In this discussion, I will look at the interplay of gender and “race” categories as they are used and displayed in the discursive construction of migrant domestic workers, as well as in training and recruitment practices in the domestic sector. I will deal with two different fieldworks I have carried out for my on-going doctoral research. The first concerns the town of Genoa in Italy and the second concerns Paris in France. Though Italy and France present very different policies and models of organisation of the domestic service sector, my ethnographic data suggests that similar constructions of those migrant workers exist in the two locations. So the question I would like to raise today is: what are the rhetorical and discursive resources used to racialise migrant workers in the specific domain of domestic service?

Issues of European “race” and racism

First, a theoretical remark has to be made concerning the use of the category of “race”. In social sciences in France, the term “ethnicité” is preferred to that of “race”. This is largely due to the specific French political culture and colonial history, and notably the dominance of a republican universalistic discourse which is reluctant to employ terms such as “minority” or “ethnic minority”. Incidentally, it’s only recently that ethnic studies has started to develop in France, notably during the nineties (Poutignat and Streiff-Féart 1995; V. De Rudder, C. Poiret and F. Vourc’h 2000). Similarly, in Italy such concepts has only been used very recently. This is related to the fact that immigration is a recent phenomenon in this country. Despite this, critiques have been advanced by some scholars bringing to the fore the specificity of racialisation processes of migrants in European societies. Alessandro Dal Lago (1999) has shown how Italian society constructs migrants as a social threat and tends to control them through the idea of ethnic and cultural difference. In Belgium, Andrea Réa (1998) has raised the question of the existence of a “European racism” based on the argument of a insurmountable cultural difference, suggesting that xenophobic discourses and practices circulate and interact in a transnational level in Europe. Both authors establish links between European racism and the construction of the European Union. These elaborations stand for the beginning of a European approach to the issue of “race”. This perspective takes the analysis of migrant labour and of immigration policies as a central point and deconstructs the idea of cultural differences. In this sense, and in relation to the question raised by this paper, I would like to define “racialisation” as the construction of individuals as belonging to presumed “cultural groups”, whereby the individual is overlooked and merely perceived as a cultural object. Moreover, these “cultures” would be radically different from a so-called European culture. In the racist European discourse this cultural difference is naturalised and migrants or people of migrant origin are represented as people who cannot be integrated. These processes respond to a logic of naturalisation of social relations. Consequently, I prefer the concept of racialisation to that of “ethnicisation”.

The starting point of my research is the observation that the current demand for domestic and care services converges with the presence of a large number of migrants who are illegalised and pushed into the informal labour market by immigration policies. In recent years there has been a substantial increase in demand for private domestic services throughout the European Union. Far from being the remains of a bygone society, domestic services constitute a significant trend of contemporary economy in societies where reproductive work is still very unequally shared between men and women. The sharing of reproductive work has been a
crucial point of feminist movements in different European countries, yet it is a domain where gender relations have not significantly changed. The demand for domestic services is mainly fulfilled by migrant - often undocumented - women working in the informal sector. The issue of migrant domestic labour questions the sexual division of reproductive work at a global level (Parreñas 2000).

Before presenting my fieldwork data I would like to stress the fact that the category “migrant domestic worker” hides great diversity. Some domestic workers state that they have always been correctly paid and treated by their employers, while others have undergone psychological, physical and sexual violence. In this sector one can find people from a large range of countries and different educational levels – quite often they have a certain educational background - and different professional experiences and skills. Documented and undocumented people work in this sector. Finally, in Italy there are a certain number of migrant men working as carers, even if women constitute the large majority. Thus, I believe this category should be considered as being “nation-state centric”, a simplistic definition that is applied to migrant individuals by receiving societies where an important demand for care services exists. In this paper, I shall analyse the applications of this racialising category. To do that, I will neglect the data concerning how migrant domestic workers react and interact with this construction, as well as their narratives, and instead, I will focus on how the construction operates and how it influences training and recruitment practises.

**Italy : the caring culture of the “badanti”**

In Italy, the majority of training and recruitment services for domestic workers are linked to the catholic Church. On one hand, this results from the fact that, traditionally, the catholic Church has taken over the mission of caring for young, single women. From this point of view, domestic workers are by definition “women without a family”, thus women believed to be in moral danger. On the other hand, the Italian state has been slow in introducing legislation and policies on immigration, and for years has refrained from explicitly recognising itself as a receiving society. Therefore, the role of catholic institutions and volunteering activities in the assistance to migrants in Italy has been important since the first migrant workers arrived in the seventies. These services – sometimes based in parishes – recruit migrant workers in the formal as well in the informal domestic sector. At the same time, police authorities are very tolerant about this management of informal migrant domestic labour. However, legislation and practices on regularisations have become very restrictive in Italy especially since the last immigration law (Bossi-Fini law). This law explicitly subscribes to the myth of “immigrant invasion” that Italian society has constructed in the last decade. At the same time, a massive regularisation has been carried out, specifically addressing migrants working as carers for the elderly who are known as “badanti”.

