

## FINDING ONESELF ABROAD:

*Au pairs' strategies of self-positioning in hosting societies*Caterina Rohde-Abuba<sup>\*1</sup>, Olga Tkach<sup>\*2</sup><sup>1</sup>Centre for German and European Studies, Bielefeld, Germany<sup>2</sup>Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR), St. Petersburg, Russia

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This Special Issue comprises six articles to explore how au pairs position themselves in their receiving societies in the context of migration and domesticities. In diversified societies, au pairs negotiate between their own aspirations and the existing immigration and employment opportunities. At the micro-level of intercultural encounters with their host families and outer communities, au pairs perform and maintain their identity. While becoming an au pair, young migrants self-position themselves toward their host families and later they reflect upon their social, ethnical and cultural belonging to the hosting society.

Traditionally, the au pair scheme is a European mobility form that has been predominantly used by young women as a developmental phase in their early adulthood. The French term 'au pair' means 'at par', 'at equal shares' or 'on mutual terms'. This corresponds with the ideal that in the au pair relationship, both parties – families and au pairs – should benefit. The so-called 'Welschlandjahr' is considered as one of the early examples of former forms of au pairing. Around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, young German speaking women in Switzerland went to live with French speaking Swiss families in order to prepare for the role of a housewife, while also learning French (Orthofer 2009: 113). Approximately at the same time, the term 'au pair' established itself in France denoting the stay of young English women from the wealthy middle classes in French families to learn French and teach the children of the family English language (Caudera-Preil 2001). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain, au pairs existed in the form of domestic labour. The European (mostly Swedish, German, Austrian and Danish) girls came to Britain to work as domestic helps based on informal exchanges and individual agreements. This practice continued in the interwar and post-war periods (Liarou 2015: 21).

The 1969 'European Agreement on Au Pair Placement' drafted by the Council of Europe formalised what had already been an informal practice for several decades. This document defined the regulatory frameworks of a Europe-wide (lately, worldwide) form

of international mobility for young people in their (early) twenties, both male and female. In theory, the au pair placement provides an opportunity for young people to learn language and culture abroad, while temporarily (1-2 years) living as a 'member' of a host family and providing light domestic work and childcare for this family. In turn, the host families provide au pairs with pocket money (not salary) and cover their language training.

The au pair stay is officially defined as a cultural exchange program, thus au pairs are legally not granted the status of migrants, workers or students. Unlike many migration statuses, such as educational, labour or marriage migration, au pair placement is a blurry category. The official definition of the au pair stay incorporates national au pair regulations and migratory policies. On top of that, the situation of au pairs is impacted by care and gender regimes, public attitudes towards newcomers from certain countries, a set of social opportunities provided for newcomers at a local level, as well as the au pair's relationship with the host family. The lack of monitoring and supervision of au pair stays, as well as the poor definition of au pairs' rights, usually leads to numerous cases of abuse of the scheme, exploitation and various forms of harassment of au pairs. In their current analyses, social scientists and practitioners evaluate the legitimacy of the scheme, in terms of the extent to which it fits the political and public norms of the receiving society. They warn that the initial idea of au pair placement as cultural exchange program has been distorted and either the careful restoration of the original program is necessary, or an official transition to the employment contract of a domestic worker should be implemented (e.g., Øien 2009; Bikova 2010; Sollund 2010; Widding Isaksen 2010; Widding Isaksen & Stenum 2011; Moss 2015; Løvdal 2015; Smith 2015).

A previous research about the au pair stay has shed light on different aspects of this phenomenon. Firstly, au pairing has been studied as a migration process, secondly, it has been investigated as a form of domestic and care work, and thirdly, au pairing has been examined as a biographical phase of young adulthood.

