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Contesting identity of Taiwanese home-care workers Worker, daughter, and do-gooder?

Frank T.Y. Wang*

Institute of Health and Welfare Policy, National Yang Ming University, 155 Sec. 2 Li-long Street, Taipei 112, Taiwan

Abstract

One of the administrative dilemmas in home-care delivery is that an appropriate and trusting relationship between the home-care worker and the client must be developed; yet this relationship is not readily visible to service managers. Setting up organizational processes for building allegiance and turning the home-care worker into an ideal one become major administrative tasks for home-care managers. Within such organizational context, the home-care worker is then faced with the issue of developing her own identity. This study lays out the Chinese particulars of what being a home-care worker is all about on the ground in Taiwan. In the Chinese context of family and cultural prerogatives around filial daughter and doing good, being a worker (agency perspective) and being a daughter (client's desire) are both problematic. Many home-care workers view themselves as a do-gooder portrayed by the Buddhist discourse of karma. The findings suggest that administrative tasks, client, and worker relationship may appear similar on the surface but the dynamics are quite different.

Keywords: Home care; Subjectivity; Critical ethnography; Family discourse; Home-care worker

1. Introduction

It was approaching the Chinese New Year, the time for all Chinese people to be home with their families. The workers in the home-care agency were busy packing the donated gifts of soap, toothbrushes, and shampoo into small bundles for the elderly clients. A note

* Tel.: +886-2-2826-7181; fax: +886-2-2820-5503.
E-mail address: tywang@ym.edu.tw (F.T.Y. Wang).

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of seasonal greeting was attached to each of these gifts, stating that "for the past year, the agency has taken care of you as if we were your family. On the eve of the Chinese New Year, we bring you a gift to wish you a Happy New Year!" Underpinning the statement is the rhetoric of family, which portrays the ideal model of home-care service—to maintain elderly persons in their homes as long as possible and to provide home-like care. Yet, the organization of its services is fundamentally contradictory to that of the care provided by families themselves. The organization of home-care services is actually based on a hierarchical division of labor and relies on the criteria of professional competence to define each worker's role. The compassionate rhetoric of family care and the rational organization of home-care provision constitutes a fundamental contradiction in home-care practices and generates conflicting interpretations for the work experiences of home-care workers in their daily contacts with clients.

The fact that home-care is a service that occurs outside organizational boundaries makes it difficult for an agency to monitor and control the processes of service delivery (Schmid & Hasenfeld, 1993). Although the content of a home-care service is quite simple, its success depends on a trusting interpersonal relationship between the home-care worker and the service recipient. A dilemma in home-care delivery is that an appropriate and trusting relationship between the home-care worker and the client must be developed; yet this relationship is not readily visible to service managers. The agency encounters acute difficulties in controlling and monitoring its home-care workers. This home-care dilemma is similar to that described in "street-level bureaucracies" (Lipsky, 1980), where workers are quite removed from the control center of the organization, yet the organization is highly dependent on them for the information needed for monitoring practices. Despite rules and procedures, home-care workers can exercise considerable discretion in their interaction with clients. Hence, the capacity of the organization to detect deviations from organizational rules is greatly diminished, especially if the client, the home-care worker, or both choose to ignore them. This fear of client/home-care worker alliance against the agency compels the agency to set up institutional measures to maximize its control and minimize the potential danger of the development of personal ties between the client and the home-care worker.

This study explores how the home-care worker negotiates her identity with the client under the agency's constant attempt to control, regulate, and monitor. The identity of the home-care worker is a negotiated product among competing interpretations that are activated through various parties, including the agency, home-care workers themselves, and clients. To control home-care workers' tendency to have personal relations with el-derly clients, the agency looks for ways to urge home-care workers to develop a formal bureaucratic, and impersonal, relationship as a functional substitute for intimate and primary family relations (Litwak, 1985). One of the most effective ways is to constantly construct and promote an ideal home-care worker model[1] and to make it explicit by the agency as the norms. However,

[1] A case of promoting professional consciousness among home-care workers through training is documented by Burack-Weiss and Rosengarten (1995, p. 205) in a home-care program in New York City.

such regulatory practices cannot be strictly implemented in the home-care workers' everyday contact with their clients, because workers and clients are both active players in negotiating their relationship. In other words, these regulatory practices on home-care workers' identity do not ensure total success. In fact, home-care workers engage in processes of negotiating their identity in their everyday contacts with clients. In the article, I will examine how workers and clients frame and reframe their relationships that the agency actively seeks to regulate. Although the difficulty in managing home-care worker/client relationship may seem similar, the dynamics of such negotiation are socially determined and culturally specific and therefore different from the cases in the North America. It is the purpose of this article to lay out the Chinese[2] particulars of being a home-care worker in the Taiwanese context.

