

of their own households, with children outside their households and with agents of other organizations such as outside households, schools, stores, firms, churches and voluntary associations. Contrary to cherished images of children as economic innocents, we discover children actively engaged in production, consumption and distribution. We also discover that their economic activity varies significantly from one category of social relations to another. . . .

I argue that:

- Once we examine social lives from children's own vantage points, we discover an extensive range of economic activity significantly differentiated by setting and social relation.
- On the whole, ethnographers have been more successful than other investigators in documenting that activity because they less often adopt adults' definitions of serious economic activity, rely less on individuals' conventionalized retrospective reports of activities, and more often observe negotiated social interaction as it occurs.
- Children develop extensive connections with adult-dominated spheres of production, consumption and distribution, but generally experience those encounters as unequal exercises of power.
- Despite adult efforts to contain them, they also establish segregated, partly autonomous spheres of production, consumption and distribution on their own.
- It is therefore useful to adopt rough distinctions among three sets of social relations: with other household members, especially adults; with agents of organizations outside children's own households; with other children.
- In all these social relations, children negotiate understandings and practices with other participants, however unequally they do so. . . .

In keeping with the common assumption of the child as consumer rather than as producer or distributor, researchers have so far given much more attention to consumption practices. This article again reverses the perspective by stressing production and distribution before turning to a briefer sketch of consumption. In each of these three sectors we find differentiation of children's economic activities depending on their predominant social relations. We focus here on three types of relations: with other household members; with agents of organizations outside the household; with other children.

## **CHILDREN AS PRODUCERS**

. . . Production here means any effort that creates value (see Tilly and Tilly, 1998). Such a definition obviously includes far more than the conventional paid employment and production for the market. In this framework, Miri Song's (1999) respondents are exceptionally active producers, fully collaborating in their parents' take-away shops. With some variation from family to family as well as by age and gender, she shows us children—often as young as 7 or 8—in the evenings, after school, or during weekends, cooking, cleaning and taking customers' orders. At times, children were also involved in caring labor, translating and mediating for their non-English-speaking parents (see also Orellana, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

These child workers carefully differentiated what they saw as their 'helping out' from formal employment. As we heard earlier from Anna, bargaining with an employer-parent created distinct economic practices, turning compensation, for instance, into a perk or a bonus, rather than a standard wage. In fact, some children refused any payment at all. Laura, another of Song's respondents' explained:

It's because being a family business, it's part of our lives, and you don't think, it doesn't feel like real work, you know? It felt awkward, the idea of receiving a wage. (Song, 1999: 86)

In some cases, children, while uneasy about taking money for their labor, felt obliged to accept their parents' payments, more as filial recognition of parental provider status, than as payment for work. Others, meanwhile, welcomed the money as tangible recognition of their household contributions. Paul told Song:

Paying us was a nice way to do it; it meant that we weren't just putting out a hand and taking money from our parents. We were actually helping out as well. I felt sort of quite justified having taken it. (Song, 1999: 86)

On the other hand, some children resented parents' payments as unwelcome bribes, forcing them into work they disliked. In all these cases, instead of passively accepting their parents' handouts or a standard wage, the children were bargaining out a distinctive set of meanings corresponding to their relationships with their parent-employer.

Similar bargaining occurs in households that do not run their own businesses. In an . . . analysis of 7-year-olds' economic behavior in Nottingham, John and Elizabeth Newson (1976) document a wide range of household work for compensation among both middle-class and working-class families. Children, their mothers report, brought in the coal, dusted, helped in the garden, cleaned the car, washed pots, polished brass, cared for younger siblings, ran errands, vacuumed, fetched clothing, cleaned shoes and even tickled their father's feet. Once again, parents and children bargained out compensation systems; a fireman's wife explains:

Sometimes he'll go and help his Dad with the garden, but not a set rule; although I do sort of say that their pocket money—they are given it in return for running errands and washing pots and helping with the little ones. I mean, Saturday they have it, and they do two or three errands before they get their money—they get them done very quickly! (Newson and Newson, 1976: 227; for other British cases and a New Zealand parallel see Morrow, 1994; Fleming, 1997)

In the US as well, children participate in a variety of productive domestic tasks, such as cleaning up their rooms, cooking, dusting, doing laundry, washing dishes, vacuuming, setting or clearing the table, cleaning the bathroom, sweeping floors, carrying out garbage, mowing the lawn, cleaning the yard or caring for younger siblings and pets. A 9-year-old girl that Victoria Chapman (1994) classified as one of her 'Chore Hounds' reported a very wide range of household tasks. Among other things, she helped her mother with grocery shopping:

I push the carriage. I hold coupons that she uses, and usually the coupons that she does not use I hold and sometimes she'll tell me to go get something and I'll go get it. (Chapman, 1994: 167)

Recent studies report that American children are spending increasing amounts of their time in such household chores (see, for example, Lee et al., 2000). Children's marketing specialist McNeal (1999: 71) estimates that children in the US perform 11 percent of total household work.