<sup>\*</sup> E-mail: caterina.rohde@arcor.de<sup>\*</sup> E-mail: tkach@cisr.ru

Current au pair studies reveal that since the early 1990s, this institution has been transformed from primarily an intra-Western exchange program for middle-class girls to economic, predominantly female, migration from the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe or Southeast Asia to Western Europe (Cox & Narula 2003; Hess & Puckhaber 2004; Hess 2005; Anderson 2007; Hrženjak 2007; Williams & Gavanas 2008; Øien 2009; Sollund 2009, 2010; Calleman 2010). Often au pair applicants are students or graduates, who in spite of their high educational qualifications do not have access to other forms of migration (Hess 2005; Búriková & Miller 2010). The main reason why these women decide to become an au pair is that educational and employment options in their countries of origin do not appear aspiring or satisfying to them and that, due to the limited access to other migration options, they consider the au pair stay as the easiest or the only way to (temporarily) live abroad. Typically, these women strive to enter the skilled employment market in the receiving or home country after the au pair stay. Implicitly, it is assumed that au pairs return to their countries of origin after au pairing, but in fact this program provides an avenue for various modes of consequential migration through different types of labour, education and training, marriage and also tourist activities (Rohde 2014; Tkach 2014).

The employment of female migrants in private households to cover domestic and care work of the family has been widely discussed in literature (e.g., Morokvasic 1991; Anthias & Lazaridis 2000; Hochschild 2000; Anderson 2006; Lutz 2008). The need for domestic and care workers in private households arose from the increasing labour market participation of women without an equivalent involvement of men in reproductive labour, while public arrangements do not cover sufficiently the need of families for childcare, elderly care and housework (Hess 2009: 191 ff, Karakayali 2010: 45 ff, compare also Oertzen 2002). The au pair stay has been subordinated to this sector of employment (e.g., Anderson 2000; Parreñas 2001; Lutz 2011) and au pairs have been interpreted as a link in the global care chain (Bikova 2010). These studies show how middle class families used au pairs to organize childcare or housework in their private household. Very often au pairs cover parts of the work or the entire work of nannies and cleaners, but receive much lower payments than the professional groups.

Within the research field of domestic and care work, the aspect of gender (in intersections with culture, religion, age, etc.) is important for the regulation of the employer-employee relationships. As organising the domestic and care workers is usually considered the responsibility of wives, the employer-employee relationship is often a purely female one. As MacDonald (2011) has stated, this may prompt competition over who is the better housekeeper and mother. Therefore, the employment of a female domestic and care worker by a female employee manifests and reproduces the gendering of domesticity. Rohde-Abuba (2015) investigates the perspective of au pairs on privatized in-home childcare, who generally reject the idea of hiring an au pair for their own future family. Outsourcing childcare contradicts the au pairs' ideals of dedicated motherhood as the primary marker of femininity, while also the looks and successful homemaking of the au pair is considered to constitute a threat to the position of the wife and the mother.

Employing a person who, because of her migration status, does not belong to the same social milieu as the employing family, seemingly poses a risk to the privacy of the family from within the family's social environment (Búriková & Miller 2010: 176). In the au pair scheme, it is a precondition that the au pair is of a foreign nationality as the locals cannot participate in the programme. Anderson argues that because

Western European families are often uncomfortable about employing a care worker in their household, and thereby commercializing their private sphere, the employment of a domestic and care worker from another country is interpreted as an act of charity of offering a life chance to a migrant from an apparently poor country (Anderson 2007: 245). Above that, it can be assumed that the dominance of migrants in the sector of domestic and care work in many countries is based on the fact that migrants often have to accept work for lower wages than locals. This especially holds true for au pairs, because the au pair scheme of many countries fix their salaries, termed as 'pocket money', at an especially low level, whether or not au pairs have to work night shifts or during public holidays.

Meanwhile, recent studies have revealed that au pairs from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, as compared to caregivers from other countries, tend to be 'class peers' of the families for whom they provide care (Mellini, Yodanis & Godenzi 2007: 46). Being well-educated individuals and professionals, the au pairs often experience care work and their dependent position in the host family as involuntarily downgrading and as a devaluation of their professional qualifications (Tkach 2014).

The third perspective links the au pair scheme to the biographical background of its participants and explains their short-term migratory choices and consequential mobilities with reference to conditions in the context of origin, especially the family and social network (Rohde 2011; Rohde 2012). The biographical perspective on the au pair stay focuses on the specific life phase of youth and young adulthood, in which au pairing takes place. Most of the receiving countries have restrictive age limits for au pairing, which regulate that only young adults below the age of thirty are able to become au pairs. Some au pair schemes, for example the one in the USA, also specify that au pairs have to be single and childless. Therefore, au pairing normally takes place in a specific biographical phase of independence from the family of origin, and before the start of their own family. In this research perspective, au pairing is considered a rite de passage, which encompasses the dissolution from the family of origin and the process of identity building and identity formation in a foreign context, while improving foreign language skills.

