Open to Disruption

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In my life history of Olivia, I interviewed one Chicana over a twenty-year span; she was the daughter of a live-in domestic worker in a gated Los Angeles community. Olivia’s mother, Carmen, was an immigrant from Mexico who had started working as a live-in maid in the Country Club area in El Paso, Texas. In her mid- to late twenties, Carmen accompanied friends in search of employment to Los Angeles. Finding the work in the garment district difficult and unappealing, she turned again to domestic work and began working in a gated community. After the birth of her daughter, Carmen returned to the border area, leaving her mother and sister to raise Olivia as she worked as a live-in maid in El Paso. When Olivia was three, Carmen made arrangements to live-in with her daughter in Los Angeles. There, Olivia and Carmen negotiated a mother-daughter relationship within the confines of the employers’ household, trapped in the contradictory boundaries of “being like one of the family.” Returning every summer to Mexico, Olivia spent time with her grandmother, aunts, and cousins, never losing sight of her family or culture.

Olivia’s experiences offered the ingredients for examining the reproduction of privilege in opposition to the national narrative that claims meritocracy, equality, and assimilation as the means to material success in the United States. Moving from experiences in the gated community and
Country Club to meals with Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles and her family in Mexico, Olivia compared and contrasted personal choices and was aware of the different consequences and the vastly unique opportunities gained by being a member of the upper class. These contrasting social settings and relations constantly challenged Olivia’s perceptions of her mother. Among her employers, Carmen was the ideal maid, but among her fellow immigrant workers, she was a valued friend who helped find others employment and to negotiate above-average working conditions. Among her family members in Mexico, Carmen was the major wage earner and had their respect and admiration. Rather than following instructions as she did in the homes of her employers, Carmen made the major financial decisions in her family. When Olivia’s experiences outside the gated community are not included in the picture, Carmen appears as a low-wage worker in a dead-end job instead of an entrepreneur engaged in numerous asset-building activities. Carmen may have been merely a trusted maid in her employers’ world, but in the immigrant community and within her family, she was a trusted adviser and a financial success. If I had not allowed life to take its course, I would have ended up with one stop-action photograph rather than the many photos of a journey that provided meaning to past experiences.

The following chapter is a reflection on the methodology I used to study the children of domestic workers and more specifically on the life story of one daughter of a live-in maid. Rather than beginning with a precise research question and limiting my data collection to a specific time period, I developed research foci as I collected and analyzed the data, wrote extensive research notes, and further developed the literature review. Like other researchers, I was faced with the decision of when to stop collecting data (Lareau 1989). However, I based my decision not on whether I had reached a saturation point in the narrative, but on what I would capture of Olivia’s stages of life and her construction of identity and meaning. Approaching the study of domestic service from the perspective of the maid’s daughter who lived in her mother’s workplace offered both research challenges and opportunities. I began the study by examining the access children had to their mothers’ work as domestics. I used this data to inform many of the questions I asked in conducting a life story with Olivia. Learning to interview the same person over twenty years took on its own process and routine, which shaped the researcher-subject relationship. I conclude this chapter with a reflection on constructing a life story.
Who Takes Care of the Maid’s Children?

Olivia first approached me at a conference in El Paso, Texas, after I had presented a paper on the experiences of Chicana domestic workers. However, it was not until a year later, at the next annual conference, when she confided that she had grown up in the same house that her mother worked in as a live-in maid. This meeting was very emotional for Olivia: she had concealed her background because she wanted to be identified not with the social world of her mother’s employers but rather with the Mexican immigrant workers who cleaned their houses, cared for their children, cooked their meals, washed and ironed their clothes, cut the grass, and pruned their gardens. A recent college graduate working for a civil rights organization, Olivia had become increasingly uncomfortable with the disconnect between the cultural capital she had acquired from being raised in an upper-middle-class household and community and the working-class ethnic identity she claimed as the daughter of a Mexican immigrant woman employed as a domestic. Our paths crossed at an opportune time in Olivia’s life. She was at a point in her life where she wanted to talk about her experiences with members of the Smith family, her mother’s employers. For her, “being one of the family” held both truths and contradictions. The fact that she was no longer living near her mother, but residing in another state, increased the urgency of her need to understand the mother-daughter tensions that remained after years of negotiating their relationship within the dynamic of her mother’s employment. Olivia was ready to tell her story from the standpoint of the maid’s daughter.

