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CHILDREN AS ECONOMIC AGENTS

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ABSTRACT

A generational perspective recognizes that children have preferences which may differ systematically from those of adults, and, furthermore, that a children's standpoint should be recognized by scholars and activists and incorporated into policy targeted at children and their families. Economics has not considered children as agents because of their lack of power relative to adults. The implications of recognizing children's agency are explored for the case of children's paid and unpaid labor force and household work.

KEYWORDS

Child agency, child labor, unpaid work

INTRODUCTION

Economics does not treat children[1] as agents. Children are not considered to have human "agency" in that they are not viewed as "contributing to the accomplishment of a purpose or results" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1971). Economists generally ignore evidence that children can and do use what power they have to try to affect outcomes about which they have preferences and stakes. As we study children and families, economists can benefit from path-breaking work on childhood and children's agency in sociology, anthropology, and political science.[2] A range of approaches are used in this work, yet they are distinguished by a focus on children as units of observation and by a willingness to recognize children as actors in their own rights, constrained by societies' constructions of appropriate spaces and activities for childhood but mediating the impacts of social boundaries by their choices and behavior.

In this short essay I make three related points. First, I discuss why children's agency is overlooked in economics and why, for reasons of accuracy and fairness, economists should treat children as agents. Second, I show how considering children as agents can lead to different conclusions and policy recommendations in one illustrative example: children's participation in work activities. This example leads to the third point: I argue that

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the belief that it is acceptable to exclude children from paid work but reasonable to require them to undertake unpaid work is a reflection of children's relative lack of power rather than a reflection of systematic evidence about how best to promote children's well-being.

CHILDREN AS AGENTS

There is a striking parallel between the evolution of feminist research – from "add women and stir" to gendered analysis and feminist standpoint theory – and emerging directions for studies of children and childhood (Leena Alanen 1994). While feminist economists now attempt to explore the intersecting dimensions of gender, race, class, and culture, studies almost without exception are from the standpoints of adult women and men. Just as gendered perspectives have historically been ignored due to women's lack of power relative to men, so children's perspectives have been overlooked due to their lack of power *vis-à-vis* adults. The role of power in defining the prescribed positions of children in society is recognized explicitly by scholars of childhood, who point to power and interests as driving the relationship between adults and children: "the adult world does not recognize children's praxis, because competence is defined merely in relation to adults' praxis – a suggestion which is all the more powerful since adults are in a sovereign position to define competence" (Jens Qvortrup 1994: 4).

Economists of various traditions sustain the invisibility of children by recognizing them only in their "appropriate" spheres, as recipients of care or students, never as actors or as givers.[3] Even in the realm of neoclassical microeconomics, with its emphasis on individual utility, children are not deemed worthy of study. Young and old adults alike are assumed to have preferences which direct their behavior, subject to constraints. Yet children are modeled as puppets, subject to family or parental utility functions and the ensuing "family" decisions. In essence, children are depicted as powerless, and certainly without agency of their own.

Economists have misplaced confidence in "what everyone knows" about children and what is best for them. Jo Boyden (1990: 185) summarizes, "The major tenet of contemporary rights and welfare thinking is that regulation of child life should give priority to making childhood a carefree, safe, secure and happy phase of human existence." She goes on to argue that most modern strategies of child protection are underpinned by "theories of pollution," in which innocent children are better off segregated from "the harsh realities of adult life" and the social dangers that go with it (pp. 185–6). The family utility function is a manifestation of this segregation. Yet even as an ideal it is problematic: Martin Woodhead, a child development specialist, analyzes statements about children's psychological "needs" and finds their underpinnings to be "a complex of latent assumptions and judgments about children" rather than convincing empirical evidence (1990).

Economists need to consider children as agents with preferences, upon which they act to the extent possible given the constraints of adult restrictions. This is not only fair to children, it is also appropriate in the interests of accuracy and an enhanced understanding of human behavior. Considering children's actual (rather than assumed or idealized) activities and preferences and, insofar as possible, children's agency, is likely to challenge conventional conclusions and, perhaps, policy recommendations in many arenas.

