

“THIS IS THE LIFE I WANT”: Au pairs’ perceptions of life in the global city

Abstract

London is an important destination for au pairs, who, like many other young migrants, are attracted by the social, cultural and economic opportunities the city offers. London also has strong demand for au pair labour, shaped by childcare regimes and working practices that have made in-home, privatised childcare popular with many families and a migration regime, including the deregulation of au pairing, which has funnelled migrants into low-paid domestic and caring work. This article examines the effects of au pairs’ perceptions of London. We argue that in the context of deregulation, au pairs aim to use the opportunities that London affords in order to develop networks and skills that they will use for future migration and careers, trading good conditions for the chance to be in the capital. Thus, positive perceptions of London work in host families’ favour as au pairs will accept poor pay and conditions in order to be located in London.

Keywords

Au pairs • childcare • deregulation • domestic work • London

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Introduction

Au pairing is a migration route for many tens of thousands of people, most of them are young women. The International Au Pairs Agency Association (IAPA) claims members in 45 countries worldwide, including China, Peru, Colombia and South Africa (IAPA, 2014). Au pairing has grown from its roots as a form of exchange between families in pre-war Europe (Liarou, 2015) into an international phenomenon. This proliferation of au pairing suggests that it needs to be better understood, both as an experience and as part of broader work and migration strategies.

The United Kingdom has one of the least regulated, but most popular, au pair schemes and the draw of London is a part of this popularity. No numbers are available, as au pairs’ movements and posts are not measured or registered, but estimates suggest that there are perhaps 90,000 au pairs in Britain at any one time (Smith, 2008). Since November 2008, there has been no specific au pair visa and no government guidance on what an au pair is or is not. Instead, au pairs are almost exclusively EU nationals who have the right to live and work in the United Kingdom but have chosen au pairing as a way to migrate, which provides accommodation and some form of structure and possibly support. In making this choice, they enter into an arrangement that is unregulated, not covered by employment law, the EU working time directive or minimum wage legislation. Few have contracts or are even in contact with agencies.

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As a result of this lack of regulation, au pair posts are at the whim of market forces, the nature of au pair placements and experiences is extremely variable and motivations for au pairing are mixed (Cox and Busch, 2016). Au pairing can be a ‘gap year’ abroad or the start of long-term, perhaps permanent, international migration (see *inter alia*, Búriková and Miller, 2010; Cox, 2006; Cox, 2015; Newcombe, 2004; Rohde, 2011; Rohde-Abuba, 2016a; Williams and Baláž, 2004; Yodanis and Lauer, 2005).

This article explores the interaction between this deregulated au pair sector and the draw of the global city. Migration researchers have long sought to understand the effects of migrants’ perceptions on their choice of destination (see Pelligrini and Fotheringham (2002) for a useful summary), and this paper looks qualitatively at the experiences of a group of migrants with very positive perceptions of a particular city. London was seen by au pairs in our study as an attractive destination both because of its cache as a cultural hub and because it was thought to provide opportunities for work and training that were not available to them elsewhere. Socio-economic conditions in London also underpin relatively high demand for au pairs, as families negotiate the complexities of paid work and home life in the global city. Many cities are attractive to au pairs, but this paper explores the specific way in which au pairs’ perceptions of London as a desirable destination creates an oversupply of au pairs, which, because of the deregulation of au pairing in the United

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Kingdom, may feed into the deterioration of working conditions and remuneration. Yet au pairs are not passive victims of supply and demand and London was perceived by many to be a place that offered opportunities for career development and education which could underpin long-term migration. Au pairs could trade better pay and conditions for the opportunities London offers. The example of au pairs' experiences within a low-waged labour market may have wider resonances as other young migrants may also be trading their work and living conditions for the chance to be in London and au pairs in other cities around the world may be making similar trades for the chance to be in exciting locations (see, e.g. Aguilar Perez, 2015).

