



PATHS TO PARTICIPATORY AUTONOMY

The meanings of work for children in Germany

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Key words:

autonomy, childhood, child work,
participation, qualitative research

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SAGE Publications. Los Angeles, London,
New Delhi and Singapore, Vol 14(2); 257-277.
www.sagepublications.com
10.1177/0907568207078343

This article examines the experiences of working children aged between 9 and 14 years in a German city, and the meanings the children ascribe to their work. This qualitative study is based upon a broad concept of work, which includes both unpaid and paid work. As far as work is concerned, the most important thing for children is being able to act independently and find approval for their work.

They prefer to receive adequate payment as a form of recognition, but money is not a necessary motive nor the only motive for working. Children's attitude towards their work differs according to a number of factors: whether it offers the opportunity to perform their skills; the concrete use it has for others, and how far that work is appreciated by adults in their social environment. Work is not regarded as being in competition with school, but is seen as an additional opportunity for children to gain new experiences and expand their scope of activities. Work experience can become an important element in children's participative autonomy. Thus it can potentially strengthen their social status and encourage girls and boys to play an active role in society.

Within our society, children are to be found at work at many times and in many places. They may be working for money, or frequently unpaid; they may be working illicitly or, in special instances, with permission; they may be working because it is expected of them or on their own initiative and under their own supervision. Sometimes they are visible, but mostly they are invisible and disregarded. Alongside their work in school, they make a more or less significant contribution for themselves, for others, for their family and for society in general. And not only this: they want to work, frequently take their work very seriously and enjoy that work when the conditions are right.

Our research project into the meanings that work has for children – carried out between July 2002 and June 2004 – focuses on the experiences and viewpoints of children working in Germany. These perspectives have remained up to now hidden from view. In contrast to earlier work on 'child labour'

in the German-speaking countries, we offer a fresh perspective. Our study aims to show that work by children is not perceived first and foremost as a social problem that has to be tackled, but rather to ensure that children are taken seriously as reflective, active subjects in all imaginable aspects of their lives.

The presentation of our results is divided into two main sections. In the first section, we develop a typology of forms of work and experience out of the way the children themselves describe and attribute meaning to that work, while placing particular emphasis on the aspects of independence and payment. In the second section, we examine in detail the meanings that these experiences of work have for the children, and the consequences for their sense of identity and their place in society. To begin with, we delineate our conceptual and methodological approach against the background of previous research.

Qualitative research with working children

The limitations of earlier research

Research into child work in Europe has been driven by differing and often contrasting epistemological concerns. On the one hand there are studies that are interested above all in finding out to what extent 'child labour' breaks existing laws or how far the society concerned or children are damaged by work (see Cecchetti, 1998; Council of Europe, 1996). In general, such research understands children's work exclusively as a legal, social or economic problem but not as a broad field of activity that is determined by many different forms and conditions and that encompasses a wide variety of experiences for children.

When such studies start to look at the effects of work, working children appear as the objects of processes over which they have no influence, and even on those occasions when child work is seen in a more differentiated fashion, the effects of the work are almost exclusively derived from the conditions of the work themselves (e.g. Lavalette, 1994, 2000). In such research, the sociocultural context plays as little a role as the living conditions and the individual and collective resources of the children, although it seems obvious that children's perceptions and their personal engagement even with difficult and demanding conditions are affected by such factors.

In dealing with the effects of work on the children themselves, it is still customary for the researchers to claim some universal kind of judgement even when they are using criteria that they have laid down themselves or have even been given by the commissioning bodies. Even when children are asked their 'opinions', these views are mostly subordinated to the preordained interpretative strategy and relativized as 'merely subjective'. This in effect denies working children the competence to judge their own situation.

On the other hand, recent years have seen studies – primarily in Britain and Scandinavian countries, but recently also in Italy – that try to observe how working children think and act from the perspective of the children themselves

(see Hobbs and McKechnie, 1997; Hungerland et al., 2007; Leonard, 2002, 2004; Mizen et al., 2001; Morrow, 1994, 1996; Solberg, 1997, 2001; Tagliaventi, 2002). An important element of this kind of research is that children are seen as actors or subjects participating in the social construction of their societies. In contrast to most of the studies carried out to date, the interests that guide this research into children's work are also broader. For one thing, they are not restricted to studying gainful employment alone; for another, they do not merely record the extent of offences against the law, but also attempt to explain the diverse conditions in which children work, to cast a more precise light on the positive and negative meanings that the various types of work have for children. We see our own study as following in the footsteps of such research.

A problem that is often underestimated in studies into children's work lurks in the concepts that are employed. Concepts are essential both in everyday communication and in academic research, since they help us to order and comprehend social reality. Since they are an abstraction, however, there is always a tension between the social reality and what our concepts express. This tension, often overlooked, is generally expressed in terms of 'social representation'. Once present in the world, concepts take on a life of their own, from which even we researchers cannot fully escape. Michel Foucault (1966) spoke of 'discourses' in this context and attributed them a considerable importance in the legitimation of the power to interpret.