It is interesting to notice that the Italian Welfare state traditionally relies on women’s unpaid reproductive work, that it is particularly poor with regard to services for the elderly and that Italy is the oldest country in the world. More precisely, it has the highest percentage of elderly people among all countries with more than 10 millions inhabitants (WHO 2002). So on one hand the Italian state sets out an informal policy on migrant domestic work, based on cyclical regularisations of undocumented workers employed in the informal sector. On the other hand the laws and the regularisations’ modalities themselves turn out to produce more undocumented migrants and more illegalised domestic workers. Thus, the Italian “model”, while acknowledging the need for migrant domestic workers, stresses the dependency of these workers on their employers.

That said, analysing the term used by the Italian state to define immigrant carers is a revealing exercise. The Italian verb “badare” means “to care”: for example, when referring to the attention paid or “level of care” invested in the meal one is preparing, but not in the sense of the attention or care given to elderly or dependent people. The verb is thus employed in reference to objects and not in reference to people. Different scholars have stressed the ambiguity of the verb and in particular, the problems encountered in trying to disentangle the two meanings and the different connotations implied in the notion of “care”. Caring is constructed and accomplished as bringing together emotional work and material labour. In this view, caring for somebody includes an important amount of domestic chores, such as cleaning, as well as emotional work concerning relations between the carer and the cared for. The new official linguistic definition of migrant carers in Italy tends to overlook the emotional role played by the carer, focusing instead solely on the
Bridget Anderson (2000) argues that female employers “are, like men, divesting themselves of the physical labour of care, but are still the <mother> in terms of their responsibility for and involvement in the emotional and moral development of the child”. Yet, the different constructions of reproductive work performed by Italian women and of that performed by migrant women results not only from the fact that the first is unpaid and the second is paid. Informal care is often considered as being superior to paid care simply on the grounds that it is guided by genuine emotional attachment. However, sometimes paid migrant carers are constructed as better carers than Italian women. For example, migrant domestic workers are sometimes represented as the indispensable substitutes of Italian women leaving their households to work outside the house. In regard to this question, it is worth considering J. Andall’s (2000) critique of the catholic Acli Colf, an organisation created to provide assistance and lobbying power in defending the rights of Italian domestic workers. From the beginning of the arrival of migrant domestic workers in the eighties, Acli Colf has stressed the fact that in a changing social and economic situation Italian women and families need more paid domestic work. By doing that, Acli Colf’s official discourse shifted from the use of a Marxist vocabulary stressing class divides between Italian employers and Italian workers to a vision implying solidarity between women, but actually obscuring the real needs and difficulties of the migrants. As my data suggest, discourses constructing migrant domestic work are based on the gendered construction of morality and “love” as feminine qualities, stressing the relational and emotional dimension and obscuring the “race” and class divide between female employers and domestic workers.

Research on domestic service suggests that professional relations in this sector are often constructed as personal ties and that this representation tends to obscure the contractual dimension: domestic workers are often depicted as being “one of the family”. Interviews and participatory observations show that specific characteristics of the Italian catholic services for migrant domestic workers can result in a peculiar attitude to define relations between migrant workers and Italians in a moralistic, apolitical and maternalist (Rollins 1999) way. In Sayad’s (1999) view, emigration-immigration is a highly political phenomenon because it questions the nation-state’s categories. Therefore, approaching the presence of migrants in the receiving society in moralistic terms obscures its political signification. It is characteristic of the recruitment services that Italians working as trainers and recruiters in these services are generally women, that they are generally older than the average migrant women coming to the services, and that they work as volunteers. In these training and recruitment activities, volunteers match up Italian employers with migrant women. The volunteers’ relation to migrant workers anticipates in some way the real service relation between employers and domestic workers. As is generally the case for employers, recruiters also look for “persons” and for “personal qualities” in the workers they choose. Employers rely on them to find workers who fit their requests (which are sometimes explicitly racist), and migrant women depend to a certain extent on these catholic services to find a job. The ethnographic observations I carried out in those centres suggest that migrants have to manage different elements in order to create a certain profile which will satisfy recruiters’ expectations – even if it does not correspond to their social reality. One of these elements can be the catholic religion, but many Muslim Moroccan women, for example, frequent those centres. Moreover, as migrants and domestic workers, women are generally assumed to be poorly educated and from a sort of “pre-modern” world. In reality, they often have quite high levels of education and different professional skills and backgrounds and do not necessarily conform to expectations representing them as subalterns in order to get a job.

