

**'We cannot discriminate against someone without an eye or a leg ... But I do look at obesity': Statistical discrimination and employers' recruitment strategies of housecleaning service companies in Johannesburg.**

**‘We cannot discriminate against someone without an eye or a leg ... But I do look at obesity’: Statistical discrimination and employers’ recruitment strategies of housecleaning service companies in Johannesburg.**

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**2006**

**Johannesburg**

**South Africa**

## **ABSTRACT**

The landscape of paid domestic work has changed considerably in recent years with the growth of housecleaning service companies in South Africa and elsewhere. Housecleaning service companies transform domestic work into a service economy where trained domestic workers render a professional cleaning service to clients. In South Africa, little is known on what factors employers of housecleaning services companies take into consideration during the selection and recruitment process. A key feature of paid domestic work is the gender, class and race constructions of domestic workers, with the vast majority of them being women, usually of colour, from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Whether we see a change in the demographic profile of domestic workers with the growth of housecleaning service companies remains unclear. This paper therefore focuses on the recruitment strategies of employers of selected housecleaning service companies in Johannesburg to shed some light on the on the challenges that job seeking domestic workers may face. Open-ended interviews with managers revealed that gender, race, age, long-term unemployment, technical and personal skills of job seeking domestic workers have a strong impact in the recruitment process, while immigration status plays a somewhat reduced role. This paper concludes that housecleaning service companies have not changed the demographic profile of domestic workers in South Africa yet, and that paid domestic work is still predominantly a Black woman's job.

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**KEY WORDS: Housecleaning service companies; domestic work; recruitment strategies; statistical discrimination**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The employment of domestic workers is an integral feature of South African life. The Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2015: vii) estimates that there are just over one million domestic workers in South Africa, which forms the largest sector of employment of mostly African women (Fish, 2006: 108). Domestic work includes general household chores, preparing meals for employers, caring for the elderly, children and pets of employers (Anderson, 2000: 15). Generally, traditional paid domestic work is perceived as a low-skilled job, often undertaken by the minority group with little education (Cock, 1980; Ally, 2010).

Two patterns emerge from the literature on paid domestic work in South Africa. One set of studies highlights the historical background of domestic work in South Africa in terms of gender, class and race (Ally, 2010; Boddington, 1983; Cock, 1980; Gaitskell *et al.*, 1983; Van Onselen, 1982). The relationship between gender, class and race in domestic work is complex, as domestic work has historically been performed by Black female servants for White middleclass and elite employers (Gaitskell *et al.*, 1983: 88; Hickson & Strous, 1993: 109). The seminal work in South Africa on this is Jacklyn Cock's *Maids and Madams* (1980), which provides a useful assessment of domestic work under apartheid.

In 1996 in South Africa labour rights were extended to the domestic sector. The Basic Conditions of Employment Act was the first Act to formalise domestic work as a "protected sector within the legislative framework" (Fish, 2006: 116). This spurred on a second set of studies that focused on the causes and consequences of the transition of domestic work from precarious work, to work that is formalised and presumably protected by labour laws in post-apartheid South Africa (Du Preez *et al.*, 2012; Fish, 2006; King, 2007; Grossman, 2011; Ally, 2010). Key works include Alison King's *Domestic service in post-apartheid South Africa: Difference and disdain* (2006) and Shireen Ally's *From servants to workers: South African domestic workers and the democratic state* (2010). However, none of these studies have looked at domestic work in the context of housecleaning service companies. The only detailed study to date on housecleaning service companies in South Africa, stems from Du Toit's (2012) Masters research published in a subsequent article (Du Toit, 2013). This study focused on the working conditions and changes in employment relations of housecleaning service companies in the Stellenbosch area (Du Toit, 2013). However, a question

largely unanswered, and one that this paper wants to shed some light on, is whether housecleaning service companies change the demographic profile of the domestic work sector in South Africa?

Although research has been done in countries such as the United States (Salzinger 1991; Mendez, 1998; Ehrenreich, 1998), Australia (Meagher, 1997), France (Devetter and Rousseau, 2009) and Portugal (Abrantes, 2014) on the nature of housecleaning services, little has been done in the South African context (Du Toit, 2012, 2013). To date there is no South African study that focuses at how these housecleaning companies operate in terms of selection and recruitment strategies used to employ domestic workers. This paper therefore focuses on the selection and recruitment strategies that employers of housecleaning service companies use for the following reasons: First, since Black African women are overrepresented among unemployed groups in South Africa, they often end up as domestic workers for middle-class households. With the increase in outsourced housecleaning service companies across the country that emphasise a professionally trained workforce, a better understanding of the challenges that applicants face may shed some light on how certain groups of people are discriminated against more than others. Secondly, since domestic workers often lack formal skills and education, employers of housecleaning service companies may focus more on the individual qualities of jobseekers such as personality, motivation, social competencies, interpersonal skills, age and appearances during the screening, selection and recruitment processes. Research shows that human and social capital, hard and soft skills, and demographic characteristics of job seekers are important even in elite professional organisations and that jobseekers are often faced with “a combination of discrimination and error” (Rivera, 2012: 999). What factors do employers of housecleaning services companies take into consideration during the recruiting and selection process? There has been no scholarly study of this sort in South Africa and this study hopes to fill this void in a small way.

