

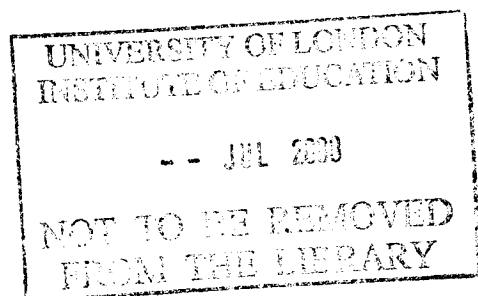
## **MODERN MAIDS**

**A STUDY OF AU PAIRS AS 'GAP YEAR' DOMESTIC WORKERS  
FOR FAMILIES**

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## Abstract

This is an empirical study of au pairs. Its purpose is to increase understanding and knowledge of the au pair arrangement and of au pairs as family based domestic workers. The main research question is why and how the au pair institution continues in a modern society. The non-systematic sample consisted of twenty-two Finnish young people who worked as au pairs in host families in London between 1994 and 1995. Twenty-one of the au pairs were female and one was a male. Nineteen host mothers and four representatives of au pair agencies were also interviewed. The data collection was carried out by using a combination of interview methods and generated eighty-two interviews altogether. The data was analysed largely through the use of qualitative analysis based on grounded theory.

The middle class Finnish young people in this study had become au pairs because this provided a socio-culturally and developmentally determined chance for a self sufficient 'gap year' of travel abroad. The middle and upper middle class host mothers entered into this arrangement because it provided a material and economic 'coping strategy' within their family and labour market relations. The practice of an au pair arrangement was an oppressive, but diverse private and personal work relationship. Characteristics of this labour relationship such as exploitation, employment and companionship varied in time and space.

This study suggests that subordination of all domestic workers is reproduced through the structures of gender and class. The power differential between au pairs and their host mothers was also reproduced by age, nationality and culture. However, au pairs were not bound to this labour relationship through structures of domestic work but represented themselves as 'working travellers' in a globalising world.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS AN AU PAIR?

## Phenomenon of au pairs

Au pairs are accepted in many contemporary societies as a social phenomenon. From time to time, an au pair related, often scandalous topic hits the media headlines generating debate. I have followed these debates since 1989 when I first became interested in this phenomenon whilst working amongst Finnish au pairs in London. Au pairs have aspects in common with groups like adolescents, young adults, exchange students, travellers, tourists, (im)migrants, family members and lodgers, as well as with servants and domestic workers. However, although au pairs are a common phenomenon, little is known about them.

The history of au pairs dates back to the end of the 19th century, but this predominately female phenomenon expanded after the two world wars (Griffith & Legg 1989:11). According to the Council of Europe's report of 1966, it was estimated that there were about 50 000 au pair girls in Europe (The Council of Europe 1966:14). Since the 1960s, this phenomenon has grown into an international industry, with national and international policies, commercial agencies recruiting au pairs, and different organisations responsible for their welfare in Europe, the USA, Canada and countries of East Europe. However, the total number of people working as au pairs is unknown. The reasons for this are similar to those given in the Council of Europe's 1966 report:

"The very personal nature of the practice, the ease of crossing frontiers, the failure, deliberate or otherwise, to complete registration and regularisation formalities, make it impossible to answer this question precisely." (The Council of Europe 1966:13-14)

There is no doubt that working as an au pair has, over the years, provided

affordable opportunity for many young people - especially females - in different Western countries to spend some time abroad at a certain stage in their lives. It can be argued that this arrangement has pioneered the growing international mobility of young people as one form of cultural globalisation. It has also provided young people with an opportunity to get to know a foreign culture, to learn a language and to finance their travels.

The concept of this arrangement for young people has changed over time and space. In the past, becoming an au pair may have meant a great personal adventure for young females as there were limited other resources and opportunities. For example, there were fewer opportunities for travel and for making international contacts than for young people today. Communication technology was not as developed as today and it was more difficult to remain in touch with one's own family. An au pair arrangement may also have provided a job supplement or 'a meal ticket' for some females seeking permanent migration, particularly for au pairs from more undeveloped countries. On the other hand, girls in the 1950s and 1960s were probably more used to engaging in domestic work in their own homes than girls today and, in this sense, working as an au pair was not different from their work at home.

The phenomenon of au pairs is structured geographically, socially, culturally and economically. Becoming an au pair has different connotations for, for example, a middle class high school graduate from urban Finland than for a girl from the rural Czech Republic or from former Yugoslavia. Interestingly, this arrangement has not been expanded between developed and Third World countries. Broadly speaking, becoming an au pair is generally regarded as an opportunity for privileged young white people - especially single young women - from Western countries to travel and to spend time abroad at a certain stage in their lives.

On the other hand, language skills, language learning, travelling, tourism and internationalism are no longer an elite practice, although they still could be defined as middle class pursuits. With the increasing opportunities, they are reaching more people as well as responding to societal demands. For example,

various forms of tourism and travel have grown into big international business creating employment opportunities because of cultural and economical globalisation and improvements in technology and education. In connection with the international economy, the supremacy of English language has also generated an inequality and asymmetry between countries and different nationalities in terms of cultural mobility and the level of international communication. This determines for instance the numbers of ingoing and outgoing au pairs in different countries, although English as an international language is gradually being spoken everywhere.

Opportunities for young people to visit foreign cultures, not only as tourists, have grown during the last ten years including study and training exchange programs, language courses and voluntary work. These opportunities are regarded as acceptable ways for young people to live away from home. Crossing frontiers particularly between EU countries also allows free and easy mobility of people and labour. Although opportunities have grown, young Europeans are divided particularly by gender, class, ethnicity and nationality in terms of access to these opportunities: the middle class, white and well educated young people from urban areas and from the advanced industrialised countries being privileged and, particularly in the case of au pairs, females having fewer non-domestic opportunities. On the other hand, in the international labour market, young migrant people with no vocational training or work experience are vulnerable to being recruited for 'poor' work, meaning low status, low paid domestic jobs in hotels, catering and, like au pairs, in private families and households, on a less attractive contractual basis than in the so called primary labour market.

An au pair arrangement is also a useful and, in a way, unique alternative to getting domestic help for the receiving families, particularly in countries like Britain and the USA. In these countries domestic service has a long middle and upper middle class tradition and childcare is still ideologically considered a private concern. There is also a lack of communal childcare and after school care places. Compared to other forms of paid domestic labour, an au pair is a cost effective option for a family, for example in Britain, because au pairs

receive remuneration for their domestic tasks as pocket money and in kind as full board. Furthermore, there are no social insurance fees and au pairs are not liable for tax. In this context, both the social construction of au pairs as domestic workers and the structure of domestic labour relationships can be regarded as having similarities and differences with other forms of paid domestic labour, these being structured not only according to gender and class, but also according to race, age and ethnicity.

Modern living has generated new demands on family life. Determinants like young dependant children, a mother's employment and dual earner families, as well as the changing gender division of domestic tasks, has increased the demand for helpers. Particularly within nuclear families and in urban areas, families cannot rely on older family members to provide care and help. There is also a growing concern for children's safety. Developments in household technology and the food industry, as well as increased leisure time may have changed the time spent on domestic tasks. All these determinants contribute to the need for paid domestic service in private households. Hiring private domestic labour on a more contractual and mutual basis than in the past reflects demand from a growing number of contemporary middle class families.

Both national and crosscultural immigration and employment laws and ideologies of childcare and domestic work control mobility and conditions for au pairs. For example, the hiring of au pair is becoming more widespread in countries like Finland, even though these countries are not perceived as providing language learning opportunities for young foreign people, and even though the employment of private domestic workers in households is rare. In Finland, the number of working women is high but the communal day care system for under school age children works. However, as elsewhere, the daily domestic tasks are perceived as the woman's responsibility and this places a heavy burden on the working woman. And there has also recently been a debate on the effects on young school aged children of being alone for 2 to 4 hours after school and on the lack of after school care. On the other hand, the increased international mobility of people has increased demand for family accommodation for native speakers like exchange students and au pairs,

because their parents want to keep up the language skills of children from bilingual families or of those who have learnt a foreign language from an early age.

### *Au pair policies*

There is no single definition of an au pair, although policies on au pairs and au pair arrangements provide an official perspective on this issue. At the policy level, au pairs are identified in multilateral and bilateral agreements and particularly within governmental immigration and employment laws and regulations. Although according to these agreements au pairs can be expected to perform childcare tasks and are often equated with nannies, in countries where private home-based childcare is common, like Britain, the USA and Canada, there is a lack of a comprehensive federal childcare policy and not all private childcare arrangements are subject to official state regulations or funding (Bakan & Stasiulis 1995: 305; Cohen 1993:532; Spedding 1993:541,546-547).

There is no standardised system for au pair arrangements although most European countries currently follow the recommendations of the European Council au pair agreement (The Council of Europe 1969). This agreement has not been reviewed since the 1960s, though concern for au pair arrangements has been raised by The Council of Europe since:

"It is now by tens of thousands that the candidates travel throughout Europe and it is quite obvious that the uncontrolled development of such temporary migration cannot be allowed to continue if only in the interests of the parties concerned. Hence the need to seek a solution of this international problem by international regulation - in the case in point, a European agreement." (The Council of Europe 1972:5)

According to The Council of Europe, an au pair arrangement is 'an exchange' between material, educational and cultural benefits to a young person working as an au pair and the domestic help they provide for a family (Council of Europe 1972:13-15). The au pair arrangement is defined as having a non-economic and cultural purpose:



"This type of contract has an eminently cultural and non-economic purpose. Consequently, it does not raise competition against the local labour force, nor does it represent disguised means of immigration."  
(Council of Europe, CDEM (91) 4:5)".

Until the 1980s, the gender of au pairs in many countries was laid down by legislation. Greece and Belgium still only permit female au pairs and foreign males were only allowed to enter Britain to become au pairs from 1993 (Hempshell 1995: 11).

The Home Office stipulates that au pairs may learn a language, live as a member of an English speaking family and help in the home for a maximum of five hours per day in return for a reasonable allowance (the recommendation was a minimum of £35 in 1994) and two free days per week. Au pairs are defined as young single adults of 17 to 27 years of age without dependant children. They are allowed to work as au pairs in the United Kingdom for no more than two years. In exchange for domestic tasks, an au pair gets full board and an opportunity to study. (House of Commons Paper 395, 1994:17-18.) Before the change in legislation in 1994, the recommended number of working hours was 30 per week with one day off. Different countries vary in their rules and recommendations. For instance, in the USA an au pair can be expected to work up to 45 hours a week (Hokkanen & Lehtikoinen 1994: 8). In Switzerland and France the language course is obligatory and in Canada au pairs have to have a minimum of six months experience in childcare.

### *Problematics of au pair arrangements*

Supply and demand for au pairs is often regarded as 'an exchange' between a young person and a middle class family. The French word 'au pair' means 'on equal terms' and emphasizes the equal status of such an exchange. However, various pressures and conflicts both on an au pair and on the members of the host family can be identified in this arrangement. Young people are not only vulnerable in a foreign environment because of their age and the cultural differences but also because of their life situation. For instance becoming an au pair may be the first time when these young people have been separated

from their homes and families. Although these young people are usually legally adults, they may not be defined as adults in the developmental psychological or sociological sense. As domestic workers they are expected to carry out tasks such as childcare and housework, but they are not trained in these fields, and may lack work experience particularly in a foreign cultural environment. There is also the question of the quality of childcare provided by au pairs. The au pairs are not qualified child carers and they usually only stay for about a year. This suggests that they may lack both knowledge and experience as child carers and child rearers.

Although the host family has the advantage of domestic help, it has to provide board and lodging for the au pair. As this au pair is an additional 'member' of the household this can put a strain on family relations, particularly as the au pair may not be familiar with the culture and the environment, or fluent in the language. The interaction between an au pair and a host family involves acculturation and adaptation to cultural and lifestyle differences. It also involves the organisation of domestic work and work relations. These all affect everyday communication, behaviour and expectations.

In a very personal and private crosscultural relationship there is always a possibility of a conflict. This raises questions of rights, responsibility and power relations. In this connection I would like to draw attention to the recent case of British au pair Louise Woodward, who was accused of killing her American host family's baby and was convicted for manslaughter in autumn 1997. Soon after this tragic case became public, some au pair organisations started to arrange psychological testing for their au pair applicants. This and other similar cases also generated proposals to regulate au pair and nanny arrangements, for example in Britain. However, public attention has focussed on the rights of families as employers rather than on the rights of au pairs and nannies as employees.

Employment and immigration policies on au pair placement have not clearly identified a category to which au pairs belong and provide only superficial and often contradictory answers to questions such as what au pairs do and who

they are. Policies on the position of host families within this arrangement are even less clear cut. In Europe, au pairs are not categorised as domestic workers or students, but constitute a separate category. They are defined at policy level as 'casual migrants' with a cultural purpose. Because of the cultural aspect of her sojourn, an au pair's immigration status allows her to enter a country and stay for a maximum of two years. However, permit and visa requirements for au pairs, as well as rules and recommendations, vary between countries.

In the European Union countries there are no legal barriers to mobility of au pairs or for people in general. Finland joined the EU at the beginning of 1995, during the data collection stage of this research. Joining the EU changed the legal position of Finnish au pairs considerably, because EU-citizens have, at least in theory, similar social, economic and legal rights and responsibilities in all member countries. Au pairs from outside EU-countries and entering countries which are not members of EU, can be defined as 'non citizens' because they are granted temporary resident status and only permitted to take up au pair placements during their stay. In other words, their status and legal rights are dependent on the country they come from and the country in which they plan to work as an au pair. In this respect, au pairs are a heterogeneous group of young Western people.

It can be argued that, at policy level, the exact nature of an au pair's responsibilities is played down by emphasizing the cultural aspect of this arrangement and by limiting discussion to migration legislation. The 'cultural work' of au pairs may be part of this crosscultural arrangement, but it does not define the day-to-day domestic work undertaken for families and households.

Au pair recruitment is usually equated with private enterprise. In Britain, this is a free and fairly uncontrolled form of entrepreneurship (as part of the new liberal capitalist economy). Au pair agencies charge families a fee, although some national organisations can charge out-going au pairs for providing them with information and co-operating with the au pair agency in the receiving country. Defining au pairs as applicants and families as clients illustrates their different

status within the recruitment business. Where there is a mismatch or a problematic placement the agency's support and help is not guaranteed, although it usually promises to find a new placement for the au pair and a new au pair for the host family concerned.

Au pair agencies are like private employment agencies. They treat au pairs as independent job seekers and host families as employers. These agencies make their money from the employers who pay them a fee for finding a suitable au pair. This recruitment practice contradicts the definition of au pair at policy level, as au pairs are not deemed to be employees. This also illustrates the difficulty of viewing private household and family as a work place.

As discussed above, many pertinent issues can be raised. It is clear that although the number of people involved annually in au pair arrangements is unknown, it affects a wide range of people in various countries, not only the young people who become au pairs and their families, but members of host families and those working in recruitment agencies and in organisations responsible for au pairs. However, as an academic topic this phenomenon has remained relatively under researched and is rarely discussed in detail in any related context. The phenomenon of au pairs is not only important and interesting but a challenging target for research.

### **Research introduction**

It was not, however, the confusion surrounding policies for recruitment, but rather the everyday experiences of au pairs and their hosts which generated this research. When I worked as a welfare officer for the Finnish community in London in 1988-89, the most striking problems raised by au pairs were turnover, vulnerability and their lack of power where there was conflict with the host family or where they faced the possible loss of their jobs. They were also concerned about the variable conditions in different host families and about the occasionally exploitative relationships. Apart from these problems, the au pairs were generally satisfied with their lives as au pairs.

It was mainly women who contacted me concerning their au pairs or who came to talk about au pair arrangements in general. The host mothers I talked to were concerned about possible conflicting expectations between themselves and their au pairs. They raised the issue of varying levels of commitment shown by their au pairs. They also wanted more clarification of their responsibilities towards the au pair as well as the nature of the responsibilities of au pair and recruiting agency. It was evident from these discussions that having a live-in young foreigner whose status as a domestic worker was not clear cut, generated an emotional and vulnerable relationship between the au pair and their host families.

The definitions of au pairs at policy level, and in general, illuminate many possible perspectives for a study of this phenomenon, but there is not much research done on au pairs. At first my motivation for this research was the need to provide practical policies rather than theoretical implications, so I began this research with 'ethnographical curiosity' and viewed it from various perspectives. Following Alasuutari (1993:177) I began my qualitative research as an interactive process. The final research framework for this thesis developed during the research process.

The target groups for this study consisted of Finnish au pairs working in families in the London area between 1994 and 1995 and their host mothers. A multiphase sampling strategy generated the two groups of 22 au pairs and 19 of their host mothers. Both groups were interviewed, as well as 4 representatives from au pair agencies. The data was collected by using a combination of different interview methods with participants. My aim was to interview each au pair three times at different phases of their stay and to interview the host mothers and agency representatives once.

I started by asking broad questions about the phenomenon of au pairs. I began the first interviews with the au pairs by asking different kinds of questions about their life situations, their reasons for becoming au pairs and their experiences as au pairs and we discussed a wide variety of related issues. After conducting the first interviews, I realized there was a contradiction between their motives

for becoming au pairs and their everyday experiences as domestic workers in the host families, although the discourse of 'family membership' was continuously applied. Most of the Finnish participants in this study had gone abroad as au pairs to spend a 'gap year' in transition from high school. They were also different from other groups of private domestic workers by virtue of being educated, middle class white young females. The main research question arising from these confusions and contradictions was formulated as: why and how do au pairs continue in a modern society?

The policy level definition of an au pair arrangement as a 'cultural exchange' seemed more appropriate from the perspective of the au pairs than from that of the host mothers and their families. The principal experience for both au pairs and host mothers of this arrangement was explicitly and often implicitly the domestic work and domestic relations. A basic discourse of the au pairs was identified as the nature of their work in families and households, because domestic work provided a common platform for the au pairs and the host mothers. The questions were formulated around a concern for the construction of an au pair arrangement by au pairs and by host mothers and the domestic work relationship between them. Research methodology and procedure are discussed in Chapter Four.

Before the description of the contents of other chapters, I would like to present just two of the many meaningful things this research process has taught me. Although the confusion and concerns at the practical level as well as the contradictions at the policy level generated this research and its empirical focus, I have learned that researching and increasing understanding of any social phenomenon is at its best a dialogue between theory and empirical research. I have also learned that attitudes of people change slowly, while I have faced similar ignorance in the 1990s to, for instance, Ann Oakley (1980:11) in 1969 when she tried to register her thesis entitled *Work Attitudes and Work Satisfaction of Housewives*. I have continuously faced the question, both inside and outside academic circles, whether a study on au pairs can produce a Ph.D. Fortunately, there has been a lot of support as well. I would like to thank the following funds and organisations for supporting this research

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### *Contents of chapters*

In order to answer the question, why young people spend a gap travelling abroad as au pairs, I was interested in the rather fashionable literature on (post)modernity discussed in Chapter Two. This is about the ongoing changes in society, self-identity and personal biography (see Beck 1992; Giddens 1990, 1991). From this basis I started to investigate ways in which gap year and travel abroad might produce phenomena characteristic of late modernity.

The phenomena of the gap year and travel abroad are well known, but have not been combined as an area for study in academic literature and research. However, young people are regarded as important socio-cultural intermediaries by youth researchers and sociologists and have been studied in a range of disciplines. On the other hand, opportunities for travel abroad have greatly increased, affecting a wider variety of people than ever before. This has produced a remarkable travel and tourist industry as well as providing a target for research in different disciplines.

In Chapter Two my aim is to explore au pairs as young people connected to two interrelated phenomena: the gap year, and travel abroad, and to explain the ways in which studying abroad and migration are different from these phenomena and are therefore not a focus for this research. My formulation of the research question also meant that my primary focus was not on au pairs as a cross-cultural arrangement nor on the processes of adaptation and acculturation, although these are interesting and important study areas and also affect au pairs as domestic workers.

Various writers on youth have pointed out the difficulty of defining youth today. Mainstream youth research tries to identify modern youth by studying certain thresholds in the transition to adulthood. Of particular interest to me were those

studies concerning the many young people in Europe today who embark on exploratory phases after completing their schooling (see Galland 1995; Sauli 1991). Recent youth research, for example in Finland, has also provided further understanding of how (post)modernity has affected young people in the contexts of self-identity, values and meanings, and particularly girls. On the other hand, cultural studies on youth have focused on subcultural transition. These studies emphasize the meaning of gender, class and race divisions structuring youth and provide a critical perspective for studying the ongoing changes.

The discussion on sociological youth research in Chapter Two will show how a range of youth research work in different countries, using different approaches, can provide a relevant framework for the study of young people and the gap year and increase our understanding of youth and young people in modern society. It also reveals how little is known about this particular phenomenon. Instead, young people and travel abroad are discussed within the context of social history and sociology of tourism and travelling. The literature on the distinction between tourism and travel and the Grand Tour provides an understanding of the diversity of meanings of travel abroad for an increasing number of people today (Clifford 1992; Craik 1997; Urry 1990; Rojek & Urry 1997). Particularly interesting in this context is Jokinen's and Veijola's (1997) recent work which draws attention to a rarely recognized form of travelling where travel and work abroad are combined. Although these writers highlight au pairs in the context of postmodern tourists, they also stereotype this social group, which suggests that there is a need to study au pairs as a social group more closely. In Chapter Two I will discuss the gap year and travel abroad and how these phenomena are socially and individually constructed. These phenomena may also be characteristics of late modernity and particularly for a growing number of Western young people. These phenomena may also depict youth as a mode of life and may be connected in a broader sense to fragmentation of different boundaries and diversity of life courses during modern times.

Modern youth, the gap year and travel abroad provide the basis for this study of



the au pair syndrome, together with the different work on domestic work which constitutes the daily life of young travellers working as au pairs or in casual jobs in hotels and catering. In Chapter Three I will describe the general conditions and consequences of contemporary families who currently employ private domestic workers today. However, my main focus in Chapter Three will be on the theoretical and empirical literature on domestic work/ers which is wide. This provides a framework for the study of au pairs as family based domestic workers.

Domestic work is universal and carried out mainly by women everywhere. In this context, au pairs as domestic workers can be identified with mother substitutes and future mothers, girls, sisters, female friends and mistresses. Domestic work is also frequently considered as work that women and girls are capable of. It is assumed that all of them can do it, and also that it is useful for girls as preparation for their future life. It also transforms a paid domestic worker from a total stranger in a family into 'one of the family'. I will challenge these views in Chapter Three, where I will establish a framework for the study of au pairs as domestic workers in families.

Some writers on (late)modernity and domestic work regard domestic service as either non-existent or marginal in contemporary advanced societies. However, feminist structural theory, often called dual systems theory (Delphy & Leonard 1992; Hartmann 1979, 1981), provides a relevant framework for the study of au pairs as domestic workers, because this theory 'goes behind the scenes' to explain the domestic life of families and households and does not play down the meaning of domestic work in a modern society. Such theorists on family work as Delphy and Leonard (1992) have made an important contribution to the study of domestic work/ers by exploring material and economic work relations within marriage and kinship. In short, the dual systems theory developed by various feminist writers can provide a framework to study both paid and unpaid domestic work/ers and explain the existence of different forms of domestic work as well as the low status of domestic work and the oppression of women in general.

Domestic workers, particularly au pairs, are in an interesting 'in-between' situation in terms of labour market relations and family relations. The position of au pairs illuminates dual systems theory because there are issues in common with unpaid family workers, who are involved with patriarchal family and capitalist labour market relations, and also issues in common with paid domestic workers, who are involved with patriarchal and capitalist labour market relations. I will often refer to the phrase 'host mother' because it is commonly used in the context of this particular group of people. Theoretically the host mothers are considered as private employers in families and households.

Au pairs are discussed in relation to studies on domestic workers in Chapter Three. This discussion focusses on paid domestic workers for families. It therefore does not include unpaid family workers or domestic workers working outside the family institution. This is because these groups are not closely identified with domestic workers like au pairs, even though they are often discussed collectively.

However, au pairs are not historically, socio-culturally or internationally a separate category, but are related in many ways to the other categories and groups of domestic workers. I will discuss the relationship of au pairs to domestic servants in terms of the historical literature which explores the development of domestic service during 20th century. This will show that live-in au pairs may have provided a relevant supplement for the domestic labour shortage for families since the war, for example in Britain. A review of the empirical survey on *Young Europeans in England* (Political and Economic Planning in London, PEP 1962) and the literature on domestic servants, shows that au pairs in the 1960s continued the tradition of families who hired a 'maid of all work'. Au pairs did the most menial domestic tasks and worked long hours.

The main contemporary studies on family based domestic service workers in Britain, is Gregson's and Lowe's work (1994), *Servicing the Middle Classes*. This study explores nanny and cleaner occupations in Britain today, but they do not look at migrant domestic workers or au pairs. Although female migrant

workers for families have interested some writers in Britain (Anderson 1993), they have been more widely studied outside Europe (for instance Cock 1989; Colen 1986; Giles & Arat-Koc 1994; Romero 1992). In these studies race and ethnicity together with gender and class, have provided a framework for understanding the low status and oppression of these workers. Work relations between au pairs and their employers are structured by gender, age and nationality and, in the domestic context, also by class.

Studying domestic workers such as au pairs contributes to feminist sociological theory by providing a 'missing link' in theory and empirical research on domestic work. This study will show the possibility of bringing together both paid and unpaid domestic work undertaken in various different conditions, by different categories and groups of workers. According to Wenona Giles and Sedef Arat-Koc (1994: 2), a comparative analysis of all reproductive workers (particularly in the domestic work context) is needed to be able to understand the forms of subordination they all share.

Substantive Chapters Five, Six and Seven illustrate the contradiction between these young people's expectations and the reality of their lives as au pairs and also the contradictions between the expectations of au pairs and those of their host mothers. At its worst, what was meant to be a 'modern' form of travel, self-discovery and self-development for a young person could turn out to be a nightmare of domestic exploitation. Interestingly, exploitative work conditions and relations may also ultimately be regarded as a positive experience, in which the 'gap year' of travel abroad is perceived as an adventure as well as a lesson: a harsh reality and the nature of their mothers' work in their own families. Au pairs are not, however, 'trapped' into domestic service in the way migrant and working class women are. In some respects au pairs are 'free to travel' as they wish. On the other, hand what is meant to be domestic help for a host mother could turn out to be a confusing relationship for the host mother with an 'extra member of the family'.

This study will also show how the phenomenon of 'gap year' travel, of which au pairs are an instance, can be regarded as a feature of late modernity in

contemporary Western societies. This is related to the capitalist and patriarchal structures of domestic work. It will also show that this reproduces the low status and oppression of domestic workers and women in general. Interestingly, to understand the existence of au pairs is only possible by accepting, at least to some extent, the tensions between structure and actor both theoretically and empirically. The expression 'modern maids' describes this dualism. Au pairs may be modern in their relation to work as gap year working travellers, but at the same time they face traditional work conditions and relations as family based domestic workers.

## **2 AU PAIRS IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN YOUTH, 'GAP YEAR' AND TRAVEL ABROAD**

The social group I am interested in, in this study of domestic workers, are young people who usually come from Western countries like Finland. These young people are often high school graduates who want to go abroad to learn a language and to learn about other cultures during a 'gap year' between graduating from high school and entering the academic or vocational institutions. In popular culture the concept of the 'gap year' is widely used to describe this phenomenon.

The gap year is often spent abroad. The alternatives of spending a gap phase in the home country may involve unemployment, irregular and low-skilled work or part-time studies. In countries like Finland, males often enter compulsory military or civil service in the transition period after leaving school. This is also evidently available to girls on a voluntary basis. However, not all young people need or want to take a gap year. Also the experiences of this phase may differ considerably between different groups of young people.

A gap year abroad may be more fulfilling than a gap year spent at home and more representative of the transition to adulthood. Opportunities abroad today involve exchange studies or language courses, travelling as a tourist, voluntary or kibbutz work, and domestic work in private families and households, as well as in hotels, catering and in work camps. Although the number of gap year opportunities abroad has grown, the number of 'applicants' has also grown. This means that becoming an au pair is still popular but it may attract young people from a diversity of backgrounds and for many different reasons. In comparison to other opportunities, an au pair arrangement has also got financial, social and emotional advantages for a young person.

Since the opportunities to travel, to study or to work abroad have grown, the

short-term stays overseas have become more common amongst young people and the elitist stamp has decreased. Becoming an au pair can be regarded as one way for young people to travel overseas. Becoming an au pair is often the first time that these young people have experienced life away from home and parents. In this respect, spending a gap year abroad provides thresholds such as separation from the childhood home and learning more independence although financial and emotional support from their own families may vary enormously.

Many young people today, particularly from Western countries, undertake 'European or world tours'. The advantages of this arrangement are also described in a the large variety of guide books available to young travellers but the academic literature on this particular area is limited. However, the statistics on young people and travel, for instance in Finland, show that 37 per cent of young Finnish people travelled abroad in 1987 (MEK 1985, 1998). Furthermore, in 1994, only 15,2 per cent of Finnish high school graduates continued in higher academic education or in polytechnics straight after completing high school (Tilastokeskus 1998). This suggests that Finnish high school graduates take and need to take a gap year or years.

### **Historical overview of the gap year**

The so called 'Grand tour' or 'European tour' for young people is not a new phenomenon. Young people from the upper social classes have traditionally travelled abroad to learn about other cultures at a certain stage of their lives. Symbolically this kind of travel abroad refers to an elitist rite during the transition to adulthood which is not only about learning about other cultures, but is also about young people 'finding' their own personal and cultural identity.

The au pair arrangement has a century-long history as an opportunity, particularly for young females, to spend some time abroad in a foreign family. Its historical development is discussed more closely in Chapter Three. One central distinction between the au pair arrangement and the 'Grand Tour' or contemporary interrrailing, is that an au pair does domestic work for a host

family in exchange for pocket money and full board. However, a German youth historian Michael Mitterauer (1992:126) has pointed out that travel did occur in connection with work in the past and domestic service provided special opportunities for single young people's mobility. Mitterauer's work explores the ways in which domestic service, and its material, economical and educational implications shaped youth in by-gone days and how it was common for ordinary young people to enter domestic service. The question still open to research is how far back adolescent service goes in European history. Mitterauer also suggests that juvenile domestic service as a contribution to the family economy disappeared with the development of paid employment. This study investigates how the au pair arrangement continues the tradition of juvenile domestic service as a contribution to the family economy with the familiar battlefields of dependent work as is discussed in Chapter Three.

In the past, learning to do domestic work was central to young females from working class backgrounds as live-in servants who sought employment in middle class families. Working as a servant could also provide an opportunity for social and occupational mobility. This study will show that the principal reasons for contemporary young girls is to learn a language and to develop their knowledge of other cultures rather than to develop domestic skills. The contradiction between au pairs as a contribution to the family economy and the individualistic reasons to become an au pair makes this arrangement and its practice an interesting social phenomenon.

However, the feminine image of domestic work is also a reason why young female adults continue to have an advantage in obtaining enter au pair placements compared with male applicants. Because of the domestic work orientation, becoming an au pair could be defined as a substitute for the traditional Grand Tour or for some contemporary forms of travel available to young people from more 'ordinary' backgrounds. An interesting feature of au pairs is that their work enables them to cover the cost of their travels. Furthermore, single young people are preferred as live-in lodgers and workers in private households because the parents in the host family may position them as children and find them easier to control. Taking gap years - particularly

working as an au pair - indicates singleness. According to Gordon (1994: 195), women's singleness is most typically a phase in her life. These phases may be important periods especially for young women who try to construct independence.

### **Au pairs in the context of migrancy, adaption and acculturation**

Au pairs have aspects in common with other social groups like migrant workers and foreign students particularly in the contexts of migrancy, citizenship, adaption and acculturation. All these social groups are aliens in a foreign culture and society.

Although there are obviously various reasons for migration abroad, Bakan and Stasiulis (1995: 303-307) argue that paid domestic work continues to attract migrant applicants on an international scale because of the promise of gaining permanent residency status. Although au pairs do not usually take up domestic placements to gain permanent residence or as a means of upward social mobility, there are still some patriarchal, neocolonial and class orientated undertones. I will focus on au pairs as an interesting group of contemporary domestic workers in families and households positioned differently particularly in terms of their socio-cultural construction. This means that domestic labour is not approached as a universal category and predominantly as migrant labour.

On the other hand, au pairs share aspects in common with foreign students, although the status of these social groups can be regarded as different. Many crosscultural training and study exchange programmes meet similar developmental and socio-cultural purposes as the gap year abroad. However, training and studying programmes can be planned beforehand and these students may only mix with teachers and fellow students, who themselves come from foreign backgrounds. Therefore programmes where a student lives in a foreign host family are an exception. On the other hand, long term students who aim for a degree are different from those who embark on short-term overseas study, because these students may not return to their home country and may become more adjusted to degree level study in the foreign country,



not in their home country. In this respect, these students as well as many migrant workers, may adapt and acculturate into the foreign culture to a great extent. No doubt, both the length and the context of overseas stay are relevant in connection to adaption and acculturation into the foreign culture.

According to Lulat (1984), literature on international students is dominated by two principal sets of research concerns: those of socio-psychological character studying crosscultural consequences and those dealing with adaption in an alien institutional and cultural environment. In this research I am interested in studying au pairs and a gap year of travel abroad as a socio-cultural phenomenon rather than as a socio-psychological phenomenon, because my main aim is to explore the reasons why the phenomenon of au pairs continues in modern society rather than the ways in which au pairs adapt to the foreign environment as individuals.

As explained above, there are certain difficulties in identifying au pairs with migrant workers or overseas students. I am therefore interested in creating a conceptualization of au pairs as young people in modern society and as a distinctive social group, who may have features common with migrant workers and/or foreign students, but who are also differentiated from these groups in general. In this chapter, I discuss why and how this gap year abroad is organised as a personal choice as well as a life situational obligation, and why and how spending a gap year abroad has become a fashionable and relevant option in the lives of young people today. The predominant question in this chapter is, why white educated middle class young women enter domestic au pair placements today. This question is investigated through some of the diverse literatures concerning late modernity, youth and young people and travel abroad.

## **2.1 Postmodernity, self-identity and life-course**

Derived from art, literature and architecture, the concepts of postmodernity and

postmodernism have also become fashionable in the social sciences. However, there is a lot of debate about the use and meaning of these concepts; and concepts like late modernity, high modernity, post-industrialism as well as risk society, consumer society and globalisation have been introduced to conceptualize ongoing economical and socio-cultural changes. Although there is agreement amongst social scientists that contemporary societies are undergoing remarkable changes in the relationship between social structures and social agents, it is not clear what these changes are, why they have emerged, and what are their effects and meanings in society. Most sociologists agree that it is premature to speak of a universal postmodern scheme rather than postmodern phenomena. In this chapter I discuss what is meant by these phenomena and particularly the effects of late modernity self-identity and personal biography.

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck describes the ongoing modernisation process as follows:

"Just as modernization dissolved the structure of feudal society in the nineteenth century and produced the industrial society, modernization today is dissolving industrial society and another modernity is coming into being". (Beck 1992: 10)

Beck argues that there is a clear distinction between modernisation in the nineteenth century and modernity today. In the nineteenth century, modernisation took place against a background of its opposite. Modernisation today is reflexive. In society, this means that cultures, traditions and institutions, like family and work, are not standardized as they were within the framework of the industrial society and the nuclear family. (Beck 1992: 10-13.)

Many sociological theorists (Beck 1992; Lash 1990; Giddens 1991) consider individualization as a characteristic of late modernity. According to Beck, so called 'triple individualization' is a coalition of three aspects: liberation, loss of stability and re-integrations. Liberation means removal from traditional social forms and commitments in the sense of dominance and support. Loss of stability means a decrease in respect for practical knowledge, faith and norms; and re-integration refers to a new type of social commitment and control. These

modern individualization processes affect both objective life situations and biography as well as subjective consciousness and identity. Within this process, an individual and her/his biography becomes institutionally dependent, because situations are no longer private. (Beck 1992: 127-137.)

According to Beck:

"Individualization in this sense means that each person's biography is removed from given determinations and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependent on decisions. The proportion of life opportunities which are fundamentally closed to decision-making is decreasing and the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing. Individualization of life situations and processes thus means that biographies become self-reflexive; socially prescribed biography is transformed into biography that is self-produced and continues to be produced." (Beck 1992: 135)

Beck's central argument is that the hierarchical model of social classes and stratification has been subverted. The meaning of subcultural class identities and status-based class distinctions have become weakened because of changes in the standard of living and the process of individualization. Beck explains this individualization tendency in the context of social class as follows:

"Empirical stratification research or Marxist class analysis probably detect no significant changes; income inequalities, the structure of the division of labor, and the basic determinants of wage labor have, after all, remained relatively unchanged. The attachment of people to a 'social class' has nevertheless become weaker. It has now much less influence on their actions. They develop ways of life that tend to become individualized. For the sake of economical survival, individuals are now compelled to make themselves the center of their own life plans and conduct."  
(Beck 1992: 92)

What Beck is suggesting is that individual survival and changeable life-plans derive from the uncertainty which results from breaking familiar boundaries. This means that life for the individual becomes in a way more complex. An individual has to be prepared to function across class boundaries because society today does not function in a traditional way, but is reflexive and demands flexibility in changing conditions and situations. For instance, the development of technology has led to destandardization of labour and the boundaries between work and non-work are becoming fluid. For example,

working hours and conditions are flexible and part-time work and unprotected, illegal and temporary work are available. This kind of 'modern' individualization is characterised by taking chances rather than very calculated risks. However, it can be argued that these developments apply unequally to different groups of people divided by gender and class. They do not necessarily present individualized life-plans.

Reflexivity, individualization and the breaking down of familiar boundaries are outcomes of 'new' modernity. However, this does not mean that structural inequalities have disappeared in a social, cultural or global sense, because they are built into industrial society and its relations. What is suggested is that these inequalities become 'weaker'. Giddens (1991:6) emphasizes that difference, exclusion and marginalisation result from modernity. Beck's views on late modernity in relation to family, work and women are discussed in Chapter Three. The purpose here is to draw attention to how this new modernity affects self-identity and life course or personal biography because the institutions of modernity shape new mechanisms of self-identity (Giddens 1991: 2).

According to Giddens (1990) globalisation is one of the principal consequences of modernity:

"In the modern era, the level of time-space distanciation is much higher than in any previous period, and the relations between local and distant social forms and events become correspondingly "stretched". Globalisation refers essentially to that stretching process, in so far as the modes of connection between different social contexts or regions become networks across the earth's surface as a whole." (Giddens 1990:64)

Socio-cultural and economical globalisation have been discussed in the social sciences through an analysis of their effects on societies, people and their everyday lives. For example, Giddens (1990,1991) is interested in (post)modernity at the level of individual life and self, although globalisation has to be understood at institutional level as well. Phenomena such as tourism and crosscultural mobility for study, training or working overseas, have grown into economical and socio-cultural institutions like the tourist industry, intercultural exchange programmes for students and trainees, the language learning

industry and intercultural corporations with multicultural and mobile workforces. Furthermore, the explosion of rapid communications and internationalization of popular culture has contributed to the decline of national cultural distinctiveness by exporting national identities, although some opposite trends are also evident (Cesarini & Fulbrook 1996:209-210; Giddens 1990: 65). These shape individuals and their everyday lives and no longer constitute an elite practice.

Through this process, reflexivity becomes a characteristic of our present-day world both at institutional level and at the level of self. This means that the individual is very concerned with taking control of her or his own life through the negotiation of self-identity. According to Giddens (1991: 5) "self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour" and continuously revised biographical narratives, multiple choices and diversity of options shape the lifestyle and self-identity, when tradition loses its hold within the growing dialectical interplay of the local and global with the influence of abstract systems. According to Giddens, the dialectic of standardization and new forms of fragmentation create new risks, and self-actualisation becomes a project which balances opportunity and risk. Taking chances rather than calculated risks becomes a source of self development.