As a result, domestic service is constructed as a “work of love” and domestic workers as people who are pushed by their “vocation” toward such tasks. The vocation’s paradigm is constructed in a twofold way. On one hand, “vocation” is gender based: migrant women are led to domestic work because they are women. On the other hand, “vocation” for domestic service is culturally determined. For instance, Peruvian women, more than their Nigerian counterparts, are supposed to be more suited to caring for the aged, or Moroccan women are expected to be predisposed to cleaning tasks. According to their different nationalities, migrant women would have specific “cultural and traditional predispositions” to accomplish certain professional tasks. Such ideas shape recruitment practices without being constrictive.

Training courses are based on the reiterated performance of discursive and physical interactions that are expected to take place between Italian employers and migrant domestic workers. These interactions are supposed to be based on the value of “deference” (which is explained on the basis of the necessary respect for the older age of the employer, for the privacy of his house, for his style of life). What I would like to
stress is that in this context the professional necessity of deference and social invisibility for the domestic worker are based on gender and “race” categories as well as on the idea of moral boundaries. For example, migrant women are encouraged to keep their “cultural origins” as that could help their professional and social integration into Italian society. “Cultural authenticity” is seen as a moral quality that can assure the success of migration as a social mobility project. This shifting from class and nationality/“race” structural inequality to “cultural authenticity” is evident in the prescriptions concerning the use of the polite form with the employers (“lei”, the third person singular in Italian, instead of the second person singular “tu”). Migrant women are encouraged to use the third person even if they are addressed with the “tu” form by employers. The use of the “tu” is considered a bad Italian habit that South American women are encouraged to avoid. They are advised to use the third person (the Spanish language makes the same distinction between the two forms), which is presented to be their own traditional habit.

France: the ambiguous enterprise of making reproductive work professional

I shall now turn to the French case. Unlike the Italian state and despite significant public intervention in the sector, the French State remains reluctant to recognise the need for migrant labour in domestic services. In the nineties, the French government’s policies concerning the standardisation of the domestic sector were based on tax exemptions for employers (Le Feuvre et Parichon 1999). The main goal of the state intervention was to create jobs, in a context of high unemployment rates. As a consequence of this intervention, a certain part of informal domestic work has moved to the formal sector and some professional training has been provided. However, owing to the precarious nature of the jobs created, these measures have tended to exacerbate job insecurity. They also have tended to increase domestic service based on contracts directly established between two persons, the employer and the worker, instead of promoting agencies that hire domestic workers and provide then services to clients.

These policies have been criticised by different actors in France: trade unions, for example, have stressed social dumping and the risk of a “new domesticity” while feminists have questioned these policies with regard to equality issues. These critiques highlight how policies on the “emplois familiaux”, and in particular measures concerning professional training, reproduce the feminisation of the sector, disciplining men from entering it. However, little attention has been paid by French scholars to the evident racialisation of the “emplois familiaux”. Consequently, in French feminist research, social and economic polarisation between women is not approached from the perspective of “race”. However, different actors of the domestic sector acknowledge the overrepresentation of migrant women, as well as the data concerning the massive regularisation that took place in 1981. In France, recruitment and training activities are nevertheless set on the basis of racialising criteria.

Over the last four months I have attended a training course for domestic workers (caring and cleaning tasks), as an observatory participant. Based in Paris, this training is funded by social services and is aimed at unemployed people. The group I followed was composed of fourteen women, only two of which were French. The course is presented as based on “intercultural” activities and contents. The training staff explicitly present the caring professional relation as a relation between “cultures”. This opposes on one hand, the employers’ culture and that of the elderly persons being cared for; and on the other hand, the culture of the migrant worker. In this view, getting trained as a professional caretaker means undergoing a process of adaptation to employers’ “culture”. The professional carer must be capable of adapting herself and her professional practices to the habits and life-style of her different employers. At the same time, different habits of the employers in managing their material domestic environment (such as the way the dishes are washed) are conceptualised as “cultural differences”.

Like in Italy, prescriptions and recommendations that are given to migrant women attending the course appear to rely on the intertwining of gender and “race”. In fact, trainers assist migrant women in the process of taking a distance from the feminine “nature” of reproductive practices. In fact, they encourage women to distance themselves from the way they perform reproductive tasks at home. This would be necessary to give a professional quality to their caring skills. Trainers insist that doing domestic work in their own home is completely different from doing it at someone else’s. Rather than producing a distinction between unpaid and paid domestic work (as it claims to do), the training ends up reproducing gender-based stereotypes. In fact, the social and political implications of the “natural” quality of unpaid domestic work are never
discussed. At the same time, the training process should lead migrant domestic workers to overcome their “natural” ethnocentrism (that is, the way in which they are used to accomplish domestic work in their own country) and to adapt their reproductive practices to the employers’ “domestic culture”. Therefore, a short-circuit occurs between the so-called “domestic culture” of the French employer and the supposed culture of French society.

