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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 individuals, in respect of migration theory and policy.

The absence of quantitative data rendered a qualitative approach to the subject essential. This study, conducted in the Oxford area, combines data collected through questionnaires and in-depth interviews. It also takes a theoretical approach, utilising secondary sources taken from the field of migration studies and other related disciplines. These concentrate on the construction of, and demand for, reproductive labour within the home, as well as the importance of recognising mobility and its connection to permanent migration.

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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, and the fact that this is a movement that has been occurring for more than 30 years, the relative silence around au pairs is surprising. I

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.

Fourth, migration studies have in the past been guilty of ignoring flows pioneered and dominated by women, this flow would appear to be no exception. Au pairs are an innocuous migration flow because they are often young, single, white and are mainly female. These factors enable them to merge into the majority population with ease.

Finally, au pairs are positioned in a liminal space in just about every sense, which means they easily fall through the cracks between debates. In the home they are neither guest, worker nor family member, but a sliding combination of each, depending on mood, circumstance and situation. In society they are not in the ‘student category nor the worker category, but...a special category which has features of both’ (Council of Europe 1969: 2). Although they are not ‘officially’ workers they are still expected to do work, although they are not seen as being skilled they are given a great deal of responsibility within the home, and although they are not actually students they are thought of as studying language and culture. In terms of migration they are visitors and yet staying beyond an ordinary tourist visa;

they are often legal and yet have no rights and work informally; they are independent travellers and yet they are channelled into a specific sector of demand; finally they cross national borders, but often borders within Europe that are already open. Each of these things combines to explain why au pairs have been overlooked. Investigating these factors will enable us to uncover this particular migration flow, whilst also challenging the way that we have previously approached the study of migration itself.

This paper begins by exploring how comfortably existing empirical and theoretical models related to migration fit in this case. Work on au pairs as a group of temporary migrants has been scant, not only because they are an invisible group, but because the two fields of theoretical discussion most relevant, mobility and social reproduction, have themselves been ignored until recently. Migration has always been a difficult concept to box up, but new and existing mobilities prove that we must extend our conceptual parameters in order to widen our understanding, and also to distinguish impacts on more permanent forms of migration. Social reproduction has also been sidelined in favour of concentrating on those in productive work and movement of productive entities. Reproduction, used here in its widest definition, talks of activities and work that reproduce a productive workforce and specific sets of relations. It requires a more dominant profile within migration studies, but especially in terms of the interlinkages occurring between production and reproduction. Both of these bodies of literature are discussed in relation to au pairs, especially with reference to where the demand comes from and how relationships and categories are constructed.

This theoretical section is followed up through an analysis of au pair narratives. The empirical research conducted was small scale and qualitative in focus. Questionnaires were sent out via various methods to au pairs, and these were backed up by a series of in-depth interviews with au pairs, host families and intermediaries, such as au pair agencies. The study was based within the Oxford area, given the considerable demand for domestic service and childcare in the south of England (Gregson and Lowe 1994). Finally, the concluding section draws together the theory and findings by focussing on the key relationships apparent at institutional and individual levels. These offer a starting point for ideas that could be pursued in terms of policy recommendations and future research projects.

2. Mobility and Social Reproduction

Au pairs are not 'proper' migrants, and domestic labour is not 'proper' work. To explore this liminal, but numerically significant group, theories of mobility and of social reproduction are both useful and relevant. Au pairs are not constructed as 'migrants', but are mobile because they are young, temporary residents. Moreover, this sense of mobility contributes to them – like those on Working Holidaymaker visas – not being constructed as 'workers'. Thus an exploration of liminality is not simply a theoretical exercise, but one that can throw light on how the demand for 'invisible' and flexible labour – patterned by gender, race and class – is met by the state in ways that present the least threat to the status quo. This discussion will provide the theoretical underpinning for a model illustrating power axes that determine an au pairs' experience, a model that will be tested empirically in the following section.

2.1 Temporary migrants or temporarily mobile?

2.1.1 Migration Policy

Technological changes mean that, in theory, people are able to move with increasing ease and decreasing cost, and many people do, whether that means moving internally, internationally, locally, for work or pleasure, permanently or for a short period. This has clear implications for immigration (and asylum) policy. The 'managed migration' policies of the UK Home Office attempt to limit movement while facilitating a supply of labour for British business (Flynn 2002). Migrant labour is brought in through a series of small and temporary policy doors, making the system so complicated that agencies and intermediaries, as well as individual officials, are given a substantial degree of unchecked power (Bakan and Stasiulis 1995; Anderson 2000). More particularly, temporary migration programmes such as the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Scheme and work permit schemes available for work in the food manufacturing and hospitality industry⁴, are wheeled in to solve the problems of labour shortages. Numbers of people who are moving, but not constructed as workers, most particularly,

⁴ For further information on these temporary schemes see: http://www.workpermit.com/uk/short_term_work_permits/introduction.htm

au pairs and 'working holidaymakers' are as a result, on the increase. In theory, these sorts of 'migrants' come for a short time, remain attached to their homeland, and return when the contract is finished i.e. they do not want to 'integrate', and the state's responsibility to them is therefore extremely limited. Public objection is neutralised because they are rarely shown to draw on state resources (Findlay 1995). In reality however the demand that they fill is long term and structural and often they do want to stay. Contract labour has also been shown to lead to new flows of migration and permanent settlement (Castles 1995). There is no reason to expect au pairs to be any different. We can anticipate therefore that the UK Government's use of mobility may contribute to the growth of a population with extremely limited rights.

Au pair migration neatly fits into a managed migration policy agenda, because it is acceptable to a majority, but also because it falls into a unique space between temporary migration, youth mobility and student migration. Their time is limited, they are not represented as an economic burden since they are the responsibility of the family, and they are not 'taking jobs', as they are not really working at all. Like migrant domestic workers they are not found in civic space and therefore are not perceived as a threat (Anderson 2000; Romero 2002). All this combines to diffuse any possible public panic. Another contributory factor being the fact that they are constructed as white and Christian (Cox 1999). Au pair agencies then assist by fulfilling and promoting stereotypes surrounding au pairs. In all the material, printed and web-based, that I found in my research, I did not find a single picture of a black or Asian au pair. Nick Clarke's observation on British working holidaymakers in Australia has similar implications:

'WHM's [working holiday makers] are welcome in Sydney because they are "young, healthy, attractive", and because they "spill out" and "consume food and drink and souvenirs"' (Clarke 2003: forthcoming)

One has to ask, would large numbers of Indian working holidaymakers similarly be considered 'attractive'? Could 'attractive' be replaced with 'white' or 'young and healthy' imply 'economical' in terms of possible state support? The sad fact is that race, nationality and religion are increasingly important factors within migration, especially since the events of September 11th 2001 (Castles and Miller 2003).