2. Methodology

The methodological approach used in the study is based on Dorothy Smith's institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987, 1990), which has been influential in a number of studies of social work and social services (for example, de Montigny, 1995; Ng, 1996; Swift, 1990; Townsend, 1997; Wang, 1998). Smith's methodology is best understood as a line of inquiry to explore daily operation of ideology. Her approach is an effort to extend people's knowledge about the social organization of their experiences, which in turn will make the broader social relations that seek to rule our everyday lives become visible. Smith's methodology makes ideology visible by connecting actual practices with broader social relations. Ideology is powerful mainly because we are not aware of the actual processes through which ideology shapes our thinking. By making the familiar visible, changes become possible (Chambon, 1999, p. 54).

The design of an institutional ethnography starts with exploring a web of power relations from the standpoint of a particular group of persons. Identifying traditional objective knowledge as a source of oppression for women, Smith (1990) suggests that we reject interpreting lived experiences through any theory, but begin with a disjuncture, the rupture of consciousness experienced by the informant.[3] The researcher listens to experiences of tension to "explicate the actual social processes and practices organizing people's everyday experience from a standpoint in the everyday world" (Smith, 1990, p. 151). Starting from

[2] I used the term *Chinese* in its cultural sense rather than political sense, while *Taiwan* is used in its geographic sense. I use the term *Chinese* with a broad definition to refer to people who are cultivated and influenced by Chinese culture. Though politically, Chinese (citizens of People's Republic of China) is distinct from Taiwanese (citizens of Republic of China in Taiwan), both groups share the same cultural origin. As 95% of Taiwanese are Chinese, it is appropriate to use Chinese culture as the most shared culture in this article. However, the readers should note that there are many cultures and ethnic groups in Taiwan.

[3] Smith's idea of studying the rupture of consciousness is influenced by Harold Garfinkel's ethomethodology (1967), which studies the constraining power of a world organized according to phenomenological principles by disrupting "shared social realities."

the experience of the informants, the researcher preserves people's presence as subjects and interrupts the reproduction of ruling relations. The responsibility of the researcher is to elicit and put together pieces of data that form an account that makes sense of these relations and processes.

For the researcher to produce a cohesive map to explain the links between actual practices and social relations through institutional ethnography, three procedures are required (Smith, 1987): (1) Describe the everyday world and trace work processes, (2) identify ideological procedures and display ideology, and (3) connect such procedures with broader social relations.

In the first stage, the key task for an institutional ethnographer is to be able to give a full description of the informants' actual activities. Then the researcher can move to trace work processes that connect the work of the studied informants with the work of others — in this case, the policies, procedures, working manuals, and other processes that coordinate the delivery of home care. For instance, before an elderly person gets the actual services, s/he must go through an intake interview, home visit, and needs assessment by the social worker. The amount of services that a social worker prescribes is predetermined by the state bureaucrats, which involves another work process organized within the government.

Second, after linking all these work processes together, the researcher begins to analyze the underlying ideological procedures that are used to render an organization's work accountable. These ideological procedures are constituents of broader social relations that articulate the work processes to the institutional function. These ideological procedures, through which ideology is materialized, are most apparent in texts. Documents are analyzed with an assumption that each document has an intended reading and is written for insiders.

Third, after gaining an understanding of the internal working procedures of the ideological practices, the final step is to contextualize them within the outside world and to analyze the social relations that orchestrate and organize these work processes as social courses of action. The knitting of work processes into social relations is not always a conscious effect and requires the researcher to sort out.

Identification of these ideological practices should not solely depend on the interpretation of the researcher but rather a reflexive process in which they are identified in actual practice. The researcher needs to engage with the ways in which people are actually involved in the production of their everyday world, examined with respect to how that work is organized by and sustains the institutional process. At this stage of analysis, the researcher is required to sketch the form of social organization that underlies these procedures.

It is important that the researcher engages in a reflective relationship with the information provided by her informants. The aim is to produce a complete map that reveals the linkage of practices and broader social relations. Completion of such a map represents the saturation point of interpretation for institutional ethnographers. The article presents part of the findings in my doctoral study (Wang, 1998), drawing data mainly from interviews with home-care workers.

3. Entering the field and describing the setting

This study starts with the experiences of home-care workers because of their relatively inferior status within the institutional power structure. I gained access to the field because in the past I had worked as the executive director for 3 years. Having been the executive director in the agency under study had both its strengths and its weaknesses. In-depth knowledge about a setting is an important component of an investigation of this type (Swift, 1990). It equips you with sensitivity to key issues that are not obvious to an outsider. My former position provided an entry point into the field, not only as a researcher but also as an expert in the area of home care. In addition, my knowledge of the setting provided a comfort zone for both social workers and home-care workers to engage with me about their work because they felt I could understand what they were talking about.

