Locating *au pair* in the UK Within a Global Political Economy of Care

Localisation de la jeune fille au pair au Royaume-Uni dans une économie politique globale du care

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Introduction

- 1 Across Europe there has been an increase in the number of domestic workers who provide live-in care for children, as well as cooking, cleaning, shopping and looking after family pets while their owners are at work. In the UK, as is the case elsewhere in Europe, these roles are commonly taken by migrant women who enter the sector with varying levels of migration and employment regularity and security. Governments across Europe have used a range of visa regimes and practices to manage the entry and working conditions of migrant domestic workers, including ignoring the use of undocumented workers or allowing live-in carers legal entry but withholding the employment rights available to other groups of workers (Anderson 2010b).
- 2 This article looks at the example of changes to the in-home childcare employment sector in the UK following the introduction of the points-based immigration scheme and the abolition of the *au pair* visa in 2008. The focus of the article is on the way understandings of what an *au pair* is for – and what she or he can be asked to do – have evolved in the light of changes to the UK's migration regime. The revised understanding of the *au pair* scheme in the UK suggested by this article is supported by analysis of the text of 1,000 ads for *au pair* placed by prospective employers. The article also draws on interviews with *au pair*, employers of *au pair* and with key informants to argue that the 'cultural baggage' surrounding the term *au pair* has obscured the role vulnerable young migrant women (and fewer migrant men) play within a global political economy of care in the UK and elsewhere in Europe.

- 3 The findings of the research conducted for this article suggest that *au pair* in the UK commonly work between 25 and 50 hours a week during the day and additionally provide at least two evenings of babysitting per week for a minimum of £75 'pocket money' a week. This care 'work' performed by *au pair* is not, though, understood as 'work' that constitutes an employment relationship. Instead the government department responsible for employment issues in the UK – the Department for Work and Pensions – provides advice that specifically excludes *au pair* from minimum wage legislation, and other forms of employment protection that apply to workers (see www.gov.uk/au-pairs-employment-law). *Au pairing* is instead constructed by government literature, by the British *Au pair* Agencies Association (see <http://www.bapaa.org.uk>) and in the media as a 'cultural exchange', an extended holiday, a 'win-win' situation or a 'time-out' from the normal life of the *au pair*. In this article I argue that *au pair* are in fact care workers, and that there is no significant difference between the work performed by *au pair* and the work performed by other live-in domestic workers such as nannies and housekeepers. I demonstrate the trajectory from *au pairing* being a cultural exchange programme for relatively privileged and highly educated Western Europeans to it being a mainstream and long-term migration route for people from throughout Europe and beyond.
- 4 Existing literature on the employment of migrants in the in-home childcare market has identified points at which ideologies around childcare have intersected with ideologies around migration, and highlighted the ways in which this intersection has had particular implications for the employment and lived experiences of migrant workers in differing national contexts. This has been expressed by Lutz (2008) and Williams and Gavanas (2008) in terms of the operation of three different regimes that are at the heart of the way in-home care and domestic work has been performed across Europe – gender regimes, care regimes, migration regimes. The term 'regime' (Esping-Andersen, 1993) is used in this context to refer to the organisation and corresponding cultural codes of social policy and social practice in which the relationship between social actors (state, labour market and family) is articulated and negotiated (Lutz 2008). This article argues that the role *au pair* play in the UK is shaped by the UK's 'care cultures', which has influenced the growth in (low) paid in-home care for children often by migrant women (Anderson 2009; Constable 2007; Ozyegin and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008). The article therefore locates *au pair* in the UK within a global political economy of care by making the case that the competing demands of the home as a place of care and of the paid labour market are linked to global labour flows and state migration policies (Williams and Gavanas 2008).

