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The Discourse of Powerlessness and Repression

Life stories of domestic migrant workers
in Hong Kong

Hans J. Ladegaard



The Discourse of Powerlessness and Repression

Drawing on a large corpus of narratives recorded at a church shelter for abused domestic helpers in Hong Kong, this monograph explores how the women discursively construct themselves in sharing sessions with other helpers. They see themselves as ‘helpers’ who have come to Hong Kong to help their families, to help the people in the city, and to serve God. A wide variety of competing identities are constructed in the narratives: submissive helpers, sacrificial mothers, daughters and wives and powerless traumatised victims, but also resourceful indignant migrant women who, through sharing and peer support, become empowered to fight against abusive employers. This book provides a detailed discourse analysis of the women’s narratives, but it also explores larger issues such as global migration, exploitation, language and power, abuse and the psychology of evil, inter-group communication and peer support and empowerment.

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With photos by Gratiane de Moustier

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Acknowledgements

This book is about identity in domestic migrant worker narratives. It is also a book about human suffering, drawing on an on-going research project about the lives and experiences of Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers. The stories that have been analysed for this book were recorded at a church shelter over a four-year period (2008–2012), and (to a lesser extent) during a fieldtrip to rural Java in Indonesia and to Bohol in the Philippines to visit migrant worker returnees. The research was part of two projects funded by the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong, and I am grateful for their financial support.

The stories in this book focus on domestic workers in Hong Kong, but the location is less important. These stories of suffering and humiliation could have happened anywhere in the world. Research projects, news reports and surveys from migrant worker NGOs tell the same story: that no matter where they go, domestic migrant workers are exploited and abused. Employers in Hong Kong are not bad people per se, and they are certainly no worse than employers in other countries that employ large numbers of migrant workers. And labour laws designed to protect migrant workers' rights are arguably better in Hong Kong than in many other countries. But in too many cases, the laws are not enforced, and migrant women are hidden away from the public eye and left at the mercy of their employers.

The stories in this book provide compelling evidence of human-inflicted suffering and as such, they are unsettling – emotionally, ethically and morally. They provide insight into poor migrant women's suffering, but at the same time, also into the unfathomable capacity for evil that human beings possess. The overwhelming majority of abusive employers in Hong Kong are Chinese women, but I argue as forcefully as I can that they have become abusive for social and psychological reasons, not because of their ethnicity or gender.

The research behind this book began as voluntary work at a church shelter, but was turned into research (as well) because of my desire to get more attention to domestic migrant women's plight. So, the book is also an attempt to discuss how researchers may engage in multiple, seemingly contradictory, roles (the social activist vs. the 'neutral' observer and analyst). I made mistakes and I changed my view on sociolinguistic research radically along the way. I used to believe that scientific objectivity was not only obtainable but also desirable. After my meetings with migrant women and the NGOs who work for them, I believe that

scholars who work with marginalised and vulnerable minority groups have to take a stand, and that stand will often be against the powerful elite who knowingly allows powerless people to suffer because of financial gains. It is my hope that this book will be read and discussed not just by academics, but also by lawmakers, business people, news reporters, lawyers, NGO staff and ordinary citizens in the East and the West so that we can work together to improve living conditions for migrant workers.

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their stories with me and with their friends. For a couple of hours, we shared life stories, and these stories changed my life forever. For brief moments, their pain and their grief became mine, and it's my hope that this has provided me with enough background to do justice to the stories in this book. The challenge for any intercultural encounter is that we get "inside the shoes of the other, long enough and profoundly enough to see his or her reality" (Blight, 2002). If this book has helped accomplish that for just some of its readers, I think it has accomplished its goal.

Hong Kong, March 2016

Hans J. Ladegaard



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1 Introduction

1.1 Domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong

Immigration is an essential premise of life in a global world. Globalisation has offered increased opportunities to many professionals and skilled workers who can choose to deploy their mobile resources across different spaces and contexts for shorter or longer periods of time. However, for people at the bottom of the globalisation market, as Blommaert (2010, p. 179) puts it, globalisation has seriously constrained their lives and opportunities because they do not possess the resources and qualifications that are sought after in the global economy. For refugees, asylum seekers and unskilled migrant workers, immigration is not a choice but a necessity. People from developing countries are often faced with grim choices. Either they stay at home with their children, who are then kept in poverty with no prospects of a better future, or they leave home and become migrant workers, but, at the same time, suffer the pains of being separated from their children and other family members. This book is about a group of people who have become victims of globalisation, whose position remains vulnerable and whose future is precarious. It is a book about the life stories of domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong.

