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They treat me like I am not a person: Contextualising identity work amongst domestic workers

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Orientation: Domestic workers constitute a vulnerable workforce and one from which we can further our understanding of marginalised gender identities at work. Moreover, they represent an understudied context for exploring work identity.

Research purpose: This article explored the work identity of domestic workers in South Africa with a particular focus on the multiple contexts in which they develop and maintain a sense of identity.

Motivation for the study: The aim of the study was to increase our understanding of the role of context in the development, regulation and negotiation of work identity in a non-managerial sample.

Research approach/design and method: Using a multiple case study design, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six domestic workers, to explore their identity negotiation in context. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Main findings: We combined extant understandings of work identity and context to examine domestic work identity in the relation to the contexts and multiple identities involved in its construction and negotiation. We identified three contexts in which identity-related sense-making occurs – the job, the employment context and the broader national societal context. Within these contexts, we pinpoint multiple social identities the participants develop and negotiate.

Practical/managerial implications: These findings can guide policy makers in regulating the domestic worker employment sphere.

Contribution/value-add: We have developed a nested model of identity contexts to illustrate the complexity and interrelatedness of domestic worker's identity work which can serve as a basis for understanding other forms of contextual identity work.

Keywords: identity; work identity; identity work; context; domestic workers; dirty work.

Introduction

The International Labour Organization (2021) describes domestic work as 'that which is performed in or for households, within an employment relationship and on an occupational basis'. Domestic workers typically perform duties such as cleaning, cooking, caring for children and the elderly or disabled, as well as tending to the garden or other household chores deemed necessary (Dawood & Seedat-Khan, 2023). Domestic work in South Africa constitutes approximately 6.7% of the workforce with over one million people employed in the sector, which exceeds the labour force in both agriculture and mining (Department of Statistics, 2023). Thus, while domestic work is one of the single largest sectors of the South Africa labour force because they work 'behind closed doors [and] within private spaces' (Ally, 2008, p. 1) research concerning their lives, duties and experiences is relatively sparse despite its persistence over space and time (Dinkelman & Ranchod, 2012). Research into the experience of domestic workers in South Africa includes the experiences of migrant Basotho domestic workers (Griffin, 2011), factors that contribute to a positive work experience for domestic workers (De Villiers & Taylor, 2019) and the development of a clinical model for identification of systematic inequality and the reduction of exploitation (Dawood & Seedat-Khan, 2023).

Consistent themes in the extant literature regarding domestic work in South Africa are exploitation, marginalisation, invisibility, violence, class-based imperialism and the powerlessness of those employed in this sphere (Cock, 2011; Dawood & Seedat-Khan, 2023; De Villiers & Taylor, 2019; Donald & Mahlatji, 2006; Gama & Willemse, 2015). Thus, entry into domestic labour as an

occupation is defined through desperation rather than design and thus provides ideal conditions from which we can further our understanding of marginalised identities at work. Moreover, the lack of choice characterising domestic work suggests strong contextual drivers in occupational choice and raises interesting questions regarding the nature of context in the formation and development of identity.

Identities do not exist in a vacuum, nor do they develop without context (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). Context, as an important source of meanings, influences the nature of identity work (Brown, 2015; Srinivas, 2003), the process of forming, maintaining, repairing and revising identities (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). As such, identities are relational (Kreiner et al., 2006), connecting people to personally meaningful groups, roles and social categories, and providing possible resources for managing the challenges posed by the complexity of life (Ashforth, 2009, p. 171). In so doing, identities are shaped by the historical, geographical, religious, cultural and social structures of which we are part (Ybema et al., 2009). They are activated in specific contexts which determine which of our multiple identities are salient at a given moment (Leavitt & Sluss, 2015). While there is increasing interest in the role of context in the phenomena we study (Stahl et al., 2023), much of the larger contextual formations structuring identity remain underexplored (Bysh et al., 2023; Ybema, 2020).

Authors who have explored contextual formations include Srinivas (2013), Crafford (2011), Carrim and Nkomo (2016) and Crafford (2022). While these studies have in common the exploration of identities in post-colonial work contexts, their focus is professional and managerial work, and do not provide greater insight into marginalised occupations characterised as 'dirty', of which domestic work is an illustrative example. As Ashforth and Kreiner (2014, p. 423) argue, where demeaning work is conducted by those who are marginalised in respect of socio-economic, gender and racio-ethnic identities, it creates an 'entrapping recursive loop between "dirty work" and being labelled as "dirty people". Domestic work, despite being one of the largest employment sectors in South Africa and carrying profound social and historical significance, remains underexplored in identity scholarship. This article responds to that gap by foregrounding the lived experiences of domestic workers, examining how their work identities are shaped, constrained and negotiated within multiple, intersecting contexts. By centring an occupation often rendered invisible in mainstream identity research, the study aims to contribute to a more contextualised and inclusive understanding of identity work.

