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"Oh, *you're watching me*": Care workers' experiences of surveillant assemblages on the platform and in the home

Hunter Akridge
Princeton University, USA; Carnegie Mellon University, USA

Alex Ahmed
Sassafras Tech Collective, USA

Free S Bàssïbét
University of Washington, USA

Magally A Miranda Alcázar
University of California Los Angeles, USA

Sarah Fox
Carnegie Mellon University, USA

Abstract

Domestic workers have long been marginalized, even as they are made hypervisible to their employers. This is a process increasingly augmented by digital technologies. These technologies include care platforms, which have increasingly mediated the process of finding employment. This article reports on interviews with in-home childcare workers or "nannies" who shared experiences of scrutiny and surveillance across the labor process, both on and off the platform. This includes background checks, in-person monitoring, hidden cameras, and more. Although these practices might be legitimized as an extension of parental care or benign monitoring, workers' negative afffects—

Corresponding author:
Hutner Akridge, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA.
Email: hunter.akridge@princeton.edu

fear, worry, anger—disrupt this normalization. Their stories make visible harm and hidden burdens from this hybridization of care and control. Through their accounts, a surveillant assemblage comes into view that intensifies uneven visibility regimes and reinstates the racialized and gendered power dynamics that have long defined domestic labor.

Keywords
Care work, childcare, platforms, surveillance, workplace monitoring

Introduction

In an essay in the New York Times Angella Foster (2019), a nanny in the Boston area, described the "deep betrayal" she felt when she realized the family she was working for had been recording her voice without her consent. Foster's employer indicated that she wanted to say something without being recorded and they needed to move away from the camera. In that moment, Foster realized that "the camera was doing more than just capturing silent videos of me and my interactions with the children. It was also recording everything I said, whether it had to do with my job as a nanny or not." She went on to describe how, as an undocumented immigrant, she would sometimes need to take calls to deal with business related to her immigration status or family matters. Knowing these calls were recorded felt violating. She also felt afraid and "didn't have the courage to object or talk about it."

Foster's story is troubling, but it is not exceptional. In our interviews with care workers, we uncover similar stories of nonconsensual surveillance in the home. These practices can seem like simply part of parents' legitimate interest in the well-being of their child. This is in no small part because of how domestic workers are cast as suspect. Foster (2019) writes, "we are often underpaid, undervalued and treated like intruders, or worse, criminals." The companies marking "nanny cams" have long relied on these tropes to sell families on surveillance (Zeavin, 2023). These marketing logics have had a resurgence in recent years to sell parents on an array of smart-home-enabled devices (Zeavin, 2023). Similar concerns about "bad actors" (SEC, 2019) have also surrounded the digital marketplaces for care work, which increasingly mediate the process of finding caregivers (Mateescu and Ticona, 2020). The largest of these digital care platforms had over 31.7 million members in 2018 (SEC).[1] They have sought to offload liability from platform to parents, putting the onus on families for verification and monitoring as a part of a risk mitigation strategy (Mateescu and Ticona, 2020; SEC, 2019).

How these developments have been experienced by care workers is not well understood. However, scholars have considered how trust and safety concerns impact platform workers in other contexts (Mosseri, 2022; Sannon et al., 2022; Chan, 2019). For example, Mosseri (2022) argues that ride-hail drivers surveilled by their passengers take on additional labor in the form of "reputation auditing." Yet, there are important reasons why it is worth attending to how this dynamic manifests in the case of domestic workers using digital care platforms. Behind closed doors, this labor is more intimate and prolonged than fleeting service interactions with ride-hail drivers or delivery workers.

Domestic work is also structured by particular forms of racialized and gendered inequities. Mosseri has called for work that examines "how systems of gender and race produce distinct experiences of visibility across the digital economy" (Mosseri, 2022).

This is the work we take up in our interview study with in-home childcare workers or "nannies" using digital care platforms. We ask, how do techniques of platform governance impact childcare workers? What are their experiences as they exit the platform and off of it, in their everyday working relationships? This approach allows us to unpack how monitoring and surveillance impact childcare workers at each stage of their labor process. In addressing these questions, we draw on labor process theory as a conceptual framework to attend to the specific means by which work is organized and controlled (Braverman, 1998). This theory highlights the agonistic process by which employers seek to decrease worker autonomy (Braverman, 1998) and encourage compliance through producing conditions of insecurity (Bain and Taylor, 2000) and surveillance (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Edwards, 1979). We found that background checks create additional burdens and seemingly arbitrarily boot some off the platform all together. Initial contact with potential employers is defined by intense expectations of responsiveness and transparency. Exiting the platform too, puts workers in a potentially vulnerable position where they may fear compromising their security and privacy. And finally we detail how nannies experience pervasive and layered practices of monitoring and surveillance in the home. These practices are experienced through fear, worry, and anxiety and result in a shifting labor process to accommodate demands for visibility.