## **2. BACKGROUND OF HOUSECLEANING SERVICE COMPANIES**

Globally and in South Africa, the landscape of paid domestic work has change considerably with the growth in outsourced housecleaning service companies, the focus of a small handful of studies. Some international studies on housecleaning service companies reveal that they provoke a revolution in domestic work, because

they change the market of domestic work to the service sector (Devetter & Rousseau, 2009: 312). Mendez (1998: 118) calls this the “commodification of domestic service”, while Ehrenreich (2000: 64) refers to it as “a fully capitalist-style workplace”. Housecleaning service companies transform domestic work in that domestic workers are trained to clean rooms in a standard “top to bottom, [and] left to right” technique and they are often accompanied by qualified and skilled managers and supervisors (Ehrenreich, 2000: 66).

Housecleaning service companies in South Africa offer cleaning services on a weekly, bi-weekly, monthly or on an ad hoc basis, where domestic workers offer a professional cleaning service aimed at the niche market of clients who want the convenience of having their houses professionally cleaned. Housecleaning service companies mostly render general housecleaning services inside clients’ homes which usually exclude window and pool cleaning. Some housecleaning service companies provide cleaning equipment, uniforms and lunch for domestic workers, while others do not.

There exist mostly three types of housecleaning service companies in South Africa. The first type renders cleaning services by means of teams of domestic workers. Supervisors usually divide work among the team of up to five domestic workers, where one worker will clean the bathroom and bedroom, another one the kitchen and lounge and another one does the ironing and so forth. Teams of domestic workers clean up to three houses per day in up to three hour sessions (Du Toit, 2012, 2013). The second type of housecleaning service company provides clients with one domestic worker for the day either on a regular or on an ad hoc basis. In both these cases, the housecleaning service company is legally the employer of domestic workers and deals with all administrative issues regarding domestic workers such as wages, employment contracts, and UIF and CCMA issues, among others. The clients pay the housecleaning company for services rendered and the employer pays domestic workers. The third type of housecleaning service company operates on the principle of a placement agency, where housecleaning service companies place a trained domestic worker with a client for a once-off fee. For example, clients may call the housecleaning service company with specific requirements of the type of domestic worker they would like in terms of demographics and/or specific skills. In this case, clients pay the housecleaning service company a placement fee and thereafter the client is the legal employer of the domestic worker (Du Toit, 2012).

Most housecleaning service companies require relatively little start-up equipment or capital, making it relatively easy for new entrepreneurs to enter the outsourced cleaning market. However, employers are faced with the challenge of having a motivated, reliable and trustworthy team of domestic workers. Housecleaning service companies' success largely depends on the quality of the workers and the skills and abilities they have to perform the job according to the company's and clients' standards and expectations. In other words, what becomes important is to understand how employers of housecleaning service companies go about in employing the right team of domestic workers in their company. What factors do employers take into consideration when jobseekers apply for a job in a housecleaning service company and when do they reject applicants? One way to look at this issue is to focus on statistical discrimination as a theoretical framework that may provide some insights into how employers screen, select and recruit job seeking domestic workers.

### **3. STATISTICAL DISCRIMINATION AND SOFT SKILLS**

Valuable research contributions have been made with regard to how employers use statistical discrimination as a tool in the recruitment and selection process of jobseekers. In the workplace, statistical discrimination broadly refers to how employers exclude jobseekers from certain jobs based on their observable physical characteristics such as gender, race, immigration status, ethnicity and/or age (Fang & Moro, 2011: 135; Bonoli & Hinrichs, 2010: 7). Applicants are often assessed based on previous experiences or societal prejudices and employers may decide to not to include applicant for certain jobs or positions that possess certain physical characteristics (Norman, 2003: 615). It is believed to be a practical, cost-effective and a time-saving tool that employers often use in the screening process of applicants (Wang, 2015: 531).

If employers believe that a minority group will perform worse or pose a higher risk for the firm than the dominant group, even though both groups have identical experience or qualifications, then the minority group will most likely be discriminated against or treated differently in the screening, selection and recruitment process than the dominant group (Fang & Moro, 2011: 135). Minority applicants that are frequently targeted include older applicants, women, disabled and immigrant applicants or those who have a criminal record and are often not considered when applying for a job. For

example, an immigrant Black woman above the age of fifty, who struggles to speak the local language, may be less successful in getting a job than a native born person of a younger age with similar experiences and qualifications (Bonoli & Hinrichs, 2010: 7). Employers therefore use statistical discrimination as a tool to make decisions regarding hiring, task assignment and/or promotion within the firm and to exclude certain groups in this process.

