Unequal working conditions among home care service workers in France: What does working in the domestic sphere mean for working-class women?

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Home care service jobs have developed considerably in all western countries, under the combined influences of increasing female employment and the aging of populations.1 These home service jobs, well-established but long invisible, have attracted increasing attention from public authorities in recent decades, who in several countries have established policies professionalizing the sector.2 They have also attracted growing interest in the social sciences. Thanks to research associating feminist theory, economics, and economic sociology demonstrating the devalued position of caring labor in western economies and exploring how certain social policies might improve its economic and social status (Folbre 2001, Trabant and Weber 2009), we know that these home service jobs are predominantly taken by women; that they are socially devalued, poorly paid, and often insecure; and that they imply complex employment relations interweaving money and sentiments (Folbre and Nelson 2001, Zelizer 2005). Thanks to ethnographic research on the intimate confrontation between employees and employers among domestic workers (Rollins 1985, Romero 1992, Parrenas 1999, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001) and nannies (Wrigley 1995, Hochschild 2003), we also know that in large American cities these home service jobs are most often held by women of color or immigrants who are submitted to an exacerbated domination at work. We aim to contribute to this already rich field of research by introducing three modifications in how we look at these home service jobs: situating them in the social space (that is, reintroducing class3 into the analysis); taking the work itself seriously (studying it closely, using the classic tools of the sociology of work); and

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1 Another strong factor explaining the growth of paid domestic labor is the intensity of income inequalities (Milkman, Reese and Roth 1998). According to the structure of income inequalities in a given region or country, these jobs will be more or less numerous. The nature of lines of work and the employment and working conditions associated with them will also differ.

2 A. Fouquet (2001) has demonstrated the connection between French feminist statisticians’ exposure of domestic work and the attention public authorities devoted to developing home service jobs.

3 We base this work on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social space (1983), which combines the Marxist and Weberian definitions of social classes.
comparing different kinds of home service work with each other as well as comparing them with other “low-skill” occupations.\textsuperscript{4}

In France today, members of the working classes\textsuperscript{4} have a much greater likelihood of experiencing subaltern work in the low-skilled tertiary sector (3.5 million low-skill employees\textsuperscript{5}) than they do as a low-skill manual laborer (1.9 million low-skill laborers). And while the employment market for manual laborers is in decline and is particularly affected by unemployment and temporary jobs, home service jobs continue to multiply, accounting for nearly all growth in low-skilled employment (Avril 2012). In France this growth took place mostly in housecleaners and home aids for the elderly, and home-based child care providers (that is, those who take children into their own homes) are also increasing; over 1.3 million women are currently working in the sector (which contains less than 1% men). The share of immigrant women (17\%) is higher in service jobs than it is among all employed women (11\% of whom are immigrants), and has doubled over the last decade.\textsuperscript{7} Working-class women today thus have the likely destiny of working as a housecleaner, a home aide for the elderly, or a home-based child care provider, and it is not rare that such a worker’s salary alone also supports her laborer spouse who may be unemployed, working temporary jobs, or in early retirement.

If we want to improve our understanding of contemporary working classes, especially their capacities for collective organizing, we must study low-skill labor in greater depth (Amossé, Chardon, 2006), and home service jobs in particular. From the 1950s through the 1970s, many studies in working class milieus tangibly explored the connections between working conditions and class belonging, showing the extent to which laborers’ ability to form a group was partially due to the characteristics of the work situation. Working together in the same place, opposing a clearly identified hierarchy together (through the promotion of informal work rules or certain forms of sociability), or achieving occupational recognition from peers (even in jobs that are officially low-skill) favored the formation of a collective identity and sense of belonging.\textsuperscript{8} And yet at first glance these aspects seem to be absent for home service jobs in France: isolated, the women doing these jobs would be derived of a work collective or a clearly identified hierarchy