Between May 2012 and January 2014, we interviewed 40 au pairs and 15 host families, key informants in the sector (NGOs, au pair agencies, etc.) and analysed 1,000 advertisements from Gumtree.com, a web site that is a very popular place to advertise for au pairs and au pair positions. The text of all advertisements placed in the 'Nannies/au pairs wanted' section was analysed to find the pay and conditions being offered including hours, remuneration, number and ages of children to be cared for, whether own bedroom was specified or excluded and any personal characteristics of the au pair being sought such as age, nationality or particular skills (see Busch, 2015). The au pairs interviewed came from 15 different countries, all in Europe. The most important countries numerically were the Czech Republic (six interviewees), Germany (six interviewees), Romania (six interviewees) and Spain (five interviewees). The age of au pairs ranged from 18 to 29 years and they had been au pairs for between 2 weeks and 5 years. Whilst most of the interviewees had been au pairing for 6–9 months, three had been an au pair for 5 years and about half had worked for more than one family, with three having also been an au pair in a country other than the United Kingdom. Nineteen had high school as their highest level of education, 11 had university qualifications including 6 with professional qualifications or postgraduate degrees. We asked au pairs about their reasons for au pairing, and for coming to the United Kingdom, their work and remuneration as au pairs, their relationship with their host family and their future plans.

The paper begins by situating au pairs within research on migration to London and the organisation of reproductive, particularly childcare, labour in the city. State policies have created a migrant division of labour (Wills *et al.*, 2010) within which home-based childcare and domestic labour are increasingly a migrant niche. In addition, we show how policy, cultural norms and the organisation of work in London have created a relatively large market for deregulated, low-paid childcare. We then look in more detail at the UK au pair scheme and show how this has evolved. The current form of au pairing in the United Kingdom means that there are low barriers to entry for EU citizens. There are also few formal barriers to exiting au pairing and moving into other forms of work. We then discuss findings from our empirical research to explore au pairs' perceptions of London and the effects of these in terms of the erosion of au pairs' conditions and the opportunities they embrace to try to realise their goals.

Migration and reproductive labour in the global city

In this section, we discuss the relationship between the deregulation of labour markets and the emergence of a migrant division of labour, particularly in care and domestic work. We add to this an exploration of how London's 'global city' status has affected family life and

childcare cultures to show the particular circumstances that shape au pairing in the city. London was identified by Sassen ([1991]2001), along with New York and Tokyo, as one of three 'global cities' a place shaped by its position as a command and control post for the global economy and as a destination for migrants, both rich and poor. In 2014, London was host to 3 million people who had been born outside the United Kingdom (Rienzo and Vargas-Silva, 2016).

London is attractive to migrants for both economic and 'lifestyle' reasons. Conradson and Latham (2007) found that London was seen as a place to encounter cultural diversity, to experiment, to work on the self and, perhaps, to become cosmopolitan (cf. Aguilar Pérez, 2015). The time spent in London was not meant to leave the person the same but instead offered possibilities of 'resubjectification' (Conradson and Latham, 2007: 234) through encounters with a new place and people. Similarly, King *et al.* (2014) argued that young German graduates migrate to London in order to experience living in a large, multicultural and cosmopolitan city. London is, therefore, perpetually (re)produced as an attractive destination for migrants, where the very fact that it is an attractive destination makes it more appealing still, and the flow of enthusiastic, capable migrants is maintained (see also Griffiths and Maile on young Britons in Berlin and the importance of cultural attractions and opportunities for intensified emotional experiences in that context and Gilmartin (2008) on migrant subjectivities).

Despite the attraction of London to graduates and others with skills, figures suggest that migrants in London are more likely to be found in the lowest-paid jobs, in the most dangerous, dirty and unpleasant situations (LSE, 2007; Spence, 2005) even if their skills and qualifications would equip them for other work. Migrants are the majority workforce in domestic work, and were very significant in hotels and restaurants, construction, transport and distribution, health and care services. Migrant workers typically earned 40 percent below the wage of the average Londoner, with newly arrived migrants from A8 European states earning little over minimum wage on average (LSE, 2007). Within certain sectors, such as personal services, hospitality and catering and commercial cleaning, there is evidence that growth was made possible because of an increased supply of migrant workers available to do these jobs flexibly for very low wages (see, e.g. Anderson, 2007; Matthews and Ruhs, 2007; Wills *et al.*, 2010), and we would argue that the same has been true for in-home childcare such as that provided by nannies and au pairs (Busch, 2015).

