employers (Jacquemin, 2004; UNICEF, 1999). The

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

research team initially opted to interview former child domestic workers out of concern that we would be unable to recruit sufficient current employees. Unbeknownst to the research team at the time this decision was reached, the inclusion of both groups proved fortuitous beyond its capacity to boost interviewee numbers. Had we only interviewed current child domestic workers, a vastly different picture of this occupation would have emerged. Current child domestic workers were recruited via employers who had participated in this study, due to concerns that covertly interviewing child domestic workers (without employers' consent) would place them at risk of punishment (Jacquemin, 2004; Forrester-Kibuga, 2000). The ethical appropriateness of this decision was confirmed by our young interviewees' admissions that child domestic workers' time is closely monitored and that a delayed return to an employer's home (for instance, when running errands) is risky. Former child domestic workers were recruited through several channels including: a vocational training centre for former child domestic workers, snowballing in the young co-researchers' own neighborhoods, and via community leaders.

Interviews were conducted in Kiswahili by the young co-researchers. A peer-interviewing model was adopted to foster a sense of ease amongst research participants on the basis of shared experiences (Kellett et al., 2004). The two groups were asked the same series of questions, differing only in terms of the tense used. They were asked open-ended questions about the nature of their work and their general feelings about it; and also to specify benefits gained and/or problems resulting from domestic employment. These questions were not restricted to a particular household or timeframe and allowed both groups to reflect on their overall experiences of domestic employment. The former child domestic workers were asked additional questions about why they had left child domestic work and their lives post-domestic employment. A series of more specific questions relating to pay and working conditions were also asked of both groups. In order to avoid confusion for participants who had worked in multiple households, current child domestic workers were asked to provide these specific details only for their current household, while former child

domestic workers were asked to focus on a household in which they had faced challenges. These data are not included in this paper as they were not directly comparable across the two groups. The interview schedule was designed to minimize the potential for distress when investigating this sensitive issue. No questions were included that overtly asked the young interviewees about traumatic experiences or mental health and the open format allowed them to determine which experiences they were willing to disclose.

Interviews with current child domestic workers took place in their employers' houses (but only when employers were absent), whilst former child domestic workers were interviewed either in their homes or at the vocational training centre at which several were enrolled. At the cessation of interviews, all of the young interviewees were provided with contact details for the research team members, and also for a local non-government organization that provided counseling to (former) child domestic workers. The interviews were transcribed in Kiswahili by Esther, usually within one week of being conducted, in order to ensure that the adult researchers were aware of any ethical issues or safety concerns not immediately reported by the young interviewers. I translated the transcripts into English and my translation work was cross-checked by Esther and/or Paul prior to data analysis.

2.2 A review of the literature on children's work

A comprehensive review of the scholarly literature on children's work was conducted in September 2010. The aim of this review was to ascertain the extent to which former child workers have been included in recent empirical studies of children's work. Seven academic databases were searched (Scopus, Science Direct, Web of Science, ProQuest Central, Informit, Informaworld and Sage Journals Online) using the search terms "child* labour" OR "child* labor" OR "child* work" or "working children", which had to appear in the title, abstract or keywords of a paper. The search was restricted to English language journal articles published between 2005 and 2010 (inclusive).

The initial search yielded 1225 documents. Papers were excluded if they were not based on an empirical study of children's work in the Majority World[4] and, more specifically, if they failed to include empirical material collected from children/young people themselves. Following this process, 71 papers remained. The reference lists of those articles were scanned for additional material meeting the inclusion criteria. This process continued until no new articles were located. The final dataset included 91 papers. Of course, even a comprehensive database search cannot capture all articles related to a given topic. Important articles about children's work which did not use the search terms specified may have been missed.

The dataset of 91 papers covered diverse disciplines: human geography, sociology, gender studies, economics, development, behavioral sciences, public health, social work, education, medicine, psychiatry and planning. Thirteen of the papers were in 'human geography' journals and/or published by authors who identified as geographers in their institutional affiliation (Abebe, 2007; 2008; Aitken et al., 2006; Bromley and Mackie, 2008; 2009; Dyson, 2008; Evans, 2006; Hastadewi, 2009; Jennings et al., 2006; Robson et al., 2006; Swanson, 2007; van Blerk, 2007; 2008). Within the limitations of the database search parameters, this observation suggests that geographers have published, with some regularity, on research *with* working children in the Majority World. The 91 papers analyzed reported on diverse types of work undertaken by children (on the streets; in markets, restaurants and shops; in their own homes or the homes of others; on farms, in forests and in the fisheries sector; in mines and the construction industry; in the manufacturing sector; in commercial sex work; in 'sweat shops'; and in war zones) in diverse regions of the Majority World (including Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent and Central and South America). The key findings of the literature review are discussed below.

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[4]As there is no definitive list dividing countries into the Majority and Minority Worlds, studies conducted in countries positioned in the 'Very High Human Development' category in the 2010 Human Development Index rankings were excluded from the literature review.