We take a critical lens to analyzing how techniques of platform governance and surveillance are productive of new subjectivities and labor practices. We rely on scholarship in platform (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018) and feminist surveillance studies (Dubrofsky and Magnet, 2015) that has analyzed how care platforms and care work in the home are sites where gender, racial, and class hierarchies are reproduced and remade. We think alongside the framing of "visibility regimes," which Mateescu and Ticona (2020) use to understand the experiences of care workers on digital platforms. Through this framing they offer a more relational and intersectional approach to overcome "dichotomous or additive models about who stands to benefit and who faces risks in the face of pressures toward being seen" (Mateescu and Ticona, 2020). This approach is necessary in the context of paid domestic work, where workers contest invisibility even as they are subject to surveillance (Hatton, 2017). From surveillance studies, we draw on the notion of "surveillant assemblages" (Dasgupta and Dasgupta, 2015; Haggerty and Ericson, 2000) to emphasize the multiple, layered, and emergent ways domestic workers are being watched. Workers' negative affects disrupt the normalization of this assemblage and stress its weight. Their accounts make clear how an expanding surveillant assemblage reinstate uneven visibility regimes.

Literature

In what follows, we summarize the literature on the historical, political, and social conditions of domestic work, the emergence of care platforms, and evolving techniques of scrutiny and surveillance. We then turn to the experiences of domestic workers themselves, both on and off platforms.

Gendered and racialized inequities in care work

Care work and therefore care platforms have been shaped by the intertwined forces of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy (Alcázar, 2019; Nadasen, 2023). This becomes obvious when we consider who has historically done domestic labor and their conditions on the job. Domestic workers may provide childcare, clean, cook, and more generally do labor that takes on the sociocultural register of "women's work" in a home that is not their own (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2004). This work was performed in the United States first by enslaved Black women, then by Black women working as paid housekeepers, and then by migrant women workers from the Global South, particularly Latin America (Alcázar, 2019; Nadasen, 2023). This labor has historically been marginalized. In the 1930s and 1940s, domestic workers were excluded from New Deal era labor protections (Goldberg, 2015; Lieberman et al., 2021). By the 1960s, domestic labor was still essentially undervalued and relegated to largely Black and Latina women with few other options for employment. In subsequent decades, more immigrant women entered the sector at the same time the demand for domestic labor increased (Nadasen, 2023).

During this period, an increasing proportion of families sought childcare from outside the home, with the rise in women entering the labor force across the board. Childcare became increasingly commodified with the market segmenting into different kinds and quality of childcare depending on the parent's ability to pay (Michel, 1999). A domestic worker providing in-home childcare as a "nanny" tends to be the most expensive option, with the promise of more individualized attention and control for employers. Nannies then tend to be hired in upper-middle class and wealthy households with the means to support the wages of an employee directly (New America, 2016). The context of their work in someone else's home, providing care behind closed doors, makes this domestic work particularly vulnerable to abuse and wage theft (Burnham and Theodore, 2012). While the historical injustice of exclusion from federal labor protections was largely undone by a 2015 National Labor Relations Board rule change, many domestic workers lack practical access to their rights (Lieberman et al., 2021). Domestic workers tend to face multiple axes of marginalization due to race, gender, and migrant status.

With the commodification of childcare, these axes of marginalization also reflect who has access to the most highly sought after positions and the conditions they face on the job. The sociological literature has described how race and ethnicity have long structured the hiring process in defining expertise and skill (Brown, 2011; Macdonald, 2010). Class signifiers such as education, hobbies, technical proficiency, and consistent Internet access can all improve a worker's chance of success on care work platforms (Fetterolf, 2022; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2019; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Parents, while providing care themselves, are pressured to enhance control over this process by taking on the role of a care manager or CEO (Hochschild, 2013) through ongoing monitoring of children and care providers.

Regimes of visibility on and off digital care platforms

The emergence and widespread adoption of digital care platforms in the early- to mid-2010s coincide with these shifting understandings and expectations of care work and

specifically childcare. Digital care platforms encouraged the further commodification of this labor through a digital marketplace, structured to maximize the convenience of harried parents in need of help (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Scholars have described how this mandate translates to platforms surfacing providers that are most likely to meet upper-middle income parents' expectations of a proper caregiver (SEC, 2019; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Care platforms achieve this outcome through algorithmically derived search results that take into account many factors including the extent of profile curation, parent ratings, response rate, and likely more (Fetterolf, 2022; Lustig et al., 2024; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Many who are not able to successfully engage in the encouraged cultural entrepreneurship are relegated to the bottom of search listings (Fetterolf, 2022) and left without work. These dynamics also leave many providers to be taken advantage of, especially those desperate for work (Ticona, 2022). In fact, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) (2024) has recently ruled against Care.com for making it difficult for workers to leave the platform by requiring them to enroll in auto-renewing subscriptions, as well as deceptive marketing practices that inflate available jobs and possible wages.

The demand for visibility that produces these inequitable burdens is not only rooted in a desire for convenience but also in fear and anxiety. The mediation of care through the platform implies that, from the perspective of parents, the resulting relationship with a care provider is potentially tenuous and impersonal. In the late 2010s, heightened trust and concerns surrounding digital marketplaces for care work have produced scandal, moral panic, and backlash (Mateescu and Ticona, 2020; Grind, et al. 2019). In response, care platforms have walked the line between stepping up their vetting of providers and putting the responsibility for safety on families. In this context, parents have been encouraged to take up ongoing monitoring.