Methodology

- 5 It is impossible to arrive at precise figures for the number of *au pair* currently in the UK because 1) there is no longer an *au pair* visa for the UK and *au pair* as a category are not measured using any other migration statistics; 2) *au pairing* is not regarded as an employment category and, as such, *au pair* are not measured as a distinct group for the purposes of UK labour market national statistics; 3) many *au pair* agreements are negotiated privately so even if it were widely available, information from *au pair* agencies would be incomplete. The lack of migration data and the lack of employment statistics relating to the operation of the *au pair* scheme in the UK means that alternative research methods are required to learn more about the size and characteristics of the marketplace for childcare and domestic work provided by *au pair*. Given that many *au pair*

relationships are organized privately using the online marketplaces (Cox 2012, Búriková and Miller 2010), these marketplaces were referred to in order to gain a better understanding of the size and character of the market. The website Gumtree.com is an internet-based marketplace that, among a multiplicity of transaction categories, includes a section in which employers and employees can advertise themselves directly to each other. Gumtree.com has around 2,000 ads for commoditized in-home childcare jobs in the UK at any one time, and ad listings are updated throughout the day. The text of 1,000 advertisements for *au pair* in the UK placed on the nannies/*au pair* wanted section were recorded in the period January to December 2014. This material was then analyzed using thematic coding. The text of these ads revealed a number of important ways in which employers' expectations about the role of *au pair* deviated from the ways in which the scheme was apparently intended to operate at its inception. This article draws on analysis of advertisements placed by prospective employers of *au pair* on this website, as well as interviews with 58 *au pair* and 21 people who have employed *au pair*, interviews with key stakeholders, as well as a range of secondary material.

***Au pair* and the UK migration regime: from cultural exchange to unregulated labour source**

- 6 The *au pair* scheme began life as a cultural exchange programme among European countries that allowed young women – and at this point it was only women – to travel to live ‘as an equal’ with a family in another country. The idea was that they would provide help with household tasks in exchange for pocket money and the experience of living with a ‘host family’. The scheme was classed and gendered in that it was imagined as allowing for a small amount of extra household help to be given to middle-class housewives facing the ‘servant crisis’, while also giving middle-class young women from Western European countries training in running a home (Cox 2012). The scheme’s rationale rested on the notion that the housework and childcare being carried out should not be understood as constituting employment because these duties were ‘naturally’ performed by women in the home (Cox 2006). In addition to the gendered household duties to be carried out, the scheme was imagined as allowing young women to improve their linguistic skills and experience life in another country (Council of Europe 1969: 4). The Council of Europe definition states that *au pair* were expected to do no more than 25 hours a week of childcare or light household chores, and in return they were to be given ‘pocket money’ of approximately £45 a week (Council of Europe 1969).
- 7 The UK is not a signatory to the Strasbourg Agreement, so *au pairing* in the UK is not governed by the terms laid out in this agreement. However, the substance of the recommendations laid down by the Council of Europe were adopted and applied by the UK Home Office in the information it provided in relation to the operation of the *au pair* visa scheme. The Home Office *au pair* visa scheme had before 2008 allowed ‘a single person between 17 and 27 to come to the United Kingdom and live with an English-speaking family for up to two years’, with *au pair* being required to be unmarried, without dependents and ‘welcomed as a member of the family’ (Home Office, 2006). *Au pair* were to live in an employer’s home while ‘helping’ with childcare and housework for up to 25 hours a week. The emphasis of the scheme was on an *au pair* residing with a family to learn English and/or to experience the culture of the UK. The *au pair* was not regarded as an employee and was not to be seen as working; was not required to have childcare

qualifications or experience and should not be charged with caring for a baby or an infant.

