Paid domestic work, globalization, and informality

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the local demand for, and the level of informality of, domestic help in the Sacramento metropolitan area of California. It departs from the prevalent analytical approach that looks at domestic work from the supply side (i.e., the workers' perspective), and instead examines it from the demand side (i.e., the employers' perspective). Using a quantitative analytical strategy, it looks at the employer–employee relationship as embedded in specific social and economic conditions, including the sociodemographic characteristics of the household and its head, and structured by the different types of the housework workers are hired to perform.
We present four main findings. First, a sizable, domestic-work market of global scale exists in the Sacramento metropolitan area; almost three fourths of the hired domestic workers are immigrants coming from three continents. Second, although almost half of the households sampled face a care deficit, only one third of them actually hire domestic help. Third, what determines the likelihood of hiring domestic help is not the presence of a household care deficit but the configuration of the household and its class position. Fourth and finally, informality of domestic work is gendered and varies proportionally to the level of intimacy of the task performed: the more intimate the task, the more feminine it is perceived of to be, the higher the level of informality. Copyright © 2017 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, domestic service has been performed almost exclusively by co-national, poor, rural migrant women, often from ethnoracial minority groups, working for better-off urban households within their own countries. Recently, however, domestic work has expanded to form a global labor market, so that domestic workers in wealthy countries include significant proportions of nonnationals.[1]

In this paper, we examine the local demand for domestic help and the level of informality in the domestic employer–employee relationship. We depart from the prevalent analytical approach in three significant ways. First, while existing studies almost exclusively look at domestic work from the supply side (i.e., the workers' perspective), we examine it from the demand side (i.e., the employers' perspective). Second, the literature on the informality of domestic work mostly focuses on its precariousness and on employers' pervasive violation of domestic workers' rights. We instead seek to understand the internal dynamics and determinants of domestic work informality. Third, we consider domestic work not as a homogeneous, singular activity, but as a series of tasks, ranging from childcare to housecleaning to landscape maintenance. These are embedded in diverse, gendered employer–employee relations and demand different levels of intimacy and different levels of informality built on and inducing worker vulnerability. We employ a quantitative analytical strategy using data from the Sacramento Life Balance Survey, a probability survey of around 250

households conducted in the Sacramento metropolitan area of California in 2010.

Evidence partly confirms findings reported by previous research and contributes to a better understanding of domestic work, particularly in relation to the dynamics of informality and the determinants of demand for domestic work. These are dimensions that have so far been neglected in the literature. We offer four main findings. First, our research shows that a sizable domestic-work market of a global scale exists in the Sacramento metropolitan area. Over one third of the sampled households hire domestic help on a regular basis, and almost three fourths of the hired domestic workers are immigrants who hail from three continents. Second, we found that although the care deficit appears to be a pervasive problem faced by almost half the households sampled, only a fraction of these households actually hire domestic help. Third, a multivariate analysis reveals that, contrary to expectations, a care deficit is not statistically significantly associated with the likelihood of hiring domestic help. What seems to explain the likelihood of hiring domestic help is the configuration of the household and its class position, a finding that partly supports existing arguments in the literature. Fourth and finally, we found that the level of informality of domestic work is gendered and varies proportionally to the level of intimacy of the task performed: the more intimate the task, the more feminine it is perceived of to be, the higher its level of informality. Moreover, and contrary to dominant perceptions, we found a positive relationship between hourly wages paid and the level of informality. This strongly suggests that domestic work informality is mostly driven by its gendered, microsocial embeddedness in household life rather than by monetary costs alone.

This paper is organized in four parts. We first present a summary review of the existing literature related to the globalization of domestic work, including migration, household reconfiguration, the demand for domestic help, and informality. From this review, we derive four hypotheses that guide our inquiry. We then succinctly describe the contextual conditions of the study site and introduce the data and methods utilized for the study. In the final two sections, we present the main results of our research and offer a general discussion of, and some

conclusions about, the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Global labor markets and the household care deficit

A quarter century ago, Sassen (1991) identified certain cities in the global North as the centers of management and control of global capitalism and as the places where global social transformations were most apparent. Following her lead, scholars produced a vast body of evidence that strongly supported these prescient arguments. These studies show that the economic opportunities and labor markets of cities like New York, London, and Paris have become bifurcated. On the one hand, these urban postindustrial economies demand highly skilled people to occupy management and specialized positions. On the other, they also demand low-skilled workers to cater to the needs of these emerging and highly paid elite, including domestic workers. There are a large number of women migrating from Third World countries, who constitute the mainstay of the domestic labor market (Anderson, 2000; Cox, 2006; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002a, b; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Zimmerman, Litt, & Bose, 2006a, b).

Global cities have thus become migration magnets due to many economic and labor opportunities they offer, including the marginal opportunities created by the reconfiguration of middle-class households (Sassen, 2002b). The conventional middle-class household, headed by a male breadwinner and a stay-home mother in charge of the family's reproductive work (i.e., child-rearing, elderly care, and housework in general), has become less common, while the proportion of dual-career and single-headed households has significantly increased, to levels not seen before. This reconfiguration has been shaped by structural changes, including a reduction in gender inequality, a significant increase in women's paid labor-force participation, and an increase in the number of women pursuing professional careers. In turn, this has resulted in what scholars call a care deficit, or a lack of care available to meet domestic reproductive and everyday needs, such as childcare, elderly care, housecleaning, and garden maintenance (Blair-

Loy & Jacobs, 2003; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002a, b; Sassen, 2002a; Waheed, Herrera, Orellana, Valenta, & Koonse, 2016; Williams, 2010; Zimmerman, Litt, & Bose, 2006a).