In some ways though, distrust and the scrutiny of domestic workers is nothing new. In Dark Matters, Simone Browne (2015) describes how enslaved people in the American colonies performing domestic labor were subject to lantern laws (Ticona, 2020). For a slave to leave their master's home, they had to carry lanterns, enhancing their visibility in the night and enabling a white ruling class to surveil their movements. In the post-emancipation period, many formerly enslaved people and their descendants were forced to themselves work in the homes of white families where scrutiny and surveillance persisted. These legacies continue to the present day. Legacies of racialized control are described by Tamara Mose Brown (2011) in her ethnography of Black Caribbean immigrant nannies in the late 2000s Brooklyn. The childcare providers she writes about discuss a range of monitoring and surveillance tactics used by employers that include random visits, reporting by neighbors and others, body checks, and "nanny cams" (Brown, 2011). These techniques have also been described in other in-depth studies of domestic childcare from the same period (Macdonald, 2010).

Over the past decade, the terrain of scrutiny and surveillance has been augmented by a range of digital technologies in the home. This includes sensors and other "smart" technologies. This has been detailed most extensively in the privacy and security literature (Pattnaik et al., 2023). In this literature, domestic workers are often treated as "bystanders" to monitoring and surveillance (Bernd et al., 2019), but this is clearly inaccurate (Slupska et al., 2022). The use of smart-home cameras (SHCs) often situates

domestic workers as objects of surveillance (Slupska et al., 2022). The increasing ubiquity of these devices is spurred on by evolving technical capacity of SHCs (Tan et al., 2022) and marketing discourses (Stark and Levy, 2018; Zeavin, 2023). In studies with domestic workers on their experiences of surveillance, many expect to be monitored with SHCs—sympathizing with parents wanting to check-in on their children and recognizing the use of SHCs in the home as a social norm (Albayaydh and Flechais, 2022; Bernd et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2019; Slupska et al., 2022). This is not to say that all surveillance is welcome or even discussed. These studies suggest a range of experiences, with some parents making SHCs hypervisible and disclosing their use (Bernd et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2019; Slupska et al., 2022). On another extreme, parents may only believe surveillance is effective if undisclosed, hiding cameras in strategic locations without the domestic worker knowing. These cameras may even be placed where domestic workers might expect privacy, like the bedroom or even bathroom of a live-in nanny.

Domestic workers, especially those marginalized by immigration status have little agency to express their voice or make their preferences known with regard to SHCs (Tan et al., 2022). In this context, researchers have documented everyday acts of resistance. This is particularly apparent in Johnson et al.'s (2019) study of the experiences of Filipino migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. A domestic worker may "accidentally" drop clothes on a hidden camera, obscuring its view. There are also instances of domestic workers standing up for their dignity by asserting their right to privacy in their living quarters or even confronting an employer about a hidden camera. These examples are particularly striking because of the precarity and vulnerability of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. They speak to how despite structural power imbalances domestic workers find space to assert their agency. They also point to how surveillance shifts the behavior of domestic workers. Domestic workers engage in tactics of "evasion and avoidance" (Johnson et al., 2019) or alternatively attune their behavior to how they will be perceived through the camera (Bernd et al., 2022).

In some cases where parents make heavy use of SHCs and even livestream footage, the nature of working relationships are reconfigured further. Along with requesting streams of photos, text updates and more, SHCs enable more fluid communication and co-parenting between parents and domestic workers (Johnson et al., 2019). This enables parents to be "present" even when away. On the one hand, this may be an expression of care for their children and on the other a means to assert ever greater control over their employees. Johnson et al. argue that this leads to a troubled paradox of care and control, where increased digital surveillance threatens to undermine trust and the provisioning of quality care (Johnson et al., 2019). We pick up on these themes through uncovering the cost of surveillance borne by workers in the home. This article bridges the gaps between scholarship in platform studies, surveillance studies, and the privacy and security literature on domestic workers. In doing so, we describe the experiences of domestic workers across their labor process.

Data and methods

The research team conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 15 care workers between March and August 2021. Prospective participants were initially contacted

online through targeted posts on nanny-focused social media pages, including Reddit and Facebook, and via direct messages to users who discussed care work platforms on the forum. In these messages, the research team communicated that the study was open to any care worker who had experiences with platforms such as "Care.com, SitterCity, etc.," and we defined "care workers" as "nannies, babysitters, house cleaners, and domestic workers of all kinds." Anyone who expressed interest was encouraged to either email the research team directly or to fill out an online form in order to be contacted for screening and scheduling. In order to be considered for inclusion in the study, participants were required to be an adult and to have recently used a care work platform to find jobs.

One out of 15 participants identified as a man, and approximately half identified as white. Formal demographics (using a multiple choice form, for example) were not collected. Participants were instead invited to self-identify their race, gender identity, age, and socioeconomic status at their own comfort level. Although most participants live and work in the United States, two interviews were conducted with workers in the United Kingdom. Participants were interviewed individually on Zoom and the conversations lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. Thirteen interviews were done in English, one in English and Spanish (bilingual), and one in Spanish. Interviewees were compensated $40 in the form of a digital gift card for their participation.