CHILDREN AS WORKERS

Work is a fundamental part of the domain of economics, whether we care about meeting basic needs or maximizing productivity or GDP; yet most work of children has been invisible to economists. I use the example of children's work activities to demonstrate how a consideration of children's agency can affect economic analyses. In particular, I argue that children's lack of power has led economists to overlook the importance of their paid and unpaid work and thus to support policies which not only undermine children's well-being within their work contexts but also threaten their ability to be contributing and appreciated members of families, communities, and societies.

It is no coincidence that under the great majority of nations' domestic laws and international conventions, the types of work that children most want to do are forbidden them, while the types of work that they least want to do are allowed and often expected of them. Researchers who systematically listen to and observe them find that children in diverse countries and situations prefer paid work over unpaid work, work outside the home over work inside the home, and work for nonfamily employers over work for family employers. Like adults, children value work that results in status (including respect and appreciation), skills, responsibility and money.[4] Most countries, however, follow the recommendations of the International Labour Organization in allowing children to participate in unpaid work in household chores, child care, or a family business, while banning or severely limiting child work in the paid labor force. The historical precedents underlying this now-standard practice are described elsewhere; notably, the familiar tale of the rescue of children from the horrors of the Industrial Revolution is revealed as an inaccurate portrayal of events.[5] Another emerging theme is that privileged adults in various historical contexts have benefited from the exclusion of children and youth from the paid labor force and from their confinement in school, unpaid agricultural labor, and household labor. Without a historical perspective, it is all too easy – as argued in the previous section – for modern economists uncritically to accept the belief that existing laws and policies are based on a systematic promotion of children's best interests.

It would be surprising, given the range of diversity in experiences across girls and boys, older and younger children, and children of different race, class, ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds and varied geographic environments, if child labor laws which are very similar across so many of the world's countries could be in the best interests of all or even the majority of children they cover. Still, among the world's children and adolescents, domestic labor and unpaid agricultural work are preponderant experiences; in spite of considerable publicity, factory-type work is experienced by relatively few youth.[6] Perhaps, one might think, generalizations about children's activities are not unreasonable. However, there is, in fact, very little systematic evidence about the impact of work – domestic or agricultural, paid or unpaid, labor force or household – on children; almost all statements about positive or negative effects are based on adult assumptions, personal observation, or interviews with relatively few individuals.

Why is there such general acceptance (in the North) that labor force work is harmful for children (in the South), while household work is not? This belief is especially striking given the tolerance for youth paid work in industrialized nations. Yes, some jobs are truly "intolerable" – for adults, I would argue, as well as for children – but much of children's paid work does not belong unambiguously to that category. Jo Boyden, Birgitta Ling and William Myers (1998) suggest that the most common problem with present thinking about the effects of work on children is "a tendency in research and reports on children's work to confuse *hazards* or *risks* with *actual impacts*" (p. 79). The presence of risks may or may not lead to damaging consequences, as every automobile driver knows. The prioritizing of risks of work without consideration of its potential benefits – including, in particular, a recognition of children as contributors to society – is a reflection of the power of Northern countries to impose a particular vision of childhood as a universal norm.

Among potential impacts, there is a conspicuous lack of systematic consideration of the potential benefits of work for children. Boyden *et al.* (1998) draw upon evidence from psychology, sociology, anthropology, and education to argue convincingly that children's work, broadly defined, is often beneficial to their development. They document, as do many other scholars of child work, that many children work for reasons other than or in addition to family poverty. Working children like earning their own money; they enjoy the independence that work brings them; and they are proud to be contributing to their families. These points are not contested by traditional opponents of child labor, who argue, rather, that society must protect children against deleterious effects of work in general, even if some children and families would benefit from child work. The human rights approach to children, especially as embodied in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, upholds this traditional perspective on

children's work. Olga Nieuwenhuys (1998: 270) argues that the Convention on the Rights of the Child:

> . . . is not culturally neutral but is grounded in the assumption both of the superiority of the North and of the need to impose this model on a global scale. As this global project denies the possibility of diverse childhoods, it not only underscores the superiority of the Northern ideal but also condemns "other" styles of upbringing as a "lack," or, to use the popular expression, of being "outside childhood."