Youth mobility, has merited very little academic study, but has been more visible on EU agendas. The Council of Europe have made a series of recommendations in a White Paper that aimed to

promote the enablement of young people to move around Europe for education, social and intercultural learning. This was followed up by the European Youth Hostel Association that argued for:

'...the simplification and eventually the abolition of visa procedures for international travel by young people – inside the European Union and between the EU and the rest of the world – must remain high on the political agenda' (EUFED 2001)

This document specifically excludes au pairs, differentiating them from exchange students, despite the fact that this is what the rhetoric surrounding au pairs lays claim to. For example, Pro-Youth International, a group funded by the European Commission,⁵ lists opportunities for youth mobility – youth exchange organisations work camps, voluntary programmes, student and youth exchange, then under a separate heading 'Working abroad' come au pairs. This once again points to the liminal space au pairs are given since they are not seen as workers, but neither are they included in the youth exchange category. What this tells us is that the au pair scheme is something quite unique, in principle and rhetoric it is 'cultural exchange', but in reality is treated differently.

Au pairs are similarly differentiated from students, despite the recognition of the importance of language learning to their motivation for migration. Student mobility automatically appears in the skilled categories, whereas the au pair visa offers one of very few temporary so-called unskilled entry points. This has implications on a political level in that student mobility is encouraged and given significant funding, but also on a personal level in terms of how individuals are regarded and treated. Money is a significant difference between the flows. Not only are students given a higher profile in terms of state funded programmes (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003), but also those coming individually from overseas are financially crucial to many UK institutions because they pay hugely inflated tuition fees compared to UK and EU students. Overall, these factors explain why policies around au pairs have remained relatively untouched and unquestioned in relation to other immigration categories, but also why it conveniently fits into a managed migration agenda.

2.1.2 Migration Theory

How far do you have to travel, over what type of border and for how long before you are a 'migrant'? The commonsense agreement that migration is the crossing of a national border with a view to staying for some time (Cohen 1995) is becoming increasingly untenable. Bell and Ward argue that 'temporary movements and permanent migration.....form part of the same continuum of population mobility' (2000:88). This calls for a wider spectrum of movement types to be taken into account, in particular attending to apparently transitory forms of migration:

'the multiplicity and variety of types of migration and movement observable today blur the distinction between migratory dyads, turning them into continua and mixing them up into new matrices and combinations rather than preserving them as readily identifiable polar types.' (King 2002: 94)

Such an approach challenges traditional migration models and throws light on structures of rights, power, race and gender, crucial to understanding both migratory flows and the experiences of individual migrants. Traditional migration theories have, unsurprisingly, replicated assumptions that a migrant moves and stays for economic gain⁶. Thus they are difficult to straightforwardly apply to au pairs, who are seen as moving temporarily and often not for immediate economic reward. It has been pointed out that migration theories often fail to account for migrants returning home or opting for connected forms of mobility, which cannot be reduced to economic factors alone (Gmelch 1980), and these gaps are particularly relevant when considering the case of au pairs.

Theories of transnationalism at first sight seem more applicable to au pairs. These have begun to explore how migrants negotiate and manage living with 'a foot in two places'. Whether it be executive expatriates, transnational seafarers or exile communities, each represent different types of mobility and settlement.⁷ However, such models tend to focus on skilled or unskilled migration flows and therefore fail to pick up 'people in the middle, often motivated to cross borders by non-economic concerns' (Clarke 2003: forthcoming). Transnationalism does well to remove the binary between temporary and permanent migration by recognising the constant renegotiations of identity and notions 'home' often

⁵ See: <http://www.alli.fi/euro/>

⁶ For an overview of migration theories see Boyle and Halfacree et al. 1998

⁷ Examples of projects on the ESRC Transnational Communities Programme <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk>

experienced by migrants. Nevertheless, it is difficult to apply to those who are so transient that they do not feel part of a community. Rather than living in two places at once, their temporary, but legal status means au pairs are living in neither.

The lack of exploration of the connections between mobility and migration means that au pairs, like other transient populations, are often missed from academic discussion. Given the increasing policy emphasis placed on using the labour of transient populations it is important to give consideration to this phenomenon. We need to take a closer look at how at how we frame our discussions by pulling into focus aspects and groups that although always present have remained blurred in the background. This will be done in part by admitting the demand and necessity for labour and its repercussions, but also by recognising forms of migration unconnected to production.

2.2 The invisibility of social reproduction

'By looking at the material social practices through which people reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis and through which social relations and material bases of capitalism are renewed...we can better expose both the costs of globalization and material bases of capitalism.' (Katz 2001: 709)

While globalisation and the restructuring of production has received significant attention, (cf. Castells 1996; Appadurai 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) a parallel analysis of reproductive labour has only recently begun. In much of the talk about a changing, globalising, individualising modern world the gendered division of labour is conveniently forgotten. Social reproduction includes not only the biological reproduction of future generations, the provision of education, health care, food, clothing and shelter, but also the maintaining of social relations, what it is, for example, to be a man, a woman, a husband, a wife, a father, or a mother. Social reproduction takes place, not just in the home, but also in schools, television studios, market research companies and so on. Moreover, social reproduction is intimately linked to consumption (Bourdieu 1984) in the same way that production is. The private space of the home is a crucial site of consumption (O'Connell Davidson and Anderson 2002), but one that is often neglected. Like other dichotomies, such as the related public/private divide, the reproductive/productive split is in fact a social fiction, although we cannot throw away the concepts if we want to challenge the dichotomy

(Anderson 2000). I choose to focus on the literature around social reproduction and the private household, as this is the 'place' for au pairs. Issues around consumption and status are undoubtedly important when considering the demand for au pairs, just as they are for domestic workers in general (O'Connell Davidson and Anderson 2002). Since au pairs are principally seen as providing childcare, I will focus here on the demographic factors.

2.2.1 Demand for domestic labour

It has been much observed that there are increased numbers of women taking paid work outside the home (cf.: Gregson and Lowe 1994; Henshall Momsen 1999; Mattingley 2001)) at the same time as the UK, like other Western countries, has retreated in terms of its investment in childcare, shifting responsibility on to individuals and families and privatising many of its services (Cox undated). Families are often forced to move (migrate or become more mobile) for work, limiting their access to extended family and other entrenched social networks that formerly provided unpaid care. There is therefore a demand for new forms of childcare, particularly since men still fail to take up the slack:

'The presence of immigrant nannies does not enable affluent women to enter the workforce: it enables affluent *men* to continue avoiding the shift' (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003: 9)

Castells seems a little premature, therefore, in heralding 'the end of the family as we have known it until now' (1997: 139), especially when we are presented with empirical evidence, such as a survey carried out by Sandra Short in the Office for National Statistics showing that women continue to spend more time than men on all unpaid household work (2000: 1).