3. Located firmly in the present: the temporal limitations of research on children's work

Several important observations were drawn from the literature review. First, the vast bulk of the literature on children's work retrieved by the initial database search (1225 papers) was theoretical, observational, focused on policy or legal analysis and did not include children or young people as informants. Less than six per cent of the papers retrieved by the original search fit the criterion of being based on empirical, child or youth-centered research. Children and young people continue to be drastically under-represented in the literature reporting on their working lives. Second, most of the studies that collected empirical material from working children (77 of 91) only involved *current* child workers. Of the 14 papers that incorporated former child workers, only one (Evans, 2006) was in the field of human geography. Furthermore, five of those 14 papers related to former child soldiers (Betancourt, 2008; Boothby, 2006; Cortes and Buchanan, 2007; Denov and Maclure, 2007; Maclure and Denov, 2006), recruited for research because of the obvious challenges of interviewing current child soldiers and because their post-demilitarization lives were the object of study. They did not appear to have been interviewed in acknowledgement of the unique perspectives that their 'former' status may offer. Of the remaining nine papers which included former child workers (Bastia, 2005; Cleveland, 2010; de Lange, 2007; Evans, 2006; Fischer et al., 2005; Hilson, 2010; Jacquemin, 2006; Kudrati et al., 2008; Simkhada, 2008), only three reflected (even briefly) on the methodological and analytical implications of doing so (Cleveland, 2010; deLange, 2007; Evans, 2006). Finally, only five studies included *both* current and former child workers (Evans, 2006; Fischer et al., 2005; Hilson, 2010; Jacquemin, 2006; Kudrati, et al. 2008). With the exception of Evans (2006), no explanation for including both groups was provided, data were not disaggregated and no attempts were made to compare their experiences.

The disproportionate focus on current child workers observed in the literature may have arisen because scholars were attempting to report on children's experiences of rapidly changing contexts. However, a lack of awareness of the potential benefits of including former child workers may also

have been a significant factor. Here, I argue that it is important to reflect more critically on the temporal dimensions, limitations and implications of research encounters, particularly surrounding sensitive issues such as children's work. The intention of this paper is not to criticize those scholars who have actively sought to include (currently) working children's perspectives, but rather to explore the possibilities of adding an additional layer of empirical richness by also incorporating former child workers' accounts. The following section discusses the utility of such an approach through a comparison of the experiences reported by current and former child domestic workers in Iringa, Tanzania.

4. Comparing and contrasting current and former child domestic workers' perspectives

Interviews with current and former child domestic workers in Tanzania revealed divergent experiences of that occupation, as exemplified in the following empirical vignettes.

> *Tumaini[5] – former child domestic worker: Tumaini started child domestic work when she was 15 years old because of financial difficulties at home and because she had nothing else to do. She worked about 18 hours per day, from 5a.m. to 11p.m. The work was difficult as it involved hand-washing large piles of laundry and fetching water. Tumaini's employers promised her a wage of 10,000 shillings per month, but she was never paid[6]. She worked seven days per week and was not given a holiday. Tumaini slept on the floor and was not allowed to eat with her employers' family, nor did she receive the same food. She felt isolated because she was not allowed to watch TV with the family in the evenings. Tumaini's employers didn't provide medical care when she was sick. Worst of all, her employers' son sexually harassed her and when she refused, he raped her. Tumaini felt that there was nobody she could talk to because her employer was very aggressive. When she told her mother about the incident she advised her to leave, which she did. Tumaini's goal was to*

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[5]Names have been changed.
[6] At the time of the research, 10,000 Tanzanian Shillings were equivalent to U.S.$8.15.

save money to pay for secondary schooling, but because she was not paid she was unable to achieve this goal. She feels hopeless about the future.

Mariam – current child domestic worker: Mariam started domestic work at the age of 17 because the idea of staying at home with nothing to do did not appeal to her. Mariam's work day starts just before 7 a.m. and she is mainly responsible for cleaning. She works about eight hours per day, five days per week and gets time to rest. Mariam also gets to go home to visit her mother every couple of months. She does not experience any problems and says that her major benefit is that her employer is sending her to a vocational training school where she is learning to sew. Mariam is paid 15,000 Shillings per month of which she sends 10,000 home. She is also being given food, medical care and clothing. Mariam is able to watch TV with her employers' family and feels like their child. Her goal is to keep learning to sew so she can start her own business.

These vignettes do not represent isolated cases. Across the full sample of interviewees, 96 per cent of current child domestic workers described their work as 'good', almost half of the former employees described it as 'bad' (and the rest as 'mixed'). Similarly, while 83 per cent of current child domestic workers claimed to be obtaining benefits from their jobs, only 38 per cent of former employees concurred. Conversely, 62 per cent of former child domestic workers reported they had faced 'problems' as a result of their work, compared to only ten per cent of the current employees. When asked whether they knew other child domestic workers who had experienced problems as a result of their work, 100 per cent of former child domestic workers and 80 per cent of current employees indicated that they did. Data collected in the third person may offer young interviewees scope to speak about sensitive issues in a non-threatening manner. However, this approach can be problematic in relation to issues which experience significant media attention. In Tanzania, extreme cases of violence and abuse against child domestic workers feature prominently in news media. Children's accounts of 'other child domestic workers you know' are likely influenced by such