This is particularly clear in the case of 'child labour', a concept which mostly provokes negative associations and therefore largely shapes the perception of the social reality that we might want to designate and understand through the concept. Boyden et al. (1998) suggest using the concept 'child labour' only to describe clearly problematic forms of child work, and otherwise to use 'child work' or 'children's work'. But this also raises the problem of how to define 'problematic' and – using the concept child labour in an extensive way – completely ignores 'non-problematic' forms of child work (see, for example, ILO, 2004).

We cannot eradicate this problem, but if we are aware of it we can attempt to find terms that impose the least possible limits and make the fewest possible value judgements, as well as dealing (self-)critically with the existing concepts. Perhaps, in the future, one should not analyse either 'child work' or 'child labour', but rather investigate 'working children'.

In sociology, labour is seen as a key category through which status and social position, in other words power and dominance, are distributed in contemporary societies. This is particularly true of paid labour. Private, everyday work, i.e. domestic and caring work, as a form of non-paid, but nevertheless essential social labour, is valued less highly and endues those involved in such work an indeterminate social status. Their social status is generally determined by the breadwinning activities of the main earner of the family. This is also true for all other forms of labour that are not carried out under paid 'normal working conditions' (e.g. honorary positions).

As was also the case with women, an area of child work that has received little attention up to now is that of housework. While feminist gender research has in the meantime fully investigated this topic from the perspective of a *gendered* division of labour, the *generational* division of labour has received little attention from academics. The work that children carry out within families is frequently not seen as work by either adults or children. But also other, paid activities are frequently not regarded as work if they are carried out by children, because in the relatively affluent European societies, as a rule, they do not represent a substantial contribution to the income of the family.

Conceptual and methodological approach

In order to investigate the meanings work has for children, we have developed a concept of work that is broad enough to incorporate all the different activities in which children engage. We understand children's work to include every direct and indirect contribution to the economy of the family household. This also allows us both to encompass conceptually and to include within our analysis the unpaid work that children do within the private household, on the assumption that this not only provides the parents with time in which they can engage in paid work, but also includes activities for which someone else would have to be paid. An activity was evaluated as work if it was an activity that was useful for others or involved the earning of money or was a regular activity.

Within the framework of our research project, we approached the topic from a subject-oriented point of view (see Liebel, 2004: 7–12). This means that we regard the children as experts in talking about themselves, as capable of making their own statements about their feelings, perceptions and judgements. Since we were keen to take the children's perspectives seriously, we decided upon a qualitative approach and, in evaluating the interviews, based our approach on the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1994).

One particular benefit of grounded theory is that it integrates the collection and evaluation of data. The material that has been collected is appraised with the help of a systematic coding scheme and at the same time undergoes a categorization. The analysis of the material begins during the process of its collection and guides any further data collection. Through a combination of inductive and deductive procedures, we develop an object-related theory from the material. Since the complex area of child work has up to now not been subject to theoretical examination, this research method lent itself to the investigation of the children's perspectives.

We gained access to the field of research through a number of methods. We informed schools with children in school-years 5–8, whereby we sought to ensure involvement of all types of school spread across both the eastern and western districts of Berlin. Beyond this, we directly sought out children working in the media through casting agencies. In addition, we placed an advertisement

in a children's newspaper distributed free to schools throughout the region, and we also approached children while they were working.

In the course of the data collection, we carried out 40 guided interviews in Berlin with children between the ages of 9 and 15, of which 38 were analysed. We are aware of the limits as to what can be generalized from just 38 cases, and therefore understand our article as exploratory, in that it identifies themes and patterns that could help inform the design of more definitive research at some future date.

Of the children interviewed, 26 were undertaking paid work, divided equally according to gender. Altogether 22 girls and 16 boys participated in interviews. From their details it is clear that the number of children working without being paid is higher among the girls (9) than the boys (3).

Outside their own family household, the children interviewed by us work principally in the service sector. They deliver newspapers and leaflets, look after younger children and pets; moreover, they give extra lessons, help in gastronomic enterprises and in bakeries. Some of their activities are physically demanding, e.g. working in the garden or cleaning out stables. Some children work as voice-over artists, in film and in the chorus of opera houses. Beyond this, they are involved in trade. They have stalls at flea markets and repair and hire out bicycles. One child earns money by performing magic tricks.

Many children have experience of several different kinds of work. All children who regularly carry out paid work or already have experience in 'jobs' also carry out unpaid housework, although it has to be said that children from families in a higher income bracket generally do less housework.

Children's activities, regarded as work according to our preconceived criteria, can be categorized according to whether they were expected or demanded by the parents, or whether the children initiated and organized such activities themselves. Such an analytical distinction intersects with those discourses that already exist around child work. But this dichotomizing perspective, which sees working children either as exploited victims or as individualized consumers, has to be overcome if we are to gain new and differentiated insights into the meanings of work for children.

In analysing and interpreting the meanings work has for children, we come across connections to discourses about the development of learning and competencies. Both parents and children associate the working activities of children principally with the possibility of learning and see in this an investment for the future. The meanings children find in their work can also be associated with discourses about responsibility, which reveal a dialectic between the self-determination of the child and his or her duties.

In order to comprehend the various meanings that work has for children, it seems sensible to give a further dimension to the categories of self-determined and externally initiated work by relating them to the wider community as well as to the family and the self. In this way, it is also possible to investigate an

activity that is self-determined and ostensibly exclusively egocentric in terms of its relationship to the community and the subject's role within that community. At the same time, as well as being based on an independent decision, community-related activities can be imposed on a child.