"Negotiating a significant transition in life, leaving home, getting a new job, facing up to unemployment, forming a new relationship, moving between different areas or routines, confronting illness, beginning therapy - all mean running consciously entertained risks in order to grasp the new opportunities which personal crises open up. It is not only in terms of the absence of rites that life passages differ from comparable processes in traditional contexts. More important is that such transitions are drawn into, and surmounted by means of, the reflexively mobilised trajectory of self-actualisation." (Giddens 1991: 79)

In this development the life course can be described as a series of 'passages' which an individual is likely to go through, but which are not institutionalised or formalised as rites. Pre-established ties to other individuals, groups and places become less significant and each period of transition is perceived as an identity crisis. In contrast to personal ties in the traditional context, a 'pure' relationship is not based on external social and economic conditions. Modern friendship involves a commitment which is based on mutual respect for persons for their

own sake. (Giddens 1991: 78-79, 88-98,146-149.)

Some interesting perspectives have also been put forward, particularly in the recent literature, concerning consumption culture. Writers such as Featherstone (1991), Giddens (1991) and Lury (1996) have identified this culture as one of the most distinctive of postmodern institutions. Like Beck, Giddens considers that there is a movement away from emancipatory politics to 'life politics'. This refers to the breaking down of the traditional social hierarchies within traditional social positions of class, gender, race and age. Consumer culture is considered an important part of this process as it provides a more flexible relationship between the individual and self-identity.

Writers on consumption culture can be divided into those who equate consumption with postmodernity and see the new middle classes as key cultural intermediaries (Featherstone 1991), and those who argue that a reflexive relationship is not the same for all social groups but is structured by gender, class, race and age. These different groups are also seen as key intermediaries in the development of consumer culture (Lury 1996). Writers on consumption culture agree, however, that specific to modern consumption is not only the growing use of material products, but also the growing consumption of the signs and images representing these material products and culture. These go hand in hand with economic and cultural globalisation and create modern lifestyles.

The purpose of this discussion on postmodernity is to find out why educated middle class young women continue to become au pairs today. My argument is that becoming an au pair presents phenomena which attracts to the 'modern' image. For instance, for the young people in this study the low status of domestic work did not greatly concern them. Some were under the illusion that an au pair was equated with a 'real' family member, and not with a paid domestic worker. This suggests that young people who want an adventure block out the reality of the low status and low pay of au pairs. This could be described as 'false consciousness' particularly for those who believe that an au pair who works and lives in a host family is a family member. On the other

hand, it could also be described as 'youth power' or 'girl power' where, regardless of some clear disadvantages of this arrangement, a young person sets herself a challenge and regards this arrangement as an opportunity for self development and crosscultural experience.

Next I will discuss two interrelated features of young people as au pairs: the gap year and travel abroad. Young people, the gap year and travel abroad together constitute a distinctive combination in popular culture which is rarely studied in depth in any related context. These institutionally and individually reflexive phenomena might also, in a broader sense, be characteristics of late modernity as well as of certain social groups in the context of self-identity, biography and lifestyle. My theoretical standpoint concerning the current socio-cultural condition accords with those who acknowledge some of the developments and changes in late modernity but who also emphasize the familiar and traditional structural inequalities in society. These structured relations have not disappeared or changed, but they may have become more difficult to identify in a changing social-cultural condition with growing diversity of choice.

## **2.2 'Gap year' in youth sociology**

Because the target group of this research is young people, I am interested in postmodern phenomena and their critics, particularly in relation to youth, young people and the life course and life phases of Western young people today. The aim of this chapter is to examine the existence and relevancy of the so called 'gap year' by investigating contemporary youth literature and research.

### **Youth and young people: definition**

First of all, attention must be drawn to the complexity of defining youth and young people today. Notwithstanding the wide variety of approaches within contemporary youth research, there are two widely accepted issues in defining

youth and young people suggested by various writers. Firstly, there is not a homogenous group of young people, as age groups and life styles vary between cultures as well as within different social classes. Secondly, the period known as 'youth' has become extended. Young people are generally defined as follows:

"Young people are people of a certain age, between childhood and adulthood, who form a significant social group, but it is difficult to define this age group precisely." (Frith 1984:303)

Age may be a criterion in defining young people, but age orientated definitions of youth have been challenged by many contemporary social scientists. However, both youth and young people are defined according to age in many legal, socio-cultural and developmental contexts. Social scientists like Jones and Wallace (1992:4) argue that terms like adolescence and adulthood are related to life-course events and social relationships and are only loosely associated with physical age. In this respect, it becomes important to define the ways in which different groups of young people in their variable social contexts become accepted as adults. Based on this view, definitions vary within time and space and are socio-culturally constructed. This means that there are problematics involved in defining youth and young people. According to Jones and Wallace:

"Over the ages, the term 'youth', referring to a stage in the life course, has changed and narrowed in meaning. For the last hundred years or so, the term has increasingly been linked with the period known as adolescence, the part of the life course which leads into adulthood. Technically, perhaps, adolescence can itself be defined as the age period between puberty and the legal age of majority, which in Britain is 18 years, and, in theory at least, adolescence is seen as the stage in life during which there is transition from dependent childhood to independent adulthood. But there are enormous problems associated with these terms, some of which are defined according to physical development, some according to social and economic development and some according to legal status. To a great extent, youth and adolescence are social constructions, varying between cultures, and subject to reconstruction over time."  
(Jones & Wallace 1992:)

New definitions of youth have emerged from societal changes and changes in the structure of transitions. Jones and Wallace (1992: 18-19) suggest that the concept of citizenship provides a new approach to understanding youth and



adulthood, dependence and independence, because citizenship embraces the rights and responsibilities which are implicitly transmitted with age. Youth is understood as a transitional period to citizenship rather than to adulthood. Lury (1996), on the other hand, argues that youth can no longer be defined according to the criterion of age but rather as a mode of life:

“...youth is now both a symbol of choice and a category of identity created through a reflexive relation to objects as carriers of space and social change or time more generally.” (Lury 1996: 224)

According to this view, defining youth can be understood as an interplay between young people and changing society. Lury, amongst other writers, (Nava 1992) argues that youth cultures in the past were created as a spectacle, but people today live in a society which is itself a spectacle or hyper-reality. Young people constitute an audience redefining their role as cultural intermediaries within ongoing changes, where media and consumption predominate. Cannon (1995:2-3) argues that it is the world which has changed rather than young people, but young people have always responded and adapted to these changes and developed values, which shape, for instance, work culture. These processes include invasive media, worldwide consumer products, accessible communications and computer tools, global issues and opportunities to travel. However, according to Lagrée (1997) young people's life experiences show diverse and differentiated transitions. He challenges the life course perspective in which transitions such as employment, sexual relationships and independent living, signal the transition to adulthood and define modern youth. According to him, the vast structural differences between young people in different countries and in the same country do not provide support for the notion of the 'European generation'.

Contemporary sociological youth research has generated a diversity of empirical studies on young people, self-identity, values, transitions to adulthood and familiar thresholds in a framework of postmodernity. Another stance of youth research is the study of different groups of young people structured by gender, class, race and ethnicity in the context of subculture and/or feminist theories. Through a review of some of this diverse sociological literature on

youth, my aim is to investigate how taking gap years such as becoming an au pair may be a distinctive phase in the modern life course of young people as well as construct a representation of modern youth as a mode of life.

### **The gap year and extended youth**

The aim in this research is to highlight the phenomenon of the gap year, particularly the gap year abroad, and its meaning for contemporary young people. The focus is on a group of young people who travel abroad and become au pairs in a certain transitional phase of their lives. The gap year is not a specific area for research in youth literature, but it can be included generally in the extension of the period known as youth, and in the fragmentation of different boundaries and changes in transition to adulthood.

Marlis Buchmann (1989) wanted to make an empirically grounded contribution to the theoretical discussion of modernisation in the sociology of life course; in other words, to answer the questions about how contemporary social changes alter the nature of the life course and how the passage to adulthood is reshaped with regard to its role transitions, status changes, and subjective meaning. Youth as a transition period involves changing access to various life spheres. This provides a good opportunity to investigate also the changing life course.

In his survey, Buchmann compared two cohorts of white American high school graduates, one experiencing the transition period in the early 1960s and the other at the beginning of the 1980s. His main argument was that in the 1980s there was a greater complexity and diversity in transition patterns to adulthood than in the 1960s. In particular, women's educational opportunities had improved considerably. He used such status changes as completing schooling, marriage and parenthood as indicators of participation in particular life stages. Buchmann found that in the 1980s, movements to and from school suggested flexibility in educational tracking and the opportunity for the individual to revise educational career decisions. On the other hand, the longer period of schooling

and declining employment prospects meant that options were based on social and economic necessity rather than on free choice. According to Buchmann, the young people with a strong socio-economic background, experienced an extended period of youth and a gradual and late transition to adulthood because of higher educational degrees and later marriage. However, in the 1980s, the orientations and actions of young people showed more individually stratified patterns regardless of socio-economic background:

"Socioeconomic position still exerts a strong impact on life chances, but it seems less capable of conveying corresponding value and action orientations...The simultaneously increasing individualization and standardization of the life course with the development of modern society engenders a peculiar dynamic: Life is less constrained by traditions and customs and thus more susceptible to individualized action orientations; these potential individual choices, however, must be made within the context of standardized and bureaucratized life patterns."  
(Buchmann 1989: 184, 185)

According to Buchmann, this development results in a partial destandardization of the life course regime. This means that life trajectories become less predictable and calculable, and this contributes to the formation of a highly individualistic, transient, and fluid identity. Within this process, the transition to adulthood is transformed into an extended and less age-graded, diversified, and increasingly individualized period, blurring the distinction between youth status and adult status. However, Buchmann himself argues that his empirical survey remained limited in many ways as it did not investigate all of the theoretical issues and that more detailed and cross-national analysis was needed to investigate for instance the diversities between the destandardization of the life course and the shifts in identity patterns. He also investigated the familiar thresholds in creating generalised patterns in the transition to adulthood rather than exploring the possibility of 'new' thresholds or meaningful phenomena, concerning the diversity of modern youth and/or the life experience of different groups of young people.

Since Buchmann's study, the modern life course patterns of young people have interested youth researchers in Europe. French sociologist Galland (1995) analyses three models of youth that have emerged in recent empirical studies

in different European countries. According to Galland (1995), although youth in Europe has become a more and more homogenous life phase, he can identify three different models of European youth as follows:

1. The Mediterranean model: a protracted period of study, a period of precariousness and often at least one exploratory phase after the conclusion of studies, living with parents even when employed and rather independent and getting married immediately after leaving home.
2. The Northern European model: a protracted period of study, an exploratory phase after completing studies and before entering employment, leaving home early, getting married late, a mixture of short term relationships and living alone.
3. The British model: early abandonment of studies and entry to the labour market, leaving home and getting married early, an extended phase of living with a partner but without children.

(Galland 1995a: 5-6.)

This division is based on thresholds like completion of education, taking up an occupation, leaving home and living as a couple. Galland regards these transitions as significant because they lead to new social roles which demarcate age. In the 'traditional model', completion of studies is followed by immediate working life, which leads to leaving home and living as a couple, although girls may skip the occupational stage. On the other hand, for the working classes, the acts of leaving home and taking on adult status are definitive in contrast to middle class young people, who may choose more non-linear routes. For instance, Galland (1995a:15-17) has found that working class young people in particular do not leave home before conditions for independence have been met. In contrast, for middle class young people, economic insecurity is associated with living on one's own or as a couple, because the family is expected to provide material and moral backup.

Galland (1995a: 2-5) argues that in the traditional pattern of achieving adult status, youth had a marginal place being a middle class and male privilege. During recent times youth has extended especially amongst the middle class young people and amongst girls. Furthermore, the prolongation of youth can no

longer be perceived as a consequence of lengthened studies, because other thresholds have also experienced upheaval. On the other hand, explaining the extension of youth only through economic factors such as the difficulties of gaining employment, is misleading, because economic revival and a reduction in unemployment do not automatically signal the return of traditional models of transition to adulthood:

"There appear, no less on the occupational 'axis' of the life cycle than on the family 'axis', a series of intermediate situations whose main characteristic is that they are socially ambiguous, borderline situations, which may be prolonged for a number of years, situations which in their definitions belong neither entirely to adult roles nor entirely to adolescent roles. Arguably it is this intermediate situation between the dependency of adolescence and the autonomy of the adult that best characterizes youth in Europe at the present time." (Galland 1995a: 5)

Interestingly, Galland argues that youth today is an age of experimentation rather than one of identification. He suggests that for girls there is no model among previous generations of women and further that the meaning of family, class and gender have weakened in general within the socialization process. This has contributed to social mobility and the dissociation from the membership group. According to Galland, this is gradually giving way to an experimentation model which has its own logic as an experimentation of self, a gradual construction of social and personal identity and as an experimentation of friendship and sociability:

"It is this task of self-assembly that characterizes today's youth and accounts for the appearance of a fallow period in which activity is suspended." (Galland 1995b: 20)

Galland acknowledges the exploratory periods and experimentation as characteristics of many European young people today. However, he does not provide a detailed analysis or empirical evidence for the argument above, but illustrates how studying identification and experimentation could contribute to an understanding of modern youth. Both Buchmann and Galland investigate the familiar thresholds explicitly rather than implicitly and create generalized patterns in the transition to adulthood. They identify particular changes in the time frame of the familiar thresholds as characteristics of modern youth and young people. However, they do not develop further the changes in contents

and meanings of modern youth. For instance, what Galland calls the exploratory period provides an interesting possibility for a 'new' understanding of modern youth and the diversity of transitions to adulthood. On the other hand, in his book called *A History of Youth* Mitterauer (1992) explores the diversity of patterns and transitions to adulthood of the past, rather than suggests the existence of any traditional 'linear' model.

Au pairs and the gap year of travel abroad is a topic which is absent from much of the youth sociology. However, it may be an example of the broader characteristics of modern youth and young people in transition to adulthood particularly in Western countries. Buchman's 'extended youth' in America and Galland's 'exploratory phase' in the Mediterranean and Scandinavian countries support the existence of the so called 'gap year' particularly in the transition from school. They also suggest that there are differences in transitions between different groups of young people. These differences can be constructed both societally and individually.

Studies originating from subcultural and/or feminist theoretical orientations have provided some important insights in to the study of different groups of young people today. These perspectives provide understanding of the structures of class, race and gender shaping youth and the life course of young people. However, most of them concentrate on investigating the transition from school to work and familiar thresholds.

In youth subcultural theory, culture is defined as an independent public manifestation of the ways in which social groups develop differentiated life patterns and life styles. The common culture gives meaning to the life experiences of the group. Research interests have focussed on class related subcultures - particularly the working classes - and on subcultural styles and their construction.

Following this research trend in Britain in the 1970s, Paul Willis (1984) investigated the ways in which young working class men established their own distinctive culture in opposition to the dominant culture. Their working class

culture prepared them to enter male adulthood through the process of taking a working class job immediately after leaving school. Their peer group was crucial to the creation and transmission of their subculture. However, young women were excluded from these early subcultural studies. Feminist researchers (McRobbie & Garber 1976; Griffin 1985) suggested that gender structures had been ignored in subcultural theory. In studies on working class young women, gender as well as class determined their prospects and experiences. Marriage, motherhood and particularly the ideology of romance and friendship preoccupied the subcultural activities of young women.

The subcultural and feminist studies above suggested that youth is primarily about subcultural identification. They emphasized also continuity between home, school and work. More recent empirical research on a group of young people from the Isle of Sheppey by Claire Wallace (1989) concluded that the career paths of young people in the 1980s had become more fractured and confused than in the 1970s because the period of transition from school was fragmented and extended. In the labour market, such changes as unemployment and a lack of many traditional occupations have affected the changing patterns of the traditional paths of working class young people getting working class jobs. Wallace found that young people had become more selective about choosing a job particularly at the ages of 16 and 17. They were not concerned if they did not find a job immediately after leaving school. It was more important to them to wait for a suitable job which accorded with their self-image.

Accepting casual employment during schooling was also common and some continued these unskilled jobs after leaving school. However, rejecting 'slave labor' was also part of their quest for a better job. Wallace's findings support the argument that most unskilled domestic work, for example in Britain, is done by working class women and also by migrant labour. It also supports Galland's and Buchmann's research on 'exploratory' periods and 'extended' youth by suggesting that familiar transitions have become more fragmented in all groups of young people.

On the other hand, some British writers on young people and the labour market such as Lee (1991:102) suggest that creating a cheap 'surrogate' labour force of young trainees, rather than acknowledging an obligation to give young workers skills and training, has resulted in 'poor jobs' for young people:

"Young workers are especially vulnerable to 'poor work'. They are excluded by their very youth from many of the attractive sectors of the labour market and are especially vulnerable to fluctuations in the general level of labour demand. Those with little experience or training to offer are especially at risk of being used as cheap labour on low skilled exploitative tasks." (Lee 1991:88).

Generally, there is wide agreement that youth unemployment has affected family life, gender relations and people's positions in education and the job market. This means that such institutional consequences also construct the gap year and influence a young person's decision to take up employment abroad.

### **The gap year and contemporary Finnish youth research**

Youth research in many countries in the 1980s and 1990s originated from youth subcultural theories and their critics following the ideas of modernisation. These ideas generated theoretically and methodologically heterogeneous perspectives within youth research. The emphasis was on qualitative interpretation and understanding. According to Finnish researchers the subcultural approach is not considered relevant in countries like Finland, where there is no distinct class division as in Britain and where subcultures are not regarded as homogenous according to their class background (Puuronen 1997:111). However, gender and, to some extent, ethnicity can be considered as constructing youth subcultures in Finland. Youth subcultures amongst Finnish girls have interested the feminist youth researchers (Näre & Lähteenmaa 1992) in particular, but migrant youth has not been studied in Finland to any great extent. In the next section, I review some recent Finnish youth research, which provides further understanding of contemporary Finnish youth and investigates young people's, particularly girls' competences, identity, values and life courses in a modern society.



Sauli (1991) has investigated the life course of young people in Finland. According to her, schooling time has lengthened in Finland and gap years between different study phases are fairly common. During gap phases some young people travel, some work, while some are unemployed. Military service for boys usually takes place between two study phases. These findings equate with Galland's Northern European model.

Research on girls in Finland has concluded that modernisation and changes in the gender system have opened up new opportunities particularly for girls with various abilities and flexibility (Näre & Lähteenmaa 1992: 12,334). Näre and Lähteenmaa found in the socialization of girls and in girls' culture a platform to develop competences which help them to survive in a modern society. They talk about 'women's and girls' ethos', which they define as 'altruistic individualism':

"By altruistic individualism we mean individuality penetrated by responsibility rationalism, where the aim is to have a control over one's own life without doing harm to the environment and a possibility even to improve its wellbeing." (translated from Näre & Lähteenmaa 1992: 330).

This presents an interesting moral social position of young females in a modern society. Furthermore, various Finnish researchers are interested in the competences and values of young people in relation to internationalism, cross culturalism and travelling abroad. For instance, Lähteenmaa and Siurala (1991: 15, 62) found that girls do better at school and gain a better education and more language skills and travel abroad more often than boys. Helena Kasurinen (1997:246) studied the future orientation of young people by surveying a group from a small town in the eastern part of Finland. She concluded that girls were more eager than boys to study or work in foreign countries. However, the percentage (15%) of those willing to go abroad was small compared to public discussion and the increasing internationalism in the curricula of Finnish schools. In her empirical studies Helena Helve (1992: 252-253) found that girls adjust more easily to foreign people and cultures than boys. Girls emphasize social relationships, self-development and non-materialistic quality of life rather than materialistic values. From her mainly qualitative studies, Jaana Lähteenmaa (1992:157,164 ) concluded that not only

do boys try 'foolish' things, but girls also 'take loose'. She found that girls try 'foolish' things in small groups and visit various mixed groups and subcultures, rather than being committed to one group as boys often are. According to Lähteenmaa, girls develop competences characteristics of late modernity such as social flexibility.

However, according to Näre and Lähteenmaa (1992), these girls' competences do not guarantee them success in society, because different institutions and their hierarchies limit girls' actions and development of their identity. Tuula Gordon and Elina Lahelma (1992:314-327; Gordon 1994: 197), for example, argue that the supposed gender neutrality of the Finnish curriculum or the Finnish welfare state is, in practice, gender specificity. This provides one example of why the modern competences of girls remain invisible.

The findings above tend to generalize some aspects of modern youth in Finland rather than to explore the diversity of experiences and divisions of young people in ways other than by gender. However, many interesting questions can be raised about the gap year and young people. For example,

- Why do young people take a gap year and how do they spend it?
- How does the gap year create modern competences and values for young people?
- What is the meaning of a gap year for young people?
- Is the gap year a female phenomenon (not only in the case of au pairs, where gender division is still 'natural')
- To what extent does the gap year give opportunities for 'youth power' or 'girl power'?
- Has this phenomenon remained invisible and unrecognised because of its femininity?
- What are the characteristics of those young people who spend a gap year and how do different gap year options divide young people?
- What difficulties might these young people experience in foreign culture and environment?

These questions could be expanded by comparing young people from different countries, from different socio-cultural backgrounds and with different gap year experiences. Some of these questions are answered in substantive chapters below, but my aim in this research is not to answer all of these questions in relation to au pairs. However, they reveal the potential of the phenomenon of the gap year for increasing understanding of modern youth and for different groups of young people.

### **2.3 Aspects of travel abroad**

Besides the gap year, other opportunities for travel abroad can provide key answers to the question of why young middle class Western people become au pairs today. Travelling and tourism are not new, but are a growing phenomenon in modern society and a globalising world. In this section I examine some recent literature on travel and tourism touching these issues, because, like au pairs, young people who spend a gap year or period abroad can also be regarded as travellers.

Although tourism and travelling have engaged writers in a variety of disciplines, tourism rather than travel has been the focus of a great deal of recent literature. This growing interest has been on what is called cultural travelling and tourism and culturalisation of tourism (Craik 1997; Urry 1990; Rojek & Urry 1997) as well as on gendered subjectivity in relation to tourist experiences in the postmodern era (Jokinen & Veijola 1997). Travelling has been discussed particularly in the cultural history perspective of the Grand Tour (Black 1985; Buzard 1993; Clifford 1992; Craik 1997). However, relatively little attention has been given to young people as tourists or travellers, or to travel in connection with work. In this section, I discuss the theoretical literature to illuminate the perspective of au pairs as working travellers.

## Definitions of tourism and travelling

According to Rojek and Urry (1997:1), the distinction between tourism and travelling is not straightforward, because their meaning stems from both of these terms as well as from other terms including day-tripping, culture, excursion, voyaging and exploration. Paul Fussell (1987:651) has described the relationship between tourist and traveller as follows :

"Tourism simulates travel, sometimes quite closely...But it is different in crucial ways. It is not self-directed but externally directed. You go not where you want to go but where the industry has decreed you shall go. Tourism soothes you by comfort and familiarity and shields you from the shocks of novelty and oddity. It confirms your prior view of the world instead of shaking it up. Tourism requires that you see conventional things, and that you see them in a conventional way."  
(quoted by Buzard 1993: 3)

According to Buzard, these generalizations of the different mental or imaginative conditions of travellers and tourists are the product of two hundred years of cultural stereotyping. This stereotyping embraces the notion that the concept of traveller refers to independence, sensitivity, endurance, authenticity and uniqueness, in contrast to the concept of tourist which refers to the homogeneous notions of the leisure industry, vulgarity, repetition and ignorance. However, although these contrasting definitions are fairly stable, the notions of 'travel' and 'tourism' are often used interchangeably. (Buzard 1993: 1-17.)

Buzard (1993: 8,81) sees travel abroad as outside ordinary domestic and social life:

"Temporally removing one from domestic society, the tour abroad presents an image in high relief of culture's potential function in modern industrial democracies: the cultural is conceived of as 'outside' ordinary social life, comprising a compensatory domain of autonomy and creativity to which utilitarian capitalist social arrangements pay no heed."  
(Buzard 1993: 81)

Access to this kind of travel abroad has been and still is for just a minority of people. Buzard's own culture-historical analysis, based on a wide range of texts, is limited to an investigation of the educated middle classes in the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the other hand, the British sociologist John Urry (1990: 2-3) defines tourism as a leisure activity which is the opposite of regulated and organised work. He suggests that tourism is one manifestation of separate spheres and organisation of work and leisure in modern societies. Urry emphasizes the concept of regulated and organised work, and does not discuss what is considered as unregulated and unorganised work and what is their relationship with leisure and tourism. These questions could be raised in various practical contexts such as doing domestic tasks for the family during self-catering holidays or the so called 'working holiday' involving voluntary work abroad, or casual jobs abroad in catering, hotels or families.

Recent research on tourism has recognized the significance of culture within the tourist experience. Rojek and Urry (1997:2-3) have argued that since the demise of the Grand Tour for sons of the aristocracy, which combined both tourism and culture, these have become relatively distinct social practices in both time and space. In other words, tourism and culture are separate entities. In early research on tourism, it was operationalised using positivist criteria and analysed using economic criteria. This did not increase understanding of the diverse qualities of the tourist experience. According to Rojek and Urry (1997: 3-4), tourism and culture cannot be separated from each other because of the growing culturalisation of society, such as increased cultural hybridity and the development of the postmodern cultural paradigm. This paradigm involves breaking down such conventional distinctions as high/low culture, art/life, culture/street life, home/abroad. This means that different social practices are no longer found only in different social/spatial locations. The migration of people, the development of technology and the media, and economic and cultural globalisation have all contributed to these developments. This suggests that the distinction between home and abroad is decreasing and also that cultures and objects increasingly 'travel' :

"Tourists revel in the otherness of destinations, peoples and activities because they offer the illusion or fantasy of otherness, of difference and counterpoint to the everyday. At the same time, the advantages, comforts and benefits of home are reinforced through the exposure to difference.

This is a different argument from that which proposes that tourism is a quest for authenticity, or the search for deep and meaningful cross-cultural communication, self-discovery, origins, cultural forms 'untainted' by civilisation, and so on. Rather, it is an ego-centric pursuit, involving a fascination with self-indulgence and self-delusion through simulacra: approximations and analogues of 'the real'." (Craik 1997: 114)

Cultural components of the tourism experience have become important, but it may not be the same for different groups of people. The Australian writer, Craik also draws attention to class, age and gender divisions in the consumption of tourism and defines the 'true' cultural tourist as a well-educated 'elitist'. However, he suggests that 'casual' cultural tourism is growing amongst 'ordinary' tourists. According to Craik, research shows that cultural facilities and events attract more females than males and 'feminised' cultural tourism has become reorientated towards more experiential, reflective and self-improving experiences ( Craik 1997:126-131).

Many writers see in the Grand Tour or the European Tour as a historical predecessor of cultural tourism (Craik 1997:118-21) and educational tourism (Black 1985: 242-247). During the 18th century, England's social elite travelled to cultural sites in Europe. The original aim of the Grand Tour was to prepare the sons of aristocrats for diplomatic careers. It also provided a means of facilitating national and international relations. Making contacts, learning foreign languages, and debating with others were important factors in establishing these relations, and tourism was perceived as a form of education and not as a holiday. Sightseeing gradually became a new form of travel; and observation and being a witness became techniques to see, verify and order the world. During the nineteenth century, the tourist trade started to expand to include non-elite groups of tourists as well as women. The educational and cultural aspects of tourism were replaced with an emphasis on exploration, escape and pleasure. These were features of sun and sea tourism, in particular, in the twentieth century. As a result, inter-cultural communication and interaction with locals became secondary aims.

### **Au pairs as 'working travellers'**

Most contemporary young people lack the financial resources to become 'elite' cultural tourists and they may aim to combine various aspects of travel. It can also be argued that working while travelling abroad is attractive to young people not only because they can finance their travels, but also because of its image as an authentic or 'anti-tourist' experience in a foreign culture. It also provides opportunities for crosscultural contacts and interaction as well as for language learning, self-improvement and independence. In her empirical research on the interrail, Grundström (1991: 115-116) found that Finnish interrailers wanted to be distinguished from tourists, to communicate with the locals and to look for authenticity. She suggests that the interrail represents a modern or a postmodern phenomenon, although she doubts whether the interrailers' personalities were 'postmodern'. However, au pairs as 'working travellers' challenge Buzard's and Urry's understanding of work and domestic life in relation to travelling and tourism.

Interestingly, migrant workers have been travelling for centuries as domestic workers and as servants, yet they are rarely considered as travellers or tourists. Clifford (1992:105-108) considers that there are various and often unrecognised forms of travel and that the structures of gender, race and class determine the dominant discourses of travel. Some groups - like women, migrant labour or servants - who travel with their employers, are not considered as serious travellers. Clifford argues that in the travel myth, the traveller is someone who has the security and privilege to move about in fairly unconstrained ways. This runs contrary to the political disciplines and economic pressures that control poor and often non-white migrant labour, who have to travel abroad in order to survive. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the traveller is someone who is sensitive to experience (Buzard 1993: 6), and this quality is not equated with the poor. However, Finnish research on young people and travel reveals that a growing number of students, girls and young people from the most urban areas travel abroad (MEK 1985) and make interrail trips (Jauhiainen 1989). Au pairs as white and well-educated young women may achieve the status of travellers in the context of a gap year and may

escape from the dilemma of migrant labour. This is because they are not forced to travel abroad to survive and their background has provided them with sufficient sensitivity as travellers. On the other hand, their status as travellers is also decreased by their position as domestic workers, which is a characteristic of migrant female labour.

Literature on the tourist provides further understanding of tourist experiences. Writers on postmodernity, such as Bauman (1993), suggest that a 'continuous holiday' has come to represent the normal or good life and that the tourist and the vagabond are plausible metaphors for postmodern times. Some writers (Craik 1997; Jokinen & Veijola 1997) have alluded to the maleness of most of these metaphors and to women's exclusion in cultural theory and analysis of travel. They suggest that women are identified closely with the home and men with limitless external space. The question is, how are au pairs equated with these male dominated metaphors of tourist and vagabond.

The Finnish writers Jokinen and Veijola (1997) draw attention to this 'forgotten' group of female travellers within their figuration of 'the disorientated tourist' as a female figure of contemporary postmodern tourist. They describe the paparazzi as postmodern flâneur, a sextourist as a stranger or an adventurer, and an au pair as a nomad:

"...we will metaphorise a particular nomadic becoming, a female figure, whose 'crises and adventures' have led her to choose trajectories formerly reserved for men only: the trajectories of travelling abroad."  
(Jokinen & Veijola 1997: 43)

Jokinen and Veijola note that au pairs are absent from the travel and leisure theories as well as from the sociology of work. However, they provide a stereotype of who and what an au pair is and what she does, as follows:

"An au pair is, most often, an adolescent girl (for instance, from a country like Finland) who travels away from home to do domestic work for a year in a household in a foreign country (preferably Paris or London). She has usually been warned (by fathers, friends and feminists) against becoming an au pair since its hazardous nature is common knowledge. Still, young girls want to leave, perhaps they have to leave - to free themselves from fathers, mothers, possessive boyfriends. This is, after all, a relatively



acceptable way for a girl to get on the road. What else is relevant to be taken into account in this figure? The au pair enters - not only a foreign culture, a foreign locality, a foreign family, but also a foreign language. In more than one sense, she has left all her homes/houses, in order to enter a totally strange symbolic order, a configuration of a foreign culture/language/household. Either she adapts herself to it - or she is sent back home."

(Jokinen & Veijola 1997: 44)

Furthermore, Jokinen and Veijola equate the au pair's role with that of a 'babysitter', whose main task is to take care of the babies in a foreign family. The writers also assume that communicating with members of a foreign family in a foreign language, and meeting other au pairs from all over the world, are features of this stereotype. Jokinen's and Veijola's stereotyping of au pairs is not unproblematic, because it provides a rather limited discussion of au pairs as a social group and because it is not based on empirical observation.. It also raises more general questions about contemporary feminist theory and practice:

"...a number of contributors express their anxieties about the current influence of some forms of postmodernism which are so far removed from practical concerns that they imply that social research is pointless."

(Maynard & Purvis 1994: 8)

However, regardless of the limitations of Jokinen's and Veijola's analysis, it does give some insight into au pairs as female travellers. Equating au pairs with nomads, Jokinen and Veijola quote Braidotti (1994) and Kristeva (1986), who have written on women's subjectivity within feminist theory. Jokinen and Veijola (1997: 44) perceive the 'babysitter' au pair as a counterpart to Braidotti's nomadism (1994: 1-5). The writers suggest that 'emphatic proximity' and 'intensive interconnectedness' are characteristics of an au pair as a babysitter. Following Kristeva (1986: 206,209), this is perceived as a 'maternal space' or attentive and gentle love, where one forgets oneself. Jokinen and Veijola draw attention to the au pair's 'subjectivity in a foreign language'. An au pair is regarded as a 'stranger' and an 'adventurer' in the foreign symbolic order, but is granted a position of a subject in parole, in laughter and in conversation with other au pairs:

"In a foreign home and in a foreign language house - that is, in a foreign

symbolic order - the au pair is legitimately and consciously only a visitor in language; just as women as speaking/enunciating, individual subjects are only visiting the language of the male symbolic order. In this sense, she is a 'proper' tourist. But, like a tourist, she can see her situation with the stranger's eyes: for her, her subjectivity in language is no more transparent. The au pair sees the language at work, the language which she operates and which operates her; which she figures and is figured by. Word by word, utterance by utterance, she wins her subjectivity in a foreign language by speaking and positioning herself as the subject of enunciation, an interlocutor in a conversation... In parole, in laughter and conversation with other women who are in a similar situation, she is granted a position of a subject, an enunciator." (Jokinen & Veijola 1997: 48-49)

It is interesting that Jokinen and Veijola do not discuss the sexualization of au pairs because sexualization of women is a central issue within the feminist literature on postmodernity and subjectivity (see Braidotti 1994) and au pairs can be sexualized in their domestic context. The writers also present a rather optimistic picture of emphatic proximity, intensive encounter and love between a foreign au pair and the baby in her care which my observations do not support. Emotional work is a feature of a wide range of work women do, and housework and childcare are often described as 'labours of love'. However, caring for others is also work which is done in many different contexts and for various reasons other than care and love for other people, and it often does not include love. In this respect, the description of an au pair as a stranger and an adventurer in a foreign family, language and culture may be more appropriate than that of a nomadic subject establishing lasting ties.

Jokinen and Veijola describe the 'post-modern tourist' as somebody who has re-emerged in the sphere of work rather than of leisure. No doubt, the number of people as well as their contexts of work and travel are expanding. The growth of the service sector and consumer industry have contributed to these developments. They also emphasize the dissolving of boundaries between work, travel, leisure and holiday which are regarded as characteristics of the postmodern socio-cultural order. This trend is evident from opportunities which are advertised as 'working holidays'. 'Working travellers' have globally become a distinctive group of overseas workers with low status and in non-skilled and casual positions. But it can be argued that the metaphor of tourist is not

appropriate for all working travellers who have to adapt rather than 'enter a configuration' of foreign cultures, work places and languages. Furthermore, metaphors like flâneurs, strangers, adventurers, nomads etc. may describe an individual experience rather than a group experience. For example, au pairs may be 'imprisoned in a language house' in a foreign family and a symbolic order, and may be like strangers or adventurers in this order.

In this chapter, my aim has been to illustrate the complexity of the interrelated phenomena of the gap year and travel abroad involving institutionalization, individualization as well as structural divisions. I have combined three fairly unrecognized study areas in any related literature: the gap year, travel abroad in connection with work and becoming an au pair. I have shown how these phenomena relate to the current socio-cultural condition representing (post)modernity and structural divisions and how little is so far known about these particular phenomena. My main argument is that becoming an au pair is a part of these processes and phenomena, which must be taken account of in studying au pairs as domestic workers for families.

### **3 AU PAIRS AS DOMESTIC WORKERS FOR FAMILIES IN THE 20TH CENTURY**

Domestic work is fundamental to every household in most societies. Most domestic work is done by women and is both paid and unpaid. According to Gregson and Lowe (1994: 45,50) middle class families in particular hire paid domestic labour, although not necessarily as an automatic and accepted social practice.

Questions as why and how the different forms of domestic labour, particularly housework and childcare services, are demanded and supplied in contemporary societies, are often analysed in connection with changes to the family institution. After the world wars the number of middle class families grew and today a wide variety of families belong to the middle classes. During this century, research on the family suggests changes like a decline in size of households, the change from production unit to consumption unit, growing household technology, increased women's employment and the growth of the professional 'service class' and different service occupations in labour market. There is a wide range of theoretical and empirical literature on all these topics, which provide insight into the 'modern' family and household.

Economic imperatives are considered as a reason why domestic service in families persisted during the inter-war years. There was a demand for domestic labour by middle and upper middle class families and a desperate need for work among working class women. The system was strongly supported culturally and ideologically, so it was regarded as normal (Taylor 1979:121), although many servants would have preferred non-domestic work. Today many families and households in advanced capitalist countries face a situation described as 'crisis in the domestic sphere' (Arat-Koc 1989: 34). The growing number of women working outside the home and the increasing dependence of

the family on two incomes have contributed to the demand for childcare and other domestic help. According to Morgan (1975: 168), the empirical accounts of dual career families indicate that a few privileged families are able to reduce considerably the burdens of domesticity and, in this context, the exploitation of some (professional) women is weakened within the family institution. Furthermore, according to Gordon (1994: 19), companionate partnership is still the experience of a privileged few because inequalities are structured. However, the privileged women often achieve an escape from their domestic work load at the expense of female domestic workers.

### **Childcare/ers**

Childcare is of great concern to parents. In practice there is a lack of public childcare places, and private childcare is common in many countries including Britain (Moss 1986: 27). There is a demand for private childcare and a need for trained childcare workers to work in the private sector (Gregson & Lowe 1994:163). Many families employ unregulated and/or untrained childcare workers like nannies, mothers' helpers and au pairs. Alongside these arrangements, children are cared for by relatives like elder siblings and grandparents, friends and neighbours, although in urban areas, in particular, support from these networks is decreasing. In this context, it is rarely emphasized that concern for children's safety in a modern society, and especially in big cities like London, has increased demand for continuous care not only for children under school age but also for school age children. This has prompted parents to make arrangements for school transport and for someone to look after their children in public places and at home.

Parents may decide to seek live-in or home-based care for their children for many reasons. These include the high cost of regulated childcare, difficulty in obtaining day care places, particularly for middle and high income families, and their own long and irregular working hours. The growing number of single parent families has also contributed to the need for help with childcare, and the ideology of mothercare and home-based care may have encouraged some parents to elect to make private arrangements for it. According to Moss

(1986:27), in the the 1980s the parental home was seen as the right place for young pre-school children, and a mother's care as the best form of childcare.

In the 1980s unpaid caring done by women in kin and family relations was in focus of much of the British feminist research (for instance Finch and Groves 1983; Ungerson 1983, 1987, 1990). According to Anttonen (1997: 129), paid caring - for example, done by female servants and by women from ethnic and racial minorities - was not included into these definitions of caring.

The general pattern of day care providers was established in a recent survey in England and Wales (Moss et.al. 1995). Nurseries, playgroups and childminders who were included in the independent sector of childcare providers, were the target of the study because it was concerned with the Children's Act as it applies to day care services for children under 8 years. However, unregulated childcare providers like nannies and au pairs were not included.

According to Melhuish (1991:102), most research on day care has concentrated on childminders and nurseries. The main focus of these studies is on the quality of childcare and the effects of day care on children. However, little attention has been given to the day care providers as employees or to their labour relationships. Various writers on day care have acknowledged the poor pay and conditions (sometimes also illegality) of childcare workers. This has contributed to instability and high turnover in the workforce (Cohen 1988; Moss 1991: 89). These factors may affect with language and social development of children (Whitebook et.al 1989). Many writers on day care have also expressed concern over the dearth of studies on unregulated day carers and the lack of comprehensive childcare legislation in general.