media coverage, and may not always be based on direct contact with children facing these problems. The types of benefits and problems commonly cited by the current and former child domestic workers interviewed are outlined in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Benefits reported by current and former child domestic workers[a]
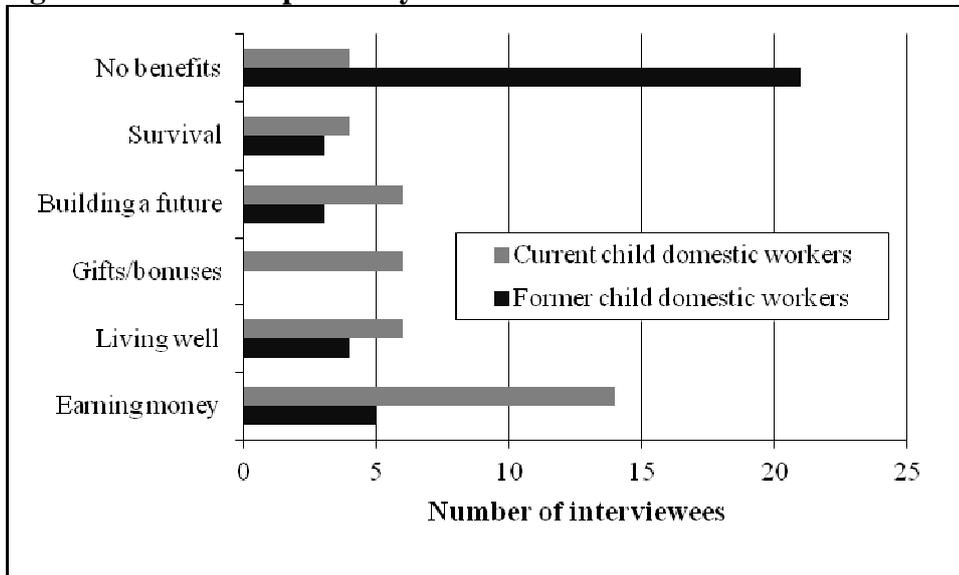
Source: Interviews with 30 current and 34 former child domestic workers conducted in Iringa, Tanzania.
[a]Respondents were asked an open-ended question relating to 'benefits', rather than being asked specifically whether they benefited by 'earning money', 'living well', and so on.

Figure 2: Problems reported by current and former child domestic workers[b]
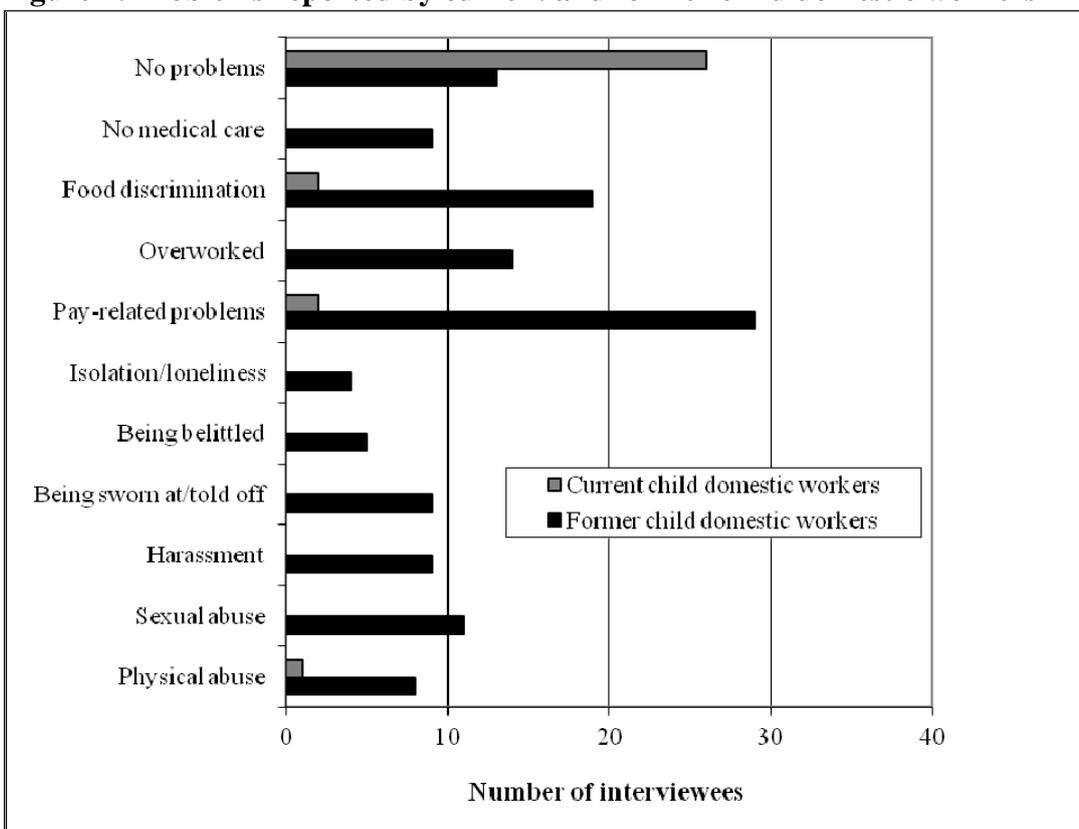
Source: Interviews with 30 current and 34 former child domestic workers conducted in Iringa, Tanzania.
[b]Respondents were asked an open-ended question relating to 'problems' experienced, rather than being asked specifically whether they were physically abused, sexually abused and so on.

