

Power asymmetries and the exercise of authority in paid domestic work

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Abstract: The present article aims to stress the assumptions underlying the notion of power in studies on paid domestic work and proposes to include an empirical analysis of the management of power asymmetries through the exercise of authority. The methodology of the article bases on the review and analysis of theoretical and empirical texts on the notions of power and authority in gender studies in general, and studies on domestic work in particular, in particular emphasizing the Chilean context. The analysis shows the relevance of stressing the notion of power as domination and makes a proposal for the study of the exercise of authority on the basis of empirical investigation on the affective and intimate relationships between employers and domestic workers.

Key words: domestic work, power, exercise of authority, Chile.

Resumen: El presente artículo tiene como objetivo tensionar los supuestos que subyacen a la noción de poder en los estudios sobre el trabajo doméstico pagado y propone incluir un análisis empírico de la gestión de las asimetrías de poder a través del ejercicio de la autoridad. La metodología del artículo se basa en una revisión y análisis de textos teóricos y empíricos alrededor de las nociones de poder y autoridad en los estudios de género en general y los estudios sobre trabajo doméstico en particular, poniendo especial atención a la producción en Chile. El análisis da cuenta de la relevancia de tensionar la noción de poder como dominación y hace una propuesta para el estudio del ejercicio de la autoridad a partir de la investigación empírica de las relaciones afectivas e íntimas entre empleadoras y trabajadoras domésticas.

Palabras clave: trabajo doméstico, poder, ejercicio de la autoridad, Chile.

Original article language:
spanish

Translated by
Fátima Maris Hernández

Reception:
January 21th, 2021

Approval:
May 3th, 2021



Introduction¹

Domestic work constitutes a historical nub of feminist theory, politics and practice, and is the subject of research on patriarchy, the value of reproductive work (Federici, 2012) and the relationship between women and politics (Pateman, 1988). But special attention has been given to paid domestic work as an object for understanding power relations articulated by structural and historical elements in terms of gender, racial, ethnic and social class differences. We argue that studies on domestic work have been dominated by a definition of power based on the notions of domination and oppression, a legacy that is also found in gender and feminist theories that are beginning to be questioned with post-structuralist, postmodern and intersectional feminism, but that does not disappear, influencing the ways in which we study and understand gender relations. Although these principles have been crucial in denouncing relations of subordination and the experiences of women workers themselves in creating and resisting such relations, we consider that they fail to account for other dynamics of management of power asymmetries, those that do not necessarily respond to logics of domination/subordination or command/obedience. We argue that the adoption of a notion of power as a form of domination and oppression is a product of how gender and feminist studies have privileged this definition of power and neglected another category that we believe can shed light on the management of power asymmetries: the exercise of authority. The aim of this article is to stress the assumptions regarding power in the studies on this work, to propose that, in addition to power, it is necessary to include an empirical analysis of the management of power asymmetries through the exercise of authority, taking into account its intimate and affective dimension.

Paid domestic work is a relevant object to study not only power, but also the exercise of authority as a tool for analysis. Its ambiguous space “in between” (Saldaña, 2014), which links intimacy and affections to contractual

1 This text is the result of the empirical study “Diferencia y figuras de autoridad femenina. Análisis a partir del trabajo doméstico pagado y el giro afectivo”, thanks to the Vicerrectoría de Investigación, Desarrollo e Innovación de la Universidad de Santiago de Chile (POSTDOC_DICYT, Code 031894_AK_MIL) for its funding, and is also the result of the theoretical analysis of the project “El ejercicio de la autoridad en las relaciones entre mujeres. Aproximaciones sociológicas a partir del estudio del trabajo doméstico pagado”, Fondecyt Postdoctoral no. 3210057, funded by the Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo de Chile (2021-2024).

relationships, functions as a hinge to configure power relations in the family context and in care and service tasks (Gutiérrez, 2010). This practice of “serving others” (Rossi and Campanella, 2018) summons us to think about the management of power asymmetries in an “intimate” space and that translates, many times, into diverse and ambiguous strategies of proximity and distance, intimacy and differentiation, negotiation and resistance. In this article we will see that the exercise of authority is a crucial analytical input to understand the management of power asymmetries in a situated and relational way, straining the hierarchical, binary and dichotomous notion of authority, in the intimate affective, contractual relationships between employers and domestic workers.

The methodology of the article is based on a review and analysis of theoretical and empirical texts on the notions of power and authority in gender studies in general –following the review proposals of De la Fuente (2015) and Allen (2016)– and studies on domestic work in particular, paying special attention to the production in Chile, and on the presentation of a research proposal whose focus is the exercise of authority among female employers and domestic workers. The Chilean case is relevant to shed light on what has been called the care crisis. For the case in question, such “crisis” shows specific points on how care needs are experienced in the affluent classes. As other studies indicate, the crisis is felt as the absence of adequate solutions to the care needs of society (Acosta, 2015) and the product of the “nanny problem” (Staab and Maher, 2005), which refers to the perception among employers that today there is a high demand for workers and, at the same time, a lack of women willing to work as domestic workers behind closed doors. However, and as I have pointed out in other writings (Fernández, 2018a and 2018b), this “demand” or “crisis” has more to do with the crisis of the family –as a national referent– and with the historical expectations of employers regarding domestic workers performing their roles with love, devotion, and a servile attitude, than with a practical problem related to the demand/supply conditions of domestic work. This makes the Chilean case interesting for the international debate on the crisis of care and other forms of managing power in the context of the desire and nostalgia for servitude and child rearing (Canevaro, 2014). The Chilean case is also relevant because, on the one hand, it shows continuities regarding this colonial legacy of servitude just like other countries in Latin America (Saldaña, 2014; Rossi and Campanella, 2018), and, on the other hand, it shows cultural and normative transformations regarding the ideal of more horizontal relations and respect between different subjects (Araujo and Martuccelli, 2012). This

simultaneity makes the Chilean case a contribution to the study of domestic work in a global world that requires complex ways of analyzing power and its management in affective and intimate ties.