Migrant workers have played an important role because they are not necessarily interchangeable with native-born workers. Instead, in certain sectors including some within personal services industries such as in-home childcare, cleaning and other forms of domestic work, native-born workers rejected low-grade jobs on the grounds that the pay was too low and the jobs too were of low status and/or poor quality (McDowell, Batnitzky and Dyer, 2009; Herod and Aguiar, 2006). These were also 'migrant' jobs because if migrant workers were not available to do them, they would go uncreated or unfilled altogether (Dustmann and Fabbri, 2005; Dustmann, Hatton and Preston, 2005). That is, the supply of low-waged migrant labour has created a market for services that otherwise would not have been used or that would have been provided for free by the state or by family members. These dynamics shape the role migrant workers played across the market for in-home childcare in London of which au pairs are a part.

State policies have also opened up segregated and low-paid labour markets in London and elsewhere in the United Kingdom (Hirst and Thompson, 1999), and paid domestic work has been particularly

constructed by policy makers as a migrant niche. Research on paid domestic work in advanced industrial states has suggested that in many contexts, state policies were designed specifically to recruit migrants to do this low-paid labour (Anderson, 2000; Pratt, 2004; Ozyegin and Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2008). Anderson (2010) argued that such migration policies have moulded a workforce with particular downgraded relations to employers within localised labour markets. These workers were employed under less advantageous conditions than non-migrants and have impeded access to welfare in the case of pregnancy, illness or unemployment. The deregulated form of au pairing that exists in the United Kingdom at present can be seen as an example of this kind of moulding of a workforce. The classification of au pairing as something other than work holds down remuneration and limits au pairs' rights, whilst its portrayal as a cultural exchange scheme draws in certain groups of migrants and shapes their relationships with their hosts (Cox, 2012).

In addition to the regulatory and economic context that has encouraged the migration of low-paid workers into care-related work, it is also necessary to understand the situation of working families in London and the prevailing care regime of the United Kingdom. Existing literature on the employment of migrants in in-home childcare has identified points at which ideologies around childcare have intersected with ideologies around migration and highlighted the ways in which this intersection has had particular implications for the employment and lived experiences of migrant workers in differing national contexts (see in particular Lutz, 2008; Williams and Gavanas, 2008). This can be understood in terms of how different welfare, gender, care and migration regimes operate in different places. The term 'regime', following Esping Anderson's (1990) characterisation of welfare regimes, is used to refer to the organisation and corresponding cultural codes of social policy and social practice in which the relationship between social actors (state, labour market and family) is articulated and negotiated (Lutz, 2008).

Williams and Gavanas (2008, p.15) defined childcare regimes as differentiated by three policy-related factors, the extent and nature of public and market childcare provision; policies facilitating parents' involvement in paid employment; cash benefits for childcare; and the *care culture*. The United Kingdom was characterised by Esping-Anderson (1990) as having a liberal welfare state, and this welfare regime provides the broader context within which the childcare regime is shaped. The UK childcare regime has been one of favouring 'mother-like' care as best (Gregson and Lowe, 1994) with relatively low levels of state support for childcare and an expectation that families (read mothers) are individually responsible for finding market-based or other private solutions (Williams and Gavanas, 2008). At the same time, the United Kingdom has high rates of labour force participation of women with children – in 2013, 80 percent of women with children aged 4–10, who lived in a couple, was in paid employment in the United Kingdom (ONS, 2013) – and, compared to the Nordic countries at least, there are limited expectations on men to participate equally in reproductive labour. One outcome of this is high demand for privatised forms of childcare, such as nannies and au pairs. In London, working parents are also faced with a shortage of nursery places and high nursery costs (cf. 30 percent higher than that of the UK average and running at up to £22,000 a year in affluent areas (Hill, 2015)). The particular expense and pressures of working in the capital have also conspired with the high cost of nursery places to make nurseries a less attractive or viable childcare option. Such pressures include long commute times because of centralised work, long (relative to the rest of Europe) working hours and increasing demands for 'flexibility' from employers, all of which make it difficult to

