

Working to be Someone: Child Focused Research and Practice with Working Children by Beatrice Hungerland, Manfred Liebel, Brian Milne, and Anne Wihstutz

Tobias Samuelsson

Linköping University Post Print



N.B.: When citing this work, cite the original article.

Original Publication:

Tobias Samuelsson , Working to be Someone: Child Focused Research and Practice with Working Children by Beatrice Hungerland, Manfred Liebel, Brian Milne, and Anne Wihstutz, 2009, Anthropology of Work Review, (30), 2, 77-78.

Copyright: American Anthropological Association

<http://www.aaanet.org/>

Postprint available at: Linköping University Electronic Press

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:liu:diva-20760>

***Working to Be Someone. Child Focused Research and Practice with Working Children.* Beatrice Hungerland, Manfred Liebel, Brian Milne and Anne Wihstutz (Eds.). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007.**

Tobias Samuelsson, Dept. of Technology and Social Change, Linköping University, Sweden

Do children in the world of today work? A widespread and popular opinion in society seems to be that working children is only a historical phenomenon, or at least something only existing in poor countries in the south, in developing countries. Few recognize that the phenomenon of working children is also alive in the northern industrial part of the world. Even fewer recognize that there are many similarities between the work undertaken by children in the north and the south.

To begin, children's work is often seen as something that disappeared in the northern industrial countries as a result of labour regulations, technological development and the introduction of widespread schooling. However, this might be a misunderstanding or even an effect of empirical ignorance. Most traditional labour research has been devoted to work in industrial environments and has focused on paid work. These are all phenomena's that do not easily fit with the work most children do.

At the same time, researchers with a wider focus, most often with backgrounds in anthropology and sociology have shown that children all over the world take part in a number of productive and reproductive activities in their everyday life at home, in school, for companies and organizations. However, the tasks children perform are seldom recognized as work. Given this, scholars sometimes describe children's work as hidden and as invisible. It is hidden and invisible because it is not counted as work. More common is that,

children's, often informal and unpaid, activities in and outside the home are categorized in less auspicious terms than work.

Moreover, when it comes to children's work there has historically been an almost exclusive focus only on the negative aspects of the work. In international conventions, children's work has often been treated solely as exploitation and as a threat to the children's development. When it comes to children, labor legislation is overall designed to protect children from exploitation, from performing work that is hazardous. Over the years, ideas based on a romantic ideology of childhood appear to have dominated the policy work and the children themselves have seldom been given the chance to express their point of view.

Scholars from different academic fields have since the late 20th century carried out studies on children's work, trying to complement, deconstruct and even reverse previous research and the many wide spread opinions existing when it comes to children's work. Many of these studies have a qualitative approach and in many cases have a child focused perspective in the forefront. This research has shown that children in the world of today do considerable amounts of work. Children in different part of the world work during the weekdays and at weekends. They take part in wage labour as well as in more marginal economic work activities, outside or on the fringe of the formal labour market. The working conditions of children, as regards work hours, payments, etc., seem to vary to a high degree from context to context. Many children appear to enjoy and like their work. The incentive for doing work appears to differ, but the will to work is often connected to ideas of personal development.

The book *Working to be someone. Child Focused Research and Practice with Working Children* comes out of this

tradition. The forerunner to the book was an international symposium in Germany 2004, in which most of the contributors in the book participated. The ambition of the book following on the conference is, according to the editors, to 'contribute towards giving new accent to research on children's work, by lending weight to the hitherto unheeded experiences, perspectives and voices of working children' (Hungerland et al. 2007:9). *Working to be someone* contains 24 chapters with contributions from scholars with various academic backgrounds as well as contributions from activists working with child rights questions. In the chapters of the book, we are presented with theoretical approaches challenging our understanding of children's work. We are also served a number of empirical case studies that often highlights the working children's own ideas and opinions about the work they undertake in their everyday life.

The authors of the book have their base in different parts of the world such as Africa, Asia, Central America, Europe and North America. This geographical diversity is reflected also in the case studies presented in the book. The different contributions, presenting material from the south as well as the north, demonstrate similarities between the work done by children in different cultural, economical and social contexts. In the book it is made clear that children's work is part of daily life of most children, not only in the south, but in the north as well. Several researchers in the book apply what could be called a 'agency perspective'. They highlight the children's role as actors and the children's part in the construction and reconstruction of the structure of everyday life. The researchers underline that many children that work are far from exploited victims. Rather, the scholars demonstrate that the working children are competent, responsible and independent. Moreover, they show that many children are fully aware of the value

of their own work and even want to work. The work the children undertake is important in their present life. However, as has also been demonstrated in other research in this field, the work also appears to be part of a learning process and a general preparation for adulthood. In the book, the scholars show that the children negotiate with adults and in this process the children change the child-adult relationship. We are presented with examples of this from many contexts. For example, in some of the books chapters, we are presented with inside accounts from movements working with children's rights and accounts from organizations working with working children, clearly illustrating such negotiations. Finally, in the books very last chapters, we are given pointers of perspectives lacking in the research carried out hitherto as well as presented with suggestions on research that still has to be undertaken.

The book gives a good overview over a wide-ranging field. As mentioned, several academic traditions are represented as well as activists and the contributions present examples from many parts of the world. This is one of the books major strengths. On the other hand, several chapters are very short. This could be an affect of trying to fit this many perspectives in one book, still keeping the books size reasonable. The arguments and the examples in these short chapters are naturally somewhat underdeveloped. Still, also these chapters might give the reader some direction of previous research done by the scholars. An eager reader can easily use the short chapters as an orientation and with the help of the books bibliography look up the authors' earlier work in other books and journals.

Some chapter's in the book highlight methodological problems facing an adult researcher trying to approach children, trying to understand their standpoints, and their take on everyday life. The scholars in

the book stress the difficulties associated with studies of children's work. Our understanding of children's work is, they argue often to a very high degree entangled in our preconceived notions of what work is supposed to be as well as how we perceive children, and childhood. This might naturally affect our understanding of the field we approach. Furthermore, another risk is that the adult researcher uses interpretive approaches that are to adult-directed. A researcher studying children's work who asks children about their work may risk ending up with answers containing nothing more than the predominating societal or adult discourse on children and childhood. To handle this, the authors in the book recommend that we try to leave our pre-conceived notions of children, childhood and work behind us. To find more than merely the preconceived stereotypes, we have to try to do research with children and maybe even use their definitions, we have to take all the children's activities into account and maybe eventually extend the work category beyond activities on the formal labour market. These ambitions are more obvious in some of the books chapters. However, in other chapters, I argue, we can still find traces of the old, more adult-directed, approaches to children's work. Moreover, it is notable that no study in the book rests solely on the children's own definitions of work, despite the books ambition concerning child focus.

To sum up, I would argue that this, the use of a child focus, is the greatest challenge for future research on children's work, or maybe I should rather say, with working children. Using children's own terminology and their own interpretations of their experience can change the way we perceive children and childhood. However, using children's perspective on work might change not only the way we perceive children and childhood. Rather, this change of perspective can challenge also the way we perceive adults activities and maybe

change or at least expand our understanding of work as a whole.