In the following, we will explain the focus of gender and feminist studies on power relations and their influence on domestic work studies, which often assume a notion of power based on relations of domination/subordination. Then, in light of recent research for the Chilean case and following Araujo's (2020) proposal regarding the empirical study of authority, we point out that the exercise of authority as a relational and situated sociological problem is a necessary research proposal to understand the management of power asymmetries in a job marked by intimacy and affectivity.

Power in Gender, Feminist and Paid Domestic Work Studies

Power in gender and feminist studies: the problem of domination

A significant part of gender sociology and domestic work studies have concentrated their analysis on power relations, the notion of patriarchal authority and the configuration of sites of resistance by women, immigrants, racialized women and working class women, and have paid less attention to the notion of authority (Hanrahan and Antony, 2005)². The protagonism of the notion of power has often been assumed as a way of managing asymmetries through hierarchical, domination and dichotomous relationships.

Following Allen's (2016) reading, three ways of conceiving power in feminist theory and gender sociology can be distinguished: 1) power as resource; 2) power as domination; and 3) power as empowerment³. The three conceptions, according to the author, share two key tensions that, we argue, are linked to the question of authority without explicitly incorporating authority as an object of inquiry. First, the assumed difference between

2 The works of Hanna Fenichel Pitkin (*The Concept of Representation*; *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli*; *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of "the Social"*) propose a dialogue between notions of power and authority. However, these works do not carry out an empirical study of the exercise of authority.

3 These three conceptions function as a way to classify the uses of the notion of power, but they do not manage to encompass the totality of uses nor do they pretend, in this article, to represent a homogeneous version of power studies. For example, de la Fuente (2015) also works with a typology where she develops four ways of classifying the uses of power in feminist theory.

“power-over” and “power-for,” that is, between a Weberian conception of power as the ability to make others act according to one’s will and a Hobbesian conception of power as the ability to act (this is especially seen in those that focus on the notion of agency) (McNay, 2016). The sociology of gender has worked with various theoretical proposals –from the notion of patriarchy, gender and intersectionality– to enter from both sides of power (over and for). However, although most authors recognize both places, they end up focusing on the study of one of them, either power over (as domination) or power to (as agency). Second, the distinction between power as action and power as a structural axis. The former would be focused on the individual capacity of the actors to act (in notions such as resistance or women’s empowerment) and the latter on the structural systems and matrices of power, generating a relational, social and historical view of power.

Taking up the three conceptions of power defined by Allen (2016), the author points out that in the case of the definition of power as a resource –especially evident in works inspired by the liberal theory of power– a notion of power-for predominates; that is, power as a social good (Okin, 1989) or as a capacity (Nussbaum, 1999) that is unequally distributed and would require equitable redistribution in order for women to be able to act in the world. Here the power-for women would imply that they do not have access to resources, without necessarily generating a reflection of women’s power over other subjects, reproducing a static notion isolated from the social context in which power relations occur (de la Fuente, 2015).

In the conception of power as domination, according to each theoretical position, it can take the form of oppression, subjection or submission, notions that assume a power-over relationship that is unjust or illegitimate. This perspective is clearly observed in the works of the second wave and in radical feminism with respect to the notion of patriarchy as a system of male domination (Amorós, 2005) and the family as the axis of patriarchal authority (Millett, 1970). But it is also reflected in other thinkers and theoretical positions. For example, for de Beauvoir (1974), women’s oppression is understood by the interpellation to be the Other of culture, subjects not for themselves but for others, limiting their freedom. Young (1992), Ahmed (2006) and Oksala (2016) focus on the body and women’s experience of oppression to better understand how oppression is structured, but also how it is resisted. Other examples are the uses of the domination/subordination dichotomy, especially in the work of MacKinnon (1989), who points out that sexual difference is an effect of male domination, or in that of Frye (1983), who sees power in terms of total access versus being