In the United States, household transformations have been particularly dramatic. Until relatively recently, elite households hired domestic workers, while the vast majority of middle- and working-class women did their own cleaning, took care of their own children, and often looked after the elderly as part of their obligations (Ibarra, 2000, p. 452). However, this division of housework and care labor by class and gender has been significantly transformed over the past half-century, as women have joined the paid labor force in higher numbers. While in 1960, only 20% of mothers worked outside the home, by 2010, 70% of American children lived in households where all adults were employed outside the home (Williams & Boushey, 2010).[2] An additional factor leading to the household care deficit is related to the stagnation of wages and salaries, which has forced Americans to work longer hours. In 2006, Americans worked 568 more hours per year than they did in 1979 (Mishel, Bernstein, & Shierholz, 2009). More significantly, for the past several years, American workers have led developed countries in the length of their workweek. While in 2000, American workers worked 7 hr less per year than workers in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries; in 2014, Americans worked 15 hr longer than Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development workers (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). The ensuing care deficit is seen as the driving force behind the growing demand for domestic work.

The informal economy and informalization

For the most part, domestic work remains an informal activity. The regulations present in other areas of employment have not reached the private location where domestic work is done, namely, the home. Thus, domestic workers often do not benefit from the protections of most labor legislation, making them one of the most vulnerable groups of workers in the world. Existing studies show that despite its global scale and character, even in the global North, domestic work is still perceived as an undervalued occupation and synonymous with informal, low-paid, economically insignificant, and virtually invisible work (International Labour Office [ILO], 2013; Portes & Haller, 2005; Salazar Parreñas, 2008; Tomei, 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2006a, b).

The characteristics of housework lead us to examine the analytical understanding of informality in general and critically examine how it has been used in relation to domestic work in the United States. When the concept was first introduced, the informal economy was associated exclusively with the subsistence activities of the marginalized urban poor in less developed economies (Hart, 1973; ILO, 1972). However, the informal economy is now recognized as an important dimension of postindustrial economies (Portes, Castells, & Benton, 1989; Portes & Sassen-Koob, 1987; Slavnic, 2010). It is defined as a heterogeneous field that includes "all income-earning activities that are not effectively regulated by the state in social environments where similar activities are regulated" (Portes et al., 1989, p. 12; Roberts, 2014).

It is important to emphasize that economic informality, as it has been theorized, is inherently determined by state regulation; by definition, if there is no state regulation, there is no informality. Informal activities are licit economic endeavors in which workers are not offered the same protections as those provided by formal work, including a minimum salary, working protections, overtime pay, health benefits, retirement plans, and other fringe benefits. As such, informal work engenders labor precariousness, including job instability, uncertainty, and persistent poverty. Analytically, however, informality and precariousness are two different, rather than synonymous dimensions. For formal work does not preclude precariousness (Visser & Guarnizo, this issue). In fact, precarious work has been growing for the past three decades as a core characteristic of both formal and informal labor markets across the globe, as neoliberalism has become the dominant economic and governance system and migrants "its quintessential incarnation" (Kalleberg, 2009; Schierup, Alund, & Likic-Brboric, 2015, p. 51; Standing, 2011).[3]

Informality and domestic work

In this paper, we seek to interrogate domestic-work informality by focusing on the

employer–employee relationship. However, we do not focus on the precariousness such relationship inflicts on the employee, a subject we examine elsewhere. In our analysis, we emphasize a key dimension often overlooked in existing studies: the close familiarity and friendly relationship, or intimacy that domestic work creates between employer and employee. In part, this type of relationship is engendered by the fact that the employer's home is the employee's workplace. The everyday reproduction of domestic life through childcare, housecleaning, or gardening unavoidably engenders the development of various degrees of physical and emotional intimacy, a feature that sets domestic work apart from other kinds of work. Some analysts conceptualize this relationship as the commodification of care (Zimmerman et al., 2006a). We hypothesize that informality in domestic work is related to the level of intimacy of the activities hired.

Our interest here is to uncover the internal dynamics and determinants of informality in domestic work in a globalizing neoliberal world. In this sense, we contend that given the particular socioemotional characteristics of domestic work, the received economic rationale of informality (increasing profits and minimizing costs and risks), as studied in the case of businesses, does not fully apply here (Triandafyllidou, 2013).

Borrowing from Granovetter's (1973) work on the structuring of social interaction, we argue that in domestic work, the *closer the social interaction* (i.e., forming a strong tie) between employer and employee, the less rigid, more intimate, and more flexible the contractual working relationship, and thus the *more informal* the labor arrangements are. Conversely, the *more distant the social interaction* (i.e., forming a weak tie) between employer and employee, the more structured, specific, and thus *more formal* their contractual working relationship is. We thus assume that informality would be higher for domestic workers toiling inside the house (childcare, housecleaning, etc.) than outdoors (landscape and garden maintenance).

The vast majority of existing studies, most of them based on ethnographic or nonrepresentative surveys, focus exclusively on the conditions experienced by domestic workers (for a description of contemporary domestic workers' conditions in the United States, see Burnham & Theodore (2012)). Quantitative inquiries into the demand for domestic work and its relation to informality are still in their infancy. However, existing studies show that this type of analysis can shed some light on these issues. In the late 1990s, Enrico Marcelli and his collaborators attempted to measure the level of informality or informal economic activity in the Los Angeles County labor market. Based on 1990 U.S. Census data, they analyzed 501 occupations using the proportion of undocumented Latino workers in each occupation as a proxy for informal work (Marcelli, Pastor, & Joassart, 1999). The larger the proportion of undocumented workers in an occupation, the greater its level of informality. What they found was a labor market segmented by levels of informality—i.e., divided into high, medium, and low levels of informality. Not surprisingly, private household services ranked first in informal labor participation, corroborating findings from previous ethnographic studies.