As I began analyzing Olivia’s narrative, I realized that my first book, *Maid in the USA* ([1992] 2002), had focused entirely on the employer’s home; I had not included a comparable examination of employees’ families. While I did compare and contrast the differences found among employer and employee spouses, I did not examine the different division of household labor among the children. As Olivia recalled her mother’s work as a domestic, she pointed to the ways she had learned to be responsible for cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry, as well as how she had heard about and sometimes seen the vastly different houses and family life in relation to her family in Mexico or immigrant families in Los Angeles. Rarely has the dilemma of women’s work been examined from the child’s viewpoint. What does it mean when working mothers are too tired to spend quality time with their children at the end of the day? How does the child interpret work obligations that extend into family time?
How does their mother’s occupation shape the way that children are treated by their employers and the larger community? These are all questions concerning mothers who care for their employers’ children and clean their houses—raised from the perspective of employees’ children. Low wages and lack of benefits in domestic service point to the ways that carework is unequally distributed among families, communities, and nations. This research inquiry pointed to the reproduction of privilege.

**Interviewing over Life Stages**

My first interview with Olivia was unlike any interviewing I had ever done and may hold a clue to why the interview process extended over two decades. In previous interviews, I had always been able to mark a beginning and an end. As a graduate student, I learned that many times the interview actually begins when the recorder is turned off. I soon learned to keep the recorder running as I finished up—just in case my interviewee began to elaborate on points made during the “formal” interview. I had never interviewed anyone as assertive as Olivia. Any concerns about getting her to talk or to discuss questions that might cause discomfort were immediately erased. As we sat down to begin the interview, I turned on the tape recorder and before I had even voice-recorded the date and setting, Olivia began her story as the maid’s daughter: “My mom was born in a place called Piedras Negras—not the border Piedras Negras but a small town in Aguascalientes, Mexico. Her father was from the state of Chihuahua. She grew up with my paternal grandfather’s relatives and spent a lot of time with her aunts and grew up with them.” As each audio tape ended, she waited as I turned it over or started a new tape. Olivia continued for six hours without any other type of interruption, and then announced that we had done enough for the day and turned the recorder off. Without further discussion, we turned our attention to dinner and talked about university life and politics.

Olivia is the only person I have ever interviewed who started the interview without any preliminaries and had a beginning to her story. However, any idea of her telling her story with a beginning and end was quickly dispelled in the following interviews. Future interviews took on an “Olivia is in charge” format but did not follow the same chronological order as her first interview. Many of the interviews were scheduled in response to Olivia’s interactions with her mom or a member of the employers’ family.
For example, trips to Los Angeles resulted in revisiting old arguments or sentiments, or reporting new turns in her mother’s relationships with the employers. She began such interviews with a detailed description of the incident or story and then wove in other memories or information that offered possible explanations. Since she was so easily distracted from her stories, which reminded her of other incidents, I tried to avoid interruptions. While she talked, I kept notes of items to go back and ask her about. These questions were usually for clarification, but sometimes they were requests for her to elaborate on various points of the story or the meaning she attached to an incident or comment. Later, as I transcribed and analyzed the tapes, I kept a journal of questions and topics requiring more detail. This journal came in handy during interviews scheduled around my travels rather than in response to her contacting me to share additional stories and news.