The meanings work has for children must be discussed against the background of the hierarchical relationship between the generations. The status of this relationship between children and their parents is mirrored in the categories of work activities that we have established.

The variety of children's work

Unpaid work expected by parents

Unpaid work (housework, shopping) is the largest area of children's work. Helping with the household and looking after younger siblings is expected by almost all parents and carried out by almost all children. Admittedly there is variation in the number of activities and the amount of time these take up. Typical child work includes: tidying one's own room, taking out the rubbish, laying and clearing the table, washing up or loading the dishwasher, looking after the pets. In addition, and in varying degrees, there are: dusting, cleaning, cleaning the bathroom, putting out and folding the washing, ironing, small amounts of shopping, gardening, looking after younger siblings and many other tasks.

These tasks are in general organized, directed, delegated and supervised by the mothers. The mothers in the family decide which tasks are to be taken on when, how often and for how long by the various members of the family – themselves, fathers and children. This is even mostly true when the fathers are unemployed and regardless of whether the mothers themselves are seeking employment or not:

L: Well, it's not as if we have a rota . . . the way it is, our mother . . . says, for example: well, yes, it would be nice if you could manage to take out the rubbish in the morning, or after we've eaten, she says, come and help me with the drying-up, Lea. But it's not really laid down.

I: So, you have the right to say what you think and can say: no, I don't want to right now.

L: Well, we can say that, but it doesn't make any difference. So, it's better if you do it straight away, but there's no point in having a discussion. That's when my mother lays down the law. (Lea, girl, 13)¹

By working in the household and in the garden, the children alleviate the burden on their parents and place time at their disposal. Such a transference of work responsibilities is legitimized by the parents when they point to the educational benefits of such work.

Fathers delegate tasks to their children more infrequently. In part, they carry out the activities that have been transferred to or taken on together with the children, whereby the children, mostly the sons, are required, or permitted, to stand by their side as 'assistants'. Alongside the usefulness of such activities,

fun plays a role: such work is used by both fathers and sons as a kind of leisure activity in which they spend meaningful time together, in other words 'quality time'. Through common activities, a sense of community can be established.

Among themselves, children scarcely talk about these collaborative activities, as they are not something about which one could be particularly proud, nor are they something that it is worth complaining about:

I: And do you tell others about what you do around the house?

M: If someone asks me, then yes, but not unless they do.

I: Does anyone ask?

M: It tends to be rare, it's not really the major topic of conversation amongst my friends, the question of who does what at home. (Michi, girl, 14)

This kind of work is not valued socially, something of which children are also very aware. On the other hand, this kind of work gives expression to the generational hierarchies within the family, hierarchies that leave limited room for manoeuvre and remain unquestioned in the social relationship of adult to children:

I: And are there things that you disagree about in the family?

X: Yes, there are, if I don't tidy up my room, or if it's not properly tidied up.

I: And how do you work it out?

X: I go and tidy it up. . . . You do have to do your duties around the house from time to time, but the other duties, they are more fun.

I: Can you say why that's the case?

X: Because, well, if you're sweeping, you get so dirty, but you earn money doing the other things. (Xiyanxi, girl, 11)

There seems to be an unspoken consensus, or it is taken for granted, that parents or adults can tell children what they have to do. The children feel as though they have little room for manoeuvre with regard to such tasks, they find them unavoidable and natural, or even unpleasant and boring:

I: And do you also tell your friends that you help out with the chores?

L: Yes, they also know that's the case. But my friends mostly also have to do things around the house, everyone has to do something, at least as far as my friends are concerned. Everyone has to do something, even if it is just vacuuming or cleaning the bathroom once a week. (Leo, boy, 15)

Against the background of this generational hierarchy there are variations depending on the family's sense of identity and the meaning that the tasks have for one another. That meaning is dependent on how far the child is integrated or participates within the community. The dominance of the parents can be more or less visible, depending on how authoritarian or democratic the structure of the parent-child relationship is. This corresponds to a US study (Eberly et al., 1993), which reveals a positive relationship between perceptions of parental acceptance and children's helpfulness in the household. In other words, the readiness of children and adolescents to assist their parents is not an inherent feature of a particular stage of a child's development, as is commonly suggested, but results from the way in which the parents relate to their children. In this sense, children's and

adolescent's 'helpfulness toward parents provides another window for viewing changes in parent-adolescent relations' (Eberly et al., 1993: 241).

Paid work expected or initiated by parents

Paid child work that is initiated by parents or clearly encouraged by them reflects the hierarchical generational relationship. Parents support the paid work of their children because they hope to gain different forms of capital from it (following Bourdieu who distinguishes economic, cultural and social capital; see Bourdieu, 1979). Alongside the gaining of economic capital, which is not foregrounded in Germany, or whose primary status is at least not admitted, work can, or is supposed to, serve the acquisition of cultural and social capital.

Those paid activities that are demanded or initiated by the parents are mostly additional work that is not carried out in the context of the usual household duties. Here too the educational experience is frequently and clearly named as the primary motivation that children presume their parents have in supporting their work:

I: What does your mother think of the fact you babysit?

