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She's my nanny: Discourses and perceptions of children who are cared for by child and adolescent domestic workers

Sarai Miranda

Introduction

The goal of this article is to explore and describe how social inequalities are replicated in the discourse of children who are cared for by child and adolescent domestic workers. The local context analyzed is the Mexican city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, where child and adolescent domestic work is part of a social dynamic based on the normalization of servitude relations and hierarchical relations between mestizo families and indigenous and migrant families (Miranda 2022).

San Cristóbal de Las Casas draws a diverse indigenous population, mostly Tzeltal and Tzotzil, in search of employment, health services, and commercial and educational activities. The city also preserves its colonial architecture and is one of the state's main tourist locations (Serrano 2017). The Chiapas Highlands region is characterized by deep poverty and marginalization; its population has historically faced a series of economic difficulties including the access to basic services, and 98% of the population is identified as being part of an indigenous group (Villafuerte 2015; INEGI 2020).

Child and adolescent labor is a manifestation of the conditions of material deprivation and also one of the survival strategies implemented by impoverished and racialized families. The concept of housekeeping girls, goddaughters, daughters-in-law, nieces, or working girls is common in this context.

Indigenous young and adolescent girls arrive in San Cristóbal de Las Casas in search of work to help their families, to continue their studies, or to flee extreme poverty and domestic violence (Pérez and Hernandez 2017). Domestic work is a niche they have found to enter the labor market, since it is accessible and cheap for white mixed-race families to have a migrant girl or adolescent in charge of domestic and care tasks, often in exchange for room and board without economic remuneration. Child and adolescent domestic workers face conditions of high vulnerability, exploitation, and violence by the members of the household for which they work, including the children they care for.

This article presents the results of interviews and focus groups conducted with children from middle and high socioeconomic strata who have an indigenous girl or adolescent as a caretaker. The analysis places special emphasis on the discourses on which racist discrimination¹ against female caretakers is based. A qualitative methodology was used to delve into the subjective meanings of the social actors and the coexistence between children and adolescents who are caretakers and the children they care for.

Domestic child labor and racism

Child domestic and care work is a practice that persists around the world as an effect of the widespread poverty in which millions of children and adolescents live. They find an opportunity to leave their rural communities and obtain sustenance and housing in exchange for domestic and care work in urban homes (Miranda 2022; Sagot 2004).

Various authors in Latin American anthropology have shown that these care processes are sustained by a systematic structure of inequality and therefore of exploitation of the caretakers. Domestic work performed by girls and adolescents has been documented and a consensus reached on its role as the tip of an iceberg sustained by the racist, classist, sexist, adult-centric, and xenophobic systems that prevail and that place certain social actors in the most socially devalued jobs that are highly susceptible to exploitation (Miranda 2022). Likewise, research has resumed on internal migration due to the activation of hierarchies in places that do not necessarily receive international migration, and where domestic and care work –

including child and adolescent work – “continues to be nourished by ethnically and racially stigmatized groups, generally domestic migrants” (Durin, De la O, and Bastos 2014, 347).

An important current line of research analyzes the renewal of patterns and stereotypes associated with indigenous peoples and their supposed place in the labor markets, i.e., ethnic niches (Durin, De la O, and Bastos 2014). These are all low-ranking jobs that expose ethnicized groups to certain forms of discrimination, mistreatment, and violence that materialize in new mechanisms of hierarchical social interaction.

Little is known about the relationship between children and their caretakers, especially if the latter are children or adolescents themselves. Winkler (2009) addresses the learning of racial differences from an early age and states that preschool children can exclude peers because they consider them different in phenotype. The author argues that family and school environments are crucial in the construction of racial stereotypes because it is precisely in these spaces that the practices of discrimination and exclusion on racial grounds are deployed.

Masferrer (2016) starts from the recognition of peer relationships as a space in which bullying occurs as a way of reproducing racism towards the Afro-Mexican populations of the state of Guerrero's Costa Chica region. The author shows how bullying experienced by Afro-Mexican boys and girls even violates their rights, with some being forced to change schools and, in the worst cases, leave the school system entirely. In her research she reports that girls and boys can also exercise violence and discrimination against their peers.

The lack of research on how children interact with and treat their caretakers, particularly when they are also children and adolescents, extends to the power hierarchies that are established between two groups of children and adolescents coexisting in the same private space but at different levels of the social hierarchy.

The present research, although modest in nature, offers a novel contribution, as it shows a side of the problem that has seldom been explored: the perception of girls and boys who are cared for by other girls and adolescents. It is important to point out that the scope of the reflections presented here is influenced by the specific features of the private schools attended by the children interviewed, which condition their perceptions to a certain extent.

