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'THE GOOD GIRL FROM RUSSIA CAN DO IT ALL':

Au pairs' perspective on morality and immorality in the au pair relation

Abstract

This article investigates the perspectives of au pairs on conflicts and exploitation during the au pair stay. Theoretically based on the concept of moral economy, it will be shown that au pairs disidentify with professional domestic and care workers to maintain their identity of an international student acting as a helper for a local family struggling with childcare. Referring to moral norms, au pairs react to conflicts by using the strategy of 'shaming' to protest against dissatisfying conditions of au pairing, or they decide to change to another family. These forms of resistance are legitimised in narratives, which in processes of *othering* establish a moral hierarchy between the au pair and family to reject victimisation of exploitation and demonstrate their own capability to act as an independent adult person.

Keywords

au pair • moral economy • care work • othering • domestic workers

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Introduction

Although the au pair stay is officially defined as a cultural exchange program, for many families, it is the 'least bad option' to cover the need for affordable domestic work and childcare, as well as for many au pairs to be internationally mobile in the face of restrictive immigration regulations (Búriková & Miller 2010: 33). Therefore, the au pair stay is an ambiguous social phenomenon between migration (cf. also Dalgas 2016), waged work and care work within families, officially defined as a cultural exchange program offering 'family integration' for young foreigners in exchange for 'help' in the household. Unlike other forms of globalised professional care work such as nursing (cf. Wrede & Näre 2013), the au pair stay is officially not regarded as a work relation but rather a form of mutual support between both parties on equal terms. The relation between au pair and employer is officially interpreted as a quasi-family relation involving a parent–child hierarchy. In this interpretation, the au pair is denounced as 'part of the family' and referred to as 'the girl', who is placed in a 'host family'. The salary of the au pair is termed as 'pocket money' and the family has to provide food and accommodation. The maximum working hours of the German au pair scheme are limited to 30 hours per week and the au pair should be granted free time to take language courses.

In the official definition, the au pair relation is supposed to create immaterial benefits of temporary 'cultural exchange' for both parties. In theoretical terms, this kind of social relation of au pairing can be understood as a 'moral economy', largely regulated based on the vague moral norms of 'mutuality', 'reciprocity' and 'equality', whilst only very few rules – such as the maximum of working hours – are defined and fixed in a written contract between au pair and family.

Owing to the poor regulation and monitoring of the au pair stay (cf. Cox & Busch 2016 and Sekeráková Búriková 2016), the au pair relation creates a high level of vulnerability of au pairs for conflicts and exploitation. The forms and extent of these grievances are unknown because of the lack of statistical data. However, in recent research about the au pair scheme, au pairs' dissatisfaction with conditions with their au pair stay is often reported, resulting from unpleasant chores and a stressful relation with the au pair family (Búriková & Miller 2010, Stenum 2011, Chuang 2012, Tkach 2014), which require a significant amount of emotional labour (cf. Tkach 2014: 139).

The analysis in this article is based on 14 biographical interviews with Russian women who, at the time of the interview, were working or had worked as an au pair in Germany. For the past 20 years, Russia has been one of the most important sending countries of au pairs in Germany, although the annual number of Russian au pairs accounts for a very small part of the overall immigration, with around 1,000 or even fewer persons (Migrationsbericht 2010). Similar to many current migrant domestic workers (Riano *et al.* 2006), these women are highly educated but for reasons of restrictive migration regimes could not enter the receiving country via educational migration or skilled work migration (cf. also Tkach 2016). Jolly and Reeves argued that this form of de-skilling in the migration process may cause a biographical paradox for migrants, because they are

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confronted with a lower social position in the receiving context than they hold in the home context (Jolly & Reeves 2005: 20).

In the absence of functional formal regulations regarding the au pair relation, this article investigates from the au pairs' perspective how these young women define their position as being an au pair in the specific employing family with references to moral norms such as 'mutuality', 'reciprocity' and 'equality'. Moreover, it explores how they evaluate the family's behaviour toward them and carve out their space of agency to change working conditions in cases of conflicts and exploitation. It will be shown that au pairs make use of narratives that are defined in literature about domestic and care work as a variation of 'othering' (cf. Tkach 2016). In existing literature, the concept of othering is used to investigate narratives of employers about their employees, in which employers make references to a social hierarchy arising from categories such as class, race and culture to legitimise unfavourable working conditions of their employees (Cox 2015, cf. also Lan 2006, Lutz 2008, Huang et al 2012, Marchetti 2014). The aim of this article is to show how (former) au pairs also use strategies of othering in their narratives by referring to moral norms that subordinate their employing family in a moral hierarchy and use moral judgments to legitimise their resistance against conflicts and exploitation by using strategies of protest and family change.