The requirement for caring labour does not of course in itself have to be met by live-in carers. Ideas of what constitutes appropriate care (e.g. one to one relationships, location in the private home, substitute mothering) together with the flexibility often required of workers outside the home (late meetings, uncertain schedules, weekend working etc) make hiring a live-in carer seem both appropriate and practical (O'Connell Davidson and Anderson 2002). Live-in nannies are expensive and, for those who have children of a school age, not completely necessary. They may also be too visible. Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003) note a shift in the display of status that more recently has kept domestic workers deliberately in the background:

'Servants are no longer displayed as status symbols, decked out in white caps and aprons,

but often remain in the background, or disappear when company comes ... affluent career women increasingly earn their status ... by apparently "doing it all" (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003: 4)

Au pairs are ideal, because as well as being live-in, they are flexible, cheap and invisible. The National Childcare strategy, published in 1998, recognised the barriers parents, namely women, face in being able to enter the labour market: 'Parents typically bear 93% of childcare costs...the typical cost for a family with children...is £6000 per year...it is still out of the reach of too many' (Wilkinson 2001). A recent report reviewing this strategy 'Delivering for Children and Families'⁸ states that 'Childcare enables parents, particularly mothers, to go out to work, or increase their hours of work, thereby lifting their families out of poverty'. This recognition may be a positive step forward, albeit a slow one. However, despite listing all the forms of provision and the changes that are required they make no mention of au pairs or the contribution that they provide enabling women to go out to work. This seems short-sighted when it is reported that more than 60,000 families have an au pair living with them (Addley 2002).

Some attention has been made to the knock-on effects of buying in migrant labour to do reproductive work, in particular the consequences of the loss of their reproductive labour in countries of origin. It has been argued that migrants replace the support that is no longer available and in turn outsource the care of their children to families or another person. This, Hochschild terms 'global care chains' (2001). Immigration law forbids those with dependants from entering as au pairs, and au pairs as a result do not fit the care chain model⁹. However, on an individual level their temporary migration meets many of the au pairs own reproductive requirements, by gaining education, experience, independence, as well as food and shelter. A study by Williams and Baláz(Unpublished) on returned Slovakian au pairs highlights this well by revealing their overall financial, human, social and cultural capital gains. The difficulty comes when these factors do not meet their expectations or they conflict with the family's own expectations and requirements. At this point au pairs can be

⁸ See: <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Society/documents/2002/11/06/su-children.pdf>

⁹ Though were one to take the broad approach to reproductive labour advocated this would not be nearly so clear cut, - who does the dishes, changes the sheets etc when the oldest daughter goes away to be an au pair?

extremely vulnerable because their productive power is entangled in the reproductive sphere. Therefore, although there might not be a 'care chain' in terms of the model that Hochschild outlines, there is chain of service and reciprocity that makes the nature of the relationship with the host family crucial.

2.2.2 Contract and domestic labour

Anderson (2000) has drawn attention to the problematic nature of applying contracts to domestic labour in private households, both theoretically and in practice. She has argued that, key to an analysis of domestic labour, is a focus, not so much on the tasks done, as the nature of the relations that dictate how work is done. Thus mother and au pair may carry out the same task, but the social relations governing how they carry them out are very different. The social imagining views the home, not only as separate from the market, but as a refuge from its individualistic and materialistic values:

'The family and the home were seen as safe repositories for the virtues and emotions that people believed were being banished from the world of commerce and industry. The home was said to provide a haven from the anxieties of modern life' (Olsen 1983: 1449)

This makes the commodification of domestic labour and the social relations relying on it, extremely problematic for individuals to negotiate because it counters the assumed, simple split. The au pair model, where reproductive suppliers are constructed as 'part of the family', has a long history – for this is where such needs are 'supposed' to be met, but it also helps ameliorate these social difficulties. The scheme officially endorses the notion that the au pair is a family member, which means that au pairs are not workers, contract does not apply, and they are paid, not wages, but 'pocket money'. By encouraging migration via unpaid or familial contracts the State can transfer responsibility for migration to individuals and families. This can also be seen with other migratory routes, such as family reunion, volunteers, marriage and youth exchange. These routes are not seen as problematic because there is no need to justify their movement or shoulder a cost burden. The temporary and unpaid status of au pairs excludes them from welfare benefits and therefore makes them more dependent on the host family. Even the convention on the rights for all migrant workers only applies to those 'engaged in a remunerated activity'¹⁰. This shift can only be

¹⁰ See article two of the convention: http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/m_mwc_p1.htm

constructed through immigration control because it would not be possible to instigate the same relationship with a nanny moving from the North to the South of England.

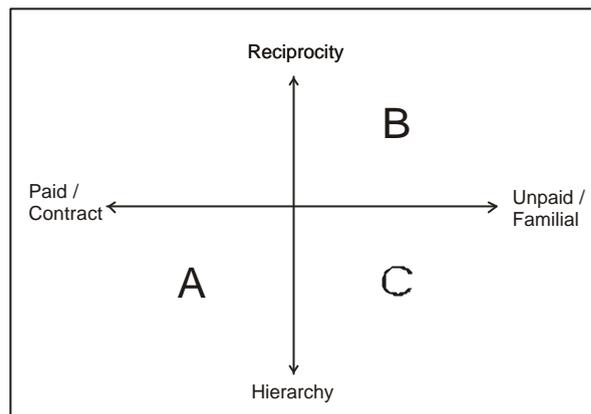
2.2.3 'The personal touch'

While notions of contract vs unpaid family labour and state responsibility for social constructions of au pairing are extremely important, another factor with a huge impact on the experience of au pairs is the particular family within which they are placed. To understand this it may be helpful to consider a set of relations other than familial or contractual, that is relations between friends. Friends, particularly female friends, can and do share domestic labour and childcare in particular. This model has been under-explored, but key to it, I would hypothesise, is a notion of reciprocity. One does things for a friend on the understanding that, under similar circumstances, she would do the same for you – and she does. If the giving is all one way the friendship will often cease. Of course au pairs are not in an equal relationship with host families, but the notion of exchange, a recognition of reciprocity, is central to the benevolence of the scheme, yet the degree of reciprocity practised is up to the family concerned. Precisely because au pairs are decreed as being (in some magical way) like a family member and as coming under a family's protection and care, individual households are given a tremendous degree of unchecked power. It is in the end the individual family that can make the experience of an au pair rich and exciting, or miserable and lonely. The crucial question then becomes: is the au pair more a friend (reciprocity) or a servant (hierarchy)?

2.3 Interlinking mobility and reproduction

Figure 1 represents the sets of relations that affect individuals' experiences of domestic labour. It is applicable both to paid and unpaid labour. The horizontal axis represents the formal social relations of domestic labour, the vertical axis the household interpretations of the relations. The vertical axis becomes more important once one crosses into the unpaid familial sector. Au pairs are considered to be somewhere near 'B', in that they are constructed as a member of the family operating on reciprocity rather than hierarchy. Although this might not always be the case they do tend to fall somewhere in the adjacent segments, but not usually 'A'. Wives in an intensely patriarchal society might fall under C.