\begin{itemize}
  \item In French public statistics, the occupations home-based child care provider, home aid for the elderly, and housecleaner are categorized as “wage-earners without job qualifications” (salarit non qualifié), which we chose to translate as “low-skilled workers” for this paper.
  \item As shown by a wide collection of research in France over the last 20 years (for example, see Cartier 2003), the concept of “working classes” used by Hoggart (1957) remains relevant for studying groups that have the following in common: weak economic resources, a distance from cultural capital, and occupying what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) called “executant” positions in the world of work.
  \item All figures are drawn from the Enquête sur l’emploi (Employment survey) (INSEE, 2011).
  \item In France, if immigrant women’s participation on the job market has increased significantly, the proportion of immigrants working in the industrial and low-skilled service sectors has remained the same: 17\% in 2011 (Enquête sur l’Emploi, INSEE 2011).
  \item We could cite innumerable works, but notable among them are D. Roy (1952, 1959) and P. Willis (1977).
\end{itemize}
present daily. Indeed, in contrast to the United States where there was a movement organizing and unionizing home care workers in the 1990s following State social policy reforms,9 home care workers in France remain little organized, despite unions’ efforts to establish themselves. What exactly are the working conditions of these jobs? In this paper we will examine the working conditions of home-based child care providers, home aids for the elderly, and housecleaners in greater depth.

While attention is usually given to what distinguishes the range of care jobs from less feminized and more highly regarded occupations, here we choose to place ourselves closer to the work situations, comparing these occupations with each other as well as with other low-skilled manual occupations. By “work situations” we mean the work as it emerges from the encounter between the worker and her work environment (in technical, legal, regulatory, organizational, and relational terms).10 We hold that the generic term “home” that serves as a blanket category for workers in this sector11 is misleading if one hopes to get a grasp on these work experiences and understand their contribution to the transformation of the working classes: working as a housecleaner, home-based child care provider, or aid for the elderly relates to different working conditions that are more or less distant from the world of manual labor, to which these women remain close as much due to their social backgrounds and those of their domestic partners as due to their other occupational experiences.

To study these women’s working conditions in detail, we use a combination of statistical and ethnographic data (cf. box on methods). Three dimensions of domestic work held our attention. After exploring what differentiates working in the domestic sphere from working in the factory, we will question the category of “home” on two levels: by comparing the working conditions of those who work at their own home with those who work in someone else’s, then by comparing the working conditions of those who work in the domestic sphere in contact with others and those who work alone.

Statistical Data and Ethnographic Data

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9 This is the case, for example, for home-based child care providers (Reese, 2010). On the unionizing of low-wage workers, for the most part immigrant, in Los Angeles, see Milkman, Bloom and Narro (2010).

10 On the advantages of combining research methods to determine all dimensions of a work situation, see Avril, Cartier and Serre (2010, chapter 1).

11 In France this propensity to confuse occupations that take place “at home” is especially present in the domain of public statistics. Thus, until 2003, in the nomenclature of professions used in the INSEE Employment survey, home aids for the elderly were mainly classified in the category “home-based child care providers, nannies, family workers” and secondarily in that of “in-home employees and cleaning women for private individuals.” Even today child care providers working in their own homes and child care providers working at the child’s domicile (nannies) are put in the same category.
The statistical data used in this article come from the latest available survey on working conditions conducted by the statistical service of the French ministry in charge of employment (DARES), from 2005. The Working Conditions survey is a supplementary part of INSEE’s Employment 2005 (Emploi 2005) survey, and was conducted among 19,000 actively employed people from the outgoing sample (1/6 of the Employment survey). It was conducted by INSEE staff, who went directly to individuals’ residences throughout the year 2005. This supplementary survey aims to describe and understand working conditions and has been conducted every seven years (approximately) since 1978. The next edition is planned for 2013. For each category of INSEE nomenclature for professions and socio-professional categories that we studied (categories 563a: ‘home-based child care providers’; 563b: ‘home aids for the elderly’; 563c: ‘cleaning women for private individuals’; plus categories 67, 68, and 69, low-skilled manual laborers in industry, the trades, and agriculture), we selected a certain number of variables concerning work hours and organization, the content of the work, and its constraints and strenuousness. Among the 59 variables examined, we only retained the most significant for this paper.