The au pair relation as a moral economy

In Germany, the differentiation between unpaid reproductive work and waged work along the lines of gender remains the basis of the organisation of daily life within many families. The position of the au pair is located in the space between care work and waged work and has to bridge differences between these two regimes. One fundamental difference is that waged work is highly formalised and based on a contract between employer and employee, which defines specific activities and salaries to be exchanged (Hess 2009: 179). By contrast, care work within families (also termed reproductive work) involves not only the practical organisation of the household but also the social and emotional labour of caring for members of the household. Along with technical skills of domestic work and emotional skills of empathy and affection to build up functional care relations, care work presupposes the knowledge of implicit socio-cultural norms, which – for example – determine the standards of cleanliness, cooking or child raising.

Similar to many other industrialised and post-industrialised countries, childcare in Germany is essentialised as a feminine attribute arising from the presumed women's need to care for loved ones. The colloquial term 'labour of love' undertaken by mothers and housewives signifies not only that care work is done out of love but also that care work is compensated with love and affection rather than money. In theoretical perspectives, care work is a moral economy regulated by (mostly implicit) moral norms and the exchange of immaterial benefits. As Näre argued, the moral economy involves 'highly personalized labor relationships, which cannot be reduced to profit maximizing' (Näre 2011: 397). The morality connected to care work serves other goals such as maintaining social status (Näre 2011: 400). Therefore, the moral economy of au pairing also regulates fulfilling domestic and care tasks in the au pair relation and organises the au pair relation at the level of social status.

Although the German au pair scheme (similar to many other national schemes) demands defining the minimum amount of 'pocket money' for a maximum number of working hours in a contract between au pair and family, it is not required to define specific activities and working hours or working days of the au pair in this contract. Hence, in the absence of precise written rules, the au pair and family have to negotiate the au pair's tasks, working hours and working days. In this process, both parties may refer to the images of the au pair programme as a relation of 'mutuality', 'equality' and 'reciprocity' to support their standpoint, although they are unable to rely on definitions of how these norms are supposed to be fulfilled in the au pair relation. Based on the norms of 'mutuality', 'equality' and 'reciprocity', the work aspect of the au pair programme is negated and the personal relation between the family and au pair is emphasised, which is supposed to work as a moral economy regulated by moral norms and the exchange of immaterial benefits. The relation between the female employer and the au pair may be organised informally as a maternalistic relation (Rollins 1985, Arnardo 2003), in which the au pair is subordinated to the female employer, the 'host mother'. In this regard, control and authority may be obscured as the mother-like supervision of the quasi-daughter. Hence, the au pair's status as an adult independent woman undertaking waged work for the family in such a relation may be denied and the au pair may be subordinated to the private sphere of the family without being equal to the employers.

The construction of the au pair relation as a moral economy means that the family and au pair negotiate their relation on a personal rather than a professional level by referring to social norms of morality such as 'good', 'bad', 'fair' and 'unfair' in evaluating whether the anticipated 'mutuality', 'equality' and 'reciprocity' are fulfilled by each party. As Hess argued, the 'moral economy of caring' (Hess 2009: 178ff) leads to the anticipation of au pairs being rewarded with gratitude and recognition for their physical and emotional labour. Therefore, the failure of families to provide 'mutuality', 'equality' and 'reciprocity' may be interpreted by au pairs as immorality on behalf of the family, contrasting the moral behaviour of the au pair. This form of narrative distancing by drawing moral boundaries and constructing a moral hierarchy is described in post-colonial studies (cf. Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007: 156, Spivak 1985) as the mechanism of 'othering'. With the help of the narrative strategy of othering, power relations are established by constructing persons as different and thus unequal 'others'. The actor's own identity is constructed by narrative boundary-making in relation to others, whereby a social hierarchy is constituted (Johnson *et al.* 2004: 253) based on moral or cultural subordination by projecting negative qualities to the other. At the same time, a positive identity or sense of self-worth is constructed by distancing oneself from the other, who is interpreted as being morally inferior (Sayer 2010: 174), whilst the self is understood to be morally superior in supporting the dependent other.