A recent survey, which also included unregulated private childcare providers, suggests that only the most affluent families can afford to hire domestic help in their homes (Meltzer 1994: 17-19). The results of this survey on day care services in Britain concluded that all working and non-working mothers with pre-school children who hired a nanny, mother's help or an au pair belonged to the two highest social classes, defined by the working status of the mother and the

social class of the head of household (measured by occupation). Most working mothers taking advantage of these options were in full-time employment and most often self-employed. Furthermore, Meltzer's survey found that private home-based day care was more common in urban areas than in rural areas.

### **Housework and private domestic workers**

Although childcare is of great concern to parents, particularly employed parents, it is not the only concern which affects a family's life. Other day-to-day domestic tasks, like cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing and shopping, need to be done as well. In various contexts it has been emphasized that, universally, women take responsibility for most of these tasks and are more likely to do the housework than men, even if they are employed themselves, and particularly in households with dependant children. There is a wide range of literature which emphasizes that gender division of domestic work in families and households is still strongly embedded in contemporary societies; the mother and/or the female members of the family and household being largely responsible for the domestic sphere. Increased household technology and developments in the food and clothing industry have not fundamentally changed this pattern.

The growing number of employed middle class women may seek solutions to this double work load by buying domestic labour rather than by sharing domestic work with other family members. This increases the demand for various categories of private domestic workers like au pairs, cleaners, ironing ladies, window cleaners and housekeepers and for the setting up of the home as a work place in modern society. However, also full-time housewives and upper middle class families hire private domestic workers and domestic staff. A female employer - employee relationship can provide an escape from domestic drudgery for privileged middle class full-time housewives or working mothers. For domestic workers, this relationship can mean drudgery with poor pay and poor contractual terms.

Delphy and Leonard (1992: 96-97) acknowledge the different social status for full-time employed men and women who buy domestic services. Men can

obtain domestic services through unpaid family labour or by hiring domestic help. However, if women buy domestic services, they are perceived as adopting the role of 'domestic managers', supervising work they are traditionally expected to do themselves. This is not accepted by society to the same degree for their male counterparts, who look to their wives to provide unpaid domestic labour.

Domestic service, and particularly the employment of live-in domestics, was very common during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Furthermore, according to Mitterauer (1992), juvenile domestic service traditionally played a central part in the socialization of young people. The industry of private domestic service gradually altered from live-in to a preference for live-out domestic servants. Delphy and Leonard (1992: 96-97) suggest that 'nannies', 'childminders' or 'cleaners' have replaced the stigmatized term 'servant'. However, some categories of domestic workers, like au pairs, nannies, maids and migrant domestic workers, continue the tradition of live-in domestic service. For private employers who hire live-in rather than live-out domestic workers, the low cost and flexibility of these arrangements in relation to the tasks, working hours and organisation may outweigh the pressures of having an additional and often foreign person living in the household and occupying one of, or the only, guest room. In contemporary households, there is rarely a separate servants' quarters and the domestic space may be limited to one guest room. This often was the case in the host families interviewed for this study. This closeness increases the image of the au pair as a 'family member'.

The findings of Gregson's and Lowe's (1994: 40,50) recent study on dual-career families in Britain, concluded that 30-40 per cent of middle class households, where both partners were in full-time employment in professional/managerial occupations, employed waged domestic labour in some form. Around 40 per cent of such households with pre-school-age children employed a nanny. Three-quarters of dual-career households employed a cleaner. However, less than 15 per cent of dual-career households employed more than one paid domestic.



## The au pair industry

Little is known about the number of private domestic workers in contemporary Britain. One reason for this may be that research has concentrated on either childcare or household workers. Furthermore, concepts like 'household worker' and 'domestic worker' have been used interchangeably. These concepts are discussed more fully in the last section of this chapter. On the other hand, the various categories of private domestic workers create diverse work relations which are difficult to include in one study. For instance, Gregson's and Lowe's (1994) investigation, based on advertisements for paid domestic labour, identified over a hundred categories of waged domestic labour. Moreover, the word 'au pair' was found in eight different categories.

There is no reliable data available on the number of au pairs in Britain (or elsewhere) because not all au pairs - for example, those from EU-countries - need to register with Home Office. However, the following unpublished table obtained from the Home Office shows the total number of au pairs excluding EC-nationals in the period 1984 - 1990.

TABLE 1. Au pair girls given leave to enter the United Kingdom between 1984 and 1990 (the unpublished paper obtained from the Home Office in 1992)

<u>year</u>	<u>au pairs in the United Kingdom (excluding EC nationals)</u>
1984	8020
1985	9190
1986	6270
1987	6150
1988	5780
1989	7420
1990	8010

The table above shows a fairly stable number of incoming au pairs to Britain between 1984 and 1990, although not all of them may be registered. The inclusion of the EC-au pairs in the figures would present a clearer reflection of the total number of au pairs in Britain. However, au pairs are probably the biggest group of live-in domestic workers in modern industrialised societies.

According to American writers Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave (1985: 123) bringing in female aliens under au pair programme and using them as servants was widespread in USA in the 1970s. Most au pairs are recruited by profit oriented au pair agencies and non-profit organisations, who use the terms of the European agreement and national immigration/employment acts to establish their businesses and contract terms for au pair arrangements. Besides au pair agencies, direct advertising in national papers, and contacts through friends, are additional sources for families looking for an au pair. Over the years the recruitment industry for au pairs has expanded. For example one study (PEP 1962: 43) conducted in the 1960s found that only 23 per cent of au pair arrangements were made by English agencies. In my study 86 per cent of au pairs had been recruited by au pair agencies, although because of the smallness of the sample, these findings cannot be generalized.

The agencies operate within the framework of national private sector labour recruitment, although licensing, regulatory mechanisms and monitoring of these businesses are minimal or non-existent. However, some au pair agencies in Britain are members of employment organisations like the Federation of Recruitment and Employment Services, or international au pair organisations trying to establish their reputation. According to Hokkanen and Lehtikoinen (1994: 6-7), the recruitment of Finnish au pairs is concentrated in big organisations, which co-operate with the Finnish Labour Ministry, the European Commission and international au pair agencies.

In this chapter, I will discuss why au pairs are an example of the reproduction of structured inequality of work in a modern society and how au pairs are defined as family based domestic workers through reviewing some of the theoretical and empirical literature on domestic work and domestic workers.

### 3.1 Theoretical perspectives

Domestic work is still not an accepted academic topic. However, from the 70s, the domestic labour debate (for instance Dalla Costa 1975; Seccombe 1974; Molyneux 1979), growing interest in the dualism of the labour market (see Redclift & Mingione 1985) and the growth of the service sector and service workers in general (Marshall & Wood 1995), have contributed to recognition of the meaning of both paid and unpaid domestic work in households and families. Nowadays there is general agreement that domestic work - including housework and childcare - is *work* although it is often viewed as a secondary, informal and reproductive mode of non-capitalist work. Notwithstanding the different perspectives, there is also wide agreement on the gender division within and the low status of both paid and unpaid domestic work. Some writers on paid domestic work (Gaitskell 1984; Cock 1989; Romero 1992) have argued that analysis of domestic work has mainly focussed too much on unpaid domestic work undertaken by full-time housewives, and ignored women's paid domestic labour for households and families.

#### Domestic work and modernisation thesis

The American writer Coser has suggested that domestic service is a pre-industrial and obsolete occupation in modern society:

"The status is now so stigmatized that it can hardly attract potential recruits among ordinary citizens and must increasingly turn to a pool of otherwise "undesirable" foreigners...Families will no longer be able greedily to devour the personality of their servants."  
(Coser 1973:31,39).

According to this view, domestic service is characterised by personal allegiance, long hours and a high level of commitment. In the past, it was legitimated by religion and because there were few alternative employment opportunities. According to studies on intergenerational social mobility among European immigrants, domestic service was regarded as a 'bridging occupation', because it provided employment opportunities in the United States for immigrant women from European countries during the migration years

(McBride 1976:63-78; Katzman 1981:171). Domestic service was therefore considered as a transitional occupation into the formal sector. It was a way of 'modernising' traditional, rural, ethnic women and offered a means of social mobility.

This modernisation thesis has connections with those family theories which support the idea of a symmetrical family (Young & Willmott 1973). The idea of social change as evolutionary is evident in the change in relationships between women and men and in families, which are now more egalitarian. Improved household technology was also expected to solve 'the servant problem' by making servants redundant. This theory is also based on Parson's (1959) functionalist approach to family life. It emphasizes universalism prevailing over particularism in the modern occupational order. This means that the servant role was rooted in a premodern type of relationship in which particularism prevailed over universalism (Coser 1973:32). However, Coser's modernisation thesis does not explain the continuing existence and meaning of domestic service in modern societies or the relationship between traditional domestic service and waged domestic labour in contemporary households.

Contemporary writers on late modernity, such as Beck (1992), do not focus on domestic work, but discuss family, work and gender in late modern society. As discussed in Chapter Two, Beck considers reflexivity, individualization and fragmentation of familiar boundaries as characteristics of late modernity. Beck argues that women are in a different position to men because of their intermediate status between freedom from domestic work and freedom to become real wage earners. Demographic liberation, the deskilling of housework, contraception, divorce, and participation in education and employment have freed women from the traditional female role. Beck regards housework as marginal work because its isolation and automation have directed women towards work outside the home.

"It (housework) becomes the invisible and never ending 'left-over-work' between industrial production, paid services and technically perfected domestic furnishing of private households."

(Beck 1992: 110)

On the other hand, Beck considers that married women continue to be largely dependent on economic support from their husbands because control mechanisms of the labour market and motherhood free them from the obligation to accept paid work. However, there is also the increasing need for two incomes as discussed earlier and seasonal and part-time work have become an attractive option particularly for women during late modernity.

"It remains unrecognized that the inequality between men and women is not a superficial problem that can be corrected within the structures and forms of the family and the professional sphere. Rather, these epochal inequalities are built into the basic plan of industrial society, its relations between production and reproduction, and between familial and wage labour." (Beck 1992:123)

This means that a patriarchal society reproduces women's oppression. On the other hand, Beck also undervalues the meaning of domestic work and gender inequality in modern society by emphasizing a women's privilege to remain 'free' from wage labour, together with the marginality of domestic work in private households caused by automation in an advanced industrial society. According to this view, domestic work is regarded as inferior to what Beck defines as 'real' wage labour.

These approaches to modernisation thesis contradict various contemporary studies which emphasize the expansion of the domestic service sector as well as the value of private domestic workers in contemporary societies. The 'disappearance' of domestic service and the lack of importance attached to domestic work in modern society, are not the conclusions of these studies. However, the Council of Europe's (1969,1991) au pair agreement supports these views in the sense that it defines the au pair arrangement as a non-economic, cultural exchange. The reasons for young Western people becoming au pairs were explained in the context of the (post)modern in Chapter Two. However, notions of late modernity in the context of family, domestic work and women, underestimate the value of the work au pairs do for their host families.

## Dual labour market theory

In mainstream sociology of work, dual labour market theory provides an account of the primary and secondary labour markets. The secondary labour market is made up of those with low skills, those with (im)migrant status and those engaged in seasonal, part-time and temporary labour, whereas the primary labour market is made up of profit-oriented, unionized and capital intensive industries and enterprises. Economic and technical developments have been offered as explanations for the growth of this division (Grint 1991:243-244; Morris 1991:73).

Gender, class, race, ethnicity and age are important factors in development of 'casual' labour under capitalism. This labour is equated with the secondary, peripheral, informal or marginal economic sectors. Furthermore, this division of the labour market is regarded as essential to capitalism.

"This implies characteristics such as low pay, few rights, few skills, little training, little security, easy firing, few options for vertical mobility or for movement into the primary labour market, and large turnover. It has often been pointed out that the secondary labour market, or the peripheral economy, attracts and recruits the more vulnerable segments of the labour force: immigrants, both legal and illegal; racial, ethnic and national minorities; women; and vulnerable age groups, primarily the young and the elderly." (Bernstein 1988: 651)

The dual labour market theory has been criticized because it is largely descriptive; although it offers some insights into the internal structure of the labour market, it is unable to account for broader economic tendencies or to explain why there are no alternative opportunities for particular groups of women who continue to be employed as domestic workers (Gregson & Lowe 1994:68-69). Although dual labour market theory recognises the low-status of 'invisible' or 'informal' domestic work, it is often accompanied by views on modernity. This means that the dualism of the labour market is seen as essential to modern society. Furthermore, domestic work as women's work is treated as no different from other work done in the secondary sector. This notion is male orientated and accepts the patriarchal (and capitalist) hierarchy as natural. Dual labour market theory can only provide a partial analysis of

contemporary domestic workers because it does not regard domestic work relations, particularly family relations, as a central issue.

### **Feminist structural theory**

It remains as a challenge for feminist theory and practice to increase understanding of domestic work and domestic workers in a changing society. Feminist analysis acknowledges the economic, social and emotional nature of women's work, particularly domestic work.

According to Beechey (1987:14-15), recent analyses of gender ideology and the process of social construction have been discussed within feminist theory on work in the 1980s. This has generated empirical studies which show how gender affects the organization of work in a variety of ways. Delphy and Leonard (1992:70, 16) argue that psychoanalytical and postmodern arguments have recently been used to study the constitution of gendered subjectivities and cultural representations of familial relations rather than to study what actually goes on in households, such as housework, domestic relations and domestic violence.

Similar domestic tasks are undertaken under different terms and conditions, paid and unpaid, and by different groups of women and categories of domestic workers. According to Malos (1995: 211-213), the main theoretical debate within feminist theory on domestic work has been about the relationship of domestic labour and the Marxist theory of value. It has also addressed the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism generally, generating differentiated analysis on the production of domestic work and different explanations for the mechanisms of women's oppression:

"Debate and discussion about the importance of household work and the position of women in the family and household have involved disagreements about the nature and meaning of the work itself, its relationship to work in the labour market, its economic importance, and how it relates to perspectives and strategies for women's equality. These difficulties still remain." (Malos 1995:206).

Domestic work and domestic labour relations are seen as central to an analysis of family relations, of family work and of women's oppression (Delphy 1984; Delphy & Leonard 1992; Finch 1989). These factors increase our understanding of the gender and generational relations of family members and show that family production relations operate to produce both non-market and market goods and services. The value of emotional work carried out by women, in addition to routine housework tasks, is central to these analyses.

Most feminist structural theorists agree that the dual system of capitalism and patriarchy creates women's oppression, although they provide a different understanding of the degrees of interconnection and autonomy of these systems. Heidi Hartmann (1979, 1981) and Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard (1992) consider patriarchy and capitalism (as well as racism) as separate social systems which influence each other.

"Our analysis starts, however, from the premise that women are oppressed and exploited in and of themselves, and that patriarchy and capitalism are distinct, and equally social, systems which are empirically and historically intertwined. We do not think capitalism dominates patriarchy, but rather that they influence and structure each other. We must consider the possibility that women's liberation can be achieved under capitalism, and that capitalism can be overthrown without patriarchy being weakened."

(Delphy & Leonard 1992: 47)

Hartmann defines patriarchy as :

"... a set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men, and solidarity among them, which enable them to control women. Patriarchy is thus the system of male oppression of women."

(Hartmann 1979: 232)

Both Hartmann (1979) and Walby (1986) consider patriarchy is now sustained by women's oppression in the labour market. Together with other writers on labour market relations (Adkins 1995; Mies 1986) they use the phrase 'patriarchal capitalism' to stress that capitalism has grown on top of patriarchy. This means that supplies of male and female labour are gendered in the context of an employer's demand for labour. This produces an occupational hierarchy which itself is gendered because of the maximization of profit. Sex



segregation is considered as a primary mechanism in a capitalist society to maintain women's oppression and the low wages for jobs traditionally done by women. Research on patriarchal capitalism has provided some insights into the gendering of the labour market as well as into sexual and employment relations, for example, between secretaries and their employers (Pringle 1988) and among female workers in the tourist industry (Adkins 1995).

Delphy and Leonard (1992) focus on material and economic relations within domestic work, particularly within unpaid family work. Whereas Hartmann believes that it is capitalism rather than men who are now benefitting from the long hours of working women, Delphy and Leonard suggest that it is domestic patriarchy which maintains women's oppression. They focus their analysis on the unpaid work done by family workers like housewives in marriage and kinship relations. But their analysis also provides a framework to explore paid domestic work outside marriage and kinship relations, but still in and for the family.

The structural perspectives of feminist theory on work, described above, complement each other and help to explain the complexity of structured oppression of women. The feminist approach also challenges the structural-functional view of Talcott Parsons (1959) on the family as well as the marxist view which perceives the family as meeting the needs of capitalist society. These theories have tended to focus on relationships between the family and society rather than relationships within the family. They also do not address the ways in which these relationships both structure and are structured by external social, economic and power relationships. Feminists have challenged the view that the family has become more egalitarian and symmetrical. They argue that it still oppresses women and that women are exploited and subordinated within it. (Abbott & Wallace 1990:74-75.) On the other hand, Morgan (1985: 260) has noted that a direct attack on family by the feminists may harm other struggles such as the struggles of working class women in the workplace and ethnic minorities.

Defining relations within marriage and family as labour relations can be

criticized for providing too narrow a perspective on family relations. For instance, a material and economic labour relationship may not equate with women's own experiences as mothers and/or wives. As explained above, however, this theory has certain advantages in its ability to conceptualize both paid and unpaid domestic work and to explain the universality of the low status of domestic work and women's oppression as well as exploitation within domestic labour relationships. This means that Delphy's and Leonard's analysis on family workers like housewives in the framework of material and economic labour relationship provides an important link between domestic workers both inside and outside family relations. Following Delphy and Leonard (1992), I emphasize the meaning of social relations through an investigation of domestic workers and work relations between au pairs and their host mothers (and families). Using the dual systems theory I will construct a theoretical framework to investigate this particular work relationship which represents both work relations in the labour market and work relations in families and households.

### **3.2 Empirical contributions**

There are various empirical studies on different categories and groups of domestic workers. Although au pairs have things in common with family workers like housewives, paid domestic workers for families and households provide empirically closer identification groups for them. Rather than reviewing the wide variety of studies on domestic workers, I have selected just some of the studies most relevant to au pairs.

#### **Au pairs in a comparative historical context**

Domestic service was a common facet of middle and upper middle class households during Victorian and Edwardian times. According to Davidoff and Westover (1986: 15), in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, domestic service was one of the most important occupational categories for women and girls in Britain. However, studies of the past history of domestic

service rely heavily on a limited number of written documents. According to McBride (1976:9-10), this lack of material is also due to the nature of domestic service: the isolation and lack of unions, the casualness, femininity and lack of status of domestic work.

The phenomenon of au pairs can be examined in the context of developments in the domestic service industry during the 19th and the 20th centuries. Domestic service in Britain is often regarded as a 19th century phenomenon but many historical studies on domestic service have found that domestic servants have remained an important occupational category, particularly for women, well into the twentieth century. For instance, according to Pugh (1992:220), there were still 1.3 million female domestics in Britain in 1930, although they were increasingly live-out rather than live-in domestics. However, much less is known about live-in arrangements such as the provision of board and lodging in the history of servants (Laslett 1977:45). In most Western countries the interwar years marked a transition between the household economies of the early 1900s, heavily dependent on servants, and those of the post-World War II era. During the inter-war years, more girls entering the service sought positions outside family and the average age of those in domestic service became progressively older, reflecting its increasing unpopularity. (Birch 1984; Palmer 1990; Pugh 1992.)

After the world wars, full employment and developments in education (also for working class girls), the rise in workers' wages, better employment opportunities for women elsewhere, - for example in the factories, and in secretarial and teaching jobs - and the growth of the middle classes meant that fewer and fewer families could afford domestic staff or a nanny or a nursemaid. The housewife managing with the new domestic technology and without servants also became a fashionable phenomenon. (Melhuish & Moss 1992:170; Oakley 1974: 32; Pugh 1992: 83-87, 220.)

In their guidebook for au pairs and nannies, Griffith and Legg (1989: 11-12) suggest that after World War II, the numbers of au pairs and the participating countries rose dramatically. They found that the first recorded usage of the

word "au pair" was in 1897 in the *Girls's Own Paper*. An au pair referred to an English girl who taught English in French households in exchange for lessons in French, although caring for children soon became a principal task. On the Continent, at the turn of the century, the Church encouraged single women who were leaving home to take jobs in the cities, to live and work in families for the benefit of their moral welfare and so that they could learn useful household skills.

Generally, the decline of the institution of domestic service has been similar in most Western countries. Although there is some disagreement on how and when domestic service declined in Britain, there is wide agreement that, by the 1950s, working class girls were entering other low status domestic and secretarial jobs, and middle class women were, to a great extent, coping without domestic servants. After the wars, domestic labour became difficult to get and hiring domestic staff was a sensitive issue amongst women and certainly in the second wave of feminist movement (Davidoff & Westover 1986:27).

Interestingly, the decline in the number of live-in servants and the increase in the number of au pairs and participating countries seems to have taken place concurrently after the wars. For instance, in their study of childminders as a working class day care system, Jackson and Jackson (1979) conclude that au pair girls took over, in part, the role of the disappearing servant as well as that of the Victorian nanny, particularly for the middle classes and professional mothers:

"No one knows the scale, but probably far more middle-class children are in part looked after by this new-style nanny than ever had a nanny in the past". (Jackson & Jackson 1979: 18)

This means that the industry of au pairs made up for part of the national domestic labour shortage in families and households after the wars. Defining an au pair arrangement as language learning, cultural exchange and family membership may have also improved the image of au pairs as domestic servants and eased the guilt of women who employed them. Furthermore, au

pair girls did not necessarily come from working class backgrounds. This helped to break the class division mechanisms of live-in domestic service during the interwar years:

"The only solution was for the mistress to either employ a middle class girl as a live-in help, or to engage a working class girl strictly on business terms and give her enough freedom to build a life of her own."  
(Lewis 1984:155-116)

Although au pairs as a separate group and category of domestic servants are absent from the academic historical and anthropological literature, there is some empirical evidence available about them in the context of domestic service work. In the 1960s au pairs were the focus of public debate which provoked action in the European Community and a survey called *Young Europeans in England* (PEP 1962). The PEP study originated from suggestions that these young people were unhappy in their host families because they were not being treated according to the Home Office's terms and conditions or as 'daughters of the family' but were being exploited by the host families. Although the random sample of PEP study consists not only of au pairs, but also of mother's helpers on work permits, full-time students and workers in hospitals and catering, au pairs constitute half of the sample. The principal aim of the PEP study was to describe the conditions, relations and satisfaction of these young people in a foreign family and country. Because empirical research on au pairs is limited, this PEP study provides an interesting and important empirical framework to study au pairs in comparison to female servants in the past as well as to contemporary au pairs in Britain.

The young Europeans in the sample were mostly girls, predominantly middle class defined by their father's occupation and with a good educational background. The random sample of 417 young Europeans living in the London area and Oxford and Cambridge, was collected from English language classes, which meant that all the participants were also attending language courses. Those working as au pairs were usually 18 - 20 years old. 62 per cent came from upper middle class families, 26 per cent from lower middle class families and 12 per cent from working class families. 94 per cent of the host families were upper middle class and most of them had children under five years old. It

is likely that most of these upper middle class women were full-time housewives in the 60s. (PEP 1962:46.)

It is interesting that most of the au pairs in the PEP study came from upper middle class families. In my own study I found most Finnish au pairs coming from intermediate status or middle class backgrounds. These class backgrounds are different from those of female servants in the past and from most contemporary groups of private domestic workers. An (upper) middle class background might be connected with the notion that au pairs should be treated like 'daughters of the family'. On the other hand, this form of work abroad is considered acceptable and safe for single girls from middle classes, because they enter families with similar class backgrounds to their own. Furthermore, (upper) middle class parents may be more supportive of their children travelling abroad than parents of children from the working classes.

In Victorian and Edwardian Britain, the norm for skilled artisans and lower middle class families was to hire a young, unmarried female 'maid of all work' from working class background and a rural area rather than a whole staff of servants (Higgs 1986; Pugh 1992). Higgs amongst other writers (Laslett 1977; Davidoff & Westover 1986) suggests that domestic service in traditional Britain was a 'life-cycle' occupation. It was a job for young unmarried women aged 15 - 20 from areas with no alternative form of female employment which also provided training for marriage and motherhood. However, most of the participants in the PEP study had three main reasons for going to England: to learn English, to increase their knowledge of Britain and British people, and a desire to travel. Other reasons mentioned included a desire to be independent, boredom with their job, an escape from an unhappy personal relationship, conflicts with parents, for a change, to earn money or to increase their social status. From the time they spent on English classes, additional tuition and homework, their desire to improve their English appeared genuine.

These findings of the PEP study illustrate my earlier argument about contemporary au pairs that becoming an au pair is not an economic and material necessity. It is prompted by a desire for educational, cultural and

exploratory travel abroad as well as for adult independence. On the other hand, working as an au pair may at least have meant training for marriage and motherhood for the girls of the 1960s. It is common knowledge that some au pairs also find their future husbands while working as au pairs and subsequently migrate abroad.

The PEP study also investigated the working conditions of young Europeans. The study makes an interesting point about the au pairs' difficulty in defining working hours:

"There was some difficulty, however, in defining "hours of work": some girls interpreted working time as time when they were not free to do what they wanted, while others interpreted it as the time when they were actually engaged in tasks which they considered as constituting work."  
(PEP 1962:47)

This difficulty has been emphasized in various studies on domestic servants and contemporary domestic workers, particularly in the case of live-in domestic workers. It illustrates the private and personal nature of domestic service work, where an employee needs to adjust to their host family's everyday life and is dependent on the family. It also illustrates the open-ended nature of the 'contract'. In the PEP study (1962: 47-48) it was found that the au pairs' average working day was 8.8 hours, although 29 per cent worked 12 or more hours. 62 per cent of the participants in the sample did both housework and looked after children and only 4 per cent were hired to provide only childcare. Washing-up, washing, ironing and mending, polishing silver, cleaning shoes and windows, lighting fires and cooking were the most usual household tasks in order of frequency. The description of tasks and the long working hours suggest that au pairs were hired as full-time maids of all work who took care of most low status household tasks in families in the same way as many young female domestics in the past. My study will show that the au pairs' domestic tasks and hours have changed to some extent since the 1960s, but the overall image of a maid of all work is the same.

The PEP study does not indicate whether the host families hired other domestic staff in addition to the au pair, or whether the family members shared any of the

domestic tasks. Historical studies on domestic servants do not conclude that upper middle class housewives shared many of the domestic tasks with their staff. Instead, they took on the roles of organisers and 'managers' (Branca 1975: 18). For instance, in the 19th century, it was common for nannies, nursemaids and governesses to free privileged upper middle class mothers from the daily routines of childcare so that they could pursue other activities they preferred and which were culturally more acceptable (Melhuish & Moss 1992:157-166).

Nowadays, it is quite obvious that only a very small number of families can afford to hire a whole staff of domestic workers. In this respect, au pairs still continue the tradition of live-in maids of all work taking care of various tasks for families. This does not necessarily mean that au pairs are responsible for everything but they may be expected to do the most low status and routine domestic tasks. The PEP study suggests that au pairs in 1960s Britain acted more as cleaners than as nannies. Also the minority of au pairs in my study worked as full-time or part-time nannies. This may be due to the higher value placed on childcare and its emotional nature. It may also be due to the lack of childcare experience of young girls and the lack of trust in them as childcarers. However, the general context of au pairs may vary between different countries, and their current public image for instance in the USA, equates au pairs with nannies.

The PEP study (1962: 68) concludes that the long working hours of au pairs do "not appear to be consistent with the spirit of an au pair arrangement" and not all of their tasks could be described as "lighter household tasks".

"...there are some families who regard their au pair girl as a cheap maid, but most families covered by the sample appeared to try along the lines of "daughter of the family" treatment and to succeed." (PEP 1962: 69)

The PEP study also concludes that there was no relationship between job preferences and a young person's degree of satisfaction with the family. It is interesting that the PEP study does not point up contradiction between the notion of au pairs as members of the family and the fact that the daughters (or



sons) of upper middle class families did not do domestic work for 8 to 12 hours. What au pairs in the 1960s and female servants in the past have in common is the long working hours and the routine nature of the housework. However, in the PEP study 81 per cent of the participants considered that they were treated well, although 21 per cent would have liked to have changed families. In this context, it is interesting that 51 per cent found it difficult to adjust to domestic work, although most claimed that they had known what to expect. Also half of the participants considered that foreign girls were generally used as cheap maids and another half considered that families liked foreign girls because they were good workers. Both the PEP study and this study found that neither the domestic tasks nor the amount of money that the girls received appeared to have a direct bearing on levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. More important in this respect were the hours of work, the free time and particularly the social relations between the au pair and her host family:

"For example, the more girls were taken out by the families the more satisfied they were. Girls who were left to eat in the kitchen alone and felt that they were being treated as a maid or who found that they had to come to a family where there was no opportunity to practice English felt dissatisfied." (PEP 1962: 68)

According to the German youth historian Mitterauer (1992: 131), payments in kind like food, accommodation and clothing were very important to maids in the past. He points out that the subordination of servants in the past extended far beyond the realm of work:

"There was no difference between maids and daughters in the restrictions on going out. If a maid had a romantic involvement, this was supervised. In service there was no such things as a private sphere independent of working relationships." (Mitterauer 1992: 131)

Mitterauer points out that domestic servants in the past and daughters of the family shared a subordinate position in the family. The difference was that the daughters were not paid for their services. The overall 'satisfaction' of au pairs in the PEP study suggests that these middle class girls of the 1960s were used, at least to some extent, to their subordinated domestic position at home, which might not be the case with the contemporary Finnish girls in this study. On the other hand, the PEP study does not describe in detail the variable conditions

and relations of au pairs in different host families. According to Davidoff & Westover (1986:15), the experience of domestic servants can vary greatly depending on the location, size, resources and personality of the family employing them. The oppression of maids, including sexual exploitation by masters, sons and visitors to the family was not uncommon. Also, according to some other writers on domestic servants (Lewis 1984:168,191; Burnett 1977:137), the conditions varied enormously and the high turnover rate suggested probably a search for a 'better place'. Domestic service was also considered a dull and isolated occupation, while the deferential relations between servant and mistress often made it additionally humiliating.

The PEP study provides a number of interesting points which describe the conditions and the relationships of au pairs in their host family. For example:

	%
-could use phone without paying for the call	81
-was not taken to visit other families	57
-was taken out by family	53
-did not know if they could invite boyfriends	46
-was not taken out by family	42
-was taken to visit other families	40
-could not invite boyfriends	21
-could use phone if they paid	12
-could not watch TV	8
-had to eat in the kitchen by themselves	7
-had to share a room	5
-family never spoke to them	3

The PEP study also identified some adjustment problems of the young Europeans and argued that younger people and those living in the London area found it more difficult to adjust than others. Most young people were, however, generally satisfied with their sojourn in England. On the other hand, the au pair girls in the PEP study pointed out that the conditions of work, especially the working hours, should be explained to them before they started the au pair

placement. These aspects may illustrate the context of au pairs as gap year travellers as suggested in the previous chapter.

TABLE 2. Respects in which young Europeans experienced adjustment difficulty (PEP 1962: 59).

cause of difficulty	%experiencing no difficulty	%experiencing some difficulty	%experiencing great difficulty
Absence from home and friends	16	59	25
Missing language and festivals	43	43	14
Social respects <sup>1</sup>	24	71	5
Non-social respects <sup>2</sup>	15	81	4
Working in household	49	23	28
Feeling of depression and boredom	40	36	24

1 Social respects= behaviour of the people, social life, psychological adaption.

2 Non-social respectes= city, weather, food.

The findings of the PEP study suggest that au pairs occupied a subordinate position in their host families similar to servants in the past, although their own experience could be at variance with this conclusion. I would argue that contemporary au pairs share aspects in common with servants in the past and particularly with au pairs in the 1960s, but contemporary au pairs are also different from these groups in a number of ways.

Contemporary young girls (not only Finnish girls) may not be used to domestic tasks or to occupying subordinate positions in the family (their own or the host family) to the same extent as young people in the past, and they may find it more difficult to adapt to their domestic position than au pair girls in the 1960s. Furthermore, contemporary au pairs might be more conscious of any subordinate position they might have to adapt as au pairs. They might accordingly show greater dissatisfaction with their domestic position than, for example, the au pairs in the 1960s. On the other hand, contemporary girls may

have gained modern competences, as various Finnish studies have suggested, and may consequently survive more easily in a foreign environment. This study also investigates the meaning of language learning in relation to becoming an au pair because the PEP study concludes that the participants were also enthusiastic language students. Furthermore, this study also investigates whether there is any change in attitudes towards male au pairs as male school leavers also take gap years.

The PEP study argues that domestic work was not the reason why the participants became au pairs. This contradiction between motives for becoming an au pair and the reality is of central interest to this study. The desire to travel during the gap year differentiates au pairs from female servants in the past. Social mobility rather than travel was central to the young 'life-cycle' servants.

The discussion on au pairs from a historical perspective has shown that they may have played a part in the continuity of live-in and private domestic service particularly after the wars. It can be assumed that most of the au pairs in the PEP study worked in upper middle class host families where the mother was a full-time housewife. As the PEP study shows, au pairs took care of the most unpleasant domestic tasks in the family and worked as maids of all work. Language learning, family membership and cultural exchange served as a mask for the au pairs' drudgery and for the middle class women's escape from their drudgery. However, in contrast to the PEP study, about half of the au pairs in this study worked in families where the mother was in full-time or part-time employment. It will be interesting to see whether this has changed the au pair arrangement in general, the position of au pairs in their host families and the relationship between au pairs and their host families. Questions will include what kind of employed parents hire au pairs and why.

The PEP study showed the relation of au pairs to domestic service and gave some idea of the meaning of this phenomenon for middle class families and for young Europeans. Although the PEP study was largely descriptive, it provided a rather unique historical perspective for an investigation of contemporary au pairs. The PEP study also concluded that this phenomenon needs to be

analysed in detail, not only from the viewpoint of au pairs but also from that of the families. Unfortunately, there has been no follow-up research based on the findings of this study.

### **Contemporary private domestic workers**

Both the theoretical and empirical literature on contemporary domestic service workers for families and households in Britain are fairly limited. Instead of being studied and analysed as a topic in its own right, different categories of domestic workers have often been discussed within the context of related topics such as the unpaid domestic work of housewives and other family related subjects like women's employment, dual careers and day care for children. All these topics constitute their own study areas and are approached in different ways.

I am interested in those empirically based studies which have increased understanding of work relations between private domestic workers and their employers. Most theoretical studies of racial-ethnic and working class women as domestic workers, consider race, class and gender as socially constructed, interlocking systems which shape the material conditions, identities, and consciousnesses of women rather than discuss these structures as separate systems of hierarchy. For example, the domestic workers' subordinated positions which are maintained through family patriarchy, are less frequently analysed in these studies than the hierarchy maintained through class and race relations.

Notwithstanding the differences in approach, some common interests in studies on domestic service workers provoke questions such as, who requires this form of domestic work and why. Many studies also describe the nature of domestic work. There is wide agreement that paid domestic work often involves long hours, low pay, hard physical labour, monotony and social isolation.

#### *Studies in Britain*

Gregson's and Lowe's study (1994) *Servicing the Middle Classes*, researches

nanny and cleaner employment in contemporary middle class families in Britain. It provides a framework for a study of the demand for au pairs by middle class families and also relations within this 'employment', although as noted it does not include au pairs. Gregson and Lowe combined different research methods in their study and included 542 dual-career families in their survey. The aim of their study was to establish that the employment of nannies and cleaners was central to the reproduction of everyday life in contemporary middle class families. They studied, in particular, supply and demand in these occupational categories and the socio-economic trends which have led to this 'new' phenomenon.

Gregson and Lowe (1994: 128) argue that women who make up the domestic labour force in Britain are not a homogenous group. This contrasts with a number of advanced industrialised countries like the United States where, for example, the domestic labour force is composed of migrant women of colour.

"In comparison, in contemporary Britain, no such close association exists between ethnicity, female migration and waged domestic labour; although anecdotal evidence suggests that in London at least, if not in our study area, certain households are using migrant women of colour as waged domestic labour...the nanny in contemporary Britain is an occupational category characterised predominantly by young, unmarried women from white collar, intermediate status households, whereas cleaning is the domain of older, married, working-class women".  
(Gregson & Lowe 1994:123-124)

Gregson and Lowe suggest that young migrant female labour from the regions satisfies the demand for nannies by middle class London households. However, demand for all forms of waged domestic labour is met primarily through local labour markets. Gregson and Lowe consider that nannies and cleaners are differentiated by their class and life-cycle. Furthermore, they argue that there is no one clearly identifiable group of women which satisfies the demands of contemporary British middle class households for domestic labour.  
(Gregson & Lowe 1994, 123-125.)

By considering migration as an anecdotal characteristic of the contemporary waged domestic labour force in Britain, Gregson and Lowe undermine those

studies which highlight migrant women's labour in Britain. They also overlook au pairs in this context, although migration is not a central issue for au pairs, as discussed earlier. Phizacklea, amongst other writers (Anthias 1983; Brouwer & Priester 1983; Morokvasic 1983) has drawn attention to 'hidden' armies of female migrant labour in Britain and in Europe from the 1950s who have filled the demand for low-skilled, low paid and insecure work. In her work entitled *Britain's Secret Slaves* (1993) Briget Anderson has used interviews and survey material to study female domestics from Third World countries who travel with their employers, for instance to Britain, or are recruited by foreign diplomats or VIPs to work in luxurious residences. Anderson describes the intolerable conditions and oppressive positions of many of these female workers today. She emphasizes that these women often work in Britain illegally with the status of tourist and therefore they are an easy target for exploitation and abuse by their employers. She draws attention, in particular, to the group of domestic workers who work in the residences of foreigners in Britain, while Phizacklea focuses on migrant women and on labour market relations. Concerning the employment of these migrant women by 'native' families in contemporary Britain, to date there is very little research in this context.

According to Gregson and Lowe, the supply of nannies and cleaners is constructed in different ways. The structure of the benefit system is considered to play a major part in the reproduction of cleaner employment among working class women who have few alternatives but to work as private domestics in contemporary Britain. For older working class women, working as a cleaner supplements their state pension. This kind of informal work also suits working class mothers who have children. An annual supply of qualified childcare workers, together with day care provision in contemporary Britain, leaves many of these workers little choice but to work as nannies (Gregson & Lowe 1994:164). The supply of au pairs has little in common with the supply of nannies and cleaners in contemporary Britain. There is no annual supply of 'trained' au pairs looking for childcare jobs, neither are au pairs a labour reserve of women on the benefit system.