The Philippines is one of the largest exporters of labour in the global economy, with an estimated 9.5 million Filipino migrant workers living and working overseas (around 10% of the population).¹ Although Indonesian migrant workers ‘only’ comprise an estimated 4.3 million (1.7% of the population), the figure is sharply increasing, with around half a million new migrant workers leaving their home country every year, and Indonesia is therefore expected to be a major player in labour exports. Although introduced as a temporary measure to ease unemployment, the labour-exporting policies of developing countries like the Philippines and Indonesia have now become an integral part of the global economy and are therefore not likely to change. Remittances constitute a major part these countries’ economies – in 2010, an estimated US\$21 billion for the Philippines, and US\$8.2 billion for Indonesia – and the rise of the migrant worker, discursively constructed by his/her government as an ‘empowered individual’ who can choose to become, or not to become, a migrant worker, has become an important embodiment of globalisation in Asia (Tyner, 2004). Policy makers and recruitment agencies have framed labour migration as a win-win situation simultaneously

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addressing the labour shortage in developed countries and poverty and unemployment in developing countries (Pratt, 2012). However, what the official policies on labour migration fail to address is the pain and suffering experienced by migrant parents and their children (Parreñas, 2005), caused both by “the destructiveness of distance” (Pratt, 2012, p. 46) and by the discrimination, exploitation and abuse experienced by shockingly large numbers of migrant workers (Chiu, 2005; Constable, 2007; Bales, 2012). What many experience when they immigrate is that the “gains in earning power are diffused by loss in racial and class status” (Parreñas, 2008a, p. 172). Thus, poor migrant workers may escape the social constraints they have lived under at home, but only to confront a different set of racialised gender and class constraints in Hong Kong and other Asian and Middle Eastern economies to which they immigrate.

The majority of migrant workers are women. Most of them work as domestic helpers, primarily in the Middle East, or in other Asian countries like Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan, but in recent years, increasing numbers of foreign domestic helpers² (FDHs) have also found work in Europe and North America (Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2010; Pratt, 2012). There are about 330,000 FDHs in Hong Kong, the vast majority being from the Philippines (48%) and Indonesia (49%). They work as live-in maids on two-year contracts providing much-needed remittances to their families back home. For many years, non-local domestic workers in Hong Kong were almost exclusively from the Philippines, but in recent years, increasing numbers of Indonesian women have been recruited to meet the labour shortage. Smaller numbers are also being recruited from Bangladesh, Thailand and Myanmar. Historically, upper- and middle-class families in Hong Kong have a long tradition of employing Chinese *amahs*, live-in maid servants, and this has paved the way for a massive influx of foreign labour, particularly in the 1980s and 90s, when many Chinese domestic workers turned to paid work outside the home for better wages. However, as Constable (2007) argues, the Chinese *amahs* also paved the way for a system that expects domestic helpers to be subservient and humble and obey their master without question. Thus, the *amah* system has become “a metaphor for control and domination and a tool with which to put present day workers ‘in their proper place’” (p. 62).

This book analyses the life stories of FDHs in Hong Kong focusing on how language is used to index different social identities. They are *not* stories about the ‘average’ domestic migrant worker in Hong Kong. Various anthropological studies have explored the life stories of a broad segment of migrant women in a community and provided a broad picture of their lives in the diaspora (see, for example, Constable, 2007; Liebelt, 2011; Pratt, 2012). The stories in this monograph focus on migrant women’s experiences of repression, fear and powerlessness. The narratives were recorded at Bethune House, a church shelter that provides temporary accommodation to FDHs whose contract has been terminated or who have run away from abusive employers. Many of the stories told by the women at the shelter are trauma narratives about physical assault and sexual abuse, harassment, starvation, underpayment and other forms of exploitation. They are “stories about things that shouldn’t happen, rather than about things that didn’t happen” (Shuman, 2005, p. 20), and they epitomise that domestic migrant

workers, perhaps more than any other group, are vulnerable and repressed and their future precarious. Despite legislation designed to protect FDHs' rights in Hong Kong, many are exploited, assaulted and abused (see Chiu, 2005; Constable, 2007; Ladegaard, 2012; 2013a; 2013b), and because FDHs are often not aware of their rights, employers may get away with months, or even years, of abuse before it is discovered.