The dominant understanding and use of the concept of othering in the research field of domestic and care work is that subjective positions are constructed by powerful groups (employers) who subordinate 'others' (domestic and care workers). This perspective may victimise subordinated groups and perceive them as inactive. In contrast to this research frame, Jensen (2011) showed that persons who are othered in public discourses may react to these negative representations through 'capitalization on being positioned as the other' in using ascribed negative aspects as a resource of symbolic value or 'refusing to occupy the position of the other by disidentification and claims to normality' (Jensen 2011: 62). Hence, othering is met by agency 'as the capacity to act within as well as up against social structures' (Jensen 2011: 66). Following Jensen, this article aims to investigate the narratives of (former) au pairs used in reacting to or compensating grievances of the au pair's experience arising from the ambiguous status between waged work and care work.

Methodological framework of analysing au pairs' narratives

Between 2008 and 2012, I conducted a dissertation project based on participant observations and biographical interviewing to study the transnational migration processes of young women who had come to Germany as au pairs. During that time, I conducted biographical interviews with young Russian women who were born between 1978 and 1988 and stem from educated but not wealthy families. Their contexts of origin are cities of the European provinces of Russia but not the metropolises Moscow and St. Petersburg. The sample comprises highly educated young women (mostly university graduates and some students) who – based upon of their foreign language skills – have had access to au pair mobility but could not organise their migration via a student exchange programme, because either their home university did not participate in one or they could not finance the exchange.

At the time of the interviews, these women comprised three groups: three interviewees had worked in Germany as au pairs (Anna, Tatyana and Alina), seven had stayed in Germany after their au pair stay (Nina, Anastasia, Olga, Elena, Marina, Maria and Alisa) and four had returned to Russia after their au pair stay in Germany (Viktoria, Polina, Kristina and Daria).

The data presented in this article were collected using narrative biographical interviewing, which aims to generate biographical accounts that cover entire lives or particular life phases by stimulating narratives rather than asking closed questions. The interviews were analysed using a combined methodology comprising hermeneutic sequential analysis (Oevermann *et al.* 1979) with a transnational researchers' group (Amelina, 2010) and narrative analysis according to Schütze (1976, 1983). The analysis aimed to reveal collective biographical interpretation patterns ('biographische Deutungsmuster') used by interviewees to explain biographical experiences, given that these biographical interpretation patterns provide insights into the perception of (biographical) problems and orientations to act upon them.

The analysis will be structured in sections focusing on (1) the description of the social setting of being an au pair, (2) the relation of the self to others within this setting (therefore constructing and positioning the self and others) and (3) the scope of agency of the self resulting from the social setting and the social relation within the au pair context. The latter aspect will especially be investigated in two case studies that portray the two distinctive strategies of resisting exploitation, namely, protest and family change.

'I knew what I was there for': Au pairs' definitions of their position in the au pair family

The biographical thematising of au pair work by former and current au pairs focuses on the expectations about the au pair stay and the actual situation in the family. Generally, few interviewees in my sample present the au pair stay explicitly as a positive experience and extensively describe positive relations with the family members. The majority of my interviewees reported rather negative experiences, whereby their narratives demonstrate how the family violated regulations of the au pair scheme and how they tried to resist against this exploitation.[1]

The promotion of the au pair stay as a cultural exchange programme by public institutions and au pair agencies uses the idea of 'family integration', that is, the notion that the au pair should be 'treated like a family member' who 'helps' with care work. This is a widely communicated norm of the moral economy in advertisements and flyers of au pair agencies. Furthermore, this is also an aspect of au pairing that is most difficult to monitor, as it is not clearly indicated how family integration should be achieved and how a 'quasi-family member' like the au pair should be treated by other family members. As Viktoria explained, she only realised how she felt about being an au pair at the moment when she began her au pair stay:

> I understood that I am just a maid there, maid or servant or – of course you can justify yourself saying that I am just a student, I am doing an au pair programme, and but inside, so it is actually contradict to what I expected [...] I knew what I was there for. I could be told go there, do that.