An earlier, nationally representative study led by Kevin McCrohan sought to determine the size of the demand for informal work based on the results of three U.S. national probability household samples (McCrohan, Smith, & Adams, 1991). The surveys inquired about what goods or services (out of a list of 14 of these) households had bought in the 12 months prior to the interview "from vendors doing business *on the side*"—i.e., informally (McCrohan et al., 1991, p. 30, emphasis in the original). According to their results, domestic services and lawn and garden maintenance, were ranked at the top in terms of informality. Households reported that 87% of their expenses in lawn and garden maintenance and 83% of housekeeping services were in the informal market.

A recent study estimates that 16% of California's households (around two million households) pay for domestic help (Waheed et al., 2016, p. 15). Over half of these households (54%) hire housecleaners, while one fourth of them (27%) hire homecare helpers and one fifth (19%) seek help with childcare—gardening was not included. Employers tend to be highly educated, with 46% holding college or postgraduate degrees, with 26% of them working in managerial or professional occupations. However, a significant proportion of employers are low-income households (pp. 35–40). Although the study does not address the determinants of informality, it does describe domestic work as a sector characterized by informal practices and unstable jobs, for the majority

of employers sampled hire sporadically. Yet the study found that the vast majority of employers (83%) pay minimum or higher wages, with one third (32%) paying $21.13 or higher per hour with wages reaching "an hourly high of $40–$50" (30%; unfortunately, the authors do not provide an average hourly rate for the state).

Finally, another quantitative study attempted to measure the dynamics and determinants of domestic work at the regional and local level by looking at this market in the U.S.–Mexico border region (Pisani & Yoskowitz, 2002). This study was based on the results from a non-probability sample of 195 domestic workers and 194 employers in Laredo, Texas, conducted in 2000. Almost all the workers in the sample were immigrant women from Mexico, and all the employers were Hispanic American. The employers were from well-off, small-size households led by well-educated, married couples living in affluent neighborhoods. Despite the affluence of the employers, the work arrangements they had with their domestic workers were informal—inter alia, they paid an average wage that was one third below the official federal minimum wage at the time of the study. Apparently, the ready access to a seemingly unlimited supply of poor Mexican women arriving from across the border gave Laredo's middle-class households the upper hand in determining the wages they paid. The size and dynamism of this binational market on the U.S.–Mexico border region have been confirmed by other, qualitative studies (Mendoza, 2011).

As in other parts of the world (ILO, 2013), the evidence presented here confirms domestic work's structural significance and social embeddedness in informal relations. Yet it also suggests that informality is embedded in particular sociospatial and intimate contexts.

From this complex landscape, we posit four main hypotheses to guide our analysis. These hypotheses are informed by three questions: First is domestic work in the Sacramento metropolitan area, a non-global city, also part of a global labor market? Second is the care deficit one of the main factors driving the demand for hired help? Third, what factors at the household level determine the informality of domestic work?

H1 *The geographical scale of the domestic-work market in the Sacramento metropolitan area is global.*

H2 *The demand for domestic work is mostly fueled by households' care deficit. So the greater the deficit, the higher the likelihood of hiring domestic workers.*

H3 *Domestic work is informal and low-paid, regardless of the type of domestic work performed (i.e., childcare, housecleaning, landscape upkeep, etc.).*

H4 *Informality depends on the level of intimacy of the work hired, such that the more intimate it is, the higher the level of informality (i.e., work performed inside the house, like childcare, housecleaning, tends to be more informal than landscape maintenance).*

DATA, METHODS, AND CONTEXT

Data

The data for this study come from the Sacramento Life Balance Survey, a probability survey of 227 households, which seeks to understand how middle-class households deal with domestic chores, including hiring domestic help. The survey is part of the Gender, Migration, and Domestic Work in the Sacramento Region research project, a pilot project conducted between October 2009 and July 2012.[4] Conducted in 2010, the survey was based on a purposive sampling at local farmers' markets in three cities in the metro area. The sample was limited to people who were 18 years or older, were decision-makers in their households, and resided permanently in the Sacramento metropolitan area. At the selected farmer's markets, an official booth staffed with at least two interviewers was set up once a week between June and September. Interviewers were instructed to approach one of every five people passing in front of the booth, inform them about the project goals, determine whether the person was qualified to be part of the study, and request an interview. Interviews took, on average, between 15 and 45 min to complete.

The survey instrument was divided into three main sections inquiring about personal and household characteristics (age, gender, education, marital status, household composition, type of housing, and location); work characteristics (occupation title, work place, work hours, and commute information); and domestic chores (the household division of labor and whether labor is hired to perform six different tasks—see below). In the latter section, the survey asked questions about the different types of services performed by

hired labor and the characteristics of work arrangements (the total number of people hired, hours, and amount paid per week). In this section, the survey instrument also includes a battery of questions inquiring about, respectively, how employers characterize their relationship with employees (1 = *employer–employee*; 2 = *like acquaintances*; 3 = *like friends*; and 4 = *like relatives*), how well they know their employee (1 = *not well*; 2 = *well*; and 3 = *very well*), whether they know the employee's family (1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*), and whether the employee has health insurance (1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*).

Measurement

For our analysis, we define two main dependent variables: hiring domestic work and the level of informality. We operationalize domestic work as being composed of six different tasks: laundry, cooking, childcare, elderly care, cleaning, and garden maintenance. We consider the first five tasks as forming what we call *indoor domestic work*, and thus are part of an inherently closer, more intimate employer–employee relationship. Historically, indoor domestic activities have been gendered and identified as "female work." Meanwhile, outdoor domestic work, such as landscaping and grounds upkeep, typically engenders a more distant and formal employer–employee relation and tends to be performed almost exclusively by men. Regularly hiring workers to perform any of these tasks qualifies a household as a domestic work employer. When used as a dependent variable, hiring domestic work is measured as a dummy variable (1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*).