A number of current child domestic workers felt that they benefited from earning an income, living well, building a future, receiving gifts or bonuses, and simply by 'surviving'; whilst the vast bulk of former child domestic workers claimed to have received no benefits at all (Figure 1). Conversely, only a small proportion of the current child domestic workers interviewed reported problems (Figure 2). Difficulties commonly reported by former child domestic workers included various types of discrimination, segregation and isolation, such as sleeping on the floor whilst members of the employer's family slept in beds, or not being permitted to eat or watch television with their employer's family. Former child domestic workers also reported a lack of basic care – including medical care when unwell. This was particularly problematic as many were not paid wages and were thus unable to meet their own basic needs. Pay-related problems were the most common issue for former child domestic workers, but what was most concerning was the regularity with which they reported physical, sexual and/or verbal abuse (being sworn at, told off and/or belittled). While one current child domestic worker reported physical abuse, this occurred at the hands of a previous employer, thus the research team was not required to intervene. Conversely, a substantial number of former child domestic workers recounted extremely serious cases of abuse. Of course, former child domestic workers also no longer lived with their abusive employers and thus were not at immediate risk. However, by asking interviewees to recount their experiences, our research ran the risk of re-traumatizing former child domestic workers by dredging up unwelcome and upsetting memories of the past (Hutchinson, 2011). As previously mentioned, we sought to minimize this risk by avoiding direct questions on particularly traumatic issues. The interviews were remarkably free of tears or other obvious signs of distress – even when the young interviewees recounted devastating experiences. This may have been an artefact of the peer-interviewing process, although this cannot be substantiated. The interview excerpts presented in Table 1 offer a qualitative snapshot of the current and former child domestic workers' contrasting perspectives. Possible explanations for the discrepancies between the contemporary experiences reported by current child domestic workers

and the retrospective accounts of the former, as well as their implications, are explored in the

remainder of this paper.

Table 1: Contrasting reports of child domestic work

Current child domestic workers
I just think it [child domestic work] is good…I work well and I just live well *(Child domestic worker#15)*.
Eeee, I get [benefits]…Like being cared for well, eating and sleeping well, and I am cared for like a child of this family…I just think it [child domestic work] is good…she [employer] considers me like her child and I see her like my mother *(Child domestic worker#21)*.
I just think it [child domestic work] is good…There is not a lot of work here, we help each other *(Child domestic worker#18)*.
Eeee [I get benefits]…I mean I do the domestic work, s/he [the employer] gives me money *(Child domestic worker#4)*.
Former child domestic workers
It is just torture, it reaches a point you are working…they [employers] don't care if you are sick or whatever, what they want is just for their work to be done *(Former child domestic worker#14)*.
I thought it [my work] was bad…Because they [the employers] beat me until I got wounds...*(Former child domestic worker#31)*.
I would advise [primary school girls] they should not go to do domestic work because domestic work has torture…you work without resting *(Former child domestic worker#30)*.
I was waking up at 5a.m. and sleeping at 10p.m. or 11p.m…in the morning I was doing the cleaning, I made sure her [the employer's] children had eaten and had gone to school, there was one child who stayed [at home] with me. At 9 o'clock I was going to the [employer's] farm, at 12 o'clock I came back to start cooking lunch. When I finished cooking I washed clothing, I went to the market, when I came back from there I collected water until the drum was full and when I finished that I started to cook dinner. Then I was waiting for them to eat, then I should take away the dishes and wash them, and when they went to sleep that is when I got time to go to eat. That situation continued just the same every day *(Former child domestic worker#21)*.
[T]hey said that they were saving it [my wage] for me, but when I left they did not give it to me *(Former child domestic worker#19)*.

Source: Interviews with 30 current and 34 former child domestic workers conducted in Iringa, Tanzania.