The ethnographic data come from two separate studies. The first was conducted between 1999 and 2004 among about 75 home aids working at the homes of elderly persons by intermediary of a non-profit association located in a small town in the Parisian suburbs. The study combined interviews with observations, both in association offices (meetings, training sessions, and the like) and primarily in the homes of the elderly while the employees were working. The second study, still underway, is being carried out with home-based child care providers in a large city in western France. It includes lengthy interviews with the providers and the municipal child development staff charged with their supervision, and the observation of occasions when the child care providers come together (in public parks, at activities in municipal buildings, training sessions, events organized for parents).

We also use a study based on interviews (30) carried out in the west of France that also included direct observations of the professional activities of home-based child care providers, which was conducted by a group of university undergraduate students in Sociology (Cartier, Lechien, d’Halluin and Rousseau 2012).

I. Domestic work = Return to the home, isolation, being cut off from the world?
Through the 1980s many women from the dominated strata of French society escaped the position of housewife or domestic servant by starting work very young in packaging, textile, or electronics factories (Borzeix and Maruani 1982, Kergoat 1982, Omnès 1997). The studies show that whatever their relationship to the job’s activities as such (largely unfavorable), all were nonetheless attached to their employment: they like the ambiance, the joking around, and the feeling they have “things to say” thanks to this world of work. In order to stay in such employment, a growing number of them end up becoming home-based child care providers, housecleaners, or home aids for the elderly after being laid off, factory closure, or the bankruptcy of their retail employers. Do they interpret these new jobs as a “return to the home,” isolating and cutting off from the world once again?

It is clear that in comparison to manual laborers’ work, women holding home service jobs are relatively isolated. Only 45% of them are involved in work meetings, as opposed to 56% of low-skill laborers. What’s more, fewer than two out of ten can rely on co-workers to help with a complicated task, while seven of ten low-skill laborers can count on this kind of help. This isolation may also be found by reading between the lines: 63% of home care workers find the question on the existence of tensions with co-workers to be irrelevant, compared to only 11% of low-skill laborers.

However, looking more closely, one notices that situations of isolation are very different between child care providers, housecleaners, and aids to the elderly. As the statistical results show, housecleaners (along with the only category of manual labor jobs experiencing significant growth, cleaning services workers) are among the most isolated low-level employees today: all these women work alone all day long. On the other hand, this is not the case for child care providers, and even less so for aids to the elderly, 20% of whom may have access to outside help for complicated tasks as opposed to 6% of housecleaners. Likewise, over a third of child care providers and nearly half of home aids for the elderly say they have meetings for work, while this is so for only 9% of housecleaners. So who can these “home” workers trade services and organize meetings with? The field studies help us identify the forms that these unexpected occupational sociabilities took, barely discernable in the statistics on working conditions. Home-based child care providers, though employed by private individuals, have the possibility of asking for help from the staff of municipal organizations dedicated to early childhood, as well as social workers and pediatric nurses from the departmental Mothers’ and Children’s protection services.

12 Mary Tuominen’s study of family (home-based) child care providers suggests this occupation is heavily rooted in local networks of neighbors and family, as seen both through the recruiting of children and the discourse of the interviewed African-American women, who represent their work as "community care work" (Tuominen 2003).

13 For the last 10 years these organizations have proliferated in France and elsewhere in Europe due to policies for the “professionalization” of child care.
In France they often may belong to independent professional associations that organize meetings and group activities during or outside of work hours. In daily life, home-based child care providers also see their colleagues in public spaces where they have informal conversations.

When weather allows spending time outside, public parks and school exits may serve the role of informal union halls. The workers, seeing each other regularly at set times in a protective in-group environment, exchange information on their rights and advice on work contracts and relations with employers.\(^{14}\) As for home aids for the elderly, their occasions for seeing each other are more frequent and more formal, as in France most of them work for private companies or, more often, nonprofit associations. Beyond the organizations’ regularly scheduled meetings, the home aids stop in several times per week to see the office staff to talk or ask advice. For that matter, it isn’t rare for them to meet nursing workers, or even doctors, at the elderly person’s home. Lastly, as with home-based child care providers, they also meet up among themselves more informally: they arrange to meet in cafés, they lunch together, and pass each other frequently in the street while going from house to house.