Figure 1: Social relations of domestic work



Source: Adapted from the Cartesian Co-ordinates used by Anderson (2000)

'A' on the other hand might be where domestic workers and other skilled workers are located. These groups are not usually put together which presents us with links between production and reproduction, as well as highlighting a difference between au pairs and domestic workers. It does not mean that either place is automatically better, because a hierarchical role, where you know your responsibilities and you are fairly paid might be equal to reciprocal relationship where you are expected to do things as part of the family. 'B' also represents the positioning in terms of other migration categories such as volunteers, youth exchange, marriage and visitor migration, all migration categories that are often thought of as positive and unproblematic and increasingly encouraged by the state. Often migrants in this category have a positive experience, but should they face problems there would be little help on call. Plotting different cases along these co-ordinates therefore highlights contradiction and similarity in different migration situations, but also the influence of different actors and where alterations can be made.

Reliance on dichotomies in social studies should not be done without interrogating each opposite, in terms of the interlinkages and the aspects omitted or on the boundaries. Considering au pairs as a group shows up problematic divisions between production and reproduction, and tourism (cultural exchange) and migration, because it sits so uneasily in all these camps. This particular case study shows that mobility and reproduction are linked by their invisibility, resulting in an innocuousness that makes movement acceptable and even encouraged. Therefore, comparing to whom doors are opened to and to whom they are closed to will facilitate a more nuanced and integrated approach to migration. Dichotomised subjects are difficult to

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 ineffective. Not only is it difficult to obtain, but where it has been attempted it is unlikely that a definition encompassing au pairs would have been used because they tend to be legal, although their work is not 'formal'. Demographic data sets, such as the Census, have limited use in terms of mobility patterns because they are conducted so infrequently. They also work on a model of the family that au pairs do not necessarily fit. However, when the latest figures are available in full later in 2003, this may be an option worth pursuing to get more accurate total numbers. Finally, as many feminists argue, the gendered nature of statistical collection has tended to bypass migration streams dominated by women and have not adequately taken into account the operation of households (Pessar 1999).¹¹

3.2 Constructing a sample: Access

Finding a representative sample for a survey can be problematic: ordinarily, it is important to devise a sample frame that seeks a proportional selection of a population (Bridge 2003). However, this was not possible for au pairs as they are a relatively small and scattered population. Without knowing the population size, it is statistically impossible to tell how representative a small-scale survey is and where it fits into the national or international picture.

There are various methods for finding small and hidden populations (Lee 1993). The three most

suitable for this study were: networking, outcropping and advertising. These were used to find host families and au pairs mainly for requesting interviews, and where applicable to distribute questionnaires.

Networking or snowballing may not guarantee a representative sample, but it is one of the most effective and sometimes the only option for finding hard to reach or hidden groups (Atkinson and Flint 2001). This method utilises social networks key to au pairs whilst in the UK, but also host families. Each respondent met was asked if they knew of anyone else that might be willing to take part. Personal introductions helped break the ice and increase trust. The downside to this technique meant the exclusion of au pairs who hadn't managed to make friends or were trapped in the home. Equally, it is likely that I only met hosts that felt they had a completely clean conscience in terms of the way that they treated their au pairs. This technique may also reap a biased sample of like-minded people, unless multiple start points are used. I did this through outcropping, advertising and other personal introductions. For example a labour attaché in the Turkish Embassy was very keen to learn more from the research and helped to administer some questionnaires. Overall this technique did result in a varied mix of people from different backgrounds and countries (Figure 2) and a wide range of experiences. However, there was some bias in the survey in that many of my respondents were ex-au pairs or ex-hosts. This was not a problem in terms of the richness of the accounts expressed, but it meant tapping into networks of current au pairs was made difficult, in addition to the fact that the accounts were likely to have changed in retrospect.

Table 1: The profile of questionnaire respondents

Nationality	F	M	Method of Access
Turkish	7		Turkish Embassy
Slovak	5		Advert – email and poster
Czech	3		Advert –poster and email, personal contact
Spanish	2		Snowball contact
Brazilian	1		Email
Colombian			Snowball contact
German	1		English class
Polish		1	English class
South African	1		Email advert

¹¹ I make brief comments on the above elements because they do not shed a great deal of light on this subject, but also because they have been discussed in more detail in a previous paper "Empiricism in Migration Studies: Researching the Experiences of Au Pairs." Available from the author.

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 childcare whilst school was closed.

Finally, in order to set in pace 'snowballs', I chose to advertise on local websites and put up posters in libraries, primary schools, churches and fitness centres. I also sent out email circulars to departments of different institutions, which proved the most effective method getting in touch with host families. All three families were contacted this way and a further three offered to be interviewed. Although families did not have worries about immigration status or language, questioning what goes on in the private domain can be sensitive. Again this method of contact relied on self-selection, so like networking bias may enter.

Conducting the research in the South of England, principally in Oxford, but also London, was ideal because Gregson and Lowe (1994) found this area of the UK to have a high concentration of demand for waged domestic labour. Web searches certainly seemed to back this finding up, with many of au pair agency websites being based in or near London.

3.3 Qualitative data sources

3.3.1 Questionnaires

Given the limited statistical data available on au pairs it was important to distribute questionnaires in order to provide a breadth of comparable variables not available from interviews alone. Au pairs being located within the home, and perhaps because of their age, experience and gender are often sentimentalised. These factors, plus a reluctance to explain or critique what happens within the private sphere combine to make the research field sensitive. Questionnaires were tailored to account for these aspects. The questionnaire was piloted with a small number of

au pairs in order to see how long it would take to complete and if they had any difficulties. Some changes were made at this stage by way of language and structure.¹²

Questionnaires enabled a completely anonymous response and could be designed to 'allow the respondent to provide potentially discreditable information without disrupting the interaction or causing embarrassment or loss of face to the participants' (Lee 1993:75). This was important when ascertaining views or beliefs, because questions were loaded to refer to general circumstances or past occurrences, for instance whether au pairs were 'generally treated like servants'. More sensitive and personal questions were located towards the end of the questionnaire, as was the more open-ended qualitative question. An additional design issue particularly pertinent to au pairs was their comprehension, especially since improving language skills is often a reason for migration. It seemed likely that some might have difficulty with complicated or open-ended questionnaires, so, short and easy to understand instructions and lists of optional answers were used. Although this may have forced respondents into answers that did not exactly fit, they offered simplicity for answering and analysis.

In total 55 questionnaires were given out and 22 returned, giving a response rate of 40%, which was not unreasonable or untypical given the difficulties that were encountered.

3.3.2 Interviews

Interviews were the prime research tool employed to assess the 'complexities and contradictions of social experiences' (Valentine 1997:112), allowing respondents to express their views and myself to follow up interesting or unconsidered aspects. Face-to-face contact allowed me to recognise difficulties in understanding and to rephrase questions. The interview questions paralleled those in the questionnaire survey, although they were semi-structured. Interviews were conducted with nine au pairs, four host families and three au pair agencies, all of which were taped and transcribed. Due to limits of time and resources I concentrated the analysis on au pair narratives. Although it would be interesting to interview corresponding sets of host families and au pairs I decided this might not lead either party to be completely open. Also in terms of ethics, au pairs were asked to provide only their first name to

¹² Although I designed a questionnaire suitable to send out to host families I decided not pursue it. Not only because it would have been a drain on resources, but also it was unlikely to have a significant response rate.

ensure no chance of recourse and pseudonyms are used within the write-up to guarantee anonymity.