The starting point was children's capacity for reflection (Cohn 2005). Also considered is the fact that

children are “a socio-historical construction and ... boys and girls ... interpret and influence social reality” (Vergara et al. 2016, 1237). Likewise, Article 12 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which specifies children's right to express their view on matters that concern and involve them, is also recognized.

Approach and local context

The state of Chiapas has been characterized by the highest rates of national poverty and marginalization and is a state with complex social dynamics that are fueled by its geographic location. A significant proportion of its population of indigenous origin has little access to welfare. By 2020, it was estimated that 75.5% of the population of Chiapas lived in poverty, 32% in a

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situation of educational backwardness, and 51.4% – that is, half of the population – showed some type of lack associated with food security (CONEVAL 2020). Most of its population has little access to basic services and experiences daily discrimination based on class, gender, ethnicity, and age. The state has a Gini index of 0.54, a high level of income inequality among the population (CONEVAL 2020). Chiapas is also characterized by economic and social inequalities. There are vast natural resources and economic activities, such as agricultural production and tourism (Villafuerte 2015).

Production and profits from these activities are concentrated in a few historically privileged families. The economic elites are white and mestizo families with access to a process of accumulation of advantages. Social inequalities persist and are perpetuated from generation to generation. Children in Chiapas live with the prevalence of curable infectious diseases and internal displacement, but there is a lack of knowledge about socioeconomically privileged children. The children belonging to the elites in Chiapas come from

different backgrounds: from families that benefited from agrarian distribution policies dating back to the mid-20th century, to families of foreign origin who have invested capital in economic activities of high global dynamism.

In San Cristóbal de Las Casas, the situation is similar to the rest of the state; it is the administrative center of the Chiapas Highlands region, and its economic focus is on domestic and international tourism. The city also receives a constant flow of indigenous migrants who leave their communities and settle in the city's periphery in search of better living conditions (Serrano 2017). The children living in the city and municipality of San Cristóbal de Las Casas experience inequality and poverty. The municipal Gini index is 0.50, and 77.1% of the employed population earns less than two minimum wages (CONAPO 2020).

The primary school where the research was conducted is bilingual (English and Spanish), private, and tuition costs 3,595 Mexican pesos² per month per student. The tuition fees exceed one-third of the monthly average income of a Chiapas household.³ This shows the financial implications of enrolling children in private schools; only a minority of households can access this type of education.

We listened to girls and boys who are part of the local elites about how they perceive and normalize the social inequality that is so marked in the territory they inhabit. We use a qualitative approach, in which three focus groups were conducted in November 2021, when hybrid modality (face-to-face and online) was returning to private schools. The three focus groups were conducted with children in the 4th, 5th, and 6th years of primary school, with ages ranging from 8 to 12 years, and a total of 23 girls and boys. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 6 girls and 5 boys who showed particular interest in sharing their experiences during the focus groups.⁴

The children interviewed belong to economically and culturally privileged households. They are the children of entrepreneurs in the tourism industry, coffee producers and traders, academics, artists and intellectuals, two of them of foreign origin. Initially, they were shown three photographs of child street vendors in the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas and two photographs of indigenous girl and adolescent domestic workers, one in a domestic service uniform and the other dressed in her traditional garb, both performing domestic and care tasks.

The prompt questions related to the children's opinions and feelings about the photographs and associated topics such as work, school, family and native communities, about the living conditions of children in poverty, and about their caretakers if there was a girl or adolescent taking care of them at home. Of the

23 children interviewed, 19 said that a person similar to those in the pictures takes care of them. We obtained 15 drawings that show the ideal situation in which working children⁵ should live from the perception of children from middle- and high-income households.

Children's words

When asked if they knew these types of workers and if there were any of them in their homes, the children responded as follows:

Yes. She is the *chacha*⁶ (Boy, 12 years old)

Yes. She is the *sirvienta*⁷ who takes care of me (Boy, 11 years old)

Yes. She is my nanny (Girl, 8 years old)

Yes. She is from Chamula (Girl, 9 years old)

No. Mine wears a shawl to carry my little brother (Girl, 9 years old)

Yes. She takes me to my swimming lessons (Boy, 11 years old)

Yes. She gives me my food (Girl, 10 years old)

They were asked the following question: Do you play with her? These were their answers:

Yes, only in the garden (Girl, 11 years old)

No, my mom does not let me (Boy, 9 years old)

Yes, but I do not let her sit on my bed, she smells (Girl, 11 years old)

No, because she cannot speak well (Girl, 11 years old)

