1

"Making Your Job Good Yourself": Domestic Service and the Construction of Personal Dignity

Bonnie Thornton Dill

This article explores the ways Black women household workers negotiated the employer–employee relationship to gain the respect of their employers and construct their own sense of self-worth and personal dignity. It describes their strategies for gaining mastery over work that was socially defined as demeaning and demonstrates how they actively resisted the depersonalization of household work. It also conveys their efforts to assert the values of a rationalized work setting within a workplace with rules and norms based primarily on personal relationships and family life. Finally, the study demonstrates the ways in which individual acts of resistance, even within the work setting of a private family, can have collective consequences for the overall organization of domestic labor as an occupation.

THE STUDY

The data on which this paper is based are drawn from a larger study exploring the relationship between work and family among African–American women who were employed as private household workers for a major portion of their working lives.[1]

Data were collected through life-history interviews with twenty-six American-born Black women between the ages of sixty and eighty-one.[2] These women had worked in New York and Philadelphia for most of their working lives and had raised children during their years of employment. The overwhelming majority of them had migrated from the South to the North between 1922 and 1955 and had completed about eight years of schooling. Approximately half had mothers

who had done some kind of domestic work and most had fathers who were farmers or laborers. On the whole, they had had limited opportunities for education, and many had begun working when quite young.

Most of the women agreed to be interviewed, in part, because they wanted to help me. Many expressed a sense of pride and satisfaction that young Black women now had opportunities that had been closed to them. I became, in their eyes, part of the generation of "daughters" and "granddaughters" for whom they had sacrificed, worked hard, and prayed so that we would have a better life.

THE OCCUPATION

Private household work has always been, and remains, women's work. It has low social status, low pay, and few guaranteed fringe benefits. The private household worker's low status and pay, like that of the housewife who employs her, is tied to the work itself, to her class, gender, race, ethnicity, and the complex interaction of these within the family. In other words, housework, both paid and unpaid, is structured around the particular place of women in the family. It is considered unskilled labor because it requires no training, degrees, or licenses and because it has traditionally been assumed that any woman could do it.

Black women in the United States were concentrated in household work until as late as 1960.[3] This was a direct carry-over from slavery and a result of racial discrimination. By the time most of the women who participated in this study entered the occupation, in the early 1900s, a racial caste pattern was firmly established. The occupation was dominated by foreign-born white women in the North and Black freedwomen in the South, a pattern which was modified somewhat as southern Blacks migrated North. Nevertheless, most research indicates that Black women fared worse than white immigrant women, even in the North.

> In 1930, when one can separate white servants by nativity, about twice as large a percentage of foreign as of native women were domestics. . . . As against this 2:1 ratio between immigrants and natives, the ratio of Negro to White servants ranged upward from 10:1 to 50:1. The immigrant was not the northerner's Negro.[4]

Black women had far fewer employment options than did white women and as a group they were older and more likely to be married. Thus, whereas private household work for white women of diverse nationalities was often an entry point into urban settings, a stepping-stone to other jobs, or a way station before marriage, it was none of these for Black women. Instead it was an essential means of support for them and their families.

Nevertheless, the preferences of individual Black women had an impact on the overall structure of the occupation. Responding to the needs of their own families, they changed it from a primarily live-in system of employment to one in which most workers "lived-out," in their own homes, and worked during the day for their employers.[5] This was referred to as doing "days' work." According to

historian David Katzman, this shift occurred between 1870 and 1920. Before that time, most household workers "lived-in" and were virtually on call twenty-four hours a day.