The concept of rite de passage, originally developed by Arnold van Gennep, was first used in an au pair research by Búriková and Miller (2010). The authors emphasize that the au pair stay is a phase in-between two other institutionalized biographical phases, such as high school and university education and work (Búriková & Miller 2010: 156). Günther (2009: 241) argues that migration processes in the phase of young adulthood lead into a 'double transformation process', since the individual maturation and the confrontation with another cultural context take place at the same time. Consequently, the young people are supposed to build up orientations for their future life, such as education and professional choices, the relationship to the family of origin, partner choice and family making, while they are confronted with a new cultural context. Thus, their future life plans have to be negotiated with not only the socio-cultural norms of the context of origin and the receiving context, but also with the structural conditions of the immigration and employment laws. At the same time, many au pairs experience alienation and loneliness in the unfamiliar environment, but also make new contacts and discover unknown possibilities. Young migrants, who are confronted with these transformation processes, have to mobilize their 'internal and external resources' (Günther 2009: 243), such as mental and cognitive competences as well as material, financial and social resources in order to cope with the challenges of the independent migration process at such a young age.

The main contribution of the biographical approach to au pair research relates to its emphasis on the role of agency in (female) au pairs' routes. As discussed above, roughly before 2010, au pairs were mainly studied in the context of social deprivation as migrant care workers arriving from poor to wealthy countries, as class and ethnically others. With regard to the level of daily interactions, au pairs have been researched as objects of the gaze of the local population. The way they are sexualised and subordinated in public discourses (Cox 2007), exposes the institutional racism and whiteness.

Recently, the researchers have turned to the fact that au pair mobility is driven not only by au pairs' economic commitments to their families left behind, but also, and sometimes primarily, by existential reasons, such as a desire to see the world, learn about other places, cultures, languages and people, or act beyond customary biographical scripts. In this perspective, au pairs are seen not as maids doing dirty work, but rather as young reflective mobile persons who make complicated choices, and observers who learn about the new life around them with curiosity and passion. Regardless of the current trends of transformation of au pair placement into employment of care workers, au pairs still define it as a cultural exchange program with regard to their experience of facing the 'other' and learning different life scenarios. Au pairs' aspirations to broaden their life horizons always have to be negotiated with their obligations of housework and childcare in the au pair family. Yet, recent studies show that female participants in an au pair scheme are actively standing up for themselves against a background of unfavourable immigration conditions, and when confronted with multiple obligations arising from their au pair placement and their own family.

Au pair applicants perform as agents or actors even before departure, when they decide to move either to provide for their sending families or to fulfil their own ambitions. They perform a transnational balancing act between two contradictory goals, in order to use au pair placement for their own needs of development and for further integration into a new context (Bikova 2015). The scholars also show how au pairs act in the cases of failed relationships with host families – under exploitation and harassment. In order to reject the image of obedient care worker and protect their dignity, they apply different strategies, such as active negotiations with host families, leaving them when the situation cannot be improved (Rohde 2014; Tkach 2014; Geserick 2015; Sekeráková Búriková 2015), separation from the hosts through effective boundary work (Stubberud 2015), or active outside networking that helps them to get some support (Durin 2015).

While agency has been discussed above as a category of practice, it can also be applied to the research of the (trans)formation of subjectivity and identity as 'the capacity for social actors to reflect on their position' (Backewell 2010: 1694). The self-positioning of au pairs as agents through their perception and evaluation of host societies, families and outer communities has only begun to gain scholars' attention. For example, Séverin Durin (2015) explores the influence of French host families and contacts outside of the family on how Latin American au pairs construct a sense of identity in relation to 'others' whom they meet in France, and on what the au pairs think of local people. Durin concludes that due to their experience of being immigrants and foreigners, au pairs tend to construct otherness of both host mothers and other immigrants through a practice of ethnicization.