In Viktoria's narrative, becoming an au pair is interpreted as losing the status of a student and taking up the position of a maid or servant in a German family. Viktoria's statement depicts two fundamental dimensions of the social setting of au pairing, namely, the au pair's function in the care system of the family and the au pair's position in the power hierarchy of the family. According to the interviewees, au pairs are primarily hired because families need domestic and childcare workers, rather than families being interested in cultural exchange. Hence, families are accused of misusing the au pair stay to employ cheap domestic workers, which is a transgression against rules of the au pair system. Sometimes the position of the au pair – as in Viktoria's quote – is even interpreted as that of a maid or servant, because this position accumulates many different tasks in the household and equates to 'on call' work. Above this, au pairs like Viktoria do not experience their relation to the family as reflecting mutual support on equal terms, but rather tasks are assigned to them by considering only the needs of the family and not au pairs' own preferences or choices. Hence, the moral failure of families to provide equality in the au pair relation is demarcated. This narrative reveals the complex intermingling of the illegitimate misuse of the au pair scheme by not fulfilling or transgressing against written rules of the scheme on the one hand as well as the moral misuse of au pairs by transgressing against norms and expectations that are very subtly conveyed in the promotion of the au pair scheme on the other hand. Whilst the former can often be found in narratives of au pairs who are unsatisfied with the type or amount of work, the latter can typically be found in narratives reporting a negative quality of the relationship to the au pair family. Naturally, many au pairs show both patterns in their narratives.

Interviewees who have experienced the relation to the au pair family negatively often reported that family members did not show any interest in them apart from delegating chores to them. Marina – who was hired by a full-time working single mother with two sons – recalls that at the beginning of her au pair stay, she was disappointed that her employer only wanted to talk to her about the au pair's responsibilities.

> And the mother, she was never willing to talk to me about something like – she rather expected me to report what happened during the day and like that, and what I did with the children [...] Communication was only about my responsibilities at home and nothing else […] I wanted to get to know more about life in Germany, also through her life and her relation to her friends, because when you come here you know nothing about how people live and what they think and feel. (Marina)

Marina problematised that her employer used the au pair as a worker and rejected Marina's wish to establish a personal relation. In this respect, Marina highlighted that her employer did not fulfil the notion of 'cultural exchange' used in promoting the au pair scheme, because she did not provide insights into her personal perceptions about life in Germany. Similarly, Nina explained that she could not develop a personal relationship with her female employer because she rejected any kind of communication with Nina and simply ignored Nina's presence in the house.

> For example for weeks she did not speak with me and you just feel the tension when you sit at the table for dinner and this person sits next to you and does not even look at you. At this time I was crying a lot and I was really suffering. (Nina)

Nina's narrative implies a moral judgment about her employer, who did not fulfil the expected family integration by developing a personal relationship with the au pair, whilst Nina actively tried to establish such a relation by trying to engage her employer in conversation. To support this moral judgment, Nina highlighted the extent to which she suffered from her employer's behaviour.

The narratives of Marina and Nina demonstrate the distancing of au pairs from the employers by drawing moral boundaries and constructing a moral hierarchy that au pairs use as a form of othering against their employers. Through examples of communication situations, both au pairs quoted above highlight that their employers rejected their wish for family integration, despite both au pairs trying to achieve this. Accordingly, a moral hierarchy is constructed between the au pairs – who aim to fulfil the norms of the au pair programme – and the employers, who immorally do not allow the au pairs to take up any personal relation with the family but rather reduce them to being a worker. This narrative is used by interviewees to point out that families illegitimately misuse the au pair scheme to hire domestic and care workers and immorally refuse personal contact with au pairs, whilst au pairs actually try to fulfil the norms of family integration and cultural exchange of the au pair scheme by building up a personal relation with family members, as reflected in Marina's efforts to talk to her employer about personal experiences and perspectives on life.

The narrative strategy of being morally superior to the family is supported by interviewees' self-positioning as a helper of the family. The au pair stay is promoted by German au pair agencies as a form of 'help' or 'assistance' to a local family. For example, the non-profit agency Association for International Youth Work (Verein für internationale Jugendarbeit)[2] stated on its website: 'All together you will help a maximum of six hours daily and thirty hours weekly in the household of your host family – including babysitting in the evening'. This peculiar interpretation of the term 'help' combined with detailed modalities of the performance of the helper remarkably shows how agencies try to avoid declaring the au pair stay as a work relation, as well as trying to implement some regulations of the au pair–family relation. Interviewees took up the notion of 'help' and used it to evaluate whether their employing family adhered to the regulations of the au pair stay.

Anastasia explained that at the beginning of her au pair stay, the female employer had to stay in hospital due to an acute illness, whereby Anastasia took over all of the care work. After the female employer had returned home, Anastasia was supposed to continue this work schedule.