According to Gregson and Lowe, social relations and employment status within

nanny and cleaner employment are considered as different. The casual nature and limited social interaction of cleaner employment reduce the potential for upward social mobility that is present full-time nanny employment. In nanny employment, contradictory tensions between the social relations of wage labour and 'false kinship' may arise. Nanny employment is characterised by these contradictory tensions, which are a product of the ideological constructs of mothering and motherhood. Waged domestic labour also signifies the traditional reconstitution of domestic work along class lines. (Gregson & Lowe 1994:201-206, 229-230):

"...being a cleaner in contemporary Britain is rather different to being a nanny. Far more autonomous, cleaner employment is less 'messy', less contradiction bound, than the nanny. It contains none of the elisions, for example, of childcare professional/mother substitute. The cleaner can be a much loved individual, someone incorporated within the web of familial relations - a giver of favours and gifts. But, alternatively, she can also be a much more distant employee; someone who simply and invisibly just gets the job done. Instead of being characterised by double constructions, cleaner employment appears to be characterised by alternative constructions". (Gregson & Lowe 1994: 229)

The hierarchy of domestic tasks also creates prestige for nannies. Many writers on domestic work have acknowledged the higher status accorded those who look after people than those who do the cleaning which is associated with dirt and inferiority. Au pairs may have things in common with both nannies and cleaners, because au pairs are, in many ways, in a unique 'in-between situation': they can clean as well as take care of children; they are not children themselves but have not yet achieved full adult status; they have no childcare qualifications, but they can be expected to carry out similar tasks to professional childcarers; they live in a family but are not related by kinship or marriage; they are educated and middle class girls but are doing paid domestic work; they are not waged/regulated workers but are still paid for their services. Furthermore, their focus may not be their domestic work but labour relations are presumably of central importance to the employing host families.

Gregson and Lowe have used the concept of a 'coping strategy' in their analysis on families employing domestic service workers. This conceptualization of paid domestic labour originates from the work of



Rapoports (1976) on dual-career families and from 'role strain theory' in studies based on symbolic interactionist tradition (Brannen & Moss 1991). Stress management in dual-career families has produced a 'new' family form and hiring domestic labour is regarded as a coping strategy for professional couples. According to Gregson and Lowe, the reasons which legitimize the hiring of a nanny are in order of importance, ideological (home based childcare), organisational (transport, flexibility in terms of hours) and economic (cheaper than a childminder for families with more than one pre-school-age child). The paid cleaner, on the other hand, substitutes for unpaid household labour increasing the 'quality time' of family members and particularly freeing the female partner from domestic tasks. According to Gregson and Lowe, a cleaner, in particular, represents not just a coping strategy, but an enabling strategy which goes beyond domestic labour itself. (Gregson & Lowe 1994: 107-120.)

Gregson and Lowe suggest that a nanny represents an ideologically based 'coping strategy' for middle class families while a cleaner represents patriarchal family relations. They provide an interesting analysis on social relations between private employers and nannies or cleaners. They highlight the femininity of this labour relationship, which is usually between a female employee and an employed mother rather than a father (for instance these workers are often paid from women's salaries) and the tension between waged labour and false kinship relations. They also conclude that these arrangements reproduce traditional gender and class divisions. However, Gregson and Lowe are not very clear about the subordinate position of both female private employer and employee in family and labour market relations and how this creates images of the social relations within this labour relationship. Such images as false kinship and substitute mothering by a nanny and the social distance of cleaners, must be understood in the context of women's subordinate position and the labour relationship. For instance, home-based childcare also offers convenience to women in the form of organisational flexibility, and the ideology of home-based childcare may serve to mask its oppressive characteristics. On the other hand, relatively little is known about men's experiences in connection to tasks and occupations dominated by

women (Morgan 1992).

An au pair in the role of a childcarer may substitute for a nanny as a cheap and even more flexible option for some middle class families. One male interviewee in Gregson's and Lowe's study compared nannies, au pairs and mother's helpers as follows:

"There were various options. Au pair, mother's help and nanny. Of the three the au pair is cheap but she is never going to stay for more than a few months at a time, is not going to be trained and is probably not even capable of looking after children. The mother's help is an in-between. And the nanny is the best of the three. A trained professional. The most expensive. In it for a career."

(a quotation in Gregson & Lowe 1994: 175)

In this study, I will argue that private domestic workers like nannies, cleaners and au pairs provide both a material and an economic coping strategy for middle class families regardless of the different tasks associated with these categories of domestic workers. Hiring au pair represents the middle class families' material and economic choices concerning their domestic life. These choices were also illustrated in Gregson's and Lowe's (1994: 191) study. For example, many nannies received a standard 'declared' payment and cash 'top-ups'. The employer saw this as a 'deal' which often meant extra favours undertaken by a nanny.

Gregson's and Lowe's analysis of the development of domestic labour is based on resurgence of waged domestic labour, particularly of such groups and categories as nannies and cleaners for a growing number of British middle class dual-career households. This is misleading as there is no evidence of the disappearance of private domestic service in Britain in the 20th century. Rather, this form of labour and labour relationship, as well as its social meaning, has been changing in time and space. The discussion earlier in this study has suggested that au pair girls may have played a significant part in the provision of private domestic service for the middle classes particularly after the wars. However, the overall increase in the number of private domestic workers during modern times has probably contributed to the growth of professional dual-career families as suggested by Gregson and Lowe. On the other hand, there

are no figures available for the number of families, other than dual-career families who hire domestic labour in Britain.

### *Studies Outside Europe*

Studies which focus on contemporary domestic service workers as social groups and categories are more common outside Europe in North America (Colen 1986; Dill 1988; Glenn 1986,1992; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992), in Latin America (Chaney & Garcia Castro 1989; Gogna 1989) and in South Africa (Cock 1989; Preston-Whyte 1976). Domestic service in these countries is characterized by race relations and migration as well as by gender and class division. In a recent large and multilevel study involving India, Saudi-Arabia and Far-East countries (Heyzer et.al. 1994) it was found that paid domestic work and female domestic service was a big international trade in these countries. In the following section, I will review some of these studies and discuss their findings in relation to contemporary au pairs.

As a cheap category of domestic service workers for families and households female migrant and immigrant labour, in particular, supplement shortages of domestic labour. In her survey of 225 households, Jacklyn Cock (1989) suggests that the South African waged domestic is a 'trapped worker'. A similar argument is put forward by Mary Romero (1992) in her study of minority Chicanas who work in Denver as domestics and whose families had migrated from rural areas of New Mexico and Colorado. These writers suggest that the most common route to survival for black and racial-ethnic women involves migration into domestic service, where they are trapped by poverty, labour controls and a lack of employment alternatives. According to Romero, this meant that social mobility or a high turnover were not features of the domestic service these women entered. Instead, they were subjected to lifelong exploitation:

"Such exploitation is evident in their low wages, which ensure physical survival, but little more; their long working hours and lack of paid holidays; their deprivations of family and social life; their low status, lack of job satisfaction; unsatisfactory relationships with their employers; absence of

legal protection; and lack of collective bargaining and worker rights.”  
(Cock 1989:104-105)

Together with other writers on paid domestic workers, Cock concludes that hiring paid domestic labour is a middle class phenomenon and a practice organised between women. In Cock's study, the majority of employers were full-time housewives. She argues that these women were themselves 'domestic workers' accepting their subordinate position in society. A predominant pattern was to hire a live-out 'maid of all work'. For security and for the company were among the reasons given for hiring a domestic servant. There was a range of skills and knowledge expected by employers and these included complicated and personal services involving trust and responsibility. (Cock 1989: 106-108, 23.)

Cock found that the tasks of domestics depended on the size and wealth of the households and on the number of workers involved. For instance, in small households, many roles had to be combined and payments in kind were frequently used to legitimise the low wages. The lack of rights and legislation as well as extremely long working hours characterised domestic service. Most of these black women had another domestic sphere waiting for them at home. Also issues such as the 'rationing' of food were open to different cultural interpretation in Xhosa society according to age, sex and family position. According to Cock, in the majority of households, domestic workers received 'servants' rations'. (Cock 1989: 24-26.)

Cock found that the relationship between black domestics and their white employers represented a paternalistic form of dependence. Whilst seen as 'part of the family', the domestic worker was treated like a child and subjected to psychological and sometimes physical violence or sexual harassment. Personal interaction was largely limited to the work situation, despite the fact that employers said they regarded their domestics as 'one of the family' or as a friend and were fond of them. Although they were aware of class and racial exploitation, Cock suggests that these domestic workers developed a mask of deference to conform to employer expectations. In some relationships this was regarded as purely instrumental, but in others, it shaded into loyalty towards

employers whom the domestic workers perceived as kind and thoughtful. (Cock 1989: 67-84).

Through a comparison of domestic workers in two residential areas of Durban in South Africa, Preston-Whyte (1976) argues that the employer-employee relationship is not as homogeneous as Cock suggests. She found that in more prosperous areas, it was formal and distant, in contrast to the suburban family areas where it was characterised by close physical proximity, familiarity and by tolerance and understanding. Furthermore, some female household members and waged domestic workers shared domestic work. Two different social and cultural worlds as well as language differences often reinforced the social distance.

On the other hand, in her study of 25 USA born female Chicana as domestic workers, Mary Romero (1992) argues that they were struggling to control the work process. These women tried to change the usual employee - employer relationship to a client - tradesperson interaction in which labour services rather than labour power were sold. Romero suggests that this struggle of the domestic workers over the work process was an attempt to develop new interactions with employers that eliminated aspects of hierarchy along the lines of gender, race, and class. On the other hand, she considers that the experiences of women of colour as private household workers identify those structures of the daily rituals, practices and relations of domestic service. However, the workers' strategies to try and restructure their work highlighted a variety of concerns about their tasks, wages, benefits and social relations.

Romero's aim was to understand the way in which emotional labour is tied to the structure of housework through a consideration of the relationship in domestic service within the broader labor process. She found that all the gender specific aspects of unpaid housework of a physical, personal, emotional non-work nature were present in domestic service. Housewives and domestics confront each other over housework and childcare, which are culturally defined as "labours of love". A domestic worker is easily perceived as an extension of a housewife rather than as a worker. The employers' references to their

domestics as 'one of the family' also reinforce the gender specific characteristics by equating the work with homemaking. (Romero 1992: 43.)

Both Romero (1992:86) and Colen (1986) argue that immigration and ethnic minorities are central to an understanding of contemporary waged domestic labour in the United States. In Colen's study on West Indian childcare and domestic workers in New York City, waged domestic work is described as a sponsorship situation and as legally sanctioned indentured servitude until the 'green card' is granted. According to Colen, the ideology of family legitimises the personalised context of domestic labour. The phrase 'one of the family' justifies the use of domestics as well as helps the workers to tolerate the exploitative working conditions, especially if they are illegal immigrants.

Rollins's (1985) study is based on her own experiences as a waged domestic worker. Central to her study is the relationship between employer and employee, both of them females. She identifies four reasons for employing waged domestic help: practical necessity, to enable time to be used for more valued activities, to symbolise middle class status and to continue a family tradition of employing domestic help. Like other writers, Rollins sees the relationship between domestics and their employers as exploitative. She focuses on gender relations and views the employment of domestic labour in private households as reproducing of existing gender and class inequalities within domestic work.

Romero (1992:132) argues that employing white women or college students as household servants does not establish the same power differential as hiring ethnic minority women and Third World immigrant women because racism underpins the social relations of waged domestic labour in the United States. However, although au pairs are different from black and racial-ethnic women in many ways, I argue that the power differential between au pairs and their employers is central to this arrangement. This power differential can be established according to gender, age and nationality. However, class is also central, because domestic service itself carries a label of class division. In some ways, au pairs may be even more vulnerable than contemporary black and

racial-ethnic female domestic workers, because they live in a family and can be positioned as children because of their young age (and foreign background). On the other hand, au pairs are white, educated and often come from middle class backgrounds themselves. They are therefore not 'trapped' like the domestic workers in Cock's and Romero's studies.

Furthermore, au pairs have got no other domestic responsibilities outside their service in the family, neither do they have to do this work in order to migrate or to gain 'a green card', as in Colen's study. Instead, as discussed earlier, domestic service provides them with a chance for a gap year of travel abroad. These young people are looking for temporary work abroad to help to pay for their travel. However, as foreign workers, young people with no qualifications have few (legal) alternatives other than to enter domestic placements for instance as au pairs, especially if they come from countries outside the European Union.

Of central interest to this study is how employee/employer conscious the au pairs and the host mothers are. For instance, Romero (1992) suggests that the black domestic workers in her study tried to change the work relations to client - tradesperson interaction. It could be argued that Western au pairs are not interested in developing this kind of trade relationship, because domestic service is not going to be their future occupation, neither is it the principal motive for a gap year of travel. However, as discussed earlier, contemporary Western young and educated people might not adapt to their subordinate position. On the other hand, as gap year travellers, they might be willing to try, because they have a temporary need for the work and, as young foreigners they do not have many work options abroad. Furthermore, au pairs as aliens in a foreign culture, language and family need to adapt to the foreign environment to some extent. This also affects the au pairs' labour relationships. Therefore an au pair may have few options but to show some deference to the dominant culture and the way of life in her host family.

Most writers on black and racial-ethnic domestic workers focus on establishing a connection between domestic service and gender, class, race and ethnicity.

Lifelong obligation, social mobility and migration to 'better conditions' are dependent on the particular group in focus. Material, social and emotional exploitation characterizes these labour relationships. Most studies (Cock 1989; Colen 1986; Romero 1992; Rollins 1985) reviewed above illustrate how patriarchal family and capitalist labour market relations affect the relationship between private domestic workers and their employers. However, it is not clear from these studies whether the subordinate position of women in the family and in the labour market is seen as central to all the different groups and categories of paid domestic workers and whether systems of race, ethnicity, age and nationality lead to the basic domestic work divisions of gender and class.

My central argument is that female employers, who hire domestic workers are themselves subjected to the patriarchal family and capitalist labour market relations. The subordination of these women creates oppressive labour relationships between themselves and their employees. This relationship is private, personal and diverse. This is also why such representations as 'family membership', 'labour of love', 'substitute mothering' as well as 'deference' and 'exploitation', characterize private domestic service.

#### *Recruitment of migrant domestic workers*

Most domestic placement agencies are usually small entrepreneurial businesses, often family owned or single employee agencies which almost always close down after a short existence (Bakan & Stasiulis 1995: 304). Although recruitment of domestic workers as a business is not the main issue in this study, it appeared in connection with organisation of au pair arrangements according to the au pairs and the host mothers interviewed in this study. In this section, I will review a research on the recruitment of immigrant domestic workers and the function of domestic placements agencies conducted by Bakan and Stasiulis (1995). This important topic is rarely acknowledged in studies of paid domestic workers. Bakan and Stasiulis based their analysis on case study interviews with Canadian agencies and have focussed on the recruitment of Third World domestic workers and their restricted positions as non-citizens. However, many related issues can be raised with regard to the



recruitment of au pairs in all Western countries.

According to Bakan and Stasiulis, domestic placement agencies can control immigrants' access to domestic placements and the agencies' perceptions of the needs of generally white and upper income families are usually crucial. Racial, ethnic and gendered stereotypes may determine the source countries and the number of female domestic workers:

"Because agencies are normally paid by the employer on the completion of a successful placement, normally at the rate of one month of the domestic's salary, and their services are backed by a three- to six-month guarantee to replace the domestic if the employer is not fully satisfied, it is not surprising that the agencies interviewed universally credited their economic success to carefully monitoring the racial and ethnic stereotypes of their clients." (Bakan & Stasiulis 1995:310)

Bakan and Stasiulis argue that the agency owners have pressures to accommodate racially and sexually oppressive ideologies regardless of their personal views, because they operate in a highly competitive market. For example, some agency owners interviewed mentioned that Canadian parents preferred to hire Europeans as live-in domestics, because their culture and standard of living was similar to their own and because of the Europeans' supposedly strict upbringing as compared to domestic workers from Third World countries. This preference suggests that white domestic workers are ranked higher in the hierarchy of private domestic workers but can be paid only a little more than domestic workers from Third World countries. For instance, until the 1960s, white European domestics, primarily from England and Scotland, were favoured in Canadian policy and Irish women migrated to the USA and Britain as domestic workers. These applicants were given less restrictions for permanent residence in the host country and often subsequently became the wives of white men in the receiving countries. As industrial expansion offered them other employment options the availability of white European women declined. However, au pairs still provide white and Western live-in domestic labour for families and households.

According to Bakan and Stasiulis, the most successful agencies screen prospective clients, but the emphasis is on the client's attitudes towards child-

care and economic matters such as the ability to pay wages and to provide appropriate accommodation. The right to scrutinize applications indicates the different levels of power of the parties involved in the recruitment process. The question is also who in the household makes decisions about hiring a domestic worker and on what basis. Is it, for instance, women hiring substitute mothers or is it men hiring substitute wives?

"Not only are the parties subject to differential scrutiny by the placement agencies but they are also entitled to differential rights of scrutiny of each other, again making relevant the analogy between live-in domestic workers and an arranged marriage. The opportunity to scrutinize the application of the prospective live-in domestic, like that of the prospective bride, is virtually unlimited; in contrast, the opportunity of the applicant to obtain information regarding a future employer or husband is virtually nonexistent." (Bakan & Stasiulis 1995: 312)

Immigrant domestic workers and their employers are screened through a system of written applications. These domestic workers are sometimes described as 'mail order servants' (Macklin 1992). Regardless of the agencies' screening systems and criteria this screening 'on paper', together with structural pressures, increases the vulnerability of these arrangements, and risks for a mismatch are high. Obviously, in a mismatch, the domestic worker is more powerless than her employer because she may lose her residency status and income and there are no networks which provide her with a means of support in foreign environment. Avoiding mismatches ensures economic success for agencies because the mismatches increase the agencies' work load and affect their reputation. They may lose both applicants and clients. Mismatches can also lead to stereotyping of clients and applicants which, in turn, affects an agency's approach to recruiting from different cultures.

It is not clear from their research whether Bakan and Stasiulis equate au pair agencies in any way with domestic placement agencies. Although the position of white and Western au pairs is different from the position of domestic workers from Third World countries, these differences may not affect the process of recruitment, and the operation of au pair agencies is in fact very similar to the domestic placement agencies who recruit migrant domestic labour. Au pair agencies recruit au pairs for host families, but do not usually provide similar

support mechanisms as, for example, universities and colleges do for their overseas students although in the USA there is an orientation course and tutoring available for au pairs. It is evident that au pair agencies treat au pairs as job seekers and host families as employers and their paying clients. This may cause difficulties, in particular to au pairs, in a mismatch or in conflict situations between au pairs and host families in similar ways than to immigrant domestic workers.

### **3.3 Family based domestic workers: definition**

Regardless of different feminist analyses and empirical interest in the studies of domestic workers, a common theme is their subordinate position. The unrelatedness between the concepts used in different studies and the lack of definitions make it difficult to understand how feminist studies on domestic workers are connected with each other. According to Giles and Arat-Koc (1994:2), there is no theoretical and comparative work that brings together all reproductive workers and their forms of subordination. This is also why it is essential to define what is meant by au pairs as domestic workers in this study.

According to Delphy and Leonard (1992:20), work and paid employment, or waged labour, are commonly considered equivalent. Work refers to labour market production, which does not clearly define women's paid employment or the work done in families and households. Domestic, family and household are often regarded as synonymous in the context of work. Similar domestic tasks are undertaken, both paid and unpaid, by different categories of workers and in different contexts and social relations. For instance, many writers and researchers on paid domestic workers overlook any discussion about different terms and their relations, referring automatically to terms like domestic work, housework or housekeeping as reproductive work and discussing housewives, domestic servants, domestic or household workers or waged labourers depending on the context.

In a broad sense, work can be defined as a social activity (Grint 1991:12). According to Pahl (1984:128), not all social activity is work but work as a social activity involves certain specific circumstances and social relations and relationships. Domestic work, particularly housework and childcare, is done within three main social contexts. Firstly, it is done unpaid by housewives and other family members within the service relations based on marriage, family and kinship. Secondly, it is done paid by private domestic workers like au pairs, nannies, mother's helpers and cleaners, outside marriage and kinship relations but for families and households. Thirdly, it is done paid by waged domestic workers outside families and households but within labour market employment and service relations. Domestic work is also undertaken sometimes unpaid, outside family or employment relations, as voluntary work. A person can also do domestic work by her/himself for her/himself, when it carries its own remuneration.

According to Lash (1990:46-47), the growth of waged domestic workers has contributed to domestic labour so that it is not only considered as having use-value, but also as having exchange-value. Delphy and Leonard (1992: 75-104) provide a detailed analysis of the familiar boundaries between production/reproduction/consumption and exchange-value/use-value. They explain that exchange-value is not the opposite of use-value; but both are aspects of the same goods and services. Housework is what is common to all households' production for self-consumption. The relations of production are considered central to the theory of work, also domestic work:

"In other words, the reason why housework is treated as a specific entity in everyday thinking, why statisticians try to separate it out from other work, and why it is not included in the GNP, cannot be explained by the economic theory which is overtly referred to. We need to go on looking for the theory which underlies the categorizations which are actually practised. This theory is equally economic, but refers not to the distinction between production and consumption, or between housework and occupational work, but rather to who does the work, for whom, and under what circumstances, that is, it concerns relations of production."  
(Delphy & Leonard 1992: 94)

The importance of social relations in the definition of work has prompted the feminist focus on work not only for the production of economic capital but also

social and cultural capital. Delphy and Leonard (1992:22) include in the definition of work economically or practically productive work, cultural work and emotional and sexual work. These can all be done for self-consumption or for exchange, and unpaid or paid. All three types of work can also be directed into any one task. Emotional work is considered an important component of women's domestic work:

"Emotional work is work which establishes relations of solidarity, which maintains bonds of affection, which provides moral support, friendship and love, which gives people a sense of belonging, of ontological strength, of empowerment, and thereby makes them feel good. This too requires effort and skill." (Delphy & Leonard 1992:21-22)

Delphy and Leonard define family workers like housewives as unpaid dependent workers in marriage and kinship relations:

"...we separate out and distinguish as family work, all the unpaid work done by dependants, to emphasize the relations within which the work is done are those of dependency and that people are recruited (obliged) to do this work by kinship and marital relationships. Household work is 'unpaid' when done by family dependants, but carries its own remuneration when done by a head of a household or a single person for themselves."

(Delphy & Leonard 1992: 100)

The concept of family work refers to work done in a specific relationship, which is not the same as the relationship between private domestic workers like au pairs and their employers. Private domestic workers are not dependent on their employers through marriage or kinship but as paid workers they are dependent on their private employers through economic and material work relations. This means that this work relationship is affected both by family and labour market relations.

Both family and household are regarded as basic domestic groups. As discussed earlier, paid domestic work is required, to a great extent, by families with dependant children and domestic labour needs are highest in these families. Families are also households, but not all households consist of families. According to Delphy and Leonard the family is defined as:

"...a social idea, refers to a combination of two meanings: to a group which lives together and is related by marriage and close kinship, and specifically a domestic group made up of a man and his wife and their children."

(Delphy & Leonard 1992: 4)

According to Delphy and Leonard (1992:5), defining domestic groups as households is used to downplay the significance of family relationships in structuring people's lives. This is particularly true in the situation of mothers and full-time housewives, but refers also to those paid domestic workers who work for families and particularly to those who live with a family, like au pairs. For instance, au pairs work to a great extent for families with dependant children. The meaning of family relations distinguishes this category of domestic workers from domestic work as regulated wage labour.

Following Delphy's and Leonard's (1992) definitions on work and family, au pairs are defined as family based domestic workers. Family based workers are paid domestics who work for families, like nannies, mother's helpers, private cleaners, ironing ladies and maids. It is mainly this group of workers which can be further categorised as live-in and live-out domestic workers.

Nannies are differentiated from other categories of family based domestic workers as they are usually qualified childcarers, whose material and economic work relation is more typically based on a contract than other categories of domestic workers. Theirs is usually more 'formal' employment in that they pay taxes and National Insurance contributions (Gregson & Lowe 1994: 184-191). All these workers fall into an 'in-between' situation between unpaid family workers and waged domestic workers in the labour market. In contrast to family workers, family based domestic workers are paid, but remuneration may be in kind as is the case with au pairs. Family based domestic workers are not regulated waged workers.

According to Delphy and Leonard (1992:99), housework refers to regular day-to-day domestic tasks undertaken to maintain a home. However, private domestic workers like nannies are responsible for caring for the children rather than for the home. Au pairs can be expected to do a range of household tasks

and housework as well as taking care of the children. According to Game and Pringle (1984:127-134), physical care often overlaps with emotional care and these cannot be separated. Childcare and care for people involve continuous and explicit emotional and reproductive work, while housework involves these more implicitly. Childcare tasks are often ignored in analyses of housewives or domestic workers in the context of housework or housekeeping. Anttonen (1997: 131) argues that the concepts of caring and personal services should be separated and that the Scandinavian welfare model relies on professional care work and workers. However, these concepts are interlinked because professional care work may also involve personal services.

I have chosen the concept of 'domestic work' because it combines a wide variety of domestic tasks in families and households. The word 'domestic' also refers to work in private homes, because it originates from the word 'domus', which means 'home'. On the other hand, it is widely used to define various different tasks outside the family institution. Domestic tasks are not different in a broad 'domestic' sense for many groups and categories of both paid and unpaid domestic workers. For instance, au pairs can take a wide variety of domestic tasks, which can be defined as household tasks, housekeeping, housework and childcare.

## 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

Qualitative research methodology was chosen because there is only a limited literature on au pairs and the interest was in the basic nature of this phenomenon. The purpose of qualitative research is to increase understanding of social phenomena and to provide a theory which is often based on non-generalizable research material. This research therefore follows the heuristic rather than the positivistic research tradition.

Qualitative research is unique. According to Patton (1990:372), the human aspect is the biggest strength as well as a weakness in qualitative research and analysis. Qualitative research is about solving 'a mystery' (for instance Alasuutari 1993). One of the features of this kind of research is that the nature of the questions posed, develop during the research process. The mystery is solved during an interactive process between theory, analysis and data collection by using both deductive and inductive argument. This is why qualitative research rarely adheres strictly to the method guide books (Alasuutari: 1993: 176-177) and research methodology, practice and process affect each other.

I will start this chapter by describing the research questions for this study, and how the questions were developed during the research process. Then I will explain why I used a certain interview method. This will be followed by a discussion and a description of sampling strategies, the interview process and the interview themes. Then I will explain the qualitative analysis used in this study and finally, I will describe the participants.



## Research questions

My chosen strategy followed initially the symbolic interactionist research tradition. In this tradition, central to understanding of self, society and social interaction are the roles and groupings people adopt and, through discourse, negotiate what they ultimately mean (for instance Cuff et.al. 1984: 113-150 ). However, I began with no very clear perspective and started by asking broad questions about the nature of the au pair phenomenon. During the early stages of data collection, I became increasingly aware of contradictions and tensions within the au pair arrangement. There seemed to be a disparity of expectations between the young people becoming au pairs during their gap year, the work they had to undertake, and the expectations of the host mothers whom they helped with daily domestic tasks. Moreover, au pairs as Western educated middle class young people were different from other groups of contemporary domestic workers in private households. Following Silvermann (1986: 4-9), this 'puzzling datum' generated the main question for this research. This was:

Why and how does the au pair institution continue in modern society?

There is obviously no straightforward answer to this question. Preliminary findings were not fully explicable within the symbolic interactionist tradition and this meant that I had to look for an alternative theoretical framework. In this process I found it relevant to investigate the diverse sociological literatures on postmodernity, youth and young people, tourism and travel abroad as well as the literature on the sociology of domestic work/ers, women and family. From the interactive process between literatures and initial data-analysis the subquestions were specified as follows:

1. How is entering an au pair placement constructed as 'gap year' travel by young people?
2. How is hiring an au pair constructed as a material and economic 'coping strategy' by and for host mothers?
3. What is the practice of an au pair arrangement like?
4. How is the power differential within an au pair arrangement and particularly

between au pairs and their host mothers established?

5. What are the characteristics of the domestic work relationship between au pairs and their host mothers?

### **The interview as a research method**

The data was collected by using different interviewing methods. Patton (1990: 280-287) has identified three types of interviews: the informal conversational interview, the general interview guide approach and the standardized open-ended interview. The informal conversational interview generates non-systematic data and is a spontaneous form of interviewing. In the standardized, open-ended interview, participants are asked the same questions in the same order, to generate comparisons between them. The general interview guide approach is a semi-structured interview method which is also called a theme interview (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 1991) or a focused interview (Merton, Fiske & Kendall 1956). It is a flexible interview method which employs themes rather than a set of pre-planned questions.

The interviews in this research mainly utilized themes planned in advance and some questions were asked systematically. However, time was reserved for more informal conversation about unexpected topics arising from the themes. This kind of interview method was well suited to a study of au pairs because some earlier work in this field and particularly on related domestic arrangements, had been carried out from which some systematic themes could be formulated. Furthermore, open-ended non-systematic interviews with ten au pairs conducted between 1993 and 1994 as a pilot study had generated some common themes. A lack of relevant literature on the phenomenon of au pairs in general prompted the need for more flexible interviewing, as this allowed participants to direct the interview and to raise topics, or aspects of a topic, with which the interviewer was unfamiliar. In other words, the purpose of conversational interviewing was to provide a deeper insight into the phenomenon of au pairs. The advantage of qualitative research methods in general is that they are able to take account of nuances, interdependences,

diversity and different contexts (Patton 1990: 51). According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (1991: 40-41), a theme interview is appropriate when the interest is in the basic nature of the phenomenon and in searching for a hypothesis.

### **Sampling strategy and interview practice**

Qualitative methods have the potential to generate a lot of information about a small group of people and cases (Patton 1990: 165-169). This means that there is no valid way to generalize the data, although this is not necessarily the purpose either. This also means that cases are often chosen because they provide 'fruitful' information. Patton talks about 'purposeful sampling' (1990: 169) and Mäkelä (1990:49) about 'cultural representativeness'. The sample in this research was selected by using different and multiphase strategies. However, purposeful sampling describes the sampling in this research well because the aim was to collect a sample which provided both revelatory and variable information about a phenomenon which is relatively unknown but which is assumed to have a common pattern regardless of diversity.

The non-systematic principal sample in this research consisted of twenty-two Finnish au pairs, who worked in London area between 1994 and 95. I contacted a third of them through the Finnish Youth Co-Operation Alliance, which is one of the biggest recruitment organisations for au pairs and is under the control of the Finnish Labour Ministry. This organisation sent my letter to prospective interviewees and this generated a third of them (7/22). By using snowball sampling, this group of au pairs generated another third of the participants already working in London. These au pairs were contacted by telephone and they met the contact au pair for the first time in London. I met the remainder of the participants myself when I visited the Finnish Church in London on several occasions in September 1994. Many Finnish au pairs gather at the Finnish Church in London, particularly during the weekends, to meet other au pairs and Finns rather than because of any religious commitment.

However, this purposeful sampling was limited in that only Finnish au pairs were included. Thus, crosscultural variety, which is a characteristic of the

phenomenon of au pairs, could not be examined in this study. However, focused interviewing requires a good understanding between interviewees and interviewer. This was facilitated by the fact that I am also Finnish and we shared a common language as well as a common culture. Confining my sample to Finnish au pairs also helped me financially as I did not have to use my limited resources as a lone researcher to hire native speaking interviewers. Conversing in our native language helped generate a 'therapeutic' atmosphere for the participants, although this was not the purpose of the interviews. Some of them who were experiencing severe problems during their au pair placement said that the opportunity to speak about their experiences to someone who listened and took them seriously had meant a lot to them.

There was no difficulty in getting the au pairs to take part in this research. In fact, no one refused to participate, and many of them told me in the course of the interviews that they found the topic very important and interesting. Their enthusiasm was also expressed in their commitment to a multiphase interview process as well as in their willingness to undertake a time-consuming journey to meet me for the interview. Their travel costs were met by myself from the research budget.

After completing the initial interviews with the au pairs, it seemed to me that this sample of twenty-two au pairs provided an interesting diversity of cases. My research strategy consisted of four interviews for each case study: three interviews with each au pair and one interview with the host mother (or father). This was a total of eighty-eight interviews with possibly a few interviews with au pair agencies. Following the idea of purposeful sampling, I decided to limit the number of au pairs to twenty-two because these provided a 'fruitful and representative' sample for the purpose of this research.

The field work took place between September 1994 and August 1995. Eighty-two interviews were conducted, fifty-nine with au pairs, nineteen with host mothers and four with representatives of au pair agencies. Most of the interviews took about an hour and all but two of the interviewees (two host mothers) allowed the use of a tape recording.

The interviews with the au pairs were organised spatio-temporally as the aim was to interview each of them three times during their placement as au pairs. This was because it had been evident from the pilot interviews that an au pair's situation and experiences change during the course of her stay. However, six of the au pairs had to return home earlier than expected, so five of them were interviewed only twice and one of them only once. All but two of the interviews with au pairs took place at the Finnish Church in London at a pre-arranged time. One au pair was interviewed once in her host family's house and another once over the telephone.

The au pairs worked for a total of thirty-one different host families during their stay. Twenty-five of the host families were contacted by letter in the spring of 1995 and nineteen of these were interviewed. In practice it was always the host mother, not the father, with whom I initially spoke about the interview. Some host mothers suggested that it was very difficult to arrange the interview also with the host father because of his long working hours and disinterest in this topic. However, in four cases a husband and/or the children participated for a short period of time. All but one of the host mothers were interviewed in their homes at a pre-arranged time. One host mother was interviewed over the telephone. Six representatives of au pair agencies were contacted by phone and four of them were interviewed either in their office, or by telephone or in their home. Two of them contacted were either not interested or too busy.

Some problems occurred in relation to the participation of host mothers. These were mainly due to this study's sampling strategy rather than to a lack of interest on the part of the host mothers. As the main focus of this research was interviewing au pairs, the sampling strategy was developed on that basis. This generated situations where some of the au pairs were not certain if they wanted me to interview their host family. Six host mothers were not contacted at all. In four cases, there had been a serious conflict between the au pair and her host family/mother. These au pairs had left the host family without notice and in stressful conditions. These au pairs were afraid for their own safety and consequently hesitant about my conducting interviews with their host mothers. In this context, it was clear to me that my respect for people and their everyday

life was greater than my respect for conducting academic work. In two cases, I was not able to reach the host family, either because the au pair had failed to pass on the contact information or because the family had moved.

A few of the host mothers expressed anxiety about participating in the empirical research. For example, I became aware of some tension accompanying some of the interviews when one host mother called me after the initial interview with her au pair to express her concerns. She suggested to me that I should have sought her permission prior to conducting the interviews with her au pair. Another host mother agreed to give me an interview, provided I told her what her au pair had told me. Only a few host mothers expressed disinterest or said that they were too busy to take part. Most of the au pairs also seemed quite hesitant about telling their host families that they had been interviewed and sometimes left this until their last interview had been completed.

These tensions surrounding the interviews are also outcomes of the private, personal and 'secret' nature of the au pair arrangement. They prompt the notion that an au pair is a worker or an inferior who needs permission from her employers or hosts to talk to someone outside the family and suggest that people are uncertain about what can be revealed about private domestic life. Interesting questions arising from this might include whether similar tensions might have been generated had the au pairs been interviewed after their host mothers and whether the host mothers had more 'to hide' than their au pairs. On the other hand, if the focus in this study had, from the outset, been on both the au pairs and on the host families other difficulties might have occurred. For example, only those au pairs and hostmothers who had 'good' relationship might have participated.

The problematics of a sampling strategy in this research raise not only technical research questions but also interesting moral ones about sampling in qualitative research particularly where there are different parties involved. The discussion above clearly shows that in qualitative research the findings can be manipulated consciously or unconsciously by a sampling strategy.

Taking account of the methodological questions in relation to the sampling strategy, the response from the host mothers can be regarded as good. For example, one host mother said that she never participated in voluntary interviews or filled in surveys, but felt that in this case she had to make an exception. Some of the host mothers felt strongly that if their au pair was interviewed, they should be interviewed as well. Some of them had almost a decade of experience with au pairs and they acted as experts on this topic. One host mother said: "I could write a book about my experiences with au pairs". Like the au pairs most of the host mothers interviewed found the topic very important and interesting. Only one host mother regarded a study on au pairs as "a narrow field for a PhD".

The host mothers interviewed were not offended by my Finnish background or the sampling strategy's focus on au pairs. The fact that, in many cases, I belonged to the same age group as themselves and had experience of motherhood in Britain seemed to form a bond between myself and the host mothers. As one host mother expressed: "As a mother you know yourself..." Indeed, during this research process I had to confront my role as a woman, a mother, a (house)wife and a researcher as well as a foreigner or a Finn in Britain. At the same time as my awareness of the phenomenon of au pairs grew, I also became also more aware of my own situation. According to Finch (1984: 76-78), a subordinate structural position by virtue of gender creates the possibility of a particular kind of identification between a female interviewer and interviewee, and sharing experiences as women and/or mothers characterizes the female interview relationship.

Like some feminist researchers (Finch 1984; Oakley 1981), I was surprised at how both au pairs and host mothers found it 'easy' to talk and to be interviewed, and I did not find the interviewing an unpleasant experience. Finch identifies certain ethical and political questions arising from the ease with which a woman researcher can elicit material from other women. In this study, these questions were also linked to the fact that I and the au pairs were of the same nationality. During the research process, I became aware of the danger of exploiting the trust placed in me by the participants particularly as this was during a period

where I was developing a commitment to feminism and sociology in general. Like Finch (1984), in her study on clergymen's wives, I had to make a distinction between the structural position of women and their own experience of it. This meant that in some cases my conclusions conflicted with the female interviewees' own experience, particularly the host mothers'. This demonstrates the power of a researcher.

### **Interview themes**

The interview themes were developed on the basis of related literature and researches, my pilot study and my own experience of the au pair arrangement. Because I was interested in the basic nature of this phenomenon and because the available literature on au pairs was limited, I started by providing themes which generated many perspectives rather than using themes already developed from certain theoretical concepts (see Hirsjärvi & Hurme 1991: 41). As explained earlier, the main questions and concepts developed during the research process.

Each theme was operationalised into various interview questions during the interview process. Participants had an important role as operationalisers (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 1991: 41-41). The background information on au pairs and their host families and, to some extent, au pairs' working and living conditions was elicited through systematic questions. The interview themes were applied to those cases where an au pair had changed families or had gone to work elsewhere. During the interviews with the representatives of au pair agencies, these themes elicited information about the agency's function and about au pairs, host families and au pair arrangements in general.



Themes of first interviews the au pairs

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| -au pair's background                                   | -host family's background              |
| -recruitment process                                    | -working and living conditions         |
| -experience of domestic work                            | -au pair's position in the host family |
| -departing from home                                    | -au pair's duties/ a concept of work   |
| -reasons and motives for becoming an au pair            |  |
| -expectations of the host family and au pair experience |  |
| -first experiences in Britain and in the host family    |  |

Themes of second interviews with au pairs

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| -satisfaction as an au pair                | -day-to-day activities with host family        |
| -working and living conditions             | -relations with the members of the host-family |
| -a typical day/week                        |  |
| -types of remuneration, contract, holidays | -conflicts and difficulties                    |
| -working hours                             | -au pair's position in the host family         |
| -lodging                                   | -au pair's duties/ a concept of work           |
| -leisure time and friends                  |  |

Themes of third interviews with au pairs

- |                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| -satisfaction as an au pair    | -future plans                               |
| -leisure time and friends      | -suggestions to develop au pair arrangement |
| -conflicts and difficulties    |   |
| -meaning of au pair experience | -au pair's duties/ a concept of work        |

Themes of interviews with host mothers

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| -host family's background                                | -conflicts and difficulties with au pairs   |
| -reasons and motives for hiring an au pair               | -au pair's leisure time and friends         |
| -recruitment process                                     | -au pair's position in the host family      |
| -au pair's working and living conditions                 | -au pair's duties/ a concept of work        |
| -a typical day/week                                      | -expectations of au pairs                   |
| -types of remuneration, contract, holidays               | -male au pairs                              |
| -working hours   | -suggestions to develop au pair arrangement |
| -lodging   |   |
| -day-to-day activities with au pairs                     |   |
| -au pair's relations with the members of the host family |   |

## Qualitative analysis

Various methods have been developed to organise qualitative data and to make interpretations. These are often based on the grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1968; Strauss 1987). For example, 'the constant comparative method' is based on data, and the research focus develops through interaction between data collection, data analysis and theory. A comparison of cases or groups is often the first stage in the development of a theory or systematic categorizing.