The story of Maryane,³ a 28-year-old Indonesian domestic helper, is one out of many. She came to Bethune House on 4 May 2010, visibly distraught, telling the staff that she had run away from her employer with no luggage and no money. She had worked for four months for an abusive employer who beat her every day. She worked 16 hours a day on very little food, and she had to sleep inside the toilet. As the story unfolds, with detailed accounts of how she was beaten and dragged by the hair across the kitchen floor, she sobs and is barely capable of speaking. This is a story of unspeakable suffering and humiliation, a trauma narrative whose tellability is compromised by the unacceptability of the events (Shuman, 2005, pp. 19–20).

Unlike many FDH narratives, Maryane's story is documented, which makes it even more compelling, and the cruelty of the employer more unfathomable. She recorded the beatings, and her employer yelling at her, on her mobile phone, and after the abuse, she used her phone to take pictures of her swollen face and bruises. For four months, she did not leave the house; she was beaten almost every day, and she was never paid any salary. The excerpt below is a transcript of one of the beatings that Maryane recorded on her phone. She has laid the table for breakfast, but has forgotten to put the butter on the table (voice of female employer; original in Cantonese; transcription conventions in the Appendix).

Excerpt 1

what is missing? what is missing? (2.0) huh? (2.0) anything? what is missing? anything? [slap] anything? huh? [slap] why can't you [slap] take a look? [slap] can't you take a look first? [slap] to see what is missing before you do the laundry? [. . .] maybe the butter is missing, then bring it out, I didn't ask you to toast the bread, what's wrong with you? should I get angry again tomorrow? (2.0) I have reminded you many times, you have a poor memory, then you should check, if anything is missing (1.0) huh? (3.0) you better die [slap] why aren't you dead? you better jump off the building and kill yourself, you better die (3.0) you make me so angry every day, you better die

Like the Abu Ghraib incidents discussed in Caton (2010), Maryane's story represents "a limit case in our thinking on ethics." It somehow exceeds "what we might call the 'unethical' and might be better captured under the category of evil" (p. 166). Although modern philosophy and anthropology have virtually abandoned evil as an analytical concept and consigned it to theology, it seems appropriate to reintroduce it to characterise intentionally demeaning behaviour that appears to serve no other purpose but to humiliate and dehumanise another human being (Tileaga, 2007).

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In the remaining part of this chapter, I first explain the contributions this book makes to existing research on migrant workers, its rationale and scope, and what it adds to existing theories in sociolinguistics. Then, I provide a summary of the content of the individual chapters.

1.2 Domestic migrant worker research: An overview

Life stories and narratives have been studied extensively in recent years by scholars from diverse disciplines, such as sociolinguistics, ethnography and anthropology, human geography, sociology and social psychology. Despite significant variation in methodology and analytical frameworks, as well as the types of narratives that are being analysed, most narrative research could be seen as attempts to fulfil the promise of storytelling, which, according to Shuman (2005, p. 1), is

to make meaning out of raw experiences; to transcend suffering; to offer warnings, advice, and other guidance; to provide a means for travelling beyond the personal; and to provide inspiration, entertainment, and new frames of reference to both tellers and listeners.

The following brief account of relevant research is far from exhaustive. It focuses on (narrative) studies of domestic migrant workers, and it identifies areas in the current literature that are still under-researched and questions that are still unanswered.