However, in many low-skilled jobs, particularly in the service sector, workers often have similar demographical backgrounds such as race and gender, with similar education levels and experience. One can argue that the physical observable characteristics of job seekers are then arguably less important. What becomes important then are their so called “soft skills” which commonly consist of interpersonal skills, motivation, personality, commitment, proficiency in a certain language and a positive attitude (Bonoli & Hinrichs, 2010). Particular low-skilled service jobs, which include cashiers, bartenders, waiters, call centre workers - and domestic workers – among others, one could argue that certain soft skills of workers are of significance. In other words, how well a future worker gets along with customers, co-workers, managers, supervisors and employers are especially important, as these types of jobs require workers to interact either face-to-face or voice-to-voice with others. They often are required to engage in emotional labour and to a lesser extent aesthetic labour.

Emotional labour refers to “the effort, planning and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions”, while aesthetic labour refers to the appearances of workers (Morris & Feldman 1996: 987; See also Hochschild, 1983; Noon et al., 2012; Bolton 2000). Workers must be presentable, have a friendly approach and positive attitude when communicating with customers, which is often considered as a skill.

A recent study by Bonoli and Hinrich (2010: 11-19) reveal that employers use statistical discrimination as a tool in low-skilled jobs in Europe. This study shows that job seekers who are of a higher age, a certain immigration status and have been unemployed long-term are often excluded from jobs or positions within service firms. These groups of jobseekers are also more likely to get a trial period with the firm where they are employed on a short-term temporary basis to test whether they meet the standards required.



In terms of domestic work, Abrantes' (2014) found that gender plays a significant part in the recruitment of domestic workers in housecleaning service companies in Portugal. For example, in this study, Abrantes (2014) found that all housecleaning service companies, with the exception of one, employ only women as domestic workers, while men are employed as drivers or maintenance workers within the firm. When applicants are screened, they have to present the employer with a curriculum vitae, past referrals or references and a criminal record, if they have one. Apart from these requirements, it was found that employers focus specifically on two aspects during the face-to-face interview: Technical and personal skills. Technical skills include the applicant previous job experiences regarding domestic work, while personal skills include having a neat appearance, pleasant attitude, communication skills and an aptitude for team work (Abrantes, 2014: 437). Employers often prefer workers to be in a certain "age bracket", and that jobseekers that are older are often excluded from the position.

In South Africa, research on the domestic work sector and domestic workers *per se* has mainly focused on exploitative working conditions, unequal employment relationship between employers and domestic workers and more recently ineffective labour law protections for domestic workers (See Cock, 1980; Fish, 2006; King, 2007; Ally, 2010). However, few studies have focused on the growth in outsourced housecleaning service companies, which changes domestic work into a service industry where domestic workers render a professional cleaning service to customers. Whether employers of housecleaning service companies in South Africa use statistical discrimination in the selection and recruitment process remains unanswered and this study hopes to fill this void to some extent by focusing on a small number of housecleaning service companies in Johannesburg.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Research design, problem and objectives**

This study is located within the qualitative research paradigm. What guides my epistemological understanding of how managers of outsourced housecleaning service companies possibly use statistical discrimination as a selection and recruitment tool,

is based on the interpretivist ontology. Interpretivism is rooted in Max Weber's concept of *verstehen* (understanding) of social life. It is concerned with understanding participants' views and meanings they attach to everyday life (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Sarantakos, 2005: 40). The interpretivist paradigm was thought to be the most appropriate approach since this subject of selection and recruitment practices of managers of outsourced housecleaning service companies is under-researched. The aim of this research is to uncover interpretations and meanings that managers of seven outsourced housecleaning service companies in Johannesburg attach to the selection and recruitment practices of job-seeking domestic workers and subsequently trying to uncover whether these managers use statistical discrimination as a selection and recruitment tool and what effect this have for job-seeking domestic workers searching for employment in the outsourced housecleaning service market.

The research question of this study is two-fold: "Do employers' of housecleaning service companies use statistical discrimination as a tool in the recruitment and selection processes of domestic workers for their company, and if so, what are their reasons for using it?" To answer this question, the first objective of this study is to reflect on managers' of housecleaning service companies perspectives on the recruitment and selection strategies they implement in the screening process of job seeking domestic workers. This objective will enable the researcher to understand whether employers of housecleaning service companies use statistical discrimination in the recruitment and selection process. Are the demographics of job seeking domestic workers such as race, gender, immigration status, long-term unemployment and/or age important? The second objective focuses on whether soft skills of domestic workers are important, and if so, what types of soft skills are particular significant in the recruitment process. By identifying the types of soft skills employers of housecleaning service companies look for in potential job seeking domestic workers, it may provide a better understanding as to why employers recruit domestic workers with certain skills.