Not only are home care workers not all isolated, but the field research leads us to believe that they do not see their work as closing them back inside the home – indeed, to the contrary. If they sometimes miss the ambiance of camaraderie they knew at the factory or in big service or sales businesses, they also insist on the forms of freedom and autonomy that home service work offers them. Monique Leroy,\(^{15}\) a home-based child care worker in southwestern France, stopped working to raise her children, having started working at age 14 as a laborer in the porcelain industry. After having gone back to work at the factory around the age of 40 thanks to a state-subsidized work contract, she then worked in university cafeterias for several years. Comparing the various jobs she’d held during an interview, she declares: “I preferred the university, the co-workers were a lot nicer… Like they say, we didn’t pull dirty tricks on each other like at the factory… And then, after that, home-based childcare provider, well, you’re really at home with that. You do what you want, you know? You’re not your own boss, but, well, almost… You want to sit down in the afternoon, no one’s going to say ‘What! You’re not going to sit down!’”

The statistical study confirms the existence of forms of work autonomy and freedom for the three occupations we studied. While only three low-skill manual laborers in ten say they are not subject to any kind of oversight concerning their use of working hours, this figure rises to over seven of ten home care workers. Likewise, only 10% of them say that the pace of their work is

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\(^{14}\) A recent field study of nannies from the Côte d’Ivoire who watch the children of residents of fashionable Parisian neighborhoods analyses the role of small parks as an informal union space: there they swap information on their working conditions and together construct the norms of what is and is not acceptable in their employers’ demands (Ibos 2012, p. 132-133).

\(^{15}\) All informants’ names have been changed to preserve anonymity.
imposed by permanent inspections and oversight by the hierarchy, as compared to 43% of low-skill laborers. Other than work hours and pace, the ways of doing one’s work are more flexible. Only 10% of them feel they are subject to instructions from their superiors telling them how to do their jobs, while this figure climbs to 40% among low-skill laborers. Generally speaking, nearly half of them do not feel that questions on how they follow instructions apply to them, which is only the case for 11% of low-skill laborers. This result is doubly significant: not only do these jobs not signify an increase in the degree of domination at work (contrary to what the recurring comparison with ‘domestic workers’ leads one to think), but in addition, they give these women from the working classes unhoped-for forms of autonomy. They allow them to take distance from bosses and escape the daily and successive monitoring that typifies low-skill female salaried work. Indeed, all studies show that in the industrial world, female laborers are considerably more subject to the hierarchy than male laborers: watched over more than men, they also have a greater likelihood of not being allowed to move around, speak to each other, take the initiative, or get out from under orders (Gollac and Volkoff 2002). All studies addressing tertiary sector specialized workers in large organizations such as retail chains, hotels, and restaurants, as in retirement homes and day-care centers, show that these jobs concentrating working-class women are also characterized by the strict prescription of ways of working and by frequent oversight. Lastly, for these women who can only lay claim to jobs at the bottom of the ladder, home service work, even if it does mean isolation in contrast with working in groups, also implies much appreciated independence and freedom.

When a statistical category includes several legal categories

Since the mid-1970s, successive French administrations have established increasingly advantageous mechanisms for exempting “jobs in direct service to families” from taxes, so effective that the French informal sector is one of the smallest in Europe (as compared to Belgium or Italy, for example). The employment status of housecleaners, child care workers, and home aids for the elderly is usually defined by one or more collective labor agreements, a national legal text that supplements the Work Code. Nevertheless, these jobs are institutionalized to unequal degrees.

16 Of course, as in the United States (Glenn 1992, Boris and Klein, 2010), the history of these jobs is rooted in the history of domestic servants, which is seen in the fact that these workers have, in general, lesser legal protections compared to most other workers. Yet the comparison also has its limitations and contributes to obscuring the particularities of today’s jobs from those of domestic servants.

17 While these forms of autonomy appear in the American ethnographic studies devoted to housecleaners, they are not always placed at the heart of analyses, which more often highlight the exploitation they are exposed to, always assumed to be greater than in other low-status jobs (Milkman, Reese and Roth 1998).