To prepare for our interviews and contextualize our results, the research team installed and created accounts on four care work platforms—Care.com, Carelinx, Honor, and HHAExchange—on our personal devices. We were guided by the "walkthrough method," an approach to the study of apps that revolves around three "phases of interaction": entry, everyday use, and disconnection (Light et al., 2018). The final dataset included over 200 screenshots across all apps along with our own annotations and memos. Rather than formally present and analyze these data on their own, we refer to aspects of the platform alongside and in support of our interviews with domestic workers.

Interviews focused both on domestic workers' experiences using care platforms to find jobs, as well as off-line interactions with employers. These discussions frequently touched on the role of the platform in determining the mode and frequency of engagement between workers and prospective employers, as well as the degree to which information was made reciprocal. Later questions focused on how these early interactions on the platforms gave way to day-to-day experiences on the job, which included discussion of SHCs and other smart-home technologies used to monitor workers. We practiced informed consent and sought to ensure the well-being of participants while discussing sometimes difficult subject matter, which—as we will go on to detail—included gender-based harassment, micromanagement, exploitative labor practices, and overall feelings of "fear, anger, frustration, and worry." Per ethical research standards, we reminded interviewees of their right to stop participation at any time, though none chose to do so.

We analyzed the interview transcripts thematically using inductive techniques of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). This approach allowed us to foreground the forms of surveillance promoted on the platform and experienced by domestic workers. We developed reflexive memos based on our analysis and reviewed them together during weekly meetings. We then iteratively revisited and refined our interpretations across later rounds of analysis, building emergent foci such as parental autonomy, the hybridization of care

and control, and how ongoing monitoring affects caregivers' feeling of safety and autonomy within the home. The sections that follow organize our findings according to forms of oversight workers encountered—from families requesting proactive reporting to the use of SHCs and in-person monitoring. In drawing together these accounts, we build toward an understanding of surveillance that spans workers' employment, from enrolling on the platform and interviewing to ongoing monitoring on the job.

Findings

Information asymmetries and surveillance in securing employment

Bans and background checks. Caregivers described difficulties getting set up on care work platforms in the name of security, in some cases preventing them from doing so altogether. Charlotte, an African American woman with a background in care work, said that shortly after she registered for Care.com, she received a "rejection email" that indicated her account was not approved. She added, the platform "never gave me specifics [on the ban], and I didn't call to actually find out what it could have been that they seen that prevented me." While it may be reasonable to assume that caregivers have access to the most information about themselves, Charlotte's experience reveals that even caregivers can be unaware of what they had done that would warrant a ban and are left in the dark after one is enacted. Although Care.com's official materials admit that background checks can be inaccurate, our interviews show that the platform's bans are decisive and uncontestable. Care workers on the platform are required to complete a "CareCheck,[2]" which, even for those who pass it, creates additional burdens.

The platform also advises families to purchase additional background checks "at time of hire" for increased security. They write that "A background check is not a substitute for conducting thorough in-person interviews, reference checks, online and social media searches, obtaining copies of the candidate's identification documents, and conducting ongoing monitoring of any individual you hire." Later, we detail the on-the-ground consequences for Care.com's encouragement of "ongoing monitoring" of caregivers. But first we describe the effects of offloading responsibility to parents during the process of finding then securing employment.

Initial contact with families. For all of Care.com's rhetoric of personal choice ("it's up to you!"),[3] our participants repeatedly indicated that the process of finding work concentrates power in the hands of the platform and the family. This is true from the moment of initial contact with families. Participants described pressures to repeatedly engage with the platform against their wishes. For example, Lucy said that she has often received irrelevant messages that she would rather not respond to, like from families offering extremely low pay (e.g. "four kids for $8 an hour"). However, Care.com calculates,

> the percentage of messages that you respond to within 24 hours. So, like, you kind of have to respond to everything, um, or else your percentage lowers, and like, the lower your percentage, the less likely you are to show up in a search result.

As a makeshift solution, Lucy uses a template that she copies and pastes to retain her message response rate, which has "worked really well," except when families then respond to the response (e.g. "Thanks for letting me know"). In those cases, she said, she must engage in a "socially awkward" exchange wherein she has to continue responding to get in the last word, even though the "conversation's clearly ended."

After recounting her difficulty maintaining her message response rate, Lucy pointed out the asymmetry between caregivers and individuals seeking care on the platform, saying that it is "obviously not the case with parents that they have to respond." Clients pay a premium price to message freely on Care.com, but an increased influx of messages can penalize caregivers who decline to, or cannot, respond. Grace explained that ignoring unwanted contact through the platform carried negative repercussions on SitterCity as well. She elaborated,

> I've had potential families email me or use [SitterCity's] messaging app repeatedly and wouldn't take no for an answer . . . I kept getting this pop up that says you have an interview scheduled on this day and this time with this person, and it was the same person every time.

Despite the fact that the client was located in another state, and was offering "not even minimum wage," SitterCity flagged her account as "missing interviews." Lucy, likewise, told us that canceling an interview with a family they'd never met can lead to negative reviews being placed on their profile, which can impact their ability to find jobs in the future.

