



# Questioning the productivity of victimization – research on au pairs and unexplored au pair- subjectivities

Philosophy of Science Essay, June 2014

By Mariya Bikova

## Introduction

The au pair arrangement has become a largely researched topic internationally as well as in the Scandinavian countries due to its controversial nature and its development from a scheme for cultural exchange to a migrant work-arrangement. The institution of au pairing is old and is based on the idea of placing young middle-class Europeans to live with families of similar socio-economic status, who, in exchange for help with childcare and the housework, hold the au pair with board and lodging (COE, 1969, Griffith and Legg, 1989). Today, rather than with young middle-class Europeans, the au pair scheme is mostly associated with au pairs from the Philippines, and rather than cultural exchange, it is mostly used for provision of migrant care and domestic labour.

Also in Norway the number of foreign au pairs, especially from the Philippines, has been increasing since the middle of 2000 (UDI, 2012) reinvigorating discussions about the return of the 'servant class' that in Norway became extinct in the 1950s with industrialization, changes in the job market and development towards gender equality (Sogner, 2004). Both academic work on au pairs (Sollund, 2009, Øien, 2009, Bikova, 2010, Sollund, 2010a, Sollund, 2010b, Stenum, 2011a, Stenum, 2011b) and journalistic contributions (Kvalheim, 2006, Sandvik, 2006, Bergem, 2011, Isungset, 2013) have pointed to similarities between au pairs and live-in domestic workers in terms of working conditions, living arrangements and relation to the employing family. The affinities between the situation of the au pairs and that of live-in domestic workers are reflected also in theoretizations on au pairs where parallels are drawn between dominant research on migrant domestic workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001a, Parreñas, 2001a, Parreñas, 2001b, Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003, Constable, 2007) and au pairs. In such theoretizations au pairs have often been portrayed as disadvantaged and deprived workers, as victims and "servants of globalization" (Parreñas, 2001b) who have no other choice but leaving their families behind and taking up servant jobs in the developed economies of North.

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The objective of this essay is to reflect on the process of knowledge production I engage into when placing my own study into the research field of migrant care and domestic work – a field that most of the existing literature on au pairs has been placed into ‘by default’ – due to similarities between au pairs and domestic workers. On a very general level, this essay is about the politics of academic knowledge production and also an attempt to reflect upon researchers’ responsibility for the (re)presentation of their objects of study given that “knowledge is in and of the world, generative precisely because of its representational dynamics” (Jazeel and McFarlane, 2010: 114; emphasis in original).

Important in this reflexive process has been the identification of the available and dominant representations of au pairs as these have been the starting point for my own study on the subject. It is my claim – based on my immersion in the literature on the field, that the dominant picture of au pairs in academic (and journalistic) work is that of ‘victims of globalization’ and that the overtly focus on victimization might have left other sides of the phenomenon of au pair migration unexplored. As a part of the reflexive elaboration on my own knowledge production, I have seen as necessary to address the questions of how the overtly focus on victimization of au pairs may be understood and whether Sirnes’ (2000) and Loga’s (2003) notion of ‘discourse of goodness’ may provide a meaningful analytical framework for understanding the victimization of au pairs?

The ‘discourse of goodness’ is about the protection and promotion of democratic values and universal human rights and is activated when ‘good’ values are threatened – for example when social groups defined by the ‘discourse of goodness’ as vulnerable are badly treated or abused, or, when these same groups do not have the knowledge, skills or opportunity to require fair treatment. Can the academic, journalistic and political interest for the situation of the au pairs in Norway be related to a ‘discourse of goodness’? Can it be the case that the victimization of au pairs is a ‘necessary’ condition for the activation of the discourse of goodness? And if so, what are the representations and subject positions of the au pairs that the discourse of goodness does not accommodate? These are the questions that I discuss in this essay.

The first part of the essay establishes the foundation for my claim that the dominant picture of au pairs in the literature is that of victims and ‘servants of globalization’. This part of the essay may also be read as a methodological discussion of the epistemological foundation of the literature on au pairs. On a more general level, the discussion is about the reliability of the research findings, but more than pointing to some of the obvious methodological fallacies in the literature, I do not endeavor at providing an elaborate methodological analysis of existing literature. In the next part of the essay I introduce media and journalistic work as another institution contributing to the victimization of au pairs. I also discuss the relation between research and politics through examples of policy responses to research-based findings and recommendations. Beyond a discussion of the relation between research and politics, this second part of the essay serves to develop my idea that the victimization of au pairs

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may in fact be necessary and 'productive' if seen from within a 'discourse of goodness'. The notion of 'discourse of goodness' is elaborated on in the third and largest part of the essay where I discuss whether the 'discourse of goodness' may provide a meaningful analytical framework for understanding the dominant representation of au pairs in academic and journalistic work. In the last part of the essay, I discuss what representations and subject positions of au pairs are not dominant in the research literature and with that also identify a research gap in the existing literature.