The structural vulnerability, exploitation and suffering of domestic migrant workers are well documented in the literature (see Chuang, 2010 for a discussion). In many studies, they are portrayed as “prototypical victims of the triple oppression of race, class and gender” (Liebelt, 2011, p. 5). Parreñas (2001) argues that exclusion and dislocation are core problems for domestic migrant workers. In her study of Filipina migrant women in Rome and Los Angeles, she identifies four types of dislocation: first, they are excluded from the nation state because they will only ever experience, at best, partial citizenship. Second, migrant workers are excluded from the intimacy of family life: they remain strangers in their employers’ household, despite common misperceptions that they are often treated as ‘one of the family’ (Constable, 2003; Parreñas, 2014), and, at the same time, suffer the pains of being separated from their own family. Third, domestic migrant workers are involved in what Parreñas (2001, p. 3) calls “contradictory class mobility,” i.e., they are engaged in socially devalued, low-status work, despite the fact that they themselves are often well educated. Thus, for many particularly Filipina domestic workers, their diasporic experience becomes associated with social deroute (Ladegaard, 2012). Finally, migrant workers are dislocated from the migrant community because the narrative of profitmaking, which is their motivation for being there, ultimately leads to alienation from other migrants. While there is substantial evidence for the first three types of dislocation in the narratives that are analysed in this book, there is no evidence that the FDHs at the church shelter are isolated from the migrant community. On the contrary, the community in the church, and at the shelter and other migrant organisations, is often mentioned as a

rallying point, bringing together Christian Filipinas and Muslim Indonesians, and as a means of survival in the midst of turmoil and adversity.

An additional area of exclusion that Parreñas does not mention is in relation to language. As Pillar and Takahashi (2010, p. 542) point out, “the experiences of migrant reproductive workers are profoundly embedded in linguistic and communicative inequalities.” It is a common problem that employers and their domestic workers do not speak the same language, which adds to FDHs’ sense of inferiority and exclusion (Anderson, 2000). It is also common that linguistic inadequacies are used by employers to demean their domestic helper (Ladegaard, 2013a), or the helper’s ability to communicate in English (or Chinese) is used as a way to assess her overall competence (England & Stiell, 1997). It is also clear in the current study that the relatively lower status of Indonesian helpers compared to Filipinas, and their more profound (sense of) exclusion and exploitation, are caused, at least to some degree, by their inability to communicate in English (or Chinese). However, language is also used by resourceful Filipina helpers as a way to mock an abusive employer and thus, at least temporarily, gain the upper hand, as in Ruth’s reply to her monolingual Chinese employer: “I’m sorry ma’am, I don’t understand you so you better speak in English so that we can understand each other” (see Chapter 7).

In general, domestic work is socially devalued; it is considered non-professional work and therefore, usually underpaid. Domestic work is also constrained to the private sphere of the household, and both the household and domestic work have been constructed almost universally as female domains (Liebelt, 2011). It is not surprising, therefore, that in much of the existing research, domestic migrant workers are seen as victims of prevalent gender and racial ideologies. Parreñas (2001; 2008a) links globalisation and the feminisation of wage labour, which has led to an international division of labour in which women from the global South are taking over female tasks of social reproduction, such as caring for children and the elderly, cleaning, shopping and cooking, from women in the global North. Mills (2003) speaks of a ‘gendered global economy’ and argues that an increasing number of women from developing countries are being recruited to ‘do the dirty work’ (Anderson, 2000) in developed countries because they are flexible, cheap and easily disciplined. This interpretation fits well into a feminist framework in which “gender ideologies function to legitimize gender-specific and hierarchically structured divisions of labour” (Liebelt, 2011, p. 9).

Thus, the care industry, or, as Constable (2009) puts it, the commodification of care and intimacy, has become a highly feminised and racialised domain that compels migrant women in developing countries to leave their own children and families and immigrate in order to care for the children of middle-class families in developed countries. Their lives and experiences, their battles and hardships and their negotiations for recognition have been recorded in a number of predominantly anthropological or sociological studies from a range of communities across the world, including Latin American maids in the USA (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001) and in Europe (Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2010), Sri Lankan domestic helpers in Saudi Arabia (Gamburd, 2000) and in Lebanon (Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004), Moroccan, Polish, Latin American and Filipina domestic workers in Europe (Anderson, 2000;

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Lutz, 2008b), Filipina domestic helpers in Europe and the USA (Parreñas, 2001), in Hong Kong (Constable, 2007; McKay, 2007), in Taiwan (Cheng, 2006), Singapore (Yeoh & Huang, 1998; 2000; Paul, 2011) and Israel (Liebelt, 2011) and Filipina or Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia (Chin, 1997) and in Hong Kong (Lai, 2011; Ladegaard, 2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2014; 2015; 2016a). Although different in terms of their methodologies and theoretical frameworks, these studies share a common concern for domestic migrant women's precarious lives and futures, and for the dilemma they find themselves in of being emotionally tied to, and yet distant from, their families back home (Lai, 2011).