However, my previous engagement with the agency also set constraints on the research. My appearance represented a threat to administrative staff, which often put them in a defensive position. They felt that somehow I was evaluating and judging their work. Some responded with politeness, expressing the expectation that my comments on the program would lead to improvement in their personal situation. Others responded with silence and caution. Its impact on my data collection is limited because administrative staff was not the major source of information. In contrast, most of the social workers and nurses welcomed the opportunity to talk about their working experiences. However, some were unsure about the potential value of their knowledge and expressed uncertainty about the contribution that their participation could make. Some home-care workers could not quite separate my role as a researcher from my previous role as an executive director, and speculated that I might resume the position later. During the process, I learned to deal with all of the above in the following ways: expressing appreciation of the quality of administrative work to administrative staff to ease their anxiety, constantly reassuring informants of their contribution to my research, establishing relationship with homemakers through exchanging ideas about ways of doing housework, repeatedly claiming the impossibility of my resuming the position as director, and expressing my willingness to learn from them. This does not mean that information obtained through the process is no longer "tainted" by my previous engagement with the agency but it does indicate the importance of establishing rapport with informants to enable skepticism to be raised and dealt with in the interview process. Furthermore, it confirms that social practices, including my investigation, are situated in sets of social relations, which need to be taken into account in the analysis.

The agency is a nonprofit organization, which provides home-care services to low-income elders in Taipei City. The service consists of two types: homemaking services including shopping, cleaning, escorting to outpatient clinics, preparing meals; and personal care including bathing, grooming, feeding, etc. The agency was the first nonprofit organization to receive a government contract to provide home care and is considered the leading model in Taiwan. The agency distinguishes itself from other nonprofit groups by its emphasis on social work professional competence and the adoption of case management as a practice model. The

administrative framework of home-care services includes the supervisor, usually a social worker or a nurse, as case manager and the home-care worker, who receives 2 weeks of training before starting and monthly on-the-job training.

4. Sampling and data analysis

I stayed in the agency 3 days a week during the study period from January to March 1997. Three types of data were collected: transcription of interviews, field notes, and documents. Twenty-eight individuals were interviewed. These included: 5 social workers, 15 home-care workers, 3 administrative staff, 3 public social workers, and 2 state bureaucrats. Monthly case conferences were also recorded and transcribed for analysis. Data collected from this 4-month research process include 70 hours of recorded tapes and generated about 400 pages of transcription.

At the time of the study, the agency had 3 full-time home-care workers and 64 part-time home-care workers.[4] All were female. Home-care workers were interviewed based upon their seniority and their willingness to participate. The criterion of a good informant for institutional ethnography is their in-depth and concurrent knowledge about how the system works. An experienced home-care worker is apt to have accumulated the necessary knowledge to "survive in the system." Three sampling strategies were used to generate a pool of potential participants. First, home-care workers who had worked more than 5 years were selected. Second, I asked social workers to recommend a list of "typical" home-care workers "who know how to do their jobs well." Third, in order to gain multiple views about a case, those home-care workers providing care to the cases, which social workers discussed with me, were also interviewed. In total, 15 home-care workers were interviewed. All participants were explained regarding the purpose of research and signed a written form of consent. A total of 15 home-care workers agreed to participate. Characteristics of the interviewed home-care workers are shown in Tables 1 and 2. All of them were female in their middle age, raging from 39 to 54. Most of them had graduated from high school or junior high school. All had experiences of marriage. Two were divorced, one separated, and one widowed. Three were full-time workers, the others were part-time workers. Work status made little difference on the number of working hour. Most of them worked more than 30 hours per week, almost as many as the full-time workers.

Data analysis follows the analytical framework outlined earlier, which starts from lived experience, identifying actual and ideological practices, and linking these practices to power relations both within and beyond the agency. Since the knowledge that informants have is treated as socially organized, rather than a mirror-like reflection of reality, the method of

[4] In practice, the distinction between full- and part-time home-care worker is based on the number of work hour but based on the form of payment. Full-time home-care workers are paid monthly while part-time workers are paid hourly. Such practice allows the agency to reduce personnel expenses by not paying home-care workers for unfilled time slots. As a result, many part-time home-care workers work as many hours as the full-time workers.

Table 1
Characteristic of participants

Home-care worker	Age	Level of education	Duration of employment (years)	Full-time/ part-time work	Marital status
1	46	H	14	F	divorced
2	44	E	6	F	married
3	45	H	13	F	married
4	47	J	4	P	married
5	53	H	5	P	married
6	54	H	5	P	separated
7	47	H	4	P	married
8	42	C	4	P	divorced
9	48	H	1	P	married
10	43	J	2	P	married
11	45	H	4	P	married
12	39	H	4	P	married
13	47	J	3	P	married
14	53	H	3	P	widowed
15	42	J	4	P	married

Level of education: E = elementary school; J = junior high school; H = high school; C = college. Work status: F = full-time; P = part-time work. Marital status: D = divorced; S = separated; M = married; W = widowed.