- 8 Before 2008, *au pair* wishing to come to the UK could come from EEA states (in which case they did not need a visa) or they could apply for an *au pair* visa if they were from a list of named countries that included: Andorra, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, The Faroes, Greenland, Hungary, Macedonia, Malta, Monaco, San Marino, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Switzerland and Turkey (in December 2002, six accession countries were added: Bulgaria, Estonia, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania) (Newcombe 2004). From May 2004, *au pair* from the new EU accession states joined other EU and EEA citizens in being able to enter the UK and live as an *au pair* without a visa.¹ On 26 November 2008 the *au pair* visa scheme that had allowed *au pair* from outside the EU to enter the UK was closed and replaced by the 'Youth Mobility Scheme' (Tier 5 of the new points based system), which only applied to people from NZ, Australia, Canada and Japan (although offering *au pair* placements to New Zealanders, Australians and Canadians clearly broke the link between the *au pair* scheme and learning English).
- 9 After 26 November 2008, then, the entry and stay of *au pair* in the UK was no longer governed by Home Office regulations. No replacement government authority was suggested, though, with the Home Office instead directing people to the British *Au pair* Agencies Association website (www.bapaa.org.uk) for details of *au pairing* in the UK. This website, and the many others run by agencies that place *au pair*, maintains the idea that there is a specific legal entity called an *au pair*, and it sets out working hours, allowances, holiday entitlement etc, which are similar to those specified by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate when the *au pair* visa existed.² This ambiguity has fostered a situation in which after 2008 *au pair* in the UK are an 'imagined' category of 'non-workers' who are not entitled to the minimum wage nor the holidays prescribed by the European Working Time directive (Cox, 2012). The unregulated status of *au pair* – in the context of a thriving open market for in-home commoditized care – can be contrasted with European states such as Germany, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands, which allow third country nationals to enter as *au pair* and where, as such, the scheme remains subject to immigration rules that apply to many *au pair* participating (Stenum 2011). The United States also issues an *au pair* visa, and again the *au pair* scheme is tied to immigration rules and regulations.
- 10 The new arrangements for *au pair* in the UK post-2008 can therefore be understood in the context of changes to the country's migration regime. In the sections below I draw on analysis of ad data and interviews to argue that the effects of the changes brought about by the expansion of the EU and the removal of regulation around *au pairing* represent a marked shift from the original intentions of the *au pair* scheme and the explicit ways it has been promoted by agencies – as a form of cultural exchange/language immersion – to a form of domestic service/low paid nanny work whereby young women are required to combine cleaning and childcare for low pay.

Advertising for an *au pair*: assessing UK labour market standards in the market for in-home childcare

- 11 There is no reliable data available for measuring the size of the market for *au pair* in the UK and little information about how the market functions. The aim of the research

conducted for this article was to use alternative data sources to build a better picture of what *au pair* do, for whom and under what conditions. To this end, we familiarized ourselves with the marketplace for *au pair* positions on Gumtree.com, making a note of the text of 1,000 *au pair* wanted positions and then analyzing this data using the following codes 1) number of hours required per week; 2) number of evenings babysitting required; 3) pocket money offered; 4) age of the children to be cared for; 5) requests for prior experience as an *au pair*; 6) requests for references.

- 12 The lack of clarity about what is an *au pair* position (i.e. not a job but a cultural exchange) and what is not an *au pair* position (i.e. a paid childcare and or domestic work position) is apparent immediately in that ads for *au pair* and ads for nannies, housekeepers etc. are included under the same category of employment: “babysitting and nannies”. This category is then broken down into live-in (including *au pair*), live-out, maternity nurse and nanny share. Within the live-in category, nanny jobs and *au pair* jobs are advertised together and live-out jobs include ads for ‘live-out *au pair*’ as well as for live-out nannies. The ‘job descriptions’ used by prospective *au pair* employers on gumtree.com then continue to reflect a lack of clear distinction between what constitutes an *au pair* position and an employed childcare position – such as a nanny – in that it is very common for employers to advertise for an ‘*au pair*/nanny’ or an ‘*au pair*/housekeeper’, for example.
- 13 The following ads for *au pair* positions in London outline duties and expectations that suggest there is little to separate these *au pair* positions from paid employment positions:

Ad 1. Native Spanish speaking au pair, North London

We need a native Spanish speaking au pair to help look after two children (aged four and six) as well as our home. Hours are flexible to some extent but would be around 35 per week plus up to three nights babysitting. For this you would get your own room (with TV and wifi) and bathroom and £100 per week. We live in Hampstead Garden Suburb, near East Finchley station, zone 3 on the Northern Line. Please only reply if you are happy to speak to me and the children in Spanish

Ad 2. Au pair wanted, Richmond

Au pair wanted for two girls, aged 4 and 7 months. We are looking for:

- Live in au pair
- 35-40 hours per week (weekends free)
- Minimum stay 6 months (preferably 12 months or more)
- Ideally previous experience as au pair
- Someone who understands and engages well with children
- Nursery run, playing, feeding, preparing meals, take to park and activities
- We have a cleaner but still require some cleaning, tidying up etc.
- Female au pairs from any European Nationality - Must already be in the UK
- Start ASAP
- Good spoken English essential
- Well organised
- Non-smoker
- Valid CRB and 2 checkable references.

We will provide:

- Your own large room with double bed and large flat screen TV
- Wi-Fi internet
- £85 per week (below tax threshold)
- All meals

Please reply to this ad with full details and your phone number. Must Be In London For Interview and Ready For Start within 2 weeks.