J: I think she considers it good ... that we take on responsibility as well, and I think she considers it good that one learns how to do that. Since I want to have children myself later and one has to be able to do these things. (Juliane, girl, 14)

Learning to deal with self-earned money and learning that activities possess a value also belong to those competencies that children are expected to acquire. In these tasks, both parents and children place value on the fact that they are fun and thus have the character of leisure activities. For the children themselves, the 'fun factor' is often rated more highly than the possibility of earning money:

I: Would you say that your acting is work?

M: I don't think so, okay, I earn money in doing it, but I wouldn't see that as work but rather as a hobby, no, not as work. (Milena, girl, 11)

Among those tasks that are primarily educationally oriented are mowing the lawn, gardening, looking after horses, working in the media and, in part, babysitting (for parents' friends). Through these kinds of work, children can, want and are supposed to test themselves in acquiring different skills.

Children believe that adults approve when they develop self-confidence, and learn both responsibility and the value of self-earned money through working. For parents and children, the pedagogical aspect is of primary importance here, while the material gain made through such work is also seen as an educative factor. This kind of work is seen by parents and children as an investment in the future, while at the same time, the anticipated usefulness is not directly connected with the concrete activity. The development of soft skills is principally foregrounded.

Such activities are primarily restricted to children from middle-class backgrounds, because such work is generally made possible through the parents' social contacts. In part, considerable time commitments are demanded of the

parents (the mothers), in order to facilitate the work (castings for children working in the media, 'background' networking in the case of babysitting). This kind of work is the best paid: it is made possible through the parents' social contacts and is dependent on the family already possessing sufficient social capital.

Tasks such as newspaper delivery and selling from stalls at flea markets and other markets can be classified as primarily economically motivated work. Alongside this kind of work, which is part of our sample, there are doubtless numerous other economically motivated activities in which children participate. Only a few of the children interviewed by us indicated that they were obliged to contribute to the family income. Admittedly, this may be down to our selection and the taboo nature of the topic. At the same time, in less well-off families, in particular single-parent households, the economic element cannot simply be ignored.

Younger children tend to work in consort with their parents, delivering newspapers together and helping them on flea market stalls. For them, therefore, earning money is not the primary motivation, but work is rather a common activity and has the character of a leisure activity similar to the unpaid common activity that fathers do with their sons:

K: It's good to do stuff together, then you can have a chat at the same time, or we take the dog with us, then you don't need to take it for a walk afterwards. The dog's always happy when we pack the newspapers into our rucksacks.

I: You have a chat with your mother while you're doing this?

K: Yes, we chat about various things. (Kelly, girl, 12)

Unpaid work organized by children themselves

When we turn to unpaid work organized by children themselves, this category includes babysitting, helping on their own initiative, cooking and domestic work in other households and looking after animals. Such work is not expected or demanded by adults, but is chosen and taken on by children themselves. The children take pride in their work, since they are aware that they are carrying a level of responsibility that is not normally expected of them. Through the inherent characteristics and the intrinsic qualities of their work the children experience themselves as 'older' and more 'adult-like' (this corresponds to the findings of Solberg, 2001).

The children explicitly mention the fact that their work is meant to provide help and support. They want to take pressure off adults. The gratification gained through this work is, on the one hand, pride at their achievement, and, on the other, approval from adults. The children themselves recognize the relevance of their work and consider the shouldering of extra responsibility to be 'honourable' and a transcendence of the 'childhood space of play' to which they have been ascribed. They are particularly proud when they experience approval and are treated in a way that disrupts the hierarchical relationship between children and adults:

I: What do you imagine your aunt would do without you?

L: Oh, she wouldn't know what to do. That would be really difficult for her, it wouldn't look good for her at all. But I think it's better that I do help her. (Lucy, girl, 12)

Children may decide to take on such work when they realize that it is necessary to support the adults. This is above all the case in single-parent families, but also where small siblings are in need of particular care. It is important that the children can decide whether to take on the work. They also consider the benefit they can expect to derive from the work before deciding in favour of taking it on.

These voluntary activities are frequently carried out in the extended context of the family, i.e. among relatives and in the circle of family friends who can be understood as a self-selected extended family, or in self-selected other communities, like the 'adopted' family of horse- and farm people. The children have a positive perception of the possibility of having new and autonomous experiences in a secure space, experiences that extend into an adult sphere.

In these communities work is a means for the children to demonstrate their sense of belonging. It is central to the meaning of their work within these communities that it enables children to establish positions independent of sibling hierarchy or parental dependency.

Paid work organized by children themselves

In our sample, the majority of paid work by children is not undertaken on the initiative of the parents, but is instead sought and organized by the children themselves. We distinguish this paid work, organized by the children themselves, from paid work initiated and supervised by adults. Since the former is a voluntary activity, the children ensure that fun and income generation are combined. The possibilities for children to find an appropriate job are admittedly limited and defined by specific conditions. The youth protection regulations mean that children under the age of 14 are only permitted to undertake a few activities that offer such potential. As a result, children look for niches in the labour market, which is for the most part closed to them, and make use of 'structural opportunities'.