This was the process followed with this research; the first analysis of different themes during data collection generated a main concept, which I called 'domestic work relationship'. At this stage, my research question also altered from 'what happens' to 'why and how does it happen'. The data included information not only about au pairs and host families, but also about the terms of private domestic service. This may contribute to an understanding of modern life, youth and the British family.

Strauss (1987: 28-36) divides the analytic process into 'open coding', 'axial coding' and 'selective coding', but central to this is the formulation of the main concept(s). During open coding, all the data is categorized by using general concepts. During axial coding, each category is divided into different dimensions; and during selective coding, the emphasis is on those categories which are relevant to the main concept.

My analytic procedure followed a similar strategy. All my interviews were transcribed using the Microsoft Word text programme and printed on 1350 pages. I read the material carefully and wrote in the margins concepts which the interviewees had used, and/or I developed new concepts from the material (open coding). In the next stage, I wrote a description of each case (and interviews) by using the concepts in the margins. These concepts were also added into the original text in the text programme. This made it possible to find the most common concepts, to create and combine different kinds of text fields and to make comparisons between interviews, participants and cases (axial

coding) At this stage, the interviews and participants were coded and identification elements, like real names, were deleted. However, it is possible that some participants may still be able to recognise themselves in this report although I have been careful to disguise away sensitive material.

The coding system is as following:

A1:5 means the first interview with au pair A, page 5

R3:6 means the third interview with au pair R, p. 6

wA:8 means the interview with au pair A's employed host mother, p. 8

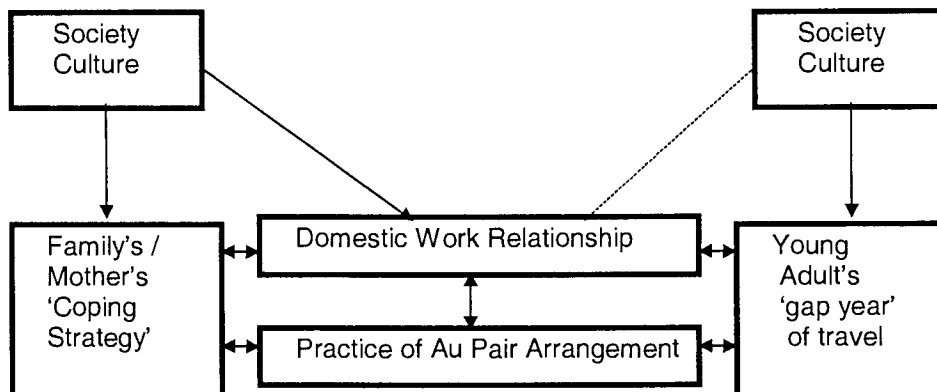
hR:9 means the interview with au pair R's housewife host mother, p.9

wHa:2 means the interview with au pair H's employed first host mother,  
p.2

AG1:4 means agency representative no 1, p. 4

Gradually, I started to develop the most relevant general categories in relation to my main concepts: 'domestic work relationship' and 'practice of au pair arrangement' (selective coding). This development had links to the literature derived framework and to the formulation of subsidiary questions. The general categories which emerged were 'construction of the experience as a gap year'; 'the construction of it as a coping strategy'; 'working and living conditions'; 'social relations'; 'nature of the au pair arrangement' and 'structures and characteristics of work relationship'. Each of these general headings was divided into various sub-categories and/or dimensions, which often overlapped. Thus the general categories became the basis for the analysis in this study as is illustrated in the next diagram.

DIAGRAM 1. Main Analytic Framework



The interview material is often complex and the concepts overlap, so direct quotations and case studies are mainly used to demonstrate the findings, their relations and the conclusions in this study. The collection of some systematic data made it possible to measure the frequencies of some variables, although these frequencies do not say much about the contexts and relations.

The concepts 'research confidence' and 'understanding' are used in this research rather than the concepts of 'validity' and 'reliability' used within quantitative research and the positivistic research tradition. Following Grönfors (1982: 178), my aim has been to increase research confidence through a detailed description of the research process, and furthermore, to 'triangulate' to increase understanding of shared meanings. I used triangulation in the sense that the phenomenon of au pairs was investigated from two perspectives.

Furthermore, some similar themes and questions were included in different interviews with each au pair participant, and in the host mothers' interviews. There was of course an interesting methodological question concerning the certain 'imbalance' between several interviews with an au pair and one interview with the host mother. In practice this meant that au pairs' interviews consisted of more detailed and, to some extent, more systematic information than the interviews with host mothers. A collection of more systematically comparable material would have contributed to the confidence that one might have been able to place in the findings. Furthermore, Hirsjärvi and Hurme

(1991: 130) point out that a researcher's own experience and ideas about an equivalence between results and reality measures the confidence.

## **Description of participants**

### *Au pairs*

All but one of the twenty-two au pairs interviewed was female. Over half of them (13/22) came from the southern part of Finland and the others came from the middle regions (8/22) or from the north (1/22). The vast majority (16/22) came from towns or suburbs. The vast majority were young adults aged 18 - 20. Only three au pairs were over 20 years old. Most of them (16/22) were 18-19 years old high school graduates. The older 20+ high school graduates (6/22) had either studied or worked after high school and all of them had already lived away from home. One of these au pairs had a youth worker's diploma.

All au pairs interviewed had previously travelled abroad. Almost half of them (10/22) had been to England before, usually to attend a language course during the summer holidays. One au pair had already visited England four times. The vast majority of the au pairs interviewed had travelled in Scandinavia and been to the Mediterranean countries on a family holiday on at least on occasion. Four of them had also travelled outside Europe.

All au pairs interviewed had some work experience in casual summer jobs during the school holidays, for example, as cleaners or shop, cafe, museum, or library assistants or on strawberry farms. Two au pairs had worked in a family business. Two others had worked as summer au pairs abroad. Most of them had limited experience in childcare but this included some babysitting and taking care of younger siblings. One au pair had worked as a nanny for one year in Finland, and another had taken a short course on childcare. Their experience of different housework tasks was usually gained at home by looking after their own room and clothes as well as by Hoovering, washing dishes and occasionally cooking at home.

The majority of the au pairs came from average Finnish two parent families. In three cases the au pair's own parents had divorced and two au pairs lived in a one-parent family. Most of the au pairs (17/22) had one or two siblings and only one au pair was an only child. Most of the au pairs' mothers were employed full-time outside the home and three mothers shared the work on the family farm. Most mothers and fathers worked in intermediate status occupations and some in skilled status occupation. The classification of occupations was based on the Open University text (1983) which follows the Registrar general's census definitions. The most common occupation among the mothers was nursing (6/22) and for the fathers, working as a technician (7/22). Most of the families lived in their own house and some in their own flat. One agency representative summarized the background of Finnish au pairs as follows:

"Most Finnish au pairs come from ordinary working families. They are usually high school graduates, the usual standard is a high school graduate, who wants to have a break or comes just for the summer time. The most usual stay is six to eight months and, during summer time, three months."(AG1)

Most of the au pairs were ordinary Finnish female high school graduates with an all-round education rather than with childcare or domestic work qualifications. These au pairs came from a variety of middle rank families and a few came from working class backgrounds. High school education in Finland is state funded and, in that sense, does not divide young people according to their socio-economic background. According to Tilastokeskus (1998), between 1992 and 1996, 57 per cent of high school students were females. In 1996, 55 per cent of age group which was in transition from secondary school began high school in Finland. In 1994, the year of the data collection for this study, only 15,2 per cent of high school graduates continued in higher academic education or in polytechnics. This means there was a gap in transition from high school to further studies particularly for girls who do not usually enter military service in Finland. The recession years in the 1990s have also decreased young people's chances to enter casual jobs in the transition from high school to higher education.

This study also suggests that contemporary au pairs do not come from upper

middle class families as it was found in the PEP study (1962) in the 1960s. The results also support those Finnish studies which have suggested that going and travelling abroad is more common for young people from Southern Finland and urban areas than for young people from the north and from the countryside (Grundström 1991; MEK 1988). On the other hand, the population of Finland is centered in the urban areas and the number of people who travel abroad is rapidly increasing in all sectors.

### *Host families*

The background of the host families (31) is based on the au pairs' descriptions of them rather than on the host mothers' interviews (19/31). This is because the sample of all the au pairs' host families was bigger and the interview data generated from the au pairs often included more systematic information about the host families' backgrounds.

Almost half of the host mothers (15/31) were full-time housewives. The other half was employed either full-time (12/16) or part-time (4/16) outside the home. However, the majority of host mothers interviewed (13/19) were employed outside the home. Defined by occupation, most of the host parents belonged to the professional or intermediate status, and could be defined as middle or upper middle class families (The Open University 1983). For example, almost a third (8/31) of the host fathers were bankers or accountants and another third (9/31) owned and managed their own businesses. A third of the host mothers who were self-employed (6/16) owned and managed their own businesses. Some couples can be defined as dual-career couples where both partners were in professional or managerial positions. More host mothers than host fathers were employed in intermediate status occupations like nursing and teaching. The husbands of full-time housewives usually worked in the professional status jobs. One host mother was a single parent and another had remarried after a divorce.

TABLE 3. Children's age and mother's employment

	full-time housewife	employed mother	total
at least one pre-school-aged child	11	8	19
only school-aged children (5+)	3	8	11
no children	1	-	1
total	15	16	31

The families where the mother was a full-time housewife more often had pre-school aged children than the families where a mother was employed outside the home. In the majority of host families (24/31) there were two or three children. In three of the host families there was a baby born during the au pair's stay.

Private education for the children was common: only in two of the host families were the children attending state primary or secondary schools. Most host families lived in the outer London area or in the London suburbs. According to the au pairs, most of them lived in houses with at least 4 bedrooms and in about a third of the cases the host family's house was described as very large, and in some cases as luxurious with a swimming pool and a tennis court. My impression of the homes of the host mothers interviewed was that they ranged from ordinary mid-terraced houses to luxurious homes set in big gardens and furnished with expensive rugs and antiques.

Besides the au pairs there was additional domestic help, most often a window cleaner and/or a gardener. In almost a third of the host families (9/31) a cleaning lady came regularly. Only one host family had a domestic staff - comprising a housekeeper, a cleaner, a gardener and a window cleaner in addition to the au pair. In this host family, the host mother was a housewife with four children.

In about a third of the host families, there had been ten or more au pairs over the years. Some of the host families had mainly hired au pairs from Finland. In about a third of all the host families (10/31), the au pair interviewed was the



host family's first au pair, although some of these host families had earlier hired a nanny or a maid. Two of the host mothers interviewed (2/19) were first timers with au pairs, while six of them (6/19) had had ten or more au pairs over the years.

The majority of the host parents were between 35 and 45 years old. Most of them (23/31) were British. Other national or cultural origins of the host families included American (2) and Greek (2). In three host families the host mother was Finnish. One host mother was of Asian origin. Four au pairs mentioned that the host family had a different religious background to their own. All these four families were Jewish.

Most host families in this study belonged to the British middle or upper middle classes defined according to the host parents' occupations, housing and the children's schooling. These findings support Meltzer's (1994) recent study, which suggests that affluent families in Britain hire domestic day care in their homes. However, this study suggests that contemporary au pairs do not only work in upper middle class families as suggested in the PEP study (1961). Furthermore, hiring domestic labour in some form is not confined to dual-career families with dependant children as in Gregson's and Lowe's study (1994). This is because about half of the host mothers in this study were full-time housewives with at least one pre-school-aged child. Employed host mothers in this study often worked in intermediate status occupations, which were not necessarily included in the Gregson's and Lowe's definition of dual-career. Their definition of the dual-career included only couples in full-time employment in professional/managerial occupations.

### *Some Socio-Cultural Differences*

Most host families fell within a higher socio-economic middle class than the au pairs' own families, defined according to the au pairs' fathers' and the host fathers' occupational status. However, this comparison is problematic when it concerns two groups of people who come from different societies and where there is a lack of information about socio-economic backgrounds and living

standards. For example, state education, public childcare and progressive taxation affect the definition of social class divisions in Finland, so definitions according to occupation are not as distinctive as in Britain.

It is rather obvious that the Finnish au pairs in this study had come from a less class divided and multi-cultural society than their host families in London with its multimillion population. Au pairs and members of host families also belonged to different generations. However, regardless of socio-economic and cultural differences, there might not be huge differences in the overall living standards between most Finnish au pairs' own families and their host families in Britain. For example, although the host families' houses were usually bigger than the houses and flats where au pairs lived in Finland, the au pairs often mentioned the greater convenience of housing in Finland in terms of heating, warm water and safety.

Women are responsible for much of the domestic work in families and households both in Finland and in Britain, although socio-cultural conditions and historical and political developments are different. For example, although a characteristic of women's employment in Britain is still part-time employment and dependency on the age of the youngest child, employment among British mothers of younger children (under 10) is now at the same level in the UK as for the European Union overall (Brannen et.al. 1994). On the other hand, private domestic help, such as au pairs, is obviously more common in British than in Finnish families whether mothers are in full-time employment or are full-time housewives. Although only 6 per cent of work-aged women in Finland are full-time housewives, Finnish women are responsible for much of the day-to-day housework in families, but the partners share childcare duties to some extent (Julkunen 1995: 61,69). Although Finnish young girls' own experiences of housework were rather limited, they were probably accustomed to the gender division of housework in their families.

## **5 CONSTRUCTION OF AU PAIR ARRANGEMENT**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the way in which the au pair arrangement was constructed as a gap year of travel for the Finnish young people in this study. It will also explain the way in which this arrangement was constructed as a material and economic coping strategy for the host mothers living in London who hired the au pairs.

### **5.1 Entering the gap year by au pairs**

During the initial interviews the participants were asked why they had become au pairs. They referred to their life situations and individual attachments, together with socio-cultural and developmental determinants in their answers.

The concept of 'gap year' was commonly used by the au pairs interviewed to mean a period of time between finishing high school studies and beginning occupational studies in universities or colleges. I will use the concepts 'gap phase' and 'gap year' to mean a 'gap' in the transition from high school to occupational studies, because the vast majority of au pairs in this study were in this transition from high school to academic or vocational studies at the age of 18 or 19. However, these 'gaps' can also occur in other transitions in the life course of young people such as in the transition from vocational studies to work. Only two of the au pairs who were over 20 years old were in transition from occupational studies to work rather than from high school to further studies. The other four participants over 20 had a longer transition period after leaving high school.

The length of a gap year also varied. For instance, in this study a minority of the

au pairs interviewed (5/22) had planned to work for a year or more as au pairs. The majority of them (17/22), however, planned to work for a shorter period varying from six months to less than an year. Two of the au pairs had stayed longer than they had planned but three of them shortened the length of their stay.

### **Societal and individual construction of a gap year**

The difficulty in obtaining a place in a higher education institution after high school was often mentioned as a reason for taking a gap year after high school. A lack of casual employment in Finland was another reason why some of the respondents decided to become au pairs. Half of the young people interviewed (11/22) mentioned at least one of these determinants as a reason why they had entered the gap phase and particularly taken a gap year abroad. It was also often mentioned that only a minority of their classmates had obtained a place at a higher education institution just after high school.

On the other hand, only a minority of the participants had already applied for a university place after leaving high school. However, all of them had considered pursuing further education in universities or polytechnics and taking a gap year as a 'natural' stage in their lives.

"Well, I wanted to take a break and I didn't want to be unemployed. Also I knew that as a high school graduate with no specific training I couldn't get a job..."(E1:10)

"I wanted something different, because I didn't get a study place."(N1:2,6)

"...because the job market is bad in Finland so, I thought that this was a good alternative."(O1:2)

"Quite a lot of the boys are in the army, actually the majority of them and then I know some who were unsuccessful in obtaining a university place offers."

Q:"What did those students who were unsuccessful at gaining a university place do?"

"Some of them took courses that they needed for the entrance tests and didn't have them at school at the Open University and some are working...One girl from my class went to work as an au pair to Germany and one from another class applied to go to England and at least one girl is already here... Many of my friends have been to the student exchange or had a break. Almost all the time somebody has been somewhere. This is not really anything new."(F1:4,7)

The construction of the gap phase in transition from high school seemed to be different for boys and girls in Finland. According to the participants, many boys in the same age group had entered military service after high school. Finnish girls, on the other hand, had to search for opportunities available in the community.

The participants were also highly motivated to spend a gap year abroad rather than in Finland. Some of them suggested that a gap year abroad was a 'must' when still young and free. This was emphasized by two older au pairs who were in transition from occupational studies to work. Half of the interviewees (11/22) said that they had wanted to take a gap year abroad because this was popular amongst their peer group and friends, who had often encouraged them to do this.

"...there where at least six or seven au pairs on the same plane and I talked with five of them." (H1:16)

"It think many people in my town think that this is a kind of fashion, you know, I have to go because the others go abroad as well ...I know that when I start studying I will do it and nothing else and then later, I think that if I have kids, or whatever, I can hardly go anywhere. It's better to go when you are still young and everything is worth seeing and you want to go and you don't have any obligations". (P1:3,8)

A gap phase in the lives of young people was also constructed as an individual choice. Some young people were still uncertain about their future studies and what they would like to do. A gap phase therefore provided a natural 'time-out' in their new life situation. Some were more certain about their study plans, but a gap year abroad was their 'dream' and/or a well-earned 'break' in their studies. Many interviewees said that they felt tired with studying at the end of high school.

"This has actually been my problem, that I don't really know, where I would go after this. It has never been clear to me, what I would like to become." (B1:7)

"I was too tired to go to school again. I felt that I was in need of a break...Well, I wanted something other than school." (R1:2-3)

"I lacked the energy to study for the entrance tests and I thought that a break could be an alternative and it would be nice to be here, away from school." (I1:2)

"I always knew that I would not enrol anywhere just after high school but instead I would go abroad..." (P1:3)

"I think it was in the third grade of high school when I didn't yet know what I wanted to do and where I wanted to enrol and what I actually wanted to do with the rest of my life. So, then well, I just wanted a break..."(O1:2)

"I wanted time to think about what to do in the future, because I don't yet know exactly where I would like to study, so I can think about it this year..."(I1:6)

Only one au pair considered that becoming an au pair was an 'escape' from her previous life: "I didn't come here with the same attitude as other au pairs - to have a one year break. I came to stay. I have no intention of going back to Finland" (G1:28). However, this participant also planned to further her studies abroad, but it is not known whether she was successful in migrating to Britain on a permanent basis.

The support given by friends and relatives also demonstrated how taking a gap year as an au pair was a personal 'challenge'. Although travelling abroad was common among peer groups, travel abroad alone was not typical of all young people. The images of courage and the 'uniqueness' of a gap year abroad placed new expectations on these young people as well as increased their autonomy in relation to family and friends.

"Some (friends) said that they were envious of me because they wanted to go as well, so it was really good." (Q1:9)

"I talked with my friend's mum and she had told her daughter how brave I must be to go somewhere like London and for half a year..."(H1:10)

"They (relatives) all live in the countryside, almost all of them, and then they said that they lacked the language skills and the courage, so they couldn't go. So they encouraged me to go, but anyway they have always regarded me as a kind of dare-devil." (E1:11)

Interestingly, entering a gap year abroad as an au pair was not usually regarded as 'real' work experience. For instance, only three au pairs (3/22) said that getting work experience was one of the motivations for becoming an au pairs. During the initial interviews most of the au pairs (14/22) did not consider au pairs as engaging in domestic work. Many described their domestic tasks as 'helping'. In this context, it is also interesting that in the Finnish language the expression 'being an au pair' is used rather than the expression 'working as an au pair'.

"I don't think it's really work...it's just normal housework at home."(C1:7)

"In some ways it's like work, but in the end it's not very hard work."(D1:9)

"I don't actually consider this as work. It felt strange when I got my first salary, to get money for something like washing, ironing and cleaning, the things you need to do anyway at home."(E1:14)

"This is not really work. I think it's just nice to be with kids and to do some housework."(F1:9)

"I don't consider being with the kids as work but when I cook and clean, I think that is work."(I1:8)

"I don't know if it is work or not. In a way, it is like language learning. It's half work and half learning." (M1:12)

"I don't think it's work."(N1:7)

"I decided to be realistic and told myself that I was going to work there."(J1:27)

"I didn't really have any clear concept...I didn't really know anything about what it was going to be like in the family. It's difficult to know beforehand." (I1:3)

"I came to work. I knew this was not dancing on the roses, it was more like a job..." (H1:11)

Furthermore, the participants were not particularly aware of, or interested in, their working and living conditions in their host family before their arrival. For instance, many of them had not asked for any further information about their host family and their working conditions before their arrival. They had been satisfied with a general description provided by the agencies or by the host mothers in the informal invitation letter, or on the telephone. These often fairly superficial descriptions included images of au pairs as 'babysitters' or family members doing 'light' housework, taking care of children and helping in the host family. They were not descriptions of au pairs as domestic workers or employees.

However, these young people were also aware of the public perception of au pairs as oppressed maids, but this did not deter them from becoming au pairs. According to some participants, compared to high status opportunities like international student exchange becoming an au pair was a low status gap year opportunity. Regardless of this paradox a typical attitude of au pairs before their arrival was: "it just felt great to be accepted by some host family" or "I hope they like me and don't kick me out". In this context, work, working conditions and

work experience were secondary issues for the vast majority of participants nor did they have much previous experience in housework and childcare.

"I just feel that somehow in Finland, if you say that you have spent a year in America as an exchange student, well Hallelujah, how great. But if you say that I have been an au pair for one year, well, they say, what kind of awful duties did you have to do..."(H1:11)

Most young people were not clear about their role as au pairs in their host families when they entered this arrangement. For instance, some mentioned that they would have never accepted similar working and living conditions in Finland to those they accepted abroad. This suggests that working as an au pair provided them with a chance for a gap year abroad in their transitional life situation and it was expected to represent something 'unique' in the lives of these young people.

### **Socio-cultural and developmental determinants of a gap year abroad**

During the initial interviews, the topics most discussed were learning languages, learning about other cultures, new experiences, international contacts and travelling. Spending a gap year abroad as an au pair was expected to provide these young people with important competences like language skills and an ability to adapt to a foreign environment and culture as well as cross-cultural contacts. Internationalism, activity and independence were considered beneficial for future life in modern society. English language was one important reason why these young people chose to come to England.

"The language was the most important reason, because with English you can manage all over the world. I want to learn to speak it and not to be afraid of speaking it. All this and then that you can see a little bit of something else, the different ways of life compared to Finland and to become more independent."(B1:5)

"I am interested in the other cultures and the different ways people live, so I thought that this would be a good chance to live in a family and see everyday life. .. I think the important part of this is that you learn about foreign culture and learn language." (F1:8)

The participants often talked about the developmental meaning of becoming an au pair. All the 18-19 year old interviewees had left home and their parents for



the first time when they entered an au pair arrangement. Two of them had lived partly away from home during their high school years. This separation from home, parents and familiar environment was described by one au pair as "a big step in my life".

Separation and independence from home and parents were experienced concretely in terms of departure, distance and finance. For example, some au pairs described the emotional pressures during their departure from home and how they coped with home sickness. These pressures also illustrated the symbolic meaning of a gap year abroad, which also generated a new situation also for the parents.

"I am on my own for the first time in my life, this is like a beginning..."(F1:10)

"I haven't really been anywhere without mum or somebody else familiar to me, this is the first time when I go somewhere on my own..."(D1:22)

"Sometimes I thought I didn't really want to go and then that I would go, but then, just before departure, I thought that perhaps I shouldn't go. I continued to think about this on the plane; I wondered if I had made the right decision and I thought about this many times..." (K1:5)

"...So I thought, it's great, it (high school) will end and then life will begin. Well, it felt really nice but, on the other hand, I must admit that at the same time it was so safe or it was so easy, when all the time you knew that you just had to go to school the next day and after that, do your homework, and so on..." (L1:3)

"This is the first time I am really leaving home behind. If I get through this, it will become easier and easier...I just burst into tears at the passport check. I thought then that I didn't want to go. I just opened the gates, I just tried to cope and went to sit down. I had another panic situation here in front of the door, when we arrived here and we were at their door. I just thought to myself, I am not able to do this, but I didn't think that I wanted to go back home." (A1:15,16)

"This was like: help! Did I have to blow the whole year straight away? I haven't ever been away for that long, so why had I decided on such a long period? I could have tried initially to take on a summer job as an au pair or something. So, I must have been mad to go away for a whole year. I hadn't really thought about that...It feels like a big step when you are with your friends in high school and everybody lives at home. It's kind of village life and then someone arrives and says: I am just going to move away for one year to live and work in London...Many people think it is a brave thing to do." (G1:7)

Spending a gap year abroad and leaving home, parents and friends also meant also an opportunity for growth and self-development. The participants used various concepts to describe these developmental determinants, which also

generated new expectations from the young people themselves and from their familiar others. The concepts most often used were independence, maturity, responsibility and initiative. However, six au pairs over twenty years old emphasized the socio-cultural rather than the developmental aspects as reasons and motives for becoming an au pair. For example, separation from home seemed more important to high school graduates than the older au pairs who had already lived away from home after high school.

"Perhaps the most important reason why I wanted to go was that I need to develop myself in some way, to become more independent, to learn a language." (A1:4,5,)

"I wanted to see if I could manage on my own, so that nobody was advising me as to what to do, when to be careful and what to care for ; but I have to be able to do all this myself." (P1:8)

"I should become more independent so that I could make my own decisions without asking my mum for her opinion. And then, I would like to know what I would like to study." (I1:24)

"Well perhaps just, that I wanted to grow up and become more independent and take the initiative; for instance, nobody needs to tell me to do the cleaning at home and things like that, so I have to grow up. I don't really want to change as a person, but just perhaps to see what the world is really like." (O1:19)

"I have to manage by myself. I just can't phone home and ask mum what to do because it will take a week to get an answer ...So I need to be responsible. And if there is something wrong or frightening me, I don't want my mum to be worried about it...Growing up, I think, is about taking responsibility for yourself and your actions. I expect that, in a way, I will be a bit smarter when I go back." (G1:28).

#### Au pairs of 20 years old and older:

"I think for the eighteen year olds it's a safe idea to become an au pair, but not for people of my age. I would tell them (to the older ones) not to become an au pair, but to find other work." (U1:7)

"Well, I had thought for a long time that I should go abroad, because my language skills are bad and this would be the only way to improve them. On the other hand, because my language skills are not good enough, I could not get a proper job and I don't yet have any occupation." (Q1:4)

"It was a real disappointment because I failed again (to get a study place). But then I decided to come here as an au pair for one year or six months and after this, I will try again...I wanted new experiences, that's the most important reason...I wanted to experience something new, I wanted something different, because I did not get a study place." (N1:2,6)

A young person's decision to become an au pair also affects her family

structure and her parents. The parents had reacted differently to their daughter's decision to become an au pair and to go abroad. Interestingly, a few fathers had considered that au pairs had low status and, in this sense, becoming an au pair provided not 'suitable' status for a high school graduate. The most of the participants suggested that their parents, or at least one parent, had supported them and some had clearly encouraged them to go abroad.

"I felt like they (the parents) were so proud of me, that I could just go into the big world, nobody was against it...They were really supportive. So that's why if I had had to go back earlier, I don't know what I would have said, because they were encouraging me to go and see the world. So what if I returned with my tail between my legs because I couldn't manage here." (D1:7)

"My dad asked me: 'Do you really have to go to be a maid? Is there no other and more respectable way to go abroad? Wouldn't it have been better to go on a student exchange?' I said: 'No, at this stage I am not going to think about what I should have done a few years ago, because I didn't do it then. I shall just forget about it and now I am going to be an au pair because I have thought about it for a long time and this is what I am going to do.'" (E1:10,11)

"I got an absolute 'no', straight away from my dad. Well, he said it was just a waste of time and of course I had to go on with my studies although I didn't even know at that time whether I had got a study place or not." (F1:7)

"At first my mother was quite terrified. She said I couldn't go; but then she started to think that it would be a good experience and she started gradually to accept it...I think, she was afraid to send her child out into the world...I think my dad didn't really know anything about au pairs." (N1:6).

The advantage of au pair placements during a gap year of travel is that young people can finance them themselves. A gap year as an au pair provides an opportunity for financial independence from parents, although some parents had paid their children's travel costs and/or sent them money during their stay. Compared with other options for taking a gap year abroad, this opportunity for financial independence was appreciated by the vast majority of the au pairs.

Although a desire for independence was a central concern for the young au pairs, they often expected their live-in position in their host families to provide emotional as well as material support. To some extent, it was perceived as a substitute for their own families. Some au pairs said that becoming an au pair was therefore a safe and easy option for a gap year abroad.

"I don't know if I was independent enough to live here alone and in the end I think it's good to live in a family..." (M1:11)

"I think it's so much nicer to live in a family. You have contacts and you don't need to be alone... So it's important you don't need to be alone. You can just go and be with them, you know, to watch telly, to have a chat or have a dinner." (G1:7)

Some of the au pairs considered the transition period between the end of high school and the beginning of higher education to be the ideal time frame in which to work as an au pair. This view was expressed in particular by those young people whose parents had given them the opportunity of becoming international exchange students while they were still at high school. These respondents said that they had been too young to maximize this experience. There was also the question of the cost. Becoming an au pair during the gap year was a cheaper alternative to being an exchange student.

"I considered that it would have been nice to go abroad as an exchange student, but it's so expensive. This is a cheaper alternative." (B1:6)

"I think that with this student exchange, people think that you have to be really rich to be able to go. Perhaps you don't have to be so adventurous because there is a family supporting you. It's more like your own family really, because you are not working there but they are taking care of you; and you pay a lot for it. But as an au pair, you have to be able to manage by yourself or to be able to take care of yourself." (K1:3)

The participants were willing to accept almost any 'poor' work and lodging abroad for their gap year. Their attitude was: "It doesn't really knock down the world. It's not that long a time" (K1:5). These young people did not become au pairs because they particularly wanted to do domestic work, although some may have liked children and cooking. As one interviewee put it: "I didn't come here to take care of children and to clean, but because of the new environment, language and new experiences" (M1:6).

Several socio-cultural and developmental features of becoming an au pair characterised it as an exploratory experience, even as an 'adventure'. In other words, the au pairs identified themselves with travellers rather than with (migrant) workers. They could be described as 'working travellers' because they worked abroad in order to travel. These middle class young people were 'modern' in their relation to (domestic) work as becoming an au pair broke

boundaries between work, travel and holidays.

## **5.2 An au pair as a coping strategy for host mothers**

The purpose of this section is to investigate the other side of the au pair arrangement. I will explain how and why taking on an au pair was constructed as a coping strategy by the mothers interviewed who lived in the London area.

The concept 'coping strategy' is widely used particularly in the socio-psychological literature on the family and childcare both to describe the ways in which families with children 'cope' with their everyday life obligations in modern times, and to explain why families adopt different strategies (Rapoport & Rapoport 1976). I will use this concept to examine the host mother's perceptions of au pairs.

### **Socio-economic determinants: family and labour market relations**

It was evident that all nineteen host mothers interviewed had taken on au pairs because they wanted and needed somebody outside their family to take care of certain domestic tasks. Hiring domestic workers like au pairs and buying domestic services in some form was the norm for all but one of these middle and upper middle class host mothers.

Au pairs were regarded by these host mothers as employed domestics. Host mothers had not taken on au pairs because they wanted to give these young people an opportunity to learn the language and culture, to grow up and to cope with separation from their own families. These factors were not given as reasons for hiring an au pair by any host mothers, although many felt that their au pairs did 'grow up' during their stay and did learn English, particularly if they were self-motivated to do so. Nor were the host mothers primarily interested in crosscultural relations: only two host mothers mentioned that it had been nice, particularly for their children, to learn about other cultures through au pairs. One

Finnish host mother commented that her children had been able to learn Finnish.

All host mothers interviewed (19) expected their au pairs to do some housework and take on some childcare duties. These tasks depended on the host mothers' position as a full-time housewife (6/19) or as an employed mother (13/19) as well as on the age of the children and on the presence of other domestic staff. For example, five full-time housewives with at least one child under school age expected their au pairs to look after the children and do some housework. Whereas one housewife with schoolaged children required her au pair to do cleaning.

Most of the employed mothers (9/13) did not have pre-school-aged children and only one of them also employed a cleaner. These host mothers stressed usually the childcare role of the au pair. These au pairs were expected to babysit, look after the children after school and in the school holidays and were also responsible for school transport. A minority of these employed host mothers (4/13) had at least one pre-school-aged child and they expected the au pair to provide childcare on a part-time or a full-time basis. Only two host mothers expected the au pair to take care of a baby or a toddler on a full-time basis, meaning 8-10 hours a day.

"I think in general this area is a fairly affluent sort of area - a lot of business executive families. The families who live around, some of them are working mothers - mothers who tend to have older children, to work part time and need somebody to be around to get the children off in the morning and also when the children come home from school in the afternoon. So there is a gap between the children coming home and the mother returning and they need somebody to fill that gap. I suppose it would be mainly divided between families like ours where there's a family with very young children, where the husband works late and very long hours. So the au pair provides support for the mother and the children. On the other hand, the career woman needs somebody to sort of run the house - you know, to do the housework and fill the gap between the children coming home from school and her arriving home." (hR:15)

The host mothers were generally more clear about the role of the au pair as a worker than the young people who entered au pair placements, although some of the mothers described the role as "not hard work" or "not difficult tasks" or as "helping".

These mothers considered that they usually treated their au pairs as "part of the family", as an extended family member, or as a friend rather than as a domestic employee. The concept of family membership is also promoted at policy level and by the agencies. It is therefore possible that the host mothers, in the interview situation, wanted to demonstrate that they were cognisant with these policies and fully supported them. However, they appeared to be confused about the au pair's position in their family at the level of everyday practices and interaction. Areas which contributed to this confusion included au pair's live-in position, her young age, and her nationality, in relation to the host family's/mother's responsibilities and privacy.

"They are young, so it is very difficult to treat them in the same way that I treat a colleague at work because I am having to tell them or ask them to do things all the time. But I think that they are a part of the family and yet not quite a part of the family." (wM:5)

"A lot of them don't realize what they are getting into. I mean, being an au pair is jolly hard work...They(au pairs) need to know that it's work, that it's a job...No matter what kind of job and how insignificant it is, you need to put in some effort and the more effort you put in, the more you get. ...But it's funny, from my point of view, because they start feeling like they are your daughter." (wVb:8)

"Not just in au pairing, but in any job, people don't care, they do it for money or being someone...She is just here as a person. Of course she works for me, but she is also a person, not just a slave who looks after the children and does housework. You know, she has got feelings." (hG:2)

"There are things that have to be done but it's more personal. For instance if I employed a secretary, I wouldn't be so concerned about her welfare. I would be, but not as concerned as I am about somebody who is living here, for whom I am her family for three to six months. That's me, I think, rather than the job." (wHa:9)

"Mmh, friends and part of the family, not part of the family, that's impossible, but as close as you can get. There has to be a lot of trust...They like their own space and we like our own space; but that's what I was worried about actually. But we have never had that problem which is good." (wS:5)

The host mothers had taken on au pairs because they needed to 'cope' with their domestic life and for the sake of their family. These women needed to cope either as full-time housewives with '24-hour domestic management', or as employed mothers with a 'double work load'. All these women considered themselves responsible for organising the day-to-day domestic tasks in the family, also for hiring and 'managing' domestic workers like their au pairs. The husbands were absent from this reality because of their demanding jobs and

long working hours, which illustrates the gendered relationships in families and work in general.

"He works fairly regular hours, but he leaves home at seven o'clock and comes back at seven in the evening. He has very little to do with running the household. He prefers it that way, unfortunately for me. But it works quite well, because there are certain things he does." (wHb:2)

"The au pair usually falls into the woman's role, you know. My husband couldn't say: I want this done on Thursday and this on Friday or whatever. I mean that's not his deal." (wVb:13)

"My husband works very long hours and quite hard, so I never have meals with the au pair, because it doesn't really work out, you know. I never know when he is going to be back and he is tired.." (hC: 6)

"We prefer her to take her day off during the week, because the only time my husband is at home, really, is at the weekends, so he likes to be able to relax and in order for him to do this, he likes some time when the children aren't around." (hR:11)

Besides the gender division of domestic tasks there were other interlinked material, economic and emotional determinants which affected what kind of domestic labour was hired and why. The housewives had made a choice between employment and housewifery and that they preferred the more traditional role of wife and mother in the home. Buying domestic services like hiring an au pair provided these women with 'breaks' and some 'quality time' of their own and reduced their domestic work load at home. This suggests that hiring an au pair provided these full-time housewives with a domestic coping strategy in the sense that they were then able to provide material and emotional support to their husbands and children. This increased the 'quality of family life'.

"The mothers are in the same situation as myself. They have made a positive choice to stay at home because their husbands can support them financially." (hFb:3)

"I think, you know, from our experience, for my husband and I, it has been a very very nice change because he comes home from work in the evening, I don't grumble and groan that I have had a long day..It removes a lot of stress from family life in a way. My husband's business life is extremely stressful. He has a very stressful job and when he comes home in the evening, he wants to switch off and relax. When he comes home, I am relaxed, the children are relaxed, because they have had all the attention they need. I am relaxed because I have had somebody to take the strain away from, you know, having to focus all my attention on the children and run the house and you know, the pressure is taken off and I do give myself...I can go off for a while and have a quiet swim...Her role is to sort of take the pressure of me, so that I can actually concentrate on one of



the children while she can keep the other one occupied so that I can do more constructive things." (hR:6,11)

However, it is interesting that the cost of childcare was often equated with the wife's rather than with the husband's salary. This means that full-time housewifery can also provide an economic solution to the organisation of a family's domestic life. Work outside the home was not always financially rewarding for the women and their families because their salary went on paying for private childcare and other domestic help. This is particularly true in England where private childcare is common and where women often work part-time and earn less than the men.

Q:"What would you do if there were no au pairs at all?"

"I would work part-time and do a nanny share..." (wI:2)

"I don't need a nanny and I don't need a housekeeper. ...Instead I would have a cleaner and babysitters and it would be very expensive." (wHa:4)

" There is no point employing a nanny, because firstly all my wages, all my salary would go to the nanny..."

Q:"If there were no au pairs, how would you cope?"

"I wouldn't go to work because my children are in private schools and the fees are astronomical. I would probably go back on night duty and that's how I would manage; that's what I would do." (wE:10)

"You know, I don't see it as anything other than good value really. And I think that's why people have au pairs. I think it's got to be relatively cheap because you are having a completely untrained person...In need of a better alternative. I mean, in order to pay a nanny, even a live-in very young nanny, a hundred pounds, it would cost me a hundred and fifty, so I would have to earn two hundred." (wM:6,7)

These socio-economic aspects were identified by some employed mothers as a reason why they hired an au pair instead of choosing other options. By purchasing domestic help as cheaply as possible, they had enough of a profit margin from their employment to raise the family's living standards. For instance, eight host mothers interviewed (8/19) gave the low cost of au pairs as one reason why they hired them. The vast majority of these were employed mothers. These findings suggest that, for these employed mothers, the au pair provided 'a coping strategy' which enabled them to work outside the home, increased their family's living standards and reduced their 'double workload'.

Besides the socio-economic determinants, there were other reasons for hiring an au pair. The majority of the host mothers (14/19) gave the flexibility of this arrangement as another reason. This flexibility, in terms of the au pairs' domestic tasks and working hours, was very convenient for the full-time housewives and the employed mothers and particularly for single mothers and mothers with irregular or late working hours. Some employed mothers said that it was important for them to be able to arrange home-based childcare and care for children during school holidays and illnesses.