### How victims are produced: Some methodological fallacies in the literature on au pairs

Research on the au pair institution, internationally (Hess and Puckhaber, 2004, Cox, 2007, Mellini et al., 2007, Anderson, 2009, Búriková and Miller, 2010, Geserick, 2012) as well as in the Nordic countries (Isaksen, 2001, Platzner, 2002, Hovdan, 2005, Stenum, 2008, Øien, 2009, Bikova, 2010, Stenum, 2010, Sollund, 2010a, Sollund, 2010b, Løvdaal, 2012), has examined extensively the au pairs' motivation and reasons for migration, living and working conditions in the destination countries and revealed cases of poor treatment, overworking and exploitation.

Due to the nature of the work done by the au pairs –live-in domestic work and the nature of the relationship between the au pair and the host family reminding in many senses a feudal-type of relationship with the host family (sometimes) having full control over the au pair's working, sleeping and free time, studies of au pairs (Hess and Puckhaber, 2004, Hovdan, 2005, Anderson, 2007, Stenum, 2008, Sollund, 2009, Bikova, 2010, Stenum, 2010, Sollund, 2010a, Sollund, 2010b, Stenum, 2011a) have found affinities between au pairs and domestic workers and based much of their theoretizations on dominant research on migrant domestic workers (Parreñas, 2000, Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001a, Parreñas, 2001a, Parreñas, 2001b, Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003, Constable, 2007).

Particularly the work of Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2000, 2001a,b) on Filipina migrant domestic workers in Italy and the USA has been much referred to in theoretizations on the 'situation' of au pairs in Europe and the USA often without taking into consideration the specific social, political and historical contexts in which Parreñas (2001b) conducted her study, the empirical foundation of her research and/or the characteristics of her sample. For example, Sollund (2010b: 150), in her study of Filipino and Eastern European au pairs in Norway makes the following observation,

That many au pairs, particularly the Filipinas, send most of their earnings home underlines that they are migrant workers who have not come to Norway for a 'cultural exchange'. They learn from family/friends that the 'pocket money' in Norway is more than the salaries paid to domestic helpers in, for example Singapore. Consequently, the sojourn in Norway represents a continuation of a situation in which they work as domestic helpers in countries with the most beneficial conditions. They migrate

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to improve their own and their family's living conditions (Hochschild, 2000, Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001a, Parreñas, 2001b, Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; emphasis added).

The way of reasoning illustrated in this quotation, namely that au pairs are "migrant workers" and "domestic helpers" forced into migration "to improve their own and their family's working conditions" is common in studies of au pairs and as demonstrated in the quotation above – with extensive references on the dominant research on migrant domestic workers; in the work of Sollund (2010b) also without any references to interviews with au pairs and drawing on conclusions from studies carried on in quite different social, political and historical contexts than the Norwegian. The use of the word 'Filipinas' – heavily burdened with colonial history and having become synonymous with 'maid' (Barber, 2000, Constable, 2007) may be seen as contributing stylistically to the victimization of Filipino au pairs.

Also the dominant theoretical perspective on the south-north gendered migration – the theory of "global care chains" formulated originally by Parreñas (2000) as "the international division of reproductive labour" and rephrased by Hochschild (2000) as "global care chains" to refer to the "personal ties between people across the globe based on the paid and unpaid work of caring" (Hochschild, 2000: 131) has been extensively drawn upon in theoretizations of au pair migration (Sollund, 2009, Øien, 2009, Bikova, 2010, Stenum, 2011a) often without taking into consideration the particular welfare context in which the 'global care chains' perspective has been developed. A major element in the analytical framework of the 'global care chains' is the transfer of motherly love and care from the migrant care worker to the employing family's children and the consequent extraction of "emotional surplus value" (Hochschild, 2000) at the expense of the migrant worker's own family members who experience "care deficit" (Pyle, 2006). This transfer happens at the absence of affordable public childcare in Italy and the USA, which is why families hire Filipino nannies in the first place. In Norway, however, the public support for childcare is generous and families with care responsibilities for children send their children to kindergartens even when the family has hired an au pair. Due to these particular institutional arrangements, au pairs working in Norwegian homes spend much less time with the host family's children and the transfer of love and care is of quite different dimension compared to the full-time nannies in American homes studied by Parreñas. Moreover, only the minority of Filipino au pairs placed in Norwegian homes are mothers with care responsibilities for children back home. Only five of thirty au pairs in Sollund's (2009, 2010a, 2010b) sample were mothers. Still she generalizes her conclusions to all au pairs working in Norway.