Informality in general is a rather fluid and difficult to measure category. Most existing studies tend to analyze it from a legal perspective (i.e., looking at whether wages, taxes, and/or benefits are paid according to the law), from a political-economy perspective (i.e., describing the exploitation and marginalization of workers by employers and looking at power relations between capital and labor), or from an economic perspective (i.e., cost–benefit analyses, estimating fiscal costs for the state, and so forth). Not unlike studies on informality in general, studies on informality and domestic work have focused on the description of informality and its effects (i.e., employers' labor rights violations and workers' precarious labor conditions), not on its determinants (Burnham & Theodore, 2012).

The survey instrument poses a series of questions seeking to characterize the relationship between employer and employee, as well as to measure workers' access to some formal rights, including whether they have healthcare insurance. Operationally, we created an Index of Informality to capture the employer–employee social distance at work and be able to test H4. The index is formed by four variables measuring: the employer's perception of the relationship with the worker (1 = *acquaintances, friends, or like relatives*; 0 = *like employer–employee*), how well the employer knows the worker(s) (1 = *well or very well*; 0 = *other*), whether the employer knows the worker's family (1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*), and whether the worker lacks health insurance (1 = *if she does not have health insurance*; 0 = *if she does*; see Table A1). The index (α = 0.8235) ranges from 0 to 1.75, so the higher the score, the more informal the relationship.

Household care deficit, according to many scholars, is one of the most critical dimensions explaining the increasing demand for domestic work. The survey instrument thus inquires whether the household faces a care deficit by asking the following question: "How challenging, if at all, is trying to balance the demands of your professional career and the everyday responsibilities and tasks related to attending to your family and household needs?" Respondents used a 5-point scale ranging from "very challenging" to "not challenging." For the analysis, the answers were dichotomized as follows: "very challenging" and "challenging" were coded 1 (household faces care deficit), else was coded 0 (no care deficit).

Table A1 presents the definition and descriptive statistics of the other variables in the analysis. However, it is important to clarify that given the unreliability of survey information about income, we decided not to inquire about it. Instead, we assigned to each household the mean annual household income of the census track where the household resides. For this analysis, we used the log of that income.

Method

To find out the factors that determine the likelihood of hiring any domestic work, we use a nested logistic regression (Table 3). We examined the effects of the sociodemographic characteristics of the head of household interviewed (Model 1), the household characteristics (Model 2), and the

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context in which the household is located (Model 3) on the likelihood of hiring domestic help. To analyze the determinants of the level of informality of the domestic work hired, we use a nested multivariate linear regression. The three models in Table 4 show, respectively, the results when we regress the Index of Informality on the personal sociodemographic and household characteristics only (Model 1), when contextual characteristics are added (Model 2), and when the characteristics of the contractual work arrangement are included (Model 3).

Context

California is the home of over 10 million immigrants, or one fourth of all immigrants in the United States, which makes it the country's top migrant destination state (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Meanwhile, 18% of the 2.5 million residents of the Sacramento Metropolitan Statistical Area are immigrants (U. S. Census Bureau, 2015). The Sacramento area includes Sacramento, the capital and the seat of the state government. The metropolitan area attracts highly educated people to fill positions in city and state government agencies and official institutions. It also houses two large universities, the University of California, Davis, and California State University, Sacramento, as well as several community colleges, the large UC Davis Medical Center, and numerous high-tech and biotech companies, all of which add to the demand for highly skilled workers. Official data show that the region's labor force composition reflects a bifurcation similar to the one reported for global cities. Indeed, 39% of the region's labor force hold positions in management, science, and professional occupations, while 35% hold positions in low-

status, low-skilled occupations, including household services.

On the other hand, ethnic diversity is evident throughout the region. Asians (44%) and Latin Americans (34%) represent the two largest immigrant groups, while the remaining 23% are European (16%) and from other regions of the world (7%). While Sacramento has been called one of the most ethnically diverse and integrated cities in the United States (Wells, 2015), surrounding, smaller cities such as Woodland, Winters, and Dixon, are less so as their nonnational populations are almost exclusively formed by Latin American immigrants mostly working in agriculture- and food processing-related industries.

FINDINGS

The majority of the heads of household interviewed are middle-aged (mean age 47 years), highly educated (38% hold postgraduate degrees), and female (58%; Table A1). The average household has around three members, one fourth of them have children under 12, and almost one third live in two-headed, dual-income households (29%). Four fifths of the sampled households reside in suburban areas and have an average annual income of $91,517 (Table 1) which puts them into the highest quintile of the U.S. household income distribution (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Nearly half of these households face a care deficit as measured by our definition—finding it challenging or very challenging to keep the balance between home obligations and work demands.

Our first important preliminary finding is that a significant proportion of the households sampled (36%) do hire domestic help. More importantly, the workers hired seem to be part of a global domestic-work market, with 71% of them being immigrants (Table 2). While, unsurprisingly, the

Table 1. Paid domestic work: household characteristics

	Households hiring DW	Households not hiring DW	Total
Household size (persons)	2.85	2.67	2.73
Care deficit (%)	50.63	44.59	46.70
Hires domestic help (%)	—	—	35.76
Mean annual income ($)	98,839.96	87,443.51*	91,517.36
Head of household has graduate degree (%)	55.70	28.38*	37.89
N	79	148	227

Note. DW = domestic worker.
*p < .001.

majority of the workers come from Mexico (54%) and other Latin American countries (4%), a non-negligible proportion of them (13%) come from other parts of the world (Table A2). This evidence supports H1 (The geographical scale of the domestic-work market in the Sacramento metropolitan area is global.).