"I will say to the people that they need to be fairly flexible, sometimes I am delayed at work, come home late; sometimes I have to go back to work...I need somebody flexible and I'll be flexible in return..." (wE:10)

"If I start clocking down exactly how many hours someone has done every day, she is not part of the family. They, they are a paid person. I, I try to make it informal." (wK:4)

"...There are complications with that (nanny share). Things like whose house the nanny lives in, the working hours, holidays. It needs negotiations between so many people - husbands and wives from the both families and the nanny and, if she is a childminder, with her family as well. Depending on when the au pair arrives, it makes her a flexible option.." (wI:2)

"..Because I am out. I can be out four, five times a week and so it's important that they (the children) have somebody in the house that they like and that they can feel confident with and I hate doing housework and I don't have the time because I am out all the time..I would have to change my life to deal with the house, if I didn't have the au pair..It's really to keep the house in order and to give continuity to the children in the evening, so I don't have babysitters coming in all the time..." (wHa:4)

"...I wouldn't really want them to go to the childminder, because I think, if the parents are not at home when the children get home from school, things at home must be as stable as possible especially where there has been a divorce. Mmmh, so I think that their being in their own home after school and having their own friends around is important." (wM:6,7)

"I never put my children in a daycare situation. So I don't want - I feel guilty enough because I work - so if I am at work I want to make it as easy as possible for them. That's basically my main reason and it's nice to have someone, you know, kind of to look after the house for me." (wVb:4)

"It's very nice for the children if you go out, to see the same face and not to have different babysitters. I would prefer to have, that they had the same person all the time and someone I trust, so I think we will continue to have another au pair...If there were no au pairs available at all, I wouldn't have any help obviously..." (hC: 6)

"I don't need an au pair for much, but being a single parent I feel very vulnerable.

Just, just having the whole load on myself and I need to get out once a week and to have somebody there, who I like and trust with the children and also some help around the place...They are both at school all day. But if they are ill, what do I do. I haven't got family around. So I can't take a day off, if they are sick. That is, that is really one of the main reasons for having an au pair living in...People see it as a luxury having an au pair. To me life is more difficult when I haven't got one, for my sanity ...” (wK:1)

Those host mothers who had had many au pairs over the years said that the au pair arrangement provided them with important household help which was affordable to them. For this, they were willing to sacrifice their family privacy. Loss of privacy was cited by almost half of the host mothers interviewed (8/19) as the biggest disadvantage of this live-in arrangement. Almost half of the host mothers (9/19) also said that they and their au pairs often had different expectations concerning this arrangement. These host mothers suggested that when the au pairs arrived, they had no clear idea of the nature of domestic work expected by the host family and some of them even thought that they had come on holiday.

Hiring domestic workers like au pairs represents one domestic coping strategy for both full-time housewives and employed women in Britain. This socio-economically constructed coping strategy is based on women's family and labour market relations. This does not mean that hiring live-in au pairs as a coping strategy can not be meaningful for the mothers as individuals. For instance, three host mothers in this study said that the au pair provided company for them. Although this was not a primary reason why au pairs were hired by these women, it helps to explain the position of women at home. For example, full-time housewives can be fairly isolated and single mothers may have no adult company at home. In these circumstances, private domestic workers like au pairs provide social and emotional services in the form of childcare and company for the mothers.

”I have heard some, people complain and say they don't like having au pairs because it is an intrusion into the household. But because I haven't got a husband around, to me it is not an intrusion; it is company. It is nice to come home when somebody is here rather than to an empty house.” (wK:9)

### 5.3 Discussion

This study suggests that a gap year in transition from high school may be fairly common, particularly for Finnish young people, although it may also take place within other transitional periods in the lives of young people. Furthermore, there is no one reason for this. Interestingly, unemployment or engaging in casual studies while living at home were regarded as alternatives to becoming an au pair. Other opportunities to travel and work abroad were not regarded as safe and easy ways to travel as becoming an au pair. Although this arrangement was connected with limited opportunities for young people to work and to get study places after high school, becoming an au pair during the gap year was appreciated as an opportunity for independence, self-development and crosscultural contacts rather as a work experience. This chance provided a 'break', a 'time-out', a 'must' and/or a 'challenge' in the transitional life situation.

These findings accords with the PEP study (1962) which has suggested that the main reasons for going to England were to learn English, to increase knowledge of Britain and a desire to travel. My findings also support those studies on youth and young people which emphasize that the extended youth and exploratory periods are characteristic for youth today and the linear transition to adulthood is fragmented (Buchmann 1989; Galland 1995; Sauli 1992). Furthermore, working during travelling, for instance as an au pair, represents the late modern form of travelling as suggested by Jokinen and Veijola (1997). Like many travellers, au pairs emphasized 'authentic' new experiences in a foreign culture together with self-development.

The gap year does obviously not mean same things for all young people. In particular, a gap year abroad in transition from high school, may be a characteristic of the most educated and academically orientated young adults in Finland, but is not the norm for all of this age group. Taking a gap year abroad just after high school may be more common for the Finnish girls than for the boys because boys have 'natural' access to military service after high school (and girls to domestic work). The socio-cultural orientation of a gap year abroad

also supports those arguments which suggest that girls in Finland are more keen on languages, foreign cultures, travelling and working abroad and immaterial values than boys (for instance Grundström 1992; Helve 1992; Kasurinen 1997; Lähteenmaa & Siurala 1991). For example, a gap year spent as an au pair was perceived to embrace many of the socio-cultural determinants characteristic of other opportunities for travel abroad. These determinants include skills, images or competences, which are appreciated in contemporary Western societies in relation to internationalism and cultural globalisation. In this sense learning English was very important.

It is interesting that most of the young people who became au pairs did not identify themselves as domestic workers nor perceive the relationship with their host mothers as a material and economic labour relationship, whereas their host mothers clearly did. In other words, the au pairs and the host mothers had very different expectations when they entered this arrangement.

Most of the host mothers interviewed expected the au pair to take care of a range of specified tasks also done by private domestic workers like nannies, cleaners, ironing ladies, maids and housekeepers. Au pairs in this study were rarely expected to work as full-time nannies or cleaners, but the presence of pre-school-aged children and the host mother's employment were the principal reasons why the au pair had to take on childcare duties. Interestingly, almost half of the host mothers were full-time housewives with dependant children although some studies (Gregson & Lowe 1994; Meltzer 1994) have highlighted that particularly employed mothers hire domestic service in Britain.

Au pairs were expected to work as 'maids of all work', whose backgrounds and live-in position generated rather complex work relations. For the host mothers, an au pair arrangement was a low cost and flexible solution to the organisation of their family's domestic life. These findings suggest that the contemporary au pairs continue the tradition of low paid and live-in domestic service in middle and upper middle class families. In this sense, au pairs are similar to young life-cycle servants in the past and to contemporary racial-ethnic women as domestic workers.

My study suggests that au pair arrangement is obviously one of the cheapest and at the same time the most flexible way of obtaining paid domestic services in contemporary England. In some contrast to Gregson's and Lowe's (1994) study, this research suggests that family based domestic workers like au pairs provide a primarily economic and material coping strategy for host mothers responsible for the family's domestic life. According to Gregson and Lowe, ideological imperatives in particular, legitimated hiring a nanny in middle class families in Britain, and a cleaner reduced the mother's housework load. However, the employment of a nanny and an au pair as full-time childcarer, represent two different economic and material choices of homebased childcare available to middle class families. These choices offer a lot of organisational convenience to the mothers as well as providing them with social and emotional comfort.

Mothers who enter an au pair arrangement present a paradox for women who hire private domestic workers. In this paradox, privileged women obtain comfort and status by oppressing other women and by reproducing the low status of domestic work and the oppression of women in general. However, the labour relationship between contemporary au pairs and their host mothers may not be as oppressive as that experienced by servants in the past and described by feminist historians (Branca 1975; Davidoff & Westover 1986) or that experienced by some groups of contemporary domestic employers described in Rollins' (1985) study. Hiring domestic may in fact be a new and confusing experience for many contemporary middle class women and they find difficult to take on the role of a employer. Mothers may also suffer from guilt for hiring domestic workers and/or working outside the home.

Following Gregson's and Lowe's analysis on nannies and cleaners (1994), there are a lot of pressures in the au pair arrangement to establish a 'false kinship' relation similar to that experienced by nannies. There is also the element of 'social distance' similar to cleaner employment because au pairs combine childcare and menial housework. This demonstrates how family based domestic workers' labour relationships are affected by both family relations and labour market relations. Women's own positions as family workers together with

the au pair's live-in position, young age and different nationality, increase the potential for stress in the au pair arrangement. This confusion about the work relations can lead women to undermine the meaning of patriarchal and capitalist structures of society, which determine their choices concerning hiring paid domestic workers.

## 6 PRACTICE OF AU PAIR ARRANGEMENT

The aim of this chapter is to describe the nature of the au pair arrangement between the Finnish au pairs in this study and their host families/mothers. To this end, I will review four case studies which will demonstrate the diversity of the au pairs' working conditions in the host families. This will be followed by a general description of their working hours, their pocket money and the nature of their domestic tasks. From this data, it is evident that the au pairs' overall material and social conditions in the host families, and the experiences of both the au pairs and the host mothers, varied considerably.

### 6.1 Au pairs' working conditions

#### Four case studies

##### *Saara's case*

Saara worked as an au pair in a host family with a single mother who worked full-time as a nurse. The mother had two children aged 9 and 12. Saara worked from Monday to Friday and estimated that she worked fifteen hours a week. Her pocket money was £35 a week. On a normal work day, she woke up between 9 to 10 in the morning and had her breakfast. After that, she made the beds and did some ironing, cleaning or washing depending on the day. She babysat three times a week but did not get on very well with the children. The host mother shared the domestic tasks like the cleaning and cooking but the children did not. Saara found that she had too little to do in the host family, but felt it was always her who had to be flexible. She felt bored and lonely, because there was no-one to talk to during the daytime. Furthermore, she was not getting much



opportunity to practise her English.

### *Tarja's case*

Tarja left her first host family to work in a family where both partners owned a business. Tarja was expected to look after a 9 months old baby from 9 am to 6 pm while the parents worked full-time. She had one afternoon a week and weekends off. Her pocket money was £40 a week and sometimes she was given some extra money or a train ticket. She was happy to work as a nanny and found it easy. She did not have any duties other than childcare. In the first host family she had not got along with one of the children.

### *Marjo's case*

Marjo worked as an au pair in a family where the mother was a full-time housewife and the father worked as a lawyer. The children were aged 4, 6 and 8 and went to school. Besides the au pair, the family employed an ironing lady, a window cleaner, a gardener and a car washer. Marjo woke up at 7 am in the morning and got the children ready for school. After that, she had her breakfast, cleared the kitchen and made the beds while the host mother took the children to school. When the host mother returned, she gave Marjo her day's responsibilities which varied every day. Marjo did not work fixed hours or have specific duties, but, in the evenings, she usually had to bath the children and put them to bed. She received £35 a week and no extras. Marjo felt that she was expected to do too much. For example, she was responsible for cleaning the 12-roomed house which had 4 bathrooms. The host mother did the shopping and the washing. Marjo also felt that she was expected to be available at all times and that her tasks had gradually increased. Marjo estimated that her longest working day in the host family had been 13 hours.

### *Kaija's case*

Kaija worked as an au pair in a host family where the mother was a full-time housewife and the father was an accountant. The children were aged 18

months and 4 years. The older child attended a nursery for three hours a day. The host family also had a window cleaner and a gardener. Kaija worked about 7 hours a day and initially received £35 pocket money. After a few months, this was increased to £40 per week. Her working hours were usually from 8.30am to 1.00pm and from 5.30 to 7.30pm. She had specified tasks each day like vacuuming and dusting or cleaning one room thoroughly, or looking after the children while the mother was out. Kaija thought that the host mother did not do much housework in the host family. She often had to work on Sundays. She accompanied the family when they went abroad on holiday but during this time, she was also expected to work.

The case studies above demonstrate that the au pairs' working conditions, particularly in relation to working hours and domestic tasks, varied considerably between different host families. Interestingly, the single mother did not seem to expect her au pair to do as much work as the full-time housewives who both had school-aged children. On the other hand, the au pair who worked as a substitute nanny did not have any tasks other than childcare, whereas the other au pairs were expected to do both housework and help with the children. However, the amount of pocket money in all four case studies, was about the same. The diversity in the nature of the domestic tasks and working hours were features of the au pairs in this study.

### **Au pairs' working hours, pocket money and domestic tasks**

The Home Office's recommendations on au pairs' working hours changed in the autumn of 1994, during the period of the data collection. The original recommendation of 30 hours, per six-day week plus 2, and maximum 3, nights babysitting, was revised to 25 hours per weekdays, plus babysitting. The recommended pocket money was £35 a week. These revisions had not had much impact on the au pairs' working hours during their stay between 1994 and 1995 and the majority of the au pairs and the host mothers were not even aware of this change in the recommended working hours.

TABLE 4. The au pairs' weekly working hours and pocket money in the host families in his study (N=31)

Hours	Pocket money			total
	£35(or less)	£36-£45	over £45	
30(or less)	6	6	0	12(39%)
more than 30	4	7	3	14(45%)
irregular	3	1	1	5(16%)
total	13 (42%)	14 (45%)	4 (13%)	31 (100%)

Most of the au pairs found it difficult to define their exact working hours. In twelve of the host families (12/31), the au pairs estimated that they worked a maximum of 30 hours a week, while in fourteen cases (14/31), the au pairs' working week exceeded 30 hours. In five cases (5/31), the au pairs had no regular timetable. Babysitting was not included in these working hours. The regular weekly babysitting increased the hours for some of the au pairs, but most of them considered that they had no regular babysitting duties. In the majority of the host families (18/31) the au pairs were not on duty during the weekends. A minority also worked on Saturdays. Two au pairs said that they worked on Sundays but were compensated with time off during the week. In the majority of the host families (22/31) the au pairs worked in two shifts. The first shift was usually in the early morning and the second, in the late afternoon. In three of the host families, the au pair worked all day as she had total responsibility for a toddler.

In most cases, the au pairs considered housework as their main duty. In only six of the host families (6/31) the au pairs' main duty was to take care of pre-school-aged child(ren) either full-time or part-time while the parents were working. However, there were no significant differences in their pocket money. In over a third of the host families (12/31) the au pairs were paid £35 a week or less (1/31). In the majority of the host families (18/31), they were paid more than £35, usually around £40 a week. Three au pairs received an increase in their pocket money to compensate for an increased work load. The pocket money varied from £25 to £65 a week, although there was no difference in the

on-duty hours or the amount of tasks assigned to these two au pairs. For example, the longest work day for an au pair who got £25 was 16 hours. A third of the au pairs did occasional babysitting outside their own host families. The money from this babysitting varied from £2.20 to £5 an hour. One au pair also worked in a shop in addition to working for her host family.

Besides pocket money, some au pairs got other rewards in the form of travel cards (1), language courses (1), extra Christmas money (3), a return flight ticket to Finland (2) and free use of the car (3). Some were also given movie and theatre tickets and occasionally taken out for dinner or a countryside trip with the host family. In many cases, Christmas and birthday presents were exchanged between the au pair and her host family. Most au pairs considered that they got more time off for instance during the Christmas and Easter holiday periods than the one week in every six months stipulated in most contracts. However, for some au pairs, the half term holidays meant more work while the children were off from school.

The domestic tasks most often described by the au pairs interviewed were serving breakfast and cleaning up the kitchen afterwards, making the beds, doing the ironing, the washing, the hoovering and the dusting, taking and/or collecting the children from school, playing with them and helping with preparing their dinner, their bath and putting them to bed. Their domestic duties also included changing the bed linen every week, preparing meals, cleaning the toilets, cleaning the hall and washing the kitchen floor. Some of the au pairs also mentioned other duties such as taking the rubbish out, cleaning the oven, waking up the host family or the children in the mornings, taking the pet out for a walk or feeding and bathing the pets, gardening, helping with the children's homework, taking the toddlers to a playgroup, washing the walls, helping in the host family's business, polishing the silver and looking after the house and the pets while the host family was away. Eight of the au pairs said that they had looked after the house and the family's pets while they were away for a weekend, or longer. One au pair had stayed in the house alone for two weeks; and a few au pairs had been left responsible for the children for a weekend while the host parents were away. These au pairs regarded these periods when

their host families went away as holidays, even where they were required to do extra duties during the host family's absence.

According to the au pairs, there were differences in the standard of domestic tasks expected by different host families. For instance, some au pairs were expected to keep their own and the children's rooms tidy, while others were expected to 'spring clean' the house every week or to clean the toilets every day and to carry out other time consuming cleaning every day.

## **6.2 Au pairs' living conditions and social relations**

The diversity of both material and social conditions of the au pairs in the different host families was common to the domestic work arrangement. In this section, I will discuss other features of the au pair arrangement and specifically the living conditions and social relations experienced by the au pairs and the host mothers interviewed in this study.

The living conditions of the au pairs did not vary enormously. All of them were given their own room, often with a TV and sometimes with their own toilet or bathroom. However, there were differences in everyday practices in relation to these au pairs; for example, when and with whom they ate their meals, the use of the telephone, and the times they were expected to return home. For example, in nine of the host families (9/31), the au pair ate dinner with the children. In fourteen of the host families (14/31), the au pair ate dinner either with the host family (8/14) or separately from the children but with the parents (6/14). There was also a lot of variation in the participation of the au pairs in the social life of the host families. For instance, although most of them arrived with the idea of experiencing a different Christmas with the host family, only about third (8/22) spent their Christmas with the host family.

The working and living conditions of the live-in au pairs affected the social relations between them and their host families/mothers. As mentioned earlier,

over a third of the host mothers interviewed (8/19) suggested that a loss of family privacy was the biggest disadvantage of the au pair arrangement. On the other hand, the flexibility of this arrangement afforded a lot of convenience for the host mothers. Conversely, the au pairs often found this flexibility a problem. For example, they often alluded to the difficulty of drawing a line between work and leisure and also the difficulty of defining the extra hours they had to put in and compensation for these hours. It appeared that they complained more often about these difficulties than about the nature of their domestic tasks or the amount of pocket money they received. On the other hand, many of the au pairs and the host mothers considered that the private nature of the au pair arrangement afforded an easy opportunity, particularly for the host families, to take advantage of their au pairs.

au pair: "Many au pairs have a sort of timetable, but I must be always available. I am not able to go anywhere in the evenings...I am always dependent on when they go out and if they need me. I am never asked if I am going somewhere. I always have to cancel everything...I just can't say that this is my day off and I am not going to do it." (J2:13)

au pair: "In a way, they (hosts) take it for granted that it's OK for me to babysit or whatever...well, it's always the au pair who must be more flexible than the host family." (B2:8)

host mother: "It depends on how they interpret it. Is it babysitting when I go out at seven o'clock and my husband comes back at nine? If they go out at nine, does that mean they have babysat or if they just stayed in because it's not worth going out?" (wHa:7)

The private nature of this arrangement was also suggested as a problem in terms of the roles of employee and employer. For instance, the au pairs often complained that they were not trained to carry out their domestic tasks including childcare in the host family. Also some host mothers were clearly not prepared for the role of employer. They were unsure of how to establish a set of rules, give orders, explain tasks or set standards, particularly with their first au pairs. This produced the common problem of establishing a private family and household as a workplace.

host mother: "I can be a boss at work, but not in my own house." (wVb:5)

host mother: "It was very hard to start off with, because I had not had an au pair before. I did not know what to say to her, how to tell her what to do...a terrible fluster. I hated giving orders. It was not really like giving orders to someone, but I didn't like the idea of it." (hP:6)

au pair: "This (introduction) was a bit problematic; but then, the host family's ex au pair showed me to my tasks. The host mother was not actually able to show me what I had to do." (P1:7)

Furthermore, many au pairs and host mothers said that the written contract was rather meaningless or just a formality. There was often no written contract where an au pair had applied to a second host family through personal contact. Most of the au pairs (19/22) in this study were recruited by au pair agencies for their initial host family, while the others found their first family through an advertisement placed by their host family. The recruitment agencies had required a contract in most cases, although some of the au pairs were unaware of whether they had a contract with their host family. Some of them had found the language of the contract difficult to understand.

au pair: "Although I thought that after my first host family everything would be written down on paper, somehow it didn't happen. I have realized that they (the host family) may know my first name, but they don't know my surname, date of birth or address in Finland. They don't actually know anything about me. It was so busy when I arrived there, so we never really had time to sit down and go through everything...The contract, you know, has become quite a secondary matter, because everything is going quite well now." (E2:11)

host mother: "I had to write down, you have to work 25 hours a week for £33 or £32 a week or whatever, and then she telephoned me and I said: " You know this is rubbish. This is not what you will have to do but this is what I have to put in the letter in order to enable you to get into the country." So, in fact, I spoke to her on the telephone and said: " This is what really happens in our house and, if you can do this, then, fine, you can come." (wE:20)

An au pair arrangement between 'strangers' with different cultural backgrounds also generated diversity in cultural practices. For example, regardless of the private and personal nature of the au pair arrangement, or partly because of it, it appeared that contacts, interaction and communication between the au pairs and their host families were limited to the au pairs' day-to-day domestic tasks. Some of them were disappointed in the lack of interest of the host family in Finland. On the other hand, some of the host mothers perceived the au pair's poor language skills and the lack of time as barriers to communication.

host mother: "... if it was my daughter, I would say: "You need to be a little bit more considerate" ...So it's funny; if it was my daughter I would say something, but I don't, because I don't feel comfortable. You know, because they are not my daughter, they kind of work for me; but I see on their faces, they don't like that, they don't like to be told, you know..." (wVb:9)

host mother: "I found it quite difficult to explain how I felt and it took me, I would say, probably two or three au pairs to get used to having somebody in the house. And if they did something and it upset me, I wouldn't say anything and I would get more and more upset about it and ridiculous things. Whereas I should have said straight away: "Look, please would you mind not doing that." So, I think it is experience that helps you and it takes a little while to adjust to having someone living in the house with you. And for them, I mean, it must be very difficult for the girls coming and some of them have terrible experiences." (hVa:2)

host mother: "I feel I don't talk to them enough, you know. If I am at home and the au pair is at home, I don't often sit down and talk and chat to them, because we are busy doing things. And if I do that, then I find it quite difficult, because then I start to feel resentful. You know, you don't want to come home, because you can't sit quietly. I am very bad at that. That's why I like it, if they have friends outside..." (wL:6)

au pairs:

"I am really annoyed with living there, because there is no lock or anything on the door. If I want some peace and the kids just walk in and slam the doors, it's not very nice, not with my nature. I would like to tell them to go away, because it's my time off, but I don't do it..." (M2:7)

"I don't really talk a lot with the mother. She tells me my duties and when she comes home, I go upstairs. So, there is no such a feeling of belonging to the host family." (A2:7)

"The only conversation I had with my host mother was her telling me to do this and that or asking if I had done those things or that this was not done well enough, do it again and that's it. We never had a chat about any other thing." (F1:8)

"The only thing I discussed with the mum in my first host family was what I should clean next and with what kind of detergent." (V1:11)

"The only things they said to me were: "clean kitchen, clean this and that"." (E1:9)

"I don't really discuss anything with the mum. It would be nice, but she doesn't ask me anything. I think that she wants to give me my privacy in that way." (L2:9)

"In my first host family they hardly spoke to me at all. Their attitude was quite cold. But in this new one, they ask me how I am and what I have done, and whether I had a nice day. They really like me being there." (O2:7)

During the interviews with the au pairs, a fairly common pattern emerged concerning social life and relations inside and outside the host family during their stay. The majority of them did not spend any time with their host family during the weekends if they were not working, although they would watch TV with their host family occasionally during the week outside their working hours. To compensate for this lack of social discourse, they had established a



friendship network with whose members they spent a lot of their leisure time. Interestingly, the closest friendship network usually included 2 to 4 Finnish au pairs. Only five of the au pairs (5/22) had established a fairly international friendship network during their stay.

au pair: "Au pairs, Finns, it's the same with almost everybody...It is so marvellous when you are off just to have a chat in Finnish and to pour out everything." (H2:8)

au pair: "I feel that even if I attend a language course, I just try to find another Finn. I try to find shelter with other Finns. The Finnish Church is a kind of shelter for me..My friends have been the best thing here. Without them I would not have coped." (A2:11)

au pair: "My best friends here are mainly other Finnish au pairs and we have great fun together. I think we'll keep in contact with some of them in the future." (B3:9)

This may represent some of the difficulties in adapting to the foreign culture and host family. Furthermore, it appeared that for many au pairs the high cost of language courses, travelling and visiting places limited their experiences rather than a lack of time or unwillingness to do them. Some of them talked also of the difficulty of settling into a new environment. Less than half of the au pairs interviewed (10/22) had joined a language course during their stay, whereas most of them had expected to receive language tuition during their stay. Moreover, most of them only studied English during the autumn term and only five of them (5/22) also took an exam.

The personal and private nature of the au pair arrangement meant that some of the au pairs and the host mothers became friends and the au pairs and the children of the host family sometimes grew attached to each other. However, both parties accepted that this did not always happen. This partly confirmed the 'risky' nature of the au pair arrangement, described as "*pot-luck*" by some host mothers interviewed. The host mothers, in particular, suggested that whether au pairs and their host families got on together, or not, depended on personal characteristics.

host mother: "Well, it depends entirely on the girl. For instance this particular girl, I don't want her to be a member of the family. Actually I don't like her. I don't feel warm towards her. I don't feel anything, whereas Mervi, whom you met, fitted in here very well. I felt, if we were going out for the day, let's say during half term or

holidays, we would be delighted to ask her if she wanted to come with us. So, we would include her and we would pay for her, if she came. Whereas with this present girl we just say that we are going and goodbye. It depends on personality..." (wHa:7)

hostmother: "I think it is such an individual thing. I think it's difficult to lay down things on a universal basis because each person has a sort of different view of what they want." (wN:13)

The host mothers were often more clear about what they expected from their au pairs than the au pairs about what they expected from their host mothers/families. Most frequently mentioned characteristics by the host mothers were responsibility (16/19), sociability (16/19) and flexibility (8/19). The majority of the host mothers interviewed (13/19) said that the au pair should be able to speak English reasonably. These characteristics illustrate the host mother's desire for an au pair as a coping strategy. The host mothers wanted ideally an au pair who would be able to socialize independently, but who would feel a sense of responsibility towards her work for the host family and be flexible when necessary.

host mother: "She is so flexible, which is one of the key words...The girls who have been really unsuitable have been the girls who aren't prepared to muck in and be flexible...Every household is different, but with any of these jobs, I think, it is very important there is flexibility within them." (wA:3)

host mother: "A good au pair is one who doesn't sort of say: "What shall I do next?". Who looks around and says: "Oh, this needs doing or I have got some spare time, I can clean this cupboard"...The girl we have at the moment is a very good girl. She doesn't set her watch and say: "It's six thirty so I am going now". She finishes what she is doing. She is a very giving sort of girl. She does give a lot of her own time; but by the same token, she is invited to join almost everything we do as a family." (hR:6)

Because of the private, personal and diverse nature of the au pair arrangement there were pressures to establish a 'problem-free' relationship and be successful as an au pair or as a host mother. For example, the host mothers tried to keep their au pairs happy in order to maximize their domestic work contribution and to encourage them to stay. On the other hand, the au pairs tried to please their host mothers in order to be accepted and to keep their placement.

au pairs:

"Although I can say that I am enjoying my stay here, I am also a bit fed up. I

would prefer to live on my own. I just can't stand always being kind and happy. I am tired of showing a smiley face all the time." (N2:6)

"The woman expected me to show initiative and ask her what I could do to help, and she wanted me to be happy and smile when working." (Q2:8)

"It also annoyed me sometimes, although I knew she was in a bad mood or angry, but still she tried to be like sunshine and to smile by chatting with a happy voice..." (C3:9)

"I am afraid to make mistakes...She (host mother) is very strict, she expects me always to do everything right." (J1:16)

"...If I had to go back (home earlier than planned), I don't know what I would have said...It would have felt like I was returning with my 'tail between my legs', because I had not succeeded here." (D1:7)

#### host mothers:

"I have got enough problems, you know. When it comes to an au pair having problems as well, it adds to my problems rather than an au pair being helpful here." (wK:6)

"I would never be one of those people who take an advantage, because in the long run, I don't think it benefits you unless the girl is happy, you know. They are never going to perform well if they are not in a happy sort of environment." (hR:9)

"I want her to be well and healthy because when she is well and healthy and happy, she is happy to work and happy to look after my children. So, it's all connected." (hG:11)

The private, personal and diverse nature of the au pair arrangement contributed to the complexity of domestic work practice and relations. One consequence of this vulnerability was the high turnover of the au pairs in this study. The au pair agency representatives interviewed estimated that the turnover of au pairs was usually 10 per cent. However, 54 per cent (12/22) of the au pairs in this study had left their original host family. Seven of them (7/12) were working in another family and five of them (5/12) had found a job elsewhere. One au pair had worked in three different families during her stay and another had returned to an au pair placement after working in a hamburger bar.

Interestingly, all but one of the au pairs who had left their original host family, had come from urban Finland and all but one of those au pairs who had found a job elsewhere were aged 20+. Although most au pairs in this study came from urban Finland, it may be that young people from urban areas may not be as

familiar with domestic tasks as young people from rural areas or they may be more aware of their rights and used to traveling abroad independently. On the other hand, young people aged over twenty may have more difficulty adapting as live-in au pairs than younger au pairs, if this restricts their independence.

Most of these au pairs left their original host family during the first month of their stay. Seven au pairs (7/12) decided to leave of their own accord, while five of them (5/12) were asked to leave by the host mother. There was no single reason for the turnover of au pairs. The au pairs themselves gave several different reasons for leaving or being asked to leave their original host family.

These were:

- host family treated the au pair as a maid or as a servant (9)
- different expectations (9)
- poor communication (9)
- different culture (4)
- au pair failing to adapt to the au pair placement (2)
- inexperienced host mother (2)
- not getting on with the child (1)
- the length of the au pair's stay inconvenient for the host family (1)

The host mothers gave reasons such as irresponsibility and personal problems of the au pairs. Interestingly, all four au pairs who gave different culture as a reason, worked in the host families who were not of British origin. This suggests that this arrangement is more complex and vulnerable when more than two cultures are involved.

Many of the au pairs and host mothers said that the au pair agencies were not able to provide immediate support particularly for au pairs changing families. Interestingly, the host mothers often raised issues like a lack of official monitoring of the au pair arrangement, unclear responsibilities of the au pair agencies and weaknesses in the au pair agencies' screening systems. Where the au pairs in this study were changing families, they received support either from their friends and/or from the Finnish Church in London. This church provides accommodation and counselling for Finnish au pairs in distress as well

as organises social meetings for them.

Those au pairs who entered non-skilled domestic jobs in the labour market, made comparisons between au pair placements and domestic work in terms of labour market relations. Before 1995, entering the labour market was illegal for Finnish au pairs. It is still for au pairs from outside the European Union. Interestingly, these au pairs suggested that the only advantages of these jobs compared with au pair placements were the opportunity for independence and the clearly defined working hours:

" In two months I just got fed up being an au pair and I knew I could get a work place at McDonald's. I thought, that's OK, I will try it and I thought that it would be great to work there and to live on my own and to be free and to do what you want. Just to work five days a week. But, soon after I started, I realized that it wasn't like that, really...You need to pay the rent yourself and and buy food and everything. It takes a lot of energy to think if you have got enough money for everything. You try to buy things which are cheap like macaroni and cheese and you remember how lovely it was in the family to get fruit, chocolate and biscuits. So, I have realized that being an au pair is perhaps safer than working elsewhere, especially if the family is nice. I also thought I would have more time for hobbies because I didn't need to babysit. But I haven't been once to aerobics because my working hours in McDonald's are very irregular." (H2:13)

Only one au pair regretted that she had taken a gap year as an au pair because, as she said : "I did not accomplish anything" (K3). The stay as an au pair had usually served as a 'break' or as 'time-out'. Most of the au pairs interviewed were motivated to enter studies in higher education institutions, although some did not yet know what they would like to study. Three au pairs had serious plans to return to Britain to study in the near future. These au pairs had usually established an international friendship network during their stay. Only one of the au pairs interviewed planned to take another gap year abroad.

Half of the au pairs interviewed (11/22) mentioned their disappointment with their progress with the English language. About a third of them considered that their confidence in speaking English had increased to some extent. Although the cross-cultural and international contacts they had made remained rather minimal, the au pair experience had offered a period of self-discovery, particularly in learning about their own cultural identity. For example, half of the au pairs (11/22) said that they had learned to appreciate Finland during their

stay. The personal meaning of their stay was often described through concepts like independence (17), responsibility for themselves (13) and self-confidence (7). Many of the host mothers also considered that their au pairs had become more mature during their stay. Moreover, these au pairs had begun to regard their domestic tasks more as work towards the end of their stay and some suggested that they had learned a lot about domestic work responsibility. However, it was not always clear how much they had appreciated this opportunity for domestic work in the host family or if they perceived this work relation as oppressive.

### **6.3 Construction and practice in comparison: discussion**

The au pair arrangement in practice is a private domestic work arrangement between young foreign people and mothers who take them on as au pairs. It is predominantly a female arrangement and is constructed as a domestic coping strategy by the host mothers.

The majority of the Finnish au pairs in this study took care of a range of household and childcare tasks in their host families. Some of them worked as full-time or part-time nannies. They invariably worked more than thirty hours a week, if babysitting was included, and were paid between £35 and £40. Their net salary varied on average between £1.17-£1.5 per hour, although this excludes the payments in kind such as food and accommodation. The word 'pocket money' is an appropriate description of this small amount of money but also associates au pairs with unpaid family workers such as the children rather than with the paid domestic workers. It also minimizes the value of the domestic tasks the au pairs undertake.

Compared with the PEP study (1962), the results of this study suggest that the au pairs' average working day was shorter than that of the au pairs in the 1960s, but longer than that recommended by the Home Office in 1994. As with the PEP study, domestic tasks such as washing, ironing and cleaning were

typical duties for the contemporary au pairs. However, mending, polishing silver, cleaning shoes and windows and lighting fires were more unusual. This change represents some common differences between these decades in terms of households and domestic tasks. Both studies suggest that most au pairs in Britain work as maids of all work. These findings accord with those in the previous chapter. This suggested that only a few host mothers interviewed expected the au pair to substitute for a nanny.

The findings of this study suggest that an au pair is more often regarded as a substitute mother for menial housework tasks than for emotional caring. This study also suggests that the individual host mothers' decisions over their domestic arrangements generated the diversity surrounding the practice of the au pair arrangement in relation to the au pairs' domestic tasks and working hours. However, the employment of the host mothers and the presence of pre-school-aged children dictated the nature and degree of the au pairs' caring role.

The diversity in material and social conditions of the au pairs in this study demonstrated the private and personal nature of this arrangement in a similar way to that described in the PEP study (1962) on au pairs in the 1960s. The private, personal and diverse nature of domestic work arrangements is emphasized in many other studies on domestic workers and servants (for instance Cock 1989; Colen 1986; Gregson & Lowe 1994; Preston-Whyte 1976; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992 ).

This study suggests that au pairs may be even more vulnerable than many other contemporary private domestic workers because of their live-in position, young age and different nationality. Au pairs are subjected to patriarchal family relations, because they live with the family who employs them and provide material, emotional and social services to the members of the host family. They are also subjected to capitalist labour market relations in the sense that they are hired to provide domestic services on poor pay and with poor working conditions. However, compared, for example, with non-skilled domestic jobs such as catering and working in hotels, most au pairs in this study enjoyed middle class living standards in terms of board and lodging in families. In this

sense, they are different from many other groups of contemporary domestic workers and from servants in the past.

The vulnerability of the au pair arrangement may culminate in a high turnover, similar to that suggested in historical studies on domestic servants (Burnett 1977; Lewis 1984). The PEP study (1962) also suggested that 21 per cent of au pairs considered that they would like to change their host family, though it did not actually state how many au pairs changed host families during their stay. Based on the findings in this study and the PEP study, it can be argued that the turnover of au pairs is probably more than 10 per cent. This figure was also suggested by the representatives of au pair agencies who were interviewed. However, the exact percentage is difficult to ascertain because of the small non-systematic sample in this study.

The au pairs and the host mothers interviewed were concerned about many similar issues in connection to au pair agencies as Bakan and Stasiulis (1995) in their study on recruitment of immigrant domestic workers. These issues include, for example, recruitment agencies' responsibility towards their clients and the monitoring of agencies' function in general.

Defined by the common pattern of young people's day-to-day life as au pairs in their host families, they can be identified with private domestic workers or with maids of all work rather than with travellers. Furthermore, au pairs remained also as a stranger and an adventurer rather than were granted a position of nomadic subject as a babysitter which is suggested by Jokinen and Veijola (1997). In this sense, what was meant to be a 'modern' form of gap year travel for these young people, turned out to be a routine of domestic work in a foreign family and leisure time with other au pairs, many of whom were also Finnish.

However, this study accords with the the PEP study (1962) by suggesting that most young people were generally satisfied with their stay in England. Although au pairs' construction as gap year travellers would appear to be in conflict with material and economic domestic work relation in a host family, this experience was not, however, meaningless for these young people in a socio-cultural or



developmental sense. A gap year of travel and work abroad as an au pair had a subjective meaning for individual young people. They perceived it as contributing to self-development and self-identity.

Galland (1995a) has argued that youth today is an age of experimentation, rather than identification, because traditional identification processes have fragmented. However, a gap year as an au pair means identification particularly with her own cultural and family background. In contrast to Galland's argument, this study suggests that the increased opportunities to travel and to make international contacts may play an important role in the processes and contexts of identification for young people today. This means that experimentation and identification are difficult to separate as they are both central to young people today. However, the contexts and processes have obviously changed. Furthermore, the lack of casual opportunities for work, or the lack of value placed on these opportunities may mean that many young people today get their first 'real' work experience after occupational studies. This means that identification with the world of work for these young people may develop quite late during modern times.

Thus following Clifford (1992), it could be argued that like servants, au pairs may not be considered as serious travellers by society because of the contradiction between the low status of domestic work and the high status of travelling. On the other hand, au pairs may not be considered as serious workers either, because they do women's work at home. For example, the lack of value placed on the experience gained as an au pair, was often mentioned by the au pairs interviewed.

## **7 DOMESTIC WORK RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AU PAIRS AND HOST MOTHERS**

The previous chapters examined the reasons why the young people in this study had become au pairs and why the host mothers had hired them. It also described the nature of au pair arrangement. Conclusions were drawn as what was common to the groups of au pairs and host mothers who entered this arrangement. Thus far this study has suggested that the practice of an au pair arrangement is about domestic work and domestic service. Ultimately it is about 'selling' and 'buying' domestic services.

This domestic service arrangement is also a practice with potential contradictions and vulnerability. For example, there were vast differences between the cases described in detail, particularly from the au pairs' perspective. To better understand the diverse practices of the au pair arrangement and their common framework, I will investigate in this chapter how the work relationship between an au pair and a host mother/family is constructed and identify the common features of this private work relationship.

### **7.1 Structures of an au pair arrangement**

#### **Gender and sex**

As discussed earlier, the au pair arrangement was almost always organised between two women: a female au pair and her host mother. This female representation is common for most private domestic work relationships. One male au pair interviewed was hired as a caretaker by a couple without dependant children. His jobs were principally decorating and garden work. Only one of the host mothers interviewed had ever hired a male au pair. Most of the

host mothers welcomed male au pairs in principal particularly where there were families with small boys, but the practice was very much against hiring male au pairs. Some host mothers suggested that their husbands would never allow a male au pair in the house. These mothers said that they would be worried about their daughters with a male au pair.

It is interesting that the host mothers did not bring up the question of the sexualization of this arrangement in terms of young female au pairs and their husbands or sons. On the other hand, some host mothers and also some of the au pairs questioned a young male's ability to do housework and to take care of children. This supports the notion of the traditional gender division of domestic tasks as well as gendered identities in the domestic context. It also reinforces the image of the au pair girl providing a coping strategy for mothers with direct benefits to her rather than to her husband.

host mothers:

Q:"Have you ever considered employing a male au pair?"