Olivia is a very engaging storyteller and gets into character as she describes incidents. She loudly expresses her outrage and sprinkles humor throughout her narration of events that break the social norms. After the first six-hour interview, I walked away unaware of how she had been affected by telling me about her life in the gated community. The next day, as we walked along the Colorado River, she reflected on the stories and incidents she had described the previous day. Her reflections pointed to unresolved tensions in her life. For the first couple of years, Olivia continued with a period of reflection after each interview session. At first, these reflections seemed too personal to record, but sensing that Olivia did not share the same boundaries as I did, I asked her permission to keep the tape running and she agreed. Gradually, the tape recorder accompanied us everywhere, even when we were driving, cooking, or taking walks. As the years went by, these periods of reflection became fewer, occurring only when the interview included new information or after Olivia experienced a specific event. Listening to her reflections was important: in the early years of the project, they helped me identify ongoing tensions, and later they announced Olivia’s acceptance of circumstances she could not change or simply presented an aspect of who she is.

I began interviewing Olivia when she was in her mid-twenties and a few years out of college. She was living away from her family and was working full time for a civil rights organization. We began the project at a time when she was recognizing that her assumption that leaving California would result in an end to the paternalistic relationship and condescending interactions with the employers had not been correct. Her mother continued to work
for the Smith family, and since her mother continued to work on a live-in basis, Olivia was expected to stay at the employers’ home when she visited her mother. Given her mother’s age and health problems, Olivia needed to maintain ongoing communication with the employers who shared information that her mother tried to conceal from her. At the same time, Olivia’s involvement in civil rights politics became acknowledged by the employers as a lifetime commitment rather than an adolescent fad, which resulted in increased racial and class tensions between them. Furthermore, Olivia was recognizing that even though she no longer lived with her mother’s employers, they continued to shape who she is. Submerging herself among immigrant, working-class, and first-generation college students of color, she became painfully aware of the cultural capital that she took for granted and the questions of ethnic and class authenticity that arose from uncomfortable interactions. Committed to using her cultural capital to increase her effectiveness as a civil rights advocate, she also was aware of her mannerisms, which intimidated others and marked her as an outsider.

Olivia in her thirties was occupied with beginning a family, negotiating her mother’s retirement, and building her career. Carmen had lived most of her adult life as a live-in maid and Olivia had heard her mother and the employers always tell each other they would grow old together. But, Olivia also knew that her mother owned property in Mexico and had told her family she would retire near them in Juarez. However, when Olivia asked her about this, Carmen dismissed the Juarez plan, rejecting life there as incompatible with her attachment to Los Angeles. Carmen eventually retired by moving in with Olivia over a period of several years, caring for Olivia’s children and keeping the house while taking regular trips to Mexico to visit her sisters; she also flew back to Los Angeles to help with weddings and births. Gradually, the visits to Los Angeles were replaced with phone calls, which became her only contact with the employers. In my interviews with Olivia during this period, she moved away from the painful recollections of having to spend time with Mr. and Mrs. Smith at home; of longing for her mother, who was always working; and of yearning for more cultural diversity. Now, Olivia told stories of reconciling her relationship with Mr. and Mrs. Smith by seeking business advice related to her new job and when negotiating another position. Her relationship with her mother began to change as they spent more time together and Olivia came to recognize how resourceful and smart Carmen was.
As Carmen retired and started to live full time with Olivia, both women had to negotiate their relationship outside the employers’ residence. As the primary wage earner of the family, Olivia makes most of its decisions but recognizes that Carmen is managing the family in the same way she managed many of her former employers’ families. At first, Carmen’s behavior in Olivia’s home was not much different than it had been when she was a live-in maid. This alarmed Olivia, but nothing she said or did changed her mother’s work habits. As the grandchildren got older, however, Carmen participated in their sports events and school activities in ways that she had missed out on when Olivia was growing up. In the interviews during this stage of her life, Olivia was much less emotional about and far more accepting of the fact that she was not going to change her mother, but remained steadfast about what she wanted for her own children. By starting her own business and working more independently, she has embraced the skills developed from her past experiences and is focusing on the projects she wants to contract for. The work arrangement allows her to spend more time with her children.