A second preliminary finding has to do with the care deficit. As Table 1 shows, while a significant proportion (47%) of the sampled households experiences this condition, contrary to expectations, a significantly smaller proportion actually hires any domestic help. In fact, the incidence of a care deficit is not statistically different between households hiring and those not hiring domestic help. At first glance, then, care deficit does not seem to explain the likelihood of hiring domestic help, as H2 predicts (The demand for domestic work is mostly fueled by households' care deficit.).

Apparently, however, a household's class position seems to be a better predictor of whether it will hire help. Indeed, households hiring domestic care appear to be better off and have heads of household with higher levels of education than households that do not hire domestic help. The average annual income of employer households ($98,840) is significantly higher than that of households not hiring help ($87,444, $p > .001$). Meanwhile, heads of household hiring help tend to have a higher educational level than those that do not ($p > .001$).

A third preliminary finding has to do with the informality of domestic work (Table 2).

Concurring with the received characterization of domestic work and partly supporting H3 (Domestic work is informal and low-paid, regardless of the type of domestic work performed.), domestic work informality among sampled households is present across different types of domestic tasks. However, as expected from a Granovetterian perspective, work performed indoors (cooking, housecleaning, caring, and the like), which entails closer employer–employee relationships, presents a significantly higher level of informality than work performed outdoors (garden maintenance). And while informality is conventionally associated with low wages, often below the legal minimum, our findings show otherwise. On average, domestic workers in our sample receive an hourly wage of $27.52 (median $20.00), while at the time of the survey, the official minimum hourly wage in California was $8.00 (Department of Industrial Relations, 2015). Yet around one out of every 10 workers (9%) earn less than the official minimum.[5] Interestingly, gardeners, who are generally men, on average, earn a significantly higher hourly wage ($31.40) than "indoor" workers ($25.40), who tend to be female, with nannies earning the lowest ($12.20, data not shown) of them all. These results partly question H3. Yet we find a significant variation in the level of informality across different domestic work activities. So, while the overall Index of Informality average is .74, it is significantly higher for indoor work (.83), than for outdoor work (.74). This finding supports H4 (the more intimate the work is,

Table 2. Paid domestic work: type of work and informality

Type of DW hired	Hires DW[1] (%)	Immigrant DW (%)	Index of Informality[2]
Indoor domestic work[3]	68.35	71.19	.83
Gardening	60.76	70.59	.74
Total[4]	34.80	70.97	.74***
Average number of workers per week	1.39		
Average number of hr/week	7.68		
Average hourly wage ($)[5]	27.52		
Average hourly wage indoor work ($)	25.40		
Average hourly wage gardening ($)	31.40*		

Note. DW = domestic worker.
[1]Percentage of households hiring domestic work by type of work. Total adds up to over 100% because some households hire more than one type of work.
[2]Index ranges from 0 to 1.75, with 1.75 being the most informal relationship; see Table 5.
[3]Includes housecleaning, cooking, laundry, and childcare. Childcare's Index of Informality = .88.
[4]Total percentage of households hiring any domestic help in the sample.
[5]Median hourly wage is $20.00.
*$p < .05$.
***$p < .001$.

the higher the level of informality) and, as expected, suggests a negative relationship between informality level and wages.

Put together, these results provide a nuanced perception of the determinants of domestic work demand and its informality. They suggest that demand is a matter of resources (class), not necessarily of needs (care deficit). They also indicate that while domestic work in general is informal, the level of informality increases with the tasks' level of intimacy. Thus, while gardening shows the lowest level of informality, childcare Index of Informality shows the highest (.88). This kind of differentiation has so far been neglected in the literature, which tends to treat domestic work as a singular activity, or as a series of activities equally valued and underpaid by employers. Still, these bivariate results require further analysis before a solid conclusion can be reached. This is precisely what we do next.

Multivariate analyses

The analysis of the likelihood of hiring help is guided by H2 (The demand for domestic work is mostly fueled by households' care deficit.). To test this hypothesis, we use a nested logistic regression model (Table 3) including three sets of covariates measuring the head of household's characteristics (gender, age, level of education, and living in a dual-headed and dual-income household—Model 1); household characteristics (size, having children under 12, and experiencing care deficit—Model 2); and household's location and income (suburban location and the natural log of annual income—Model 3).

Model 1 shows that, holding other variables constant, being a head of household with a postgraduate degree and living in a two-headed, dual-income household increases the odds of hiring domestic help 158% and 123%, respectively, vis-à-vis dual-headed, single-income households, whose heads have a lower educational level. The positive effect of this household configuration consistently holds across the three models, with increasing power. When household characteristics are added (Model 2), households with children under 12 increase the hiring odds 137% over households without young children, while holding all variables constant. This likelihood increases to 211% when we control for the household's location and income (Model 3). The full

Table 3. Likelihood of hiring domestic help of any kind

Variables	Model 1 Odds ratio	Model 2 Odds ratio	Model 3 Odds ratio
Individual sociodemographics			
Female	0.7553 (0.2314)	0.7637 (0.2390)	0.9089 (0.3016)
Age	1.0205 (0.0106)	1.0290* (0.0124)	1.0149 (0.0130)
Postgraduate	2.5793** (0.8104)	2.3156** (0.7495)	1.8223 (0.6294)
Two-headed, dual-income household	2.2332* (0.7584)	3.2122* (1.8004)	3.3031* (1.9554)
Household			
Children under 12 years	—	2.3700* (1.0382)	3.1140* (1.4513)
Household size	—	1.022 (0.1599)	0.8991 (0.1511)
Care deficit	—	0.4797 (0.2429)	0.4190 (0.2217)
Contextual characteristics			
Suburban	—	—	8.0754** (5.4472)
Household income (ln)	—	—	4.6732* (2.8629)
Constant	0.1265*** (0.0744)	0.0819** (0.0695)	8.11e − 10** (5.72e − 09)
N	216	216	216
Likelihood ratio χ^2 (df)	24.15 (4)***	31.63 (7)***	51.55 (9)***
Pseudo R^2	0.0862	0.1129	0.1840
Log likelihood	−128.01785	−124.27758	−114.32107
Wald χ^2 (df)	21.70(4)***	7.08 (3)	14.80 (2)***