The shift to live-out work did provide the worker with greater personal freedom, less isolation from friends and family, and more limited working hours, yet many of the factors that had contributed to the occupation's low social status did not change substantially. The work continued to center around the performance of personal services, making it virtually impossible to make a clear distinction between work-related duties and those necessitated by the eccentricities of particular employers. As a result, the domestic worker faced a situation in which the duties of and expectations for performance were unstandardized and varied from one job to the next. Additionally, the occupation offered little opportunity for advancement. Once a worker had perfected her skills as cook, housemaid, laundress, or whatever, there was no place for her to go except to another house. If she was lucky, her next job might bring higher pay, but she would perform essentially the same tasks. Legal protections and benefits available in other work settings, such as minimum wage, social security coverage, and unemployment compensation, were not extended to include private household work until the 1970s; and they have been slow to take effect and remain difficult to enforce.

Finally, the norms of this workplace were shaped by a social ideology based on the values and practices associated with family life. The modern American family was socially constructed as an arena for personal and affective relationships, and its economic activity was generally described as consumption rather than production. These concepts hindered the growth of rational bureaucratic and universalistic principles of labor relations and retarded change in the occupation of household work. Thus, these workers faced a peculiar dilemma. They sought the rights, privileges, and protections associated with the workplace in a sphere governed by personal and familial values. An article written around 1913 conveys the ideology that has continued to influence the organization of this occupation even until today: "No fixed contract can be drawn up. For the home is a place where things cannot be regulated by rule and schedule. It is a place of adjustment, like the joint in a suspension bridge. . . . In short, the house is maintained for the advantage of the family."[6]

The result was that both employers and employees ultimately focused their attention on personal traits: the employee's manner of speech or dress, her attitude and appearance, or the employer's kindness and generosity. In reality, personal traits assumed importance because the occupation was shaped by an ideology that excluded consideration of basic principles of labor and management. The employer was more mystified by this ideology than the worker who knew that she was entitled to a fair wage for a day's work. Yet the worker also understood the nature of the occupation and developed her human relations skills, because she learned quickly that they would become important tools for survival.

CONSTRUCTING PERSONAL DIGNITY IN A LOW-STATUS OCCUPATION

Most of the women who participated in this study were keenly aware of the low social status of their occupation, yet they rarely presented themselves as defeated by it. Instead, they portrayed themselves as having been actively engaged in a struggle to assert their individual worth. Their stories about work depict them as attempting to gain personal mastery over a situation in which they were socially defined as object. They sought to gain autonomy and control over their tasks and dignity in the mistress–servant relationship.

Contrary to popular conceptions, the overriding attitude domestic workers expressed toward their work was not disdain or loathing but ambivalence.

Zenobia King, a household worker for thirty years said:

> I don't think domestic work is demeaning work. It's what people make it—like you have to use the back elevators, and can't eat the same food. . . . It's not demeaning work to do.

Corrine Raines, who had attended a normal school in the South and done domestic work for thirty years in New York, said:

> So many people have gotten their education by it, and it isn't any disgrace. . . . I wasn't embarrassed that I'd done that because I knew I was prepared for something else. I did it because it was something I could do to help my husband out. . . . I think I should be proud and want to work. Domestic work is nothing to be ashamed of, but it's an art, just like anything else. You just have to learn how to do it.

Opallou Tucker, a forty-year veteran of the occupation and a migrant from South Carolina, said:

> I mean, people don't advertise it, but at the same time if they have a good job, they are not particularly ashamed of it, it's nothing to be ashamed of. You see, I think a lot of times we go into this business of talking about a menial task, and that's what put a lot of us on welfare.

Queenie Watkins, who worked for one family for more than thirty years and had received some normal school training, said:

> First you got to make your job good yourself. You work at it every day. . . . The only thing about it is that we have to learn how to live with our job. Your job is your livin' and you learn how to do it good. Nothin' is perfect.

In these comments, the women talk about not being embarrassed, disgraced, demeaned, or made to feel ashamed of being household workers. Though all four women seek to provide a strong case for the worthiness of their

life's work, it should be noted that their statements are defensive ones, reading more like disclaimers than affirmations. Corrine Raines says that she wasn't embarrassed about her work because she knew she could do something else, while Opallou Tucker argues that doing household work is a lot better than being on welfare. These essentially negative arguments in support of domestic service reflect a feeling on the part of the women that they must defend or justify the dignity and merit of their work to others. This defensive posture is largely a response to the social stigma attached to domestic service and domestic service workers.