## **4.2 Case and site selection**

Case study research involves an investigation the process where an investigator explores a case or multiple cases such as programs, events, activities, processes or one or more individuals in their natural settings over time, through detailed, in-depth

data collection involving multiple data collection procedures such as observations, interviews, audio-visual material, documents and reports (Creswell, 2003: 15; Yin, 2009:18). The use of a case study as an empirical research method is especially important for the contexts of outsourced housecleaning service companies as little knowledge exist in how these housecleaning service companies operate in terms of selection and recruitment processes. The selection of a number of cases (housecleaning service companies) may contribute to a better understanding to the underlying strategies managers' of selected housecleaning service companies' use in the selection and recruitment processes This study does not provide an intervention to job-seeking domestic workers, but rather to understand the challenges that job-seeking domestic worker face on a daily basis.

Johannesburg as a site was selected due to a number of reasons. First, various historical studies such as Van Onselen's (1982) study on the social and economic history of domestic workers and Ally's (2010) study on domestic workers and the state, are set in Johannesburg, and this prove the value of a context-specific investigation of this sector. For this reason, Johannesburg is chosen as the research site of this study in order to build on these former seminal works. Second, in addition, types of housecleaning services in Johannesburg are consistent with the national profile of this sector. While still placing limitations on generalising findings to a national level, it does not pose obvious limitations in understanding the recruitment and selection procedures that managers use for job-seeking domestic workers.

#### **4.3 Population frame, sampling selection and collection of data**

There are many types of outsourced cleaning companies in South Africa, offering various types of services. Those housecleaning service companies operating in Johannesburg is similar to others find elsewhere in South Africa. This study only includes housecleaning service companies that render general cleaning for private households and not care work, office cleaning, maintenance work or general janitorial services. It is not known how many housecleaning service companies there are in South Africa in general or Johannesburg in particular, but an intensive search on the internet revealed that most housecleaning service companies render general cleaning services to private households that include general housecleaning and laundering services.

However, constructing a database of all operating housecleaning service companies in Johannesburg is a challenge. Although *StatsSA* provide some indication on the number of employed domestic workers in South Africa, it does not provide the total of housecleaning service companies nor the number of domestic workers employed through such companies. For this reason, a databases needs to be created first prior to the reflective selection of housecleaning service companies can commence. An extensive search on the internet via various advertising platforms such as *OLX* and *Gumtree* was conducted. Since most housecleaning service companies have advertisements on the internet, it seemed best to start there. Key words such as “housecleaning services in Johannesburg”; “Domestic cleaning services in Johannesburg” and “Maid services in Johannesburg” were used. While this search provided a large amount of housecleaning service companies available in Johannesburg, it was very difficult to construct a database. Various types of housecleaning companies were advertised on these search engines such as upholstery cleaning, pre-post cleaning services, general maintenance services and janitorial services and many other types of house-related cleaning services. Some companies just provide a contact number but no information regarding their location or the types of cleaning services they provide. A large number of housecleaning service companies also appear on various search engines and to eliminate duplicate is time-consuming and a challenge. Although not impossible, but to compile a population framework from these search engines would have been an overwhelming task.

The next step was to try and ease this process by trying to search for housecleaning service companies using a different search method. I decided to look at the map of Johannesburg and to divide it into three sections: Central and Northern Johannesburg; Eastern Johannesburg; and Western Johannesburg. Five key words based on international literature of housecleaning companies were used: “Housecleaning services”; “Domestic cleaning services”; “Maid services”; “Domestic maid services” and “Household cleaning services”. From this, a database of 42 housecleaning service companies was compiled. The database captured information such as company name, address, contact information, year of existence and type of services. While I acknowledge that there are probably many more housecleaning service companies in Johannesburg, and it is impossible to know the exact number of operating

housecleaning service companies in Johannesburg at that time, (as many come and go), this database at least provides me with some information on the types of housecleaning service companies in Johannesburg and the types of services they render.

From this database, seven housecleaning service companies that offer general cleaning services to clients in Johannesburg have been selected. The sample of these seven housecleaning service companies was selected through means of purposive sampling methods. The criteria used for this selection included two that provides clients with a team of domestic workers, three that provides clients with one domestic worker for a few hours and two that place domestic workers with clients on a permanent basis.

Open-ended interviews with the employers of these seven selected housecleaning companies were conducted. Five managers were White women, one manager was a Black woman and one manager was a White man. All interviews were conducted face-to-face with managers in their offices. Interviews focused on three general themes: Background of the housecleaning service company; profile of workers and recruitment and selecting procedures.