In some cases, children carry out work against the wishes of their parents. Children gain an unusual degree of autonomy here by both undertaking an activity that is not supervised by adults as well as having their own money at their disposal.

Our sample revealed the following possibilities of earning their own money: selling at the flea market, bicycle hire, newspaper delivery, sorting libraries, packing sweets, refereeing and, to some extent, babysitting:

H: And on Saturday for example, a friend and I wanted to go to the cinema, and so we did magic tricks, loads of them, until we both had €5 and then we went to the cinema. Well, I'm not really supposed to do that ... (Handy, boy, 11)

The desire to earn one's own money is the motivation for taking up such work. Paid work means children can have their own money at their disposal

beyond or in addition to pocket money and presents. The value of the work done becomes tangible in their self-earned money. This admittedly only applies to child work to a limited extent: one should not underestimate the fact that the same work, when performed by adults, is clearly better paid than when carried out by a child.

With the passage of time, such work loses its novelty. At the same time, the children remain closely connected to their activity, regardless of whether they are contractually bound to it or not. Getting used to the independent availability of one's own money is one reason why children keep such jobs until they are old enough to find a better paid position:

L: Now, well, in the meantime it is a little stressful, because it's every week, every Friday, always newspapers, there are also people who insult you, or say something else and are unfriendly but you always have to stay friendly. And at some point you've had enough. But because I get money for it and still find the job quite good from time to time, I keep doing it, until I get another proper job where perhaps I'll have more fun doing it, and maybe earn a bit more money. (Leo, boy, 15)

On the other hand, children do feel a high level of obligation towards the job and the responsibility they have assumed. This means that they do not give it up even if it is much less fun than it was originally.

The meanings of work

In examining the meanings which child work has, it is important to distinguish two aspects:

- How the children analyse their own experiences.
- The changes in social status that are expressed in child work and result from it.

Both aspects are clearly important and in our own research, we have sought to combine them.

The first aspect is not simply concerned with the 'opinions' of children, but rather seeks to examine, in tandem with the children themselves, how a reflective interpretation of their work experiences can be established and formulated in theoretical terms. The role that the (generally adult) researchers can or should play in this process is highly debatable and by no means have we resolved this question. But one has to take into account that the children do not exist separately from their social context and its defining discourses. The interpretation of their experiences is also influenced by these factors as they come to an autonomous judgement in the course of mutual reflection. We are particularly interested in the hidden or ignored knowledge that is produced by the children's own interests and their interpretation of their own reality and the value they associate with work within that reality.

The second aspect deals with the question of whether the integration of children into labour processes brings about changes in the social position of children. As we know, primarily from the countries of the southern hemisphere, where children are more often reduced to their labour power and its exploitation, and where the possibilities of finding work under favourable conditions are very limited, child work can take on extreme forms of subjugation, right up to the point of threatening their own lives. Nevertheless, integration into labour processes can also bring about social recognition and can give the children a greater sense of self-confidence, which strengthens demands that they be listened to, be shown respect and be allowed to collaborate in sociopolitical debates (see Liebel et al., 2001).

This latter aspect has seldom been examined in research, although there are signs that working children could represent a new kind of childhood, in contrast to the bourgeois model that has dominated the discourse of childhood over the last 150 years in Europe. This is true not only for the southern hemisphere, but is becoming increasingly evident in the countries of the northern hemisphere. Here we are confronting not only a transformed relationship of dependency and authority towards adults, but changes in the social framework and positioning of children and childhood altogether. One also has to bear in mind that socially relevant work is characterized in recent times by considerable formal changes, affording children the opportunity to gain new forms of access to and new perceptions of the world of work.

What children understand by work

The children that we interviewed understand by work primarily an activity that is paid. As a result, they do not generally see those activities they do without 'payment' as work. According to their definition, these non-paid activities are taken for granted, or are seen as a form of helping others or as a way of learning important things for the future. These perceptions are surely different to the thinking of many children in the southern hemisphere who identify themselves explicitly as working children (see Liebel, 2004: 19–37).

The subjective relationship to work revealed in our sample reproduces, on the one hand, the still dominant social conception that only income-generating labour is 'real' work, and on the other, the dominant western model of childhood that does not consider children fit for work (e.g. Boyden et al., 1998). This pattern corresponds to the idea that children are still not complete, but rather have to become something,² i.e. in the apparent contrast to adults, they are to be understood primarily or exclusively as 'developing' or 'learning' beings. This identity as a person who still needs to develop or to learn often expresses itself in the way children deal with their work: they give it up when it is no longer exciting, if it is too stressful, or if something else grabs their attention. They often name school obligations as a reason for giving up a job.

For children in Germany, work is both a possible and also an important element of their lives. They do not, however, identify themselves with this

work in the way that children in the southern hemisphere do:

I: How about your acting, would you say, that's work?

M: Don't think so, I mean I do earn something with it but I would not call it work, it's more a hobby, not work, no.

I: So what is work then in your terms?

M: Work? Well, work is sitting in an office, and adults do it. I somehow don't think that it is good for children to work. That's why I would say it is my hobby. (Milena, girl, 11)

A central point of reference for the interviewed children is school, whether as something that continuously makes demands upon them or as a social living space and meeting point with their contemporaries. Almost all of the children in our sample emphasize that they do not wish to endanger their success at school through working. We have, however, found no evidence in our investigation of the frequently asserted thesis that work damages children's education.