It is in this sense that child workers in the Third World are frequently described as "not having a childhood." We have defined work as adult, therefore it is not-child, therefore children who work are violating the boundaries of clearly defined adult/child spheres. Such children must be pitied – and sent back where they belong, regardless of the implications of unemployment for that child's well-being. Just as gendered assumptions have hurt women, so generational assumptions render nonconforming children vulnerable to damaging labels and treatment by adults and other children and by powerful institutions.

"Protecting" children and youth from paid work has, in effect, moved what work they do into the unprotected sectors of informal labor force and household work – unrestricted by labor laws which, when enforced, limit hours of work and control workplace hazards. Perhaps more seriously, it has excluded children from valued social roles, leaving them defined as the other, the "not-adults," just as women have been constructed as apart from "mankind." The absence (in the North) or denigration (in the South) of fulfilling roles for children has many potential implications, possibly even including the upsurge in recent decades of depression and suicide among Northern youth. Taking children's preferences and experiences into account would almost certainly lead us to recommend a substantial revision of child labor policies.

CHILDREN AS UNPAID CAREGIVERS AND HOUSEHOLD WORKERS

Adults have defined work in ways that exclude many of children's activities, even those sharing many characteristics with "real work." Most of children's tasks have been banished to the private (female) side of the public/private dichotomy. Try as they might – and working children have organized to this end[7] – children do not have the power to bring legitimacy to their work preferences. I argue that the belief that it is desirable to exclude children from "real work" (which is paid) but reasonable to require them to undertake unpaid work is a reflection of children's relative lack of power rather than a reflection of systematic evidence about how best to promote children's well-being.

Feminists have long recognized the social invisibility of unpaid work done by women. Similarly, unpaid work done by girls and boys is almost never measured or reported in statistics and is seldom explicitly valued by adults. Children's responsibility for providing care for other children, for ill, disabled, or alcohol/drug-abusing adults, and for elderly adults must be among the least visible of all work measured by economists. Nancy Folbre (1995) isolates three possible motives for "caring labor": altruism, long-run reciprocity, and fulfillment of obligation or responsibility. Folbre's analysis focuses, however, on adults' caring labor. An additional motive for children's caregiving (and household work) must sometimes be the power of adults to dictate children's behavior: coercion, in some sense. Which is not to say that children do not resist being dictated to. Evidence from the United States, for example, shows that parents and their 16–18-year-old children have more conflicts over helping around the house than over school, money, friends, dress, sex, smoking, family issues, or staying out (Wendy Manning 1990).

Few studies have attempted to understand the consequences of children's time spent babysitting other children and undertaking household tasks. My collaborators and I find indirect evidence that girls in urban Brazil substitute for their mothers in child care and household work, and that these home responsibilities limit educational attainment more than does labor force work (Rachel Connelly, Deborah DeGraff and Deborah Levison 1996a, 1996b; Deborah Levison 1993). Yet this area remains almost unnoticed, even by staunch advocates of human capital investment. The difficulty in collecting data contributes to the relative neglect of children's household work. Pamela Reynolds (1991) finds that rural children in Zimbabwe shift between activities with such ease and rapidity that classifying and measuring their work is extremely difficult. Indeed, others have noted that young children "do not experience a work/play dichotomy; they work while playing and play while working" (Thorne 1987: 100). Reynolds also shows that adults do not necessarily know what children are doing, and that definitions of what constitutes work are critical. For example, "No adult, whether male or female, includes infant or child care in his or her definition of work. Children, however, do. . . . Infant and child care appeared neither under [adults'] work nor leisure. It is invisible" (p. 66). Reynolds estimates that in this community, girls under 10 spend 56 percent of their time taking care of infants and younger children.[8] Surely an effort of this magnitude is valuable to adults, even if adults do not choose to recognize it; whether or not it is "good" for the children is not clear.