Research purpose and objectives

In this article we shed light on an often-invisible cohort (Cock, 2011) as an example of a marginalised work identity and in doing so, explore the multiple contexts in which domestic workers identities are constructed and framed. We identify three contexts in which their identity is constructed and negotiated, these being the job, the employment context and the broader national context. Each of these contexts intersect and regulate multiple identities triggered within the context and which are negotiated with varying degrees of agency, depending on the structures and practices relevant in each context. This allows for a richer understanding of the work identity of domestic workers and the role of context in structuring their identity and regulating identity work, hence enhancing our understanding of the dynamics of the context – identity relationship (Stahl et al., 2023).

Literature review

Work identity refers to how a person perceives and defines themselves in the context of work (Adams & Crafford, 2012). Rooted in the self-concept, it consists of social, organisational or job-related identities, which influence the roles one engages in and the resultant workplace-based behaviours (Walsh & Gordon, 2008). Kirpal (2004, p. 201) highlights the complex process of negotiation involved in developing work identity, which she suggests occurs 'at the interface between personal resources, attitudes and values on the one hand, and work processes and settings on the other hand'. This definition highlights both the individual dispositions and structural conditions of the work context, which interact to influence work identity. Building on the perspective of Kirpal (2004, 2006) and combining local empirical data, Saayman and Crafford (2011) developed a model of work identity construction in organisations which is initiated through the interaction of the person, the social context, the job and the larger organisational context. The five dimensions of the model (personal identity, social identity, social practice, individual agency and job and/or task) are situated between the forces of the 'me' and the 'us'. This provides a framework for understanding how work identity is negotiated in organisational contexts, which allows for more relevant, novel and actionable insights (Stahl et al., 2023). However, this model is limited in that it does not fully capture identity construction in occupations that are marginalised, stigmatised or located outside formal organisational structures.

Research on 'dirty work' provides a compelling extension of these debates. 'Dirty work' refers to tasks and occupations that are stigmatised because of their perceived association with *physical* (e.g. garbage or death), *social* (e.g. tainted clients or servile relationships) and/or *moral* (e.g. sinful or deceptive) taint (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) argue that meaning and identity in such occupations are shaped in response to stigma, with workers forming strong occupational cultures and group bonds through strategies that counteract or alleviate the taint attached to their roles. Extending their line of work, Bosmans et al. (2016) demonstrate how domestic workers actively negotiate their sense of self through coping such as reframing (e.g. perceiving a clean house as an honourable achievement), recalibration (e.g. emphasising their role as carer rather than cleaner) and

refocusing (e.g. highlighting positive aspects of their work, such as flexible working hours). These strategies can be adaptive or maladaptive, enable workers to navigate stigma in ways that sometimes foster pride and dignity but can also reinforce negative self-perceptions. Importantly, the study shows that contextual conditions such as client treatment, voluntariness of job choice and supportive employment relations influence these outcomes, highlighting the situated, contextual nature of identity work outside formal organisational structures. It is the situational opportunities and constraints, present in their occupational contexts, influencing their identity construction and work (Johns, 2006) which characterise the focus of this study.

Research design and methodology

The present study rests on an interpretive multiple case study design which is particularly suited to explore the relationship between case and context, allowing the researcher to make comparisons and thus build theory (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). This implies an in-depth consideration of the nature of the case, its historical background, physical setting and any other relevant factors, such as political or contextual influences (Hyett et al., 2014).

Sampling and data collection

Using a combination of snowball and purposive sampling, six domestic workers were approached. Participants were accessed via a trusted gatekeeper known to one of the authors or approached informally within a residential estate in Gauteng to explore their willingness to participate. Criteria included having at least one employer within the aforementioned estate and representing a form of domestic work namely live-out with multiple employers or live-in with primarily one employer. While provision was made for a translator, this proved unnecessary as all participants were able to speak English. The participants' ages ranged from late 30s to late 50s. The minimum number of years of working experience was 6, while the maximum was more than 30 years. While this sample may seem too small according to Eisenhardt (1989), in case study design, it is possible to arrive at novel insights and thus develop theory from samples between 4 and 10.

Data were gathered by the second author using semi-structured interviews with six domestic workers. All interviews were held in neutral spaces not associated with any links to their employers. The interview schedule was grounded in the identity literature (Saayman & Crafford, 2011) and carefully worked to ensure understanding by non-first language English speakers by referring to other studies conducted amongst the target group (Archer, 2011; Bresnihan, 2014; Thobejane & Khosa, 2016). Questions centred around their entry into the occupation, their job context, social practices governing the employment context and their multiple identities interacting with their role as domestic worker. All interviews were recorded and transcribed professionally. Participants were assigned pseudonyms that best represented something of the personal presence and energy projected during the interview. A summary of key demographics are presented in Table 1.