Bekasi, West Java in Indonesia: Hosni and his grandmother. His parents are divorced and his mother works in Abu Dhabi.

Although it is widely recognised that the new international division of labour benefits both middle-class men and women in developed countries because it allows them both to work, some feminist scholars have argued that the presence of immigrant nannies does not just allow affluent women to work, but it enables affluent men to avoid their domestic responsibilities (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002b, p. 9; see also Anderson, 2000). These authors further argue that men are also directly responsible for the demand for migrant sex workers, and, in many cases, for the abuse of domestic migrant workers. The narratives in this book do not dispute that migrant women are vulnerable, personifying how inequality and the exploitation of labour have become some of the driving forces

for globalisation. But they dispute easy categorisation into essentialist gender dichotomies, which argue that men are abusive and women are not. In fact, the narratives provide evidence that abusive employers are overwhelmingly female (see also Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004). This finding also questions Gutierrez-Rodriguez's (2010) claim that gender signifies a degree of solidarity and unity between female employers and migrant workers. One of the contributions this study makes to the literature on domestic labour is to discuss and problematise the relationship between FDHs and their female employers.

The importance of race, which has also been singled out by many studies as salient in terms of explaining domestic helper abuse, is also discussed. Abusive employers may be Chinese and most of them are, which is not surprising in a city where the ethnic Chinese make up more than 90% of the population. However, the migrant women in my data also tell stories about abusive employers who are American, Australian, Indian, Pakistani, South African and even Filipino. Therefore, the study questions the dichotomous thinking, which, implicitly or explicitly, is present in much of the literature on domestic migrant workers arguing that migrant women are abused and exploited because of their gender and race. Abusive employers consistently refer to migrant women's poverty to demean them. This finding echoes with Bales' (2012, p. 4) claim about modern day slavery, which "focuses on big profits and cheap lives. It is not about owning people in the traditional sense of the old slavery but about controlling them completely." Bales suggests that the economic vulnerability of migrant workers is a key factor in their suppression.

In the new slavery, race means little. [. . .] The question isn't "Are they the right color to be slaves?" but "Are they vulnerable enough to be enslaved?" The criteria of enslavement today do not concern color, tribe or religion; they focus on weakness, gullibility and deprivation. [. . .] The common denominator is poverty, not color. Behind every assertion of ethnic difference is the reality of economic disparity. [. . .] Modern slaveholders are predators keenly aware of weakness; rapidly adapting an ancient practice to a new global economy.

(Bales, 2012, pp. 10–11)

Whilst Bales' proposition has some appeal, and is supported by the narratives in this study, it is also a fact that migrant women's otherness is a factor in their mistreatment. Our failure to embrace the cultural 'other' in his/her disquieting tension (Bredella, 2003) often leads to cross-cultural miscommunication and prejudice, and there is ample evidence in the women's stories that their foreignness may also contribute to discrimination and exploitation. I also argue that migrant workers are being demonised in the press, where stories about FDHs consistently engage in positive us-presentation and negative them-presentation, and this is arguably also a factor in legitimising their dehumanisation (Ladegaard, 2013c). An important part of their otherness is FDHs' inability to speak Chinese, which is often used by employers to mock them and as evidence of their perceived incompetence (Ladegaard, 2013a).

Another factor that is considered is the social dynamics of deindividuation and dehumanisation. Through the migrant women's narratives, we get an insight into the psyche of abusive employers. They are usually lonely women with no job and low self-esteem, who have lost the status they used to enjoy as heads of the household (Constable, 2007), and therefore, may get some degree of satisfaction and self-aggrandisement by humiliating another human being (Ladegaard, 2012). Jealousy also plays a role; many domestic workers testify that they have a good relationship with their male employer and with the children, and therefore, the women of the household are often singled out as the troublemakers: strict, demanding and impossible to please. Understanding dehumanisation is not the same as excusing it, but a study of narratives of suffering and abuse must consider why and under what circumstances employers become abusive. Zimbardo (2007) posits that if people think they can be anonymous, and if the situation implicitly gives people 'permission' to engage in violent behaviour, they will. The fact that the abuse happens within the anonymous confines of people's homes, and, almost exclusively, with only the victim and the perpetrator (the female employer) present, is therefore important.