unconditionally accessible. On the other hand, the figure of oppression has also been formulated from a socialist feminist perspective, as in the work of Firestone (1970), who suggests that gender, like class, would be a system of oppression that works by extracting the surplus value of reproductive labor power and where the family would be an institution of oppression towards women (Millett, 1970; Delphy, 1982). Intersectional approaches have theorized on the interconnected functioning of different forms of oppression: class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etcetera. The Combahee River Collective used the notion of “interlocking systems of oppression” (CRC, 1981), while King (1988) analyzes the notions of “multiple jeopardy and multiple consciousness”. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) has been an important notion for considering the interconnected forms of experiences of oppression, as well as the notion of “interlocking systems of oppression” which attempts to account for the more systemic or structural aspect (Hill Collins, 2000). These perspectives, together with postcolonial (Mohanty, 2003), decolonial and Abya Yala (Gargallo, 2014) feminist theories, ask about power among women, the power exercised by some women with others; however, in their analysis there persists a focus on the notion of patriarchy and on the experience of those women oppressed by others, on the consequences of that exercise of power, and not necessarily focusing their analysis on how power-over operates concretely. Meanwhile, poststructuralist feminism is inspired by a notion of power as a set of power relations that emerge in every social interaction and are part of the social body. Power would not be concentrated in one place, it is capillary and local, it would be distributed in the social body, although it can also function in repressive terms, but it operates mainly in the subjection of subjects: domination functions as a form of subject creation (Butler, 1990). Here we can also situate the more contemporary works influenced by poststructuralism, which develop the notion of agency as a capacity/power of resistance against logics of domination (Lloyd, 2005; Allen, 2018).

In these conceptions of power as domination, power-over is emphasized in relationships, either as oppressive or subjugating power, especially from the masculine to the feminine. Less attention is given to the exercise of authority as categories of analysis and the understanding of women’s exercise of authority with other women. While the contributions of intersectional, decolonial and postcolonial feminism are important for looking at relations between women, they continue to emphasize domination as an a priori category and, as a consequence, requiring empirical investigations regarding how such power-over occurs and is managed (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016).

Finally, the conception of power as empowerment –very evident in works on sexual difference or on care– tends to accentuate a notion of power-for; that is, power as a capacity for personal and social transformation, power from within and power for oneself (Hoagland and Frye, 2000; Irigaray, 2009; León, 1997), leaving less attention to power-over.

We argue that when the three conceptions of power (power as a resource, as domination and as empowerment) are used to understand specific cases of power asymmetry relations, the axis of power-over which is categorized as unjust and structural-is still predominant; a predominance of the notion of power linked to domination and oppression; a structuralist inheritance of the concepts of domination and subordination from Marxist and language theories; a top-down, cause-effect and hierarchical inheritance of domination (gender, sexuality, class and race would be structures that generate subjectivities and experiences of subordination and inferiorization); and a binary inheritance of power based on the dominator/subordinate and male/female binomials, where the agency of subjects is understood as survival strategies, and redistributive political struggles and struggles for recognition are justified as struggles of resistance to that domination (Fraser and Butler, 2017; de la Fuente, 2015). This is reflected in the studies on paid domestic work in general and in particular for the Chilean case.

Paid domestic work: power, domination and resistance.

Reproductive and domestic work (paid and unpaid) has been an important subject of gender sociology and feminist theory. Their studies begin with the debate on the value of reproductive work in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, especially influenced by the second feminist wave. In their discussion with Marxist theories on value, work and its commodification, the first studies explored the relationship between productive and reproductive work using theories of development and the oppression of women in a capitalist mode of production (Secombe, 1974; Dalla Costa and James, 1972). In the Latin American case, domestic work has been analyzed since the 1970s, influenced by theories of dependency and modernization (Safiotti, 1978; Souza, 1980; Jelin, 1976). These early reflections focused on the material and economic conditions of domestic work, particularly its importance in class relations and the formation of racial and ethnic hierarchy in the region, through the processes of rural-urban migration and the entry of poor, indigenous and racialized women into middle-class households as domestic workers (Tinsman, 1992). Both the U.S. and Latin American

trajectories emphasize an understanding of gender relations as power relations based on patriarchal domination, arguing that such domination operates in a particular way in the domestic space, negatively affecting domestic workers through the “bond of exploitation” (Cox, 2006) between workers and employers.

Even in their interpretation of the complexity of the relationship between employers and workers, a relationship rooted in authoritarian, hierarchical and bosses’ patterns (Glenn, 1992; Chaney and García Castro, 1989), the complicities and multiple forms of negotiation and resistance that take place are also seen from the perspective of domination, that is, as strategies of resistance to relations of domination. Although they respond to power structures, there are also diverse ways of managing and negotiating power asymmetries in everyday practices. This is shown in the publication by Chaney and García Castro (1989), which describes the exploitative conditions of this work and the forms of oppression suffered by women workers, and the various ways in which they negotiate and resist this situation, or the more contemporary works on the crisis of care in Europe by Federici (2012), *Precarias a la Deriva* (2004) and Carrasquer Oto (2013), which point out that the oppression of women in general, and of domestic workers in particular, is key to the organization of capitalism and neoliberalism.

This discussion has been taken up by international studies on domestic work and migration, problematizing its articulation with the international division of care work and the feminization of domestic work (Anderson, 2000; Chang, 2000; Herrera, 2005; Gutiérrez, 2010). These studies also describe –as did those in the 1980s and 1990s– global power relations through the lens of domination and oppression, exposing how women workers challenge relations of domination within households (Canevaro, 2014; Stefoni and Fernández, 2011).

However, in recent years, interest in the intimate and ambiguous relationships between female employers and workers, and the reproduction of power relations based on gender, race and class, became an important focus of regional (Canevaro, 2014; Bernardino-Costa, 2015; Casanova, 2019; Cordenonsi Bonez and Brites, 2020) and international (Gutiérrez and Brites, 2014) studies, which understood the impossibility of separating intimate spaces from the public domain. The focus on the relationships between employers and workers, as well as the continuous concern to highlight the agency of the latter in a job marked by the “exploitative bond” (Cox, 2006), show the limitations of the view of power as domination, showing a debt to empirically study the exercise of authority for the management of power

asymmetries in an affective and intimate work. We will return later to this line of research and its link with the study of the exercise of authority as a relevant theoretical-empirical input for the analysis of power management today.