fit work around the limited hours and lack of flexibility most nurseries offer (see also McDowell *et al.*, 2005, 2006). Unlike an au pair, nursery workers will not stay late if, for example, a parent is suddenly required to work late or has trouble getting to the nursery in time for pick up because of public transport disruptions. Also, London has a higher number of professional households 'without a wife' than the national average (Cox, 2006). This means that for many such households, nurseries might appear a less attractive option than hiring an au pair who would be expected to not only care for children but also do the housework, pick up dry cleaning, shop for groceries, put loads of washing on and so on.

Au pairs coming to London are, therefore, entering into this super-diverse city characterised by a varied population and relatively abundant opportunities for migrant workers prepared to undertake low-paid service sector work. It is also a city within which families struggle to negotiate the demands of paid work and family life and where the employment of au pairs and nannies is relatively common and culturally commended. Au pairing has been deregulated (as outlined below), creating a large and highly varied sector in which au pairs and hosts strive to realise their goals.

Au pairing in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has a long history as an important destination for au pairs (Liarou, 2015). Over the course of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the UK government first introduced, and then amended, an au pair visa that allowed young women (until 1993 when men were also included) from certain European countries to enter the United Kingdom temporarily as au pairs.¹ As the European Union expanded, nationals of the countries that had been entitled to apply for the au pair visa increasingly gained free access to the UK labour market and au pairing became less attractive to them as a way to enter the United Kingdom. The UK government responded to this first, in 2002, by extending the visa scheme to include Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania in order to ensure a continuous supply of au pairs (Cox, 2006) and then, in November 2008, by abolishing the visa and deregulating au pairing entirely (see Cox (2012) and Busch (2015) for details on this and see Búriková (this special issue) for the effects on au pairs at the time of EU expansion).

When the United Kingdom abolished its au pair visa, the expectation was not that there would no longer be au pairs in the United Kingdom rather that au pairs would now come from EU countries and would, therefore, not need visas. Until January 2014, nationals of Romania and Bulgaria could apply for a work permit to enter the United Kingdom as an au pair (Anderson, 2014; UKBA, 2013), and after January 2014, they were able to move freely and work in the United Kingdom as other EU nationals. There is also a small group of people who are allowed to enter au pairing through the Tier 5 Youth Mobility Scheme² but we did not meet anyone from this group in our research. During the period of our research, European au pairs, apart from those from Romania and Bulgaria, could move out of au pairing without breaking any rules and could choose to live independently and work in other occupations if they were able to (see Búriková, this Special Issue).

The deregulation of au pairing has made au pairs, apart from the small number on work permits, invisible to the UK authorities and the conditions that they live in are unmonitored. Between November 2008 and June 2014, the UK government provided no definition of au pairing or guidance on how au pairs should be treated, yet it did (in

other legislation) specifically exclude au pairs from the categories of 'worker' and 'employee' and explicitly deny them rights to the National Minimum Wage, to holiday entitlement and to protection under the European Working Time Directive and other labour protections (Cox, 2012). The UK approach contrasts with that of many other European nations that issue visas for au pairs from countries beyond Europe and that define the conditions in which au pairs should live, work and study, regulating, for example, maximum working hours and minimum pocket money (see other papers in this special issue and also Cox (2015) for comparison between au pair schemes).

Despite this deregulation, the United Kingdom – London particularly – is a popular destination for people wanting to become au pairs with many hundreds or even thousands of applications being made for some advertised au pair posts (Murray-West, 2012). One effect of the combined deregulation and oversupply of au pairs has been an expansion of the au pair role with au pairs being expected to work for long hours, to care for babies or infants or to do housekeeping rather than childcare (see Busch, 2015). As the example advertisement in Figure 1 suggests, there is now a lack of distinction between au pairs and domestic workers such as nannies and housekeepers (Busch, 2013). In our analysis of advertisements, we found that the average working hours being requested were close to full time (38.7 hours per week) and that average pocket money was £107.90 per week but some advertisements offered posts with no pocket money or au pair posts that were 'live out' and the posts requiring the longest hours were not those that paid most. Forty-four percent of the ads stated that experience was important or necessary, suggesting that au pairs are expected to have already developed childcare skills. Whilst conditions appear to have deteriorated since the end of the au pair visa, au pair posts also still exist in relation to the past Home Office definition of an au pair. Ads will refer to 'pocket money' and usually offer placements for a limited period of time, typically a year.