18 For a study comparing prescriptions in the private and public tertiary sectors in France, see Dujarier (2006).
Home-based child care providers (assistantes maternelles) work in their own homes, but must first obtain licenses from the departmental-level Mothers’ and Children’s Protection services (PMI). Since 2005 they have been included in a specific collective labor agreement defining their rights concerning vacation time and work-related injuries, among other things. They are most often employed by parents, and a handful work for an organization called the “family nursery” (crèche familiale) that belongs to the PMI. Another type of child care provider, nannies (gardiennes d’enfants) who work at the home of the parents, is included in different collective labor agreement that is less protective, and their work is not overseen by the PMI. INSEE, the French national statistics agency, made only one category for all these women who look after children: the core is composed of “home-based child care providers” but the category still includes nannies, who in France are much less numerous.

Home aids for the elderly (aides à domicile pour personnes âgées) are either employed directly by private individuals or are salaried employees of nonprofit associations, businesses, or city governments. They may also be hired directly by individuals who in turn delegate work and employee management to an association or business. For each status, these women’s employment is somewhat defined by legal texts that anticipate work tasks, the management of vacation time, travel reimbursement, and other work-related issues. Yet the legal framework protects statuses unequally: a municipal employee is more protected than an employee of an association, who is more protected that an aid employed directly by an elderly person or his or her family. It is rare for an aid for the elderly to live at the home of the elderly person he or she looks after (in-home senior care, or garde de personnes âgées). If the core of INSEE’s statistical category is composed of “home aids” for the elderly who commute to their charge(s) home(s), the category also includes in-home senior caregivers.

The employment status of housecleaners (femmes de ménage) is the least formalized. Most housecleaners are employed directly by private individuals without having an organization that oversees or protects them (such as PMI, nonprofit associations, municipal offices…). Those who are salaried employees of businesses or associations working in private homes do not currently fall under any collective labor agreement (a rare situation that is illegal under French law if it continues much longer). Those who clean offices or public buildings, as opposed to private homes, are classified as industrial cleaners (ouvriers du nettoyage industriel). Less protected and with less oversight, housecleaners’ work is also more vague in terms of what tasks are included in their job. If most of these employees do cleaning tasks that exclude the work of looking after others, some employees clean the homes of elderly persons where they perform tasks usually considered the work of home aids (like helping someone to get dressed), and others watch children after school.

The main form of insecurity in all these employment types lies in the extent of part time work (for aids for the elderly, housecleaners) and low hourly wages (home-based care providers). To get by, it is not rare for women to combine different employment statuses or even circulate between them.

II. Working at someone else’s home = working at home?

If isolation sets housecleaners apart from aids for the elderly and home-based child care providers, other aspects of work, by other criteria, come to differentiate their work situations.
One approach separates those who work at their own home, which in France includes the majority of home-based child care workers\textsuperscript{19}, and those who work in the homes of others – that is, housecleaners and home aids.

Working at someone else’s home as opposed to your own has an impact first of all on the physical and temporal constraints of the work. While 80% of child care providers claim they are not concerned by the survey question asking if they sometimes find it impossible to respect the imposed timetable, the figure drops to 44% of housecleaners and 34% of aids for the elderly. Indeed housecleaners and aids for the elderly both need to spend the day going from house to house, for fixed-duration interventions (usually from one to three hours) according to a set schedule. For these same reasons related to work pace, they are a lot more likely to say that they have to remain on their feet the whole work day: nine of ten aids for the elderly and housecleaners declare this work constraint, as opposed to only five of ten child care providers. Nevertheless, when it comes to the work environment, the most significant gap comes between those working in their own homes and those working in someone else’s. Regardless of the variables considered (working in a place that is overheated, unsanitary, exposed to drafts, or smells bad, to name a few), housecleaners and even more home aids for the elderly are always affected by such unpleasant conditions, whereas child care providers seem to be sheltered from them: 22% of aids for the elderly and 17% of housecleaners claim to work exposed to drafts, as opposed to 2.8% of child care providers.