Interviews as sites of heightened vulnerability and scrutiny. While nannies find themselves going out of their way to provide information and respond to potential employers, they have little incentive to be clear about what a job might actually entail. The information shared on job listings is fairly scant, according to Linda, and even after a phone conversation, "people seem very different on the phone than they do in person." She asked her husband to wait for her outside in the car while she went on interviews. Feelings of fear were echoed by Grace, who said that being interviewed is "terrifying," adding that,

> this person can be anybody . . . So I, every time I have to do the interview, I always call my friends, I turn my location on, I let them track me. Make sure that they call me 15 minutes into it. So that . . . because it's like going on a blind date so that they know I'm still alive.

In these initial interactions, interviewees explained, it is not uncommon for nannies to experience gender-based harassment. Gloria recounted being repeatedly "hit on" by the father in a home she was working in and eventually had to quit to escape the hostile environment. At other times the dynamic is more ambiguous but still fraught. When Hannah was invited to interview at someone's home, she arrived to find that the mom was still out at work and the dad was home, cooking. She said, "he offered me some wine. And I was like, I can't tell if this is casual or a test, you know, like, part of the interview of like, 'Will she accept wine?'" She added that she might have felt differently if the gig was "a through-my-friends type of situation" rather than a connection facilitated by a platform. Regardless of her interviewer's intentions, Hannah declined the offer

of wine. Her experience highlights that seemingly friendly interactions with potential employers are laced with uncertainty and, ultimately, an underlying threat (to be denied a job and needed income). In her words, "I don't know you, I have no, no context for who you are."

Relatedly, we found that interviews afford parents the opportunity to scrutinize and surveil their potential hires. Grace stated that interviews are "more for the family to decide if you're a good fit, rather than for you to decide if the family's a good fit, because they do not reveal anything about themselves." Hannah said that the interviews she had with families connected with her through care work platforms were "a lot more intense" than those she found through mutual friends or other personal connections. She said, "I went through like three or four rounds of interviews . . . they gave me an essay, like a test, that I had to write a written exam basically, of how I would respond to certain situations." Linda was also tested, but in real-time: "'We're just gonna watch you,' [the parent] told me. 'We want to watch how you interact with our kids downstairs on the camera.' She gave me the baby. And I went downstairs with a three year old and they were watching me on the camera, how I interacted." Linda was not told that this would be a component of the interview prior to showing up, and added that cameras are "fine" with her so long as she is told about them first. Lucy shared that asking directly during interviews is not always an option:

> sometimes I work up the nerve to ask if they have cameras. Um, it depends "on like, how many offers I'm getting lately, because I feel like some parents don't like if you ask about that. Like, if I'm more like, desperate to get a job, I just won't bring it up.

In this statement, Lucy connects her confidence ("nerve") with her current level of economic security, suggesting that even asking about cameras can cause her to lose the opportunity. When she does "work up the nerve," she added, parents' responses ranged from open ("we have them here, we have them here . . . we check them occasionally") to defensive ("Yeah, well, would it be a problem if we did? . . . Why is that a concern for you?").

"Ongoing monitoring" on the job: the home as a site of surveillance

Information asymmetries, surveillance, and mistrust follow domestic workers from these initial experiences of finding and meeting employers into the home. The use of cameras was widespread, even as interviewees' perceptions of them were not uniform. For some, the use of cameras, while unnerving, was normalized. Emma indicated that while "at first I cared a lot. Because I was just like, oh, *you're watching me*," eventually she came to accept the use of cameras.

> I didn't think it was all that big of a deal that they didn't ask for consent or anything like that. Especially because I wasn't doing anything that they would be worried about in the first place . . . when you step into someone else's home, there is no privacy. That is something that you pretty much have to relinquish as soon as you step into that home.

Camila shared that she felt "weird" asking her client to cover a flashing camera that was on in the bedroom, which was waking up the baby at night. She said, "I know it's not my house, you know, they can do whatever they want." On the other hand, Lucy shared that potential clients omitted sharing that they had cameras in their home during interviews, which she called "disrespectful."

Surveillance may be recognized, but it often cannot be contested. Rather, domestic workers we spoke with internalize being watched. When asked to describe nanny cams and their immediate impressions of them, Lucy said, "They look like webcams. They're usually like a ball with, like, an obvious camera thing in it. And sometimes it'll be like, on a little stand . . . [mounted] on the wall." She described that some are motion-activated and others are not: "the ones that are motion-activated, like some of them are actually kind of loud. Like you walk in and like you can hear it turn." Hannah elaborated,

> I thought I saw it blink or I thought – I was like, is that thing on? And is that for me? Or for the kids? I thought it was so awkward, and I just felt kind of powerless and didn't, didn't bring it up.

When Ella found cameras, she asked herself, "What have I been doing? You know, Did I do anything bad? . . . I was trying to backtrack . . . is there anything that I did that could have been, you know, seen as a red flag of any sort." Describing the fact that she was nannying two boys who would often fight, Ella continued: "I was trying to break them up. And, you know, I'm like, Did I do that the right way? Would the family have agreed with, like, the way I handled that?"