#### **4.4 Pilot study**

Since it was unknown whether managers of selected housecleaning service companies in Johannesburg use statistical discrimination as a selection and recruitment tool, a pilot study was conducted prior to the main study. The manager of a leading housecleaning service company in Johannesburg gave me access to 83 successful application forms of employed domestic workers. The application forms of domestic workers included information such as race, gender, age, dress size, immigration status and employment history. Table 1 stipulates the profile of successful domestic workers in this leading housecleaning service company:

**Table 1: The mean of the characteristics of 83 employed domestic workers in a housecleaning service company:**

Employed Domestic Workers	Race	Gender	Mean Age	Mean Dress size	Immigration status	Employment history
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Frequency [N=83] and percentage	Black: 81 = 98% Indian: 1 = 1% Coloured: 1 = 1% White: 0 = 0%	Male: 2 = 2% Female: 81 = 98%	40 years	36	South African: 72 = 87%  Zimbabwean: 11 = 13%	Unemployed since 2011: 13 = 16% Unemployed since 2012: 47 = 57% Unemployed since 2013: 14 = 17% Unemployed since 2014: 9 =10%
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Table 1 stipulates that the vast majority of successful domestic applicants in this housecleaning service company are Black South African women, with an average age of 40 years. The majority of them have not been unemployed for more than three years prior to getting a job in the housecleaning service company. But this information is just an average of successful applicant at one housecleaning service company in Johannesburg and a more in-depth understanding of the selection and recruitment strategies that managers of selected housecleaning service companies in Johannesburg use is necessary.

#### **4.5 Limitations and recommendations for future research**

There are some limitations to this study: First, the size of the sample is small and one cannot assume that all housecleaning service companies in South Africa use similar screening, selection and recruitment strategies regarding employment of job-seeking domestic workers. However, the aim of this study is to explore how selected housecleaning service companies operate in Johannesburg and findings may differ quite substantially from housecleaning companies in other areas in South Africa. Secondly, domestic workers' views on the selection and recruitment processes were not taken into consideration and this may be a recommendation for future research to provide a more nuanced picture of different parties' views on these processes.

#### **4.6 Data recording and analysis**

A digital voice recording device was used to record all interviews with managers. To analyse these recordings, Creswell (2003: 191-195) proposes a six-step analysis for qualitative data: 1. Transcribing interviews, 2. Read and reread through the transcripts to get a general sense of the data obtained from the interviews, 3. Code or categorise data into similar themes and labelling these categories with a term, 4. Use the coding process to generate a detailed description of the setting, people or themes for analysis, 5. Advance how the themes will be represented in a qualitative narrative using a narrative passage to convey the findings of the analysis and 6. Interpret of the data.

The above mentioned recommendations were used to analyse the data. From the transcribed interviews, pilot study and literature, important themes were selected. The data was coded into various relevant themes. The themes selected were: gender and race; age; immigration status; long-term unemployment; technical skills; and personal skills and appearances.

#### **4.7 Ethical considerations**

Participation of this study was voluntary and all participants were informed about the aims and goals of this study. Participants were informed that they can refuse to answer questions they feel uncomfortable with and that they can withdraw from the study at any point if they wanted. Participants were also asked if they feel comfortable that interviews were recorded and only one participant did not want the interview to be recorded. However, this participant allowed me to take notes during the interview. Furthermore, confidentiality was ensured by using pseudonyms for housecleaning service companies and participants. Recordings, notes and transcripts are stored in a secure place that only the researcher has access to.

## **5. FINDINGS**

### **5.1 Selection and recruitment**

Typical characteristics of statistical discrimination that employers focus on during the screening process are age, immigration status and long-term unemployment of low-skilled applicants. Bonoli and Hinrichs (2010: 11) argue that these three characteristics

are important factors that employers take into consideration in the selection and recruitment process. For example, this group of workers have to make more compromises than the dominant group to get employed, often by accepting lower wages or longer working hours or they face the risk of staying unemployed longer than others. In addition to these characteristics, one can add gender and race in the context of domestic work in South Africa, as well as technical and personal skills.

### **5.1.1 Gender and race**

In South Africa, paid domestic work is traditionally performed by women, usually Black Africans, which is rooted in the Apartheid and colonial past (Van Onselen, 1981; Ally, 2010). In terms of gender, it was found that all employers of housecleaning service companies in this study only employ women as domestic workers. Employer D said:

*I do not employ men. But that is a personal thing and I tell you why. Not to say that my ladies will never do it, but I cannot have a clear conscious of putting a man into someone's home, a woman's home. Unfortunately I am painting them with the same brush, but you never know (referring to sexual harassment or rape). It is a bit risky to me and I don't want to take that risk. People don't feel comfortable with that.*

One can argue that male applicants seeking a job as domestic workers at housecleaning service companies are statistically discriminated against based on their gender. However, some male applicants are sometimes employed as drivers or called upon when pre- and/or post-moving cleaning is required. Interestingly, it seems that applicants are not discriminated against regarding their race, but employer F explained the true nature of the selection process: "It is not that we only employ Black women as domestic cleaners, but in the few years that I am the employer here, no White woman has ever come through that doors and asked for a job". Employer C said that she employed two White women as domestic workers, but they only worked as a domestic worker at the company for a short period of time:

***They were unschooled, uneducated. The one had standard 4 (Grade 6). And if I was the client, I would have asked for the Black worker to work for me and not the White worker ... They did not stay long ... The one got employed as a secretary or something.***

Similar sentiments were echoed by the other employers. For example, employer F said: "Too many Africans are still available, and let me be honest, if you are White,



who will work for a salary of R 2 500 per month, from eight in the morning to five in the afternoon, cleaning houses?” When asked if the profile of workers have changed since she started this company a few years ago, she said: “Zip-zero. Nothing has changed in 17 years. All our cleaners are Black women. And I don’t see how this will change in the next fifty years or so”. Statements such as these imply that paid domestic work in South Africa is still mainly considered a Black woman’s job.