I: Do you think what you learn in school can help you in your job?

A: Yes.

I: Could you explain how?

A: When at my job I do calculations it helps me a lot for my classes. I do not have to practise maths any more. (Ann, girl, 11)

The children interviewed by us organize their leisure activities almost without exception according to the following priorities: (1) school, (2) work activities, (3) hobbies/leisure activities.

What children consider important about their work

For children who are paid for their work or who bring in their own income, the principal attraction of their activity lies in precisely this payment. From their perspective, the pay must be right, i.e. be 'appropriate'. In this sense, it is also understood as a form of social recognition of their own performance:

I: And what was it like when you earned your first money?

J: I thought it was funny, a little odd at first. You first do not understand. Usually you attend school and then you think, that's different. You think: I just did something and I get money for it! I always thought that was funny. Ok, on the flea market it was something different, because you give your things away and get something else for it. But in the bakery I realized for example, that work is not bad. You are there, sell, and get money. Yes, it is quite different to get wages. Just think, when you go to school you are not used to getting paid for jobs done. I had never experienced something like that before and therefore it was somewhat strange. (Joey, girl, 15)

The sheer fact that they are being paid for work is even more important for many children than the amount they are paid. We see this, for example, in the fact that some children do without extra pocket money from their parents. They think that the money they have earned themselves is sufficient and are happy that they are much less of a burden on their parents:

K: Well, at the moment, I don't want any pocket money from my parents, because I am earning money myself. My brother is still getting pocket money, but not every weekend. He asks from time to time whether he can have some.

I: And then he gets some?

K: Not always. (Kelly, girl, 12)

The children spend their money – when they do spend it – on generationally specific items. A *thoughtless* consumerist attitude, as is often attributed to children and young people in public discussion of this topic, was not to be found among the children we interviewed. During the interviews, children only occasionally suggested that they bought clothes or designer items. They emphasized the social value of such trademarks in positioning oneself within their peer groups. The children do, however, also spend their self-earned money on presents for family, relatives or for friends. They therefore use their own money to strengthen emotional ties:

I: What sorts of things have you done with your money?

V: I can't remember. But, first and foremost, I buy presents, because I've got lots of friends and relatives in the Ukraine, mostly relatives, loads of them! And then, every month, you know, it is someone's birthday, and they're always disappointed when there's no word from Germany and so, in the main, I've got to buy more presents. (Victoria, girl, 13)

It is striking that all of the children interviewed who have a paid job do save some part of their earnings. Most of them have their own bank account, many even a current account, even if this is administered by their parents. When children indicate that they save, then they associate various aims with such saving. These aims can be divided into three time-frames: (1) aims with no specific time-frame, i.e. money is put aside to be able to satisfy desires that may arise spontaneously in the future; (2) aims in the near future – this is mostly connected to the purchase of larger consumer items such as laptops, holidays or pieces of furniture; and (3) aims in the distant future such as a car or university education.

If one assumes that consumption is the primary motivation for taking on work, then one does the phenomenon of working children an injustice. It is of primary importance to recall that only a small part of child work is paid in any case. Furthermore, a glance at the expenditure facilitated by this self-earned money shows that children have only limited access to their own money. Third, our findings show that the children spend their money only after a lot of thought:

L: In the past, I once got €10 pocket money for 3 weeks. And then I just spent it on the first day I had it, I never thought about it and just bought every crap. And now I always ponder whether I really need it. Because when you always buy such plastic stuff, it breaks easily and all that. (Lex, boy, 12)

This is true above all for the purchase of 'designer clothes' and similar items, which represent status symbols among their contemporaries. These are often of great importance for the social standing within their group, especially for children from less well-off families. Children who spend their self-earned money on these items of high social value explain explicitly that they would prefer not to burden their parents with extra expenditure on these items.

It has to be said that, alongside the financial aspects, children do name other aspects of their work as being significant. They expect their work to be 'fun'. Alongside the fun connected with the work, fun also means for the children that they can utilize and extend their competencies and their knowledge-base. Decisive for a job being 'fun' is that the children are able to (help) set the conditions under which the work takes place. Through their work, they experience themselves as competent and are perceived as such both by other children and by adults.

In talking of approval by other children and adults, we touch upon a complex situation. A child who is competent is elevated out of his or her group through his or her particular skills and knowledge. This can lead the child to lose the feeling of security that comes from belonging to this community or the child may be concerned that she or he will be excluded from the group:

I: And your friend thought it was great you did it?

M: Yes, she was not jealous at all. And so I was somehow relieved she stood by me. Because in my class I was different in a way and everybody said, 'yes, she always wants to be somebody special'. But my friend saw it differently, and this is what I liked. (Milena, girl, 11)

At the same time, it is important for the child's self-esteem that her or his skills are perceived and appreciated. The children have to deal with both sorts of demands as well as their own need to belong. In the process, there is no doubt that gender stereotypes are influential as to how a girl or boy is expected to deal with her or his skills.