The conceptualization of au pair migration in terms of global chains of care is informed by and informs the idea that young women's participation in the au pair scheme jeopardizes family solidarity. Seen from the perspective of the global care chains-framework, the migration of a young woman with the objective of taking up an au pair position in Norway, may disrupt and erode the exchange of large and small favours between the members of a family or neighborhood (Hochschild, 2000, Isaksen et

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al., 2008). The assumption, then, is that not only the au pairs, but also their families and local communities are victims of the structural forces of globalization. Situating my own research practice in a research field dominated by a particular representation of the object of study raises a number of questions.

First, the question of why the dominant picture and the available subject positions of the au pairs, and especially those from the Philippines, is that of 'servants of globalization' might be seen as related to some of the affinities between au pairs and live-in domestic workers and the methodological fallacies these affinities provoke, but might as well be a question of what else have contributed to the victimization of the au pairs. Another important question is what has been left out from theoretizations on au pairs when the vast majority of studies focus on the processes of victimization of au pairs. In the next part of the essay, I focus on media as an institution contributing to the construction of au pairs as victims of globalization and discuss how the interaction between research, media and politics "sets things in motion" (Said, 1983).

### Political responses to dominant representations

The dissemination of research findings indicating that au pairs from the Philippines are the new domestic workers in Norwegian middle-class homes and that these young foreigners are overworked and exploited by their host families challenges local norms of gender equality and international solidarity, and has given rise to media attention around the au pair arrangement.

Much of the media coverage of the au pair arrangement has focused on the role of the au pair in the host family and the way au pairs have been treated by their hosts. Newspaper articles like Norwegian families want servants – not au pairs ("Norske familier vil ha hushjelp – ikke en au pair" (Hustadnes, 2012), Workers or servants? ("Tjenere eller arbeidsfolk?") (Fasting, 2013) and Masters and servants ("Herskap og tjenere") (Halse, 2013) describe a situation where the role of the au pair is one of a servant rather than of a family member, and where the power balance is in favour of the host family. The poor treatment of au pairs has been extensively discussed in media and particularly after a number of cases of trafficking and sexual abuse of Filipino au pairs were revealed during the past few years. Newspaper articles such as Forced an au pair to work 96 hours a week ("Tvang au pair til å jobbe 96 timer i uken") (The Norwegian National News Agency, 2013) and I was abused by the host mother ("Jeg ble banket opp av au pair-vertinna") (Hustadnes, 2012) portray au pairs as victims of both their host families and of the global economic inequalities that force them to accept poor working conditions.

Media's portraying of au pairs as victims has mobilized the engagement of researchers, politicians and policy makers and not at least the general public. After NRK's TV documentary Masters and servants ("Herskap og tenarar") (Isungset, 2013) was broadcasted on the Norwegian national television in April 2013, literally all Norwegian newspapers, radio stations and TV channels as well as many private

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persons, politicians and researchers commented on the situation of the au pairs in Norway establishing the need to do something for the improvement of the situation of au pairs in Norway.

LO's engagement with the subject and the ongoing discussions about the closing of the scheme (Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions, 2009), the establishment of service center for au pairs and host families (Au pair center, 2014a) and the changes in the immigration regulations concerning au pair placements (UDI, 2013b) are only some of the political responses to the increased public, political and academic engagement with the situation of au pairs. Two political responses deserve special attention – the 2012/2013-changes in the Norwegian regulation of the au pair scheme and the Ministry of Justice's initiative for the establishment of a service center for au pairs and host families.

Commissioned by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), FAFO's evaluation of the au pair scheme (Øien, 2009) concluded that the au pair arrangement no longer functions as a scheme for cultural exchange and recommended strengthening the au pairs' knowledge of their rights and obligations. Also recommended – with the objective of preventing mothers from separating from their children, was that persons with care responsibilities for children in their country of origin will no longer be accepted as au pairs in Norway. As of July 1st 2012 persons who are married and/or have children are denied au pair visas to Norway.

For the au pairs who still are "desired migrants" (Stenum, 2011a), the Ministry of Justice recommended the establishment of an Au Pair center – a service center for au pairs and host families that also offers courses for au pairs who want to learn more about Norwegian culture and values. The "Women can do it!" course, for example, aims at enhancing the au pairs' communication and negotiation skills, confidence and ability to deal with everyday challenges in a foreign country as well as encourage them to participate in the different institutions of the host society, NGOs and political parties (Au pair center, 2014b).