Likewise, Anne Solberg's (1994: 84) study of 11- and 12-year-old Norwegian children's household work speculates that children, especially girls, may be more significant assistants to mothers than their fathers are (this sort of substitution raises interesting questions

about parallels between child/parent, and spousal bargaining over household work; see, for example, Brines, 1994; Gerson, 1993; Greenstein, 2000; Hochschild, 1989; Hochschild and Machung, 1989; Lundberg and Pollak, 1996).

In most cases, children expect some kind of domestic payment. Parents agree. McNeal (1999; 69, 71) itemizes five different sources of children's cash income. In the late 1990s, 16 percent of kids' income came from gifts from parents, 8 percent from others' gifts, 45 percent from allowances, 10 percent from work outside the home and 21 percent from household work. Significantly, McNeal notes that children's compensation from household work rose to 21 percent from 15 percent in the mid-1980s. However, since parents are not standard employers, negotiating suitable payment systems turns into a delicate and highly contested issue. At issue is not merely a wage bargain but a definition of proper relations between parents and their offspring.

Indeed, the nature of children's allowances has excited debate for over a century, with some experts and parents strongly advocating compensation for children's household work, and others insisting on a separation between work effort and allowances. In the latter cases, allowances qualify not as compensation but as a parent's discretionary gift or the child's entitlement. Nevertheless, whether compensation, gift, or entitlement, allowances are subject to continual bargaining between parents and children.

Negotiations occur over both allowances and other monetary transfers. Parents, for their own part, often impose a set of terms, deciding which chores to compensate with money or overseeing, and in some cases closely supervising, children's expenditure. In these transactions, however, children do not simply echo parents' preferences for household payments, but work out their own moral views and strategies. *The Kids' Allowance Book* (Nathan, 1998), based on interviews with 166 children between the ages of 9 and 14 from 11 schools around the US, reports a variety of such rationales and strategies. Children, for instance, repeatedly praise regular allowances as welcome sources of discretionary income. Before getting an allowance, Katie explains: 'If I wanted a pair of special sneakers, [my parents] might say it's too expensive and not a necessity. Now that I get an allowance, if they don't want to pay, I can pay for it myself' (Nathan, 1998: 6).

Children divide, however, over whether or not allowances should compensate for their domestic chores, some children insisting that helping out is an expected, fair, and therefore free, household contribution. Others forcefully defend their often elaborate monetized exchanges. Listen, for instance, to Amanda:

On top of all the cleaning and garbage toting Amanda B has to do for her allowance, she regularly does freebies like folding the clothes or setting the table. 'If I'm sitting around and my mom asks me to do something, I'll say sure and won't ask to get paid,' she says, 'I do it to help out.' But if she is saving up for something special, she'll hunt for a big job that needs doing, such as basement cleaning. Ugh! She'll ask if her mom will pay extra for it. That's when the freebies pay off. 'Since I'm not always working just for money, when I ask if she'll pay me to do something extra, she usually does.' (Nathan, 1998: 15)

Children report numerous, often intricate, negotiating tips, ranging from how to choose chores (pick your own, 'if your mom chooses, she might give you a chore you can't even bear the *thought* of doing'); getting a fair wage (find out what other kids earn); how to make sure parents pay on time ('I remind my dad on the day *before*, to make sure he has the right change for my allowance the next day'); how to get a raise ('no-nos' include whining, begging, asking for

way too much, or not doing chores on time; among the 'dos': 'do lots of stuff to help out and be nice to your brother or sister [if you have one]', and 'ask for a slightly *bigger* raise than you want so you can give in a little and still come out okay') (Nathan, 1998: 55, 52, 20, 46).<sup>1</sup>

To understand this unexplored household economy fully, we need much more systematic information about actual bargaining between parents and children. . . . We know even less about children's production involving their peers, or with agents of organizations, including other households. When it comes to children working with peers, we draw on little more than sentimentalized visions of future self-made capitalists learning their skills on lemonade stands or sharing newspaper routes. Take *Rich Dad Poor Dad*, the runaway 1997 best-seller guide to financial success: its key inspirational anecdote shows us two 9-year-olds cashing in from their partnership renting comic books to other kids. They learned early 'to have money work for us. . . . By starting our own business, the comic-book library, we were in control of our own finances, not dependent on an employer' (Kiyosaki and Lechter, 1997: 52).