- 14 The ads above were at the top end of the scale in terms of hours of work a week required as the average number of hours required by prospective employers of *au pair* was 31.8 hours a week (excluding evening babysitting). In addition, of the 1,000 ads considered, 446 ads stipulated a set number of evenings or hours of babysitting over and above to the daytime hours required. Of the ads that stipulated evening babysitting, the average

working week (including babysitting) involved 38.7 hours a week). Some employers asked for more than this and some asked for less, but around one-third (307 ads) asked for more than 25 hours a week. The average pocket money offered to *au pair* was £107.90 per week. This figure did, though, include the wage offered by people who advertised for *au pair*/nannies or housekeeper/*au pair*, with the very long hours required for these posts being typically rewarded by weekly rates in the £200+ range (27 ads mentioned a figure of £200 or more). More than half (510) of the prospective employers gave no figure for pay at all and 142 set a figure below £85 per week.

- 15 The terms and conditions offered to *au pair* can be compared with the £560 (gross) average weekly wage for a live-in nanny in London and £720 (gross) a week for a live-out nanny (<http://www.nannyjob.co.uk>). Meanwhile, the average cost in London of 25 hours' nursery care for a child under two is £177 and this figure continues to rise for hours that more realistically reflect the hours needed if parents work outside the home (<http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk/>). This means that for households that are property rich (Búriková and Miller 2010) to the extent that they have a room an *au pair* can inhabit (and this isn't essential as there are examples of ads requiring that the *au pair* will share with a child/children or sleep on the sofa in the living room), hiring an *au pair* can appear a relatively affordable childcare/domestic solution.
- 16 Prospective employers also commonly wanted an *au pair* who had 'experience' as an *au pair*, with 441 employers stipulating experience as important or necessary. Some 417 employers asked for prior experience as an *au pair* to be backed up by references from previous *au pair* host families. Around one-third (329) of the ads specified that an *au pair* should be prepared for and/or experienced in the care of a pre-school age child under the age of three. A smaller but significant (137) number of ads stipulated the position involved care of an infant under the age of one.
- 17 The practice of employers advertising an *au pair* position as involving daily sole care of infants and young children, exceeds the definition of the *au pair* role as outlined by the Strasbourg Agreement, by the former UK *au pair* visa conditions and by BAPAA. The number of hours per week that employers advertising on Gumtree commonly required of *au pair* also indicated that many *au pair* positions are more like full-time jobs than they are cultural exchange/language learning opportunities. Moreover, the requirement that an *au pair* is 'experienced' and is able back up his or her experience with references suggests that for a significant proportion of employers placing ads on Gumtree.com, *au pairing* is perceived as a job in which people go from one position to another, rather than as the one-off time-limited life-stage experience that the Strasbourg Agreement on *au pair* lays down. If an employer advertised for an *au pair plus* (which commonly attracted wages of £75-£120 a week) it justified hours of 40+ a week being routinely expected.

Labour market vulnerability: *au pair* talking about *au pairing*

- 18 The section above described the market for *au pair* in the UK in terms of wages and conditions frequently attached to such positions. The data gathered suggests long hours, low pay and demanding conditions looking after multiple young children characterize what is required of *au pair* in the UK. In addition, the absence of employment regulations covering *au pairing*, and the informality of the relationship between *au pair* and host,

means that many in this role have experienced profound insecurity in their position within a domestic space and have suffered physical and/or verbal abuse. The difficulties encountered by Anita, a 22 year old from Romania, are indicative of this vulnerability. Anita said:

I remember now this experience that I had two years ago here in the UK. I was in Preston. They had a baby, six months, the mum just left the baby with me suddenly and the baby kept on crying all the time. I had to be there because they were working in a restaurant from morning 11a.m. until 1a.m. at night and I had to be with the baby there all the time. My head was spinning, she was crying all the time. The dad said I was beating her up and he actually was violent with me and he took me at 4 a.m., he took me to the highway and he said he was going to leave me on the highway in the middle of the night.