As mentioned in the previous section, nannies told us that interviews and trial periods ostensibly allow them and their clients to decide whether they agree on childcare style (for example, Ella told us that she opts not to move forward with clients she identifies as being too "strict"). However, our findings suggest that those preliminary conversations may not reflect the actual conditions of work when nannies enter a client's home. In terms of discipline in particular, nannies described how their behavior changed when they felt like they were being watched, and began to aggressively self-monitor themselves. Grace said,

> [Parents] might log in and take something out of context, because it's not even like there's cameras throughout the whole house. So we can't be in the living room and one child is really acting out and I send them to their bedroom for a timeout . . . like the parents won't know the whole story. And I think, because cameras don't usually have audio, it can really easily be taken out of context. So just, having to be making sure my mannerisms and my posture and like the way that I'm speaking to these children that, if it's recorded on the camera, that there's nothing that would look bad.

Grace also shared that she "intentionally think[s] about the angle of the camera" when playing with the kids; when making a fort of pillows and blankets, she said, "I'll make really bad ones, like lots of space and holes, so that the camera can still see us."

Nannies shared how they expend substantial, "intentional" effort to change their behavior to accommodate the camera's eye, sometimes going so far as to deny themselves rest during the work day. Camila shared that it "feel[s] weird to sit down" even after finishing all her work. She said,

> I like to work hard, but I had to take a break, you know, at least like eat or something. But I was like, always, I remember how, the family that had cameras everywhere . . . [I] used to sit down back to the camera and eating very fast because I'm feeling *so weird*.

Camila shared that she also felt "so weird" when trying to sleep while the baby was sleeping, knowing the camera was there.

In its official communications, Care.com appears unconcerned with these on-the-ground effects of surveillance on caregivers. The platform encourages parents looking to hire a caregiver to conduct "ongoing monitoring of any individual you hire." In blog posts providing guidance for new parents "nanny cams" are described as ways to "offer parents peace of mind" and "provide comfort" (Van Osdell, n.d.). A post from Care.com provides reasons for fear—the potential for neglect or abuse (Starbuck Gerson, 2022). In this context, it is the right of the parent to introduce cameras (Van Osdell, n.d.). Interestingly, Care.com still recommends that parents "meet with a criminal defense attorney" before installing SHCs (Starbuck Gerson, 2022). This both reflects the ambiguous privacy laws in many states and Care.com's bias toward offloading responsibility and legal liability onto parents. Where safety is concerned, Care.com makes it clear it is ultimately up to parents. This means that "ongoing monitoring" is often taken up enthusiastically.

Our interviews indicated that "ongoing monitoring" of nannies did not just include cameras, but also occurred through text messages, paper forms, and the children being cared for. Lucy told us that one of her clients expected "constant updates and documentation" of what she and the kids were doing via texts and photos sent to her client throughout the day (e.g. of the plates of food the children were eating). She said that this communicated a lack of trust in her to decide what and how much food to serve the children, and "it also made my job a lot harder, because like, when I'm texting, I'm not good at multitasking. So like, the girls would be trying to talk to me and I'd be like, 'Hold on. I'm trying to take a picture of your food.'" Relatedly, Gloria reflected on the constant reporting burdens at one of her jobs—"let me do my job."

Caroline shared how expectations and monitoring changed over time and in a direct response to her asking for improvement in her working conditions. She said that she was paid a flat rate for the entire day, rather than hourly. Eventually, she was asked to come in earlier so that her client could leave for work earlier; rather than coming home earlier (which would have preserved the length of her work day), her client came home later and later: "My days were getting longer and longer . . . It was just exhausting that my worth wasn't being noticed." At this point, she began to advocate for herself, and sent a message to her client insisting that they return home by a certain time and an extra $10 per hour in compensation. However, Caroline continued,

> She had started asking more of me after that. So it was like, 'Oh, well, you're gonna need to step up your game.' And it was like, "you need to write down every single thing that my kid does..".. it was almost like a punishment . . . I had to write down every activity, I had to write down everything they ate, every time they went to the bathroom, every time. Like everything.

Caroline's repetition of the word "every" underscores the weight of this expectation. This documentation took place on physical, printed sheets of paper that her client

supplied to her. These sheets were inspected before she left the home, she said, "to make sure I did a good job." The interviewee described this work as "exhausting, especially on top of having two children to watch." "I would have to take time away from them to fill it out," she further explained. "Exhausting" is the same word she used to describe the previous state of affairs—before her self-advocacy and subsequent retaliation—of her days growing longer and longer without her worth recognized.

Gloria also related another negative experience with monitoring. She described having to wake up hours early to drive to a wealthier part of the city to do her work. When the child she was looking after ate breakfast, she reported taking a short nap. "I wouldn't have done that if I didn't know that I had to then drive him to school. I wanted to be safe when I drove, but I was tired no matter how early I went to sleep." One day she got a call reprimanding her for this practice. Rather than a camera, it was the child who had revealed this to the parent. "Is your child safe? Like I had to be like, What? What is this surveillance?" It is not only cameras that keep an eye on domestic workers but children and other family members, even if—as in this instance—it was unintentional. Gloria named this incident as surveillance because of how it was negatively experienced and curtailed her autonomy. This was one of many examples of being watched in this home. Gloria also described engaging in *anticipatory conformity*, knowing that there would be cameras in the home too or that parents distrusted her and wanted text updates throughout the day. Ella described "being way more cautious" after learning about the presence of cameras and Hannah described "self-policing."