These statements also have a positive side, however, one that conveys the worker's determination to make her occupational role personally meaningful and socially acceptable. These women make positive characterizations of the work, such as its being "an art" or a source of pride and satisfaction. They exhort other workers to work hard and *make* their jobs rewarding. When Zenobia King states that domestic service is "what people make it," she is asserting that the work is not inherently menial but that the negative associations are socially created and can therefore be changed. Queenie Watkins suggests that the worker herself has more power and influence over the job than even she, perhaps, realizes.

These statements were made, for the most part, near the end of lifelong careers in domestic service. Through the years, the women had encountered a variety of work settings—some that were painful and humiliating, others that were challenging and rewarding. As they reflected on their lives in household work, they were able to identify the ways in which society had limited their options because they were Black women, confining them to the least desirable sectors of the economy. They could also elaborate upon the ways they had asserted their worth as individuals and gained pride and self-satisfaction for the work that they had done.

Their life histories demonstrate that the three most important means by which they gained mastery over their work were managing the employer–employee relationship, building a career, and utilizing supports within the Black community. In each of these arenas they found the materials that they used to construct and enhance their own sense of personal dignity. Their resistance to oppression was based on both the creation and the defense of their sense of self-worth.

MANAGING THE EMPLOYER–EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIP: STORIES OF RESISTANCE

One of the most striking aspects of the life histories was the portrayals of the employer–employee relationship. I have labeled these descriptions "stories of resistance" because, almost without exception, the women related incidents in which they had used confrontation, chicanery, or cajolery to establish their own limits within a particular household. They used these techniques to define what

they would and would not give to their employers in the way of time, commitment, and personal involvement. The basic message that these stories communicate is that the employee did not permit the employer to push her around.

Oneida Harris took her first job when she was sixteen years old, as a live-in nanny. She had migrated from Georgia to Philadelphia under the guidance of her aunt, who had found her the job.

> At the time I was very young and I didn't know how to cope. It was my first job. Maybe the children would come in from school and the floor might be a little damp. . . . She'd say, "Oh, you didn't scrub the kitchen floor today." I said, "Sure, I scrubbed it." She said, "Look at all the dirt." I said, "Well, one of the children came in." She said, "That dirt was there when I left—you just a liar and that's all!" That was unpleasant.
>
> The thing I had to learn was not to let it get to me, and to call her a liar back. My aunt says, "Listen, you've got to learn, when you work for people, to treat them as they treat you. If they're nice and sweet, you can be that, too. But if they use bad words to you, you gotta use 'em back. . . ." That's what I had to learn to do. I had to learn not to cry 'bout it, but to find some kind of way to get back at her. And that way I survived.

Her description of these early work years demonstrates that learning to set limits was critical to the worker's maintenance of self-respect and increased her ability to survive in the occupation.

Fighting back as a key to survival in the occupation was a recurrent theme in the women's life histories. While Oneida Harris provides some insight into her personal struggle to acquire these skills, Bea Rivers's story focuses upon the utilization of these skills to protect her rights as she saw them.

> One weekend her [the employer's] boyfriend was having a party and so she said, "You'll have to cook the turkey because it's Paul's birthday." I said all right. But this weekend, I think my sister was sick, and I decided I would not go back to work. So I called her [the employer] and she got real nasty. Well, I hung up and then she called me back. She apologized and said she was sorry, she had just got upset. I told her it was all right. When I came back, she said to me, "Well, one thing about you, Bea, nobody could ever say anybody took advantage of you."
>
> I said, "Well, maybe they can't say it, but you certainly have tried. The only difference is you didn't succeed, because this job here is *your job*. This job is not the type of job that I have to live with the rest of my life. I lived before I ever came here and I could leave here and go back to the city and find another job. Don't ever feel that