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

model (Model 3) shows that the households most likely to hire domestic help are two-headed, dual-income with children under 12, residing in suburbia, and earning higher incomes. Spatial location and household income appear to exert the strongest influence on the odds of hiring domestic help, while holding all variables constant. These results confirm that experiencing a care deficit is not related to the likelihood of hiring domestic help. Nor does household size or head of household's age or gender. These refute H2. It is thus plausible to conclude that while experiencing a care deficit is a pervasive condition facing many households, it does not, by itself, explain the actual demand for domestic work. Simply put, not all households who need to hire domestic work can afford it. Specific type of households (two-headed, dual-income with children under 12) with particular class resources (living in suburbia, where housing is more expensive, and having a higher income) can afford to hire domestic helpers. In sum, domestic work demand is determined by households' socioeconomic conditions, rather than solely by their care needs. The question is, what is the relationship between domestic work and informality? We address this query in the next section.

For the analysis of the determinants of domestic work informality, we use the Index of Informality as the dependent variable. The analysis is guided by H3 (domestic work is informal and low-paid, regardless of the type of domestic work hired) and H4 (informality depends on the level of intimacy of the work hired, such that the more intimate it is, the higher the level of informality). Table 4 presents the results of regressing the Index of Informality on three set of variables measuring household head and household's characteristics (gender, age, education, two-headed, dual-income household, having young children, and household size), household class position (suburban location and household income), and select dimensions of the domestic

Table 4. Level of informality of domestic work

Variables	Model 1 Coefficients	Model 2 Coefficients	Model 3 Coefficients
Individual sociodemographic and household			
Female	−0.0249 (0.0559)	0.0112 (0.0553)	−0.0118 (0.0343)
Age	0.0040* (0.0020)	0.0018 (0.0020)	0.0004 (0.0013)
Postgraduate	0.1339* (0.0607)	0.0997 (0.0598)	0.0313 (0.0371)
Two-headed, dual-income household	0.0803 (0.0698)	0.0639 (0.0681)	0.0030 (0.0427)
Has children under 12 years	0.1671* (0.0777)	0.1914* (0.0760)	0.0091 (0.0511)
Household size	0.0039 (0.0261)	−0.0250 (0.0260)	−0.0174 (0.0161)
Contextual characteristics			
Suburban	—	0.2214** (0.0745)	0.0478 (0.0468)
Household income (ln)	—	0.2258* (0.0878)	0.1277* (0.0611)
Domestic work hired			
Amount paid per hr/week	—	—	0.0065*** (0.0011)
Number of hours hired per week			0.0076* (0.0030)
Indoor domestic work	—	—	0.4259*** (0.0588)
Indoor domestic × children under 12 years			0.3978*** (0.0899)
Constant	−0.0203 (0.1364)	−2.6227* (1.1070)	−1.4170 (0.6915)
N	216	216	216
F	3.61** (df 6, 209)	4.61*** (df 8, 207)	36.85*** (df 12, 203)
R^2	0.0939	0.1513	0.6854
Adjusted R^2	0.0679	0.1185	0.6668
Block residual			
F	3.61** (df 6, 209)	7.00** (df 2, 207)	86.15*** (df 4, 203)
Change in R^2	—	0.0574	0.5341

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

work hired (hourly wage, number of hours hired per week, and type of work). In order to test H4, we include an interaction term (hiring domestic work * household has young children). A significant, positive effect of the interaction term will support H4, while the obverse will reject it.

Model 1 shows the results when controlling for head and household characteristics only. Households with older household heads holding postgraduate degrees and with younger children tend to have a higher mean index score than households without young children and with younger household heads with lesser education, when holding all the other variables constant. However, Model 1 is statically weak, for it only explains 9.4% of the index's variance. When variables controlling for contextual conditions are added (suburban location and household annual income—Model 2), the model's fit improves slightly ($R^2 = .1513$, $p < .001$), but then head of household's age and education dropped. Meanwhile, having young children remains a determining factor of informality (i.e., requiring childcare), along with contextual conditions, namely, suburban location and household income.

The final model (Model 3) adds the variables measuring the characteristics of the work hired. These variables plus household income are the only factors exerting a positive, significant effect on the level of informality, while keeping all the other variables constant. Model 3 coefficients indicate that the higher the household's income, the amount paid per hour, and the number of hours paid per week, the higher the level of informality as measured by the mean index. Each additional $1 paid per hour increases the mean of Index of Informality .007 points ($p < .001$), while each additional hour hired per week increases it by .008 points ($p < .05$). At first glance, these results seem counterintuitive, for according to existing studies low wages and employers' incomes are associated with domestic work informality (Waheed et al., 2016).

Perhaps more importantly, hiring indoor domestic work, which tends to be more intimate, increases the mean informality index by some 43% vis-à-vis hiring outdoor work (i.e., garden maintenance). Meanwhile, the coefficient of the interaction term confirms the positive correlation between intimacy of the task hired and the level of informality. The effect of hiring indoor work increases the mean index of informality some 40%

(or .09 points) for households with young children as compared to household without young children, while holding all other variables constant. These results seem to confirm H4 (the more intimate the work, the more informal it is) and partially question H3 (domestic work is indeed informal, but the level of informality is not constant across tasks as it increases with tasks' level of intimacy).