In Chile, studies on domestic work emerged in the late 1980s (Gálvez and Todaro, 1985, 1987 and 1989; Moreno, 1989; Montecino, 1993; Hutchinson, 2006), focusing mainly on working conditions and forms of social and political organization. It is important to highlight the book by Gálvez and Todaro (1987): *Trabajo doméstico remunerado. Conceptos, hechos y datos*, since it was the first publication devoted exclusively to describing the situations of Chilean domestic workers, after years of research on the subject by the two researchers of the Centro de Estudios de la Mujer de Chile and organized domestic workers. In the first part of their research, they defined domestic work as a reproductive and productive practice, and in the second, they provided statistical information on working conditions. Influenced by Marxist feminism and concerned with the political demands of women workers, the authors assume a notion of power as domination, and their hypothesis suggests that the relations of production based on the existence of servile attitudes of domestic workers determine their behavior and consciousness and their ability to organize themselves.

However, this topic was not further developed until the 2000s, when the literature on domestic work and migration partially reappeared in the social sciences (Stefoni, 2002; Staab and Maher, 2006; Stefoni and Fernández, 2011; Arriagada and Todaro, 2012; Del Campo and Ruiz, 2013; Leiva, 2015; Fernández, 2018a, 2018b and 2019; Valenzuela and Mora, 2009; CONLACTRAHO, 2004) and mainly analyzed the entry of Peruvian immigrants into paid domestic work and the intersection between nationality and the gendered division of care work. Most of the research has focused mainly on the situation in the Metropolitan Region, leaving a gap in the study of what happens in the rest of the country. At the same time, they have paid special attention to the forms of domination by gender and nationality that are reproduced within this profession.

The interest in migration and domestic work was accompanied by a series of studies on the lack of support for caregiving tasks by the state (Arriagada and Todaro, 2012; Acosta, 2015). What has been called the care crisis in the Chilean case (Arriagada and Todaro, 2012) refers to the situation where more middle and upper class women are accessing the labor market requiring support in domestic and care tasks, in addition there is an aging population and there is a lack of care services from the State.

This has revealed that care is still mainly provided by women in households, making paid domestic work a key strategy for these families. In this context, many upper-class families in Chile prefer to employ a domestic worker, because they believe that their homes are the best place for the care of their loved ones (Fernández, 2017); this situation depends on finding a way to manage this space with the help of paid domestic workers.

However, Staab and Maher (2005) make a break in the interpretation of domestic work and its forms of domination (as previous literature had been doing) and ask about the meanings and emotions that circulate with respect to care and the demand for domestic workers. The authors argue that among employers in Chile, the “nanny problem” arises: the difficulty of finding good workers who know their subordinate place and perform their duties with grace. According to the employers interviewed by Staab and Maher (2005), today’s domestic workers are not like they used to be: they tend to know too much about their rights and are not willing to do everything that is expected of them.

Other studies (Fernández, 2018b and 2019) not only confirm these dissonances regarding the “good nanny”, but also account for an ambivalence to exercising the role of “boss” on the part of the employer, moving from criticism of a notion of “patroness” and her imperious exercise of authority to discomfort regarding the affective bond that such a position implies. In these studies, women between the ages of 40 and 70 criticize younger female employers for their “lack of authority” over their female workers, that is, they do not demonstrate a clear and direct command; while female employers between the ages of 20 and 40 criticize older generations for their employer-employee relationship.

In turn, the workers interviewed in these studies point out, first, a discomfort regarding the humiliating treatment by their employers; and second, they emphasize that although exploitative relationships exist, they do not always manage to explain other ways in which employers and workers are linked. The management of domestic affairs and the emotional and psychological support to the family that employs them are some of the areas where they also exercised some authority.

We term these discomforts –of both employers and workers– the crisis of the “employer/nanny” relationship, since a perspective of power as domination (which would rather focus on the reproduction of the class and racial status of employing families and the ways that workers negotiate and resist this domination) would not be sufficient to answer the question of the management of power in affective and intimate relationships. The definition

of power as domination limits the emergence of other readings on the management of power asymmetries that open up the sociological question on the exercise of authority that does not consider domination as an a priori.

In light of these inquiries, we glimpse a research problem that, when read from the perspective of power/domination relations, fails to describe the crisis and the new adjustments in the exercise of authority in family spaces and in the affective and intimate relationships between employers and domestic workers. It is important to analyze authority in a society that assumes the crisis of traditional authority and the demand for more horizontal and democratic relationships (Araujo, 2016), as well as a crisis of the “mistress/nanny” relationship from a sociological perspective that observes its implementation, in other words, its practice.

The use of authority as an analytical proposal for the empirical study of paid domestic work

Crisis of the “mistress/nanny” relationship or why it is important to study the exercise of authority between employers and domestic workers

Power –as a category of analysis in gender studies of domestic work– can be complemented by a sociological reading of the exercise of authority. Below we present recent debates and studies in Chile that reveal the importance of investigating the roles of employer and worker and the exercise of authority between them in the context of the crisis of authority, making the Chilean case a gateway for the study of this issue in other contexts. We will then review the research proposal on the exercise of authority (Araujo, 2020) in domestic work that we define as affective and intimate.

