

Children and Work Research Series: Session 2

Restoring a Dignified Self while Making a Living Together: Child Street Vendors in Los Angeles

Dr. Emir Estrada

Street food markets have become wildly popular in Los Angeles and behind the scenes, Latinx children have been instrumental in making these small informal businesses grow.

During the time I conducted this study, street vending in Los Angeles was illegal, the majority of the parents I interviewed were undocumented and children's work was stigmatized.

For three years I spent time in two street vending field sites in Los Angeles. I shadowed five street vending families for two months at a time and I conducted 66 interviews with children and their parents who work side by side. These children are full-time students, but they are also economic co-contributors in the household. They relax, play, and socialize when business is slow, but for the most part, they are busy charging customers, taking food orders, heating up tortillas, running errands to the store, and translating for parents. I also saw them do work at home at different times of the day and night, as they cut, bag, sort, and cook the food they will later sell.

In this presentation, I highlight the surprising labor of these young workers and bring attention to the unique set of hardships Latinx youth experience in this occupation. I also highlight how these hardships can serve to cement family bonds, develop empathy towards parents, encourage hard work, and support children—and their parents—in their efforts to make a living together in the United States.

Street vending marked the children in this study as foreign and undocumented even though the majority of them were born in the United States and had never travelled to Mexico, the place they had been told to go back to countless times. The youth in this study experienced an “othering” while street vending. Their English language skills and even their own U.S. citizenship did not shield them from being labelled with epithets such as “wetback,” to underline the racialized connotation of their job.

Across the board, the children rejected traditional stereotypes of this profession. They countered the stigma by taking pride in this “cultural” activity that made them better Mexicans in the United States as it helped them develop a strong work ethic that kept them away from gangs and drugs. They also saw themselves as good daughters and sons as they saw how their labor directly helped their family and themselves.

This presentation is based on the award-winning book *Kids at Work: Latinx Families Selling Food on the Streets of Los Angeles*. The book provides a compassionate, up-close portrait of Latinx children, detailing the complexities and nuances of family relations when children help generate income for the household as they peddle the streets of LA alongside their immigrant parents.

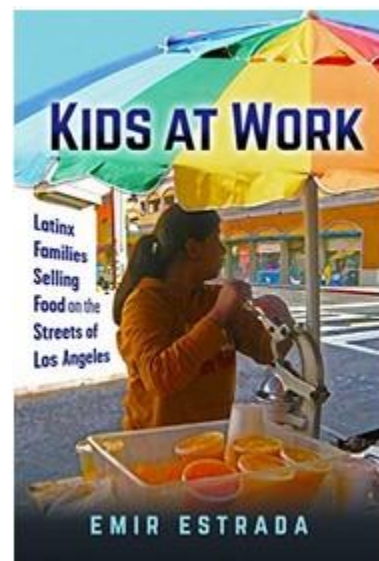
Author’s Bio:

Emir Estrada is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the School of Human Evolution and Social Change (SHESC) at Arizona State University (ASU). She earned her doctorate degree in sociology from the University of Southern California (USC). She received her bachelors in sociology with a minor in Chicano/a Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Estrada lived in Mexico during her formative years and she is a first-generation college student. Her own immigration and educational trajectory have influenced her research interests, which centers on the migration and incorporation of immigrants from Latin America with a specific focus on the role of youth.

Her book, *Kids at Work: Latinx Families Selling Food on the Streets of Los Angeles*, documents how the children of undocumented street vendors in L.A. help their families incorporate to the U.S. by becoming economic co-contributors. She also studied DACA youth who traveled to Mexico on Advanced Parole and their undocumented parents who experienced this trip from the United States. Her new book project focuses on the return migration of Mexican retirees and their children. She is also a Co-PI in the Arizona Youth Identity Project funded by the National Science Foundation and the Russell Sage Foundation . All of her research projects take an intergenerational family approach to help our understanding of Latinx families in the United States.



Emir Estrada



Kids at Work (2019)

Breakout Room Report

Breakout Room 1

The presenter, Emir Estrada, was present in this group, which resulted in the discussion focussing on the presentation and the research behind it.

Ethnicity

One issue was that vending and children's involvement is not simply a Latinx issue. Not all Latinxs were involved, and other groups were involved in other areas. Emir stressed that she focussed on vending, and on children working with families. There were also some children working on their own, and some children work with families in other jobs. She also commented that although she is herself Latinx and has personal experience as a child of working with her mother, the research taught her much that she did not know.

Benefits and stigma of work

Children made significant contributions to the business not only by the work they put in but also through skills they had that the parents did not have, particularly in translating into and from the English language, and using social media (especially Facebook) to communicate with customers.

Parents often claimed that children benefited from the work, learning social and other skills, and often commenting that it kept them out of other harmful activities. But this could be a rationalisation, defending themselves against those who think they are exploiting their children.

The children commented on the same benefits and showed pride in helping their families, but they kept their work secret from school peers and it was not included in the CVs: to that extent it was kept invisible. Some also stressed that by being involved with their parents in their work, they had better understanding of and empathy for what their parents had to endure.

Nevertheless girls sometimes complained of the fact that boys did not do as much as they did: the work both at home and at the vending stands was very gendered.

Parents did not, however, want their children to end up in this kind of work: they wanted something better for their children. None had immigrated into the States to do this work: for some it was work of last resort, and other had taken it on in response to demeaning or exploitative treatment in what the children classified as 'normal' jobs.

(Emir did not know whether making street vending legal since her research had removed some of the stigma. She pointed out that financial constraints and the inability to accumulate for capital expenditure were as big a hindrance to developing the business as were laws against it. Moreover, many of the vendors would find difficult the costs and bureaucratic requirements for acquiring permits.)