- 19 Anita's experience of exploitation and abuse as an *au pair* was not uncommon. Other *au pair* interviewed recounted similar stories of arriving in the UK expecting to be treated as 'a member of the family' and instead being treated as something more akin to a servant. The cultural exchange element of the scheme was also deemed a myth by the majority of *au pair* interviewed as Carl, a Romanian university graduate who had been an *au pair* in the UK for five years at the time of interview, explained. Carl said that before he had come to the UK he had taken the term *au pair* (from French 'on a pair') literally and had thought he would be on 'equal terms' with his hosts and that cultural exchange would go both ways. He said of this:

For me, cultural exchange means it is both ways. I learn about England and they learn about Romania. But, no way. You have to adapt yourself entirely to their way. I mean, I come from Eastern Europe and we have different views of things, we have different ways... For example, I tried to cook for them the dishes that we eat at home. No, never, they never liked it. You know, they never touched, they're always, um, the kids would touch it, 'Oh it's disgusting', you know? Like they never had this openness. I tried, I really tried... I would talk about how it is in Romania. They listened once or twice and that's it!

- 20 An earlier study of *au pair* in the UK (Anderson et al, 2006) also found little evidence of employer activity to further *au pair*' knowledge of cultural life in the UK or to encourage English language advancement (see also Búriková and Miller 2010; Cox 2006). Interviews with *au pair* and with employers conducted for this article suggested both groups believed *au pair* were 'here to work', rather than to enjoy a cultural exchange and/or to learn or improve their English. Indeed 54 of the 58 *au pair* interviewed explained that they understood themselves as being 'employed' by the family, rather than 'hosted'. Of the 21 people interviewed who had employed an *au pair*, 16 said they understood the relationship as more like employer/employee than host/guest and most said that they had hired an *au pair* as it represented an affordable and available childcare solution.

Factoring employer action and rationales into the operation of the *au pair* scheme

- 21 Annabel was among those who said she saw her role as being to 'host' an *au pair* rather than being an employer. She said she understood hiring an *au pair* in terms of participating in a cultural exchange programme, but explained further that her primary motive was still financial. She said that an *au pair* had not seemed an obvious choice to her at first because her family lived in a small three-bedroom ex-council house in a run-

down part of London, and she had felt that the scheme, “Wasn’t for people like us... you know, we’re not rich”. After discussing her childcare options with friends who had employed *au pair*, Annabel was persuaded that if she moved the children into a shared bedroom she would be able to find an *au pair* who could live in the small third bedroom of their house for “£40-£60 plus board and lodging for 25 hours work a week”.³

- 22 Annabel decided to replace the childminder she had employed with an *au pair*, and this decision was explained in the light of the financial pressure on the household, that was particularly acute because of the effects of recession in the UK from 2008 that had impacted severely on the creative industries in which Annabel and her husband were both employed. Annabel reported that the childminder she had employed provided high-quality childcare, was qualified to NVQ level and was self-motivated regarding further training and devising stimulating activities for the children in her care and was warm and caring toward the children. She said she knew she had ‘pushed’ the *au pair* arrangement in that she regularly relied on the *au pair* to provide sole childcare for a baby, and to care for two children while she worked. However, Annabel did not see this as necessarily conflicting with the intentions of *au pairing*, as long as she treated the *au pair* as an ‘equal’, rather than treating her as a domestic servant. She said of this:

I can see it’s really replacing the well-trained, professional English option with the super-casual, completely untrained, non-English option. It’s like the competition between black cabs and unlicensed minicab drivers. Black cabs drivers are like childminders, better trained but more expensive, and you have all these loose-canon minicab drivers coming in and you know they can be a bit dodgy but you take them because they are so much cheaper. *Au pair* are the minicabs of London! I felt really bad about what I was doing, but what could I do? And, you know, if it is done how it was supposed to be I think it’s ok. It is supposed to be about cultural exchange, isn’t it? About having a chance to live in London. It is supposed to be if the mother is there and it’s another pair of hands. I guess I’m pushing it a step further in that it’s sole childcare but I’m not treating her like a skiv.