> I wanted to help the family, but after the woman had returned from hospital the situation was like - it was really strange, somehow they did not treat me as a member of the family but rather as a cleaner or like a nanny. (Anastasia)

Anastasia's narrative reveals the power imbalance and lack of supervision of the au pair relation, because families may illegitimately demand that their au pairs work more than 30 hours. In such narratives, interviewees differentiate the position of the au pair from jobs as cleaners and nannies, which are interpreted as having a lower status than the au pair.

Interviewees empower themselves in their narratives by referring to the official interpretation of the au pair relation presented in advertisements and information about the au pair scheme (such as family integration, cultural exchange and equality), turning these meaning structures against the families. Hence, the power disadvantage that au pairs express in their narratives is compensated by referring to official interpretations of the au pair scheme as a higher authority, which is the basis for subordinating the families to au pairs in terms of fairness and morality. The disidentification with cleaners and nannies allows interviewees to demonstrate the identity of being a participant in a cultural exchange programme and thus refusing to occupy the social position of female labour migrants working in the low-skilled sector of care work, but rather maintaining an equal social position to the au pair family. The narrative of being a helper who was misused as a worker also allows interviewees to highlight the illegitimate transgression of written rules by the family as well as the immorality of misusing offered help rather than providing reciprocity to the au pair.

Au pairs' strategies of resistance: Protest and Family Change

The outsourcing of significant parts of housework and childcare to the au pair typically leads to the au pair's frustration when the working load exceeds 30 hours per week. In my sample, some au pairs did not react to such a situation at all, whilst others opted for the strategy of 'silent resistance', for example, by not fulfilling all tasks or only doing so incompletely. Only one au pair in my sample decided to break up the au pair stay after three weeks and immediately returned home after having realised that au pairing did not meet her expectations. The largest group of my interviewees who were unsatisfied with conditions of their au pair stay used two distinctive strategies to change the au pair relation according to their own preferences, namely, protesting to the family or changing to another family (cf. Tkach 2014).

The two cases presented below were selected first because they represent the two core strategies of au pairs' agency to resist against conflict and exploitation. Second, the narratives of these two former au pairs most coherently exemplify how strategies of agency are connected to perceptions about the au pair relation in terms of morality. Although these two interviewees were prominent in the intensive descriptions of their experiences, they use meaning structures that are collectively shared in narratives of the sample. Moreover, these case studies also show that moral judgments about employers are constructed regarding the employers' attitudes not only towards the au pair but also towards their own children.

Protest by 'shaming' families: Daria's case

Daria became an au pair at the age of 24 years, having graduated from her second study course in Russia. As a German language teacher, she aimed to improve her German speaking skills to be able to work in multinational companies in Russia. During her au pair stay, she was placed in a double earner family with two children.

Daria explained that it was difficult to care for the children of her au pair family because they were suffering from mental problems. Daria argued that she was only able to care for these children and develop a good but professional relation with them because she had studied pedagogy.

Daria criticised her employers for not showing any interest in spending time with their children but rather delegating childcare fully to her, which she discussed as a proof of 'bad' parenting. Hence, she used a moral judgment about the parenting style to identify her employers as 'bad' – for example, immoral – persons.

> It was like the parents come home and the children run to them and are just like 'Mummy, Daddy it's great that you are home!' 'Oh no kids, we are tired, better go to play something by yourself'. And then she [the female employer, CRA] is just sitting at the laptop and shopping clothes. Well she was like a Bohème woman - always smoking, a woman who only cares about her beauty and like that. (Daria)

In contrast to the female employer, who did not want to spend time with her children, Daria presented herself as a 'good' person, who cared for the children and supported them in their development in the position of the au pair. Accordingly, devoted childcare is constructed as a moral character trait that the employers lack. Daria's use of the term 'Bohème woman' alludes to the social milieu of this family. She portrayed her female employer as wealthy (see narrative below), hedonistic ('smoking' 'shopping clothes'), egocentric ('only cares about her beauty') and neglecting her children. Daria contrasted the motherhood behaviour of the female employer to that of her own mother.

> I remembered my own childhood, yes. And maybe we did not have such nice clothes and not so many colorful toys, yes? But we were happy, that our parents loved us and that they were glad to spend time with us and do something with us, yes? My mother is like - I don't know how to name it but she likes children, yes. (Daria)

By comparing the employing family with her own parents, Daria used the mechanism of othering to draw a moral boundary to her female employer by identifying with the devoted motherhood of her own mother, which opposes the employers' parenting, delegating childcare to an au pair rather than being glad to spend time with their own children. Daria explained that her own mother expressed love for her children by spending time with them, whereas Daria's employers did not show any interest in their children. Daria argued that despite the material well-being that the employers offered their children, these children suffered from their parents' lack of affection. Hence, Daria interpreted the delegation of care work to a non-family member as the parents' moral failure to fulfil the normative standard of love and affection for their own children. In this sense, Daria disrupted the maternalistic hierarchy of her female employer over the au pair and demonstrated the employers' dependence, because the female employer had to rely on the au pair to cover the motherly functions.