If I had approached Olivia’s life story project as a rigid research question and limited the research period to a few months or years, I would have failed to fully understand the nuances of her experiences as “one of the family” and its long-term impact on the mother-daughter relationship. Any predetermined research period would not have acknowledged Olivia’s own life processes in making sense of her experiences. Olivia was an adult woman with her own children when she was exposed to the ways that she and her mother had affected the Smith family. She learned that the Smith children had appropriated Mexican culture and claimed to have a Mexican mother. More surprising was the recognition that Mr. Smith had been proud of her: over the years, even in her absence, he had continued to watch her career and talk to his friends about her. As an adolescent, she had thought of Mr. and Mrs. Smith’s interest in her only as a sociology project, in which they experimented with her life to see how assimilation might lead to financial success. She had subsequently rejected assimilation and committed herself to a bicultural path to success, not recognizing at the time that they would come around to accepting her choices, even though they did not agree with all of them, and that they were proud of her. My narrative attempts to convey the ways that children learn their own status within various social settings and recognize the changes as they
move from one social group to another. However, the narrative I constructed would not have been possible until Olivia had reached a stage in her life where she felt a sense of belonging.

The two-decade research period also captured the change in our nation and the growing influence Mexican culture has had on popular culture, as well as how it is changing the demographics of the country. Just as Olivia struggled to maintain her bilingual skills, Spanish-language radio, TV, and newspapers gained a larger market in the United States. The culture she yearned for as an adolescent is now visible in concert halls, soccer fields, chain restaurants, museums, and even local gyms (in their offering of Zumba classes). Olivia’s story captures the changing cultural and racial terrain, with maids’ daughters like herself moving from living outside to inside the American Dream. Had I written the book a few years after meeting Olivia, my study on domestic workers would not have understood the role of globalized carework in the production of inequality between families, communities, and nations. The U.S. population is growing older and few women remain outside the labor force, removing them as a potential pool of caregivers. Elderly care is taking its place alongside child care as a major source of employment for women immigrant workers. In providing carework, Latina immigrant mothers “mother at a distance” by leaving their children with family members in their homeland or adapting a wide range of strategies for care of their children in the United States. Low wages and the absence of benefits—maintained through the lack of state or federal legislation—contribute to reproducing the working poor.

**Composing a Life**

A life story told over years captures the changing positions in a person’s social position, along with that person’s ways of adjusting priorities, defining tensions, and dealing with contradictions. As I quickly learned, over time our storytelling of significant events in our lives frequently incorporates new details, and sometimes different meanings, that might come to represent important turns in a life. Narrating a life over decades adds new adventures and incidents that might disrupt social relationships or begin to redefine them. Unfortunately, writing a life story takes a lot of editing, which means making choices that shape the telling of the story. The choices I made were largely made as a sociologist analyzing privilege, power relations, identity, and resistance.
As I worked on my book about Olivia, I was overwhelmed by the thought of organizing over five hundred pages of transcripts into sociology. As I transcribed the tapes, I began to organize the stories chronologically but realized the reflections did not neatly fit into different time periods of her life. I was also confronted with the repetition of stories and the unique features of each telling. Each telling of a story took it in a slightly different direction. After several attempts at writing the book, I began to doubt my ability to finish the book. Every attempt ended in a complete tangle of disjointed events and time periods. I turned to published life stories in desperation, hoping to find a method to write the book. I finally began mapping out themes. This turned out to be quite easy, since I had written shorter pieces over the years that had already identified the most salient themes in the narrative. Next, I began grouping together the major events in her life that had taken on special meaning. Some of these had been turning points or events that changed her social circumstances, but most of them represented the sum of rituals to define privilege, power relations, and social relationships. These events revealed tensions and contradictions resulting from Olivia’s status as “one of the family,” the employers’ choices to include or exclude her, and the changing expectations she experienced as the maid’s daughter.