IMPLICATIONS

While individual economists may well be motivated by a concern for the daily well-being of children, we need to translate this concern into studies which measure well-being in ways that are true to girls' and boys' experiences. We

need to make the jump from an adult-focused economics to one which identifies the factors which truly increase children's utility by explicitly recognizing children's competencies and taking children's preferences into account. In particular, economists need to tread carefully regarding assumptions about what is best for children. In the case of work, the recognition that children value and benefit from gaining skills and responsibility implies that they cannot be banished wholesale from the realm of formal work without threatening their well-being. Moreover, the exclusion of children from paid but not from unpaid work is a direct result of their relative lack of power. As a discipline oriented to the utility of individuals, we need to consider more carefully the proposition that children have some agency and analyze their work from this perspective, without ignoring the potential – as we generally do for adults – for mistreatment and abuse. Potential directions for research abound, although many will require interdisciplinary collaborative efforts and qualitative as well as quantitative data. As Diana Strassmann has pointed out, by adhering to rigid disciplinary boundaries and limiting the entry of ideas, we (economists) limit our ability to improve disciplinary practices and knowledge (1994: 155). Let us learn from and with other social scientists.

Children are embedded in families. Can we accurately consider children's standpoints and agency without placing them in the context of the family? Perhaps not. Still, economists have not hesitated to consider women and men as units of analysis even in the case of decisions which may well be affected or constrained by the presence or behavior of other family members. I suggest that we can begin to learn from partial equilibrium studies of children. Studies with a systematic generational perspective, however, will have to take power differentials and dynamics between children and adults seriously.[9] Bargaining frameworks are needed to shed light on child–parent bargaining,[10] although unfortunately formally modeled games with multiple players are extremely intractable. When we are able to take account of children's agency, I predict we will find that children use what power they have to affect outcomes that matter to them. By incorporating generational perspectives, economic models will gain predictive power and validity, and policies will be more likely to enhance children's well-being.

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NOTES

[1] It is not necessary here to adhere to one strict definition of the group which constitutes "children." While the International Labour Organization has defined children to be those persons under 15 years of age, or under 14 in the case of India and some other Third World nations, childhood has been widely recognized to be a contextually defined concept. Even within one context or country, definitions may differ by context and gender. For example, in the United States, boys may be old enough to die for their country as soldiers at age 16 but not old enough to drink alcohol until age 21. Many status offenses are crimes which can only be committed by those who violate various legally mandated definitions of childhood.

[2] In the past two decades, social scientists with nontraditional ideas regarding how to approach children and childhood have begun making their voices heard, publishing individually and joining together to undertake collaborative projects. Examples of collaborative projects include the international research project "Childhood as a Social Phenomenon – Implications for Future Social Policies," described in Jens Qvortrup, Marjatta Bardy, Giovanni Sgritta and Helmut Wintersberger (1994); a multidisciplinary project called "California Childhoods: Institutions, Contexts, and Pathways of Development," sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Pathways Through Middle Childhood and involving sociologist Barrie Thorne, economist Greg Duncan, and other social scientists; and the International Working Group on Child Labour, established by Defense for Children International in 1992 and since disbanded (Jim McKechnie and Sandy Hobbs 1998). Recent publications include Jo Boyden, Birgitta Ling and William Myers (1998), Robert Coles (1986), Allison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout (1998), Karl Eric Knutsson (1997), Olga Nieuwenhuys (1994, 1996, 1998), Jens Qvortrup *et al.* (1994), Sharon Stephens (1995), Barrie Thorne (1987), and Benjamin White (1994, 1996).

[3] While parents are often assumed to gain utility from the existence of children, this is never attributed to any active behavior or reciprocity on the part of the children.

[4] Evidence for this point is scattered yet seems fairly consistent. See, for example, Boyden *et al.*'s (1998) excellent summary of many studies.

[5] See, for example, Hugh Cunningham (1991), Clark Nardinelli (1990), and Myron Weiner (1991).

[6] This point is made by many scholars of child work. See, for example, Boyden *et al.* (1998: 24–5).

[7] Anthony Swift (1997) describes how "street children" in Brazil organized at the local and national levels. Organizations of working children exist in other countries as well.

[8] In a different context, David Oldman (1994: 52) argues that Northern children's "self-maintaining labor" – for example, the shopping and grooming that children do to look after themselves – is the real contemporary value of children's domestic labor for adults.

[9] Alanen (1994) discusses a children's vs. adultist standpoint of modern sociology; she also uses the "generational system" terminology which I have adopted here.

[10] Shelly Lundberg and Robert Pollak (1998) also make this point.

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