### **5.1.2 Age**

With this being said, although domestic workers employed through housecleaning service companies are mainly Black women, one can argue that age may be another factor that employers use to statistically discriminate against applicants. The physical nature of domestic work, which commonly includes sweeping and vacuuming of floors, polishing wooden furniture, washing of windows, standing on ladders to dust lights, pushing furniture away from walls to clean, standing for long hours to do ironing and so forth, requires a worker that will be able to do these tasks (Ally, 2010; Glenn, 1992: 7). In addition to these tasks, one of the key features of housecleaning service companies is that they render fast and efficient cleaning services to clients. It was found in this study that age is a factor that employers statistically discriminate against applicants. For example, employer G said: “I don’t employ a woman older than fifty, because they are not flexible enough” (referring to adapting to young clients’ needs). Two employers said that they do not employ anyone older than fifty-five years of age. Reasons such as “they are not coping” or “they are unreliable” were given. This implies that job seeking domestic workers above the age of fifty may find it challenging to find employment as a domestic worker and that some employers may statistically discriminate against job seeking domestic workers above this age.

Interestingly, employer C said she does not employ women below the age of 25 years, because they tend to have an “attitude”. She explained: “I rather work with someone that is uneducated than one that is half educated. These young girls think they are educated, and it is very difficult to work with them”. However, the other employers only discriminate against women older than 50 years of age. Only employer F said that she would consider an applicant of 55 years of age “if I know she can cope with the demands of the job”.

### **5.1.3 Immigration status**

Apart from the age of applicants, immigration status may also be a factor that employers consider in the selection and recruitment process. Many cross-border migrant workers from neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Botswana and Mozambique generally do not have a South African Identity Document (I.D.) or a work permit, making it illegal for them to work (Griffin, 2011: 85). However, many employers do employ foreigners illegally to avoid dealing with labour laws when employing South African nationals (McMahon, 2014). But foreigners still have rights in the workplace, as the Labour Relations Act stipulates that all employees in South Africa has the right not to be unfairly dismissed (Israelstam, 2015). Since 2008, the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) now embraces under its ambit foreign workers employed “illegally” in South Africa. For migrant workers in all sectors, including the domestic work sector, this gives them rights in that they can dispute unfair dismissals (Griffin, 2011: 86). This means that employing foreign nationals as domestic workers can be risky for some employers. Not only do foreign workers have rights under the Labour Relations Act, but employers can also face a fine for breaching the Immigration Act, if workers do not have a valid I.D. and work permit.

Interviews with employers of housecleaning service companies reveal that all South African applicants must have an I.D. prior to being interviewed by employers and all foreign nationals must provide employers with a valid work permit. The importance of immigration status of job seeking domestic workers appears to differ from housecleaning service company to housecleaning service company. However, the majority of housecleaning service companies in this sample have on average more South African employees than foreign nationals. Different reasons were given. For example, employer D said that foreign nationals are problematic to employ and she prefers to employ South African women as domestic workers:

***We reject an applicant if she is a Zimbabwean. Based on our previous experiences, they tend to steal and they don't have a nice attitude. They don't get along with our other workers or our clients. For this reason, I don't employ Zimbabweans in my company often.***

Similar sentiment was shared by employer C who said the following:

***Zimbabweans are on average better workers. They are more loyal and reliable than our girls (referring to South African domestic workers). But the problem is they want to go home Decembers, to their family. And we work December ... December and January are our busiest months.***

Only housecleaning service company B has more Zimbabwean domestic workers than South Africans. Employer B said:

***You know, funny enough most of our girls are Zimbabweans, I don't know why ... Sixty to seventy percent are Zimbabweans. About thirty percent are South Africans. I think because they come from Zimbabwe. They come here with one purpose and that is to work for their families. So they are focused. They want to go home with something. South Africans ... I do not want to blame this thing they get ... What do you call it ... Grant. Child support grant. We sometimes think that the grant thing has something to do with it. Zimbabwean women do not get this, so they have to work to get money. They are desperate for work.***

However, employers that employ Zimbabweans ask them for a “valid work permit and if they do not have one, they will not be considered for a job”. It seems that job-seeking Zimbabwean women are statistically discriminated against in some housecleaning service companies. For those who are considered for employment must present a valid work permit is a pre-requisite prior to employment as a domestic worker in one of these companies.