Data analysis

Data were analysed by both authors using a combination of narrative analysis and thematic analysis. The narrative analysis focused on each participant's experiences, considering multiple perspectives and possible interpretations, taking into account the context of the participants' own narrative and those of the other domestic workers (Gabriel & Griffith, 2004). Particular attention was paid to analysing 'narrative strings' (referring to present commonalties that run through and across the data), 'narrative threads' (referring to emerging themes) and temporal or spatial themes (referring to contexts of the past, present and future) (Maree, 2011). As part of this process, each participants' data were consolidated in the form of a detailed narrative to allow for thorough understanding of each case. The aim of this step was to identify the various contexts which regulated identity formation and identity work, as it is in context that action is rendered meaningful (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Once the individual datasets had been analysed and interpreted, it was possible to conduct a cross-case thematic analysis to identify patterns across the cases (Braun & Clarke, 2012). While the number of participants having had a particular experience certainly informed the selection of themes, there are sections where the story of one participant is particularly relevant as it 'captures something important in relation to the overall research question' (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 82). It is here that case study logic was applied as argued by Gerring (2007):

> [*W*]hat distinguishes the case study method from all other methods is its reliance on evidence drawn from a single case and its attempt, at the same time, to illuminate a broader set of cases. (p. 29)

TABLE 1: Overview of participant characteristics.

Name	Age (years)	Marital status	Number of children	Country of origin	Education level	Full- or part-time	Current duties
Love	Early 50s	Single mother†	Two	South Africa	Grade 5	Multiple part-time employers	Cleaning and household chores
Strength	Mid-30s	Married	Two	Zimbabwe	Completed O-levels	Full-time/live-in	Cleaning and child-care duties
Faith	Late 30s	Married	Two	Zimbabwe	O-levels not completed	Full-time/live-in	Cleaning and child-care duties
Peace	Late 30s	Single mother	Two	South Africa	First year nursing	Full-time but not live-in	Child-care duties
Confidence	Mid-50s	Single mother	Two	South Africa	Grade 12	Full-time/live-in	Cleaning and child-care duties
Serenity	Early 50s	Single mother	Three	South Africa	Grade 10	Full-time/live-in	Cleaning and child-care duties

†, Love was married but her partner passed away when their child was a year old making her a single mother.

Important here was the emphasis on understanding the case in order to understand other similar cases, not the broader population as one attempts to do in survey research (Stake, 2005).

Trustworthiness of the research

Trustworthiness in qualitative research requires researchers to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Loh, 2013; Shenton, 2004). In this study, credibility was supported through triangulation, supervisory checks, iterative questioning and thick description. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich contextual detail and vivid accounts that allow readers to experience the participants' realities. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened through maintaining a clear audit trail, including interview schedules, field notes, recordings and methodological documentation, ensuring findings reflect participants' experiences rather than researcher bias. Together, these strategies enhance the rigour and accountability of the study.

Reflexive considerations

As white, middle class women researchers, we acknowledge that our social positions differ significantly from those of the participants in the study. We are aware that we occupy positions of privilege in a society structured by colonial and apartheid legacies. Our race, economic status and institutional affiliation place us in asymmetrical relations of power to the black African women whose lives and labour are the focus of this study. This may shape how we have interpreted the participants narratives, as well as how they chose to share their stories with us.

As such, particular attention was paid to the multi-layered power dynamics present in a study of this nature. Ally (2011) suggests researchers pay particular attention to their ethics, highlighting the potentially exploitative nature of these investigations. For this reason, we strove to include the voices of our participants in the write up. We however, acknowledge that the findings are attributable to our own reflexive processes and the inputs of the participants, both of which are designed to both inform and persuade (Kohler Riessman, 2008). Finally, as researchers it was important to remember that our interpretations, however well justified, are never final. We needed to remain open to the possibility that other interpretations might be plausible (Gabriel, 2013).

Permission to conduct this study was granted by the Department of Human Resource management, University of Pretoria (Ethic clearance number MMD/2021/12). As per the University of Pretoria's policies as well as best practice in ethical research as required by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and Society for Industrial and Organisational Psychology of South Africa (SIOPSA), informed consent was gained in writing. The participants were provided with a written letter of research intent explaining the purpose of the research and its intended outcomes, which was read and signed by both participant and the second author. To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants in this study, each participant was allocated a pseudonym to protect their identity, and all identifying information is kept securely according to the guidelines of the university.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Pretoria Department of Human Resource Management (No. MMD/2021/12).

Results

Contexts of domestic worker identity construction

In this section, we discuss three contexts in which the domestic worker's identity was constructed and highlight salient identities that were triggered and negotiated. These contexts are interrelated and, while theoretically depicted as distinct, influence each another in multiple ways.