These results are puzzling for they seem to counter the alleged economic maximization rationale underlying the adoption of informal labor arrangements. But if domestic work informality is not driven by economic calculations alone, what underlying factors do shape it? Most plausibly, the positive effect of household income and hourly wages on domestic work informality is mostly driven by a combination of circumstantial (like seniority of employment), sociocultural perceptions (i.e., domestic work tends to be perceived as a family necessity, rather than an economic transaction), gender normativity (i.e., indoor domestic chores are perceived as "familial" women's jobs, while outdoor tasks are seen as non-familial male activities), and tax avoidance.[6] Familial activities result in closer, more intimate employer–employee relations that in turn lead to increasing flexibility in the workload assigned and laxer labor relations. It is plausible to argue that this kind of arrangement, in which the employer has the upper hand, incurs an hourly wage premium (without any fringe benefits or job stability).[7]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we analyze the demand for and the informality of domestic work guided by four main hypotheses. For our analysis, we conceive of domestic work as formed by a plurality of tasks structured around gendered norms that associate domestic chores with graduated levels of intimacy, ranging from the most intimate (childcare and other "indoor" daily domestic chores) to the least (gardening) and structured by dominant gender norms. This analytical framework sheds light on a process in which employers' intent to overcome the sociocultural predicament domestic work represents for they and their households—i.e., an ordinary business transaction that transforms their own home into a workplace. In this sense, domestic work is better understood as a socioeconomic, rather than as a purely economic relation.

The evidence shows that the domestic-work market in the Sacramento area is global in scale, although Mexicans, as expected, are overrepresented among the workers (supporting H1). Also, we found that the household care deficit by itself does not explain the actual demand for domestic workers (rejecting H2) and that domestic work is informal across the board (H3), although on average it is paid at a significantly higher rate than the legal minimum wage. However, the evidence shows that informality is graduated and embedded in microsociological, gendered structures of intimacy in which the most intimate tasks performed inside the house, like childcare (usually done by women), tend to be more informal and are paid at a lower rate than less intimate tasks performed outside the house, like landscape upkeep (usually done by men; H4).

While household care deficit is experienced by almost half the households sampled, only those with resources are able to pay for domestic work. Those who cannot afford it face a very difficult situation. As a 50-year-old woman interviewed for the study put it, "I work from 6:00 am to 2:30 pm. When I get back home I have to cook, clean, do grocery shopping, and cleaning up after my partner and children. It's exhausting, but we have no money to pay for help" (Interview E200041, July 21, 2010). Exploring the dynamics, and the practical and theoretical implications of households' inability to afford help to deal with their care deficit, should certainly be part of the agenda for future research.

The informality of domestic work

A nuanced and critical analysis of domestic work and informality has profound theoretical and practical implications. Sociocultural and gender norms construct the multiple tasks that constitute domestic work and shape its informality. Performed in the privacy of the employer's home, indoor domestic work involves activities that are socially constructed as gendered work, which historically have been the domain of, and responsibility of the mother or wife. These tasks are aimed at domestic reproduction and social representation, rather than mere profit seeking. Indoor domestic work is an invisible part of social reproductive work (caring for the children and the elderly, preparing food, and so forth), as well as social status maintenance (keeping a clean and organized house with well-kept grounds offers a representation of family well-being and social status).

When performed by hired workers, domestic chores done within the house engender certain intrinsic levels of employer–employee intimacy. These necessitate and contribute to significant interpersonal trust and familiarity. Given its private and intimate character, domestic work thus demands emotional work at levels not required in other kinds of work. Informality in domestic work is therefore built on different premises than informality in the business world, in which profit maximizing provides the main basis for labor relations. So instead of approaching the analysis from the outside looking in (i.e., how households applied or bypassed legal labor norms), we look inside out focusing on the microstructures of control and cooperation shaping employer–domestic employee everyday interactions (re)producing informality (Lowe & Iskander, this issue). To do so, we use an economic-sociological lens.

Closer social interactions (Granovetter's strong ties) translate into relationships of mutual familiarity between employer and employee. This apparent closeness, we argue, tends to favor the employer's interests over those of the worker. Therefore, closeness should not be interpreted to mean that employer and domestic employee's uneven power are equalized, for in reality, they are embedded in an asymmetrical relationship determined by class, gender, race, and ethnic structures (Cox, 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; van Walsum, 2011). In this sense, intimacy and familiarity lead to lax and flexible labor relations in which changing work arrangements and demands, such as sudden increases or decreases in work hours or tasks and unplanned additional, often unpaid, chores can be added without prior consultation and little leverage on the part of the worker in the name of her close relation with the employer. Thus, the more intimate the relationship, the more informal and precarious the working conditions tend to be.

At first sight, and coinciding with received wisdom, our findings indicate that domestic work is inherently and uniformly informal. However, upon closer examination of the diverse tasks it involves, the evidence suggests that the level of informality in domestic work is not homogeneous and is determined by the type and location (indoor vs. outdoor and more vs. less intimate) of work performed, which in turn, shapes the dynamics of

the interpersonal relationship between employer and employee (strong ties vs. weak ties). None of the characteristics associated with employers, other than household income level, appear to significantly influence the level of informality of the domestic work conducted in their homes. Neither household structure nor the household's self-reported care deficit help explain this level of informality. What does determine the level of informality of domestic work, according to our findings, is the type of work performed (the more intimate, the higher the level of informality), the number of hours of employed help utilized per week, and the hourly rate paid (the higher these figures, the higher the level of informality). Hence, the better-off households that need domestic help are the most likely to hire it, rather than all the households that need it. The more these better-off households use this help (in terms of workers and money), the more informal the relation is.