> I saw that the children were always alone and only were with the au pairs. And the last au pair she was fired because, as I found out, she hit the child. The host mother she told me that she couldn't speak hardly any German and maybe she could not build up any contact to the boy, because he was really difficult. The host mother also said, you speak so well German what do you need classes for? However, I think nobody is perfect and you can always improve. Actually, I wanted to do some kind of language certificate. (Daria)

The above narrative portrays the female employer as highly egoistic through relying on Daria's language skills to care for her children, without granting Daria any free time to further develop her language skill in a class, as demanded by regulations of the au pair scheme. Unsatisfied with her work load – namely, being responsible for the entire housework and childcare, including when the employers were at home – Daria complained to the au pair agency. However, the agency could not offer Daria another family and refused to intervene in Daria's au pair relation. Hence, Daria decided to renegotiate the conditions of au pairing with her employing family. Daria's strategy of placing pressure on the family will be termed 'shaming', because she confronted the family with the illegitimate and immoral transgressing of the au pair scheme's regulations by asking Daria to constantly overwork. Daria elaborated that it was very stressful for her to enter into this conflict because she was not used to speaking up for herself.

> Finally I told them 'No I really don't like this, I am always at home, I do not go to language school, that is not ok'. And they went 'Ok you can take a class.', but after some time she gave me such a book in which she wrote what chores I have to do. Well I had to clean all the toilets and like that and I just thought I am an au pair not a cleaner. They had quit their cleaning lady because to them I was the good girl from Russia who can do it all and never says no. But finally I told them 'No this is not right' and then the cleaning lady started to come again. (Daria)

The core argument of the above narrative is Daria's distinction between the au pair and the cleaner, arguing that the au pair is not supposed to clean toilets for the family as this would demarcate an unequal status in the family. Daria stated that she was exploited because the cleaner of her employing family was fired and Daria had to take over all such functions. Her anticipation that this happened to her because she was 'the good girl from Russia' refers to being othered by the family based on her gender, age and belonging to another nation or culture. It is unclear whether the reference to Russia refers to employers' possible assumptions about the cultural attitudes of Russians or the economic dependence on the au pair position, which hinders the au pair from complaining about working conditions in the family. According to Jensen's approach (2011: 62), Daria's reaction to being victimised by the family reflects a refusal to occupy the position of an exploited au pair, confronting the family with this immoral behaviour by 'shaming' them.

Daria depicted that the notion of being an au pair is modifiable by the family according to its needs, although by knowing the regulations and protesting against exploitation au pairs may act against such conditions. The strategy of shaming helps au pairs to present themselves as being informed about the au pair scheme, as well as being independent and steadfast to enter into a conflict with the family. It cannot be determined whether this strategy of au pairs modifying the conditions of their au pair stay is generally successful

based on the small sample even though this strategy seems to have achieved its goal in Daria's case. However, the example of Daria shows that protest may be a very important aspect to cope with the experience of being an au pair.

Change of families: Elena's case

Elena is one of the few women in my sample who interrupted her studies in Russia to become an au pair at the age of 18. She explained that she was unsatisfied with her study course and wanted to go abroad to learn a foreign language, get to know another country and reconsider her choice of studies. She was placed in a dual earner family with a toddler.

Similar to Daria, Elena described how this family demanded that she worked much more than 30 hours per week and especially delegated cleaning chores to her. She described the situation in ironic terms:

> Very early during my stay there, they mistook me for a cleaning lady. I got 400 DMarks[3] und they thought 'Ok she is earning enough and food and accommodation is for free, it won't harm her if she cleans a bit.' (Elena)

Elena's ironic comment that her employers mistook her for a cleaner highlights the power imbalance of the au pair relation, which enables the employers to interpret the regulations of the au pair stay according to their needs and even violate the clearly defined rule regarding the maximum working hours. The conflict between Elena and the family arose as Elena was ordered to clean the whole house daily and her cleaning skills were criticised by the female employer. Elena felt that her female employer considered her 'dirty', which shows that the activity of cleaning is interpreted in the au pair relation as a personal character trait rather than a skill.