No, because she could drink my chocolate (Girl, 8 years old)

Only when she does not smell bad (Boy, 9 years old)

No, because her boyfriend might be from Chamula (Boy, 9 years old)

I do not like her shoes, her feet are dirty (Girl, 12 years old)

They were asked if they had ever been angry with the domestic worker, to which they responded the following:

Yes, because I do not like onion and garlic (Girl, 8 years old)

Sometimes. She does not play when I tell her to (Girl, 9 years old)

Yes, because she goes through my iPad (Boy, 12 years old)

Yes, because she dropped my little sister, and my dad told her she should better leave (Girl, 11 years old)

Yes, when she does not come from her town she is late and my grandma gets mad, and when she does not walk my dog (Boy, 11 years old)

Yes, because she does not do things right (Boy, 9 years old)

A final block of questions focused on thoughts about the future and possible schooling of girls and adoles-

cents who work as domestic workers. The following question was asked: What would you do to make them go to school and not work at that age?

I would tell the president (Girl, 8 years old)

I would tell the president to put her parents in jail (Girl, 10 years old)

I would give her soap and water (Girl, 8 years old)

I would tell the president to build a big house with lots of beds and lots of food and lots of bathrooms so they can live there and not let them leave (Boy, 9 years old)

Figure 1. Huge house for poor children



Made by: Boy, 9 years old, 4th year of primary school.

About the possibility of coexistence in spaces where hierarchies are diminished, the children were asked if they would like to attend the same school to study, to which they answered:

No, because I would have to hide my backpack very well (Girl, 11 years old)

No, because she might like my pencil sharpener (Girl, 8 years old)

I do not know. It depends on if her uniform is clean (Boy, 10 years old)

Yes, when she wears closed shoes that do not let dirt in (Girl, 12 years old)

No, because her parents do not wear a mask and she does not wear a mask (Girl, 10 years old)

Perceptions and fears of privileged children

In the answers provided by the girls and boys, we observed some derogatory ways of addressing the girls and adolescents who take care of them and work at home. According to Masferrer (2016), this can be identified as racial discrimination against a group that is considered different and inferior. The ethnic origin of these workers can be observed in the mention of the shawl, the way they speak, the way they dress, and the municipality they come from. San Juan Chamula is one of the municipalities adjacent to San Cristóbal de Las Casas that offers a population in search of employment. In the case of girls and women, it is regularly in domestic service.

The words *chacha* and *servienta* are derogatory terms that are usually loaded with racism and discrimination. As Gutiérrez (2013) states, household members recreate power dynamics based on social markers such as ethnicity. The use of derogatory language contributes to modeling these logics and provides clues about the hierarchical and violent relationship that exists between the children who are cared for and the girls and adolescents who care for them. This coincides with the contributions of Winkler (2009), who shows how from an early age people learn to identify racial differences and, in this sense, deploy discriminatory and exclusionary practices.

Some striking derogatory perceptions repeatedly come to light, such as odors and hygiene. In the expression of these phrases we observe what Miller (1998) has described as the transmission of contempt that constitutes a mechanism constructing the other as inferior. As Gutiérrez (2013, 130) puts it, "Transmitting contempt, even if unintentionally, impacts the person who faces it, leaving them with a feeling of worthlessness."

Smell is a symbol to regulate cultural identities that "is manifested in the construction of social barriers to regulate ... the appropriation that the dominant class makes of the good smell as opposed to the bad smell that it attributes to the lower classes" (Larrea 1997, 42). Hygiene may also operate as a mechanism to regulate differences. Expressions that allude to an unclean appearance respond to a learning process from the first years of life, where dirt is associated with disease, and may also respond to certain cultural representations that legitimize social distance between subjects (Palero and Ávila 2020).

Likewise, there are references to the way of speaking and to the possibility that one of the domestic workers has links to people labeled as delinquents (when the child is referring to the boyfriend from San

Juan Chamula), in what constitutes one more aspect of differentiation and classification based on people's ethnic origin.

When we look at coexistence and play between caretakers and those cared for, the answers given are characterized by surveillance and control. It has been widely documented how control technologies are replicated in the private space of homes in order to gain access to work – in this case, domestic and care work – at a low cost and in precarious conditions. Girls and boys show in their answers their vigilance in relation to arrival times, the quality of care given to younger siblings, the use of gadgets, and the way food is prepared.

Similarly, we can observe how girls and boys from middle and high socioeconomic strata recreate and reproduce relationships of surveillance and control, and how through their discourse aspects such as labor precariousness emerge, as is the case when one child reports that the father asked the housekeeper to leave, or when there is a complaint about food or schedules and responsibilities such as walking the dog. This reveals the vulnerability and exploitation of the workers, as well as the power of discourse and action of the children being cared for.