For the children, work becomes 'fun' above all when they are able to have contact with other children. This means that time must be available for them to communicate with each other and to get to know each other better. This presumes that there are interruptions and breaks in the course of the work. In addition, the children seek to share their work with their friends, or try and get them a job with the same employer:

L: I prefer working with a colleague, so I have somebody to talk to. I don't like working let's say for 2 or 3 hours and having nobody to chat with. My brother mostly comes with me just to give me company. He does not help, he just comes along and walks and chats with me. (Leo, boy, 15)

On the other hand, a particular job can be advantageous because the activity does not need to be shared with other children but is exclusive to the child:

I: Can you describe what you like most about your job?

M: Well first, speaking in a movie itself and that you know about the movie before others, especially when it is a good one or a funny one. That's the good thing, because you . . . just that, not every child can be involved in such a movie. And many people in Germany will hear you.

I: Are you proud of that?

M: Yes, a little. (Martin, boy, 14)

A further reason why children pursue a job is that it offers them the opportunity to learn something meaningful or useful for the future. Even if they do not have a clear idea of what career they would like to follow, they are convinced that their current job will be of use later. It may also help the children to realize that they are not interested in the activity as a future career. It may be that their work allows them to gather experience and knowledge that may be helpful in a later job application or in running a household at some later point in time. In any case, children do reflect on the future relevance of their present work activities.

On the other hand, we were able to observe that children were keen to take on responsibility within their families through their work. The children clearly feel themselves to be valued if they are able to make a contribution to the economic well-being of the family. They see their activity as supporting better cooperation among the family members, whether they are donating a part of their self-earned income into the household pot, or whether they are taking on concrete tasks within the household and in childcare:

L: And one year my brother and I said, we do not want a pocket money rise because the family bought a new car. Later we said, we only wanted a raise of 50 cents because we built the house and the mortgage has to be paid. Even though you don't save great sums of money but at least we can show our parents that we want to contribute, too. That's how they can see that we do not always just want to have, have but that we are willing to give as well. (Leo, boy, 15)

This sense of identity, which the children gain as members of the community, is observable above all among children whose parents have a non-German cultural background:

M: Well, my mother works and my father, too, helps a little. And when I am alone and my brothers are not at home, I always take care of my little sister and go and get my younger siblings. And I help with the chores, dishwashing or I help my mother vacuum cleaning, tidying up beds and so on. (Mike, boy, 12)

The same is true of children in single-parent families:

A: But, well, otherwise the parents have to do it alone, all the domestic work and so on. And that's also exhausting, when they also have to work and all that. Then it is just right and proper to help them. (Ann, girl, 11)

The family's economic situation may play an important role in motivating the children to work, yet it is not the complete explanation. For not all economically poor families integrate children into the organization of the household or encourage them to earn their own money. Our findings lead us to conclude that we are in fact dealing with a different concept of family and that the understanding of childhood here differs from the dominant western model of childhood (see also the results of Brannen [1995] or Song [1999], who studied non-European immigrant families in western countries). In general, we can say that work, insofar as it is not demanded 'from above', offers a way for children to gain approval and self-esteem, to establish their own

sense of themselves and a means of gaining influence. This is true of both paid and unpaid work.

The meanings of work for the identity and social positioning of children

On the one hand, for children work represents the possibility of becoming independent and acting autonomously. The opportunity for independent activity at work is frequently perceived in a conscious fashion (see Leonard [2004], who found similar attitudes among working children in Belfast, Northern Ireland). On the other hand, work offers the opportunity to make a significant contribution to the community. Children consider this aspect to be extremely important, even essential (even with regard to the unloved 'imposed' domestic work). The two areas of potential that work offers, 'autonomy' and 'participation', are not, as might be assumed, opposed to one another, but can be related to one another (see Morrow [1994] for similar findings in Britain). In this sense, we can say that children seek a 'participatory autonomy' through their work.

The level of participatory autonomy for the children depends on the activity concerned and the significance that they attribute to the activity. The potential for individual realization and community participation are not always immediately evident when considering a particular job. The children's own ability to shape and negotiate the kind of activity, its extent and its duration is dependent on the conditions that their parents set for them. This places them in the position of minors:

J: You said, you share the chores with your brother. Or is there anybody who tells you what to do and when to do it?

J: My mother. We don't do anything by ourselves.

J: What does that mean?

J: We always try to sneak away from the table. And then she either calls us back to do some work. Or when we get down she tells us to take out the garbage. (Jenny, girl, 14 about domestic work)

While it may mean that children have less ability to determine the situation, this situation does have the advantage of protecting them from demands which are too excessive:

J: Yes, I mean what does responsibility mean . . . when there is something happening, we go and tell someone. Like, for example, if a wasp stings a horse, then we don't say: oh, it doesn't matter. But we do tell someone, because it might turn out to be a big thing later, and so it's not for us to say: oh, we had no idea. (Jenny, about her work at a stables)

The paid work parents expect of their children places in question the social construction of an economically non-productive child (see Zelizer, 1994, 2002). The parents justify such a transgression of normative prescriptions with regard to the social model of the 'child' with reference to 'fun' and the learning benefits that are expected to be gained:

I: And do you think what you learn now as a referee will be helpful in future?