Table 2
Characteristic of participants

Demographics	*n*	%
Age		
Under 40	1	7
41–45	6	40
46–50	5	33
Above 50	3	20
Level of education		
Elementary school	1	7
Junior high school	4	27
High school	9	60
College	1	7
Marital status		
Divorced	2	13
Separated	1	7
Married	11	73
Widowed	1	7
Work status		
Full-time	3	20
Part-time	12	80

analysis[5] used in this study to generate meaning is mainly through meaning interpretation. Meaning interpretation, according to Kvale (1996, p. 201), assumes that "[T]he researcher has a perspective on what is investigated and interprets the interviews from this perspective. The interpreter goes beyond what is directly said to work out structures and relations of meaning not immediately apparent in a text." The methodological and theoretical approach of institutional ethnography provides me with "certain distance" to recontextualize what was said in a specific context. Thus, the individual's experiences are interpreted as subjective attempts to negotiate and solve the contradictory demands of a home-care agency within which their work is organized. To preserve the standpoint of women's experience, Smith's concern is to locate women's practices in the actual power relations. Accordingly, in this study, participants' accounts of the work they did are examined for the ways in which they reflect the social organization of the home-care agency. In this way, the researcher can connect the experiences of participants to the larger social context that organizes and contains these experiences.

5. Transforming home-care worker into daughter

As social relationships are negotiated among all the parties involved, the worker/client relationship is also shaped by client's acts. The study finds that elderly clients are not passive recipients of care but active player in constructing home-care worker's identity. There are many ways that elderly clients adopted to assure their interests. This section will present one of the most dramatic and maybe effective strategies that elderly clients adopt in reversing their inferior power status. Namely, clients would reinterpret the role of the home-care worker as their daughter in order to transform their inferior status of care recipients to the superior one of authoritarian parents. Such transformation becomes possible under the prevalence of family discourse in Chinese culture.

The nature of home-care also contributes to the interpretation of home-care worker's role in familial terms. The discomfort as a stranger in a home setting and the lack of a well-defined role to support their intrusion often compels the home-care worker to interpret themselves as surrogate relatives to the elderly person. Furthermore, in most societies the preparation and serving of food and drink have symbolic significance and may act as indicators of social relations. Graham (1983) argues that often the provision of healthy, nutritious, and filling meals lies at the heart of women's family-caring role. Home-care workers conceive of their role in familial terms mainly because these tasks are performed in elderly people's own homes and are intimate in nature.

Among Chinese people, the home remains largely the preserve of kin relationship. Nonkin relationships rarely take place in this social setting. Home-care workers, as nonkin, threaten these rules of relevance, in particular because of their intimate knowledge of elderly people and their families. One way to negotiate the subsequent sense of dissonance

[5] Kvale (1996, p. 188–203) identifies five methods of analysis: meaning condensation, meaning categorization, meaning structuring through narratives, meaning interpretation, and ad hoc meaning generation.

felt by both parties is to conceive of each other as kin. Not surprisingly, home-care workers reframed their relationships with clients by adopting family discourse in their interviews.

> I treat him like my own family. Although we are not related, I care for him as if he is my own elder and he also treats me like his junior. For example, he will wait for me in the front of the alley though it is his time for a nap after lunch . . . He will walk me to his house. Then he will take a nap and I will start to do my job.

Adopting family discourse and assuming the position of a junior family member has implications for the power relationship between home-care worker and client, as Chinese family discourse contains a set of authoritarian relationships under Confucian teachings of filial piety. To be filial to one's elder is to be obedient to the elderly person's orders and commands. Once the home-care worker defines her role in familial terms, she soon finds it difficult to reject the elderly person's demands. One home-care worker integrated the principle of filial piety into her everyday practices:

> To serve an elder is to follow his/her commands. When I take a new case, I will follow his/her order in order to give him a good impression.

This transformation of the home-care worker/client relationship is temporary and unstable but can become permanent if it is validated through socially recognized ritual. The most extreme strategy used by clients is to transform the role of the home-care worker into that of a "fictional daughter" through the Chinese custom of "kan-tieh" and "kan-ma," namely, fictional parenthood. In a culture imbued with the image of family, there is a wealth of traditional ritual available for Chinese people to bridge the gap between lived reality and the ideal Chinese three-generational family. Such rituals include adoption (Wolf & Huang, 1980), sworn brotherhood (Jordan, 1985), and Golden Orchid/sworn sisterhood (Stockard, 1989). Fictional parenthood allows people without blood ties to develop a kinship relationship with social and legal recognition.

The tradition of fictional parenthood has a long history among the Chinese, especially the upper class. This tradition allows the rich to extend the number of their children beyond their biological limits and enables them to translate their wealth into social influence. Like other cultural institutions, fictional parenthood is like an empty vessel, into which a very wide variety of contents may potentially be poured. There are a wide variety of models from which latter-day fictional parents/children may take inspiration. Historical and literary precedents provide a wealth of imagery that may be invoked in the rhetoric with which new familial relationships are founded or from time to time renegotiated in the course of its use. Involving in the fictional parent/child relationship, the home-care worker actually introduces a different way of thinking that restructures the expectations and aspirations of both parties.

