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**Temporary migration to the UK as an 'Au Pair':
Cultural exchange or reproductive labour?**

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Summary

Au pairs are young, single, European temporary migrants. They have been absent from academic, public and political debates because of their specific profile and the role that they play. This paper aims to illuminate this group, theoretically, by looking at issues of mobility and social reproduction, and empirically, to establish the reality and complexities of these two dimensions. I argue that the state, agencies, families and au pairs themselves are implicated in crosscutting relationships of demand and power that make critical personal relationships based on reciprocity or hierarchy.

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Preface

The purpose of this paper is to make visible a previously ignored and ambiguous group of temporary migrants. This is important because there are significant and growing numbers of au pairs coming to the UK. They are worthy of more attention in their own right, but also in terms of the links that they have to issues of mobility and social reproduction. Mobility has an elusive quality that has led to a denial of its importance in migration studies. Social reproduction has also traditionally been sidelined compared to the emphasis placed on production. A discussion on the temporary migration of au pairs will illuminate and link both these important issues.

The initial premise implied in the title to this paper is that there is an either/or choice between cultural exchange and reproductive labour. This is not the case, but the tension between the two things expresses something of the underlying ambiguity. 'Cultural exchange' is assumed to be the motivation for au pairs and host families, with housework and childcare being considered an insignificant form of repayment. However, in reality the cheap, flexible assistance that au pairs supply within the home is often the main reason for families to take part in the scheme. Therefore, there is fine balance between needing a worker and incorporating them as 'part of the family'. This paper will argue that such relationships depend on

1. Setting the Scene

Au Pairs coming to the UK are defined as young women and men, aged 17 to 27, unmarried, without dependents and wishing to live abroad for a maximum of two years as a member of a family. The scheme's main intention – to allow young people to improve their linguistic skills and experience life in another country in exchange for 'day-to-day family duties' (Council of Europe 1969: 4) – remains unchanged since its inception over 30 years ago¹. Au pairs are expected to do no more than 25 hours a week of childcare or light-household chores, and in return they are given 'pocket money' of approximately £45 per week. Home Office recommendations have not changed since the outset, apart from expansions to include men and additional countries outside of the EEA². Nationals of these designated countries³ are required to apply for au pair visas before they enter the UK. This is therefore, not a new migration phenomenon, but one that attracts surprisingly little academic, media or political attention.

Significant numbers of au pairs enter the UK each year, rising from 7,720 in 1991 to 12,900 in 2001. However, this figure only includes nationals from outside the EEA that are required to have visas. Estimates for 2000 put the total figure nearer 60,000 (Addley 2002). These numbers look likely to continue rising in correlation with demand, given the increasing prominence of dual-career households, privatisation of childcare and the opening of borders within the Europe (Cox Unpublished). The numbers of migrant domestic workers, a distinct, but connected group, are also increasing to meet an escalating demand for affordable, flexible labour in order to assist with the strains of home and work life. Research on the experiences of migrant domestic workers (cf. Gregson and Lowe 1994; Henshall Momsen 1999; Anderson 2000; 2001; Nelson and England 2002)

¹ The UK is not a signatory of the 1969 Strasbourg agreement that defines 'in all member States, the conditions governing 'au pair' placement' (ibid.: 1). However, Home Office recommendations closely follow the guidelines set out by this agreement

² EEA = European Economic Area, includes all EU Countries, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

³ Designated countries are: Andorra, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, The Faroes, Greenland, Hungary, Macedonia, Malta, Monaco, San Marino, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Switzerland and Turkey. In December 2002, six accession countries - Bulgaria, Estonia, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania - were also added.

shows the vulnerability of migrant women in the household, not only because of their gender and citizenship status, but also because the nature and location of their work hides them from protective mechanisms, such as labour legislation. Research is only now beginning to extend this body of work by looking at the similarities and differences with au pairs' experiences (cf. Anderson and Cox Forthcoming; Cox and Narula Undated).