In practical, everyday terms, a close relationship between employer and employee honors the emotional dimension of domestic work and helps create a friendlier workplace. Such closeness engenders informal, looser work relations, creating a sense of employer–employee friendship, to the point where the worker is perceived as "a member of the family," as many of the interviewed heads of household stated. Yet this kind of relation is not necessarily always beneficial for the worker, who can be subject to arbitrary work conditions, abuse, and work instability, all in the name of a fleeting familiarity.

The informality of domestic work implies a less structured, more fluid relationship between employer and employee, as familiarity increases and generates a strong employer–employee tie (Granovetter, 1973). This kind of labor relation can grant employers unfettered advantages over the worker, making her or him more flexible and adaptable to the employer's own work or career time demands outside the home. However, it could also mean more flexibility for the worker, for example, when a worker-mother changes her work schedule in order to meet her own family obligations. Again, this initial apparent symmetry hides the power asymmetry structuring the employer–employee relation. For example, a worker's need for high flexibility could render her "unreliable," making her subject to dismissal without any prior notice, particularly in large urban centers with high levels of immigration. The worker, given her economic vulnerability, does not enjoy the latitude to abandon her work at will.

These particular characteristics could explain why recent official efforts to regulate domestic work and curb its informality, including fiscal incentives and the simplification of payment processes, as well as attempts at "industrializing" domestic work, have not been particularly successful (Pla-Julián, 2014; Tomei, 2011). While state initiatives in countries such as Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Brazil have helped increase the reporting of domestic work and improve wages, they have proved far less effective in stabilizing domestic worker hours and earnings or countering domestic workers' isolation. In fact, as Manuela Tomei has written, "the characterization of domestic work as women's work deprived of value and which anybody can do remains unchallenged everywhere" (Tomei, 2011, p. 186). In the United States, multiple initiatives have been launched to support the organization of domestic workers, but these efforts tend to include a proportionally small number of workers. Yet new creative coalitions involving employers seem to open up promising spaces for addressing the inequities and precariousness so far inherent to domestic work.

Domestic work informality is shaped by dominant discourses on the meaning of home and on gender normativity, both of which are supported by the lack of any official labor law enforcement. Domestic work informality is thus not merely a practice adopted by employers seeking to minimize transaction costs. After all, as our and other recent studies show, while many domestic workers are paid hourly wages that fall below the official minimum, the majority earn hourly wages at or above it. The precariousness of domestic work, however, seems to be insidiously embedded in microsocial relations of apparent familiarity between employers and employees, which project a false image of equality, in contexts in which abundant labor supply conspires against domestic workers' interests. The question then is this: under what conditions and informal arrangements could employers and employees benefit equally? Could the microstructures in which current domestic work labor relations are embedded be transformed through state policies or through conventional collective workers' efforts? These and other questions should guide future inquiries into domestic work.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ENDNOTES

1. Of the world's estimated 53 million domestic workers, the vast majority are women (83%), comprising a significant part of the world's total workforce (International Labour Office, 2013).
2. Meanwhile, the proportion of married couples with children under 18 has grown from 25% to 60% between 1960 and 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2015).
3. Precarious work is "employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker" (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 2).
4. The pilot project is aimed at understanding the domestic work industry in the Greater Sacramento Area. In addition to the Sacramento Life Balance Survey, the pilot project also includes qualitative data gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews with some 60 domestic workers from five different nationalities in the Sacramento metropolitan area.
5. Waheed et al. (2016) found that 17% of California's households employing domestic help pay less than the official minimum wage.
6. One can point to several well-off female nominees to high U.S. public office who have seen their aspirations derailed for not having paid taxes for their immigrant domestic workers. In 2010, for example, billionaire Meg Whitman referred to Nicky Diaz, an undocumented immigrant whom she fired when she launched her campaign for the California governorship, as a "friend of our family" and a faithful employee. Diaz's lawyer indicated that Whitman had initially hired Diaz "to work 15 hr/week for $23 an hour" in 2000 (Falcone, 2010).
7. Waheed et al. (2016: 31) found that 80% of California's moderate- and high-income households hiring DW paid hourly wages above $21 in 2015.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Variables used in the analysis

Variable	N	Definition or measurement	Mean	SE
Dependent variables				
Hires domestic help of any type	218	1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*	0.36	0.03
Informal labor relation	218	Index composed of four variables: Worker lacks health insurance; E states relationship with worker is like acquaintances, friends, or relatives; E knows worker/s well; E knows worker's family. Index ranges from 0 to 1.75, with 1.75 being the most informal relationship (α = 0.8235).	0.26	0.03
Independent variables				
Individual sociodemographic				
Gender	218	1 = *female*; 0 = *male*	0.58	0.03
Age	218	Years of age	47.26	1.04
Post-graduate	218	1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*	0.38	0.03
Household				
Two-headed, dual-income household	218	Married or living with a partner, both working: 1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*	0.29	0.03
Children under 12 years	218	Has children under 12 years old: 1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*	0.25	0.03
Total household size	218	Number of household members	2.70	0.09
Care deficit	218	Balancing work and family obligations is challenging or very challenging: 1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*	0.47	0.03
Contextual characteristics				
Suburban	218	Household located in a suburban area	0.82	0.03
Average household annual income (ln)	218	Natural log of average household annual income in census track where household is located	11.39	0.02
Domestic work hired				
Amount paid per hour	79	$ per hour	27.52	2.51
Total number of hours hired per week	79		7.68	1.35
Hire indoor domestic work[1]	79	1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*	0.68	0.05
Interaction				
Indoor domestic work × children under 12 years	79	1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*	0.15	0.04

[1]Includes housecleaning, cooking, laundry, and childcare.

Table A2. Domestic workers' national origin

Country or region of origin	Percentage
Mexico	53.76
Latin America	4.30
Eastern Europe	7.53
Asia	5.38
United States	29.03
Total	100.00