"Yes, but my husband refuses point-blank. Yea, I thought it was ideal with two small boys. I feel they respond better, which they do actually, but my husband is very oldfashioned about this sort of thing. Yes, I would have." (hC:6)

Q:"Would you consider taking a male au pair?"

"No. Because I have three daughters. The bath times could be a problem." (hF:3)

"I would be quite happy with a male au pair, but having said that, I haven't had one. Mmmh, I think I would be slightly worried because I have got a daughter and I haven't got a husband around. So I would feel a bit vulnerable for my daughter and I would not feel too comfortable myself." (wK:12)

"I would want more guarantees and insurances of the kind of person, because why would the man want to look after small children, you know, which is wrong. It shouldn't be like that. But, you know, we are living in a wicked world, aren't we, and you can't guarantee anybody on that, but I would want a lot of reassurance about why he is doing it...if he was genuine about it, but I think it's hard." (hG:7)

"It has never really entered my head. I don't actually I am not sexist or anything. I just don't think men are that interested in doing housework because most of them aren't. That's not fair, because some men are very good, but I can't imagine a man being that interested. It wouldn't bother me, really, one way or the other, but I think I would find them a lot of harder to handle, really, than a female au pair." (wE:18)

"I personally would consider a male au pair, but my husband wouldn't. I can't see any reason why men can't be au pairs and I think it's wrong that they should not

be considered because of their sex. But I think that if I did have a male au pair, I would be very careful to, to make sure, there was no funny business going on, just through a sort of mumsy reaction, really. There is no other reason why there should be anything odd going on, because the person is a man although one sort of gets an impression that if someone is desperate to look after children, they must be gay. But that's not really fair, is it? But I think that that would be my attitude. You know, I would be prepared, my husband wouldn't, no way. He would say, what if you fancy them?..It's a bit of sexual discrimination the other way, isn't it? It makes a change." (wM:9)

"I don't think my husband would (take on a male au pair)...I think I would have a lot of difficulty with, you know, sort of adjusting to having a male around...I know, for instance, if you are a one-parent family, or something like that, and if you want a male sort of add, different aspect, you know. I think it is probably a very good idea to have a male au pair around, especially if you have got sons, and things, and they want to play football, and as a brother...There are very positive reasons for having male au pairs, but I doubt whether it would suit our household." (hR:12)

Both the au pairs and host mothers interviewed considered that the husbands had very little to do with the au pair arrangement in practice. The distance between au pairs and host fathers generated very different reactions amongst the au pairs, while the host mothers seemed generally quite satisfied with this distance between their au pairs and husbands. Some host mothers said that an au pair generated some extra work and pressure for her; for example, in the organisation of the arrangement and in the provision of emotional support for these young foreigners. However, these women were prepared to do this if it helped to maintain a distance between the au pair and the husband and to establish their own power as women, wives and employers. In this sense, the host mothers, perhaps consciously or unconsciously, did not disclose, how the sexualization of this arrangement affected their relationship with female au pairs.

host mothers:

"The main thing, I think, with an au pair is that the mother and the au pair get on. And I have got on with all of mine." (wN:7)

"I believe the reason why it works very well for us is because of the nature of my husband's work, because he spends so much time away from home..."(hR:11)

"Dads are usually the good guys, you know; they are nice guys whereas the mum is usually the one, the strict person...I think it's like a good guy and a bad guy kind of thing and I don't like to be a bad guy, that's really tough, you know." (wVb:12)

Q: "What about your husband? What does he actually know about your au pair?"  
 "Good morning, how are you? and good night", really, I would say. He sees very little about her, just because of the type of work he does. But he always shares a joke with them; but he doesn't really get involved in, you know, day to day business... One girl had an eating problem. I found it quite hard work. She wanted a lot of attention. In the end, I had to say to her: "I can't be your mother forever, you know". I have got my husband and my children and you are here to help me." (hVa:7,10)

"He (a husband) usually makes some... he makes some effort to get on with them and he appreciates them because I am awful when we don't have an au pair. Therefore he thinks they are definitely a good thing and yes, he is okay with them for most of the time..." (wHa:12)

host father: "I really don't have any relationship with our au pair. Just 'good morning'."

host mother: "But you are always teasing them and they tease you." (wl:11)

For the au pairs, the distant relationship between them and the host fathers generated strong stereotypes of host fathers either as relaxed and nice guys (sometimes compared with host mothers as demanding madams) or as almost frightening and patriarchal masters of the house (sometimes compared with gentle and supporting host mothers).

au pairs:

"This father was quite amazing. I didn't really have any relationship with him. He was a snob and I think he thought of himself as a genius." (A1:15)

"The longest time I have spoken with the host father was just a few minutes... I feel tense in the host father's company, because I don't know him at all. It may be that I only imagine that he must hate me." (G2:7)

"Well, in principle, I don't really like this father and also that's why I try to avoid him... He becomes nervous easily and everything should happen straight away for him." (C2:9)

"I rarely see him, but he is a really nice person. I am thrilled because he always remembers to ask how I am." (J2:6)

"The usual words are 'morning' and 'good night'. He is really busy, but obviously quite a nice man." (T1:11)

"He is a very relaxed guy, makes jokes and so on. I could almost say that, because I don't see him that often, I get along with him better than this mum." (L2:7)

"I sometimes feel that he notices more than the mum, although he doesn't say much." (P2:13)

Some au pairs had had experience of sexualization of au pairs in general and they considered that au pairs were regarded as an 'easy target', for example by the British men. Au pairs can also be identified as working class and uneducated people. This presents the common class and sex based stereotypes of domestic workers.

"..I am ashamed to tell people that I work as an au pair..I think people assume that those who become au pairs are stupid girls." (G2:10)

"Au pairs are associated with stupidity...If you say (in pubs and discos) that you are an au pair and from Scandinavia, after that the men's proposals are quite forward and you feel like a prostitute because of being an au pair." (A2: 2)

"Many locals think that it's inferior work...Their attitude is that we haven't got any background, that we are not educated and that we just come here as workers, so we are inferior to them." (T2:11)

"People may ask if we have a cable TV in Finland and they think that I have come to England, because of the good living standards here. They are not able to understand that in Finland the living standard is much higher. But I have not wanted to tell them about it, because then it may sound like I have come to tell them how much better our life is in Finland." (U2:10)

The construction of gender generates (ideal) types of relationships between au pair and her host mother such as sisters, friends or work mates, or a mother - daughter relationship. Although an au pair and and host mother can share female identities, each other's company or friendship as well as domestic tasks, the tension in their female relationship is caused by sexualization of this arrangement and by 'shared mothering'. The latter is often discussed in connection to childcare workers like nannies.

The au pairs interviewed in particular raised the issue of substitute mothering in terms of the relationship between themselves and the host family's children and the confusion over their rights and responsibilities with regards to the upbringing of the children. Some au pairs suggested that the parents expected them to control the children, but they had limited powers compared with the parents. For example, some host mothers said that only they had the right to use corporal punishment, and expected their au pairs to discipline their children in other ways.

au pairs:

"They (the children) always cuddle me and tell me how much they love me and how they wished I was their mummy. They really like me a lot... I don't know how Mrs Smith (host mother) feels when the kids come to me if they want a kiss or a cuddle...It's a funny feeling, it's a bit of contradiction." (J2:8)

"I felt so ashamed when the toddler said to his mum a few days ago: "You are a cow!" and he wanted to kill her. I was like "Oh, my God". Then the mum asked who would take care of him then. He said: "Liisa (the au pair)of course"." (G2:11)

"The parents pampered him and I was not allowed to say anything to him, if he went crazy...However, the mum told me to be tougher with him and I didn't know what I should do because I was not allowed to say anything; but I had to be tough. It was quite a contradiction." (S1:12)

"Well, I haven't really got permission to discipline the kids and it is very difficult, because I need to keep order and I don't like to raise my voice. But it doesn't have any effect if I just say: "Behave yourselves, please"." (E2:14)

"I was told that the children should not be shouted at or punished. The only situation in which I am allowed to intervene is if they hit each other. So, in these circumstances, this six year old knows that I haven't got any power, if he loses his temper. The only thing I can say is, "please, calm down", but that's the only thing. So, he is very arrogant...Once he was being really annoying and the mother started to shout and to throw pieces of mirror onto the wall...Sometimes I feel that I would like to do something like that, but I always have to control myself." (A1:16)

host mothers:

"I would say, never hit the children, mmh, my husband and I would smack the children, if we thought they deserved a smack. We wouldn't encourage anybody else to do so...She (an au pair) is free to discipline them verbally in the same way as we discipline them ourselves." (hR:7)

"Under no circumstances can the au pair smack them (children). If she smacks them, she just has to pack her bags and go. I don't particularly like physical violence with my children and if anyone is going to smack them, then I will do it. If they have been excessively naughty, it is very difficult to punish them five hours after the event. But I would certainly still remind the children and talk to them...I mean, you know, that just because someone is an au pair, they are not skivvies. They are still human beings and they have to be treated as such." (wE:17)

"I always say I expect the au pairs to make the children say please and thank you if they want something and I expect the children not to be rude. There was one occasion when the children were very rude to her (the au pair), but in the same way they would be rude to me, unfortunately...I have said to her: "If you feel it is necessary to smack them because they have been so rude, then obviously do". But I don't think she does. I don't think she ever does and therefore either I or my husband have to punish them." (hC:7)

"I never allow the au pairs to smack the children which can make life very difficult sometimes. But that's down to me and my husband...There are other punishment

methods that I allow them to use but I don't think that it helps, because you don't know... they don't know sometimes how far (au pairs are allowed to go)...Sometimes she (the au pair) loves the kids, sometimes she hates them. She is like me. It is exactly how I feel about them." (wA:6)

There were various tensions between the au pair and the host mother. For example, by limiting the au pairs' power in relation to the host family's children, the host mothers may want to demonstrate their own power as mothers and employers. This may help to relieve the guilt which they might experience for 'neglecting' their children and hiring au pairs, who change frequently and who are not qualified childcarers. However, it could be argued that physical violence, in particular, towards children may demonstrate an inability on the part of the parents to create 'positive' authority. On the other hand, the host mothers may expect their au pairs to substitute mothers. Furthermore, it appeared that what the host mother perceived as giving comfort to their children, the au pairs perceived as spoiling them.

#### au pairs:

"I have heard similar stories from my friends that the kids are spoilt. We are all in rich families...They have toys and enough things for all the kids of the relatives, but they just haven't got any interest in playing with all of them...If I ask them to put, let's say, only two lego pieces into the basket before switching the telly, they don't do it. They prefer to scream in front of a blank telly." (G2:13)

"She (daughter) is like the head of the famil. She gets everything she wants. She just starts to scream in a hysterical way and she gets whatever she wants. I don't know but the parents work long hours and when they are at home, they want to be nice, so she is really spoilt." (H1:12)

"The mum gives in to the kids...perhaps they never learn to appreciate her, although she sometimes shouts at them, but they just laugh at her. They are allowed to be cheeky." (K2:9)

The issues described above generate interesting questions about raising children in a modern society. They also demonstrate the various pressures on parents with dependant children and the different emotional ties and positions of au pairs and host parents in relation to the host family's children.

Interestingly, it was the au pairs rather than the host mothers who brought up the effect of the frequent changes of au pair on the children, for example, their difficulty in adapting to the new au pairs. This may also create confusion for au



pairs and host mothers.

au pairs:

"I didn't get along with him (the host family's son). It was really difficult. I don't know why he couldn't accept me at all, but compared me always with the ex-au pair...He was really nasty telling me to go back to Finland, throwing snot at me and food on my neck...When I had to take him to school and he was supposed to walk with me, he always ran off and I got the blame. He didn't obey me at all and he didn't take any notice of what I said however kindly I tried to say it." (S1:12)

"Whenever they (parents) went out, he started to scream and during the evening story, he just cried for his mum and I felt like a witch...It took almost seven months for that three year old son to accept me...He often said how much he hated me, but now he can come and lie in bed next to me." (G3:5)

"On Sunday evening two weeks ago, she (school aged daughter) sat on her bed and I went past her room and asked if something was the matter. She started to cry and she said that she didn't want me to go away. So, it must be sad for her." (N3:8)

"I think it must be difficult for these kids. I feel sorry for them because au pairs come and go and these kids have no idea really what is going on." (P3:11)

"He (a toddler) said again yesterday, how he will miss me. I think because he is a very difficult child and because it takes time to get on with him. It's difficult for him to start all over again." (E2:6)

## **Age**

Some of the examples above have already demonstrated how age (and class) structures the relationship between au pairs and their host mothers. A mother - daughter type relationship could be identified through the structure of age. In relation to the host family's children, the au pairs can be positioned as teenagers and big sisters rather than as adults and childcare workers.

The young age and also the different nationality of au pairs seemed to cause a lot of confusion for the host mothers interviewed in terms of their responsibility towards these young foreign women. Some host mothers also felt responsible for their au pairs outside the au pairs' domestic context. Some did not and some felt that responsibility and trust were established as an 'exchange'. A few mothers said that they would have preferred to hire au pairs who were twenty or over, because they associated age with maturity and responsibility.

host mothers:

"We are not responsible. They are not children, they are adults...I need someone who is totally responsible. I don't believe that at eighteen they necessarily are. So I tend to say that nineteen is the minimum age and I would prefer twenty, really." (wE:14,18)

"They are treated in a mature way...We are not asking them to account for what they have been doing or who they are seeing. We just need to know roughly what time they are home, so that if they don't arrive home at that time, we know that there might be difficulties...I mean, I think when you invite an eighteen year old or nineteen year old into your house. It is a very tricky age anyway. They are not fully mature and they are not experienced and worldly." (hR:6,14)

"I am responsible for her welfare, I am responsible for her safety, I am responsible for whether she is eating properly, stuff like that..." (wM:5)

"Because the girls seem to be so much younger. They are eighteen, twenty years old. They are young enough to be my daughters...I feel I have a responsibility towards their families as well, because these girls come to live with you when they are very young. I have a moral responsibility, not a legal one." (wHb:9)

"I feel responsible for them, but I also feel that it's their life really. If they want to go out, if they start coming home very late every night or I think they are seeing people who I don't think are particularly the right people to be with, then it's more like a maternal role, you know. I would do something about that and I would make sure that they came home in a mini cap, if they are going to be home late. So, in that way it's more of a responsibility." (wL:6)

"I think they are a bit too young . The phone bills have been enormous. There is a general immaturity with nineteen year olds. I'd prefer it if they were older... about five years. That's the problem...The lack of thinking about tidiness; the house is treated as a hotel...I mean there is no continuity, no loyalty. They want to live their own lives and do what they want. That's why I think the age group is wrong. I would rather have someone older and pay more." (wS:12)

"It's kind of like having a teenage daughter before you are mentally ready to have one." (wVb:9)

Some of the au pairs suggested that the host mothers who felt responsible for them outside their domestic context were restricting their freedom. On the other hand, this sense of responsibility for them was often appreciated by the au pairs. However, it appears that most of them had begun take responsibility for themselves, both inside and outside their domestic context. They evidently wanted to divide their time between duties to the host family and their off-duty time outside the family.

au pairs:

"She (the host mother) says to me that I am just twenty, you know, so I haven't got enough life-experience so that I could know or be right." (E2:4)

"This mother said that I am almost an abnormal nineteen year old sitting at home all the time...I had only been there one and half weeks and been able to make only a few friends." (D1:9)

"That woman intruded too much into my private life...When I had a chance to go out, it was like a relief..." (T1:10)

"I have quite consciously chosen not to be part of the family. They always ask me if I want to join them, but they also know that I prefer to be on my own and with my friends." (C3:6)

"I just have to go out when I have time off, because if I stay there I feel like working all the time." (B3:6)

"Everyday I just had to get out alone or with a friend..." (H3:8)

### **Nationality, culture and language**

The nationality of au pairs and their different cultural backgrounds, structure the au pair arrangement and affect the relationship between the au pair and her host mother. In this sense, this relationship can be described as one between two nationals, for example a Finnish and an English woman, or between two strangers. National stereotypes, in particular, affected the au pair arrangements in this study. In summary, the au pairs often stereotyped British people as polite and self-confident, but as superficial people who were ignorant about Finland as an advanced industrial country.

au pairs:

"...I think telling lies is acceptable here. Everybody does it. On the other hand people are more open...People here are also more self confident and definitely more superficial. I think that almost everything is better in Finland, but I have only lived here for a short time." (J1:8,16)

"I am surprised how ignorant the English people are. For instance, they don't know for instance where Finland is. My host mother didn't know where Finland was, although one would expect that she could have found out...It's like a surprise that we have got Kellogg's cornflakes in Finland as well!" (G2:20)

The cultural differences were experienced on the levels of communication, everyday interaction and domestic tasks. It appeared that the au pairs

sometimes wanted to adapt to the dominant culture of the host family in the role of 'explorers' but sometimes they had to adapt as 'visitors' and 'strangers'. In practice, the au pairs did not have many options other than to accept their disadvantaged position as foreign nationals and strangers in the host family and culture. In other words, the power differential within this arrangement was also created through nationality, culture and language and in a few cases through different religion.

au pairs:

"If we argue about things, it always ends with me being wrong. People here think that they are always right." (E2:16)

"My dad, he does a lot of housework and I think that in Finnish families the mother and the father share housework more than here." (B2:8)

"I thought at first that coming to England was not such a big deal because this is not really that different from Finland. But after a few weeks, you start to realize that there are a lot of differences and strange things, things you don't recognise as a tourist...In the beginning, it took a lot of energy for instance to always say 'please' and to find out if the people really meant what they said." (L1:13)

"I took a message on the telephone for Mrs X, but this time I didn't somehow get it, although I speak quite good English. I just told Mrs X what I had understood. She phoned this person laughing that she had just got a crystal clear message from her au pair. It hurt me a lot and I started to cry. She just laughed at me and told me not to worry about it." (J1:16)

In three cases the host mother was a Finn. In two of these cases, the au pair considered that this had had a positive impact on the relationship particularly on the level of communication and interaction. However, the working conditions and the structures of this work relationship were not otherwise different compared with other cases.

"Everything has gone so much better in this family than in the first one. Perhaps one reason is that this mum is a Finn herself and we talk a lot. She has also been here as an au pair herself, so she knows things herself." (D2:10)

Those host mothers interviewed who had had au pairs from various countries, had established national stereotypes and these stereotypes affected their decisions about who was hired and from which country. Some experienced host mothers preferred to take on au pairs with same nationality au pairs as long as there were no severe complications. Seven host mothers said that similar backgrounds were a criterion when they chose an au pair.

The Scandinavian au pairs, like the Finns, were described as having good language skills and a similar educational and socio-economic background to the host families. The au pairs from Eastern Bloc countries were considered to experience more difficulties adapting to British culture, but they worked harder than Scandinavian girls. However, some host mothers considered that the Finnish au pairs were very reserved while others thought that they were very sociable. It is interesting that regardless of the personal nature of an au pair arrangement, these subjective national stereotypes seemed to influence the host mothers' decision on who they hired as an au pair. These findings are similar to those of Bakan and Stasiulis (1995) in their study of the recruitment of immigrant domestic workers.

hostmothers:

"I find her (the Finnish au pair) the most difficult to get on with because she is so incredibly shy and introverted and, I mean, even the children tell her off. She gets all upset and retreats further into herself...I will never have another Finnish au pair." (wM:8)

"...Because the children are quite young it is important that they speak relatively good English...We didn't want someone from Eastern European countries because of all the problems, you know, going on at the moment and there are lots of people at the moment from Bosnia and Croatia and obviously there being constant worries for them." (wM:2)

"I like them (Finnish au pairs). Their English is normally pretty good and they are quite easy to live with, so that's why we have used them ... the one who came last year, I think she used us as a meal ticket to get into England and to go and get a nanny's job. That was the nearest we came to changing the nationalities. I lost a lot of faith in Finnish people, and she was not a very nice piece of work." (wE:1,2)

"I don't think it is that much of a culture shock for the Finnish girls coming to England, but the girls from the Czech Republik who come, some of them are from very poor families and they have never seen a dishwasher or a washing machine or no super markets and so it's a tremendous culture shock for them...The Finnish and Swedish girls, they are more, I suppose, they have a similar type of lifestyle, they are all very independent and very selfsufficient...a lot more confident...The girls from the Czech Republik never come with any money. They always come in the coach to Victoria. They never have any money. The Swedish girls and the Finnish girls always come with money. They always fly to Heathrow." (hVa:10)

"The Scandinavian au pairs speak very good English and you know, their calibre of education, I think, is more like our own...the girls who tend to come from what we would consider third world countries, not as developed as our own, they are hard workers. They tend to work harder, you know, want to please you more, but they can't communicate...The girls who come from Scandinavia tend to be from

middle class homes like our own, so you can communicate with them. Their work ethic is not so high, so it's kind of give and take. For me it's just really important to know that whoever is here in my house, when I am not here, can communicate with the emergency services 999..." (hR:11)

"I think that what the au pairs sometimes do - the Scandinavian au pairs - is, they are really not ready to work for us. They really don't want to go to school so they come to England to kind of find themselves. So they are not prepared, because maybe I think some of them were never expected to do housework or to cook, or anything like that, and all of a sudden, they are in that position. That's part of the deal and you know, that's kind of hard sometimes. It's different mind set, you know. The host family looks at it like, great! They are going to help me in this area and that area and that area, because that's why we need an au pair. An au pair doesn't think, does not realize it's part of room and board and she gets bored and everything...I think it's not that the host families are bad or that the girls are bad, it's just the expectations of the job are just different." (wVb:13)

## **Class**

Most of the au pairs in this study came from Finnish middle rank families. In this sense the class distinction between au pairs and their host mothers was not as great as that as between private middle and upper middle class employers and their working class domestic workers. However, as a domestic work arrangement, class status is imputed in this relationship between an au pair and her host mother. In this sense, this relationship could be identified as a middle class employer - working class employee relationship and as a mistress/madam - maid relationship. For example, in practice, the au pairs were often expected to take care of the most low status and menial domestic tasks in the family. Sometimes they were expected to perform as personal servants to the host mothers.

### au pairs:

"I was their servant...they paid for me to clean their mess." (E1:13)

"I was very nervous there all the time because I felt I was responsible for every single bit of rubbish on the floor. I had to go round the whole house many times a day to make sure that everything was tidy." (J2:16)

"This host mother is of that type who just tells you what to do, but doesn't do anything herself, you know. If she takes a milk bottle or something from the fridge, she doesn't screw back the cork and she leaves it on the table. The au pair is there, that's why, to screw the cork back and to put the bottle back into the fridge." (F1a: 10)

"Well, let's say that the host father had spilled some detergent on the floor. So,

they wait for the whole Friday, Saturday until Sunday, so that when I come to work, I will wash the floor...They haven't got any idea, you know, but they leave everything for Monday when I start to work. It is a real mess. They do nothing themselves, not even make their beds. It's very frustrating." (A2b:11)

"In my first host family, I was an au pair with a big A. An au pair cleans, an au pair irons. Let's just leave the washing in the basket for Monday and the au pair will wash and iron it." (S2:11)

"She (au pair friend) had to work really hard. I remember her telling me how that woman dropped her clothes everywhere. This au pair had to pick them up and put them back. They were an awfully rich family and she was like a slave there all the time." (M2:9)

#### host mothers:

"I know au pairs who are not treated as part of the family at all. They are just au pairs, hired help, as such, and they would not care about them that much." (hP:10)

"I think a lot of mothers use the au pair really as a cheap cleaner...I have heard many more complaints from au pairs than I have from (families)...One of my girlfriends if I were an au pair, I wouldn't work for her because she expects them to work so hard...She has them up at half past six in the morning, cooking breakfast, cleaning the house, washing, doing the shopping, cooking an evening meal. Terrible." (wN:10)

As discussed earlier the au pair arrangement is very private. This suggests that the au pairs' living and working conditions can vary enormously between different host families. These differences in the form of everyday interaction and communication can also establish a power differential between the au pair as a worker and the host mother as a mistress. For instance food 'rationing' and excluding the au pair from family meals, discussion and social interaction, as well as the 'flexibility' of the au pair arrangement, illustrated the inferior and powerless position of an au pair as a 'working class' domestic worker in a private household. In relation to the children of some host families, the au pair was also positioned 'just' as a domestic worker as illustrated in earlier examples.

#### au pairs:

"I didn't get enough food." (Q1:14 )

"I was served the same amount of food as the kids (2 and 4 years old)...I tried to eat more when the host family was away." (F1:10 )

"Sometimes when I came home earlier during the weekends, they didn't ask me to join the family dinner. I know that their ex-au pair was actually never asked to

join in." (M2:9)

"I have a friend who is not allowed to eat with the host family during the weekends because she is not working then." (I1:11)

"They had a kind of family meal, relatives coming, and I was asked to go out." (E1:13)

"It was no use protesting, because I think that she (host mother) was simply so stupid that she took no notice, because she worked on the principle that I was always wrong...she doesn't discuss anything with me, she just tells me." (A1:16)

"That woman wanted to show me that there was no use saying anything against her, because it was her word, that mattered. So, in the end, it was no use giving my opinions." (T1:12)

"It was no use giving my opinion because she became raving mad. So it was better to be quiet." (Q1:11)

"She (host mother) doesn't say anything, but I can tell by her sour look. That's hateful, because she doesn't say anything. I am not able to think about anything to talk about with her." (I2:7)

"Quite often she asked me to answer the phone and take messages saying that she was not at home or she was busy, even she wasn't." (C3:6)

"I live in their corners and eat their food. I have a feeling that they are rulers and they decide. I feel that I can't really say no to anything they ask me to do because I am an employee." (G2:8)

"I felt I was a substitute for a skivvy and I was really taken on to do the work and to be quiet, not to ask any questions." (V1:12)

"They don't take me with them for their trips and they don't always tell me where they go. They just leave a note on the table telling me that they have gone somewhere for the weekend...Usually they don't ask me to join them for dinner." (M2:13)

"Every time I make a (language) mistake, the son tells me about it...The kids don't obey me or listen at me. They are allowed to say whatever they like to me. They don't care about me...They tell lies about me to the mother. They are really cold and they don't answer if I ask them something, never say hello, or things like that." (K2:11)

#### host mothers:

"Most of the time we don't notice each other, do our own things." (wS:9)

"I am cooking my husband's dinner. We need to sit down together. So, I will say: " Eat with the children and in the evening it's your free time"...She (the au pair interviewed) is so ideal. She doesn't impose on that personal time when my husband and I are together. She wants to do her own thing...She gets on with what she wants to do. Some girls want basically to be entertained and it's very hard in the house." (wA:2,11)



As discussed earlier, there were pressures on both the au pairs and on their host mothers to keep the relationship 'problem-free'. When problems occurred, some au pairs were treated as stupid, childish or even as criminals by their host mother/family. On the other hand, au pairs blamed their host mothers as employers or mistresses for being unable to keep them 'happy'. But au pairs as workers or maids were in a less powerful position compared with the host mothers. For example, when the au pairs were asked to leave by the host families they were very vulnerable, because they often had no close social network around to turn to, and they were not members of workers' unions. As discussed earlier, both au pairs and host mothers were not convinced about the au pair agencies' ability or willingness to solve complications and to give support. However, asking the au pair to leave or the au pair deciding to leave, were both powerful actions and notions which created tension between the au pair as a private employee and the host mother as an employer.

au pairs:

"The woman was about to have a tantrum by telling me how simpleminded I was and how I was harping on the same thing, you know. These things were quite unbelievable." (Q2:6)

"Sometimes she (host mother) is in a bad mood and she yells at me without really meaning to...She has told me not to be upset by her mood swings...She doesn't really apologize, but just continues quite normally as if nothing had really happened." (M2:13)

"I have a friend who spent one day sewing buttons on the quilt covers and she forgot to do one and that crone (the host mother) was behind her staring and telling her that her five year old child could do that job better than she did." (G2:16)

"I wrote my diary partly in English...The host mother came to me. She had read my diary and she knew that I was not happy...She said that from her point of view I could go...They accused me of trying to kidnap their child...She (the host mother) threatened me with the police and hit me. I was just terrified...The woman said that I was lucky that her husband was not at home, because he would have killed me...I tried to explain that I was only there to meet my friend, but they didn't listen at me. They didn't want to believe me." (O2a:11,12)

"I think there should be more places like the Finnish church, because if the family kicks you out, you know that there is a place where you can go...I know from my experience as I had to stay with the family for two days after I got fired. I felt terrible. The first thing this mother asked was when was I going although, in principle, you should be allowed to stay in the family for another two weeks." (D2:13)

"I would have preferred to talk to this mum before I left but the agency told me that it's no use, because the mum will just start to shout at me and will kick me out straight away...In the end, I just collected all my things. The mum was not at home, but I was so sure I had to leave that minute, not a moment later." (F2:11)

host mothers:

"When the au pair first told me that she was going to quit, I was really upset, but I am not anymore." (wHa:4)

"I have a friend who physically threw out four of her au pairs in eight weeks because they were so bad. I mean, it wasn't her fault, but my friend said that the guilt was terrible." (wE:1,15)

"She (the au pair) came and left us in five days. She just came downstairs one morning with her bags packed and said that she was going to quit." (wl:4)

"One girl friend of this Czech au pair came to England to be an au pair because her friend had said that it was lovely and she liked it. Unfortunately the agency this girl used was unscrupulous and they lied to her and told her that she was going to a family with a house and garden. As it turned out, it was a flat on the top floor. The parents worked at night. She knew nothing about that and the child had a problem. So this girl was like a prisoner and when my girlfriend's husband went there to rescue her, the family called the police. They made a terrible scene and they took away her belongings. They wouldn't let her to have her belongings back and eventually my friend's husband had to go to the police and to say that they had stolen her goods." (wN:3)

## **7.2 Characteristics of the domestic work relationship**

By investigating the diversity of cases in this study and particularly of the au pairs' experiences in the different host families, it was possible to gain an understanding of the nature of domestic service relationships between the Finnish au pairs and their host mothers. I have identified features of these relationships as 'exploitation', 'employment' and 'companionship'. These features might vary for an au pair in a host family through time and in space. Alternatively, one element might dominate the relationship. The same features were also identified in the interviews with host mothers. However, the differential between the features identified in the interviews with the host mothers were less marked than in the interviews with the au pairs. This raised an interesting methodological question concerning the certain imbalance between the au pairs' and the host mothers' interviews which was discussed in the methodology chapter.

In this chapter, my aim is to illustrate the very considerable diversity within the au pairs' experiences in the different host families. I have chosen three case studies where one of the three features identified dominated the relationship between the au pair and her host mother. The description of the background to the case study and direct quotations from the au pairs' interviews will be followed by an analysis and discussion of each characteristic.

## **Domestic exploitation**

### *Tiina's case*

Tiina was a nineteen year old high school graduate from a small town in southern Finland. She came from a Finnish middle class family background and was the second child in a family of three daughters. She had been to England once before to attend a language course and had travelled quite a lot but this was her first time living away from her own family. She had work experience in cleaning and childcare - mainly looking after her little sister. She wanted to take a break after high school and was planning to apply for a study place after a gap year. She understood the nature of the au pair arrangement as helping the host family with housework and childcare and spending some time building up a relationship with them.

Tiina found her family through a newspaper advertisement. No contract was signed. Both parents in the host family were working. The host mother's office was in her home. The family had two school-aged children and one pre-schooler and they lived in a four bedroomed house. Apart from the window cleaner, the au pair was their only hired help. Tiina described the house as a typical but spacious British house. Prior to her arrival Tiina was not aware that her host family came from a religious subgroup.

Tiina left her host family after three weeks without telling her host family. She got a lodging at the Finnish Church in London until she moved to a new host family. Tiina was satisfied with her new family and remained with them for the rest of her stay. The second host mother was also interviewed and she

suggested strongly that the first host family had treated Tiina badly.

I contacted the first host mother by phone and at first she promised that we could arrange an interview. Then she told me that Tiina was the rudest au pair her family had ever had and she regretted that it was this au pair out of all her au pairs who had been selected for interview. Then she asked if the purpose of my interview was to interrogate her. She also asked about Tiina's whereabouts and what Tiina had said about her. I explained that all the interviews were confidential and that I would prefer to hear her side of the story regarding Tiina and also about her experiences with other au pairs. I reassured her that the purpose of the interview was not an interrogation. However, she was not persuaded by these reassurances and declined to be interviewed. The following text is translated and edited from the interviews with Tiina.

"It took me three days to unpack my luggage because I was thinking that I couldn't stay there. I was so homesick that I wrote in my diary that 'own family is the best' and 'it's better to stay at home'. After a week, my mother phoned me and asked about everything and I just told her how bad things were and started to cry. I was homesick because I was disappointed with that host family. But I didn't tell my mum that I was not allowed to eat there because she would have told me to come back home. I thought that I had to find out if this was all really true or just me making it up.

The only thing that was written on the paper was the working hours: 30 hours a week and I should take care of the youngest child for four hours and two hours was for something like ironing. This was all I knew beforehand about my duties. But in reality this didn't happen and I was disappointed because I was more prepared for childcare duties. After the first week, I was given a note which she and her husband had written together. Everything they expected me to do was written down. There was actually twice as much work listed as I had done the previous week and if I had done all those things I really would have worked like a dog or like a homeslave.

I was the first one to get up in the morning and I made the breakfast and they came to eat. Then the father went to work and the mother took the older kids to school and I stayed with the toddler, changed his nappy and dressed him and played with him for about half an hour. Then the mother came back and put the child to bed and went to her office. While the toddler was sleeping I washed the breakfast dishes because I wasn't allowed to do any housework while I was with the toddler. Then I had to clean the bathrooms and toilets and the hall every day. There were also different rooms to be cleaned properly every day like, in the lounge I had to Hoover, to dust and to take off the sofa pillows and brush them. First, I always had to clean or tidy the children's rooms and there were all kinds of small duties every day. Then one day the mother asked me to prepare a salad. When she realized that I could do a salad, she included that task for me every day as well. I also had to dust all the walls and doors, windows and mirrors.

They had inside doors with twelve little windows in each door and it took a lot of time to wash them on both sides. It was a very untidy house and it looked just the same after cleaning.

I didn't need to do any washing because they never showed me how to use the washing machine, but I did ironing and they didn't use the dishwasher at all. I wasn't able to wash my own clothes. I don't know if they expected me to use the laundry but, as I said, they were really mean and I didn't benefit from living with them in any way. I washed some of my own clothes by hand when I took a shower. They also expected me to clean all the sinks and the oven twice a week with ironwool and this woman baked a few times and left the tables for me to clean. I think cleaning here is different because there is more dust and they do things in different ways using a lot of different detergents. They expected me to know these things and they always assumed that I knew ...I was paid £35 a week. I just didn't do the things which I thought they wouldn't notice. I just did six hours a day because I felt that they were using me and I just decided that I would do only what I had time for and no more. I didn't tell them if I didn't have time to do all that they expected.

One Saturday, I was working there and the family was at home. They hadn't changed the toddler's nappy during the whole day and then they told me to change his nappy. I just did it and then they continued happily again. It was something unbelievable to me. I just couldn't imagine things like this to be true: I was there to do the dirty work like, if I was washing the dishes, he was brought to me and I had to change his nappy. Then I gave him back and they went to play and I continued washing.

I didn't even think about using the phone, other than reverse-charge calls, yet they always told how expensive phoning was. I think they meant that I wasn't allowed to use the telephone although they didn't say it. I always had to ask if I wanted to take a shower. I had a telly in my own room, but it didn't work properly. Once I went to watch telly downstairs. They were amazed by that and they didn't like it. After sitting there for five minutes, I asked if I could make some tea, because that was the only thing I was allowed to make for myself.

I thought that when I lived in their house I would have to appreciate their customs and to do things their way. But because I wasn't familiar with their (religious) customs and because they never really told me about them, I experienced some difficult situations and I had to really think how to do things in the best way. They prepared the meals themselves but otherwise I did everything. It was unbelievable that they didn't trouble to do anything themselves. It was obvious that I was just an employee there. And there were things like, I couldn't eat with the family because they often went to eat at their granny's or they just didn't eat at all. Sometimes, when they had a meal, they asked me to leave the room and go outside. For instance once when they had a special evening I had to stay upstairs. After they had finished dinner they told me that I was allowed to come downstairs to wash the dishes. Then I really felt as if I was just working for them. I ate with them two or three times. One evening, when they had guests coming, I was initially told I couldn't join them. But then she said that she could cook for me as well, although it was extra work for her. In the end, she said that she would see if there was any food left for me. I just couldn't believe that such a well-off family couldn't think about preparing enough food for everybody. I just couldn't believe how mean they were. For instance, the Hoover bags had to be used twice and if there was some tuna left on the children's plates, it was put back in the tin. Okay, in some sense it is a good idea that the food is not thrown away but, why

wasn't I allowed to eat it? They just didn't arrange any meals for me at all. This was very confusing for me. I decided that I was not going to die of hunger; on the other hand, I was not going to use my own money. So always when they went out, I made some tea and sandwiches, because I felt I was entitled to eat there although they didn't offer me anything. So for a few weeks I have just eaten sandwiches and jam.

One evening the mother told me that she wanted me to speak to her if there was something I would like to say. I said straight away that actually there was something I would like to talk about. She was putting the kids to bed and she became so angry that she started to shout at the kids telling them to get off to bed and telling them how annoyed she was about what I had just said. My heart was pounding and I thought, what did I do? But after she had put the kids to bed we had a chat. She made a cup of tea and I told her about the note. I said that if I really did everything she expected, it meant that six hours a day, or thirty hours a week, was not enough...She then told me that actually she wanted to explain the duties to me, not just to give me that note. Then she asked if I really meant that I didn't want to do the extra hours. I replied that I could do extra hours, but I wanted to be paid extra as well. She said that she would be happy to pay the extra and it seemed to me that we were both happy...But the next morning she asked whether I meant that I was not going to do this and that and everything was bad again. I felt as if she had deliberately misunderstood me. Obviously, she had discussed this with her husband during the night and in the morning everything was bad again. I thought that it was a mistake to have opened my mouth in the first place; but I was happy that I had done it anyway.

I was also told that their previous au pair had been very happy. I think she was trying to tell me that I didn't seem to be very happy. But I heard from one au pair in the neighbourhood that the previous au pair wasn't happy either, because she wasn't allowed to eat and sometimes had to clean the whole house again in the evening and they paid her less than me. She stayed in this family because her previous host family had been even worse than this.

The problem was that they didn't tell me about anything. I always had the feeling that I was making mistakes, although the host mother showed me round the house and told me where to find the detergents and so on. It was so confusing because she always spoke about 'we': today we could do this and that; yet in practice, it meant that I had to do things. I didn't know what she really meant: did she mean that she was going to do something. And should I leave something for her if she wanted to do something and so on... This mother often spoke to her husband very quickly in a low voice, so that I wasn't able to understand anything. And I don't know, they just never spoke to me, never told me things and suddenly they would just leave the children with me and my programme could change in five minutes. I just took orders from them and that was it.

After some time, I decided that if I could find a good host family I would quit this host family. I didn't tell them anything, not even when I knew I had got a new host family. But I didn't expect to leave in this way either. But the last straw was when I was told to go out to the back yard while they were eating with their guests. Then I thought, okay, no problem I will go, but only with all of my things, because I couldn't stand it any more. I phoned the Finnish Church to make sure I had a place to go to because I couldn't go to my new host family at that time. I thought that it was better to quit than wait for them to throw me out although I didn't know if they ever would ever do it because I think they wanted me to be there. I was their servant because they wanted somebody who was only there for them.