The objective of this Special Issue is to broaden our knowledge of au pair migration by researching au pairs' perspectives on the au pair stay, and their negotiation of its complex notions of work, cultural exchange, family integration and migration. The official scheme only

sketches some aspects of au pairs' daily lives; how it works out in particular cases depends on the families' and au pairs' responsibility. Being migrants, au pairs face new people and places, social rules and norms, patterns of communication and consumption, and a new system of social inequalities. They learn about immigration and settlement opportunities, reflect on their au pair placement and improvise paths to adjust it and make it appropriate for them. The articles in this Special Issue show that au pairs' belonging becomes a complex intersectional set of perceptions regarding different aspects of the receiving society and their place in it. They compare this new experience with their previous one lived in the host country. This intellectual and practical work enables them to position themselves under the new conditions and assess their prospects in the migratory situation. Besides, their relationships with sending countries and their friends and families left behind also influences the strategies of self-positioning in the migratory context, and the forming of multiple and contested belongings.

The central questions in this Special Issue are built around various realms where current and former au pairs construct their identity and agency, and seek their own place in new localities. The articles analyse au pairs' perspectives on (1) the receiving foreign culture and society in a broad sense, bridging cultural differences from the perspective of continental, postcolonial and post-socialist identity; (2) receiving localities – cities, housing settlements and neighbourhoods as a new social environment; (3) host families and domesticities, including gender and work relationships, modes of parenting and care cultures; (4) related prospects and strategies in the context of immigration opportunities and mobility.

The article 'Filipino Au Pairs on the Move: Navigating Strong and Weak Ties in the Search of Future Paths' by Karina Märcher Dalgas is based on ethnographic fieldwork among the prospective, current and former Filipino au pairs in Denmark. She analyses how au pairs navigate between financial obligations towards the families left behind and opportunities of the newly built networks with hosts and outer communities in Denmark. This study shows how belonging to different social webs sets up a specific context, in which au pairs as actors try to realize their individual plans, in particular, migratory aims in Denmark and beyond. In contrast to following pre-planned migration routes, the development of migration trajectories, as shown in this article, is strongly dependent on the nature and quality of au pairs' social ties that transmit knowledge about migration opportunities. The author argues that Filipino au pairs in their migration trajectories do not necessarily distinguish between their own ambitions for their future lives and the welfare of their families that is secured by their remittances. Rather, their role as a supporter of other family members can be a way through which Filipino au pairs develop their individuality as adults.

Zuzana Sekeráková Búriková's article 'EU Enlargement and Au Pairing in the UK: The Experiences and Migratory Strategies of Slovak Au Pairs' experiences in the UK changed, after the EU enlargement in 2004 provided the Slovak migrants free access to Europe and its labour markets. Empirically, the article is based on an ethnographic fieldwork carried out in London. Sekeráková Búriková compares the au pairs' positions in the host families in pre- and post-enlargement periods, and discovers that visa-free regime empowered them in relation to the host families and made them more mobile in terms of migratory choices. Au pairs now actively use the opportunity to take side jobs in the course of au pairing; negotiate with the hosts and leave them in cases of mismatch; and consider au pair as a preparation period to be followed-up with migratory steps. Free access to the labour market changed Slovak migrants'

considerations of au pair stays as limited temporary stays in the country, since they could make them more long-term and combine them with other types of activities and work in the UK.

Caterina Rohde-Abuba in her article "The Good Girl from Russia Can Do it All": Au Pairs' Perspective on Morality and Immorality in the Au Pair Relation' investigates conflicts in the au pair relation from the perspective of the former and current Russian au pairs placed in German families. The central argument of this article is that au pairs reject the identification with professional domestic and care workers such as nannies and cleaners, to maintain their biographical identity as an international student who wants to help a local family struggling with housework and childcare in exchange for the opportunity to stay abroad. Reacting to being abused by the host families, for example with regard to overwork, doing dirty work and serving the family, some au pairs 'shame' the family by pointing out the immorality of exploitation within the au pair scheme, while others silently decide to change to another host family. These forms of resistance are legitimized by au pairs in narrative patterns that establish a moral hierarchy contrasting the moral self with the immoral other - the family. This allows au pairs to reject victimization of exploitation, and they can demonstrate their own capability to act as an independent adult person.