On July 13, 2020, Soledad Brinck –a Chilean upper-class homeowner and professional woman– posted the following tweet:

Llevo 6 meses sin nana, el ahorro q he tenido es tan Grande q es inevitable plantearse un cambio de modelo. Me imagino q x distintas razones hay mucha gente pensando lo mismo y no sola en el plano doméstico [...] Claro, no sólo el sueldo, se gasta menos, te rompen menos cosas, la casa está mucho más limpia, lo único malo es que estoy agotada pero basta con comprar un par de robots equivalentes a uno o dos meses de sueldo de la nana y la pega se aliviana mucho [...] un grupo q está acostumbrado a un sueldo muy por sobre el mínimo, con muchas ventajas y poca capacitación o preparación para hacer otras cosas (Brinck 2020).

[I have been 6 months without a nanny, the savings I have had are so big that it is inevitable to consider a change of model. I suppose that for different reasons there are many people thinking the same thing and not only at the domestic level [...] Of course, not only the salary, you spend less, they break less things, the house is much cleaner, the only bad thing is that I'm exhausted but it's enough to buy a couple of robots equivalent to one or two months of the nanny's salary and the work is much easier [...] a group that is accustomed to above minimum wage, with many perks and little training or preparation to do other things (Brinck 2020).].

The tweet generated quite a lot of controversy in social networks, some people supported and others did not. The image of the book *Vivir sin nana* (Living without a nanny) began to circulate, where Michelle Reich invites readers to "free themselves from the nanny" (Reich, 2017: 5), highlighting that the labor market for female consultants has changed and that the labor relationship established is no longer the same. Reich calls to stop being "bosses" and only hire cleaning services. Other opinions also appeared among the employers with phrases such as "I could not live without my nanny", showing the other side of the affective-possessive dependence (by the use of "my") with the workers.

In turn, feminist organizations warned about the classist and dehumanizing nature of the tweet. The domestic workers themselves from Sintracap and Anecap (union and association, respectively, of domestic workers) expressed in their social networks, as well as in interviews in national newspapers and radio stations, their repudiation of Brinck's remarks and recounted the difficult situation they live today in the context of the pandemic and made their demands visible through the campaign #CuidaaquienteCuida (take care of the ones who take care of you). The situations they denounce are evidence of their unequal status in society in legal, cultural and political terms. Without access to unemployment insurance (until October 2020), the obligation to stay in the homes where they work, the longer working hours and the greater number of tasks required has even led to claims of the existence of a condition of slavery and servitude (Cáceres, 2020), echoing the situation of many domestic workers in Latin America during the Covid pandemic¹⁹ (De Costa, 2020; Desimone and Guerrero, 2020; Acciari, 2020).

"Boss" and "maid/nanny" went viral in the networks, enunciating positions and roles deeply rooted in the relations between employers and domestic workers and in the history of our country referred to the command/obedience relations, to the places of authority and labor relations established in the domestic space (Valdés, 2006). Positions saturated in normative terms by the status they carry, their use today is mixed with more modern notions

(female boss and female worker), but they continue to appear and recall a complex memory regarding the exercise of authority and power asymmetries relations (Fernández, 2018b).

These situations develop in the current context where egalitarian family models coexist with traditional models, generating a “fractured conservatism” (Martínez and Palacios, 2001) or a “modern traditionalism” (Valdés and Valdés, 2005). Added to this are the processes of individualization of the population in general and especially in the case of women, who have become protagonists in the transformations of definitions, practices, discourses and family patterns (Araujo and Martuccelli, 2012). This protagonism of women is seen in both employers and workers, and coexists with the persistence of the need to hire other women to carry out the projects of middle-class and affluent women, mainly due to the non-existence of a welfare state that provides support for care and male dis-responsibility regarding domestic and parental tasks, even despite the new discourses on modern parentalities (Acosta, 2015; Valdés, 2008; Gómez and Jiménez, 2015). The hiring of the “nanny” is part of the remnants or updates of the traditional model for the management of middle-class households (Montecino, 1993).

Although studies in Chile demonstrate a transformation in the management of power asymmetries in the family and private sphere towards a more democratic model of gender relations, it is also highlighted that traditional and even patronal models linked to the notions of “good” employers and “good” nannies persist in such management (Fernández, 2018b), which are manifested in relationships within households (Valdés, 2006). The tweet and studies on the subject (Staab and Maher, 2005 and 2006; Stefoni and Fernández, 2011; Fernández, 2018a) show that today there is discomfort on the part of both female employers and female workers with respect to the labor and affective relationship between them, a relationship that is in a paradoxical state. As these studies have analyzed, on one side, women employers indicate not wanting “nannies” or not being able to live without them, two poles (the first of a more “modern” character and the second more traditional or dependent) regarding the discomfort with this relationship and with exercising the role of employer. On the other hand, women workers insist on their place as such through demands and struggles in the political and legal sphere, as well as in their place of authority, that is, the category of workers authorizes and legitimizes them to exercise their contractual and affective role in their jobs.