A commonly cited critique of this research method is that interviewees may be conscious of what they would like to present. That is they 'perform'. However, where performance ends and social reality begins with a person's belief in the performance is an extremely grey area. For example, England and Steill (1997) show that domestic workers in Canada internalised national stereotypes and performed them, just as much as 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 my own experience of temporary migration.

Whatever research tools are used findings can never be anything more than a snapshot of a particular time and place, taken by a particular person. However, the focus of the picture can be altered using a good methodology. For me, this meant a triangulation of methods and an awareness of the problems involved. Since little research has been conducted on au pairs this research cannot claim to be representative, but it is exploratory and illustrative of a group within one particular migration phenomenon.

4. Findings

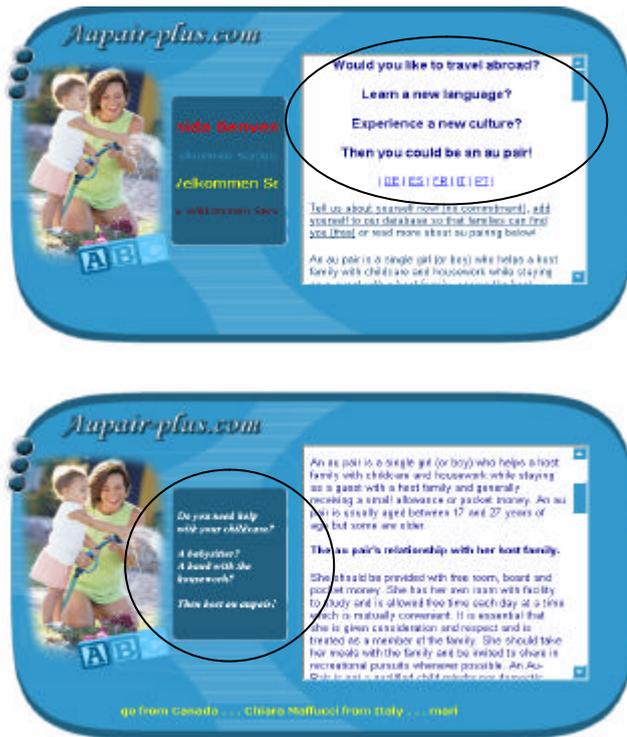
This section begins with a brief outline of the commonly accepted image of the au pair. This is then juxtaposed by three vignettes that challenge the model upheld by legislation, agencies and families, albeit from different places on the continuum. These serve as an introduction to the complexities of the issue and lead a discussion of the variables that separate each case. Finally, I return to the model set out in section 2 in order to indicate links between theory, policy and individual relationships.

4.1 The normative view

Immigration legislation formulated by the Home Office, as outlined in section 1, is very powerful. It provides both a legal construct and an 'official line' reiterated by au pair agencies and other related immigration agents. This draws on and reinforces deeply entrenched views on the arrangement of reproductive labour within households because providers are seen as being 'part of the family'. It is officially sanctioned through au pair legislation; a sanctioning that is utilized even where immigration legislation does not apply. For example, it applies to those coming from within the EU who do not require an au pair visa for their stay, just as it is used by others that can discard the stigma of being a domestic worker, as shown by a Paraguayan woman who came forward to be interviewed as an au pair.

Au Pairs are normatively perceived as being young, cultural tourists, language students, flexible and temporary. Agencies refine this model by emphasising, and capitalising upon, the two separate factors – cultural exchange and social reproduction – in relation to au pairs and families separately. The two web pages below (Figure 2) epitomise many others available in that users are differentiated and aspects of the scheme are tailored to suit specific demands. The first links from: 'Tell me about being an au pair' and highlights aspects of travel, language and cultural learning. In contrast, the second links from: 'Tell me about hosting an au pair', and refers to elements of housework and childcare.

Figure 2: Exchanging two separate commodities



Source: www.aupair-plus.com

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.

4.2 A more complex view

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 were content with their experience, as shown by Mica's narrative in Vignette 3. It is impossible to say that every au pair will fit into one of these categories or even that they won't slide between them. However, it is necessary to pull out common threads as these will form the basis for more detailed discussion on the factors that make up the difference.

4.2.1 Vignette 1

Serena was 19 when she first came from Spain to be an au pair in order to improve her English. She is now 24 and working as a waitress in Oxford. Serena lived in Windsor for almost a year as an au pair with two families. In both families her

experience completely contradicted the assumed convention. Serena was consistently working over the maximum 25 hours per week, she was expected to do more than 'light duties' around the home and she was given sole charge of child care. Moreover, she was not included as part of the family, never being invited to join the family in any activities or shared meals. She felt extremely vulnerable not only because she did not want to worry her parents or go home and admit defeat; but due to her long working hours she had little time to seek help and no idea where to start looking for it.

Serena's story

... the mother didn't work, but the man worked in a pharmacy. They were quite rich. The woman was so big, I have never seen a woman so big before! She didn't move a finger to anything, she had a bell and she called me like that! She would get up really late then she would call me to bring the tea upstairs. I always have to look after the baby, I had the speaker [baby monitor] in my room, so I had to go if the baby cried, the mother didn't get her at all. I had to look after the girl and I had a whole list of things to do about cleaning. I had to scrub and clean every thing the top of cupboards, not just tidying. I was cooking for the whole family. It was just awful. I remember trying to hold the baby in one hand and Hoovering with the other and all I could hear everyday was 'Serena, Serena', she was shouting at me all the time. I was so stressed. I didn't know what to do and I didn't know enough people. I never have time to myself... I was never asked what food I like, I have to eat whatever I could find around but I never could eat with them. The only time off I had to myself was when they went shopping, but still I had to look after the baby when they were out. One day I have to clean everything in one room, one day the garden, one day, one day defrosting the freezer, this...that. I was really scared, I never leave any of the housework at all. Whatever you did they could throw you out.

Serena, as an EU citizen, was eventually able to find a job outside the home when the family were away for an extended period. On their return she told them of her job and that she thought she should leave, but the mother convinced her to stay, promising that things would be different. After a couple of weeks however, the mother changed her mind, and called Serena from work telling her to get out immediately. Without even being able to call for a taxi, Serena found herself with all her possessions in bin liners on the street. Fortunately, Serena was able to seek refuge at a friend's house that she had met at work, until she was able to find her own accommodation.