When we inquire about possible solutions to child and adolescent work, the children we interviewed mention confining and punishing the parents of working children and adolescents, as well as confining the working children themselves. In Mexico and Latin America has been a tradition of confinement and institutionalization against poor and indigenous children, due to the fact that since in the process of independence and the construction of a mestizo republic poor and indigenous children were seen as a problem for which confinement was instituted as a “device of isolation to try to recreate a fictitious world within another world” (Del Río 2012, 24). This responds to a racial concern in which discrimination related to the poor and the indigenous is masked, in addition to the direct relationship that is assumed to exist between poverty and criminality, for which confinement and punishment is necessary.

This aspect was also observed in the illustrations made by the girls and boys. Figure 1 was titled “Huge house for poor children.” The explanation was that it was the house President López Obrador would build for all the poor children, and he would give them a lot of money and not let them leave. The aspect of hygiene also comes to light again here, which directly links economic deprivation with hygiene habits and a lack of water and soap.

The children repeatedly hinted at the relationship between poverty and criminality when answering the questions about being able to coexist in the same

school space with the girls and adolescents who take care of them. They expressed that they would have to guard their belongings due to the possibility that their school supplies could be stolen by the other children. The idea of hygiene and odor is repeated as a condition for accepting coexistence among equals. Indigenous children in the region are accustomed to wearing open-toed shoes because of their low cost, hence the rejection of this type of footwear and its association with dirtiness.

Another perception that was expressed related to the use of masks, which are part of the measures to stop the spread of Covid-19. In the context of the pandemic, poor and indigenous people are associated with a lack of care. Palero and Ávila (2020) state that the recent pandemic has been one of the main situations that have highlighted social inequalities, since not all economic strata had the same conditions for access to basic care measures, which in turn recreated hygiene-related notions that conceive of the customs of the poor sections of society as agents of unhealthiness.

Conclusions

In the local context we studied, there is a marked inequality between middle- and upper-class children and indigenous and working children. Both groups coexist and converge in the domestic space where some receive care and others provide it. The prevalence of the culture of servitude and the re-creation of certain discriminatory discourses learned by the children of the local elites can be observed.

On the one hand, it is evident that the discourses of the girls and boys are not merely individual cognitive and psycholinguistic processes but also social constructs with content that obeys what is learned from adult worlds (Vergara et al. 2016). In the discourse of children, as in any other social group, the re-creation of stereotypes and discrimination based on sex, gender, ethnicity, and age can be found, which contribute to legitimizing power hierarchies between individuals and social groups.

On the other hand, this research highlights the prevalence of the symbolism of odors and hygiene as a mechanism to perpetuate social difference and the construction of the other as a different, inferior being. As Larrea (1997) suggests, odors distinguish others by promoting the notions of otherness and identity: odors and the perceptions surrounding them can be analyzed as a symbol for the social construction of interpersonal relationships based on sex, ethnicity, and social class.

Finally, the discourses of the children we interviewed bring to the discussion some actions towards

their caretakers that project and express contempt and disrespect, which likely places the caretakers in situations of invisibility and inferiority. The presence of child and adolescent caretakers and domestic workers is ignored and denied when showing them disgust and distrust. It seems that the children interviewed normalize inequality. In their discourses, which are full of nuances, mechanisms for stigmatizing, differentiating,

and stereotyping socially and materially disadvantaged children are reproduced.

This exercise opens the door for further research and analysis on the coexistence of differentiated children, the possible violence that is replicated, and the need to understand the processes of social fragmentation and segmentation from the earliest stages of life and in the most intimate space in homes.

Endnotes

- 1 The term "racist discrimination" is used in the same sense as by Masferrer (2016), who regards this term as the most appropriate to underline the non-existence of races and to recognize the practice of racism.
- 2 215 US dollars.
- 3 The National Survey of Household Income and Expenditure (-INEGI 2021) estimated that in 2020 the average monthly income of a Chiapas household was 9,722 Mexican pesos, around 580 US dollars.
- 4 All were read and shown an informed consent form, and the objective of the study and their participation were explained to

- them. Parents and school authorities were also informed of the study.
- 5 The research instrument has some limitations, one of which is that it adheres to the hegemonic notion of child labor, in which the disadvantages of working as opposed to attending school are observed. This is due to the intentional search for the perceptions of middle- and high-strata children on the subject.
- 6 Derogatory term for housekeeper.
- 7 Derogatory term for housekeeper.

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