Intrusion of another horizon of meaning into the home-care worker and client relationship does not occur without resistance and hesitation. A home-care worker reported her ambiguous feelings toward the changes that fictional parenthood brought into her daily work:

> I feel that when I call her [the client] kan-ma [fictional mother], it makes us feel closer, unlike strangers or outsiders, but like family. To tell the truth, the reason why I do this is to give the

> elderly person a warm feeling. But calling her mother has its side effects, that is, if she asks you to come at any time, you will have to come.

Adoption of fictional parenthood significantly transforms not only the relationship between the worker and client, but also the worker/client/agency tripartied relationship. Family discourse reshapes the home-care worker/client relationship with ultimate authority endowed to the elderly client as the parent while the role of the home-care worker is transformed into that of an obedient daughter or daughter-in-law who provides unconditional care for her elderly family member. As such, the role of the home-care worker is pulled between the image of the ideal home-care worker promoted by the agency and the image of the ideal daughter portrayed in the family discourse. A home-care worker described the dilemma as following.

> If I call her mother and she calls me daughter, then doesn't that mean we can ignore the agency and turn home care into underground personal contract between us? If she wants me to do anything, I cannot refuse it.

The power of fictional parenthood lies in its ritual meanings. It makes a public statement of permanent commitment to the caring relationship. Beyond that, it provides referent points within which obligations and rights are explicitly stated. The idiom of filial piety carries with it an ideology that demands unconditional care and responsibility on the part of the child and mutes conflicts between the participants. By reframing the home-care worker/client relationship in familial terms, the hierarchical structure of the relationship is reversed.

The ritual power of fictional parenthood, as a socially recognized tradition, is reinforced with the commonly believed spiritual punishment. A home-care worker elaborated such spiritual punishment of the fictional parenthood tradition:

> We Taiwanese say, when an elderly person dies, there must be a daughter coming back to wear mourning garb and cry in front of the funeral parlor [to fulfill the image of ideal old age—an elderly person dies with the companionship of a caring daughter]. If you become someone's fictional daughter, you must come back to cry [in front of the funeral parlor] when the elderly person dies ... Otherwise, the elderly person's spirit will haunt you because you are not filial to him/her.

Most home-care workers interviewed encountered situations where their clients asked them to become their fictional daughters. None of them reported having engaged in the ritual but all mentioned knowing other home-care workers who did.[6] Their hesitation to engage in fictional parenthood arises from the implied long-term commitment to the elderly person. Such commitment is contradictory to the social organization of the home-care worker/client relationship, which is involves a contract of employment and accountability to the agency, which is publicly funded. As a result, some home-care workers will only address the elderly person as fictional father or mother in daily conversation in order to bring psychological

[6] The number of home care workers involving in the practice of fictional parenthood may have been underreported due to the researcher's previous administrative position. This further demonstrates the influence of institutional power and the contradictions these home care workers must live through in their daily work.

comfort to these childless elderly people whose final years are defined as bad ones under the prevailing discourse of family.

6. Home-care worker's self-perception as do-gooder

Home care activities have personal significance for home-care workers. It is important to understand how these women themselves constructed the meaning of their caring work. This section presents another identity, "the do-gooder," which becomes possible within the Buddhist discourse of karma,[7] and then describes the patterns through which this identity is negotiated between home-care workers and their clients.

Most home-care workers did not use the vocational terms of career development to explain why they had joined the agency. Instead, they spoke of wanting to help or meet people. Some home-care workers indicated that they were single parents and that their wage was the sole source of household income. Some implied that they were at the empty-nest stage when their children had all grown up and that they wanted to make the best use of their time. Whether they saw themselves as breadwinners or caregivers, all spoke of the job of a home-care worker in relation to their own personal family lives. Not surprisingly, the chief reason for becoming a home-care worker was its convenient working hours that could be arranged to accommodate their family responsibilities. This suggests that the majority of home-care workers saw their primary roles as housewives and mothers.

What most home-care workers drawn on are their knowledge, skills, and experience as housewives and mothers. A home-care worker described how her experiences as a housewife enabled her to perform the role of home-care worker:

> We bring the love for others and the caring experiences accumulated throughout our experiences of raising children, caring for a husband, father-in-law, and mother-in-law. We just have to apply what we have learned from these life experiences and I find they [clients] accept us very well.

Besides drawing on their experiences as housewives for inspiration, many home-care workers viewed their work as virtuous. Such a philanthropic view is reinforced through the Buddhist discourse of karma. Buddhists believe that the soul will transmigrate from life to life and the quality of one's life is a result of deeds done in previous lives. Their work as home-care workers is then interpreted as meritorious virtuous deeds for which they would be rewarded in their next life. Home care then becomes a site for accumulating merit and a way of cultivating one's soul to become a Buddha.[8] A home-care worker who is a low-income single mother articulated how becoming a home-care worker could make her next life a better one.