The study also considers "the local codes of argument, the cultural and ideological resources used to account for controversial issues such as prejudice, discrimination and inequality" (Tileaga, 2005, p. 606). By examining ideologies of moral exclusion in Hong Kong, I attempt to explain how certain groups, such as Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers, become conceptualised as legitimate outcasts (Opotov, 1990). I argue that moral exclusion happens through public and private discourses about FDHs. In stories involving FDHs, the media consistently engage in positive us-presentation and negative them-presentation (Ladegaard, 2013c), and in private discourses about migrant women, they are constructed as cunning, and as liars and thieves who must be controlled in order not to 'become cocky' (Ladegaard, 2011a; 2016b). Despite no concrete evidence, popular myths about the undesirable attributes of certain minority group members exist in any society (Kulick, 1993) and work effectively to infer that there is something essentially wrong with a certain group of people as an aggregate (Hanson-Easey & Augoustinos, 2012). I show how both public and private discourses in Hong Kong about FDHs serve to justify repression and discriminatory behaviour and thus legitimise their depersonalisation and dehumanisation (Ladegaard, 2013a).

In some studies, FDHs are portrayed as victims: victims of globalisation as embodied in the unequal distribution of access to economic and social capital, and victims of predominant gender ideologies, which ascribe 'the dirty work' with no prestige and low pay to women (Anderson, 2000; Parreñas, 2001; 2008a). Or victims of racial and class ideologies that are at least partially responsible for menial labour being outsourced to developing countries where the workforce is cheap, and because domestic labour cannot be outsourced, cheap migrant labour from third world countries is imported (Lutz, 2008b). In other studies, however, the emphasis is on migrant women's struggle to actively negotiate and challenge dominant positions of gender, race and class and claim their own space. Liebelt (2011) points out that domestic migrant women in Israel frequently engage in political action to better their situation, and many openly challenge the ideologies that oppress them (Constable, 2007; 2010; Cheng, 2013).

A simple answer to the question of whether, or to what extent, FDHs are victims is perhaps that migrant workers do not constitute a uniform group and it is to be expected that different groups in different contexts and situations will display different characteristics. Many of the migrant women at the church shelter whose stories have been recorded for this study have been abused and therefore, we should not expect that they are actively engaged in fighting for domestic helper rights, or challenging dominant positions of class, gender or race. For most women at the shelter, the issue at hand is survival more than anything. But this does not mean that discourses of resistance are absent. As Constable (2007, p. 13) puts it: “domestic workers resist oppression in certain ways but also simultaneously participate in their own subordination.”

The question of FDHs’ victimisation is ultimately tied to the notion of choice. It has been argued that “choice is always at work, even with the poorest migrants” (Agustin, 2003, p. 32), and therefore, depriving them of choice is also contributing to their victimisation and depriving them of agency. However, if migrant women have real choice, they are arguably also empowered to make decisions about their lives and future. In other words, if they choose to come, they may also choose to leave, and this is empowering. However, drawing on the women’s narratives, I argue that domestic migrant women do *not* have real choice. ‘Choice’ is a Western concept tied in with privilege, nationality and education, and with the socio-economic power that comes with it. Most migrant women do not have access to these resources but have to leave their children and families behind in order to sustain them. Brenda, a 37-year-old Filipina helper and a mother of four, explained it like this to a naïve volunteer/investigator (Int) during one of his first sharing sessions at the church shelter. Six other Filipina women participated in this sharing session.

Excerpt 2

- 1 *Int:* Did you choose to come to Hong Kong, or did somebody ask you to go?
 2 (2.0)
 3 *Brenda:* Sir, we don’t choose (1.0) when your children cry at night because they’re
 4 hungry and you cannot feed them, you don’t **ask**, you **go**

Brenda’s reply epitomises FDHs’ dilemma, it encapsulates their inferior position (the polite address form ‘Sir’ in line 3, which also signifies inferiority), and it stresses, more than any other statement I have seen about this topic, that they are not in a privileged position to ask or choose, only to go (note the emphasis on ‘**ask**’ and ‘**go**’ in line 4). Thus, FDHs do not have a real choice, or, if they do, it is essentially a ‘choiceless choice’ (Langer, 1980).