Au pairs, although doing similar work to migrant domestic workers, are unique in many respects. Their profile typically differs because the legislation requires them to be of a certain age, not to have dependents and to stay temporarily. Although this may also reflect the reality of many domestic workers, this is not how they are generally perceived. Domestic workers are considered to have a paid, contractual relationship with their employer, whereas au pairs are supposed to be 'on equal terms' (translation of the term 'au pair'), offering their help as a family member. How this plays out, successfully or unsuccessfully, is very important in terms of exploitation or enjoyment. Au pairs, unlike domestic workers, fit neatly into a modern conception of mobility and integration within Europe, hence the extension of the scheme to include accession countries. This is therefore a rare example of immigration rules opening up without challenge, but why? I argue that different groups, from the state and au pair agencies, to individuals and families, have vested interests in the scheme's existence. The state has a need to manage migration, provide affordable childcare (to increase people's ability to go out to work) and to encourage mobility within an integrated Europe. Au pair agencies on the other hand make their money as intermediaries between host families and au pairs. Families require flexible, cheap, on-call assistance in the home. And finally, au pairs themselves are motivated to capitalise on gains to be had from the experience of living abroad and improved language ability. This suggests a win-win situation, but it is too simplistic an approach. I argue that all these players are implicated in crosscutting relationships, not as part of some conspiratorial plot to exploit, but in a classic example of mobility that is necessary to different groups, and easily acceptable to the general public.

Given the considerable numbers of au pairs that travel within Europe and beyond, the large amount of literature generated on domestic work,

suggest that they are absent from any debate for five reasons.

First, there is an assumed positivity around au pairs. The reciprocal trade off – so-called cultural learning for help in the domestic sphere – is often presented as unproblematic by politicians and policy makers alike. For example, Home Office Minister Beverly Hughes celebrated the extension of the scheme last year by saying that it will help 'the young people who want to have the enriching cultural experience of coming to the UK, and the British families they will stay with' (Hughes 2002). Public, media and political interest is therefore rarely roused because they are not fleeing dangerous situations, requiring help, nor are they threatening the status quo, by swamping social services or taking jobs.

Second, the movement of au pairs is normalised. Most people will know what an au pair is, even if they have never met one. They are not seen as bizarre, hostile or unusual, especially because they don't collect in large communities. In fact, because it is not stigmatised, the term 'au pair' can be easily picked up or discarded if someone chooses to do so.

Third, like tourists, they are not seen as demanding integration, nor are they portrayed as a burden to the welfare state. In fact, since families are given the responsibility for integration and welfare support for the duration of their stay, should anything go wrong then it is individuals and families, rather than collectives that are seen to be at fault.

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experienced by migrants. Nevertheless, it is

do away with, but their critical analysis may be key to finding things that have previously been invisible.

3. Methods

3.1 Existent data sources

Finding accurate quantitative data on au pairs is virtually impossible. At first sight immigration statistics appear perfectly adequate, but since many au pairs come from within the EU, they are not picked up by immigration statistics. They also do not appear in labour market data sets, because they are not considered to be formally working. Informal sector numeration is similarly

Outcropping aims to access certain populations by going to places where they are likely to congregate. Again this method is susceptible to bias, but it is likely to save time and guarantee wider coverage than snowballing. Cox and Narula (Undated) employed this method for reaching au pairs by going through English language classes, au pair agencies and primary schools. However, relying on gatekeepers, such as English teachers or agency managers, was problematic because some were reluctant to give their trust and time. Also it was unfortunate that I was conducting research when classes were revising, taking exams and closing down for the summer. Even where summer courses were operating, attendance by au pairs was usually poor because they tended to go home, go on holiday with their host families or were doing extra hours of