The national context

Domestic work in Southern Africa cannot be understood without reference to the national *political* context and the consequent *socio-economic conditions, the educational context* as well the *regulatory framework for domestic work*. We assume that a political system to a large degree will influence the boundary conditions of identity construction, providing or constraining opportunities and influencing the degree of agency a person has in the choice of identities, including occupational ones. The political context influences the socio-economic conditions which in turn impact educational possibilities. The following quote, taken from Faith's interview, highlights the consequences of political instability in Zimbabwe, South Africa's neighbour, which led to a socio-economic crisis which impacted her ability to continue with her schooling. Faith draws attention to the harsh economic climate experienced in the early 2000s, and the impact this had on their ability to provide for their most basic needs, including her school fees:

> 'Zimbabwe be[*came a*] very, became a very difficult place, where you can't even afford a bread. Where you can't, can't afford even to buy an apple. My mother couldn't even pay my, my school fees to write the O-Level. I ended up leaving school. At the end it was around like 2004. We ended up leaving then. Then the life was becoming harder. My mother [and I], we just wake up in the morning, we don't know what to eat, what to put on the table …' (Faith)

Desperate to put food on the table, Faith chose migration, making her way to South Africa, via Botswana, in search of a better life. As a South African, Serenity told a very similar story:

> 'I'm coming from a poor family. My father pass[*ed*] away, I was still very young. And my mother [*had to*] continue to work. My mother was a domestic worker. [*She*] worked hard for us to go to school. But [*she*] doesn't manage, because it was my brother, my sister and I also… I don't have a choice. I [*was*] just working, and then I leave it, because [*the factory*] were closed. So, I start working for that woman…' (Serenity)

While Faith's story speaks to political instability, Serenity's story contains a tacit reference to South Africa's historical political situation and the many years of structural oppression through colonial rule and the apartheid system that relegated black African women to domestic labour (Dawood & Seedat-Khan, 2023). This has had far-reaching consequences for the development of Black identity generally (Abdi, 1999) and introduces a temporal dimension into our understanding of context and its impact in identity formation and development. The fact that all these women are black African also draws attention to the close relationship between their embodiment and the dynamics of historical political context.

Both of these extracts highlight how the link between poverty and its impact on education plays a significant role in the development of identity, setting boundaries for opportunities, or lack thereof, regarding occupational choices (Ayling, 2015; Palardy, 2013). While educational levels amongst participants differed (see Table 1), ranging from Grade 5 (Love) to first year nursing (Peace), all the domestic workers in our study ended their education earlier than they would have liked because of socio-economic constraints. The participants' stories delivered numerous examples of economic deprivation which had impacted their education and consequently their choices and options regarding their possible occupations. For example, Love grew up in a semi-rural home and upon instruction from her maternal grandfather and mother, had to leave school in Grade 5 because of financial difficulties. Bound by the socio-economic constraints, Love had to give up her dream of becoming a teacher and take on a position as a domestic worker:

> '... because [*of*] we were very cross because we cry so much, when my grandfather drop[*ed*] us from school. I cry for sure [*for*] three days. Because I was say[*ing*], "If I finish the school, I'm going to be a teacher." Yes. I love to be with the children.' (Love)

This is consistent with the pattern highlighted in the work of Seedat-Khan (2009) who traces the role of significant others in the primary socialisation of black African girls, which lays the foundation for a cycle of domestic work and servitude.

While all participants as a result of their circumstances found themselves in domestic work, each had occupational identity aspirations which suggests the presence of possible selves (Ibarra, 1999) but given the contextual constraints were forced to take on domestic positions. Nevertheless, elements of these provisional selves remained, and many found ways within their work context, to express these elements of their identity. For example, Strength had wanted to become a nurse, but instead found her calling in combining healthcare and housekeeping in becoming a qualified home carer for the elderly. She planned to complete a course in eldercare to expand her future employment options. Thus, while contextual constraints posed identity–related challenges, these led to a process of sense-making and the repositioning of identity in ways that at least mitigated the constraint. Identity construction thus constituted a sense-making process that occurred at the interface between context and personhood.

The employment context

In the case of the domestic worker, the employment context was defined as their relationships with their employers, their working conditions, including remuneration. Consistent with the extant literature (De Villiers & Taylor, 2019), the employment context of most domestic workers in this study was defined by poor remuneration and working conditions, and at times, strained relationships with employers often resulting in them leaving to seek alternative employment. While their employment conditions differed, most had stories of employment settings that were characterised by long hours (up to 15-h days), unclear and flexible job descriptions which were adjusted at the whim of their employers, inconsistent leave days and time off, very poor pay and a lack of clarity around other benefits such as food.

While the government does prescribe a minimum wage (*The National Minimum Wage Act No. 9 of 2018*)[1] and basic conditions of service (*Basic Conditions of Service Act No.75 of 1997*), there is limited enforcement of the latter, and it remains unregulated which often leads to unequal and exploitative work conditions. All the participants referred to employment contexts where they had been poorly paid and only two of the participants had employment contracts:

> 'But even if you look [*at*] the minimum [*wage*] of South Africa government, I'm not even reaching there… And I don't know also how often you must [*get*] off and how it works with days you must not work, which days you work. Like other people in the [*estate*], when we're sitting they say, "No, there should be, there should be a contract that you must sign."' (Faith)

> 'But then, I, I can't leave the job. I really need to work. I need money. Yoh, you see sometimes when you struggle, you'll agree to everything…' (Strength)

Both Faith and Strength, hailing from neighbouring countries, felt that they had limited negotiation power. However, because of their breadwinner status, they were reluctant to complain, fearing they could lose their only means of earning an income. Their identity as foreigners as well as their migrant status increased the likelihood of exploitation and exacerbated the vulnerability they felt as domestic workers. This further inhibited their agency.