1.3 Rationale and scope

There are at least five rationales for this monograph and the research behind it. First, narratives are important for identity research (De Fina, 2003; Bamberg, De Fina & Schifffrin, 2007). If storytelling is seen as an activity where identity is

instantiated and negotiated, then it is appropriate to investigate speakers' identity work through an analysis of their narratives (Taylor, 2007). Second, identity research on migrant workers is important because it explores how loss of belonging and displacement affect identity construction and maintenance (De Fina, 2003; Solis, 2004). FDHs in Hong Kong have not only lost their sense of 'home,' but they are also being rejected by the society in which many of them have spent the better part of their lives. While the social and political aspects of immigration are relatively well researched, we know little about who migrant workers are, what they think and feel about themselves and why they have immigrated (see De Fina, 2003, p. 2). Therefore, an in-depth analysis of domestic migrant women's narratives will provide us with new insights into FDHs' lives and experiences.

Third, the language of trauma narratives is under-researched. A characteristic feature of abuse narratives is that the victim is often unable to make sense of what happened and why. Therefore, storytelling is vital in order to "give voice to the trauma that was not previously understood or 'knowable'" (Duvall & Béres, 2007, p. 231). The women at the shelter have often been silenced by months of abuse, and the sharing sessions, where the narratives were collected, provided them with an opportunity to share their stories in a safe environment. The analyses consider both the structural features of trauma storytelling as evidenced in 'broken narratives' with voids in the narrative flow (Brockmeier, 2008), as well as the emotional component of trauma narratives focusing in particular on crying, which is seen as an authentication of feeling and meaning. The analyses also consider how crying in sharing sessions is a shared accomplishment where the narrator is granted a license to cry, as it were, by other group members. Crying thus becomes part of the discursive context rather than an expression of an inner psychological state of being (Ladegaard, 2014).

Fourth, FDH narratives are examples of intercultural discourses that are of interest to sociolinguists, intercultural communication scholars and discourse analysts alike. 'Intercultural' here refers to FDHs' accounts of how their employers construct them as 'different,' as abject and out of place – i.e., as evidence of the demonisation of the cultural 'other' (Ladegaard, 2013c). But it also refers to the sharing sessions at the church shelter where different nationalities meet, where different norms for interaction are negotiated and where language issues – such as lingua franca English, the power of English and Chinese, languages of inclusion and exclusion, code-switching and mixing and translation – are ever present.

Last but not least, FDH narratives are stories that simply need to be told. Many domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong and elsewhere do not have a voice: either they are not aware of their rights and therefore cannot speak up, or they have been silenced by abuse and exploitation. Narratives of suffering do not escape the question of the purpose of such research, but "they insist, sometimes even more explicitly than the scientific rationale, on knowledge as redemption and on the possibility that telling untold stories might make a better world" (Shuman, 2005, p. 162).

In terms of scope, the book offers new insights and different perspectives on domestic migrant worker narratives in a number of areas. First, the study is based on, to my knowledge, the most extensive database on domestic migrant worker

narratives that exists. More than 300 FDHs have participated in sharing sessions at the church shelter and had their story recorded, comprising around 60 sharing sessions and more than 90 hours of recorded material.⁴ This gives the analyst not only the opportunity to choose between a large number of examples, but also to see patterns in the narratives that only become transparent because of the sheer size of the dataset. Second, sociolinguistics has always been accountable to its data, and a sociolinguistic approach to narrative therefore pays close attention to not only *what* the participants are saying, but also *how* they say it. In some of the existing accounts of FDHs' lives, the data is either limited or reduced to primarily or exclusively second-hand accounts with no recorded material included (e.g., McKay, 2012). More than many previous studies, the current study aims to give the word back to the migrant women, as it were, and focus on *their* account of events.