These are important political initiatives that aim at improving the situation of au pairs in Norway. They do however, as illustrated with UDI's use of FAFO's rapport, rely on research findings, in which, the dominant picture of au pairs is that of 'victims of globalization'. The overtly focus on the victimization of au pairs raises the question of what other representations of au pairs are not communicated in journalistic and academic work? Also, how are we to understand the extensive focus on victimization and the large public engagement for the situation of au pairs? These are the questions I will address in the rest of the essay.

### The discourse of goodness and au pairs as we want them to be

That au pairs from the Philippines have been overworked and treated badly challenges core Norwegian values of equality, democracy and international solidarity. The ideas that "We don't treat people like that in Norway" and that "We have to do something to help the au pairs" have united

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politicians, activists and scholars for the improvement of the situation of the au pairs and legitimated 'interventions' in the national immigration legislation. The consensus about the necessity to help the poor, the marginalized and the needy, the language and systems of meanings put into work to legitimate this necessity is what Sirnes (2000) and Loga (2003, 2004) refer to as "discourse of goodness". The discourse (of goodness), as "a system of thought composed of ideas, attitudes and courses of action that construct the subjects and the worlds they speak of" (Foucault, 1972) is activated when social groups are defined as in need of help and when universal human values are threatened. On a larger level, the discourse of goodness is about the protection and promotion of democratic values and universal human rights (Loga, 2003, Loga, 2004). On a practical level, it is about the re-establishment of allegedly weakening social bonds – a development that requires each of us 'to be a better person' and to care more about each other (Loga, 2003: 65).

Loga (2003) takes on Sirnes' (2000) original formulation 'regime of goodness' in her analysis of the (discursive) power of the Norwegian Value Commission's texts, discussions and recommendations (Loga, 2004). In *Regime of Goodness. Constituting the Moral Empire*, Sirnes (2000:3) uses both concepts 'regime' and 'discourse' to discuss how contemporary military interventions are presented and legitimated as protection of fundamental human rights and as war against terrorism. The terror-concept, Sirnes (2000: 4) argues, "offers all too tempting discursive weapon, commanding moral rage, especially from USA and European nations, and logically calling for violent solutions". Military interventions in the name of the protection of our moral order are presented as necessary and 'good'. For Sirnes, the acceptance for something as 'good' generates (discursive) power that "has certain productivity and important effects in social, cultural and political fields" (2000:5).

The concept 'regime of goodness' is used also by the historian Terje Tvedt about Norwegian development aid, which he sees as a Norway's "state branding" just like Volvo is Sweden's state branding and Nokia - Finland's (Tvedt, 2005: 479). For Tvedt (2005), the concept of 'regime' communicates the idea of a relatively stable and complex system of redistribution. Tvedt (2005: 501) speaks of a "national regime of goodness" as a political field with its internal logic of financial and political organization of resources to be distributed to countries that need Norway's help to reduce poverty, improve the public health and the literacy of their populations and most importantly – achieve democracy. The allocation of resources is based on an cooperation between the state, NGOs and research institutions, which Tvedt refers to as "the Norwegian model" and sees as a form of corporatism (Tvedt, 2009). The Norwegian model, Tvedt (2009) argues, is undemocratic as it is based on Norway's moral superiority of having the power to promote values that we consider universal human values.

The Norwegian humanitarian 'goodness', then, may be seen as producing asymmetrical positions as it places those in need of help into an inferior position in relation to the giver (Sirnes, 2000: 9).



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For the purpose of the discussions in this essay, however, I deploy the concept of 'discourse' rather than 'regime' (of goodness) as the notion of 'discourse' successfully communicates the idea of how networks of words, statements and references create systems of meanings with limited number of subject positions to be occupied. The 'discourse of goodness' defines certain social groups such as the Muslim, (migrant) women, children, the disabled, homosexual and the elderly as vulnerable and in need of help and protection. (Loga, 2003: 65). It is the assumption that 'the other' needs to be rescued, educated and empowered that activates and legitimates different interventions in the name of the 'goodness'. Academic and journalistic work on au pairs, as argued in earlier sections, has contributed to the construction of au pairs as victims and servants of globalization. A relevant question to ask here, then, is whether the large academic and public engagement with the situation of the au pairs in Norway may be understood with help of the analytical framework of the discourse of goodness?