Where the domestic workers had formal employment contracts, these helped enormously in protecting their rights. For example, Confidence's employment contract with her previous employer specified she would be paid a double salary in December as a form of bonus. When this commitment was not honoured, Confidence produced their written contract, hoping that it would settle the issue:

> 'Then I called them, I said "You said you gonna give me double pay." I called the woman, I said "[*name of employer*], you said you gonna give me double pay." She said "Domestic workers doesn't deserve double pay." I said to her, "But we… here is the contract." She said, "You can tear up the contract… Or you can go to the police station."' (Confidence)

1.The National Minimum Wage is subject to annual review and in 2025 was set at R28.79 per hour.

Confidence was able to resolve this situation without having to go to the police. Standing up to her employer, she was able to negotiate more equitable treatment for herself; this brought more positive meanings around her identity as a domestic worker and highlighted the agency she could enact.

Despite difficult circumstances, the participants were reluctant to leave as their work allowed them to provide for their families. As mothers, they were willing to sacrifice their own comfort and dignity for the benefit of their children. Their identity as mothers manifested in a determination to ensure their children had a better education with greater possibilities, but this also meant that their choice to leave was restricted, often forcing them to stay in situations of exploitation.

Living at the intersection of work and family, the interviewed domestic workers were at the whim of the dynamics of their employer's personal lives and subject to domestic conflict, emotional outbursts and the trauma of divorce. From an identity perspective, the employment context as experienced by the participants was characterised by three identity tensions: the cultural identity clashes, the ambiguity around their status as 'family members' and the tension around their identity as mothers.

The cultural identity differences were highlighted especially in preferences regarding food choice and preparation, which were mentioned as a challenge:

> 'So, I said "You know, we Black people, we love pap and our stuff." You see? Sometimes I can, I, I can cook pap and gravy or pap or… mogodu [*tripe*], like that. It's our food. And we enjoy it, nê? And then, if I cook in your house, you gonna come inside and say "ooh, what smells, what…? Then you make me feel like I'm a not good or I'm maybe I make your house something smell."' (Confidence)

The second tension lies in the label of 'family', an identity often given to women working in domestic spaces. Yet, invoking the intimacy implied by the term family masks the inequality present in these working relationships (Stacey, 2005). One of the common terms for domestic workers in South Africa is the Afrikaans word 'ousie' which means 'little old sister'. The irony of invoking the meaning of family, but in which the 'littleness' of the older person is reinforced, provides linguistic support for the notion of inequality.

All the participants except Peace mentioned the idea of family though attached different meanings to it. Love had worked for her main employer for 27 years and often invoked this identity in relation to her employment there. She also mentioned she felt like family when as a new domestic worker her employers expressed concern about her whereabouts and made sure they greeted her in the morning and at night. From Love's perspective, this concern was construed as love, and she viewed it as being part of the family.[2] Confidence compared her current employers, with whom she feels like family because she is made to feel 'at home', with her previous employers[3] who told their friends she was 'family' but she 'didn't see it'. Serenity provided the best example of family in action as she spoke about the respect and care she was given and the way she was treated like a 'real' mother on Mother Day:

> 'Exactly, they are my family. They respect me and then they listen to me, each and every time when I've got something, maybe it's not going well with me, When I come home, sometimes in weekend, something hurt me, and then I go and stay and then we talk. And then she [*her employer*] give me advice, you see…. And Friday, when I go home, she bought me a box of chocolates, and flower, and she gave me a voucher for R500. This Serenity, enjoy your Mother's Day on Sunday.' (Serenity)

The invocation of the family identity in relation to their employers, also implies a tacit reference to the fact that in being part (or not) of their employer's family, they are spending long periods of time away from their own families, the source of the third tension. From a relational perspective, domestic workers involved in caring for children face the complexities involved in the mothering identity placed on them in reference to their employer's children, to whom they often became surrogate mothers. This is not surprising as woven into the meaning of the domestic workers, is the expectation that they will 'exude the effects of motherhood authentically in the home of her employer' (Akalin, 2015, p. 65). An exemplar case in the study is of Strength who has a very close relationship with her employer's children with whom she spends a significant amount of time, raising them, teaching them, going on holiday with them; she views herself as a default mother for them, even calling them 'my kids' in parts of the interview. While Strength struggles with the long hours and poor pay, the cord of this adopted mothering identity is powerful, exerting influence on her decision to leave this challenging employment context:

> 'Uh, what keeps me there, is the kids. "Cause when I work, when I work, when I am stressed, when I look at them. Because they always like talk, laugh, you know the kids how they are. They make you do anything…So he makes me happy, like, he keeps me going. Uh, so like when I'm sitting there sad, he just come "Where is my second mummy?" I just end up laughing.' (Strength)

Faith also highlights the relationship with the children she cares for referring to them as her 'present children at that moment'. All the love she cannot pour into her own children is given to those under her care. Yet, despite being expected to 'mother' her employers' children she is denied the authority to act on this. Faith discovered this when she started teaching her employers children to pick up their toys and she was told 'No, that's your job' by their parents:

> 'That's why when I tell the kids like "Hey go and pick up that thing." She will tell me "No, that's your job".' (Faith)

Thus, while Faith is expected to assume the identity of a second mother within the household, she lacks the authority to exercise the full rights of motherhood and is constrained in exercising her beliefs. She believes that training children to

2. This could also be interpreted as unnecessary regulation by her employer and the infringement of her freedom as an adult. However, given our commitment to expressing the voices of our participants, we align ourselves with Love's interpretation.