The invisibility of domestic workers, behind closed doors, in the private sphere of the home, structures their vulnerability to harassment, mistreatment, and other issues like wage theft. While Grace was taking care of children, their grandfather came by and began drinking alcohol and sexually harassing her. After he had left the parents came back and accused her of emptying the wine bottles strewn throughout the kitchen. Grace was taken aback and told them to check with the kids. If there had been a camera, perhaps this too could have vouched for her behavior and the harassment she experienced. Increasing visibility through the use of SHCs could theoretically help counteract these harms. For example, Charlotte described feeling "a little safer that, you know, someone knows what I'm doing when I'm there." Yet, as some of the existing literature points out (Slupska et al., 2022), it is not clear when a domestic worker might be able to access video footage or appropriate surveillance for their own ends. Emma described how she would have liked to have access to the cameras used in the house to help multitask and monitor children. Implicitly, asking about using cameras was out of the question. Again, we find that the visibility regimes at work here are too often one-sided.

Discussion

Throughout our findings, we have described how scrutiny and surveillance are pervasive across the labor process. From signing up to talking with potential employers, care workers take on additional labors to meet the demands of the platform (Mateescu and Ticona, 2020; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). During the matching and interview process, nannies are keen to avoid potentially exploitative or dangerous situations but because of the power dynamics at play they are the ones under scrutiny. And finally in the home, while

employed with a family, nannies describe being subject to an array of monitoring and surveillance techniques, especially with cameras. Surveillance may be recognized but it often cannot be contested. For example, Lucy discussed how having the "nerve" to even bring up the use of cameras depended on her economic circumstances, how desperately she needed the work. The visibility regimes these workers are subject to are situated within stark power imbalances. Through the experiences of nannies, it becomes more difficult to see practices of scrutiny and surveillance as benign forms of monitoring. Although this is often exactly how it is understood.

Parental interest in the care for and well-being of their child obscures and depoliticizes these burdens placed on workers. The dignity, privacy, and security of in-home childcare workers becomes secondary. Emma, described learning to accept that "there is no privacy" and that it is just something you have to "relinquish as soon as you step into that home." The lack of privacy helps employers realize what Macdonald (2010) has described as "shadow mothers." Through a combination of scrutiny during the hiring process and ongoing surveillance, parents seek to make their nanny a proxy for themselves (Johnson et al., 2019). This enables parents to enact the norm of intensive parenting, and more specifically the gendered norm of intensive mothering, at a distance. While some praise this dynamic as enabling more fluid forms of co-parenting, there are costs.

Disruptive, negative affects produced in response to surveillance practices are at the core of our findings—fear, anger, frustration, worry. Domestic workers understand the use of cameras in this context not only as a form of care but as means of control. Nannies are not "bystanders" to monitoring in the home; they are often its objects (Slupska et al., 2022). And even where intent is more ambiguous, nannies still absorb harm. Many we spoke to could not shake a sense of unease. We also describe nannies shifting their work to accommodate the gaze of the camera. Some workers report fearing taking a break or sitting down to eat. Nannies also participate in their own monitoring as a part of the job. This includes regularly reporting back to families, updating as they go.

What these nannies experience include many of the characteristics of "new surveillance" enabled by digital technologies, which are productive of new practices as existing ones are variously intensified and reconfigured (Marx, 2002). Scholars have identified how data-driven surveillant practices are increasingly pervasive across workplace contexts (Ajunwa et al., 2016; Levy, 2023). These dynamics in domestic work have long been in the making, as we described in the Literature section. For example, "nanny cams" have been utilized since the 1990s (Zeavin, 2023) and scholars were already surfacing some of the dynamics we describe around the use of cameras and digital technologies in the early 2010s (Brown, 2011: 105). However, the affordances of digital care platforms and smart home technologies are enabling more seamless and instantaneous surveillance. Parents can run background checks, stream footage from SHCs to apps on their phones while also messaging, FaceTiming, and tracking domestic workers directly.

To make sense of these layered and emergent practices we draw on the concept of "surveillant assemblages" (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000). This is an alternative framing to the "electronic panopticon" (Bian and Taylor, 2000) which implies the centralization of totalizing surveillance practices. Thinking about contemporary surveillance practices

as a part of assemblages enables us to name the way these practices are not top down, but are horizontal, multiple, and sometimes loosely constructed. The negative affects we surface are produced in response to scrutiny and surveillance seemingly around every turn, with a number of discrete practices. It is not that these practices are being enacted by the state or even the platform alone, but primarily by individual parents in their own homes who can utilize a number of techniques to keep an eye on their nanny. These heterogeneous and at times improvisational practices together construct a new terrain for power and agency.

We argue that regardless of intent, surveillant assemblages on the platform and in the home reinscribe the uneven visibility regimes that have long defined domestic labor. Their enactment treats workers as suspect and potentially criminal. This has a particular history on care platforms, but also intersects with the racialized and classed nature of this work. Migrant status, race, and class status intersect to make domestic workers legitimate objects of surveillance (Brown, 2011). Because these practices disproportionately harm women of color, we might think of surveillance on the platform and in the home as a kind of "racializing surveillance" (Browne, 2015) encouraging the internalization of a surveillant gaze (Foucault, 1995).