The discourse of goodness has its own language with its rules of how to argument for, present and legitimize one's case in order to gain moral authority (Sirnes, 2000, Loga, 2003). Loga (2003: 67) sees the discourse of goodness is constituted of "chained assumptions", that is, the discourse chains together certain concepts to certain values thus constructing a frame within which certain answers are produced. A negative answer to the question if one sympathizes with disabled people, for example, will, within the normative and conceptual frame of the discourse of goodness, define that person as insensitive – a quality that will bring association to other qualities placed outside of the discourse of goodness; one who does not sympathize with the disabled is a ruthless and self-centered person void of emotions and compassion. Within the normative frame of the discourse of goodness the correct answer is that one sympathizes with the disabled. In this way of thought and in light of research findings and journalistic work revealing cases of abuse and exploitation, the question of whether one sympathizes with the au pairs leaves few alternative answers but agreeing on the need of helping 'them'. Alternative answers to this question may challenge core Norwegian values of equality and international solidarity and are outside of the discourse of goodness. The discourse of goodness, however, defines its outside as its opposite (Sirnes, 2000).

The large engagement with the situation of the au pairs in Norway and the political responses to LO's requirements for improvement of the legal protection of au pairs must be seen as related to the picture of au pairs as 'servants of globalization' that dominates the academic and journalistic work on the subject. The victimization of au pairs is in this sense 'productive' as it might be seen as activating a discourse of goodness within which policy responses to LO's requirements are necessary. Policy responses in form of 'interventions' in the immigration legislation or in form of empowerment courses for au pairs are, within the normative framework of the discourse of goodness, 'good' for the au pairs. At the same time these 'interventions' are also about the protection and dissemination of core Norwegian values that are threatened when au pairs are treated badly or when they do not have the



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knowledge and skills to demand equal treatment. That is why teaching au pairs communication and negotiation skills and exposing them to the Norwegian culture is believed to be good for them and also the type of skills they can take with them to their country of origin. As a host mother interviewed by the local newspaper Bergens Tidene explains, the employment of an au pair is a development aid that through the au pair reaches also the au pair's local community and country of origin,

Jeg tenker at au parene får en verdifull erfaring fra et annet land ofte langt fra deres egen kulturkrets. De opplever andre skikker og kanskje viktigst av alt, de ser andre typer kjønnsroller i praksis enn dem de er vant med fra hjemlandet. Det vi viser våre au parer den tiden de er her, vil forme dem og gi dem impulser de ellers ikke ville fått (Borchgrevink, 2013).

If we are to see the Norwegian research and politics on the au pair field as related to a discourse of goodness where the victimization of au pairs is a necessary condition for the activation of the discourse, an important question that emerges is, what sides of the phenomenon of the au pair migration are not accommodated by the discourse?

### Concluding discussion – au pairs as we don't want them to be

This essay opened with an observation that much of the academic and journalistic work on au pairs is dominated by a picture of au pairs as victims and 'servants of globalization'. The victimization of au pairs, it has been argued, may be seen as related to the affinities between au pairs and live-in domestic workers and to methodological fallacies in the conceptualization of these affinities. The victimization of au pairs has also been seen as necessary and 'productive' when approached with the analytical framework of a discourse of goodness. However, what this victimization and 'productivity' has left less space for is an analysis of the agency of the au pairs. The subject positions of au pairs as agents – active, independent, empowered and reflexive is not accommodated by the framework of the discourse of goodness.

Young people might have been forced into migration, as often is the case with au pairs from countries with weak national economies, but this does not need always be the case. Even though the economic motivation for migration is still important, an increasing number of young people – also from the Philippines – are enrolling the au pair scheme for the sake of the cultural experiences and for adventure, and are quick to declare, "I'm not a maid!" (Schultes, 2010). Regardless of the motivation for migration, au pairs have the capacity to reflexively monitor their situation and change it, to "make a difference" and recreate existing social structures (Giddens, 1979, Giddens, 1984). Rather than victims of the structural forces of globalization, au pairs may be viewed as active and reflexive agents. Such a subject position, however, does not 'fit' into the logic of discourse of goodness as it does not define the au pairs as in need of our help, education or assistance.

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The subject positions available for the au pairs are those of persons lacking the values, skills and attitudes that the Norwegian culture can offer through the very placement with a Norwegian family and through the exposure to the Norwegian culture. These are the subject positions that legitimate the very employment of au pair, allow for the framing of the scheme as a development aid, but also the positions that attract public attention around the situation of au pairs and make journalists and scholars to produce new knowledge on the subject.

Positioning my study of Filipino au pairs in Norway into the larger research field of migrant care and domestic work I do (have to) relate to the subject positions offered within the discourse of goodness. It is, however, the less legitimate and the unavailable within the discourse of goodness subject positions that are of particular interest for my study. Their very identification offers a 'new' and less examined research field that invites for new contributions.

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