In this article, we use the term 'au pair' to refer to people performing domestic work in private homes in the United Kingdom under conditions that can be seen to reflect varying interpretations by these individuals, their 'hosts' and au pair agencies of the now-defunct UK au pair visa scheme, which were subsequently adopted by the British Au Pair Agencies Association (see BAPAA, 2015). We use the term whilst acknowledging that the 'au pair scheme' no longer exists and the distinction between someone placed as an au pair and someone employed as a nanny is arbitrary. Despite the policy vacuum surrounding au pairing at the time of our research, the term remains in common use.

Au pairs' perceptions of London: The draw of the global city

Facilitator: You want to stay longer?
Esme: In London?
Facilitator: Yeah.
Esme: Yeah I love the life – it is the life I want.³

Our project deliberately sought to interview au pairs and host families both inside and outside London, but despite our best efforts, our interviewees from both groups were concentrated in the capital. London is the destination of choice for au pairs moving to the United Kingdom. The bright lights of the big city and the dream of streets paved with gold have long attracted migrants. As London has been

Nanny/ Au pair /Housekeeper – London

Permanent

Nanny/au pair/housekeeper required for family of 4.

You must have:

2 UK references which I can check.

Childcare experience with children between the ages of 4–10

Experience with daily childcare routine

Able to cook proper fresh meals

Clean the home to a very high standard

Must speak and write fluent English and be able to assist with homework.

Must have can do attitude. Grumpy people should not apply.

UK driver preferred.

You will get

A large room and own bathroom plus TV and DVD player.

Central London location

Pay negotiable depending on experience.

Apply with CV and full reference details

Figure 1. Advertisement for au pair posted on gumtree.com May 2012

named 'the best city in the world to work in' (Dearden, 2014: n.p.), the 'best for culture' (Hutchinson, n.d.) and the 'most stimulating' (Wygant, 2013: n.p.), it is hardly surprising that it is a destination of choice for young people from Europe (King *et al* 2014). In this section, we explore the perceptions au pairs had of London and the effects of these perceptions. We argue that their enthusiasm for the city made them tolerant of their work as au pairs to the benefit of host families.

We found that many au pairs fixed on London as a destination in order to enjoy the shops, museums, clubs and general feeling of 'being there'. They perceived London to be exciting, tolerant and often very different from home. For example, when asked what was good about au pairing, Anna said, 'London is incredible and it's amazing'. Rachel displayed her excellent grasp of colloquial English, when she said, 'London is so colorful [...] London [is] a bit fucked up in a positive way, a creative, colorful, culture way'.

Some other au pairs illustrated the draw that London had been to them when they explained that they were not given opportunities to experience all it had to offer. For example, Daniella, who is 20 years old and from Denmark and was in the process of moving from her first au pair post in Portsmouth to a new one in London, expressed a common frustration that the typical organisation of an au pair's day prevented her taking advantage of what London had to offer:

I think it's a good way to experience culture and I think it's a good way to learn another language but you don't get to see much because you are working. Well, I could go to London, but you don't really do that, I've been there one time when I've been here, that's why I messed up [in taking an au pair post outside London].

Amongst our interviewees, it was not uncommon for au pairs to take a post outside London or in an outer suburb to begin with and then to find a host family in a more central location later on.

Whilst not everyone loved the city or got the chance to enjoy it as much as they wanted, the perception of London as an exciting place was clearly a huge draw for many of the au pairs we spoke to. As Conradson and Latham (2007) argued about their interviewees, who were also attracted by the buzz of London, the cultural amenities and the feeling of being at the centre of the world (2007: 242–243), the opportunity to mix with new people and try new things can be a great draw (see also King *et al.*, 2014). Christina, a 27-year-old au pair from Latvia who had moved from her first au pair placement in Oxfordshire to a second one in London, commented:

Well, for me, I think it's the best job. I want to be a photographer. Also I don't have to pay for accommodation, I can attend my courses, I have a lot of free time, I can explore London [...] I have time to live in London and explore and to know and think about the future, what I will do and how to do it better.