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[7] According to Buddhism, karma is the law of cause and effect, the causes and effects of which may be spread over many lifetimes.

[8] Unlike Christianity, in which the difference between God and human beings is permanent and cannot be crossed, in Buddhism the souls of all human beings are believed to be able to be purified to the extent that a human being can become a Buddha.

> I feel that for those with money, they won't have trouble finding someone to help them. I am poor myself. I know it is easy for the rich to find help, but the poor often cry out for help without response from heaven. So, I told myself. I would become a home care worker and accumulate some merit to see if my next life could be a better one.

According to Buddhism, the rewards for good deeds are not limited to one's own future life,[9] but may also be extended to one's family members. As such, a home-care worker can play an active role in dedicating the "merit" to improve the lives of her family. Home-care workers cited various events in their lives as evidence of such rewards. A home-care worker quoted as evidence, a car accident in which her husband hit a schoolgirl, who was found not injured at all later. One home-care worker even claimed that the lifeline in her palm[10] had grown longer, proving that her work as a home-care worker had rewarded her with a longer life.

A home-care worker used this discourse of reincarnation to persuade her husband to support her being a home-care worker:

> My husband was against my taking on this job. (Q: Why?) He thought it is not that I cannot afford you [indicating failure of a husband to provide food for his family] so you have to do that kind of work. (Q: He felt this is a low-status job?) Yeah, he cannot accept the fact that I bathe others. (Q: How did you convince him to let you continue this work?) I told him that this is social service. I mean I am accumulating merits, so we will have a good death and won't be bed-ridden for a long time before we die.

Such religious framing should not be dismissed as superstition. It generates motives to help others and enables home-care workers to tolerate a high degree of squalor encountered in some cases, and the subsequent amount of heavy housework demanded of them. These conditions may be unbearable to those who see home care as "just a job." Most of all, such framing changes their relatively inferior position as the housemaid of public perception, the housewife in an institutional setting, or the obedient daughter in fictional parenthood with clients. Through the discourse of the do-gooder, a home-care worker assumes an active role, as a savior able to transform not only the life of the client, but also those of her beloved ones.

7. The economy of extra favors

The positioning of the home-care worker as a do-gooder is best illustrated by the phenomenon of extra favor behaviors. The agency's disciplinary practices of regulating home-care workers do not stop home-care workers from providing "extra favors" to clients. Nor does the home-care worker's subjectivity as obedient daughter turn all home-care

[9] The concept of reincarnation in Buddhism has gone through stages of reinterpretation. For example, the concept of "engaged Buddhism" by Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes the participation and involvement with the secular world in order to transform oneself (Hooks, 1994, p. 158).

[10] Palmistry, that is, palm reading, is a popular form of Chinese fortune telling. Lifeline is a line in the palm that indicates the life expectancy of the person.

workers into an unconditional caregiver. Each relationship between a client and a home-care worker is individually negotiated on the continuum between the two extremes of the ideal home-care worker and fictional daughter. The findings of "favors" between home-care workers and clients, documented in studies on home care (Twigg, 1994; Warren, 1990), implies the existence of such negotiation. Warren (1990) examines the personal involvement between home-care workers and clients chiefly through home-care workers' descriptions of "unofficial activities" for elderly people. In her study, these unofficial activities comprise two types of jobs. One type are those activities outside of what is agreed upon verbally between home-care workers and their supervisors or what is written on the service contract; and the other refers to those activities that contravene official policy (p. 79). What is important for this study is that favors are results of the exchange between home-care workers and clients. How and under what conditions do home-care workers bargain, negotiate, and decide to make a deal? The principles that organize the negotiation process offer important clues to how home-care workers perceive themselves. Such principles also reflect the power relationship between home-care workers and clients as well as the social relations that organize the process of exchange between them. The study finds that the key principle of extra favors is whether the subjectivity of do-gooder can be successfully constructed through the interaction process between home-care worker and client.

Home-care workers resent the fact that their work tends to be devalued as the socially given stigma of "housemaid" or "cleaning lady" (Eustis, Kane, & Fischer, 1993; Surpin & Grumm, 1990). Their subjective perception of whether or not clients or their families interpret their role as housemaid plays a key role in their decisions on the provision of favors. Two home-care workers articulated the importance of being respected and valued by clients and their families. In the former case, the worker rejects the client's request because the worker felt been looking down by the client, while the latter case illustrates the opposite case.

> This case makes me feel frustrated because I feel that she does not appreciate others. She takes my being there to bathe her and cook for her for granted. She even asks me to cook for her granddaughters . . . I feel that I am treated like a housemaid . . . If I do it out of my own will, I will do it; but if she orders me to do it, I feel that she does not appreciate my work. I am not asking her to be grateful to me, but asking for mutual respect. My help should not be taken for granted.