In such parables, we see only the above surface of what is surely a huge undersea continent. Only infrequently do researchers provide glimpses of what lies underneath. Consider, for instance, Elizabeth Chin's observations of how Tionna and Tiffany—two of her 10-year-old Newhallville informants—managed their cucumber stand, selling cucumbers one of them had grown in her backyard. Pricing their goods, Chin reports, settled into a delicate social bargain. They asked 40 cents for the larger cucumbers, a quarter for smaller ones. Unsure of how much to ask for a larger cucumber:

Tionna suggested sixty cents. Tiffany wondered if it should be seventy-five. Then, with authority, Tionna announced the price should be fifty cents because then they could split it easier and wouldn't have to wait for some change. . . . Tiffany's grandmother came by and bought a large cucumber, putting fifty, rather than forty, cents into the pot. The kids would occasionally count the money and divide it into two equal piles, since they were planning to split the money equally. They ended up with each having about a dollar seventy-five. (Chin, 2001: 72–3) . . .

What about production for outside organizations, including other households? McNeal (1999: 72) reports that children's income from work outside the home, unlike their increasing pay for household work, has remained fairly stable at around 10–13 percent for children under 12. Children earn by baby-sitting, raking leaves, mowing lawns, watering plants, shoveling snow, cleaning garages, selling cookies, candies or lottery tickets to raise funds for school activities or charities, washing cars, taking care of pets, as runners or lookouts for drug dealers, watching cars, or as baggers at supermarkets. More recently, some 11- and 12-year-olds have been making money with investments and savings (McNeal, 1999: 72; see also Lewis, 2001). Once we shift our attention outside households, it becomes clear how many of children's activities involve production, including volunteer work, and as Jens Qvortrup (1995) has forcefully argued, school work.

Production outside households draws children into a new set of economic relationships with other adults/employers. Consider the case of the Norwegian *passepike* or baby-walker, 9- to 15-year-old girls who for a fee take care of children up to the age of 3 for a couple of hours in the afternoon. Studying *passepike* in Bergen, Marianne Gullestad (1992) gives an account of their economic arrangements with employers. The fee, for instance, is established in relation to what the girls' friends get and what other mothers pay. Far more goes into this relationship, Gullestad observes, than purchasing the carer's time: mothers of smaller children often give *passepike* holiday gifts, birthday presents and clothing. For their

part the girl carers offer gifts to their charges and regularly do more than their contract requires: 'She comes in earlier or gladly changes and feeds the child before they go out. Or in addition . . . she may be a baby-sitter in the evening, may do the dishes, wash the floors, etc.' (Gullestad, 1992: 121). Close personal ties to the mother, suggests Gullestad, become part of the *passsepik*'s reward system (for related American practices; see Formanek-Brunell, 1998) . . .

Over most of the world, relatively young children not only engage in the intermittent production relationships reviewed here, but also take up full-time paid employment in agriculture, manufacturing, services, or even the military. The point should already be clear: like that of their elders, children's production takes place within negotiated sets of social relations, and varies significantly as a function of those social relations' content and meaning.

### CHILDREN AS DISTRIBUTORS

As with production, a quick survey of distribution shows children at work negotiating various ties within their households, with peers, and in relation to outside households and organizations. . . . From very early in their lives—perhaps later than when they begin consuming, but earlier than when we can meaningfully think of them as regular producers—children engage in economically significant transfers. Those transfers generally begin within children's own households, usually next turn to peers, but involve outside households and organizations from quite young ages.

Since distribution within households and with organizations is more obvious, let us concentrate on peers. Régine Sirota's (1998) observations of Parisian children's birthday parties show even very young kids actively engaged in their gift economy, starting with peer collusion in gift selection. Children negotiate not only with their parents, but also with each other over the quality, value and character of their gifts . . . In their negotiations, children are working simultaneously to hammer out appropriate terms with their peers and with their parents who (at least for younger gift-givers) subsidize purchases. The problem for children is that parents may not be willing to pay for the gift the child regards as most appropriate. For instance, Sirota reports one strong maternal gift rule, adjusting the gift's price to the strength of friendship ties: 'For great buddies, great gifts, for lesser friends, lesser gifts' (Sirota, 1998: 459).

As for the matching of gifts to children's networks, Sirota observed regular correspondence between the intensity of friendship ties and the personalization of gifts: closer friends are expected to pay careful attention to the other's taste. Sirota's respondents praise successful gift-givers: 'He pays real attention to what he offers' or, 'She always gives me something really pretty.' Personalization turns even less popular objects, such as books, into prized gifts. Julien bought Barbara partly with his own pocket money the book Joffo's *Agate et calots*, because 'he had adored *Un sac de billes*, which he had just read, he was sure she would like it' (Sirota, 1998: 461).