Domestic workers contest these dynamics, even under conditions of limited agency. We describe some of the micropolitical ways nannies refuse the normalization of surveillance. Scholars have surfaced more practices of resistance (Johnson et al., 2019; Slupska et al., 2022). However, these can be limited given the stark power dynamics at play. In response, some turn toward forms of mutual support and advocacy. Nannies online form "counterpublics" to criticize the surveillant practices of care platforms and employers, while also providing support for their peers (Ticona and Tsapatsaris, 2023). Nannies, like Angela Foster (2019), also organize with groups like the National Domestic Workers Alliance to protect their rights. This includes efforts to pass, enforce, and educate others about the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights which include provisions for informed consent about the use of cameras. The dynamics we describe here, the surveillant assemblage, has shifted the terrain of agency and resistance for domestic workers.

Our study demonstrates the importance of studying how workers are subject to forms of control that include but exceed the platform. Techniques of platform governance may be one element in an assemblage of surveillant practices used to enhance employer control, as we demonstrate here. The effects of background checks and customer ratings on the platform may also bleed off of it as Mosseri (2022) demonstrates with ride-hail drivers and is evident to a lesser degree here as well. Without both understanding the process of finding employment and the conditions workers face while on the job, our analysis would be incomplete. We argue that by bringing concerns from platform and surveillance studies together we can more effectively understand the experiences of nannies as well as workers in many other sectors. There is a need for more dialogue between platform studies and those studying workplace surveillance in order to develop more nuanced accounts of the shifting terrain of domestic work. Understanding this terrain can be mobilized to empower domestic workers (Slupska et al., 2022) and contest the evolving conditions of their marginalization.

Conclusion

In this article, we describe domestic workers' experiences with surveillance, through interviews about both the process of securing employment and their everyday working conditions. Our work contributes to the growing body scholarship on digital care platforms, while identifying how surveillant logics (Mateescu and Ticona, 2020) are also present off the platform. Information asymmetries present on the care platforms parallel those off of them. Domestic childcare workers describe encountering cameras in the home, often without prior notification or consent. They also describe layers of surveillance with families requesting proactive reporting, the use of SHCs, and in-person monitoring. Surveillant assemblages are used to keep domestic workers in line, while also enacting care at a distance. This hybridization of care and control naturalizes and normalizes. The negative effects of domestic workers disrupt this process. Unresolved anger, fear, frustration, and worry characterize the affective experience of being surveilled. This helps us see hidden harms and burdens produced by the way families manage the delivery of care. Surveillance in the home can function to reproduce domestic worker marginalization and disproportionately impact women of color. New technologies have and will continue to shift the terrain of agency and resistance for domestic workers.

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ORCID iDs

Hunter Akridge https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4640-6682

Alex Ahmed https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4565-3561

Free S Bàssïbét https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8783-0928

Sarah Fox https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7888-2598

Notes

1. This is the last year these data were made public through SEC (2018) filings. Registered members include both caregivers and families seeking care. There are indications from the recent FTC complaint that this number has only increased since and reported steady growth prior to this filing (FTC, 2024).
2. Care.com's "CareCheck" is run annually on all caregivers who register on the platform, and involves collecting a prospective caregiver's legal name, permanent address, birth date, and Social Security Number (Carecom, 2023). This information is passed on to a third-party firm, Sterling Talent Solutions, which advertises background checks with "end-to-end automation technology" and turnaround times within 24 hours in most cases. We found that as of late 2024 with a "basic" membership this background check costs about $25 annually. However, a "premium membership" that includes the CareCheck costs over $100 annually. These prices are only visible after creating an account.
3. In our walkthrough analysis, we noted that the very first screen users see when opening the Care.com Caregiver app (prior to making an account) is a banner image featuring a smiling child and the text, "Set your own schedule: find ongoing jobs, occasional gig work, or both—it's up to you!" The app's Google Play Store listing features the slogan "Find the care job

that's right for you" above an in-app screenshot showing jobs listed in order of "best match," with additional options for sorting by "new" and "nearby." However, our interviews indicated that this benefit of worker choice, which platforms claim to facilitate, is far from the reality experienced by care workers on the ground.

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Author biographies

Hunter Akridge is a research associate at Carnegie Mellon University in the Human-Computer Interaction Institute and the Tech Solidarity Lab.

Alex Ahmed works at Sassafras Tech Collective, a worker-owned cooperative. She is a proud member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Free S Bàssïbét is an MFA candidate at the University of Washington. He holds a BS Manufacturing and Design Engineering at Northwestern University.

Magally A Miranda Alcázar is a PhD student in Chicana/o Studies at UCLA. She is a Eugene Cota-Robles Fellow and a Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellow, whose work has been published in The Nation, Verso, and the New Left Review.

Sarah Fox is an assistant professor at Carnegie Mellon University in the Human Computer Interaction Institute, where she directs the Tech Solidarity Lab.