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 would speak to me in English and that is why I was able to learn a lot in a short space of time. Kate was like that, she would involve the whole village to make sure that I was busy and I wasn't bored and that I was learning English. I was also going to school and stuff and then she helped me to get a job in the pub and everyone there would teach me English. I have to say they were really good people and with Kate I did not work hardly at all. After six months of being with them the priorities changed, I had become their friend. I was going out with them more than spending time with Amy! I had a really good arrangement I have to say and I was really lucky. When I talk to au pairs now, they have such a hard deal, I never work so hard like they are working. I only worked hard because I wanted to, because Kate told that me I could do anything that I wanted to do, like working in a pub, looking after other children, she told me to go for everything and she never said 'no' to me. She said 'whatever makes you happy then do it'. She was really good. Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, there was no chance that I was working, no babysitting in the evening. I never did that ever. I only work Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday because Monday and Friday Amy was going to her Grandfather's and even on the days I was working I still spent the time with the Grandfather anyway so I was really lucky.

Maria's experience provides a good example of the personal commitment needed on both sides of the relationship in order to make the au pair model work. The family had various methods of negotiating social reproduction and Maria was just

one provider. Kate, the mother, was very aware of the contradictions implicated in having someone live in the home, being part of the family and yet doing the housework, and so she worked hard to appreciate Maria and ensure she was getting a full and varied experience whilst in England. Maria was on 'equal terms' and despite working hard for the family, she looks back on the experience with very positive memories.

4.2.3 Vignette 3

Mica was an au pair for two years after leaving Slovakia in 2001. She left a job as an accountant in order to improve her English and to leave her hometown. She was not interested in cultural exchange and felt that she has not learnt anything in this respect. Mica did not expect it to be holiday and was prepared for the hard work she knew she would do. She moved from her first family because they expected so much, to be closer to the city and to look after a small baby. In the second family she was working over the recommended hours, she was not taken to any cultural attractions and there was little exchange of culture. However, she was treated with respect, she felt that she was paid a fair amount, she had her own space and she enjoyed the childcare aspect.

Conversation with Mica

Mica: I was just looking after baby so I didn't have to do anything like this, just only cleaning. I still love to see her and love visiting her.

Interviewer: How old is she now?

Mica: Two years old. She was very young when I was still there. When I came there she didn't do anything. So felt like I actually bought her up you know. Her mum was always busy so I was like her mum. I can't wait until I see her next... My family were quite good. When they went on holiday they would pay me anyway, because they said it is not my fault.

Interviewer: Did you think the money that you were paid was fair?

Mica: It was okay because I was paid extra for evenings, he was a councillor, so when they had some meetings they would get money to pay for babysitting so they would give me that.

Interviewer: Could you afford to go out, could you afford to go on holiday?

Mica: Not for holiday but we went out every Friday.

Interviewer: Could you save money?

Mica: No!

Interviewer: Do you think that they treated you like a responsible adult?

Cont. over page

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 experiences. Since au pairs are not officially allowed to work and are not seen as doing work within the home they are left in a relatively weak position. For families this means that they do not have to pay national insurance, tax contributions or the national minimum wage. What is not clearly stated is the fact that these things do apply to au pairs, *if* they are not treated as full members of the family that is, being provided with accommodation and meals, as well as sharing tasks and leisure activities. In a recent employment tribunal case¹³ a domestic worker was awarded back pay equivalent to getting the hourly minimum wage because it was shown that she was not treated like a family member. Given that she was a stranger to the country, she was given no extra attention or help and there were limited acts of kindness. Only one photo could be produced showing the worker with the family, despite the fact that she had been with the family for 12 years. This case provides useful examples of tangible things that display what it is to be part of a family. If we consider these things in relation to Serena's case, there would be definite grounds for arguing for minimum wage, as there would be for many others in my survey.

The tribunal suggested an hourly minimum wage of £4.10, minus a living allowance for board and lodging of £3.25 per day. Working on the recommended 25 hours per week (despite the reality of au pairs providing more than 25 hours a week and often on-call support) this would entitle au pairs to be paid £79.75 per week, a figure considerably higher than the current Home Office recommendations. In actual fact 11 out of the 22 au pairs were (illegally) being paid over £45 per

¹³ Employment Tribunal Order 1990. Case Number: 2202606/2002 Ms G Sujatha v's Mrs A Manwaring

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 constructs 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 revealed that host families and au pairs were very unhappy about the amount of information, rather than its quality:

'They get an essay about you, your feelings and what you hope to achieve, you don't get much more than a few lines about what they do or want. I still would have gone for that family but it would be nice to know a little more about the family.' (Michelle, South Africa)

Agencies do not have a policy of providing more than a page of information for the au pair and claim that their resources do not stretch to checking out each individual household. They are also required to take up references on the families, but the host families that I spoke to were not aware that these had ever been pursued. Equally, host families said that they were disappointed by the lack of concern for where the au pairs were going and also for the failure to check up on the au pairs references. One agency responded to this by saying:

'Although I try to get all that I can I am only able to go on what they give me and I cannot do more than that. I can't give any guarantees or do any checking of the credentials, there simply isn't the time.' (Au Pair Agency, Oxford)

Many of the respondents felt uncomfortable about the market in au pairs because there was no sense of support and it was difficult to ascertain who the agency was working on behalf of. Several au pairs recounted stories of calling the agency to ask for help, but found it was usually inadequate or not forthcoming:

'You know we paid the agency a fee and they are supposed to check on you how you are doing. The thing is you have both paid them so you didn't know which side they are on. You don't know who they are trying to please, obviously the family because they get lots of money off them and they may be able to place more au pairs there. They are not interested in your welfare let's put it that way. The girl who was trying to act as agency she wasn't interested in my health. Her answer to me was "pack your bags and go home."' (Elsa, Czech Republic)

Often au pairs felt that once they had been placed, help or support was no longer forthcoming from the agency and since this is possibly their only lifeline when they first arrive, it is a significant failing. This is compounded by the lack of a complaints system, in fact, the only

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 agencies in Canada. They would speak as if they had no part in the replication and were merely meeting a specific demand, but they did nothing to challenge the host families, racist tendencies:

'Some au pairs are more difficult to place than others though. For example, families often regard the Turkish as being too laid back. They are also well educated, usually having been to university... Other au pairs are more well regarded, such as Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, because they are more family orientated and they come for different homes, often village and relative poverty, therefore they have often helped their families when they were growing up and therefore the work they do as au pair comes naturally.' (Oxford Au Pair Agent)

Again this points to a difference in perspective and agendas. The image of a young, malleable girl that fits in with family's needs, rather an adult with their own personality and objectives, is common. This was not something that was adequately anticipated by many of the families.