As this quote from Christina shows, London could be a location for exploration and self-development and the part-time nature of her second au pair job allowed Christina to make the most of this. Búriková and Miller (2010) found that Slovak au pairs in London experienced a sense of freedom in the city and relished the opportunity to behave in ways that they would never behave at home and so discover more about themselves. The size of London and its diversity offer both opportunities for new experiences and the anonymity to try them without worrying about what others will think (see also Tkach (this Special Issue) on the idea that au pairs appreciate emancipation from peer pressure).

Rachel from Germany, who was 22 at the time of interview and had been a college student before becoming an au pair, explained that for her, the desire to live in London had been brewing for years:

I really wanted to go to London and she [agency] only had a few families around Oxford and stuff like that. I said, "no I have to go to London because when I was 13 years old I only was here for a day and I was just like when I'm 18 I'm moving here". So on my 18th birthday, just a week after that I moved here.

Rachel went on to explain, that the cache of London was great enough, that even her friends from home who considered au pairs to be 'servants' were still impressed that she had found a way to be in London:

Everybody said, "oh wow she's like – she lives in London" and some are like, "yeah she's doing this au pairing" and some were like, "yeah she's being a servant in London". But at the same time people are saying, "well, whatever she does, she's in London".

As Rachel suggests, the perception of London as an attractive place to live is enough to disguise the nature of au pair work and many of

the au pairs interviewed described being an au pair – undertaking low-paid domestic work often for long hours – as the price they were prepared to pay to be in London. Mirza Aguilar Pérez (2015) found a similar pattern amongst Mexican au pairs in the United States, who were drawn to the promise of the cosmopolis but often found themselves immersed in the drudgery of domestic labour. To keep up impressions of the great time they were having, her interviewees often had two identities on social media. One, which could be seen by friends and relatives at home, had pictures of them taking part in tourist activities at iconic landmarks and another which was used to communicate with other au pairs, where they discussed the day-to-day problems of the role. In this way, they managed to maintain the idea that they were living the dream in the big city and to get support from peers to endure the worst parts of au pairing (cf. Rohde-Abuba (2016b, this Special Issue) on how Russian au pairs in Germany internally negotiate their contradictory status).

The perceptions au pairs have of London have effects. The high number of people wanting au pair posts in the capital work with the lack of government regulation create a 'buyer's market' that empowers hosts and favours au pairs who have experience and who will work for long hours. One host interviewee illustrated to us the sheer scale of demand for au pair positions in London:

What happened was I'd put an advert in and I'd 120 applications in an hour. It's horrible. When you put London, everybody wants London.

Whilst this host found this competition amongst au pairs 'horrible', other less scrupulous, host families will take advantage of the oversupply of au pairs. When analysing advertisements from gumtree.com, we noticed both that many advertisements were offering poor conditions to au pairs and that very few were on the site for any length of time – suggesting that advertisers had filled the posts immediately. Representatives of the British Au Pairs Agencies Association (BAPAA) also confirmed that in their experience, if an agent refused to find an au pair for a family because of the poor conditions they were offering, the family would just advertise elsewhere and could always fill the post.

The hosts interviewed understood that being able to offer an au pair post in London was an invaluable resource. As one said, 'Childcare is phenomenally expensive and then, so many people want to come to London that what you offer, your spare room, becomes a really valuable thing'. The United Kingdom can rely on the 'pull' of London to supply migrants willing to engage in low-paid jobs, such as childcare. The social and cultural attractiveness of London can be just as important to migrants as economic opportunities (cf. Conradson and Latham, 2007: 240; King *et al.*, 2014).