5. Unpacking the discrepancies between contemporary and retrospective accounts of child domestic work

The dissonances in the current and former child domestic workers' accounts were so vast that

interviewing only one of those groups would have led to an inadequate and partial insight. Had only

current child domestic workers been consulted, the research team would have emerged with a view

of child domestic work as an occupation in which most children are treated appropriately, and from

which they obtain a number of emotional and material benefits. On the contrary, if we had only

interviewed former child domestic workers, our understandings would have been dominated by

stories of exploitation, mistreatment and outright abuse. Our research would have framed child domestic work as being largely bereft of benefits, and as a source of short- and long-term disadvantage and harm. Whilst unpacking these discrepant accounts, it is important to bear in mind that all but one of the former child domestic workers interviewed had ceased domestic employment between zero and three years prior to interview. Thus, their experiences of this employment sector were recent – they had not worked during a different 'era' to those currently employed and there had been no major changes to the policy context surrounding child domestic work in Tanzania during that period. The employment contexts and backgrounds of the current and former child domestic workers also did not differ substantially - there was no difference in the mean age at first employment, although the former child domestic workers were on average two years older (18.8 years) than the current child domestic workers (16.8 years) at the time of interview. Interviewees from both groups had limited formal education, usually to Standard Six - the final year of primary school and end of compulsory education in Tanzania. Most came from rural backgrounds and had entered child domestic work due to familial poverty. Variability in employers' socio-economic status, suburb of residence, household size and household composition were equally apparent *within* both groups, thus these factors did not account for current and former child domestic workers' contrasting accounts. The research findings and literature point towards three potential explanations for the divergent stories of child domestic work presented. First, it is plausible that the different versions of child domestic work recounted resulted from 'real' differences in experiences. Second, the retrospective nature of former child domestic workers' narratives may have affected their accounts. Third, it is possible that the two groups of interviewees intentionally or subconsciously presented different 'fronts' (or even strategically misrepresented their experiences) in the dialogic moment of the interview encounter. As the circumstances prompting them to emphasize or downplay various aspects of child domestic work would have differed, this may have produced conflicting accounts. These possibilities are explored on the following pages.

5.1 'Real' differences of experience

The former child domestic workers interviewed may have been over-representative of the problematic aspects of child domestic work because they had already left the sector, often due to difficulties they had experienced whilst employed. Conversely, current child domestic workers likely over-represented this occupation's beneficial (or benign) aspects. They may not yet have been treated poorly enough to consider leaving. Further, current child domestic workers were recruited for interview via their employers – who most likely felt that they were treating their young employees well enough to have nothing to fear from allowing them to be interviewed. In addition, while many former child domestic workers had worked in multiple houses, many current child domestic workers had only been employed once. Former child domestic workers thus had a broader array of experiences upon which to draw, and often blurred their experiences from multiple households into one overwhelmingly negative portrayal of the occupation. These factors likely influenced the relative weight of positive and negative experiences encountered (and reported) by the two groups.

5.2 The influence of time passed: contemporary versus retrospective accounts

The literature review clearly demonstrated that existing studies of children's work have privileged contemporary experiences. Some of the articles reviewed were apologetic about having to 'resort' to former workers as a data source given the perceived 'limitations of memory' (Maclure and Denov, 2006, p. 122; see also Simkhada, 2008). The literature on oral history provides an insight into the character of memory and particularly the influence of time passed on informants' accounts of trauma. Of course, it is important to bear in mind that past and present do not exist in a neat binary – what we think of as 'existing', as being *present*, is already past (albeit immediate past), thus 'every perception is already memory' (Bergson, 1913, p.194; Dodgshon, 2008).

Time is not a 'neutral medium', but plays an active role in the framing of life events (Worth, 2009, p.1055, see also Grosz, 1999). Perks and Thomson (2006, p.212) found that in the immediate aftermath of a trauma, interviewees were likely to offer a 'narrow viewpoint' as they struggled to make sense of their experiences. Retrospective interviews tend to be more dramatic and descriptive, and are bound into a coherent story 'with a beginning, middle and end' (Allison, 2006, p.223). In retrospective interviews, interviewees not only tell a story, but often attempt to 'mak[e] it interesting to the listener' adding 'colour, drama…and even humour' as well as a 'justification' of the events that took place (Allison, 2006, p.224). This process of justification often involves a 'psychic struggle to 'compose' a past that [the informant] can live with' (Perks and Thomson, 2006, p.212). These reflections have considerable relevance to the study of child domestic work reported on here. The current child domestic workers' accounts were far less detailed and dramatic than those of the former employees. While the current child domestic workers' accounts were clipped and reserved, the former child domestic workers narrated a story:

> The father [male employer]…really liked me, he was saying he wants to be with me sexually… because the [employers'] child liked me, s/he helped me. We sat outside until mama [the female employer] returned. When she came home she told me that, 'If you want to leave, leave peacefully, don't make me and my husband fight'… [The child] defended me, but that mama said, 'Both of you should leave, I don't need you'… she dumped my clothes outside. I went to the police station because it was not far away, I went to report her… She was told [by the police] that she should give me my wage within five days, she gave me that money, I left (Former child domestic worker#31).

It was also apparent that the former child domestic workers had reflected upon their experiences and placed them into a broader social context. Rather than simply listing their experiences, the former child domestic workers commented upon them critically, and noted the injustice of what had

happened to them. Thus, former child domestic workers regularly adopted value-laden terminology, describing their previous jobs as 'torture' or 'harassment', and their former employers' as uncaring and cruel: 'The mother of the house…she was a harasser. She beat me, she tortured me, she cursed' (Former child domestic worker#14) (see also Table 1).