The paradox of this situation is that both actors recognize that there is a relationship of authority and that this authority is not necessarily “possessed” by only one party (it is built relationally), but they do not know how to exercise authority in a relationship that is still built within traditional-employer terms (of exploitation and the traditional-affectual register it implies) in a context of greater demand for more horizontal, democratic and modern links and ways of relating to each other (Araujo and Martuccelli, 2012). This paradox is framed in a historical form of production of society and families, typical of the continent and of the Chilean context of employers, and that today we want to put forward in modern terms without having a record of how to do it. Valdés (2008) points out that we find ourselves in:

[...] an over-familialized society but at the same time witnessing a fractured institution, strained by new expectations of its members in the absence of devices to facilitate the transition from one model to another. These types of phenomena are part of these symptoms of crisis and malaise that are perceived from within families [...] in the face of the imperatives of modern life and the weakness of social protection systems (Valdés, 2008: 54).

Thus, the problem is not only the reproduction of the power/domination logic, but the question of how a contractual and affective bond is configured and how authority is managed within it. The relationship between employers and workers has a long history and today is strongly affected by the transformations in the ways in which authority is exercised and asymmetries are managed in Chile. This –contradictory and dissonant– scenario opens us to the sociological question about the reproduction of households and the governance it requires, whether because of the role played by women, employers and domestic workers, and the contemporary tensions observed in the relationships between them in a society that claims to be in a crisis of authority models (Araujo, 2016).

This crisis refers to a lack of legitimacy, especially regarding the notion of traditional command/obedience authority in the state, work and family spheres, but also to the lack of new repertoires on how to define and exercise other forms of authority in the context of demands for more horizontal and democratic relations. Araujo (2016) argues that actors currently feel a certain ambivalence (between authoritarianism and modern notions of authority) regarding the exercise of authority in relations of power asymmetries. The problem with authority today would not be its weakening, but the need to understand its exercise.

How is the relationship between employers and workers now recomposed? How is authority exercised in this relationship in such a paradoxical context?

These are questions without clear answers. We believe that an approach to the exercise of authority between employers and domestic workers is an analytical tool to explore these questions.

Authority in social theory

Sociology and political philosophy have focused on critically analyzing authority as the principle and exercise of political order, and its forms of legitimacy through obedience and recognition (Weber, 1964; Arendt, 1996; Kojève, 2005). In this trajectory, authority is not defined as the exercise of any form of power, but as a modality of power that is produced in the command/obedience relationship through persuasion and argumentation, and not (necessarily) in the use of force (Arendt, 1996).

In the command/obedience relationship there would be a hierarchy, but it requires both the one who exercises it and the one who receives it, both sides would be constitutive of it. Sociology has taken this inheritance understanding that the study of authority needs in turn the study of power and social asymmetries; that is, authority and power are part of the mechanisms of ordering and functioning of society. In its beginnings, sociology defined authority in hierarchical terms, referring to the obedience/resistance logic and in public spaces (state, institutional and labor/productive) (Araujo, 2016)⁴.

During the 20th century, and especially due to the effects of the wars in Europe, works on authority focused on the critical revision of authoritarianism, focusing on the problem of the domination of states over citizens (Foucault, 1999), authoritarianism and violence (Arendt, 1996), and the problem of recognition (Gadamer, 1977) and obedience (Adorno, 1965). Although these works focused on the relationship between authoritarianism and authority, towards the middle and end of the century they agree on the existence of a weakening of the figure of authoritarian authority, particularly with respect to its legitimacy; they even conclude that today we are facing a crisis of authority (Arendt, 1996). Both because of its link with authoritarianism and its supposed weakening, the study of

4 His study focused on the theoretical analysis of its status, legitimacy and place in the functioning of society, especially with respect to the relationship between the state and sovereigns (in Weber's work) and its normative role in the maintenance of social order (in Durkheim's writings), a theme that has been central and transversal in subsequent studies on authority. Weber's analyses have been fundamental and highly influential in sociology in the investigation of legitimacy, bureaucracy and the place of tradition in authority.

authority was losing space within sociology and the social sciences (Cohen, 2013), with research on power gaining predominance, especially from the influence of poststructuralist theories.

In the Latin American context, the study of authority linked to authoritarianism has predominated, especially due to the dictatorships and dictatorial regimes between 1960 and 1990. Being installed in a value dispute about its role in society, either as a guarantor of order or as a form of domination, and being based on research developed mainly in the European context, today we see certain theoretical and methodological gaps regarding the study of authority (Araujo, 2016). We propose that there would be a scarcity of empirical research on the exercise of authority from the Latin American and Chilean case in particular, considering the context of the social transformations of modernity (Araujo and Martuccelli, 2012). This lack is due, in part, to a normative definition of authority that links it to authoritarianism or as something exclusive to the public and political sphere.

In the Chilean case, authority has been studied to understand the culture of authoritarianism (Brunner, 1981), but today the perception has been established that authority is in a crisis of legitimacy, both in the state and labor space as well as in the family. However, according to Araujo (2016), the problem would not be its weakening or crisis, but the need to understand its exercise. The author advances towards the study of authority, understanding it as a relational, situated and historical exercise; likewise, she has investigated this exercise in the family environment, in couple relationships and in relationships with children, focusing on the continuities and transformations of gender relations, showing the prominence of female authority figures in the family and extra-family space. Araujo (2016) proposes a sociological approach to the exercise of authority in the context of the simultaneous existence of traditional and modern logics of conceiving authority and in one of greater demand for expanding the notions of citizenship, equality and democracy.