- 23 Annabel was clear that she had decided to hire an *au pair* because as Búriková (2006) put it “It is what [she] could afford...”. Búriková also found in her account of *au pair* employment that it was most commonly used as a means for parents to continue in full- or part-time employment and it was settled upon because it provided more control over childcare than childminding and was cheaper than a nanny (Búriková 2006). Despite her categorising herself as being an employer who did abide by the ‘cultural exchange’ aspect of *au pairing*, then, Annabel’s decision could be seen to be more akin to the economic transaction outlined by Búriková.
- 24 It was clear that the majority of the employers interviewed did not see themselves as having responsibilities to facilitate cultural exchange opportunities as part of their role as a ‘host’ to an *au pair*. Moreover, employing an *au pair* was not understood to include a duty to facilitate English language acquisition or improvement. Rather, the reverse was the case as all but one *au pair* employer (who spoke French at home) said that they would not consider an *au pair* who did not speak excellent English. The prerequisite of excellent spoken English language discussed by *au pair* employers contravenes the Council of Europe, the Home Office (when it still laid down specifications) and latterly BAPAA’s directives on *au pairing* before the arrangement has even begun. Moreover, rather than a sense that it is a employer’s responsibility to be of use to the *au pair* – by assisting their guest in their quest to learn English or experience life in the UK – the unanimous sense from employers is that it is the *au pair*’s responsibility to be immediately useful to the

family, including being able to follow instructions, communicate with children, make themselves understood and thus quickly and efficiently fulfill their role as childcare and domestic worker. This suggests that rather than being guests on a cultural or language exchange, employers interviewed for this article saw *au pair* as being primarily here to work for them.

- 25 *Au pair* in the UK are, then, commonly understood as being ‘migrant workers’, and it is tacitly acknowledged that they receive very low pay for multiple duties over a long working week. This does not, though, preclude the relationship between an employer and an *au pair* being represented by employers as being essentially mutually satisfying – ‘a win-win situation’ as one employer put it – or even to the greater benefit of the *au pair*. The upshot of this is that the illusion of equality in the treatment of an *au pair* by the employer can be made to assume value. This allowed Annabel to say that despite paying her *au pair* £65 a week to in effect act as a nanny and do housework, she felt that she was a ‘good employer’, because she was not like the parents who featured in the ‘really terrible, really exploitative’ stories she had heard about.
- 26 The ways in which employers have constructed themselves as benevolent helpers of migrants working in their homes has been discussed in relation to employers of domestic workers (Anderson 1993, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parnas 2001; Pratt, 1999b, 1997; Stiell and England 1999). Employers of *au pair* interviewed for this article constructed themselves as helping ‘their’ *au pair* to get on in the UK by providing them with room and board from which they could earn money, make contacts or otherwise establish themselves. This was the case even when the same employers acknowledged that they benefited enormously from the cheap, flexible childcare and housework provided by the *au pair*, and talked openly about the money they saved on formal childcare and cleaning services.
- 27 That is, while it is clear that the majority of employers see *au pair* as being their employees, they nonetheless feel that the existence of a previous Home Office defined *au pair* scheme justified the payment of pocket money rather than a wage. This, and the fact that *au pair* are not covered by UK minimum wage legislation (www.direct.gov.uk), means that employers are able to discuss the hours an *au pair* is required to work, the tasks they let the *au pair* out of, and the amount of ‘pocket money’ paid as dependent upon their own generosity. Again, this allows employers to construct themselves as generous when they pay more than the base rate of £75, or do not insist on *au pair* acting as cleaners as well as child care workers. This is the case even though employers understand that the pocket money paid is insufficient to live on and far lower than they would have to pay for other forms of childcare on the market.
- 28 The way in which employers interviewed for this article discussed resolving their childcare needs reinforces a broader point about the UK care regime – that in the UK, along with Germany and the Netherlands, as far as young children are concerned, their care outside of school is deemed to be the responsibility of the family, whether or not their mothers worked (Annttonen and Sipila 1996; Williams and Gavanis 2008). This observation is reinforced by research conducted for this article in that employers interviewed did not accept nursery care as a standard and acceptable solution to combining work and family commitments, nor did they rely on networks of family. Instead, employers discussed a preference for in-home care for babies and/or a combination of this care with nursery, pre-school then school hours as children grew older. It was clear, though, that in rejecting nursery care for babies – or as full-time childcare solution for

toddlers – employers were not positing themselves as viable alternative carers for their children. Instead, whether they ‘needed’ care because of work commitments or ‘wanted’ care to attain more leisure time (Cox 2006), the rejection of nursery as an appropriate form of childcare was made possible because of the availability of an alternative in the form of affordable, flexible, easily accessed in-home care – and in many cases this was accessed in the form of an *au pair*. In this way it is possible to see how the supply of unregulated, often informal, labour contributes to reaffirming an anti-nursery discourse and an older morality that mother – or a mother substitute – is best (William and Gavanas 2008). The UK childcare regime has therefore dovetailed with migration regimes to contribute to the production of a particular demand for commoditised childcare in private homes in the UK that is in many cases met by *au pair*.

