

Children and Work Research Series: Session 14

Children's Participation in Work and More-Than-Human Sociality within Domestic Agricultural Economy

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Abstract

Participating in work within domestic agricultural economy in Slovenia has been an important part of children's socialization across generations. Although children's participation has been changing due to modernization, the mechanization of agricultural work and the abandonment of land cultivation, it is still relatively common that children take part in daily work within family setting from an early age through observation, play and participation. Focusing on children's sociality, namely how social relations are formed through work, I have previously suggested that both play and work can represent the human capacities for social cooperation and represent activities through which children act upon the environment and make sense of themselves and the surrounding world. My current research project looks at how through the sensory engagement with the environment while participating in work children have been also entering the webs of social relations with non-humans (plants, animals, soil and landscape itself). With this presentation, I hope to open space for discussion and feedback on the understanding of agricultural work as an activity which places people in the social world of other living things who inhabit the common environment.

Speaker Bio

Barbara Turk Niskač holds a PhD in Ethnology, Cultural and Social Anthropology from the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia (2016). She was a Fulbright visiting scholar at Rutgers University (2016), a postdoctoral research fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies - Southeast Europe CAS SEE, University of Rijeka (2018) and at the Institute of Slovenian Ethnology, ZRC SAZU (2019-2022). She is currently Marie Curie Research Fellow at the Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University. Her main research interest lies at the intersection of anthropology of childhood and anthropology of work. Her current project explores the intergenerational childhood memories of children's participation in various subsistence modes in a rural area in Slovenia and examines the concept of work as a life-sustaining practice pointing to relational, affective, and material entanglements of human work, social relations and the natural environment.

Break Out Group #1

With Barbara in our midst, we build on the discussions that started in the plenary group with a diverse group of academics and practitioners located in different part of the world. The first topic that will explored in a little more details was the play-work continuum that was addressed in the presentation. Back in those days, there were no kindergartens and pre-school children were socialised on the lands around the house, often imitating the work of their parents and grandparents in a playful manner. Those interviewed who looked back on this time explained this drive to help with work was sprouted by an inner motivation, a desire to be involved, and were happy to take on more serious work when they could. ‘Playfully playing and playfully working’, as commented by one of the group’s participants. Another commented that memories and stories of childhood work (historical work) tend to be either romanticised or problematized, and that the stories from the agricultural families in Slovenia leaned towards the former. Of course, things are more nuanced in general, and memories tend to jump between feelings of sociality and pride to less pleasant ones of tedious or hard work for long hours. One of the participants reflected on her own fieldwork with rural Mongolian families, and explained that besides the play-work dynamic there is also a form of responsabilising children with work from an early age, as the sustainability of such communities depends on inter-generational work. A neglect of such responsibilities can sometimes even lead to social punishment. One key difference between now and then is the relationship to land. Children, youth and young families nowadays do not have the same bind with land, and taking care of it and thereby allowing for work-play dynamics for children and their more-than-human sociality has become much less evident. This resonated with everyone.

Two films were discussed to illustrate some of the points made during the break-out group:

- [Children from the Napf Mountain](#) (2011)
- [Babies](#) (2010)

Break Out Group #2

Double standards in viewing children’s work

In Barbara’s presentation of the Slovenian experience from the 1940’s to the 1970’s, children’s agricultural work was viewed largely as a positive experience by both children and their families. Through their work children learned both life and work-related skills and were able to combine work with formal education. Children often worked with their friends and were able to combine work and play. The broader society held similar attitudes towards children’s work and there were

no sanctions imposed by the domestic government or international bodies. The attitudes of the global north towards children working in the global south are generally quite different.

In India children may help on family farms or carry out other forms of work but such work is illegal under Indian national laws and condemned by international bodies such as the ILO and UNICEF. Work in agriculture is considered to be of low status and not the type of career that most families want for their children. Children working in agriculture are likely to remain in a position of low status as they mature into adulthood. Such negative attitudes persist even though work as an agricultural labourer can provide a better income than the work of a university graduate in places such as Kerala.

In Ghana some children work to ensure their own survival as well as that of their families but as in India their work is illegal under national law and condemned by the global north.

Children working in agriculture with their families in Peru and other Latin American countries may perform similar work to rural American children working on family farms but the Latin American children are labeled as child labour. Small scale producers who are part of Fair-Trade programs can lose their access to preferential marketing services if they allow their children to work on their family farms.

Learning through work and the Environment

Barbara mentioned that through their agricultural work children in Slovenia learned to appreciate other forms of life: animals and plants. It would be interesting as a possible future study to look at the attitudes of these children towards the natural environment and issues such as climate change are different from Slovenian children who have not had agricultural work experience and whether these views are maintained in adulthood.