These differences are related to the objective differences stemming from the nature of the work that stand out when we look at questions about cleaning (the central material task in housecleaners’ work, and part of the work of home aids for the elderly, but not officially part of the work of child care providers, who are supposed to devote themselves entirely to the children they are watching\textsuperscript{20}). Aids for the elderly and housecleaners thus say that they work in dirty lodgings more often than child care providers, a third of them saying they breathe dust or even toxic products compared with less than 5% of those in child care. Monique Vogler, a 60-year-old former laborer who has been a home aid for the elderly since the 1980s, vented during an interview: in summer the elderly won’t let the home aids open the windows for fear of getting sick, and in winter the apartments are overheated. The air in such confined spaces is quickly saturated by odors, especially that of urine, as we noticed while accompanying the aids in their work. Gislèle Leymin, a 47 year old aid for the elderly who used to be a clerk in a small shop,\textsuperscript{19} The population of nannies mixed in with the statistics on home-based child care providers (as described earlier) is quite small.\textsuperscript{20} The concrete differences in the content of these kinds of work should also push us to question the generic notion of “care” under which all these jobs are often grouped.
does the cleaning at the homes of several people who suffer from urinary incontinence. At Simone Méliès’s home, the smell of urine is perceptible from the building’s doormat. She only wears diapers at night, and the nurse who comes in every morning, before Gisèle Leymin arrives, leaves the diaper on the floor, knowing that the home aid will pick it up. Plus, it isn’t possible to wash all the towels, sheets and blankets daily, even if the odor permeates the apartment.

Even admitting the strain associated with the work environments of home aids and housekeepers, the gap between them and home-based child care providers calls for a certain degree of prudence, since our observations point toward another interpretation: precisely because they work in their own homes, home-based child care providers may be less aware of the physical and temporal burdens of their work. Replies on questions about odors are interesting in this regard: only 8% of child care providers say they are exposed to bad odors in their work, as opposed to 47.2% of home aids for the elderly and 17.3% of housecleaners. Our field observations show, however, that the bad odors connected with small children (while changing diapers, for example, or when a sick child vomits repeatedly in his or her bed) are far from being absent in the homes of child care providers, and are actually even more disruptive because they affect the place where they and their families live.

More generally speaking, certain strains that only seemed to concern home aids and cleaning women in the statistical study are nonetheless very present for home-based child care providers. This is also the case of work pace constraints: though they don’t have a fixed schedule, home-based child care providers are constrained by the need to pick up and drop off children at school at noon and after school, and by the children’s meal and nap times. Yet they do not declare these temporal constraints. At a time when many salaried workers request to work from home instead of in their employers’ offices, it is interesting to see that work in the comfortable, familiar setting of one’s own home may lower employees’ capacity to perceive of certain work situations as constraining and abnormal. The homes of others quite probably do lead to work burdens specific to home aids for the elderly and housecleaners from which home-based child care providers are sheltered. Nevertheless, working in several, diverse homes that are above all different from one’s own gives home aids and housecleaners different points of reference for comparing work situations, which may equip them

21 “Working conditions” are never given in advance but result from an individual and collective objectivization work in which many factors intervene. Objectivization may thus be fostered by a State intervention or a brutal degradation of working conditions that drive comparisons of “before” and “after.” Conversely, other factors may work toward a sort of naturalization (Gollac 1997).

22 A student observing home-based child care was struck by this aspect, as this extract from her field notes shows: “We go to get the children, Arthur and Clémentine, after their naps. Arthur has been sick for several weeks, and in the room where he sleeps there is always a very unpleasant odor. Maria sprays it with a deodorant spray every day. That’s why it seems like a huge burden to me, to put the children to bed in your own bedroom.”
to perceive the constraints and strains of their work more clearly, and in so doing giving them possibilities for denouncing them, in contrast to home-based child care providers.