They were replicated by a wider society. We therefore deal with 'webs of socially negotiated meanings, rather than static or given interpretations of symbols, places and relationships' (Silvey and Lawson 1999:127). This was true of au pairs. Even if they recounted very positive stories, they would often add a condition about their uniqueness, implying that they understood something of a wider perception. Host families were also conscious of presenting their family as inclusive and welcoming, repeating that their au pair was treated 'as one of the family', and yet explaining the different rules established for them. There is also a growing consensus within research that researchers need to take a reflexive approach to their positionality in relation to the research subject. (Devine and Heath 1999:7). However, this is not all that easy to recognise or act on in practice (Rose 1997). For instance, my age, education, class, gender, ethnicity and experience had inevitable consequences on the research design, practice and interpretation, but how influential these factors are is impossible to gauge accurately. In general, I found it easy to talk to au pairs and host families about their experience, which was possibly related to my gender and age, as well as

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Anipair-plus.com

Would you like to travel abroad?
Learn a new language?
Experience a new culture?
Then you could be an au pair!

Tell us about yourself now! (no commitment), add your real contact details so that we can find you fast or send you more information!

An au pair is a single girl (or boy) who helps a host family with children and housework while staying in their home.

Anipair-plus.com

Do you want help with your children?
A babysitter?
A hand with the homework?
Then don't see anyone!

An au pair is a single girl (or boy) who helps a host family with children and housework while staying in a guest with a host family and generally receiving a small allowance or pocket money. An au pair is usually aged between 17 and 27 years of age and must be older than:

- The au pair's relationship with her host family.

She should be provided with free room, board and pocket money. She has her own room with facility to study and is allowed two free days a week at times which are mutually convenient. It is essential that she is given consideration and respect and be treated as a member of the family. She should receive her meals with the family and be invited to share in recreational pursuits whenever possible. An Au Pair is not used as a child minder nor as a caregiver.

The split between these two aspects is symbolic of diverging interests that require careful management. The assumed 'win-win', normative model does not account for these differing agendas, which require further interrogation of relationships between the respective parties.

The three vignettes presented here typify the range of au pair narratives that I encountered. Of the nine au pairs I met, four were badly treated as Serena was in vignette 1. Two enjoyed the experience so much that it felt like a long holiday, Maria being one of them (Vignette 2). The other two had mixed opinions, in that they worked very hard, but

4.2.2 Vignette 2

Maria left a good job and close supportive family in Slovakia to experience life in a different country and learn English. She paid an agency to find her a placement and bought an expensive flight. She ended up with a family who treated her 'like a slave', ordering her to her room when they came in, not showing how to operate things, not allowing her to eat with them, yet still giving her the responsibility for their six month old baby. Eventually the agency found another family who were quite the opposite and she was extremely happy with them for two and half years. This second experience still opposes the traditional model, because the family took a very flexible interpretation of the rules. Nevertheless it offers an example of an extremely positive experience for the hosts and au pair.

Maria's second family

I am still really good friends with them and I still see them all the time. Kate was always saying to Amy, make sure you teach Maria English. Kate would always make sure that I was busy during the day when Amy was at school, either I was going to Church to play the bells, or I was going to the market to help out. She always made sure that someone came in the door in the morning to pick me up to go somewhere and they

Mica: My family did. I had boyfriend and they never told me anything. When we came there they told me anything is okay because I had basement room and my own door. Mind you when I first went to that room I couldn't believe it. My friend came and we really had to clean the room, it was tiny. I was in hospital too for three days with poisoning from the damp in that place but I went back because I loved the baby and the family were nice to me.

Mica's case epitomizes the absence of simple dichotomies, in that generally she was content, but some aspects could have been better. Once her English improved it was easier to look for another job and therefore she was able to use the flexibility of the scheme to her own advantage by moving to a family that would suit her needs and overall aims. Mica is currently working in a restaurant and is here on a student visa studying English. She hopes to be able to come back to Oxford when Slovakia joins the EU in order to study nursing.