> Like this case, I won't reject their request for favors by claiming this is not my job because her husband is very friendly. I feel that they are not looking down upon me, so I do them favors very happily.

A repeated phrase in the above statements is "I feel." Her subjective perception determines who she is in that encounter. What the home-care worker expects from the interaction is the identity of a person who does good. This value of favors will soar if the home-care worker further adopts the religious discourse of karma. However, when the home-care worker perceived herself as treated like a "housemaid," regardless of the actual intention of the client's acts, the satisfaction of being a do-gooder is replaced by the anger of being despised and looked down upon as a housemaid. The first principle of extra favor is that when the home-care worker assumes the position of a person who does good, she is more willing to provide favors.

The second principle of extra favors is that when the home-care worker feels that she has control over the exchange process, she is more willing to provide favors to the client. There are many ways of defining how home-care workers perceive themselves as do-gooder. One of the keys lies in who initiates the process of exchange. If it is the client decides whether or not to provide the favor, the home-care worker is deprived of a sense of choice and autonomy. Autonomously deciding when, what, and how to deliver her good will is the key to the positioning as a do-gooder.

The third rule of the economy is that the client provides emotional reward by expressing gratitude to the home-care worker in exchange for favors. A key to establish the position of a do-gooder is that she has to feel appreciated by the receiver rather than being taken for granted. In the latter situation the do-gooder loses her autonomy and thus her superior status to the receiver. When the client shows appreciation to the home-care worker, the worker's intended self-identity as a do-gooder is reassured. This perception of their status as do-gooder or housemaid is so central to the home-care workers' sense of satisfaction with their work that it reflected in home-care workers' discussions of their work. Home-care workers grouped elderly people into two categories, those who take the service for granted, and those who know how to appreciate home-care workers' work.

8. Discussion

The doing of favors for the elderly clients in the context of home-care provision should not be seen as solely altruistic behavior on the part of the home-care worker nor should it be dismissed and justified as part of women's nature (Warren, 1990). Instead, it is an economic activity that involves exchanges between the client and the home-care worker. This finding parallels the debate on altruism in the field of economics. The importance of subjective interpretation in altruistic behavior has led economists to recognize that it is inadequate to express the utility equation solely as a function of the income/goods/service distribution (Hammond, 1987; Sugden, 1983). It further problematizes the assumption that charity is a public good. Sugden (1983) argues that since givers value the act of charity itself as well as the help that it gives the recipients, each person's giving becomes both a separate private good and a public good. His conclusion confirms the inadequacy of the public/private division in understanding the complexity of the giving/receiving behaviors of human beings.

The poles in the home-care worker/client relationship, from the ideal home-care worker to the fictional daughter, can be conceptualized as two modes of exchange: gift exchange and commodity exchange (Gregory, 1987, p. 525). Gift giving is the kind of exchange in tribal economies where goods are produced by nonalienated labor. The exchange of gifts creates a strong bond between the producer and the product, a bond that is broken in a capitalist economy based on alienated wage-labor. The French sociologist, Mauss (1954), who studied the meaning of gift exchange in various societies, argued that "to give something is to give a part of oneself" (p. 10). Gifts then are the embodiment of the strong emotional attachment of the producer, which compels the recipient to make a return. Wage-labor in a capitalist society

gives a "gift" without the expectation of return. Capitalism for Mauss then is a system of nonreciprocal gift exchange.

The construction of the ideal home-care worker is a process of alienating home-care workers from their product, trying to cut off the emotional bond that home-care workers attach to their caring, and a process of transforming home-care workers into wage-laborers who expect no return from clients. On the other hand, the construction of the fictional daughter embodies a form of gift exchange, which tends to be stabilized into the form of kinship that Levi-Strauss (1969)[11] argues is the origin of family. The actions of these low-income, Taiwanese elderly persons to stabilize the relationship of exchange with home-care workers through fictional parenthood are testimony to Levi-Strauss' thesis.

Yet, elderly clients' efforts to personalize their relationship with home-care workers are neutralized by institutional measures that promote the image of the ideal home-care worker. The process can be seen as part of the colonization of a capitalist economy, in which "tribal economies" are reduced to "the economy." Commodity exchange in a capitalist economy reduces all gifts to the common scale of money; similarly, the ideal home-care worker reduces the care of clients to merely a set of physical tasks, which home-care workers perform in exchange for their monthly salary. In contrast, gift exchange in a tribal economy exists in multiple spheres of exchange, each with its own definition of "money" that does not circulate outside the sphere. Home-care workers' emotional attachment to clients cannot be transferred and each relationship is individually negotiated. The introduction of the ideal home-care worker is an attempt to unify these discrete spheres into one. Such a unified sphere of impersonal relationships is best expressed in the adage "remember, it is only a job," which emphasizes emotional distance from clients for newly recruited home-care workers.