Individuals' narrations of events are also influenced by the passage of time as today's interviewee is 'not the same person' as took part in the original event being described (Portelli 1981, p.102). Interview narratives and stories of past events 'develop and change across the life course' in response to various 'happenings and transitions' (McAdams, 2001, pp. 101, 106). Changes that have taken place in the narrator's consciousness or context are likely to impact the 'valuation and the 'coloring' of [their] story' (Perks and Thomson, 2006, p.38). People, irrespective of age, are in a constant process of 'becoming' that reflects their life experiences and engagements with the social world (Worth, 2009). Annette Kuhn (2002) has acknowledged the inability of memory to directly capture past experiences and perspectives – it is always a point of view based on past experiences, present positioning and future expectations (see also Davies, 1996; Leyshon and Bull, 2011; Worth, 2009). The former child domestic workers involved in this study recounted their experiences through the lens of their present circumstances, which differed from the lens available to current employees. A number of former child domestic workers had left their employment abruptly, following experiences of abuse or highly exploitative working conditions (see Table 2). Since leaving child domestic work, many were struggling to eke out an existence, and were either living with family members or at a vocational training centre for former child domestic workers. A small number had married and had children since leaving child domestic work, but none had gained secure employment in another sector. Almost without exception, they spoke of still trying to 'build a life' or learn a skill (usually sewing), although a handful conceded to having no plans. The former child domestic workers had been forced to confront a disappointing lack of employment

opportunities beyond domestic work, and this likely influenced their perspectives on their previous employment.

Table 2: Former child domestic workers' explanations for leaving their employment

Former child domestic workers
I decided to stop because that boss there, he was wanting me sexually and when I looked at his age and my age, he was very big…*(Former child domestic worker#11)*
This situation made me lose my hope, if you think about it there where I was is far from home. They don't consider you like a fellow human being, they just make you work like a machine *(Former child domestic worker#14).*
[E]very time a person came out from bathing, right at that time I should clean the bathroom. Now one day, a person came out from bathing, I forgot to go and clean, the child was crying a lot, I was comforting him/her, when the boss came in and found that after that person bathed I did not clean, she caught me and started to beat me. After finishing beating me she went in to bathe, then, I also took my bag and ran away. I left all my wages and ran *(Former child domestic worker#16).*
I stopped that work because I saw they are cheating me with the wage, another thing they are [were] harassing me, they don't give us the same things as these children and therefore I saw I was just being harassed *(Former child domestic worker#20).*
When I saw there was a lot of harassment…I went back home…I was being sworn at…If I cook[ed] food I put it in the lounge room, I'm told I should continue with work, when they finish eating that's when I also eat *(Former child domestic worker#27).*
After seeing I am not given the wage, I decided to stop *(Former child domestic worker#30).*
The father of the house wanted to rape me…He was saying I should go to prepare his bedroom…I was refusing, one day his wife went out, he told me I should prepare his room, when I went into the room he wanted to rape me, that's when I ran away *(Former child domestic worker#34).*

Source: Interviews with 34 former child domestic workers conducted in Iringa, Tanzania.

Following Mandelbaum's (1973) concept of 'turnings' and 'adaptations' in the life course, Denov and Maclure (2007) recounted the life stories of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone. 'Turnings' are fundamental changes in roles or status that alter an individual's self-concept, whilst 'adaptations' are behavioral and attitudinal changes which occur in relation to changed circumstances, roles and relationships (Denov and Maclure, 2007, p.246). Just as turnings and adaptations characterized the 'making' and 'unmaking' of child soldiers in their study, these concepts are applicable to the current and former child domestic workers discussed here. The interviewees had experienced shifts in circumstances when entering child domestic work, and (for former child domestic workers) when leaving it. In some instances, the 'turnings' experienced were abrupt and wrenching, requiring individuals to 're-make' their own subjectivities and 'assume a new set of values and relationships' (Denov and Maclure, 2007, p.254). These processes have

profound implications for what individuals are willing (and able) to divulge to researchers at different stages of their lives. This very brief foray into the extensive bodies of social scientific literature on memory and retrospective interviewing is by no means comprehensive, but it does suggest that it is unsurprising that the current and former child domestic workers' accounts differed so dramatically. Notwithstanding the importance of these largely subconscious processes, there remains considerable potential that the two groups' discrepant accounts came about because either (or both) sets of interviewees provided partial and/or embellished versions of the 'truth' to the research team (whether consciously or not). The following section adopts a Goffmanesque understanding of performance to navigate this issue.