Elena referred to her cooking skills in narratively positioning herself against the female employer, highlighting how she could outplay this woman through cooking because the male employer constantly praised her meals. Like Elena, many former and current au pairs emphasised that their female employers could not prepare any fresh food but rather had to rely on oven-ready meals to serve their family, criticising their employers' motherhood and wifehood qualities. The most common argument is that German women's inability to cook fresh and healthy food is the reason for illnesses of their children, as well as the women being overweight. In this narrative, skills of housework are strongly gendered and related to cultural socialisation. One of the core elements of motherhood in the Russian society is women's ability to nurture their family, cater for family members and delight them with tasty food, whereby this ability is passed on from grandmothers and mothers to daughters. Interviewees like Elena take up this notion of performing motherhood and wifehood by preparing fresh food to argue why they could better fulfil this role in their employer's family compared with the female employer herself.

> The woman could not cook at all and then for the first time she made a cake, but when she cut the cake the point of the knife stuck in it. She did not want to throw the cake away because she was so proud that she managed to make it. We just started to eat it and she said to the child 'Tobi, just take good care that you don't eat the point of the knife!' and I just thought how can you be so stupid to risk that your child is swallowing the point of the knife. (Elena)

This narrative shows that Elena uses the narrative pattern of othering to distance herself from the female employer, engaging in a moral judgment to highlight her lack of practical housework skills and motherly love and responsibility for her child.

> At first the woman was really glad that I did cook every now and then but suddenly she was not happy about it anymore because her husband was like 'Oh Elena you are such a great cook' 'Oh it is so tasty!' [[laughing]] Of course this is bad for her and she said to me that I don't have to cook any longer. (Elena)

Elena argued that owing to these housewife skills as well as her youth and beauty, the male employer fancied her. Accordingly, Elena constructed a personal but not professional social relation imposed by the employing family on Elena: the relation to the male employer is constructed as that of one-sided sexual attraction, whilst Elena positioned herself as an opponent to the female employer. Elena assumed that the male employer fancied her because he commented on her physical attractiveness. She stated that once the male employer climbed the stairs behind her and commented 'how cute!'. Although she asked him what he meant and he answered 'nothing', Elena felt that this comment referred to her backside, because she was wearing shorts in the summer. She also reported that the male employer entered into her room and the bathroom when she was changing clothes on a couple of occasions. In this respect, Elena draws a moral boundary to the male employer by stating that he treated her as a sex object and molested her, which clearly breaches the norms of the quasi-family relation and the employers' function of guardians of a young foreigner. In her narrative, Elena took the jealousy and hostility of the female employer toward her as a proof of this assumption and an explanation for the conflicts between the two women. In this narrative, the maternalistic hierarchy is disrupted in Elena's perspective, because the praise of the male employer confirmed Elena's superiority in terms of care work. These narratives allow Elena to position herself as being more attractive than the female employer, thus reasoning that the female employer's hostility was based on jealousy and marking the male employer as an immoral husband who betrays his wife and transgresses the norms of the au pair scheme.

Similar to Daria, Elena assumed that exploitation during her au pair stay resulted from her national background, because employing families categorise Russia as a less-developed country and consequently the au pair migration is interpreted as a form of economic migration to Western Europe.

> They misunderstood, they thought that I am from Russia, like there comes a girl and she has to be glad to be in Germany at all and that she can make some money here and eat some good food and things like that. (Elena)

Elena perceived that the employing family assumed that she was an indigent migrant from a poor country and thus they were never willing to grant her the status of an 'equal'. Accordingly, the social category of national background is used as a substitute for differentiation at the level of social class. This meaning pattern implies that employing families misconceive and ignore the importance of language learning for au pairs because they suppose that the earned income and accommodation in a middle-class home is the major benefit for au pairs. Interviewees like Elena argued that families legitimise their exploitation of au pairs as offering some welfare to an indigent person (compare the same finding by Anderson 2007: 255ff). Hence,

interviewees felt that their social status of being a highly skilled young woman from the Russian urban milieu is negated and their major objective of learning German during the au pair stay is disregarded by the employing families. Therefore, Elena used othering in the variant that the family is ignorant and uninformed about Russia.