III. Working without “the public” = working with the elderly = working with young children?

Let’s begin once again with a tour of the statistically meaningful gaps between all these workers. Although at its outset the French Working Conditions survey in the 1970s (conducted by the ministry of labor) “was above all adapted to the description of physical working conditions and of manual labor” (Gollac and Volkoff 2007: 11), new indicators were introduced in the 1990s to better measure the psychological strain of work, with questions such as the existence of tensions with “the public.” Since then the Working Conditions survey has gradually developed to allow a better understanding of the strains specific to tertiary sector work, especially jobs involving contact with a “public.” From this perspective, working in a house alone, as for the majority of housecleaners (six of ten) sets them apart from home aids for the elderly and child care providers, whereas eight aids for the elderly and seven child care providers out of ten say that they work in contact with “the public.” For housecleaners, working in the domestic space concerns mostly physical strain; for the others it means the accumulation of industrial and commercial pressures and the forms of work intensification that go with them (Gollac and Volkoff 1998). Thus, 35% of child care providers and 47% of home aids for the elderly declare that their work pace is imposed by external demands that require an immediate response, as opposed to 17% of housecleaners. Likewise, over half the child care providers and nearly half the aids for the elderly regularly have to interrupt one task to go do another, unexpected one, which only concerns 23% of housecleaners. Beyond the pressure of demand, aids for the elderly and child care providers share the obligation of dealing with a vulnerable public alone. This can be seen in the characteristics of work involving contact: four child care providers and six aids to the elderly out of ten say they are brought to calm people down in their work, in contrast with only 11% of housecleaners. In particular, they say they are exposed to verbal aggression (33% of aids for the elderly versus 6% of housecleaners) or even to infectious diseases (56% of aids for the elderly and 43% of child care providers versus 17% of housecleaners).

If home-based workers are not exposed to the same strains according to whether they work in contact with “the public” or not, the question of the nature of the public itself also deserves to be explored. Home-based child care providers seem especially subject to the physical and moral
tension associated with the responsibility implied by taking charge of young children. Taking care of young children is clearly physically and mentally demanding, and they work at a constant pace all day long, except when all of the children take their naps at the same time, which does not happen every day. Half of them thus say that they cannot leave sight of their work, compared with only 16% of aides for the elderly. Nearly half the child care providers say they do not have a meal break, true for only a third of aids for the elderly – especially remarkable knowing the importance of the meal in the working classes and its “recuperative” role in physical jobs.\textsuperscript{23} If aids for the elderly seem less affected by the mental strain weighing on home-based child care workers (in the field studies, women who say they do not want to look after children say it is because “it’s too much responsibility”), their publics appear in a more negative light. They appear more easily as a public in a situation of distress (64%, as opposed to a quarter of child care providers), which seems to be in line with the experience of tensions with the public (half of home aids for the elderly claim to feel such tensions, in contrast with 18% of child care providers) as well as subjection to verbal aggression (38% of aids to the elderly compared with 14% of child care providers).

Yet we find ourselves confronted once again with problems interpreting these results. The interpretation problem bears once again on the possibilities for home-based child care providers to not just become aware of, but publicly denounce the strain of their work – not so much because they work in their own homes, but because they take care of young children. Indeed young children are, symbolically speaking, an extremely valued population in France today – an anthropologist (Ségalen 2010) tracing the evolution of the place of young children over centuries speaks of a society become “babyphile” – so work in contact with children (as much in the family setting as when it is remunerated) is likewise highly valued, while that in contact with the elderly is less charged with social importance. In addition to the question of odors evoked previously, we might take another variable to illustrate this point: only a third of child care providers say they make painful or tiring gestures in their work, as opposed to half of housecleaners and nearly seven of ten aids for the elderly. As the field observations show, home-based child care providers watching several young children do physically pay of their person: they carry children all day long, bend down to be at their level, walk around outside with heavy two- or three-child strollers that have to be maneuvered and sometimes lifted. It’s as if taking care of children makes home-based child care providers less inclined to speak out against the strain of their work.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{23} L. Boltanski (1971).
\textsuperscript{24} We know that nurses had to break with a representation of their profession based on devotion to come to think of the ill as “charges” (Kergoat 1992, Gollac and Volkoff 2007). In France, home-based child care workers, quick to foreground their devotion, still seem largely reticent to recognize and represent children as “charges.”
“home” with children or with the elderly thus do evoke different working conditions, and consequently unequal potentials for realizing the strains of work. We have another hypothesis, however, that cautions us against underestimating the capacity of home-based child care providers to criticize their working conditions in comparison to their colleagues: the Working Conditions survey questionnaire did not capture some of the strains experienced by these workers, especially those of child care providers. To illustrate this point, let’s look at the question about tensions with “the public” more closely. Only 18% of child care providers claim having tensions with the public, as opposed to nearly 43% of aides for the elderly. Yet the fieldwork with home-based child care providers shows that these situations of tension with children are far from rare. For example, home-based child care providers exhausted and weakened by the uncontrollable crying of particular babies regularly sought advice from the coordinators at the municipal organizations for early childhood. One might then think that child care providers under-declare tensions with children. But one might also interpret this to mean that the child care providers (or indeed the survey administrator asking the question) interpreted the word “public” to mean parents, and not children. This would be consistent with the fact that only 71% of child care providers claim to work in contact with “a public”: if they had understood “public” to mean children, 100% would have replied positively to this question. Perhaps we should instead interpret these results to mean that 71% of them have contact with the parents.