Children had ambitions for other kinds of work. Lawyers and police were a not uncommon ambition with the motive of helping people like their parents – people in deprived communities.

Breakout Room 2

This breakout room included researchers, experts and practitioners from many and diverse countries in the world, including Iran, India, Canada, the UK, the US, Argentina and Denmark. The main point of discussion was the stigma and stigmatization that surrounds children's work. Participants were asked how this plays out in their respective country, or field of research, and how children themselves challenge these stigmas.

One example from Peru was given, where children's work is considered a symbol of underdevelopment and backwardness, both economically and socially. Kids in the Peruvian movements of working children actively fight against such perceptions by emphasising their status and rights as full citizens and their positive contributions to their peers, their families and their communities.

A researcher from India addressed the complexities when it comes to children working in hazardous work, or in other contexts in which children should not be working. There is legal stigmatization as the work or working conditions are criminalised. This also feeds into the social stigma that children and their families are attributed by their society at large.

An insight into how stigma and stigmatisation also plays out amongst working children themselves was provided by an NGO worker from Iran who helps to educate working children. Two groups of children participate in the NGO programmes, Iranian kids who work to help their family, and Afghani migrant children who work to send money back. The Afghani children are looked down on and excluded by many of the Iranian children, which, one of the participants highlighted, can be seen as a way for children to point and refer to 'worse' examples to lift their own status.

An historian from Argentina that works on the history of child labour policy in the country noted that the stigma surrounding working children and the work they do did not exist during

most of the 20th century. Children that combined school and work were well viewed and were positive social representations. She is now looking at the reasons for the shift in public perception.

An anthropologist who worked on child labour in Uganda noted that stigma also has its roots in the historical past. A tribe she studied dances for tourists, including children, but this is not seen as ‘work’ by those outside their community. Instead, they are perceived as dancing monkeys, begging for money.

A final case study was provided by a researcher who studied the process surrounding a new provincial law on street children. In a first draft their income generating activities were criminalized and the children defined as inhuman. Organised by social workers, the street children took to the streets in protest against the law, assuming their identities and cultural practices while demanding a new law that would offer protection to those working in the streets.

Breakout Room 3

What can we learn from listening to what children tell us about their work?

- We can gain insights into children’s work and their life situations that we might not have otherwise anticipated.
- Children describe their work as part of belonging to their family and “making a living together”.
- Being involved in work can allow girls to have more freedom.
- Girls take on more responsibilities within their work and spend longer hours working than their brothers.
- Children provide more detail and accurate descriptions about their life situations than their parents (adults) who may tend to hide or distort information.

Why is it important to speak about children’s work?

- We are able to learn what counts as work from the children’s perspective.
- Children may be involved in household chores as well as helping in a family business; the household work through chores may be equally or more hazardous than the work outside the home (street vending) but this is often not considered.
- If we are trying to find ways of supporting (or protecting) children who are working we need to recognize that children have a right (under the CRC) to take part in developing and implementing support programs.
- Work combined with other learning opportunities (non-formal education) may be a better option for some children; formal schooling (sometimes referred to as a form of slavery) is not always a positive experience for children.

- Children may need to work to support themselves and their families and may learn useful skills (technical, business and life) through their work and this reality needs to be better understood by the broader society.

Are there some child work activities that are more socially acceptable than others?

In our group we had the benefit of having researchers with direct experience from Iran and Peru and were able to learn from these two situations. In both of these cases the stigmatization of children's work appears at least in part to be influenced by the child's ethnicity and the fact that they are part of refugee communities.

Iran

In Iran many children working as street vendors are from Afghan families. While street vending is illegal in Iran, many poor Iranian families as well as Afghan families have their children involved in street vending. Attitudes towards the Afghan children (street vendors) are harsher than the attitudes towards Iranian children doing similar work and these attitudes create an atmosphere of mutual dislike / distrust between Afghans and Iranians.

Social attitudes require the Afghan children who are working to send all of their earnings back to their families and this leaves the children with very few resources for themselves.

Even among the same group of working children there are negative attitudes and stigma associated with certain forms of work. Afghan children who are involved with street vending tend to look down on other Afghan children who are involved with garbage collection.

Government policies in Iran make it difficult for working children themselves or with adult support, to organize larger scale working children's organizations or movements. It is possible to organize small scale groups or clubs or to work through school student councils. However many Afghan children do not have legal status within Iran and are not able to attend school

Peru

In Peru many of the children involved with street vending are refugees from neighbouring Venezuela and these children are stigmatized as being foreign and different from Peruvian children. While some poorer Peruvian children are also involved with street vending they are less stigmatized although both groups of children are looked down on as street vending is illegal in Peru. Both groups of children tend to live in poor "shanty town" communities however the Venezuelan children and their families have the "worst of the worst" housing.

The Peruvian working children's movement (Manthoc) has played an important role in helping bridge the divide between the Venezuelan and Peruvian working children. The existing leadership of Manthoc along with support of the adult advisors (former working children) have introduced programs to reduce xenophobic attitudes and also provide programs on gender equality. As a result the Venezuelan working children are beginning to join Manthoc and participate in its programming and decision making. Training programs include support for public speaking and traditional languages.

Working children's movement can have important and significant impacts on the lives of working children.

Skilled Work

In both Iran and Peru as well as elsewhere ... working children report learning important skills through their work. One boy who was working in Iran learned how to repair cellphones through an NGO organized training program and is now working at a local shopping mall. He has reported that he has learned more of his skills through his work than he did through the training program. His current work as a skilled technician is not stigmatized in the way that street vending is.