***Au pairing* as part of a migration route to the UK**

- 29 A key element of the *au pair* arrangement as it is laid out by the Strasbourg Agreement, as it operated in the UK in relation to non-EU citizens before 2008 and as it is practiced in states where *au pairing* is controlled by immigration authorities, is that it is time limited. That is, ‘pocket money’ rather than a wage being paid, and the lack of employment protection an *au pair* experiences, is excused in part by official explanations that it is a cultural exchange, not a job, and in part by assumptions that to be an *au pair* is to enter into a time-limited, one-off life-stage arrangement. A significant majority of *au pair* interviewed for this article, however, had or intended to, remain as *au pair* for more than two years or for an indefinite period. It was clear from interviews, though, that whether or not the experience was to be limited to a period of one year or longer depended to a great extent on whether an *au pair* was from a Western European state or from one of the newer EU states to the East. The reason why migrants from Eastern Europe might remain as *au pair* for longer than one year was aptly summarized by, Carl, from Romania, who had at the time of my interview with him had been an *au pair* in the UK for five years. He said:
- 30 I think you really need to make a distinction between *au pair* from Western Europe and *au pair* from Romania. I can see why you would go back to France after a year. Or Germany. But I do not want to go back to Romania. Everyone wants to leave.
- 31 Carl’s point about return was reinforced in that *au pair* interviewed discussed different sets of motivations and constraints around the period in which they intended to remain as an *au pair* depending on where they were from. Of 58 people (56 women and two men) working as *au pair* interviewed, those *au pair* who discussed it in terms of it being a temporary arrangement were more likely to be from Western European states. Moreover, these people were more likely to have stated goals – other than earning pocket money – that they hoped to achieve by being an *au pair*. The remaining *au pair* could be classified as working *au pair*, and they were more likely to be from the A8 states or from outside the EU. They were more likely to discuss *au pairing* in terms of earning a wage and/or providing a wage and accommodation that was then supplemented with additional casual work.
- 32 Carl had a degree in history from a university in Romania and ambitions to become a teacher. He explained that he felt *au pairing* as it is practiced in the UK is exploitative and

degrading. However, he explained further that his journey to the UK as an *au pair* was not a temporary time-out from his life and career in his home state, but was a strategy of escape from the low wages, poor living conditions and lack of opportunities in his home state. In making this point he said:

I mean for French *au pair* that I know, they come here only for the language. I will give you another example: I can be a teacher in Romania and the salary for a beginner, a teacher who is a beginner, is, like, £180 [a month] whereas I earn £320 [a month] here as an *au pair* and I work as many hours as a teacher. So for me it's still a good thing, but it's exploitation. It's exploitation because they give you £80 a week and they expect you to work and work and work. You know, it's never good enough what you do. I mean I'm cleaning, I'm cooking. I look after two kids. I mean, yes, the girl she's 14, but I still have to cook for her and clean. You know, do the laundry... they have a two dogs, I look after the dogs as well when the mum is not here and I'm still not good enough, you know?

Conclusion

- 33 This article has argued that *au pair* in the UK are increasingly perceived and treated as low-paid childcare and domestic workers. I have made this case by drawing on original ad data and interviews to demonstrate the extent to which *au pair* are required to have sole care of infants and very young children; to speak good English before they arrive in a position; to work 25-50 hours a week for 'pocket money'; and to combine childcare with housework that allows parents to work long hours and/or enjoy leisure time. I have argued that these and other examples of common perceptions of what *au pair* are for and how they should be treated are not in the spirit of *au pairing* as it was originally defined by the Council for Europe, then by the Home Office, and latterly by the BAPAA and by *au pair* agencies. Ads for *au pair* positions such as those discussed in this article – and examples of treatment discussed by *au pair* and employers interviewed – are not, though, breaking any laws in the UK. Rather, the term *au pair* is now so loosely defined and so lightly regulated in the UK that the term can be applied to anyone from overseas who does childcare, housework or assists employers in any way within a private home (see also Cox 2012). This situation is exacerbated because, while the UK government no longer defines what an *au pair* is or what rights s/he has, employment legislation – unchanged from when *au pair* rights were outlined by the Home Office – still distinguishes *au pair* as *not* being workers and specifically precludes them from protections such as minimum wage rates or maximum working hours. The absence of regulation around *au pairing* in the UK has therefore significantly changed the construction of the *au pair*, building precarity into the role and creating a new 'not-worker' status (Anderson 2010b). The effect of the cultural, social, political and economic blind eye turned to *au pairing* in the UK is the institutionalization of a group of very low-paid migrant workers employed to preform childcare and housework in private homes whose exploitation, precarity and vulnerability is overlooked.