According to the trainers’ discourse, work in the domestic service should enable married migrant women to gain greater independence from their husbands. The latter are represented as authoritarian men coming from a traditional sexist culture. In particular, they are depicted as men “who do nothing at home” in regard to the division of reproductive work. The training course is conceived not simply as professional training but also as training to live in French society, including for example, advice on personal hygiene and sexuality. This depends also on the fact that the training programme is publicly funded and addressed to unemployed people, who turn out to be what French administration sometimes calls “femmes en difficulté”. The professional aspect of the program is sometimes contradicted by its social mission, thus adding to the problematic nature of making domestic service professional.

As my data suggests, in the Italian as well as in the French context, domestic service relations are constructed as relying on national or cultural differences, that is on the basis of the fictitious metaphor depicting the national society as a family or a household. At the same time, national identities are constructed in terms of domestic service relations. From this perspective, successful integration of live-in domestic workers into society depends on their being protected (and controlled) by the Italian family they are working for. A similar way of constructing domestic service relations emerges in the following statement, where a French trainer speaks about the “intercultural” content of the job:

“We work on intercultural issues in all activities of everyday life. For example, if we work on how to wash dishes and the domestic worker comes from a country where there isn’t much water, I am certain she is going to use very little water to do the washing, and no hot water. She doesn’t realise that, because those acts are incorporated, they are natural, but if she comes to work in my house, and I am used to washing dishes with a lot of hot water, and I see her doing that... well, I would think she doesn’t know how to do it. So she has to understand, in the very concrete acts and habits of everyday life, how conflicts can arise, how misunderstandings can arise owing to the fact that we don’t share the same culture. I mean, I don’t ask them to change, I just ask them to understand my culture where they work, where they live”.

Thus, the respect domestic workers are expected to give to employers’ privacy and habits in their professional life overlaps with the general subaltern deference they should display towards the receiving society in their own life.

Locating constructions of migrant reproductive work in a post-feminist context

By way of conclusion, I would like to raise a question. Dealing with the new organisation of commodified reproductive work today invites questions concerning the interplay of gender, “race” and class, and the heterogeneity of the category of “women”. More specifically, it questions European feminist theory on the notion of “domestic work”, calling for a post-feminist elaboration of domestic work and of the production/reproduction new links. If “production” and “work” have undergone radical changes on the practical as well as on the conceptual level, the new forms of “reproduction” are only beginning to be explored (Ongaro 2001). In the seventies the theoretical elaboration of the social and economic function of reproductive work played a crucial role in locating a feminist analysis of the relations between patriarchy and capitalism as well as blurring the public/private divide. This contribution was even more significant because in many cases it led to a political and theoretical divide between feminist and Marxist positions. So what is the current state of this feminist critique? Cristina Vega (2003) highlights the processes of institutionalisation of the feminist critique on domestic violence in Spain. In this discourse, feminist subversive analysis of the power relations at the heart of the family institution disappears. Can we speak today about a “new language of reproductive work” that applies to migrant work? If this new “language” exists, it has overlooked the important changes reproductive work has undergone in the last decades. In fact, today this work is more and more commodified, and it is largely performed by migrant women.
Finally, it is worth noting that the training service I observed in Paris originates from an association that in the eighties gathered caring workers, employers and women coming from the French women’s movement. The association’s objective was to highlight the value of domestic work. Similarly, in Italy some migrant and Italian women’s associations organise training courses for migrant domestic workers, referring to notions developed by Italian feminism in the seventies, such as “lavoro di cura” (care work).
References


www.cestim.org

www.stranieri.it
Endnotes

1 Doctoral thesis in Sociology, SOLIIS URMIS University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis in collaboration with DISA University of Genoa. An earlier version, which focuses on racialisation of migrant domestic workers in the town of Genoa can be found in Scrinzi (2001).

3 The majority of domestic workers I have spoken with at this stage of my research are women. Therefore I will use the term “women” to refer to respondents on my fieldwork.

5 Some information can be found on www.stranieri.it, www.cestim.org and their links.

6 I would like to thank Raffaella Sarti for this reference.

7 A review on this theoretical question can be found in Anderson (2000).

9 For the moment I have only found evidence of this kind of feminist critique in Fougeyrollas (2000).

10 Bridget Anderson (2000) has carried out the first survey on the racialised organisation of domestic work in France.

11 The title of the training project is “Intercultural practice in everyday life”.

Author

Francesca Scrinzi

SOLIIS URMIS University of Nice
Pôle Universitaire St-Jean-d’Angély
24 Avenue des Diables bleus
06357 Nice Cedex 4 France

DISA University of Genova
Via Balbi 4 16124 Genova Italy

scrinzi@unice.fr