Misinformation was another common complaint, but one that au pairs often blamed on their own naivety rather than a third party. Some said that wages were given in their own currency and in Sterling, but it was not until they came to the UK that they realised actually how far the money would go. Others explained how agencies would provide lists of duties, locations and family types for them to refuse or accept. Without being told what they should be expected to do many felt that in order to secure a placement they would have to agree to the maximum. Finally, the

recruitment system also led to a discrepancy in expectations of the host families and au pairs. Rather than being honest about their skills and experience au pairs were often forced into fabricating references in order to get through the necessary requirements:

'[In Slovakia] we do not have babysitting or something, nobody has money for that. So we have no experience but we must lie on our letters and our references that we do.' (Mica, Slovakia)

This resulting clash in expectations may stem from the indirect way that the skills shortages are being met. The demand for cheap and flexible labour is conveniently hidden under a cover of cultural tourism, but if this is not managed correctly the objectives of each party involved not only fail to match up, but actually result in conflict.

4.4 Individual and familial practices

The institutional context is very important in terms of establishing the context for personal relationships and what happens in practice. Individuals and families play out relationships based on hierarchy or reciprocity and it is these that were investigated when talking to au pairs, in order to ascertain how cultural exchange or social reproduction were prioritised in reality.

4.4.1 Individual Situations

An au pair can be considered a family member, a student, a worker or a guest. More commonly though it is a mixture of all the above, interchanging according to the situation. It has been widely discussed in relation to migrant domestic workers that constructing arrangements of 'fictive kin' are central to an employers' extraction of emotional labour (Romero 2002; Anderson and Cox Forthcoming). This is replicated and reinforced in relation to au pairs by the fact that they are not considered workers in legal terms. Of the host families that I met, all claimed to incorporate their au pairs into the family. However, when things go wrong with the relationships, for example, when the au pair was consistently not waking up on time or when the au pair got pregnant, then there is the potential to consider them a worker to be dismissed or a guest that needs to be sent home.

The relationship between being a family member and a worker is not an easy one to define or negotiate. When asked how the host mother treats you the majority of responses were evenly split between the categories of 'worker' and 'family member' and others who selected a combination of categories. When this was

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 this was due to the fact they wanted him around as a friend, a factor that was prioritised over the work that he shared in the home. When he left they did not have a replacement until he returned two years later to be a student and lived with them again.

'They would all help share the tasks. You want to have an au pair from another country to benefit to your children before the clothes getting clean or the dishes being done.'
(Jean Claude, France)

In this case friendship and difference in culture was seen as being a benefit to the reproductive demand, in that the family appreciated what he brought to it, but they did not fall apart without his labour. However, this was untrue of the other two vignettes and the majority of au pairs that I came

into contact with. Out of 22 responses, 16 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement 'My host family could not cope without an au pair'.

Au pairs are often relied upon for the domestic work they provide, which brings with it a substantial amount of responsibility, and yet often their independent adult status is ignored. Moreover, they are sentimentalised as 'young girls' and not considered independent sexually active adults. The disjuncture in expectations was very apparent when it came to allowing 'friends' or 'boyfriends or girlfriends' over to stay. Almost two thirds of those responding to the survey said that they would be allowed 'friends' to stay the night, but this balance was reversed when only one third said they would be allowed to have 'boyfriends' over. When this was pursued in the interviews many commented that even if they were allowed to have friends or boyfriends over in principle, they did not feel comfortable in doing so. This highlights a mismatch in the host families' requirement for a responsible adult to care for their children and yet not being prepared to accept all that this entails. Those families that were able to reconcile their own needs with the needs and motivations of the au pair, in equal measure, had a more successful experience.

Within the normative model cultural exchange is highlighted as the main reason to encourage the migration of au pairs and a reason for not formally considering them to be working. However, when au pairs were questioned on this aspect it was very apparent that this was not a priority in terms of migratory decision making, neither was it a main component of their overall experience. Three quarters of respondents rated this factor as the 'least important' or 'unimportant' in their decision to be an au pair. Indeed, over 80% of respondents said that their family had not taken them to any cultural attractions in the UK, something that might be automatic if one were hosting a tourist or an exchange student. What was more important for au pairs was the chance to improve their language skills in order to find work either in the UK or at home. This highlights a difference between au pairs and domestic workers in that they are often not migrating in order to earn money. It also contradicts traditional migration models in that motivation was not only based on economics and it was not something that many complained about. More than three quarters of the respondents agreed that they did more work than they were paid for, but half of them were content with the amount that they were paid.

'I wanted to improve my English because I didn't have any English ... They gave me £30 a

week. I was fine with money, I am not really a money person. For me it was more about happiness. I was treated very well and that was more important.' (Marie, Slovakia)

The overall migratory and career plans were not related to childcare or domestic work. The majority of au pairs in this study were looking to supplement their University education or work experience, by improving their English. This aim was achieved by most, but again the relationship with the host family was crucial, since this would dictate how easy it was to: access information about English classes, pay for them, have time off to attend them and actually get to the class. One au pair asked her host family for information on English classes consistently, but they never managed to provide it to her. It was not until she found the class herself that she found out this was actually where the host mother worked. Another host parent explained how supportive they had been, even paying for the au pair's classes. It was not until later in the conversation that he confessed that these classes were in fact free. These classes are very important to au pairs not only in terms learning, but also for meeting other people in similar situations:

'I spoke to all the au pairs from lots of different nationalities and that is where you became aware, you know you could say I am not doing that because Anita is not doing that, or I am doing that because Naomi is doing that, so you pick up lots of things.' (Marie, Slovakia)

The assumption that the family will be safe and comforting because it protects those within its bounds from the outside world has been thoroughly critiqued by feminists, since it can also provide an easy and hidden space for exploitation. Au pairs can be especially vulnerable if they are not able to access outside networks of support should anything be going wrong. In contrast, families and agencies would explain any difficulties by focussing on cultural difference rather than personal differences or a household problem. When things started to go wrong for them cultural exchange was not something to be embraced, but something to be blamed for the problems:

'So no, no particular preference [in terms of nationality], we were very flexible with that. But having said that after we had the first disaster with a girl from Slovakia we would never have another one from there. The cultural difference was just too vast, she was amoral.' (Pauline, Newbury)

A final factor related to individual situations was the geographical location of families. One au pair said location was crucial and the reason why his

placement suited him so much because: 'there was lots of wildlife around, it was perfect for me' (Jean Claude, France). He went on to say that it was not a place that would have suited everyone. Although the families I spoke to did try to be upfront about where they lived and what lifestyle an au pair could expect, they were often not direct enough and agencies did not have the time or resources to match every individual. This point summarises this section well because having an au pair is not the same as buying a labour saving device or even hiring cleaning services once a week. They are adults who have to adjust to a new place, people and responsibilities. The set up relies on individuals' personal interpretation of the scheme and recognition of the potential power imbalance. This is not always possible or even attempted, and therefore goes some to explaining the reasons that separate different cases.

4.4.2 *The Family*

Implicit assumptions about the family have an impact on the demand for, and experiences of au pairs, over and above conditions related to individual idiosyncrasies. As shown in section 1, there is an increasing demand for cheap, flexible labour with the home, with women continuing to shoulder the larger share of responsibility and management. Reconciling the demand with the outsourced supply is not easy and it can change the dynamics of a household in ways that are often not fully anticipated.