4.3 Institutional contexts

Like all social groups, au pairs are very heterogeneous. However, the three vignettes outlined above represent differing extremes of experience. How and why these three cases differ offers a useful starting point for drawing out what lies behind the normative model. These findings are not offered as empirically tested truths, due to the size of the study. However, common features have arisen consistently that affect a person's experience and provide justification for further research. The variables I hypothesise here as crucial to the success of an au pair's experience are grouped within 'institutional contexts' – the impact that state and agencies have on the construction of roles and relationships, and 'individual practices' – how au pairs and host families react to, replicate and form relationships based on crucial factors of hierarchy or reciprocity. Each of these relationships can be masked by, or related to, cultural exchange or a reproductive burden, although this is not a simple dichotomy.

Relationships, such as those between host families and au pairs, do not occur in a vacuum. They are shaped by, and connected to, demands of wider structural forces and institutions. This section therefore focuses on how the state and au pair agencies affect the temporary migration and experience of au pairs.

4.3.1 The State

The au pair scheme is built on an idea of reciprocal exchange. Matching the demand for unskilled entry into the UK with the demand for support within the home seems on the surface a

win-win situation. However, the inbuilt flexibility unwittingly favours host families, because they control access to money and accommodation in return for labour. Therefore, success requires a conscious effort on the part of the family to rectify this imbalance and often a flexible interpretation of the legislation.

Being able to work outside the home is not permitted on an au pair visa, although some families encourage or support it. This was not a factor that was originally considered, but a surprising element that arose in those cases where the au pair was very happy with the experience. For them it meant being able to extend their networks of support and friendship, whilst gaining a certain amount of financial and social independence. For example, Maria worked outside the home to supplement her income, but also to improve her English and gain new

week. Again this shows a certain amount of flexibility because payment in excess of the recommended fee would 'suggest that the person is filling the position of domestic servant, or similar, which would require a work permit'¹⁴. It is unlikely though that any au pair would embark on a lengthy complaints procedure by arguing that they deserve the minimum wage, because they stay for a limited time. Additionally, if they require a visa, unless they can immediately secure another job, they risk being deported. Despite the prominence of neo-liberal ideology the market in this case is not permitted to set wages. It is therefore state intervention in the market that maintains au pairs as a potentially exploitable underclass in the range of reproductive labour suppliers.

Cross-overs with other visa categories, such as 'domestic worker' and 'student' can lead to confusion of categories and discrepancies on the basis of citizenship can arise. For instance, au pairs coming from within the EU are legally able to work outside the home and therefore find themselves in a relatively more comfortable position should they need to leave their family. Citizenship status can also have repercussions in a multitude of ways. For instance, one au pair I spoke to explained how being unable to get a bank account because of her temporary status contributed to her feeling of vulnerability in the home.

'...if you don't have bank account it is hard... it is hard to get my name on the bill...au pairs, how can they prove their address? what bill they have? In the beginning they could show for example some their GP card, but then do not accept just this.... so somebody can go into my room and take it. Then I say I have almost £3000 and they say "ha ha"'. (Jane, Slovakia)

Therefore, although au pairs appear to be a highly mobile cosmopolitan population their temporary status as migrants can result in exploitation. Once again it is up to the family that they are with to tip the balance in their favour. This is, in part, because the Home Office construct the nature of the paid relationship, but stops short of regulating the actual working conditions.

4.3.2 Agencies

All the au pairs in this survey came to the UK via an agency and obtained information from them or friends and family. There was no significant

correlation between the accuracy of the information and its source, and only four of the respondents said the information was completely incorrect. However, the interviews rev83212 TDo Tw ()iT A.7g9hat 6n0 OTde7ly.rbl 4 TD e517 Oy t 1.426.2n-1d2ipd

¹⁴ See: <http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/default.asp?PageId=836>

option for complaint is to switch families. Where agencies were willing to help, they found it difficult to place au pairs that were unable to provide references from the previous host families, again giving the family the upper hand.

Nationality was another subject that came up consistently in conversations with agencies and host families. Many families would start off by saying that nationality made no difference, but would contradict themselves by explaining why they had been able to cancel out whole populations on the basis of one experience or a stereotype.