Elena never argued with their employers and she decided in silence to change to another family. She turned to one of her friends (Russian migrants) in Germany for help when she wanted to change to another family. As she could not speak much German at that time, her friend wrote down on a sheet of paper for her in Cyrillic letters how to say in German 'I quit immediately'. The family reacted astonished and angrily, but wanted to convince Elena to stay on. Elena left on the same day and rejected the offer of her outstanding salary, which was only little money. After leaving the family, her friend accommodated her for a couple of weeks until she found a new au pair family. With this strategy, Elena was able to show the employing family that she neither depended on them for being in Germany nor for making money and that she was able to develop personal relations outside the family. With her decision to leave the family, she subverted the power of the family. Losing the childcare of the au pair causes problems for the family, as it is difficult to organise another solution immediately. Accordingly, au pairs who change families use the vulnerability of the family to empower themselves and regain their agency.

Conclusion

The analysed narratives of current and former au pairs investigated in this article show that the narrative construction of the relation between the au pair and family is highly complex as it involves aspects of a work relation and aspects of a personal relation and intermingles the traditional economy with the moral economy. Where norms of the au pair relation are not defined in written form, interviewees constructed au pairing as a moral economy. In order to resist exploitation, the au pairs interviewed in this study do not highlight how their labour was exploited but rather argued how their help was misused. Therefore, they uphold the interpretation of au pairing as a moral economy that enables them to maintain the status of a participant in an exchange programme and disidentify with low-paid domestic workers.

Applying the notion of mutual help used by agencies and officials to promote and define the au pair stay, interviewees evaluated their position in the family. When employers delegate the entire housework and childcare to the au pair, interviewees concluded that they were pushed illegitimately by the family into the position of a cleaner, maid or nanny – sometimes even servant – without being paid adequately for it. Given that au pairs do not consider themselves workers but rather educational migrants, the interviewees did not interpret exploitation in the au pair relation as exploitation within a work relation but rather the immoral misuse of 'help' offered by au pairs to the family. In their narratives, au pairs make up their power disadvantage in the relation to the employing family first by referring to the written norms of the au pair scheme presented in advertisements and information as a higher authority. Second, au pairs refer to unwritten moral norms that are subtly transported with the image of family integration and cultural exchange in arguing that the moral economy of au pairing was not fulfilled because the family did not offer an equal position in the family's hierarchy, mutual interest and engagement in one's life and reciprocal support. The narrative empowerment of au pairs is the subordination of the family in terms of morality and fairness regarding the au pair's desire to fulfil norms of the au pair scheme and the claim that families misuse the au pair scheme for cheap domestic work. Third, au pairs use moral judgments about the female employers' failures in wifehood and motherhood to argue that employing families depended on them because the female employers were unable to fulfil these family roles properly. Interviewees refer to their cultural, professional and personal skills of housework and childcare to depict how they could compensate the female employers' failures in these family functions, as proven by the au pairs' relations with the male employers and children.

Hence, the narratives of au pairs reveal that they use morality not only to claim reciprocity, mutuality and equality in the au pair relation but also to establish a hierarchy between themselves and the female employers and present their own superiority in terms of mothering, housework and wifehood.

For these interviewees' biographical coping with these negative experiences, it is also crucial to emphasise in their narratives how they resisted against this exploitation. Interviewees elaborated about their choice to change families or protest against conditions of au pairing, thus presenting themselves as individuals who are not victimised but capable of acting. Accordingly, au pairs empower themselves against the consisting power asymmetries of the au pair scheme. The strategy of shaming shows how perceptions about the immorality of the family are turned into au pairs' practices to change the au pair relation by confronting the family about exploiting the au pair. This allows interviewees to demonstrate that they are informed about the regulations of the au pair scheme and able to assert their rights in a conflict with the family, which represents their status of an adult person. The strategy of changing families demonstrates that au pairs are not financially or socially dependent on their employing family but are able to organise their stay in Germany by themselves. Hence, when au pairs decide to change family with short notice, the ignorance of families in terms of assuming that au pairs fully depend on them results in suddenly being left behind without childcare.

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Notes

1. This article focuses on narratives about negative relations between the au pair and family. Thus, narratives about positive relations will be omitted from this analysis because interviewees used different meaning structures to describe positive experiences with families, for example, by interpreting them as a form of friendship or kinship, which has to be analysed in a separate article.
2. Homepage des ViJ, abrufbar unter http://www.au-pair-vij.org/au-pair-in-deutschland/ [Last accessed 08.10.2012]
3. 400 DMarks would be about 200 Euros at that time. The current minimum 'pocket money' for au pairs is 260 Euros.

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