5.3 Different 'fronts' for current and former child domestic workers

All self-report data are fallible and affected by the willingness of participants to divulge their personal information. Goffman (1971, p.53) argued that individuals often 'conceal or underplay' experiences, activities and motives considered incompatible with their 'idealized version' of themselves, and are more likely to do so when asked about sensitive, personal, traumatic, embarrassing, or socially unacceptable issues (Bleek, 1987). In this study, a peer interviewing model was adopted to put the young interviewees at ease. However, child domestic work remains highly stigmatized in Tanzania. There is a strong sense of shame attached to the poverty that drives girls to perform other people's 'dirty work', and also to the perception that these young women are sexually available to male members of the households where they live and work. Notwithstanding the potential benefits of peer interviewing, this approach does not have a magical capacity to sidestep interviewees' 'fronts'. Interview performances provide material to be 'deciphered', not a 'reality to be rediscovered' (King, 1997, p. 10). The discussion that follows does not seek to discover the 'truth' of child domestic work hidden somewhere within the discrepant accounts provided by current and former employees. Rather, I explore the different motives they may have

had for choosing certain performances over others, and for offering dissonant 'fronts', in order to better understand the diverse processes at play in child domestic work.

A number of factors may have prompted current child domestic workers to put up a predominantly optimistic front during interviews. They may have been concerned (despite assurances of confidentiality) that any complaints or accusations they made would be relayed to their employers, causing them to be punished (or even to lose their jobs, and thus their homes). Second, current child domestic workers may have been concerned that the researchers would remove them from the workplace if serious abuse was reported. Such feelings would not have been misguided, I certainly felt an ethical obligation to intervene if a research participant reported abuse at the hands of current employer, and I had asked my young co-researchers to inform me if this occurred. Fortunately, no such situations arose. For many child domestic workers this occupation is a survival strategy and being withdrawn from their work would have serious consequences – however well-intentioned the rationale behind doing so (Klocker, 2011; Rubenson et al., 2004; UNICEF, 1999). Third, current child domestic workers may have been concerned about the social 'stigma' associated with issues such as sexual abuse, and may not have wanted to admit such experiences. In the Tanzanian context, sexual abuse is regularly blamed on the target, rather than the perpetrator. This tendency, of blaming child domestic workers for 'seducing' their attackers, was readily apparent in the interview data we collected. Anderson (2000, pp.135-136) has made similar observations with respect to adult domestic workers, noting that female employers 'almost invariably sid[e] with the male offender[s]' and accuse their employees of ''stealing' their husbands when they are raped by them'. Finally, narratives function to 'mould our perceptions of ourselves and our place in the world' (Leyshon and Bull, 2011, p.164; Somers, 1994). The current child domestic workers may have put a positive 'spin' on their working experiences for their own psychological benefit, to avoid constructing themselves as victims and to make the most of their difficult circumstances. They may have 'been afraid of the emotional impact that telling the[ir] story may have, and the loss of control it may

invite' (Cortes and Buchanan, 2007, p.52). Similar observations were made by Kudrati et al. (2008), in their study of young people living and working on the streets of Khartoum, Sudan. They noted that street children may be reticent to express painful emotions, or recount traumatic experiences, because that process may 'make one unable to cope with immediate needs' (Kudrati et al., 2008, p.444). It was thus particularly important, from an ethical perspective, to ensure that the interviewers did not undermine the coping strategies of current child domestic workers by asking direct and probing questions pertaining to traumatic experiences. The open-ended question-style adopted may have resulted in the under-reporting of traumatic experiences by current child domestic workers, but this was preferable to taking the risk of inducing distress through persistent and targeted questioning on particularly sensitive aspects of their lives.

On the other hand, having gained some distance from their traumatic experiences, former child domestic workers may have been able to reflect on their experiences with less fear of being stigmatized, and no fear of being punished or losing their job. Evans (2006, p.113) observed that former Tanzanian street children found it easier to critically reflect on their own negative experiences and 'deviant' behaviors, than those who were still living on the streets. Similarly, Baumeister and Wilson (1996, p.324) noted that individuals who can construct 'temporal boundaries' around (past) 'shameful' experiences are able to separate those experiences from their 'present self' and speak more openly. This tendency was actually observed in relation to an employer interviewed in this study, who readily admitted that he had sexually abused a previous child domestic worker employed in his home. He was willing to make this admission on the basis that he had since become a born again Christian and changed his 'ways'. These observations imply that current child domestic workers had more cause to downplay or hide aspects of their experiences from the researchers than former employees. Indeed, Thompson (2000) observed that there may be more motivations for a person being interviewed in the present tense to 'mis-describe' their experiences than a person being interviewed in retrospect. However, following Goffman, the

former child domestic workers also presented a specific front (or fronts). Their retrospective stories may have been distorted by exaggeration and dramatic flair (Allison, 2006; Perks and Thomson, 2009) as they sought to tell an interesting or 'tellable' story (McAdams, 2001, p.114). They may have felt a need to 'justify' their exit from child domestic work with compelling evidence of harmful experiences that helped to maintain a sense of 'personal coherence' (McAdams, 2001, p.107). This latter point is supported by Leyshon and Bull's (2011, p.166) observation that individuals draw upon their memories 'to piece together an emergent and consistent life-narrative'. Some of the former child domestic workers' fronts may also have been influenced by the time they had spent at a vocational training centre, run by a non-government organization renowned for its advocacy work around children's rights, although this only applied to one-third of those interviewed.