'We actually preferred to have them [au pairs from Eastern Europe] rather than people in France and Germany, because of the perception of those people having relatively simple means, rather than having come from a more affluent sort of environment.' (Rob, Witney)

Au pair agencies that I interviewed replicated these arguments and racist stereotypes, as Bakan and Stalius (1995) found in their study of

followed up in interviews the respondents would reply that it depends on the mood of the person that day and the situation.

'... they can say 'well, she is just like our daughter' in front of other people ... If she has a personal problem, then she becomes a worker, why would you help her?, she is not a part of your real family.' (Elsa, Czech Republic)

The impact of this changeable definition was exacerbated by the fact that au pairs are located within the family home. Behind the closed doors of a family home, people expect to act without inhibition and retreat from the world outside. However, bringing market contracts into the home can make personal relationships fraught.

'Depending on a person's mood you can feel more like an interloper than at other times ... That is the thing living in a house, it would be so much easier to come in and be a day mother and leave at a set hour.'

(Michelle, South Africa)

There was a significant correlation between enjoyment and way that the family included the au pair. For instance, those that felt that they were treated like workers 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' with the statement 'I enjoy being an au pair'. A similar correlation was found between overall enjoyment and being invited to join dinner parties. It may sound like an innocuous factor, but it does reflect something of the equal terms on which the au pair was included within the family. The second vignette gave the example of Maria who was definitely treated as an equal and a friend. She was invited to all social functions, which often meant arranging alternative childcare. This resonated with other au pair narratives who felt empowered by the relationship rather than exploited. One respondent said that he would be introduced as their 'Godson' and was treated as valuable member of the family. He explained that

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responsibility for tasks showed cleaning, washing, tidying and ironing were tasks that were not on the whole shared, but done primarily by au pairs. Other duties like reading to the children, cooking for the family and shopping were shared or taken up the mother. Interestingly, eight respondents said that the father was responsible for washing the car, with a further eight saying 'other person' or 'no one had responsibility'. This was the only category where the father featured as a majority and provides further evidence that reproductive duties are still falling on women or their replacement – the au pair. I argue that au pairs are often a replacement wife or mother, rather than an 'additional other', because it was often the mother that took responsibility for finding an au pair and managing them in the home.

'I was the one that was pushing to have one and I was definitely the one to take responsibility for dealing with the au pair. That is just the way things are, the woman often has to deal with things like that. Perhaps I felt guilty at leaving my girls while I was at work.'
(Pauline, Newbury)

Where applicable it was the mother that had responsibility for setting tasks, checking work and general behaviour¹⁵. Interestingly, the father did participate more when it came to paying the au pair. Therefore, although the presence of an au pair was emancipating women from some aspects of their domestic responsibility they still had to replace themselves, which meant that the gendered division of labour was not challenged. The structure of the family and the relationships that hosts establish, in terms of hierarchy or reciprocity, are shown here to be significant. Some host families felt that paying their au pair had bought them the right to control the au pairs' tasks, but more than this, control over them as individuals.

'I felt like she was controlling me instead of her children. It was like she wanted to put somebody else there you know. I felt like I had to listen because if I did not then I felt like I would lose the house, she would kick me out and what I'm going to do. I will be on the streets, so I had to listen, but her children didn't have to!'
(Jeanie, Slovakia)

One host family interviewed proudly explained that they would treat their au pairs as family members and they were so close that they were going to Turkey to visit their ex-

to have a friendly relationship when things do not work out as they intended. For example, one host mother said that she had had much better experiences with nannies as opposed to au pairs:

