

Abstract

In the dearth of literature regarding domestic workers in general, there is a notable absence of the relationships formed between domestic workers and their employers' children. Nine young white adults who self-identified themselves as having a close relationship with their families' domestic workers for a minimum of ten years, were interviewed on the nature of this closeness and what it means in the context of the family and in South Africa. These participants shared the significance of their domestic workers in their lives, highlighting their integration into the family structure. These women often filled in for absent parents or mediated conflicted parent-child interactions, serving as a unique support system for the participants. However, contradictory evidence was also apparent as the boundaries between domestic workers and the participants' families were described. Issues of race and social difference were cloaked in a silence perceived to be an aspect of concealing the uncomfortable elements of whiteness and the implicit understandings of the institution of domestic work. When these matters were addressed, the interviewees were often ambivalent about their own role in maintaining this norm. Exploring the less than perfect parts of the relationship with these caregivers seemed to threaten the very foundations of the relationship. The findings in this report support the argument that having multiple caregivers is optimal for children's development but when the third caregiver is a black domestic worker the benefits of this arrangement are complicated by racial, social and class constructions. Moreover, constructions of the ideal Western family create friction in allowing a non-relative to be fully integrated into the family.