#### ***5.1.4 Long-term unemployed***

Bonoli and Hinrich (2010) argue that long-term unemployment is another factor that some employers often use to statistically discriminate against job seekers in low-skilled jobs. One way to test whether an applicant was unemployed for a relatively long time is to ask for reference letters from past employers. It was found that this is crucial to whether an applicant will be recruited within the housecleaning service company. As employer D said:

***We definitely require references. Contactable references. We follow up on all references. CV's not really. We used to, but there is obviously a company out there who do all the CV's for them and charges them a fortune. And it is a lot of crap. A lot of rubbish. Any rubbish is put on there.***

The other employers also indicated that they check past references of job seekers. One can therefore argue that the longer a person is unemployed, the more difficult it may be for that person to find a job. In this case, employers rely on reference letters to test how long an applicant has been unemployed and for what reasons she is unemployed.

Adding to this, employer E use social networks of current employed domestic workers to recommend someone trustworthy when needed. She said:

***It does not matter if they are unemployed for a long time. If I need another cleaner in my company I usually ask my most trustworthy worker if she has a sister or other family member that can work for me. They always have. I trust her, because if she does not perform well, then her name will be dragged through the mud.***

Only employer G use social networks as a recruitment strategy. However, one can argue that social networks may be a practical tool to save time of employers by eliminating the interviewing process as employers may trust the recommendations given by current workers.

Apart from demographical background, job history of applicants or social network strategies, employers also rely on technical and personal skills of applicants.

### **5.1.5 Technical skills**

Although domestic work is considered as an unskilled job by many (Cock, 1980), it appears that technical skills of applicants are important in the selection and recruitment process for individuals seeking employment in housecleaning service companies. Employer B said:

***We ask for a copy of any type of certificate. They do these courses. These three day child minding courses or cooking courses ... All those courses are jumping up and down. Some of them are not good enough but that is none of our business. They come with that certificate and we call the owner of that training institution and ask if so and so trained with her or whatever.***

One can argue that applicants with better technical skills are in a better position to be considered for employment in the housecleaning service company. South Africa does not have a shortage of people looking for work as unemployment is high, and the same

can be said in the domestic work sector. In that case, an applicant with some experience and skills add value to the applicant's success or not.

Apart from external courses available for job seeking domestic workers, it was found in this study that employers of housecleaning service companies usually test certain technical skills of an applicant such as whether she can iron. Employer D said:

*I do have an ironing board here and every now and again we do spot checks. Everybody says they iron brilliantly. So every now and again I will rip out the ironing board and say iron a shirt. I actually have a shirt in the car that I scrunch up for a few days and then ask them to iron it. But that is also part of our in-house training.*

The other employers said they usually provides in-house training to all workers in her company as “this is a professional company and the name of the company is on the spell”.

#### **5.1.6 Personal skills and appearances**

Another factor that employers of housecleaning service companies in this study take into consideration during the selection and recruitment process is the personal skills of applicants. Since housecleaning service companies render a professional cleaning service to clients, professionalism, motivation and trustworthiness are important factors that need to be taken into consideration when employing job seekers. Domestic workers must be able to communicate well with clients and understand what they want. In this regard, employer C explained:

***According the law we cannot discriminate. We cannot discriminate against someone without an eye or a leg ... But I do look at obesity. Our clients are mostly upper middle-class and they live in big houses ... Double story houses. She will have to climb those stairs five, six times a day. And if she can't climb over these two steps (leading to the office), then how will she be able to climb those stairs in the two story houses.***

Employers also said that they appreciate it when job seeking domestic workers show “enthusiasm”, “energy” and “some spark” during the interview. Appearances play an important role in the recruitment process as employers statistically discriminate against someone that does not look attractive. Employer A said:

***Appearances are obviously important. ... I am a little bit fussy ... I will always make some comments on the form. I will write there that she is overweight. Or she has teeth missing or whatever. Because generally customers do say that appearances are important. And you have to work with that person from seven to five.***

These statements imply that personal appearances play an important factor in the selection and recruitment process. Some employers may discriminate against the physical appearances of applicants.

**Table 2: Summary on the profile of domestic workers currently employed in the seven housecleaning service companies**

Employer	Gender and Race	Age (Not older than)	Immigration status	Long-term unemployment
A	Only Black Women	N/A	25 % Zimbabweans 75 % South Africans	< 3 years – Reference letter is important
B	Only Black Women	N/A	60 – 70 % Zimbabweans 30 – 40 % South Africans	< 3 years Reference letter is important
C	Only Black Women with exception of 2 White women	25 < 50	10 – 20 % Zimbabweans 80 – 90 % South Africans	< 3 years Reference letter is important
D	Only Black Women	< 50	10 % Zimbabweans 90 % South Africans	Varies – depending on the reference letter
E	Only Black Women	< 50	N/A	Use social networks
F	Only Black Women	< 55	50 % Zimbabweans 50 % South Africans	N/A (Train domestic workers in-house)
G	Only Black Women	< 50	10 % Zimbabweans 90 % South Africans	Use social networks