3. The employers with whom she had a dispute about her bonus.

be responsible and respectful is the correct way to raise a child, and therefore she treats those in her care accordingly. However, the response to her requests demeans her in front of the children and further highlights her lowly position in the home and society.

The job context

What we have termed the job context refers to all elements related to the job and the identities emanating from this. The job context is nested within the employment and national context, and is designated as a separate context as it is influenced by both the broad expectation of the national discourse and the distinct conditions of the employment context. We will now discuss the content of the job, the identity work strategies used to mitigate the stigmatised nature thereof and the positive identities located in this central context.

For the most part, the participants' duties as domestic workers appeared relatively consistent with what one would assume, and centred primarily on cleaning of a house and/or childminding. Table 1 provides an indication of each participant's duties. The scope of their duties impacted their workload considerably and those who were required to do both, in most instances, complained of long hours and overwork.

Several of the participants highlighted the stigma of being a domestic worker, and much of their sense-making was focused on resolving the stigma located in this identity. Consistent with the extant literature, the participants engaged in identity work using occupational ideologies (Bosmans et al., 2016) and several strategies were used in this regard. Love relied on the strategy of *recalibrating* which involves maximising a small aspect of the job by highlighting the value of a clean house. Using the strategy of *reframing*, all participants positioned themselves as ***hard workers*** infusing the stigmatised work associated with their occupation with positive value:

> 'I'm a hard worker, [*that*] is the thing that I know. I know the way I grew up, they know, there where I grew up, like when did my father passed away, like my relatives, no one even buy me a book. I have to come out from the school and then go to some piece job, at a, at a very young age.' (Strength)

> 'Never, ever let your, your boss come and tell you "No, can you see here now, this shoe is dirty." I must see myself that this shoe is dirty.' (Faith)

Moreover, they positioned themselves as ***breadwinners*** focusing on their ability to provide for their children and extended family (Bosmans et al., 2016). Faith for example, stated:

> 'I must pay my funeral policy, that if I dies here, or if my kids have got an emergency, they must go home. And then I must pay rent, because I'm owing, I'm, I'm staying on someone's place. And then I must buy the food that is enough for them, the school things.' (Faith)

Given that most of the participants were single mothers (with the exception of Faith and Strength), this was a necessity; one that is often required of African women (Hall & Posel, 2019). Despite the many demands placed on the relatively small amounts earned, their status as breadwinners provided a sense of pride which allowed a measure of influence and agency. In addition, most participants had also been able to build a house for themselves, furnishing a secure living for themselves in their old age, which significantly reduced their potential vulnerability.

While the participants indicated that domestic work was not an occupation they would willingly choose, they all highlighted their lack of choice, locating this in the contextual constraints discussed precedingly in a form of defensive tactic, *acceptance* (Bosmans et al., 2016).

In addition to the use of occupational ideologies and defensive tactics, social weighting was also used. This entails comparing the self against different types of outsiders (Bosmans et al., 2016). For example, Faith used the strategy of selective social comparisons, highlighting the moral value of domestic work in comparison to the taint associated with prostitution or selling drugs as examples. Finally, in mitigating identity threats associated with their 'tainted' occupation, participants emphasised other, more personal identity characteristics. For example, Confidence presented herself as the family problem-solver and always ensured she was well-dressed and a kept well-maintained home, in the face of siblings who had successful careers in the formal sector. Participants also drew on their ***religious identity***, as this provided a significant source of meaning in making sense of their stigmatised occupation and their value in relation to it. Domestic work was framed as means of fulfilling God's will for their lives and their service as evidence of their dedication. Faith believed that each job she had, each person she encountered and each experience she went through would lead her to a life of meaning and purpose. One day she hoped to be chosen for a greater calling; until then, however, she would continue to work hard, remain true to herself and be on the lookout for anybody who may be her 'destiny connector':

> 'Yes, and I wish someone one day, maybe I'll meet, they, they say, they destiny connector. Maybe one day I'll meet that, that person who make my destiny for my kids and my life will be very easier…Because every time when it's very difficult, I just say "God, but one day you make me proud of you." I cannot just call on your name and now end up in shame. I think one day, you'll make me… I'll give a testimony, bigger than this.' (Faith)

Towards a contextual model of identity construction

In this section, we present a model of multiple identity work contexts and the identities which are triggered, shaped and negotiated in each. These are presented in the form of a multilevel nested model influenced by Hitt et al.'s (2007) model of organisational contexts. The model contains three levels, each containing a context of relevance, namely the job, the employment and the national context. The employment

context is situated within the national context with the job context situated at the intersection of the former as it is influenced by both the national discourse and unique dynamics of the employment context. In respect to domestic workers, the national context has five sub-contexts – historical, political, socio-economic, educational and the occupation's regulatory framework, which shape and regulate their identity and identity work. The model is shown in Figure 1.