In this scenario, we propose to deepen studies on the exercise of authority in the family and reproductive sphere, especially in relations between women, given the lack of empirical research on the exercise of authority between women from both sociology and gender studies. The notion of authority in gender and feminist theory has tended to be conceptualized in negative terms, often understood as synonymous with patriarchal or masculine order (Amorós, 2005) or authoritarianism (Hanrahan and Antony, 2005), and proposals have been directed at thinking about how to understand power in a non-authoritarian way (Femenías 2000).

Regarding specific studies on authority, they focus specifically on female authority figures –such as the symbolic place of the mother (Vera, 2016; Muraro, 1991) or goddesses (Verdú, 2012) or the social role of female teachers and social workers (Illanes, 2006)–, or the study of “outstanding” women –in leadership positions in the labor sphere and institutional politics (Valenzuela 2019)–. These studies are important because they show the difficulties in gaining access to places of authority and the complexity of exercising it. For example, becoming a university professor and exercising the profession reveals the persistence of a culture that tells her that this is not her place (Hanrahan and Antony, 2005).

Such places of female authority tend to use tradition, knowledge about the domestic and the body or reproductive role as a support to justify their power-over, their place of leadership and their status within a community. The studies cited tend to consider female places of authority as symbolic, where women acquire power, rights, recognition and legitimacy in a specific context or situation by fulfilling prominent feminine roles or tasks. In them, sexual difference is an explanatory factor of such places of recognition, but it is also often an *a priori* without necessarily explaining how this authority is exercised. In them, sexual difference is an explanatory factor of such places of recognition, but it is also often an *a priori* without necessarily explaining how this authority is exercised.

The study of the exercise of authority in the affective and intimate relationships between female employers and workers.

Below we propose to understand the ways in which hierarchies and differences between women, and between employers and workers, are managed to organize the domestic through a reading on the exercise of authority, following Kathya Araujo’s theoretical and methodological proposal, and the definition of domestic work as an affective and intimate performative practice (Fernández, 2018b).

According to Araujo (2016):

the authority is thus an essential phenomenon to understand a society because it participates in establishing the modalities of management of hierarchies, which constitutes an indispensable component to account for the ways in which a society has resolved the question of the social bond (Freud, 1999): that is, the forms of coexistence, as well as the modalities of bonding that characterize it (Araujo, 2016: 14-15).

How are power asymmetries in the exercise of authority between women managed? What social ties are produced by the exercise of authority between female employers and domestic workers in the family environment? We believe that these questions complement the studies on the power relations

between them, in order to delve deeper into how asymmetries are effectively managed and how labor and affective relations are constructed. We believe that in addition to research on domestic work focused on power relations, it is necessary to add empirical studies on the exercise of authority in the relationship between employers and domestic workers. In other words, studies that understand the concrete ways in which the roles of employers and workers are exercised in a given historical, relational and interactive context and moment (based on the relationships between specific actors and constituted in the very interaction between these actors), and through the use of specific supports and mechanisms.

This type of analysis will also allow us to de-substantialize the notion of authority. Just as Butler (1990) proposes the need to understand the variable production of identity by demystifying its essentialist status, we can also understand authority as a realization that is produced in its exercise, showing its continuities and transformations. Moving away from a notion of authority as a given and invariable attribute, we propose the exercise of authority as a relational and mutable production. In turn, following Gutiérrez's (2010) contributions on the affective nature of domestic work, we propose a definition of it as an intimate-political performative site, because it not only involves performing specific tasks at the same time, but it is also a work that is spatially and physically embodied in a set of practices where people reproduce social and cultural meanings through their interactions (Fernández, 2018b). Suggesting that there are no pre-existing employers and domestic workers, rather they are continually reproduced in the intimate relationships between them by reference to an affective genealogy.

Domestic work is influenced by historically feminized and racialized affects and, therefore, has a performative character where affects modulate employer-worker relationships. Recognizing the performative, affective and intimate character allows us to understand that the management of asymmetries between women cannot only be understood as an exercise of power as domination, but in a plural and diverse management of power, one of these forms being the exercise of authority. This exercise unfolds relationally between employers and workers, and is marked by both its contingency and its historical character. It is interesting to investigate, then, how authority is exercised in the coordinates of affectivity and intimacy in the relations between employers and workers and how this exercise can reproduce or transform the dynamics of domination, as well as generate other modulations of power that are not reduced to the emancipation against domination logic and that rather show the simultaneity and complexity in which power –between women– operates.

Following the Enfoque Interactivo y Relacional de la Autoridad (EIRA) (Araujo, 2020), developed by Kathya Araujo in the framework of the Millennium Nucleus Center Authority and Power Asymmetries (USACH-UDP, Chile), we understand that the exercise of authority involves concrete actors, supports and mechanisms. The EIRA defines actors as the participation of individuals who have a differential endowment of power in any of the positions where the exercise of authority is deployed, a power of a social nature (related to stereotypes, representations, value hierarchies, etc.) and/or produced individually, but which is generated in the relationship and interaction with others, in this case between the employer and the worker. The model proposes that the actors have at their disposal different types of resources that support or sustain them (such as social prestige, symbolic investitures, legal attributions, attributed degrees of trust, relationship with the truth, etc.) in the exercise of authority.