Olga Tkach in her article "Now I Know Norway from Within": Boundary Work and Belonging in Au Pairs' Narratives' examines how female au pairs from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) perceive Norwegians and Norwegian society. She argues that au pairs perform as amateur anthropologists who explore the country during their two years of au pairing, especially focusing on new public arrangements and rules, localities and social environment, and care culture – to express their feelings of belonging to it. The realms in which CIS au pairs compare and contrast themselves to Norwegians, and their cultural background and competences to the receiving context are analyzed through the concept 'boundary work'. They oppose harsh post-Soviet realities to the easier, more secure, fairer and more rewarding conditions of Norwegian welfare capitalism. Attitudes towards Norwegian culture and Norwegians are constituted in a more complicated way, and develop as an extended process through the dialectics of distance and closeness. Au pairs not only see differences, but also try to perform similarities and get closer to the most attractive groups of well-educated and well-paid Norwegians they lived with. Agentic boundary work gears au pairs' feelings of belonging to a new society and their efforts to achieve integration within it.

Rosie Cox and Nicky Busch in their article "This is the Life I Want": Au Pairs' Perceptions of Life in the Global City' focus on London as an important destination for au pairs because of the social, cultural and economic opportunities the city offers. The article investigates the strong demand of London for au pair labour as an in-home privatized childcare arrangement, against the background of middle class parents' long working hours and commuting practices, and which is shaped by specific childcare regimes and working practices in London. Great Britain has recently deregulated the au pair scheme. The authors argue that in the context of deregulation, au pairs aim to use the opportunities that London affords in order to develop networks and skills. The authors observe that in the specific context of London, the au pairs' agency is to trade good conditions of au pairing against the chance to be in the capital. Thus, the positive perceptions of London work in favour of host families, as au pairs will accept poor pay and conditions in order to be located in London.

Christine Geserick's article "America is the Dream of So Many Things": Images and Experiences of German Speaking Au Pairs in the United States' investigates the experience of German and Austrian au pairs in the USA in a longitudinal study of 24 interview partners, whom Geserick had met three times: first shortly before their departure; secondly, in the United States, approximately 8 to 12 weeks after their arrival; and thirdly when they had left the United States after 12 months. The USA has long been an attractive destination for travellers, short-term and long-term migrants, such as au pairs. Employing Moscovici's concept of the figurative kernel, Geserick argues that the attractiveness of the USA manifests itself in the images of the 'grandness' as an underlying, historically stable, higher-order unit of thought. With their au pair stay, young people are able to fulfil their individual longing and the socially imposed imperative to visit famous landmarks and places, and verify the images they had of these sights prior to the au pair stay. Above that, the article shows how au pairs, by living in social contexts during the au pair stay are able to transform images into actual experiences and position themselves towards and within the receiving context.

This Special Issue fills the research gap about the self-positioning of au pairs towards the biographical meaning of their international mobility, their experiences with au pair work and the host family, as well as the receiving context by investigating this topic across different levels of private and public realms. The self-positioning of au pairs requires agency, which enables them to communicate with host families on equal terms, investigate surrounding institutions and communities, and benefit from the au pair stay according to their own objectives within their migration processes. In this perspective, au pairs introduce themselves as subjects of thinking, speaking, viewing the other, and acting in accordance with their migratory experiences. Therefore, researching au pairs' perceptions of hosting societies, and their self-positioning in them, discloses migrants' existential experiences, and their flexible subjectivities' courage and creativity.

**Caterina Rohde-Abuba** received her PhD in sociology from the University of Bielefeld in 2013. Her doctoral thesis, funded by a scholarship from the German Research Foundation, focused on the migration of Russian au pair workers. Currently, she is working as a senior research consultant at INFO GmbH in Berlin and she is an associated researcher at the Centre for German and European Studies at University of Bielefeld.

**Olga Tkach** holds a PhD in sociology and works as a senior researcher at the Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR) in St. Petersburg, Russia. Her current research interests include migration and mobility, domestic work and home, post-socialist transformations. Recent publications: 'Labour Migration and the Contradictory Logic of Integration in Russia', in *The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood: Migration, Borders and Regional Stability*, eds. I.Liikanen, J.W.Scott, T .Sotkasiira, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 201-217 (with O. Brednikova); "You Are Responsible for Your People". *The Role of Diaspora Leaders in the Governance of Immigrant Integration in Russia*, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol.24, No.2, 2016, pp. 173-198 (with M.Berg-Nordlie).

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