9. Conclusion

It is widely documented that home-care workers often develop personal ties with their clients (Abel, 1987; Aronson & Neysmith, 1996; Chichin, 1992; Eustis & Fischer, 1991; Hooyman & Gonyea, 1995; Kaye, 1986; Litwak, 1985; Litwak, Jessop, & Moulton, 1994; Twigg, 1994; Walker, 1991; Warren, 1990). The development of personal bonds is essential for both clients and home-care workers (Chichin, 1992; Kaye, 1986; Twigg, 1994), but turns out to be a threat to the administration's disciplinary power. This illustrates the fact that dichotomies of family/work, private/public, and formal/informal are ill adapted to home care. Home-care worker/client relationship tends to cross over the boundaries of their work role, with job responsibilities vaguely defined in their service contract. Home-care workers provide extra help that are not formally contracted. Both home-care workers and clients often speak of their relationships in familial terms. To

[11] Levi-Strauss (1969) argues for a continuous transition from war to exchange, and from exchange to intermarriage as a transition from hostility to alliance, and from fear to friendship, which he views as the origin of kinship and marriage.

home-care workers, these extra favors are likely to become exploitative. Clients are at risks of losing control of the care, either when it is completely dictated by the defined job function or defined by the home-care worker herself. The dilemma of managing personal ties is evident within the home-care field. While we are eager to solve "the problem" from a managerial perspective, the real problem might stem from the way we see it. Our urge to manage leaves us little room to understand the complexity of home-care workers' daily lives and reframe our ways of thinking.

The phenomenon of personal ties among home-care workers and clients does not have to be viewed as a managerial problem. It is the social relations in which it is embedded should be examined. Our rush to adopt the taken-for-granted managerial view replicates the relations of gender inequality. The phenomenon is interpreted by the agency, from an individual trait perspective, as the home-care workers' lacking of professionalism. The home-care worker with housewife background is seen as "nonprofessional" opposed to the social worker or nurse defined as "professional."[12] Such positioning of home-care workers creates needs for discipline. Therefore, home-care workers' lack of professionalism to maintain emotional neutrality is socially constructed by the agency, which emphasizes professionalism. The training need for home-care workers is then predetermined by the institutional structure rather than the actual shortage of capacities to fulfill their responsibilities. Under the institutional rationality of maintaining emotional neutrality, their experiences as housewives are detached and redefined.

This reconstruction of home-care worker's role as a housewife illustrates a transformation from personal domain to institutional domain, portrayed by Smith (1990), and transplants women's caring labor from home to workplace. The role as housewife puts these women to a double disadvantage in both home and employment domains. At home, women are confined to the role of caregiver under the "family ethics," deprived of access to gainful employment. Once their experiences as caregiver are recognized by the paid employment, they are degraded as nonprofessional (Dalley, 1988; Hooyman & Gonyea, 1995). While transforming these women from housewives to home-care workers, the agency inserts them into the order of labor market, in which these caring labor ranks as the lowest.[13]

As the societal and cultural contexts change, it is important to notice that the issue of managing home-care worker and client relationship may appear similar on the surface but the dynamics in the making of home-care workers is quite different. It can be generalized as a quality assurance issue, for instance. Yet this way of understanding fails to expose the social relations that organize the provision of home care. By making the dynamics of identity construction visible, some new ways of understanding home-care worker become possible. In the Chinese context of family and cultural prerogatives around doing good, being an ideal worker (agency perspective) and being a daughter (client's desire) are both

[12] The construction of profession is multiple-faced. It also depends on constructing the client as "incapable of determining what is the best for them." Professionals are defined as such by their relations with other professionals, such as the relationship between nurse and doctor.

[13] See also Ng (1996) for an analysis of institutional practices through which a community employment agency constructs immigrant women as a category of employable labor in the market.

problematic. Therefore, the home-care worker then faces the challenge of developing her own identity. Although the home-care workers' role is individually negotiable, the negotiation process is operating within limits that are socially and culturally determined. The elderly client tries to secure the maximum services and achieve the culturally defined "good old age" through family discourse, transforming home-care workers into daughters through the ritual of fictional parenthood. The cultural images evolving from the long-lasting Chinese family discourse, such as dutiful daughter-in-law, caring female relative, obedient daughter, all contribute to the transgression of boundaries in home-care relationship. The Buddhist discourse of karma enables home-care workers to assume the role of do-gooder and become an active participant in the daily negotiation process with clients. These cultural prerogatives constitute the Chinese particulars of being a home-care worker. Understanding the lived experiences of home-care workers in their locality requests us to question our current ways of understanding and directly engage with these women's struggle. Viewing the phenomenon of extra favors as deviant behaviors of home-care workers becomes insufficient and inappropriate to capture the complexity within. The better way of understanding is to view the home-care worker identity as a contested political domain in which various ways of interpretation are in constant struggles. The women's lived experiences such as extra favors then become a symbol of resistance from these women, who actively combat the power effects upon them and, in their daily lives, reclaim their autonomy in defining who they are.

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