Supporting Carrim and Nkomo's (2016) findings, this research confirms the need to locate identity work research in the broader socio-political context, allowing researchers to account for the influence of multiple levels of analysis in understanding identity. This in turn enables:

> [C]ritical and reflexive exploration of the larger social and political implications entailed in the ways individuals cope with the interface among self-understandings, ideals and a frequently imperfect and hostile world. (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 12)

At a macro-level, the identity construction and identity work of domestic workers is influenced by the national context which forms a meta-field within which power relationships are culturally and symbolically created, and reproduced (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Their embodiment, subject to the realities of the historical and political context, combined with socio-economic conditions, constrained educational possibilities, leaves little freedom in occupational choice. Given their embodied characteristics as black African women, and the accompanying stereotypical assumptions about women and their suitability for housework and servanthood (Tyner, 1994), they sought an occupational identity as domestic worker. While we have not addressed the role of embodiment specifically, we cannot underestimate the importance of this factor and its relevance in understanding the structural and context-specific elements that form the basis of inequality and the identity work that accompanies it (Ashcraft, 2013; Nkomo, 1992).

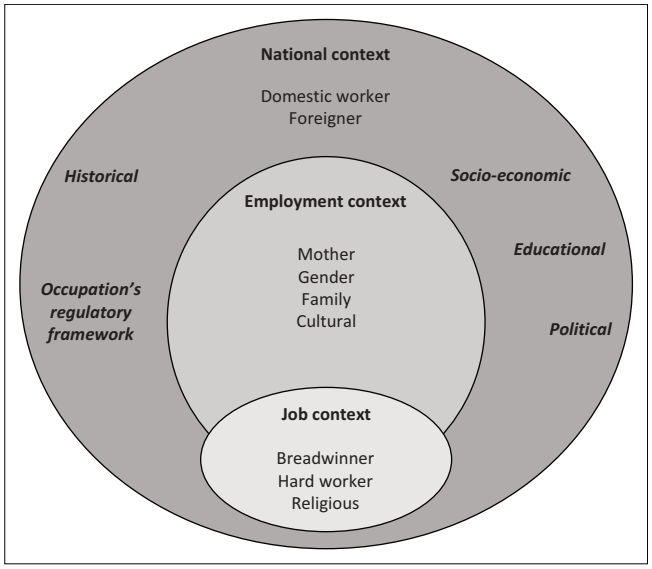

FIGURE 1: A nested model of identity contexts relevant to domestic worker identity.

From an identity perspective. much of their occupational choice was determined by structural factors (Dawood & Seedat-Khan, 2023; De Villiers & Taylor, 2019; Gama & Willemse, 2015); and the only room for sense-making in this instance was to shape the work in ways that were consistent with their preferred selves (Bosmans et al., 2016), where there was freedom to do so. The perceived lack of consistent regulation of the occupation meant that the participants believed they were easily replaceable and thus disposable, a feeling which was exacerbated if they are foreign nationals which exacerbated their vulnerability as domestic workers.

In contrast to the national context whose regulatory influence was consistent for the domestic workers and their identities, the meso-level, represented in this model by the employment context, provided for a more varied context. It was often characterised by precarious circumstances with a lack of job security (De Villiers & Taylor, 2019). Domestic workers existed at the mercy of the whims and foibles of their employers, and the shifting circumstances of their lives. It intersected with and was influenced by the national context, most notably in the lack of enforcement of regulations with respect to domestic work, where few of the employment relationships were governed by a contract (Dawood & Seedat-Khan, 2023; Dinkelman & Ranchod, 2012). Because of the wide range of structural conditions governing the employment relationship, identity related sense-making varied, allowing for more variance in their construction of identity. Where they were treated poorly, this significantly impacted on their sense of personhood (Bosmans et al., 2016), raising the question of their humanity. Where their worth and value were recognised and valued, it confirmed their sense of personhood and was reflected in more positive identity construction.

Four identities were triggered in this context – mother, gender (woman), family and cultural identity. The identity of mother was the most conflicted in the participants, especially those who were responsible for the care-giving of children, and this tension-filled identity regulated their actions in ways that left them with very little agency. Their sense of family identity in relation to their employers varied considerably depending on the dynamics of the context and meanings they assigned to it. Their own cultural identity played a significant role in their identity construction both in respect of their gender and mothering identity, as it informed their individual beliefs about societal structures and roles, and the identities most suited to achieving these (Bamberger & Biron, 2007). Living in close proximity to and interacting closely with people from a different culture meant that cultural differences, for example in the type of food consumed, were highlighted. Also, in line with cultural expectations, they tended to be easily accepting and more constrained by the power difference between themselves and their employers. Here again, individual differences were apparent, and only one of the participants Confidence was the exception. It is interesting that she is the oldest of the participants and it is perhaps in light of African cultural beliefs regarding age, that she was most likely to challenge power differentials.