For half of the au pairs contacted, both parents were in full time work and all three single parents were working full time. This points to a demand for au pairs in managing productive and reproductive work responsibilities. However, it does not explain the whole picture. There were also a lot of families where only one partner was working, but still they chose to invite an au pair to free up their own time. Families can also gain status through being seen as charitable hosts, as opposed to lazy people or exploitative employers. In reality work was not equally shared as the au pair tended to be called in as a replacement for work that they chose not to do within the home.

'...she was there for about two hours doing her makeup, then she went to the gym, then she was two hours on the phone, then she went shopping or something. It did annoy me. They were nice, but it did annoy me because why have children then if she doesn't want to take care of them? I told her this, but she said she was not that kind of person.' (Jeanie, Czech Republic)

Au pairs were therefore used in two ways, either in order to cope with the reproductive burden or to supplement a lifestyle choice. Questions about

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 by 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-au pair. When

¹⁵ 68% of responses said the mother was responsible for setting tasks 18% said it was a combination of both mother and father. 40% and 45% of responses said the mother was responsible for checking work and checking behaviour respectively.

asked though whether he would do the washing up for this person whilst they were staying with her, he immediately answered 'no, I hadn't thought of it'. This family had a very positive experience with their au pairs in general, but even here there was no getting away from the inevitable hierarchy that pervades a paid relationship.

Having a contract in the home sphere is assumed to be unnecessary, especially because au pairs are seen as part of the family. Almost a third of au pairs did have an agreement, mainly written up by an agency. Of those that did not have an agreement only a half said that they would have preferred to have one. During the interviews respondents would also say that they did not want an agreement because it would tie them to the family and force them to stay for a certain length of time. However, when asked if they would like something setting out an expectation of tasks and a limit to their role then this was welcomed.

Table 2: Professionalism Vs. Family Relations

<i>Q. As an au pair please state which you prefer, A or B:</i>	<i>Responses</i>	
	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>
A) Giving a helping hand OR B) A set of clearly defined tasks	7	15
A) To be treated like a professional OR B) To be treated like a friend	3	19
A) To be given gifts for babysitting OR B) To be given money for babysitting	2	20
A) To be left to do your own thing OR B) To be looked after	19	3

The breakdown in Table 2 shows that most respondents didn't particularly desire a professional relationship, although they did want a clear idea of the expected limits of their work. Equally they wanted to be treated like independent adults and rewarded for extra work with money. Of course it is impossible to say how reflective this pattern is of all au pairs, but it does tally with findings that have come from studies on migrant domestic workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). The only exception to the desire for professionalisation or worker status was that, 19 au pairs preferred to be treated like a friend. This may be due to the temporary nature of their migration, the way the scheme is sold or even because of their age. However, what is often not considered is that some families were not content

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:

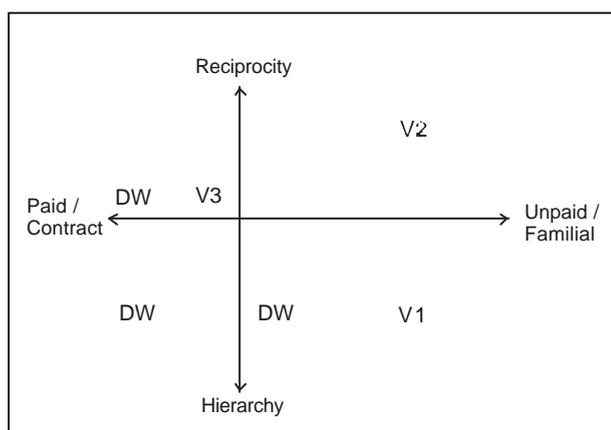
‘People would say to me, you are not acting like you are a boss. But I would say I don’t want to be, not when I am at home. I hadn’t needed to with the nannies. All the nannies we had were excellent. I expected it to be like that.’ (Pauline, Newbury)

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 be 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 simple binary that was originally hypothesised, the tension between the two does express something of the ambiguous space au pairs find themselves in. However, my conclusion is that this does not just happen by chance, this ambiguity is shaped, managed and dealt with on two relational plains, that of the paid/unpaid contract and the reciprocal/hierarchical relationship.

At the institutional level, the state sets up relationships between au pairs and host families and then walks away leaving an unregulated space, within which au pair agencies and families have the greatest room for manoeuvre. Au pairs, perhaps due to their age, gender, ethnicity, reproductive role etc. are not seen as requiring help and the only effective way of complaining is for them to switch families. The findings of this study show that this is not a deliberate move or one that families necessarily set out to exploit, nor is it something that always leaves au pairs vulnerable. On the contrary, the intentions of the scheme are well-meaning, since even those who have been treated badly managed to highlight the positive benefits they gained. However, it is important to recognise the power that au pair agencies and families are given and to consider some changes to the current legislation. These could include, allowing au pairs to do part-time work outside the home or reinforcing the importance of English classes for all au pairs, thus enabling access to networks of support, whilst also making them less dependent on the family for every aspect of their lives. Extending support given to those who are experiencing difficulties would also be beneficial. This could be done by improving the website information on sources of

support and redress, for example, advertising the fact that minimum wage rules do apply if families are not following the guidelines. Also some NGOs or charity organisations could be well positioned as intermediaries providing information and support for au pairs, and other migrant groups in similar situations. Finally, au pair agencies do have a great deal of unchecked power, because their clients are so temporary they would be unlikely to go through the complicated redress systems currently available. It would therefore be useful to have mechanisms that enforce more transparent practices, instigate quality guidelines and monitor placement procedures.

In terms of individual practices, the demand for reproductive support is often the primary reason for families to consider inviting an au pair, not cultural exchange. Families have the power to dictate whether the relationship will be one of reciprocity or hierarchy and therefore the scheme relies on families to overcome market forces by treating their au pair as an equal, rather than a worker. This reliance upon families consciously choosing in favour of au pairs is something that is forced by the laissez faire approach of the state. Families should be educated about the parameters of the au pair role and given more information about what they should be expecting to gain and provide. It should be noted that au pairs do make individual choices to come to the UK for their own personal experience and gain, rather than being drawn by necessity or pushed by force. Nevertheless, the majority of those that I came into contact with could have been treated more fairly. This might be done by clarifying pre-arrival information and establishing forums for au pairs to meet to share their experiences. Support networks could also be improved by the provision of clearer information about sources of help and support, such as being shown the advantages of joining a union or going to an independent body for advice on the minimum wage, the Race Relations Act etc.

This study has been a purely exploratory one, exposing a relatively hidden, mobile population. Further interrogation is now needed, by extending the scale and scope of this research project, as well as drawing comparisons with other mobile populations, such as working holidaymakers, volunteers and seasonal agricultural workers. It would also be useful to consider the cross-overs that au pairs make into other categories, such as staying on to be students or entering the cash economy. This will allow further discovery of the mobility continuum and the distinctive location of migrants that fail to fit into traditional categories.

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