A case in point is the question of 'choice.' Some authors have argued that migrant women can choose to go (or not go) abroad and work, and they can choose how they live. Agustin (2003), for example, claims that "combining business with pleasure is a concept available to the poor as well as the rich" (p. 32), and there is nothing therefore that compels migrant women to exclude themselves from "celebratory concepts such as transnationalism and cosmopolitanism" (p. 30). Such statements arguably reveal little awareness of the harsh realities of many domestic migrant workers' lives. I argue that (most) FDHs have no real choice, and, as far as the women at the shelter are concerned, I argue that many are victims. But I make these claims on the basis of an analysis of their talk, and by means of extensive ethnographic observations, which have come out of my voluntary work at the shelter. What this study adds to existing work is a close linguistic analysis of migrant workers' narratives. Identity needs to be treated as a multi-layered concept that considers the 'feeling,' the 'knowing' and the 'doing' of identity (Coupland, 2010a). The study offers a holistic approach to identity research, grounded in what FDHs say about themselves and their lives (Gumperz, 1982; Toolan, 2001).

Second, the nature of the data also makes it useful for an in-depth analysis of 'self' and 'other' in discourse. The majority of studies on FDHs are based on interview data. These studies have made a significant contribution to the literature, but an additional strength of the data in this study is that it is 'naturalistic' more than 'elicited.' Although the distinction between 'natural' and 'contrived' data is not as clear-cut as some studies seem to suggest (see Speer, 2002 for a critique), and although there is a good deal of interviewing taking place, the sharing sessions are arguably more 'naturalistic' than 'contrived.' The purpose of the sharing sessions was twofold: first, to get a record of the details of a particular case in case an FDH needed to file a complaint against her employer to the Labour Tribunal or to the police; and second, a therapeutic function which encouraged the women to share their stories in a safe environment.

Therefore, the data is 'naturalistic' in the sense that it serves a practical specific purpose, but it is also 'contrived' in the sense that the volunteer/researcher was aware of the research agenda when the data was collected, and this will inevitably have had an impact on some of the questions that were asked. What is important, however, is that the participants were able to set their own agenda. Mostly very

general questions were asked (such as, ‘Why are you here at Bethune House?’) to allow the women to tell stories that were important to them. Or the questions were focused on getting the details of a particular case documented as much as possible. It is my hope that the women felt compelled to tell *their* story, rather than feeling that they had to provide answers to the researcher’s questions in order to comply with a particular research agenda.

Third, the study defies easy interpretation of the exploitation of FDHs by reference to essentialist categories such as gender and ethnicity. I argue that if we look at domestic migrant women’s stories, there is little evidence that they are exploited or abused because they are women, or because they are Filipina/Indonesian. I do not question the unfairness of a world-order in which the ever increasing productivity and progress of the developed world is based on the exploitation of cheap labour in developing countries (Kramsch & Boner, 2010), but I argue that, at the micro-level, in people’s homes behind closed doors, references to gender, race and class are unable to explain why migrant women are abused. I argue that the implicit accounts of the employers’ identity construction we get through the women’s narratives provide us with insights into the nature of FDH abuse (Zimbardo, 2007).

1.4 Contribution to sociolinguistic theory

Because it is increasingly difficult, as Coupland, Garrett and Williams (2005, p. 85) point out, to identify a canonical sociolinguistics, it is also a challenge to propose exactly what a new publication contributes to sociolinguistic theory. Sociolinguistics has always been characterised by strong interdisciplinarity entertaining a broad range of theoretical perspectives. One reason why it is appropriate to analyse FDH narratives from a sociolinguistic perspective is that sociolinguistic theory has always worked explicitly at the language-society interface and oriented to both sides (Coupland, 2001). It is not meaningful to analyse domestic migrant worker life stories exclusively as a locally managed activity; as Verkuyten (2001) argues, “[the] wider ideological context is both inside and outside talk” (p. 275). To understand identity construction in FDH narratives, and to understand the dehumanisation of migrant workers, we need to look at the wider socio-cultural context and consider narratives as evidence of the ‘lived ideology’: the social, cultural and ideological resources that are used in the local context to account for and legitimise prejudice, discrimination and inequality (Tileaga, 2005, p. 606).

It is also important to pay close attention to the linguistics of narrative enquiry (Toolan, 2001). It is arguably a weakness that some of the existing research on domestic migrant workers pays little attention to what migrant workers are actually saying, let alone how they say it. This study attempts to orient to both the linguistic and socio-cultural side of sociolinguistic enquiry, and thus, contribute to what Coupland (2001, p. 2) calls an “integrationist social theory, bridging between macro-social concerns and the analysis of local communicative practice.”

An important contribution this book makes to sociolinguistics is in the area of identity research. Identity is complex and multifarious, but also problematic if we