Without effective guidance or regulation from government, the pay and conditions of au pairs are responsive to market forces. An oversupply of au pairs means that hosts are able to pick and choose between au pairs, are less likely to use agencies and can find an au pair who will work for long hours or accept low pay. The popularity of au pairing in London can also mean that au pairs with experience and references from their current hosts and people who are available for a face-to-face interview in the United Kingdom are all favoured (Busch, 2015). These trends break down the boundaries between au pairing and other forms of paid domestic work and can encourage au pairs to remain in au pairing for longer.

Forging a future: Au pairing as a strategy to gain skills and opportunities

Whilst the oversupply of au pairs in London, in the context of deregulation, has contributed to a 'race to the bottom' in terms of their remuneration and working conditions, au pairs were not all or only passive victims of poor conditions and some were extremely active in developing the opportunities that were available to them and may have opted to trade better conditions elsewhere for the chance to be in London. London was perceived as attractive not only as a place to live but also as a place for developing skills, networks and job opportunities.

Au pairing is constructed in policy and conceived in the popular imagination as a temporary state rather than a route to more permanent migration or a career change, yet it can offer opportunities that can be used well into the future. Formal au pair schemes (such as those in the United States, Norway and Denmark) tend to enforce strict limits on au pair stays of 1 or 2 years and try to prevent au pairs from using au pairing as a migration route by banning the transfer from an au pair visa to another visa category, particularly a work permit (see Cox (2015) for international comparison of schemes). Such schemes both actively restrict au pairs from becoming longer-term migrants and construct them in popular understandings as people who would not want to migrate (Newcombe, 2004). However, au pairing has also been shown to be an experience that can be usefully commodified once the au pair returns home (Williams and Baláz, 2004). As Williams and Baláz (2004) argued, au pairs can use their experiences abroad to increase their employability at home even if those experiences are dominated by 'unskilled' childcare and housework. Christine Geserick (2015) also found that German and Austrian au pairs in the United States were able to develop 'soft skills' such as greater confidence and independence that made au pairs value their experiences on their placements, even when those experiences were ostensibly negative.

In London, most au pairs not only have the opportunity to stay for an unlimited period of time (because they are EU/EEA citizens) but they also have access to a labour market and educational opportunities that, for almost all au pairs, significantly surpasses those available to them in their home town. London is, therefore, perceived as a place to forge a better future (cf. Búriková, this Special Issue). A number of au pairs we interviewed were applying for university or other forms of study in the United Kingdom, and many others were moving into specialist jobs that did not exist, or were very difficult to find, in their home towns or countries. This was particularly the case for people interested in careers in the creative industries.

Facilitator: When you finish will you look for another au pair position or will you look for a job?

Christina: [...] I really hope to find assistant job, photographer assistant, because I want to grow a little bit. In London it's an artistic city where like I think each second [person] want to do photography so it's hard to find assistant job.

Well, I have – I don't pay rent and there's good opportunity for me to learn English, because I need this English. I don't want to be au pair all my life but that's a good start because you actually don't pay any bills and you – the money you have are only for you. So, the money I take, I invest them in courses, so, my qualifications

getting better and I make new, good contacts, which will help me to find a job (Lisa).

As these quotes suggest, many of the au pairs we met were strategic and highly motivated to use their time in London productively to improve their future opportunities.

Au pairing can offer a specific context within which to develop skills and contracts. Some hosts would help with these plans and introduce au pairs to useful people or give them relevant work experience. For example, Esther from Spain was offered an internship in her host mother's company when she finished her year as an au pair. Hosts might deliberately recruit au pairs with a particular interest or goal and could help them on a career path or to develop skills as part of the 'exchange' process. We met theatre designers, English professors and TV producers all using professional skills and networks to help au pairs they were hosting or had hosted. The benefits for au pairs seem clear, and for hosts, they are more likely to get someone living in their house who has similar interests but there can also be a catch. The 'opportunity' for 'work experience' can become a demand on an au pair to do additional unpaid work, and feelings of gratitude can create obligations (cf. Williams and Baláz, 2004). For au pairs whose hosts were not so helpful, the context au pairing could be frustrating, as long and unpredictable hours caring for children could leave them isolated and unable to attend courses or events.