J: Yes, indeed. Like dealing with people. And of course there are other things like . . . organization. And that you have to take on responsibility, when something's going wrong. (John, boy, 14)

For the children, undertaking paid work means a step into a terrain that is actually forbidden to them, and thus enables them to participate in one part of the 'adult world'.

At the same time, the degree of individual autonomy afforded by this kind of work is limited since they are dependent on the adults to prescribe, initiate and support it. This may enable the child to extend the boundaries of his or her sphere of activity, but only to the extent that he or she is permitted by the adults involved.

The autonomy of the child develops primarily in those areas where she or he can decide for her- or himself to undertake work that is not expected of her or him. In those areas where there is no prospect of monetary gratification, we need to investigate what motivates the children to engage in such activities. These are primarily community tasks that children undertake voluntarily. Participation in community tasks helps form a social subjectivity where one's own actions are experienced consciously. Any autonomous decision to help and to contribute implies a moral consciousness towards the community (e.g. Mayall, 2002).

If others also perceive this, then work may lead to recognition and pride, and beyond that to the establishment of self-confidence.

Moreover, regarding work that is undertaken by choice for payment, the wages are not used exclusively as a means of satisfying individual needs. The self-earned money can equally be understood as a community contribution. Children can choose to spend their money on social purposes in different ways: some use it to pay for gifts for others, a few spend some of it on public charities such as those caring for endangered animals, while others consciously, and on their own initiative, would like to help out the common family household pot:

I: And what do you do with your money?

X: Well, I save it. And I donate some of it to help the orang utans. (Xiayanxi, girl, 11)

The level of autonomy here is not only very high, but the connection to the community manifests itself through independent income generation and determining where the self-earned money will go. The paid work that they have chosen independently influences the child's own identity and his or her position within the community:

V: Well, the people in the Ukraine always expect something from me. And so, even with the grannies, it is easiest, because they always like to drink tea. And there's this super tea shop, with stuff like green tea with strawberry or with peach, or all combined.

I: And does your granny know, or do the other people in the Ukraine know that you earn the money yourself?

V: Yes, and they think it's cool when I turn up there, everything there is so, how should I put it, so cheap. . . . But that's cool, I've always got money. And then it's all: have you got money then? Earned it yourself! That's cool. (Victoria, girl, 13)

All possibilities are open – the self-earned money can help emancipate the children from their dependency on their parents, but it can also function as a conscious contribution to the community, resulting in a corresponding sense of self-esteem and of being valued by others. Here too, as with the voluntary unpaid work, the independent contribution of the child can lead to a transformed sense of approval and a transformed sense of self within the familial community, something that the children consciously perceive and also, in some cases, seek to achieve.

Conclusions

Children's work takes on a wide variety of forms in our society. From the child's perspective, particular importance is placed on whether they voluntarily undertake the work, and whether they can act independently and find approval for the work. They see a preferred, if not an exclusive form of recognition in being paid appropriately for the work. Children take their own work all the more seriously, and appreciate it all the more, the more practical its use for others, and the more it allows them to utilize their own skills and the more they are valued by adults in their social context. Work is not seen in competition to school. Rather it is an important means of experiencing autonomy extending their sphere of activity and, in certain circumstances, acquiring competencies that are relevant for their future. This is more or less true for all working activities performed by the children in our sample, although the impact of participation and autonomy differs among the four forms of work we categorized.

Unpaid domestic work assigned to children by their parents certainly not only has an educational, but a practical use. Therefore, its contribution to the community cannot be underestimated. Nevertheless, the children mostly do not feel that this work allows them a great deal of freedom in carrying out their tasks. It only provides as much autonomy and as much participation as the parents are prepared to concede. So in general we can summarize, that this sort of work tends to reproduce the children's inferior social status compared with adults.

In public discourse, the performance of paid work that is expected by parents often has a negative image, as it is always suspected of exploiting the children. Emphasizing the educational value of such work allows us to appreciate this work. Children nevertheless mostly do not feel compelled to do this work, they appreciate the extra reward they gain and their parents' pride and satisfaction. When they prove themselves able to accomplish these tasks – which is not taken for granted by the children – this can lead to a greater amount of social participation within their family community, although the children's autonomy plays a minor role in this respect.

If children themselves choose to carry out work, this can be seen as a sign of their autonomy itself. The autonomous decision to work often shows a highly developed community orientation. This is mainly true of unpaid work, which the children perform to take pressure off their parents or others. But voluntary

chosen paid work also often has a social aspect. In contrast to general assumptions, children not only seek jobs to fulfil self-serving needs, but also quite often to spend their money for joint use.

The experiences that work enables children to have and the consequences it has for their sense of identity result from the conditions in which the work is undertaken. It also depends on the way in which the adults and indeed society in general deal with child work and children's desire to work. If work offers children a space to engage themselves in and to act independently, then work becomes an important element in children's participatory autonomy. This is even more so, if children are shown acceptance and approval. Our findings show that child work can contribute to strengthening the children's social status and furthering their active collaboration in society.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms, which the children themselves have chosen.
2. In the sociology of childhood, this is expressed through the pair of concepts *being* and *becoming*; see James et al. (1998), Qvortrup et al. (1994); and more recently, Lee (2001), Mayall (2002) and Prout (2005).

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