There are a range of reasons (strategic or inadvertent) why the interviewees involved in this study may have withheld, downplayed, emphasized or exaggerated certain pieces of information, only some of which have been explored here. According to Ansell (2009, p.205), we must recognize that 'children can only tell us so much, that what they tell and, especially, what they tell of what they see, gives access to only a very small part of their lives'. That informants are able to present fronts in the dialogic moment of the interview encounter highlights their agency (Cortes and Buchanan, 2007). Interviewees can use deceit or silence to gain power in research encounters (Nunkoosing, 2005). Concealing or downplaying certain pieces of information can be 'a strategy for survival, a code to preserve one's own and other people's self-respect', which may provide informants' 'only escape from embarrassment' (Bleek, 1987, p.319; Nachman, 1984). Asking ourselves why our interviewees may have chosen to present certain fronts in an interview encounter can lead to new and rich insights into their lives (Bleek, 1987) and a more nuanced understanding of the issue under investigation. This approach forces us to be more attuned to the social pressures bearing down upon them – especially those who occupy positions of social stigma or marginalization (Thompson,

2000). In the context of this research, it would have been damaging to pit current and former child domestic workers' accounts against each other and to adjudicate between them, using the stories told by one group to undercut and destabilize those made by the other (Silverman, 2006, p.292). There is no single 'true' experience of this occupation, and (even if there were) interview narratives could never hope to reach it. All interviews are performances, mutually created in the moment of the interview by the interviewer and interviewee (Silverman, 2006). There is a problem with the assumption that 'what is talked can be an exact replication of what is lived' (Nunkoosing, 2005, p.705), thus the concepts of true and false become irrelevant. It is not the researcher's role to 'vet what people say for its 'accuracy', 'reliability' or 'validity'' (Kitzinger, 2004, p.128), but to remain alert to the partiality, ambiguity, constructedness and complexity of all research encounters. This does not render the stories told less meaningful, but it does have implications for the way they are unpacked, and for the conclusions drawn from them. Many complex factors are likely to have influenced the 'versions' of child domestic work provided by current and former employees. By drawing attention to the motives that may underlie their fronts, this paper has drawn attention toward the value of including *former* child workers' unique and insightful voices in future studies.

6. Concluding remarks

It has become increasingly commonplace, over the last decade, for scholars to argue that children's work should not automatically be identified as a harmful aberration. The imposition of Minority World standards (of non-work) onto Majority World childhoods has been described as a form of cultural imperialism (van Bueren, 1998; Woodhead, 1999). Academic researchers (including children's geographers in general, and myself in particular) have moved away from the western preference of advocating for work-free childhoods (Aitken et al., 2006; Bromley and Mackie, 2009; Klocker, 2011; Woodhead, 1999). Working children's own accounts have been used to argue for the benefits of child work, and for children's *right* to work - particularly in circumstances where prohibiting their employment would decrease their survival prospects (Invernizzi and Milne, 2002;

Miljeteig, 2000). Such scholarship has made an extremely important contribution towards our understandings of (working) children's rights and needs, and vital progress has been made towards their participation in research.

Notwithstanding these positive trends, the literature review conducted for this paper revealed that Majority World children's voices remain large excluded from research on their working lives. Further, despite my own support for children's right to work (Klocker, 2011), I have become increasingly concerned that children's work has been defended on the basis of the partial (and perhaps unduly optimistic) 'fronts' offered by children who are *currently* employed. This is not to suggest that all current child workers, across all occupations will give more positive accounts than former child workers. Further empirical testing of the observations made in this paper is undoubtedly required. However, current child workers have compelling and unique grounds for downplaying the difficulties they face. As a result, scholars of children's work may be advocating for their right to work, and drawing attention to the benefits of that work, on the basis of information which is (at best) partial. A more nuanced insight into working children's day-to-day lives can be obtained by interviewing in both the past and present tense. Such an approach would be beneficial for researchers and activists seeking to implement strategies to improve children's wellbeing and working conditions.

The divergent trends documented in this paper highlight the utility of incorporating both current and former child workers in future studies of children's employment. Both groups offered partial and unique perspectives which, when combined, added breadth and complexity to understandings of their employment. Longitudinal research with working children over the life course – including when they cease to be working children – would also be useful in this regard, although this can be difficult to achieve in light of young workers' mobility and the often hidden nature of their employment. The extensive literature review undertaken for the purposes of this paper revealed that

many existing research projects have not benefited from the rich and distinct perspectives that former child workers can add. This is of considerable concern, given that such studies often make policy recommendations on the basis of their research findings. These observations have particular relevance for human geographers, who have demonstrated a commitment to research about and *with* marginalized children and young people (including working children). However, the utility of these observations extends beyond child-centered research. The presentism of much social scientific literature (including in geography) has inhibited widespread engagement with memory outside of historical works. This paper has made a case that deeper understandings of contemporary issues emerge when researchers move beyond the implicit assumption that we can learn all we need to know by working in the present tense. Contemporary accounts do not occupy a privileged status in relation to reliability or truth, just as retrospective accounts are not inherently inferior. When paired together, past and present accounts provide a level of empirical richness, intricacy and depth that neither could achieve in isolation.

7. References

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