**Table 3: Summary of the technical and personal skills and appearances of job-seeking domestic workers**

Employer	Technical skills	Personal skills	Appearances
A	Ironing skills	Friendly	Not overweight

			Clean appearance No missing teeth
B	Ironing skills	Friendly, Must be adaptable to clients from different socio-economic and racial background	Smart looking Old fashioned
C	Past references are called to check for technical skills	Proud , Passionate, Confident Honesty, Reliability, Punctuality, Loyalty	Not overweight No chronic illnesses
D	Ironing skills but also do in-house training	Friendly, Easy-going	No major disabilities such as missing hands or feet (Must be able to do the job – Do have a domestic worker with a cleft palate)
E	N/A (Do specific in-house training)	Hard-working, Team worker, Positive attitude	Clean appearance
F	N/A (Do specific in-house training)	Willing to learn new skills, Adequate communication skills	Neat and clean appearance
G	N/A	Team worker, Leadership skills	N/A

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

Although this paper only reflects the views of seven employers of housecleaning service companies in Johannesburg, there is some evidence that employers of housecleaning service companies use statistical discrimination techniques. The observable traits of applicants that employers of housecleaning service companies most strongly use to evaluate candidates include gender, race and age as well as physical appearances such as being overweight.

Mainly Black African women below the age of fifty are considered for employment. Employers mainly said that older workers do not cope well, are unreliable and do not adapt well the changing needs of clients. It means that job seekers above the age of fifty may find employment as domestic workers through housecleaning service companies challenging. Applicants are also statistically discriminated against in terms of gender. Men are seldom employed as domestic workers in South Africa, and it seems the same can be said of housecleaning service companies. It appears that employers may reject male job seekers altogether as domestic workers in their housecleaning service company and may employ some as drivers or when they are

needed in pre- and post-moving cleaning. Long-term unemployment may work against an applicant in some cases as it was revealed that employers of housecleaning service companies do check reference letters and may call past employers. If an applicant does not have a reference letter or when a past employer has negative things to say about the applicant, then she may be rejected for the job.

Immigration status is another factor that some employers of housecleaning service companies take into consideration during the selection and recruitment process. Only one housecleaning service company employs more Zimbabwean women than South African women. All other housecleaning service companies in this study mainly employ South African women. Trust and theft issues, unpleasant attitudes and unwillingness to work with co-workers were given as reasons why Zimbabwean women are seldom employed in housecleaning service companies in this study.

Employers also statistically discriminate against job seekers by looking at the physical appearances of applicants. For example, applicants must have a neat appearance, no missing teeth and no chronic illnesses. In particular, employers discriminate against overweight applicants. Some employers do not employ overweight applicants as domestic workers as the nature of the job may require a physical fit person. This means that even though some of the overweight applicants may be better domestic workers than slim domestic workers, they are statistically discriminated against. Overweight applicants in particular may therefore find employment in housecleaning service companies challenging.

Since domestic work is considered a low-skilled job (Cock, 1980; Ally, 2010), it was anticipated that technical skills of applicants may not be a strong indicator of being employed or not. However, this study found that technical skills such as having some training in cooking or child-minding may work in favour of an applicant. It was found that some employers of housecleaning service companies ask applicants for a “certificate of some sort”, which may place these applicants in a better position to those who do not have training. Personal skills such as motivation, intelligence and enthusiasm among other play a factor in the selection and recruitment process. One can argue that applicants who lack these personal skills are statistically discriminated against, although in theory they may be better domestic workers.



Social networks are a valuable tool used by some employers in the selection and recruitment process as it may save employers time to go through the “nitty-gritty” detail of the company’s vision and mission or by eliminating the interview process altogether. One can assume that the employee who recommends the family member or friend to the employer may have informed the recommended candidate about the expectations of the employer and/or clients. One can also argue that the reputation of the current worker who recommended someone is at stake as she may take pride in being asked by the employer to recommend someone. Although the other employers did not indicate that they rely on social networks from current domestic workers, it may be a valuable strategy for some employers of housecleaning service companies.

To conclude, this study adds to our knowledge of statistical discrimination, to some extent, by showing that employers of housecleaning service companies use statistical discrimination as a selection and recruitment tool. Employers dislike dismissals, particularly in the domestic work sector, where domestic workers are protected by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). The use of statistical discrimination as a selection and recruitment tool minimise the risk of employing the wrong person for the job. It seems that housecleaning service companies have a specific profile of workers: Black South African women below the age of 50 years, with a pleasant attitude and who is not overweight. Although this may be beneficial for employers, for job-seeking domestic workers it means that housecleaning service companies do not necessarily create more employment for them, since some groups of job-seekers are statistically discriminated against in the domestic work sector. This means that job-seeking domestic workers who do not fit these requirements may find employment in housecleaning service companies challenging.

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