The micro-level, represented in the model by the job context was located at the intersection of the national context and the employment context. It was informed by both societal expectations regarding domestic work and the manifestation of these in specific employment practices. Three identities originated from the job context: the breadwinner, the hard worker and a religious identity. The breadwinner identity held many positive associations for the participants as it reinforced their agency to provide for themselves, their children and wider families and communities. However, it was not without it tensions, and prevented them from leaving oppressive circumstances because of their perceived responsibilities, and it is this pressure that often traps domestic workers in a cycle of poverty (Dawood & Seedat-Khan, 2023). The hard worker identity suggested they embraced their occupation and were willing to excel in it, despite the stigma and connotations of 'dirt' attached to it, although like participants in Bosmans et al.'s (2016) study, they used multiple strategies. Central in the process was their religious identity, expressed as faith in God[4] and belief in the power of prayer, the sense of their lives having a greater meaning and purpose despite their relatively low status in society. The sense of companionship and support derived from these beliefs supported them in difficult times and supported their sense-making in relation to their occupation as domestic workers and the associated stigma.

Limitations, recommendations and future research

No study of this nature is without limitations and while case study research relies on depth with a small number of cases rather than breadth, the numbers involved may be perceived as a limitation by some. Although the participants could all speak English, conducting interviews in a language other than their native tongue, could have influenced the ease and candidness of their responses. Moreover, given that all domestic workers were employed within Gauteng province, findings in other parts of the country may present different results given possible differences in political beliefs and socio-economic circumstances. Having said this, the stories told by the participants in our study, included settings outside of Gauteng province which were inadvertently included in the study. These narratives provide a snapshot of their identity negotiations, and since identity is fluid, these may shift and change over time. Further research in other settings would confirm or add to our current understanding. While all possible efforts were made to put the domestic workers at ease, the differences in class and ethnicity, may also have influenced the results.

It goes without saying that research on topics of this nature should contain actionable recommendations to improve the lives and working conditions of domestic workers.[5] In this regard, we propose the following:

- In respect of policy, we suggest strengthening existing domestic worker labour regulations especially the formulation of written contracts and creating accessible reporting mechanisms for rights violations.
- Employers should be encouraged to employ fair and transparent employment practices and be more sensitive to the implications of their language for example invoking the word 'family' yet failing to practice the implications thereof.
- Facilitate closer relationships between domestic workers and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and unions to provide more accessible legal and psychosocial resources for domestic workers.

Conclusion

This study highlighted how the work identity of domestic workers in South Africa is deeply entangled with the multiple contexts in which their lives unfold. By examining the dynamics of the national, employment and job-level contexts, we showed how structural constraints, rooted in history, socio-economic conditions, education and regulatory frameworks, shape their work identity. Domestic workers negotiate multiple identity demands and constraints while simultaneously confronting stigma and disposability by mobilising strategies of reframing, recalibration, social comparison and faith.

Our findings underscore that identity work cannot be separated from the layered power relations of context and make a twofold contribution. Firstly, we add to the extant literature on context and expand our understanding of multiple contexts in which identity work can take place. The study confirms the importance of understanding contextual constraints in identity construction, highlighting the impact both before and during entry into an occupation (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016). In this way the findings contribute to a developing a more contextualised understanding of identity construction and identity work. Secondly, by exploring female domestic work as an example of a demeaning form of dirty work, the findings add to our understanding of identity development and work amongst marginalised gendered identities at work. They provide insight into their construction and shaping, their regulation and effect, and suggest a tension between structure and agency, constraint and freedom, depending on the dynamics of the setting and sense-making by each domestic worker. Despite the stigma of their occupation and the precarious nature of their circumstances, they are nevertheless able to rescue a sense of personhood and within the confines of their own meaning-making resist the imposition of structurally originated, one-sided meaning.

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4.God, as named and used in this section, refers to a Higher Power and Being that each participant separately believes in and is not necessarily, unless specifically indicated, a reference to Christianity or any other formalised religious Deity.

5.Thanks to one of our reviewers for pointing this out.

South Africa', submitted to the Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of Pretoria, in 2022. The thesis was supervised by Anne Crafford. Portions of the data, analysis, and/or discussion have been revised, updated and adapted for journal publication. The author affirms that this submission complies with ethical standards for secondary publication, and appropriate acknowledgement has been made of the original work.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

The dissertation on which this project is based was conceptualised and executed by B.M.-J. under the supervision of A.C. In this capacity I helped with conceptualisation, guided the literature review, advised on the choice of methodology, acted as peer reviewer for the data analysis and provided feedback on the various drafts.

The current article was written entirely by A.C. who added the dimension of context, and reframed the introduction, literature review and findings. This did however mean drawing on elements of the original dissertation, including the description of the methodology, some of the sources used and quotes by the participants.

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Data availability

The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, A.C., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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