I don't know whether they understood that I wasn't just going to the back yard but leaving for good, and although they were at home when I left, I don't know if they realized what was going on, because they didn't usually take any notice of me anyway. So, I just left a note and the keys on the table and left. I just wrote that I couldn't stay there anymore and this was my problem, not theirs, because I wanted to leave a friendly note. I thought for a moment whether I was causing them trouble by suddenly disappearing but they had the grandparents nearby and actually they needed a cleaner more than an au pair.

I was their servant, they paid for me to clean their mess. They showed no interest, for instance, when I tried to show them photos of Finland. They had no interest in my family or my background and I got the feeling that whoever they employed, they just didn't care about her."

According to the interviews with the au pairs, in one fourth of all the host families (8/31) the dominating characteristic of this work relationship was exploitation similar to the case described above. Interestingly, all these au pairs were usually asked to leave, or they left of their own accord. This suggests that the most common, but not the only reason, for the high turnover of au pairs was domestic exploitation. These au pairs interviewed usually described themselves as servants, maids or slaves in their host families: "My host family had hired a servant, although only an au pair". The au pairs also suggested that these host mothers had no difficulty in adopting the role of mistress of the house. However, most of these host mothers were not interviewed in this study and this caused a methodological problem which was discussed in the methodology chapter.

These middle class young people were able to rely on the financial and emotional support of their parents in a crisis, but they usually coped fairly independently for example, if they had to leave the host family because of exploitation. Interestingly, changing host families or working elsewhere was more common than just returning home. This suggests that these young people were serious about spending a gap year abroad. Interestingly, a few au pairs said that 'giving up' would have meant losing face in front of family and friends.

## **Domestic employment**

### *Pia's case*

Pia was a 19 year old high school graduate from a small town in South Finland. She came from an ordinary middle class family and was the second in a family of three children. At the time of the interview, her mother was unemployed. She had been to England on a language course but had not lived away from home before. Because she did not get a study place after high school, she decided to take a gap year. She had some work experience in casual jobs and she helped a little at home, but mainly, kept her own room tidy.

Pia found her host family through a recruitment organization in Finland. Pia's host mother was working part-time and the family had two school aged children and one toddler. Pia was their first au pair although the host mother had experience of hiring other kinds of domestic help. The host family lived in a five bedroomed house. Before her arrival, Pia did not know that she was expected to work as an au pair plus. An au pair plus is usually expected to work more hours than an au pair. Pia stayed for nine months in this host family. The following text is translated and edited from the interviews with Pia.

"Two days a week I look after the toddler and during the other days I wash clothes and iron the children's clothes. Once a week I Hoover the children's rooms and a playroom and change the children's sheets. After breakfast, there is always a terrible mess. On the two days when I look after the toddler, I work quite long hours because I am there all day long, but on the whole, I think the hours are as they should be. We discussed this and the host mother told me that Wednesdays were going to be tough days. But it is all right because it is quite easy to spend the whole day with that toddler...I also need to work on Saturdays and I get £45 for pocket money. It would be nice to have the whole weekend off although I only need to work on Saturday mornings.

Because I work as an au pair plus, I should have 35 hours a week but sometimes I am so tired and I think I have just worked too much. So, then I count up my hours of work and I think I really work about 40 hours a week. But it's very difficult to count them in a way, because the family needs me to help in the evenings when the kids come home from school until they go to bed. Sometimes I just clean up or make tea with the host mother, so it's a bit difficult. So, in a way, it's my working hours because I need to be there; but then, it isn't actually like working all the time, but still I think I work more than 35 hours.. I am usually off after I have put the daughter to bed around 8 pm.

My duties are quite routine at the moment and I feel that everything is going quite smoothly although the duties add up easily. Because I know my duties, I can also decide when to do them, things like Hoovering or changing sheets. I read a lot of books to the toddler and play with him in the playroom. If I have got things like ironing, I can do it while he is playing on his own. I don't need to play with him all the time and we often go to the nearby park. I eat with the kids and during the



day time we usually eat just bread. With the older kids, the time is more organised. When they come home they usually change their clothes and watch children's TV programmes. Then there is dinner and then they have a bath and go to bed. They also need to do some homework, so there is not much time to play really. I usually read a bedtime story to one child and I also have to teach her some words on the magnet board before story time.

One afternoon a week I am alone with all these three kids and it can be quite hard, because sometimes they don't obey me. On Fridays I clean for about two hours and I Hoover the children's rooms and the playroom and the kitchen. Every day I clear the kitchen after breakfast. So I haven't got much cleaning to do at all. They had a cleaner before, but I haven't seen her at all, so she (the host mother) cleans all the other rooms and the toilets. There is also a woman who irons the adults' clothes. The host mother thanks me quite often and she tries to tell the children not to make a mess.

It was not long after I had made my first phone call that the host mother said that although she knew it was only my first phonecall, I should keep the calls short. For awhile I told my friends that I couldn't make phone calls and asked them to call me. Then, one evening, I was going out to buy phone cards, but the host mother told me that I could phone my friends and I didn't have to buy a phone card. So, I can make telephone calls if I ask first. She has also told me that my friends are welcome and she doesn't want to limit my comings and goings by setting any time limits. She also tries to encourage me to discuss any problems with her.

I am probably like a family member. They don't treat me just like a cleaner. I think that everything with me is quite OK there. They often ask me to join them for meals on Sundays, but it's my only day off, so I don't really want to join them for a meal and then leave again. I haven't really thought about changing to another family although I think some things might be easier in another family, but I think that, in the end, it's difficult to find a better family...I like this family although sometimes I feel that I am too tied down there. But I like all of them and that's why I am also enjoying my stay although I don't especially like ironing or things like that. I don't need to clean a lot. I spend more time looking after the kids, although being a nanny is not my dream occupation either.

I feel closer to the host mum than the the dad because he works late and I always chat about my duties with the host mum. Sometimes there are situations which make me wonder whether I am a part of the family or not, but I just want things to be all right...For instance they have been away for a few weekends and there has been no food in the fridge. It seems that they are not really concerned about this. Sometimes when I return to their house on Sunday evenings, I feel that although they have nothing against my having friends and going out, they are angry with me, because I have been out and they have been stuck with the kids and with cleaning up and all this sort of thing. Once we also had a bit of a disagreement because she wanted me to come with them to visit her brother and she needed me to help with the kids on the way back home because her husband had returned earlier. But I thought that I had a right to do what I wanted during my time off instead of sitting in a car and I told her this. At first she didn't say anything. The next morning she came to see me and said that it was all right for me to stay at home. Sometimes I think that it would be nice if they thought more about whether I had made some plans, because they just take it for granted that I can always babysit and to do things like that. They just take it for granted that I will go with them during the weekends or that I want to go with

them. As an au pair you are stuck with the host family and you have to plan your own timetable according to their timetable. You just can't decide things on your own.

Towards the end, it was easier because I was used to my duties and could decide things myself and she didn't need to tell me to do this and to do that. I wasn't just a cleaner or something like that. I think they treated me quite well although sometimes I felt that they didn't realize how much work I did there. I think they didn't really understand that my duties could be quite hard as well. For instance, things like playing with the kids and going to the park with them - I think they didn't consider those duties as work. They often complained about what a hard day they had had at work. I never complained, although I did have awful days as well. I think they thought that their work was somehow different. Also I never had exact working hours. I think it would be better if you knew exactly when your hours began and when they ended, because the hours and the duties can quickly add up. I felt sometimes that it was difficult to plan my own activities. I gave up a lot of them. Well, in the end, it's the au pair who needs to be more flexible. I thought many times that if I had an au pair I wouldn't treat her this way; I would set exact working hours. During my time off I just felt that I had to get out off the house, because, otherwise, I felt as if I was working all the time. I just had to get away for awhile and to do something different, to visit a friend or something."

The domestic service relationship between an au pair and a host mother often was about negotiating the material and social terms and conditions, as in the case above. However, because of the private nature of this domestic arrangement, there were difficulties in defining these conditions compared with regulated employment in the labour market. These difficulties included defining working hours or extra hours, the remuneration and the au pair's social position. Au pairs felt that they were expected to be on-call all the time and to be flexible with their own time-table. They also preferred to make a distinction between being on-duty and being off-duty by spending their leisure time outside the host family.

However, the relationship was usually described as communicative in relation to the au pairs' domestic tasks and position although many au pairs felt that the host parents did not understand the nature of their domestic work at home. The problematics with social relations, rather than the exploitative conditions were perceived as reasons for changing families. Both the au pairs and the host mothers suggested that employed mothers, in particular, preferred the relationship between them and their au pairs as an employment. Most of the au pairs also appeared to prefer a clear contractual work arrangement.

## **Domestic companionship**

### *Kaisa's case*

Kaisa was an 18 year old high school graduate from the countryside near one of the biggest towns in southern Finland. She came from a single parent family and had a teenage sister. She had fairly limited work experience and this was her first time in Britain and away from her own family. She wanted to become an au pair because she had not got a study place and she wanted to use the gap year beneficially. She thought that childcare duties and language learning were good experience for her future life.

Kaisa found her first host family by using the services of the national recruitment organisation and their co-operation agency in Britain. She found her second host family by contacting another local au pair agency in Britain. In both host families she signed a contract.

Without any warning, Kaisa was told by her first host mother, after two weeks of her stay, that the arrangement between them was not working. Until that moment, Kaisa had been satisfied with her host family although she was disappointed that her duties were mainly cleaning. The host mother said that Kaisa was too quiet and that she stayed in her room too much and should go out more. On her part, Kaisa thought that the host mother was not satisfied with her cleaning. She was shocked and disappointed to be asked to leave because she had not been given a chance to adapt to the host family and the environment. Furthermore, she was not allowed to remain in the family for the two weeks period of her notice.

Kaisa stayed at the Finnish Church in London for a week until she had found a new host family. She remained the rest of her stay in this family. She was interviewed by the new host mother before she got this placement. In this host family the father was working as a financial clerk and the mother was a full-time housewife and expecting a baby. They already had a toddler. The mother was a Finn herself and had also worked as an au pair. The family lived in a 3/4

bedroomed townhouse. The following text is translated and edited from the interviews with Kaisa.

"I think one of the best things about this family is that my hours are clearly defined. In the first host family I needed to be available all the time if they happened to need me and if not, I just had to be there. In this host family my working hours always begin at ten in the morning and I work until twelve o'clock. After that I have two hours off and in the afternoon I work until about six thirty in the evening. I like this break in the afternoon. Usually I just relax, because I usually do cleaning in the morning. So after that, I can just be on my own and do my own thing and in the afternoon I take care of the toddler and I think this works quite well... I get £35 a week as in my first host family, but in this family, I get a monthly travel card as well, so it adds up to about £40. All my friends are jealous because I never need to worry about the travel card. I think an au pair should have the right to a travel card paid for by her host family.

The mum had more time after the first week and she explained in detail what my duties were... My duties are quite simple anyway. They are quite routine although I only have experience in tidying like Hoovering and dusting. I have never cleaned bathrooms or ovens and I have never really cleaned the kitchen in such a careful manner as I have done in this family. It's not really a problem because this mum invests a lot in cleanliness and she has got proper equipment so it makes everything much easier. In another family where I go to help sometimes, I have cleaned their bathroom a few times and it's a terrible job because they haven't got proper equipment.

After birth of the baby, the mother rarely goes anywhere and she is always there when I look after the toddler, so I haven't really got much to do... They were worried whether the new baby would be difficult in case it meant extra duties for me, but she has been fine... Well, I haven't yet changed any nappies but when the mum bathes her son, I can look after the baby and I have also babysat once. It wasn't difficult at all to be with the baby for a few hours. At first, I was a bit hesitant because I have got no experience, but everything went so well. I think this experience will be a real benefit for me in the future.

This family is just so nice that I wouldn't demand for anything if I did extra hours. I am just happy to do little services for them every now and then. I have been out with them for one day outside London and they paid for everything for me. Then they had a one week holiday and they asked me to come with them, but I wanted to stay at home with the dog. I can always go with them if I want to, and they pay for me. Once when I was babysitting they bought Indian food for me on the way home because I have never tasted Indian food. The father also arranged a bank account for me. My pocket money is automatically paid into it every Friday.

They haven't stipulated any rules. When I call home, I usually make reverse charge calls, but I do make local calls and I try not to gossip. I have always asked if I could make a call, I mean local calls, and they have always said that's fine; but if I call abroad I have to pay for it myself. I don't have rules such as not being allowed to bring alcohol or boyfriends into the house like others have. I haven't got restrictions like that. The only thing is that they expect me to get home not too late at night so that I am there in time to start to work. They trust me to take care of myself and of course I do it... I can also invite my friends and they even ask them to eat with the family because they like if there are more

people around. I also eat with them, although I am usually only at home on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. I can use the fridge as my own and take whatever I want, although it is a bit difficult to use other people's fridges. On Fridays, when they do the shopping, they always ask me if I want anything and always remind me to treat their home as my home.

Their son is absolutely wonderful and although I am not used to babies, I have learned a lot. I also get along well with the family's mum and dad. Actually I think I am like a family member. I also spent Christmas with them although I felt a bit sad and thought how nice it would be to be in my home. But everything went so quickly because they took me with them everywhere they went. I helped them as family members do and I didn't regard it as work even it was my holiday if I looked after the children, and so on.

I think we have got quite similar views about everything and she herself is quite young and has been an au pair, so she knows quite a lot about these things. I talk about all sort of things with her. For instance, once we talked about ideal men. The mum is a bit over thirty and the dad is also under forty, so they are really youthful and easygoing. This dad also makes a lot of jokes and he is really relaxed and I think our interests are very similar as well. Actually, when I left Finland I thought that it would be nice to find a host family where we I could talk about things together and this family is like that. It's like a dream come true. I think I am almost like a family member and this mother treats me mostly like a family member. I think that I am somehow a bit inferior to this host father but not much. It's when he has time off and he ought to spend time with the baby but he wants to do other things, then he just gives the baby to me. The host mother always points out that it's my time off and he should look after the baby, but it's not a big deal. I am not exactly like a family member but I am not a stranger either and this host mum tells me quite confidential things, things she can't in principal tell to others. I think family friends is the most descriptive phrase.

I have talked a lot of about my family and this host mum often tells me about the time she was an au pair. I know quite a lot about her background but I don't really talk a lot with the host father because he is not around much in the evenings or I am not around. I would like to keep in contact with them , but I don't know if they would like to do this. However, I have decided to send birthday cards to both kids."

One characteristic for domestic service relationship was companionship between the au pair and the host mother. It appeared that the au pair and the host mother worked in the household as a 'team' for whom negotiating, mutual understanding and sharing were common. In practice, the au pair and the host mother could share various domestic tasks as well as work and organise the everyday domestic life of the family together. The au pair was also included to a great extent in the family's social life. The relationship between the au pair and the host mother was communicative, interactive and friendly.

Some of the au pairs and host mothers suggested that young mothers with dependant children in particular and/or those women who spend a lot of time in the house as full-time housewives or part-time employees, established a companionship between themselves and their au pairs. The au pairs were satisfied with their conditions and relationships in these families, because these were negotiable and this kind of relationship added to their crosscultural or social relations as au pairs.

### **7.3 Discussion**

The findings in this chapter show that it is difficult to identify au pairs as a social group in the same way as many other groups of domestic workers, through the structures of this relationship. This means that au pairs are not only different from other groups of domestic workers because of their construction as gap year working travellers rather than as workers. Au pairs are not, for example, subjected to racial or ethnic inequalities, which are central to various women of colour who are private domestic workers (for instance Cock 1989; Colen 1986; Glenn 1986, 1992; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992). Furthermore, they are not bound to domestic work by class relations, but class is imputed within their work relationship as domestic workers. By age and class background, au pairs, as a social group, have things in common with young nannies from the intermediate status families, but these are usually British, not foreign women (Gregson & Lowe 1994). Another close identification group for au pairs is probably the traditional young female live-in servants, although these were usually rural working class girls working in middle class urban families. Because au pairs only 'visit' domestic service rather than being 'trapped' in it, and they do not have their own domestic responsibilities outside the host family, they can be identified with young life-cycle servants described by some historians (Davidoff & Westover 1986; Higgs 1986; Laslett 1977; Mitterauer 1992).

It was difficult to type or categorise these work relationships in this study, because they were personal, private and diverse practices. However, domestic

'exploitation', 'employment' or 'companionship' characterised often the domestic work relationship between the au pairs and their host mothers. In attempting to describe these relationships, it is evident that these case studies are also difficult to categorise according to these characteristics. This is because exploitation, employment and companionship create a synthesis and they also vary in time and space.

Exploitation of domestic workers like au pairs can take the form of material, social and emotional exploitation. This affects everyday life, for example at the levels of domestic tasks, interaction and communication. Sexual exploitation or harassment was rare in this study: two au pairs mentioned that an au pair friend had been sexually harassed by the host family's father. But as discussed earlier, in practice, the au pairs barely saw the host fathers. Sexual exploitation is also a very sensitive issue in the private domestic context.

This study suggests that the oppression experienced by some contemporary au pairs in Britain may be fairly similar to the oppression of domestic servants in the past (Davidoff & Westover 1986). However, sexual exploitation may not be as distinctive as in the past. Moreover, most studies on racial-ethnic women as contemporary domestic workers have identified material, emotional and social exploitation as central characteristics of contemporary private domestic arrangements (for instance Anderson 1993; Cock 1989; Colen 1986; Heyzer et.al.1994; Phizacklea 1982,1983,1987; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992).

However, this study was not able to distinguish whether these host mothers who exploited their au pairs were different from other host mothers as a social group. However, this study contends that these women could be any middle or upper middle class employed mothers or full-time housewives, who transfer the patriarchal and capitalist hierarchy and power differential - to which they are themselves subjected in family and labour market relations - to exploit their private domestic workers. Moreover, the 'invisible' male head of house may benefit most from this work relationship:

"I just don't understand, because I assume that they (the host family) are quite

affluent because they have restored an old estate and they have got a lot of antiques. It seems that there is a lot of money. So, why do they use other people? What is it due to? Is this husband so cruel that he decides everything and uses stupid Finns? Or is it in the end that this wife suffers and she wants to kick others because she is kicked as well?...She is a drudge all day long serving her husband and I doubt if she gets any appreciation from him. So, she suffers and takes on a substitute sufferer.” (Q2:10)

This study also suggests that contemporary au pairs may not accept highly exploitative conditions in their host families, because they are educated white young people, who are not ‘trapped’ in their position but ‘free’ to some extent to do what they wish. For example, Scandinavian au pairs may be fairly conscious of equality and human rights and ‘sensitive’ to exploitative conditions because of their educational and cultural background. On the other hand, exploitative conditions ultimately contribute to their travel experience and adventures abroad. In contrast, the South African waged domestic workers in Cock’s (1989) study were perceived as ‘trapped’ domestic workers.

The au pairs in the PEP study of the 1960s also showed dissatisfaction with their host families and their domestic conditions but only a few considered that they were not treated well. My study suggests that dissatisfaction among young people as au pairs may have increased from the 1960s, because of changes in women’s education and employment for example in Finland. This change was described by one Finnish au pair as: “I can accept being treated like an employee, but not like a servant”. However, exploitation of au pairs may be even more serious problem for au pair girls from less advantaged countries than Finland. One reason for this might be that the domestic position of these young women as female members of their families may not be very different from their domestic position of au pairs. Therefore these au pairs may accept to work in highly exploitative conditions because they are used to do so at home.

The most host mothers hired flexible, low-cost live-in au pairs on ‘poor’ contractual terms, because they were bound by their own family and labour market relations. This also affected the relationship between the au pair and her host mother and generated problematics for instance in negotiating working hours, domestic tasks, remuneration and with ‘negotiations’ between the different roles. The findings of this study, described in Chapter Five, suggest



that most of the host mothers interviewed wanted to hire somebody who was independent both in terms of the performance of her domestic tasks and in terms of her social life outside the family. In other words, many host mothers preferred a negotiable and contractual employer - employee relationship with their domestic workers but found this confusing particularly with young live-in au pairs. The host mothers wanted to establish a social distance with their au pairs similar to that between private employers and cleaners in Gregson's and Lowe's (1994) study. However, the oppressive characteristics of employment are built into these relationships.

A tendency to establish an employer - employee relationship between private domestic workers and their employers is found in Romero's (1992) and Preston Whyte's (1976) studies on racial-ethnic women as domestic workers in private households. Romero emphasizes that the Chicana female domestic workers tried to change the relationships to client - tradesperson interaction thus restructuring their work. Gregson and Lowe (1994) have pointed out the difference between cleaners and nannies as private domestic employees in contemporary Britain suggesting that full-time nanny employment in particular, causes tension between the social relations of wage labour and 'false kinship'.

The domestic employment relationship between au pairs and their host mothers demonstrates a growing tendency by women who hire domestic workers to treat the private family and household as a work place. Women's employment outside the home may have contributed to this development. For example, the au pairs were hired to take care of day-to-day domestic tasks, which were perceived outside the family's childcare arrangements. This study supports the argument that the increasing number of women in employment (and/or public childcare) have not led to a significant change in the gender division of domestic tasks in private households. This may translate into a greater demand for domestic services from a domestic 'tradesperson', particularly in terms of everyday housework tasks. For example, Gregson and Lowe (1994) identify in private domestic service an important facet of reproducing day-to-day life for contemporary British middle classes for dual-career families.

As companions, an au pair and a host mother do not only share the domestic tasks in the family, but as women, they are both subjected to the gender division of domestic tasks in family relations and to the low status of domestic work in general. Au pairs and host mothers obviously derive different rewards from their domestic companionship. An inexperienced young girl enjoying companionship with her host mother may well feel that she has been granted female adult status. Mothers are also (unpaid) domestic workers for whom an au pair provides not only help with domestic tasks, but adult company to make up for some of the isolation of domestic work at home. Both the au pair and the host mother can also try to be 'fair' to each other in the process of providing domestic services and support.

This kind of relationship establishes the home as a place of companionship and friendship rather than as a work place. The oppressive work relationship becomes blurred because of the au pair's and the host mother's material, emotional and social ties as women and as domestic and family workers. An au pair can be perceived as an extension of housewife and mother in a similar way to that suggested by Romero (1992) in her study about Chicana women as domestic workers in private households. Gregson and Lowe (1994) have also emphasized that nannies in particular, were perceived as mother substitutes.

The concept of 'false kinship' is used by Gregson and Lowe (1994) to describe the emotional and social ties within nanny employment. However, the concept of domestic companionship provides a broader understanding of one characteristic of the domestic service relationship between au pairs and their host mothers. It is like a universal 'sisterhood', which an au pair and her host mother may establish between them as women. Their domestic work and work relationship in a family is affected by such ideologies as 'labour of love', 'mothering' and 'false kinship' or 'family membership'. As women, they share (and may accept) a subordinate position in the family and labour market relations.

## 8 CONCLUSIONS

### Summary of results

The purpose of this study was to explore the reasons why the tradition of au pairs continues in a modern society. This question was investigated by means of five subquestions which have each been discussed in substantive chapters. This study has suggested that the au pair arrangement is a work relationship between a young foreign person and her host mother/family, although au pairs are not officially defined as employees. The au pair arrangement is constructed as a selfsufficient 'gap year' of travel abroad by the au pair and as a material and economic domestic 'coping strategy' by the host mother.

The Finnish young middle class people became au pairs for various interlinked reasons. A gap in the transition from high school to higher education institutions was often created through the difficulty of obtaining a study place together with the individual student's desire for a break or time-out. A lack of casual jobs in Finland was also a reason given by some youngsters for seeking opportunities abroad. Young people favoured a gap year abroad because of such socio-cultural and developmental determinants as language learning, learning about other cultures, crosscultural contacts, and becoming more independent as a result of separation from home. Work as an au pair provided the chance for independent travel abroad. Because of the casual nature of the gap year, becoming an au pair was a temporal arrangement for young people. This is one reason why becoming an au pair accorded with some young people's life plans in modern times.

The middle and upper middle class host mothers from the London area, took

on au pairs because they provided a cheap and flexible domestic coping strategy for full-time housewives and employed mothers. The dominant construction of the au pair arrangement and the relationship between the au pairs and their host mothers was one of a coping strategy for the women who hire au pairs and are responsible for their family's domestic life.

An au pair arrangement was predominantly a female work relationship. Au pairs usually worked in their host families as maids of all work and sometimes as full- or part-time nannies. They had childcare tasks mostly in host families who had pre-school-aged children and/or where mothers were in full- or part-time employment. Otherwise their everyday life followed a fairly general pattern of domestic work in the host family and leisure time usually spent with other Finnish au pairs. However, their everyday domestic tasks, interaction and communication varied in different host families and showed no clear pattern. This meant that work relationships between au pairs and host mothers were diverse and personal practices.

Hiring an au pair as a domestic coping strategy was good value for money because au pairs adjusted to the host mothers' domestic needs and choices in a flexible way. The privileged middle class women gained comfort from the forms of 'quality time' and 'quality tasks' which eased their own domestic work load. However, the au pairs' live-in position, the structures of gender (and sexuality), age and nationality (and culture, language and religion) put a strain on the host mothers, on family relations and on this work relationship in general. This meant that the power differential between an au pair and a host mother was produced through gender, age and nationality as well as through social class in the domestic work context. The oppressive work relationships were characterised by 'exploitation', 'employment' and 'companionship'. Exploitative relationships in particular contributed to the high turnover of the au pairs. Some au pairs and their host mothers or the children of the host family also became attached to each other. However, the balance of different characteristics could vary in space and through time in a same host family and between different host families.

The au pairs were differentiated from other groups of contemporary domestic workers because these middle class Finnish youngsters in the role of au pairs 'visited' the domestic work relationship through the opportunity for a gap year of travel abroad. This meant that they were 'free to travel' as they wished and they had an alternative self definition as travellers. They were also able to change families and enter labour market jobs during their stay, or leave earlier to return home. These au pairs were a vulnerable group of workers as well as an easy target for domestic exploitation because the focus was on a gap year of travel rather than on domestic work and work relations. However, for some of these young people exploitative work conditions could ultimately provide a travel adventure in a harsh world of domestic work.

Although the au pairs' expectations and day-to-day life were different to some extent, the au pair experience did serve as a 'break', a 'time-out', a 'challenge' or a 'must' and did contribute to their self-development and self-identity. The au pairs were in general satisfied with their stay and ready to move on in their lives after working as au pairs, even though their achievements in language learning and crosscultural contacts rarely met their expectations. The au pairs learnt that the host families' interests were in the au pairs' domestic services rather more than in them as individuals or as language learners.

Working as an au pair is one example of the late modern socio-cultural condition which attracts contemporary young people. It illustrates the fragmentation of familiar boundaries between work/travel/holiday and home/abroad, as well as reflexivity and individualized life plans in modern times. For host families, these young people provide an attractive option to obtain domestic services in a modern society like Britain. As a temporal work relationship, this kind of 'exchange' offers a private domestic work arrangement which has adjusted to the changing society. However, by challenging the tension between structure and actor, this study has also demonstrated how this work relationship is not about exchange and how it reproduces the oppression of domestic workers. In doing so this research, has contributed not only to the practice of au pair arrangement but to sociological theory and research on youth and travel abroad as well as to feminist theory and research on women,

family and domestic work/ers.

### **Contribution to theory and research on youth and travel abroad**

This study suggests that the phenomenon of the gap year of travel abroad presents an interplay between socio-cultural changes and increasing individual choices and attachments during modern times, which culminate in a growing internationalism. The concept of the gap year or phase may also be misleading and may play down the meaning of these phases and experiences. Instead, different kinds of 'gaps' should be understood as a natural development of the modern fragmented life course because within late modernity, because personal choice and attachment have become important in creating individualized life courses and lifestyles. Gap years abroad may therefore become increasingly more common presentations of youth and the life course regardless of physical age.

However, unemployment or a perceived lack of satisfying employment in a young person's own country and competition for study places may, to some extent, create a non-active gap phase after high school or after completing schooling in many Western countries. In this context, the au pairs in this study were not, however, concerned about entering casual and unskilled domestic placements abroad and they defined themselves as 'travellers' rather than 'domestic workers'. Furthermore, becoming an au pair did not provide subcultural identification or gender identification (or model) for these young people but provided them identification with their own culture in relation to another culture through the exploratory experience in a foreign environment. This study suggests that the gap year abroad undertaken by contemporary young people illustrates both 'modern' experimentation and identification. The gap year may even represent a 'new' threshold in the transition to adulthood for some groups of young Western people.

Becoming an au pair represents a late modern form of travelling which combines work. This form of travelling abroad encapsulates many important

meanings and images for individuals such as au pairs. The socio-culturally and developmentally constructed meaning of the gap year is probably not singular to young people who work as au pairs but is pertinent to people who enter other casual work arrangements abroad. Internationalism, crosscultural contacts and learning a language as well as adventures in authentic foreign environments are of increasing significance to people's self-development and self-identity in a globalising world. They are also perceived as offering better chances in work and life in general. Living away from home and becoming more independent during a self sufficient gap year are important experiences for young people in transition to adulthood.

Internationally mobile juvenile labour may increasingly enter the low status jobs abroad as a gap year experience, either in labour market relations or private work relations, because of reasons explained above. The rejection of nationally 'poor' work turns into acceptance when young people enter work abroad. These - often domestic - placements abroad have working class and gendered connotations. This is why young females continue to have the advantage in entering au pair placements, although the amount of related gap year options is increasing and although au pair work is formally also available to males.

Young people, particularly those with no qualifications, are vulnerable in the international labour market. It is relatively easy nowadays to work in other EU countries and in unskilled, low status domestic work in (the secondary) labour market, in private homes and in the voluntary work sector in different charitable organisations. The ease of entering these work arrangements may vary in time and space, but such employment is often available in big cities like London. Characteristics of these labour relationships are that they are temporary, unregulated, often private and sometimes illegal. Poor pay and working conditions are characteristics of much of this kind of work.

This study has shown that there is a certain contradiction between the aspirations of au pairs as travellers and the reality of au pairs as domestic workers. In a foreign family, domestic relations are structured by gender, class, age, race and ethnicity. In this context, the opportunities for au pairs to escape

male domination are restricted, despite the fact that they may have been described as working travellers representing postmodern social order, and even though they may challenge male domination by becoming independent female travellers. The gender division amongst working young travellers, such as au pairs, is distinctive, because feminine representation and personalised relations are characteristics of housework and childcare work. The difference between these young people and migrant domestic workers is that the context of the gap year abroad overlaps with the material and economic meaning of work. However, young people might not be very concerned about potential problems because of the temporary nature of their sojourn, and also because their motivation for becoming au pairs is the chance to travel abroad.

This study also suggests that young people are not a homogenous group in the context the gap year of travel abroad. It can be argued that young Western people from more affluent backgrounds may have more choices for a gap year abroad than young people from less affluent backgrounds. On the other hand, au pair arrangement may increasingly attract well educated young people not only because it provides an opportunity for a selfsufficient gap year in which they can learn a language and foreign culture, but it also offers an 'adventure' working in a domestic position. However, becoming an au pair may also increasingly attract young people from outside the EU-countries who have otherwise limited opportunities to go overseas regardless of their socio-economic background. This suggests that the meaning of this phase abroad is not the same for all young people.

This research has opened up quite an unrecognized study area of the gap year of travel abroad to research by offering suggestions and questions which can be studied from different perspectives. However, it has been limited to a study of a small group of au pairs. Furthermore, becoming an au pair is only one of the options open to those who want to take a gap year. Further research is needed about these different options and about the meaning of these 'gaps' both for individuals and society. For example, it would also be useful to investigate what the experience of gap year contributes to the young person's independence or what the experience of working as an au pair contributes to



the au pair's future employability. Further research is also needed to investigate the structures of the gap year and whether the gap year, particularly the gap year abroad, divides young people in terms of gender, class and nationality.

### **Contribution to feminist theory and research on domestic workers**

This research has contributed to feminist theory and research on domestic work/ers, by drawing attention to au pairs who work for families and by widening the definition of family based domestic workers. These workers such as au pairs, nannies, mother's helpers and cleaning and ironing ladies are not regulated or waged domestic workers, nor are they unpaid family workers. These groups of domestic workers are also differentiated from each other by their remuneration, tasks and status.

These private labour relationships are affected both by family relations and by labour market relations. Through research of this 'in-between' situation of live-in family-based domestic workers, this empirical study has contributed to feminist theory on work known as dual systems theory. This study has shown how dual systems theory is able to differentiate among domestic workers according to their terms and conditions without losing sight of women's common subordinated position in both family and labour market relations. By studying the labour relationship between au pairs and their host families/mothers, this study has also shown how structures of gender and class are crucial to an understanding of the low status and oppression of all domestic workers. For different groups of paid domestic workers these labour relationships are also structured by sex, race, ethnicity, age and nationality (culture, language and religion) which increase the power differential between domestic workers and their employers.

The characteristics of 'exploitation', 'employment' and 'companionship' are obviously common to all family based domestic workers, because both the female employers and employees as family and domestic workers are subjected to patriarchal family and capitalist labour market relations which are always structured according to gender and class. These private domestic work

arrangements involve material and economic relationships which are ultimately affected by employers' choices about their domestic life and paid domestic workers. These choices can contribute to the oppression of domestic workers and the primary beneficiary is the male head of the household.

Au pairs are differentiated from other groups and categories of family based domestic workers through the construction of this labour relationship. Working as au pairs provides these middle class and educated Western young people with a chance for a gap year of travel in a transitional stage of their lives, whereas the domestic drudgery for many working class and migrant women is lifelong. Although the mechanisms of domestic subordination are reproduced by patriarchal families and capitalist labour market relations, they are also, to some extent, reproduced by the independent position and also perhaps by the higher status of women in the contexts which overlap their domestic labour relations. I am referring to the context of au pairs as gap year travellers and the context of wives as partners and mothers. Within these contexts, the subordinated position of women easily becomes blurred with the women's own experiences. This means that women like au pairs and their host mothers become reproducers of their own and other women's subordination, because emotional, social, cultural and sexual work are not always understood as characteristics of much of women's work.

However, this research has only investigated a small group of au pairs as family based domestic workers in the London area. Further research which includes different groups of family based domestic workers and their employers, for example in Britain, would contribute to feminist theory on domestic work/ers and would increase our understanding of how family and labour market relations shape these work relations. A comparison between different groups of family based domestic workers would also increase our understanding of differences and similarities of these 'employments' and labour relationships. This area of study is relevant because these private domestic work relationships are becoming increasingly common in middle class families in many contemporary societies. The question is clearly not whether there is work available in private families and households in contemporary society, but who

will do this work or sell these services, and on what terms, and for whom.

### **Contribution to policy and practice concerning au pairs**

This research on au pairs has shown that there is an urgent need to update the European agreement on au pairs and to define the au pair arrangement as a labour relationship between a foreign young person and a host family rather than as a cultural exchange. Furthermore, there is a need for a comprehensive policy on all private domestic workers, for example in Britain. However, because of the international and crosscultural nature of the au pair arrangement, an international au pair policy such as the European agreement on au pairs (The Council of Europe 1969) should be developed to provide a basis for national policies in relation to au pairs.

In the case of au pairs, regulation and legislation would mean a review of the 'employment' status of au pairs in relation to other related arrangements. This would also mean that the attention has to be drawn to the immigration status of au pairs from outside EU -countries. In practice, improvements should include detailed definitions about the terms and conditions of this arrangement such as the au pairs' salary, benefits, training, domestic tasks and hours, extra hours, holidays, sick leave, cancellation of contracts, rights and responsibilities in connection with childcare and housework, insurance and so on. Improvements should also include proposals to control the au pair arrangement.

Regulating the arrangements would restrict both foreign young people's and families' ease of access to this arrangement. In other words, it would reduce the number of people who are unsure about their ability to fulfil the duties and requirements of this labour relationship. Legislation would give those who enter this arrangement a clearer concept of this labour relationship. It would also decrease the deliberate oppression of au pairs. However, more profound changes are needed in the patriarchal family and capitalist labour market relations to improve the status of domestic work/ers in general.

A bigger sample and the collection of more systematic information would

contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon of au pairs. The inclusion of the host families' children, fathers, au pairs of different nationality and/ or their parents, would provide a broader understanding of this phenomenon and its meaning for different groups of people. A comparative study of different groups such as families with different domestic arrangements and/or young people who have elected different options for their gap year with would also provide interesting information about these arrangements. Furthermore, an international study of au pairs would increase understanding of how this arrangement might be individually and institutionally constructed in different ways in different cultures. This study has suggested that cultural differences also play an important role in labour relationships between au pairs and host families. The further study of adaptation and acculturation might increase an understanding of this labour relationship.

Further investigation of the scale, reasons and processes of the turnover of au pairs would increase our understanding of the vulnerability of this arrangement. On the other hand, an investigation of au pair agencies, their screening methods, their support mechanisms for clients, and control of these agencies would provide interesting insights into this form of labour recruitment as a business.

Furthermore, an investigation of the function of independent national organisations, which provide support for au pairs, would contribute to an understanding of the turnover of au pairs and its socio-psychological problematics. The problem in practice might also be that the support organisations are divided on nationality lines and therefore there might not be any support organisations, for example, for au pairs from the East European countries. Concerning the current situation, there may well be a need for an independent 'au pair centre' which provides information and practical help for all au pairs in distress, at least in big cities like London.

Casual work opportunities and travel abroad may carry important meanings for young people today, for example, providing initial work experience for a high school graduate. However, poor working conditions and poor pay do not

increase the value of these domestic jobs or domestic work in general. For example, the au pair experience is largely unrecognized by wider society as 'real' work and travel experience, because it involves women's work at home and is equated with 'exchange'. Hopefully, legislation concerning private domestic workers will direct the future of the au pair arrangement in relation to the expansion of a gap year of travel and to the improvements in the working conditions and valuation of casual employment.

This is not the first research project based on an empirical study of private domestic workers which has concluded that there is an urgent need to regulate and legislate these arrangements. One could ask why, to date, this has not happened. Is it because domestic work is still not valued as 'real' work or because it is still regarded as women's work? The family is valued as a central institution of society but the family as a work place is perceived as private and secret and as non-exploitative, loving and caring. This image serves obviously men more than women and an intervention in the private domain of family is a sensitive political issue.

### **Concluding remarks**

Although it is not known exactly why young people take gap years or how often they go abroad, the opportunities to spend a gap year abroad have grown during modern times. This study on au pairs has identified some processes, meanings and structures of the gap year of travel abroad. In doing so it has showed that the phenomenon of the gap year must be taken into account in any contemporary analyses of extending youth, changes in familiar thresholds and in the transition to adulthood in general.

Focusing on young people who take gap years can widen our understanding of how changing society and young people shape each other. Studying young people who work during their travel like au pairs widens understanding of travel and work during late modern times. Work, particularly unregulated work and domestic work, cannot be separated from any contemporary analysis of travel abroad. The growing opportunities suggest that these 'working travellers' may

comprise a distinctive group of 'migrant' workers in modern societies although their work in casual domestic jobs in labour market or in private households is 'invisible'.

In contrast to working class and migrant workers, working travellers like au pairs are looking for independent travel experience in an authentic environment as they are not bound to this kind of labour relationship by their class and race relations. They are nonetheless an easy target for exploitation by employers, partly because of their gender and age.

Private domestic service is not an obsolete occupation in a modern society. Private domestic workers have existed in the past and will exist in the future, although the scale of paid domestic service in private households varies in time and space. Women's employment, in particular, a lack of public childcare provision and gender division of domestic tasks, as well as the growth of the middle classes, have contributed to an increase in the private domestic service sector in many contemporary Western societies. The discussion in some countries is moving away from gender division of domestic tasks in families, to the hiring of a 'third party', who can take responsibility for housework tasks. State supported domestic service workers have generated a domestic 'trade' in/for private households. This might have diminished, to some degree, the personal and private nature of paid domestic work. These developments involve, however, the familiar battle against the low status and oppression of domestic work/ers and women. These developments will provide increasingly important challenges for feminists and politicians in many Western countries.

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