Here we touch on a more general problem with these statistical surveys, whose questionnaires are not yet entirely adapted to studying such home service jobs: in their cases, questions concerning both “the public” and “the hierarchy” tend toward confusion. We’ll give a few examples: for home-based child care workers the public may be understood as children or parents, and similarly the hierarchy could be incarnated in the parents, but perhaps also in the staff of the organizations that certify them (the PMI). Likewise, home aids for the elderly don’t have a hierarchy, but rather several organizations proscribing their work, and it varies from one home to the next: it could be the elderly persons (or not at all, in cases of Alzheimer’s disease for example), or their families (more or less present), or the office staff of the nonprofit association managing their work (who may in turn see their role challenged by an elderly person or his or her family). Put another way, many of the questions in the Working Conditions survey are prisoner of a definition of the work situation as having only one work location, and placing the employee under the orders of a well-defined hierarchical superior and potentially in contact with “a public,” also clearly defined. Over the course of the field study on home aids for the elderly, analysis of a collective mobilization (Avril 2009) showed how successfully employees could organize themselves against the association’s director (who hoped to set up a system of clocking in by
telephone) thanks to new alliances between the aids and some of the elderly, their families, and even association office staff. In other words, the vagueness surrounding hierarchical positions, much like the characteristics of this sector’s working situations, are also behind the formation of informal groups susceptible to spawn mobilizations and the invention of new forms of organization in general.25

These factors all beg for the evolution of statistical surveys toward a better adaptation to the situation of “home” workers, in order to better comprehend the strains they are submitted to at work, as well as the opportunities they might have to form an organized group. These working situations ultimately seem to offer a new template for reading work conflicts and ways of organizing, but we still need to equip ourselves correctly to be able to make them out.

Although grouping all “care” jobs into the single category of home service workers is useful for allowing international comparisons and getting a grasp on the large-scale South-to-North migratory movement of feminine labor, it also presents some pitfalls. As the preceding combination of statistical and ethnographic data shows, all these home service workers have different working conditions, with different relationships to the class condition. But this clustering not only hides differences in working situations, it also masks unequal legal conditions, sometimes significant, between all these “in-home” workers, both within a single country and when comparing between countries. Research in the United States as well as elsewhere in Europe takes up the homogenizing category of home service workers, and has “naturally” focused on employees having the least-regulated working conditions (working under the table, lacking job security, lacking training or possibilities of getting their qualifications recognized). For a better understanding of these professional universes that now occupy a significant place in the world of employment, one must first have the means of truly being able to identify different working situations and employment conditions; in addition, it would also be pertinent to broaden analysis to medical care jobs (Weber and Trabut 2009) in order to better come to terms with the meaning of “care” work.

* This paper was translated by Juliette Rogers.

25 An example is given in P. Nadasen’s analysis of domestic workers in 1960s Atlanta (USA) (Nadasen 2010), as in the case of family child care providers in the US in the 1990s (Reese, 2010). Reference might also be made to G. Lee-Treweek’s ethnographic study (1997) in the UK, which calls for finding the way to identify forms of resistance of nurse’s aids in retirement homes.
Bibliography


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