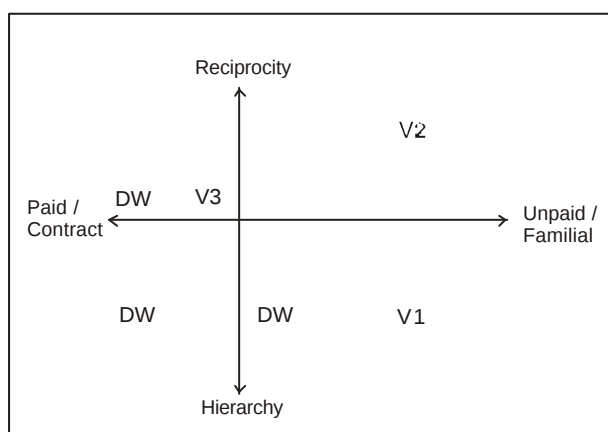
'People would say to me, you are not acting like you are a boss. But I would say I don't want to be, not when I am at home. I hadn't needed to with the nannies. All the nannies we had were excellent. I expected it to be like that.' (Pauline, Newbury)

This host family had decided not to get another nanny because of the cost and the fact that they did not require full time childcare. Yet they still expected to have a professional 'worker' because they consistently compared the service in terms of quality and value for money. Although the mother claimed that she treated her au pairs like 'one of the family', there was no understanding of the contradiction that this entailed. There is therefore a strong correlation between the structure of the family, its reproductive burden and the integration of 'another', in this case an au pair.

4.5 Summary

Relationships formed between au pairs and host families – within a context set by the state and agencies – are crucial to the success of an au pair's migratory project. Figure 3 shows the relational axes (as previously described within the theoretical discussion) on to which I have plotted the Vignettes outlined at the beginning of this chapter. These represent the three general types of experience that I judged to be most common based on my own data collation and the analysis.

Figure 3: Modelling relationships



Key:

- V1 – Vignette 1, Serena
- V2 – Vignette 2, Maria
- V3 – Vignette 3, Mica

V2 exemplifies the friendship model that proved successful for au pairs and host families alike. It operated like a friendship because reciprocity was essential. Serena, in her own words, would have been prepared to do tasks without any rules or any financial repayment. V1 on the other hand shows an opposite extreme whereby the family did not pay Maria and she was treated as the lowest rank on the family hierarchy. Cultural exchange in this case was not even a consideration. Finally, V3 gives an example of a clearer expectation of work and more financial compensation for extra duties. Again cultural exchange was not a priority, but the family was able to recognise the importance of their au pair as a reproductive asset. I have also plotted some possible positionings for domestic workers based on available literature (cf. Anderson 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Meagher 2002), which offer an interesting comparison. The key difference is that although au pairs might be within a hierarchical relationship, they do not appear in the lower left quarter because they do not have a paid contract. For domestic workers this may in fact be the most advantageous positioning because they are given proper reward for their work, rather than being expected to do things through reciprocity alone. Therefore, despite the fact that the nature of their work might be similar the relationships they find themselves in are very different. This highlights the power that families have in deciding the au pair role, because they are able to choose whether they are treated as friends and equals or as another reproductive supplier provided by the market.

The above diagram shows an extended line on the unpaid/familial side (compared to figure 1) because through this extension the state is able to shift responsibility into the private sphere, making the corresponding axis even more fundamental. That is not to say that there is a huge conspiracy to exploit au pairs. On the contrary, the scheme is an unsurprising response to various demands. However, the fragile nature of the relations requested by the legislation, i.e. being part of the family, is not properly accounted for. In many cases it simply does not work. Therefore, in order to consider any changes we must first begin to understand and admit the influence that different actors – such as the state or agencies – have in the construction of relationships. A managed migration agenda offers no space for unsuccessful migratory experiences because there is an implicit assumption of self-reliance or temporariness. In practice, there are complex levels of success and failure that are not explained by referring to individuals'

idiosyncrasies alone, or by ignoring wider structural factors.

5. Conclusions

This paper started by listing reasons that explain why au pairs have been invisible within academic, political and public debates. They are invisible for a number of reasons, not least because they epitomise liminality. This liminality has been theoretically explored in terms of the elusive nature of mobility and the concealed role of social reproduction. It was also tested empirically by looking at how au pairs are positioned in reality. Exposing these elements allows us to understand the conceptual limits of migration theory, as well as, gaining a better understanding of au pairs themselves. Although the choice between 'cultural exchange and reproductive labour' did not turn out to be the simpl

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