Although these resources are available, they do not always constitute supports, since it depends on how they are perceived and mobilized by the actors. By mechanisms, the EIRA model proposes that the exercise of authority implies a dimension of execution or concrete deployment that seeks to make it possible to effectively influence or guide the actions or behaviors of those over whom authority is exercised.

For our case, it means thinking that authority is not something carried by employers, but a social practice that is exercised according to the actors and their power endowment, whose supports (such as the emotional bond or work contracts) and concrete mechanisms (such as the definition of tasks and schedules, permission requests, overtime pay negotiations, appeal to the feminine nature of care tasks, for example) may change over time. In turn, the production and circulation of affects in the exercise of authority –such as anger, empathy, disgust, shame– can modify or strain the ways in which authority is exercised between female and male employers. To study the management of power asymmetries between them, one could include:

- 1) The actors and how they acquire, lose, share, trade, negotiate or manage power endowments to define the tasks and roles of each actor, expectations and responsibilities, rights and limits of each one. In addition to employers and workers, other actors are relevant for thinking about how authority is exercised, for example: grandmothers, mothers-in-law, friends, children, etc. The affections and the affective bond between the actors and the relations of intimacy between them are important to consider in order to analyze how the material and symbolic place that each actor occupies in concrete practices is manifested, as well as how these affections reproduce or transform logics of power.

2) To inquire into the symbolic and material supports and resources, such as affections and emotional dependency links between employers and workers, knowledge about the intimacy of the lives of employers/workers, knowledge about what affects the other or how she can react emotionally to the requests or demands of the other party, laws or public discourse on domestic or care work, morals and social norms in force about the role of women and fathers in the reproduction of households and in child-rearing, and so on, in order to circulate power or to create tension in asymmetries.

3) Analyze the concrete mechanisms through which authority is exercised, that is, those practices where limits are defined or set, such as communication and dialogue, dismissal, legal denunciation, demand for affection or an affective disposition with the family, special support in care tasks such as maternity and upbringing, among others.

These three elements allow us to think critically about the discomforts that arise today regarding the roles of “employers” and “nannies”, as well as the new ways of managing and articulating the power asymmetries between them without taking domination and exploitation for granted as an *a priori*, but rather as one of the ways in which the relationships between them are articulated and the role that affects play in these relationships. We believe that the study of power management from the perspective of the EIRA model allows us to delve deeper into the relational and performative nature of power, as well as its management through affective and intimate registers in the relationships between employers and domestic workers today. Understanding affections as circulating drives (Ahmed, 2006), we can think that the exercise of authority produces and circulates affections that can reproduce hierarchical forms of power as well as enable and enhance forms of management of asymmetries that burst and raise other possible figurations.

Concluding remarks

Empirically studying the exercise of authority between employers and domestic workers has specific challenges. The first is a theoretical challenge, since analyses focused on power relations and the understanding of power as a form of domination predominate. The second challenge is empirical: the study of the exercise of authority in the context of the crisis of authority and the crisis of the “boss/nanny” relationship.

In this scenario, the figure of authority has been defined as the place of power, which dominates, and oppresses, of a masculine nature, limiting

the study not only to authority and its exercise (by women, among women, or the authority of men from a relational perspective), but also to power. We argue that this scenario has generated limits to think of authority as a relational, situated and historical practice, that is, as a social phenomenon, lacking empirical studies and methodological tools for research on the exercise of authority.

In turn, the three definitions of power (as a resource, as domination and as empowerment) presuppose sexual difference as a category of analysis, and the places of female authority or leadership are positively observed (either because it empowers women or because it generates another type of leadership) and presuppose a relationship of power asymmetries between men and women (and not necessarily between women). Meanwhile, power as resource and power as empowerment pay greater attention to the notion of power-for, and the notion of power as domination would focus on a notion of power-over. This is a problem for the study of the exercise of power relations, since in order to analyze power-over it would also be necessary to study power-for, they could not be separated. This would be a contribution of the analysis of the exercise of authority among women: to study both aspects of power. This will allow us to examine both sides of it through the analysis of the management of power asymmetries within the household in concrete terms, that is, as a social phenomenon in the context of the crisis of authority and of the “boss/nanny” relationship, considering its relational, situational and sociohistorical character, as well as in its affective and intimate register.

The current scenario of social transformations of greater demand for horizontal and democratic relations and the crisis of the “boss/nanny” relationship is useful for understanding the exercise of authority in relations of power asymmetries. Empirical studies on the exercise of authority in the affective and intimate relationships and ties between employers and domestic workers have become a relevant field for the social sciences, since they can offer new interpretative scenarios on paid domestic work and the management of power asymmetries within it. We hope that from the empirical results⁵ of the study we can complexify the analysis on the exercise of authority, highlighting its affective character and the place and importance of recognition –an element that feminist theory has highlighted as fundamental in the restructuring of power relations (Butler, 1990; Fraser and Butler, 2017)– in such exercise.

⁵ “Difference and female authority figures. Analysis based on paid domestic work and the affective turn”. Funded by the Vicerrectoría de Investigación, Desarrollo e Innovación of the Universidad de Santiago de Chile.

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