Olivia began her first interview with me by telling her family story, recounting not lived experience but stories passed down as family lore. She gradually gave witness to her own stories of family life, many of them set in the employers’ home, where she learned the social cues of when to act like a member of the employers’ family and when to resume her social position as the maid’s daughter. Olivia’s stories of the Smith family were not about lineage or ancestral bloodlines, but rather her obligation to her mother’s employers and the pseudo-family relations placed on her as the child of the live-in maid. She had to assume a position alongside the employers when they wanted her to act “like one of the family” and in other settings she was expected to fulfill the role and status of the maid’s daughter. Olivia’s family stories included her construction of sharing time (including holidays) with immigrant workers living in Pico Union and attending maid gatherings in the gated community, which represented family time to her as she was growing up because they were activities she participated in with her mother. Analyzing these family stories captured the themes of Olivia’s search for identity and belonging, which are structured around the power relations between employer and employee, upper class and working class, English-speaking
and Spanish-speaking, and citizen and immigrant. For Olivia, “being one of
the family” has been significant in locating herself in the world of employers
and the nation that defines her mother as a noncitizen. The family became a
useful metaphor in examining home-work boundaries and the class-, race-, and
gender-based social order of globalized carework in the United States.

During the course of the project, Olivia had always generously answered
my questions and offered to share stories that she thought might be rele-
vant to the project. I never ceased to be a participant observer while in her
company. We had developed a strong sense of trust over the years. While we
enjoyed each other’s company, our interaction had developed a pattern of
me listening and Olivia talking, which at times became exhausting. The con-
versation, rightly so, always turned back to her experiences and social inter-
action. As Olivia lived her life, she never experienced the “end” to being the
maid’s daughter, but I faced the reality of needing to finish the project.

Finding an ending to Olivia’s story for the reader was easier than I had
thought. The answer was one more interview session toward the end of
my writing the book. Entering the social world that Olivia had created for
herself gave me the confidence that I would end the book with a conclu-
sion that did justice to her story as the maid’s daughter. As I entered her
home and hugged Carmen, I was immediately struck by the way Olivia had
blended aspects of Mrs. Smith’s and Carmen’s parenting practices, and by
the presence of Spanish and English on the TV and the radio. Later, as we
drove off to the gym for a Zumba class, I witnessed how she had chosen
social activities that were both multiracial and multicultural. The tensions
of being pulled by different social worlds were completely gone. Olivia had
succeeded in being successful by maintaining her ethnic roots and continu-
ing to fight for civil rights.

Now the book is complete (Romero 2011), and I am delighted that Olivia
has embraced it. I was a bit concerned when she did not read the draft I sent
her. Later, I discovered that she gave the manuscript to a friend to read first.
After the friend assured her that it was fine, she read the draft. I was surprised
at her hesitation, because she had never commented on the papers and articles
I had sent her before, or the earlier versions of the book (long since discarded)
I had shown to her. However, I came to realize that the close-up sociological
analysis of her entire life was a bit intimidating. After the book was released,
she did express some concern about how some of her acquaintances had made
her aware of the ways they were able to identify her. I thought I had taken ade-
quate precautions, but I had not anticipated her mentioning her presence in
my book to a chosen few who were not depicted in a particularly good light in her stories. These encounters were not positive experiences for her and she has become more careful about revealing her identity. Fortunately, she has no regrets about being the subject of my project.

Olivia continues to be “the maid’s daughter” in the stories she shares with me when I drop into town and we meet for dinner. For some time now, I have been aware of the way that the interview process has left its mark on our personal interactions. I have taken a passive role as listener and limit my own stories to responding to her questions. As a friend, I am interested in knowing about her adventures but am no longer interested in the sociology of her life. I enjoy seeing photos of her daughter playing baseball and I always inquire about her mother. I continue to be impressed with her ability to blend her wide range of multicultural and bilingual skills into her work. Her life in corporate America and mine in the academy do not offer many mutual points for conversation, but our interest in national politics—particularly the role Latinos play—continues to be a major point of discussion. I am glad the project is over and I do believe that we will have an ongoing friendship based on our twenty-year journey into the life of the maid’s daughter.

Note

1. “Olivia,” “Carmen,” and “the Smith family” are pseudonyms.

References