Plans to stay in the United Kingdom, particularly when they involved in developing professional careers in the creative industries, did not always work out, and some au pairs moved between au pairing, studying and working in order to make ends meet. In the end, when London became just too expensive, they might have to move home. Rachel, who had wanted to live in London since she was 13 years old and who had become an au pair just after her 18th birthday, just found the costs too high:

Rachel: If you would have told me four years back now, tell me you're going to move back to Germany and study, I would have said 'no, I'll stay in London'. So I really love living in London and I thought that that would be my first steps living in England.

Facilitator: [...] Did you have ambitions to go to university in England?

Rachel: Yeah I did but at that time when I stopped being an au pair I was – it's so expensive. I worked in a bar afterwards and I've done my film producing apprenticeship over here and I just couldn't make university over here. Yeah, I was thinking just go for it and see what happens.

So, whilst London was seen as a place that offered opportunities, it is still not necessarily an easy place to live. Rachel was not alone amongst our interviewees in moving backwards and forwards between au pairing and other forms of work and between London and elsewhere.

For some of the au pairs we interviewed, their plan was not to stay permanently in the United Kingdom but to use their improved English to allow a move to a third country – perhaps in a specialist job: air traffic controller, travel agent and shipping manager were all mentioned to us in this context. English skills were also part of at

least one au pair's plans to move to the United States where the au pair scheme demands higher levels of English. Au pairing in the United Kingdom can offer the chance to do this and so is part of long-term, multi-sited migration plans (cf. Dalgas, this Special Issue).

Au pairing then, for some, was a way to become familiar with the United Kingdom, to improve English skills and build networks in order to realise a specific migratory project. The size of London, the diversity of its labour markets and the specific specialisms within this were all perceived by au pairs to be an important aspect of their ability to realise their future plans. London grows in a self-sustaining way, with its reputation for diversity of population, cultural life and jobs making it ever more attractive to ambitious, creative migrants (King *et al.*, 2014). This explains, in part, why people who have the legal right to work in the United Kingdom might still opt for low-paid, perhaps exploitative, au pair roles in London. Au pairing offers a 'safe harbour', with a roof over one's head and bills paid, from which future plans can be realised. We met many resourceful, intelligent, determined people who were spending time as au pairs in London as part of a larger strategy for achieving the life they wanted.

Conclusion

This article has argued that within a deregulated au pair sector, au pairs' perceptions of London matter: that they have material effects. The oversupply of au pairs, particularly of au pairs with a strong desire to experience the excitement and opportunities of life in London, can mean that host families are in a 'buyers' market' and are able to exchange a space to live in London for long hours of low cost domestic work.

The broader outcomes of this unregulated buyers' market have been a disintegration of the distinction between au pairs and nannies and between au pairs and housekeepers (Busch, 2013). Au pairs are working for long hours, carrying out more arduous tasks than was traditionally expected within the role and are poorly paid for the privilege. The even wider outcomes are for host families and for their employers: some families are able to successfully negotiate the demands of home life and paid work in a way they would not be able to do without the flexible support of an au pair. These working parents are able to maintain their long working hours, their flexible work patterns and the long commutes around London because they have a spare room which can be used to host an au pair.

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Au pairs are not passive victims of the market or blinded by a dream of streets paved with gold. Many of the au pairs we met were determined, able and highly motivated young people with clear plans to take advantage of the opportunities that London affords and to forge futures that would not be possible if they had stayed at home. Au pairing can be a gap year sojourn, but it can also be a route to longer-term migration and perhaps to a permanent career. The experiences of au pairing can be commodified in many different ways, even soft skills and 'character building' bad experiences. Au pairing appears to be becoming increasingly popular at a global scale so the experiences of au pairs as migrants will be worthy of continued attention.

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Notes

1. In 2000, before the scheme was expanded, these countries were Andorra, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, the Faeroes, Greenland, Hungary, Lichtenstein, Macedonia, Malta, Monaco, San Marino, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Switzerland and Turkey.
2. See <https://www.gov.uk/tier-5-youth-mobility/overview> for details of the Youth Mobility Scheme.
3. All names are pseudonyms.

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