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NOTES

1. On 1 May 2004, the A10, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, acceded to the EU at a ceremony in Dublin. Unlike the A10, it was decided that Bulgaria and Romania would fail to meet the political and socio-economic criteria needed to join the EU in time for 2004 accession, although both were admitted in January 2007 (under stricter conditions than those attached to A10 entry).
2. BAPAA recommended a minimum of £70 a week pocket money in 2014. The website explained that *au pairs* could be expected to “help in the home for up to five hours a day, plus two evenings of babysitting, with at least two full days off a week”. An *pair plus* arrangements allowed for the exchange of childcare and domestic labour under the same conditions as an *au pair* but in this case the worker was expected to put in around 26-35 hours per week, for which they could expect to receive “weekly pocket money of at least £85 a week outside London (£90 per week in London).
3. Annabel based this figure on her recollection of conversations with friends. She ended up paying £65.)

RÉSUMÉS

Cet article soutient que le travail de jeune fille au pair au Royaume-Uni a évolué d'un programme d'échange culturel fonctionnant essentiellement entre les familles de la classe moyenne à travers l'Europe de l'Ouest vers une situation où dans de nombreux cas, il s'agit d'un euphémisme pour l'offre de soins et du travail domestique faiblement rémunérés. De plus, il semble que cette situation se retrouve dans l'ensemble de l'Union Européenne et même au-delà. L'auteure soutient que les jeunes filles au pair peuvent être associées à d'autres catégories de travailleurs vulnérables dans une économie politique globale de soins ou du care. L'auteure affirme que la culture et les conditions du travail au pair au Royaume-Uni doivent être comprises à la lumière des changements apportés aux politiques en matière d'immigration du pays, dont les effets ont été une déréglementation du travail au pair dans une UE élargie. L'article s'appuie sur l'analyse du texte de 1000 annonces pour jeunes filles au pair placées par les employeurs potentiels, une analyse qui permet de dégager des données sur les salaires et les conditions d'un secteur informel caractérisé par des sources de données inadéquates. Ces données sont utilisées pour démontrer que, malgré de très longues heures et des exigences excessives en termes d'âge et de nombre d'enfants à être pris en charge, sans compter les travaux de ménage, les personnes au pair reçoivent de très faibles revenus en étant payées essentiellement en "argent de poche", ce qui est moins que le salaire minimum. L'article s'appuie également sur des entretiens avec 58 personnes au pair et 21 employeurs de jeunes filles au pair et ce matériel d'entrevue est utilisé pour discuter des motivations et des expériences des deux groupes.

This article argues that *au pairing* in the UK has evolved from being a cultural exchange scheme operating primarily between middle-class families across Western Europe to being in many cases a euphemism for low-paid care and domestic work involving people from the across the EU and beyond. For this reason I argue that *au pair* are usefully understood alongside other vulnerable workers within a global political economy of care. The article argues that the culture and

conditions of *au pairing* in the UK should be understood in the light of changes to the country's migration regime, the effects of which have deregulated *au pairing* in an expanded EU. The article draws on analysis of the text of 1,000 ads for *au pair* placed by prospective employers to learn more about the wages and conditions of a sector characterized by inadequate data sources and informality. This data is used to demonstrate that despite very long hours and excessive demands in terms of age and number of children to be cared for and housework required, *au pair* receive very low income through being paid 'pocket money' that is less than the minimum wage. The article also draws on interviews with 58 *au pair* and 21 employers of *au pair* and this interview material is used to discuss the motivations and experiences of both groups.

INDEX

Mots-clés : au pair, Care, globalization du care, jeunes filles au pair, soins

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