Children's gift transfers do not simply translate parental values or social position into material objects. On the contrary, children's own relations and understandings play a significant part in organizing the birthday gift economy. What is more, these are economically serious matters. Sirota calculates that the average household involved spends the French equivalent of \$150 a year per child on birthday gift exchanges (the cost includes counter-gifts offered by the

birthday celebrant to party guests). As they grow older, children themselves increasingly spend their own pocket money on such gifts, thereby acquiring greater control over the entire process. With appropriate adjustment for class and national culture, similar arrangements seem to be very widespread in western countries.

Birthday gift transfers represent only one of children's multiple distribution systems, along with other holiday gifts, sales, trades, barter, treats, gambling and sharing. Beyond their households, in schools, stores, summer camps and other sites, children regularly engage in these sorts of economic transfers. Using a variety of monetary media, including cash, but also food, marbles, comic books and Pokemon cards they maintain a thriving distribution economy.

Schools provide a privileged location for observation of these processes. Notice what often goes on at lunch time. During the half-hour allotted to Newhallville children, Elizabeth Chin saw them 'trading portions of school lunch, homemade lunches, or cadging money to buy cookies' at a 'fevered pitch that often rivals that found on the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange' (Chin, 2001: 77). As with birthday gift-giving among Parisian children, New Haven's youngsters enacted their social networks in food trades, sales and donations. Turning down a deal, therefore, implied social rejection. Chin reports how this worked:

Kids very often refused to eat all or part of the lunch served; if they were willing to eat part of it (for instance the peanut butter and jelly on graham crackers) they would barter vigorously to get someone else's portion of that item and 'Are you going to eat that?' was a phrase often repeated throughout lunchtime, in concert with 'Can I have your milk?' or 'Do you want your pizza?' The negotiation of relationships between children lay clear on the face of these interactions and I have seen children pointedly dump uneaten portions of their lunches—coveted by others at their table—into the garbage. As a gesture of rejection, such an action could hardly be more decisive. (Chin, 2001: 78)

Studying first-grade African-American girls' friendships, Kim Scott identifies racial patterns in such distribution systems. For instance, in the racially mixed American elementary school that Kim Scott (1999) calls Rose Mount, she repeatedly found white girls, distributing gifts of candy, cookies, or quarters, while black girls (who in this school generally came from lower income families) were typically recipients, not distributors. In other regards, however, distribution patterns strikingly resembled what Chin found in New Haven: girls offered food and money gifts first of all to their best friends, and then to less intimate or favored classmates. Scott (1999: 130) notes that girls 'she does not like' are given an excuse, such as, 'I don't have that much . . . or a quick shake of the head no'. (For a linguistic analysis of 6-year-old children's food trades, see Mishler, 1979.)

But not all transfers of food are gifts. During her observations of African-American 11- and 12-year-old boys in an impoverished urban school, Ann Ferguson registered their 'thriving informal economy'. Surprised to notice Jamar distributing apples, oranges and bananas to kids outside his circle of friends, she discovered his apparent 'sharing' was in fact a sale when his teacher threatened to report Jamar's unauthorized business to the principal (Ferguson, 2000: 103).

Kids' commerce also takes place in the schoolroom. William Corsaro's comparison of American and Italian nursery schools shows us very young children defying school rules by bringing toys and other small objects—such as toy animals, matchbox cars, candy, or gum—to school, often concealed in their pockets. Children, reports Corsaro, 'often would show his or her "stashed loot" to a playmate and carefully share the forbidden object without catching the teachers' attention' (Corsaro, 1997: 42). Barrie Thorne's 1993 classic study of elementary

school children introduces the gendering of such clandestine distribution flows. She found kids stashing and trading small objects such as “pencil pals” (rubbery creatures designed to stick on the end of pencils), rabbit feet, special erasers and silver paper’ as well as more gendered goods, toy cars or trucks by boys, lip gloss, nail polish or doll furniture by girls. These ‘secret exchanges’, Thorne discovered, followed rigid gender lines, marking ‘circles of friendship that almost never included both girls and boys’ (Thorne, 1993: 21; see also Feiring and Lewis, 1989).

Thus, in lunchrooms, schoolrooms and playgrounds, children fashion elaborate systems of distribution covering a wide variety of objects and representing both peer solidarities and their divisions. We could make the same demonstration for a variety of other encounters in which children interact. Researchers, for instance, have documented comic book trades in summer camps, bargaining by US and Canadian kids over sports ‘chase’ cards, Pokemon cards and Beanie Babies, English children’s marble swapping and ritualized sharing among Israeli kids (see Cook, 2001; Katriel, 1987; Paris, 2000; Webley, 1996. . . .

Once we shake off adult prejudices, we discover extensively organized and differentiated children’s distributional economies.

## CHILDREN AS CONSUMERS

Because the consuming child has attracted greater media attention than the producer or distributor, we have more extensive documentation of children’s consumption. Yet even that documentation misses the centrality of negotiated and differentiated social relations to youthful consumption activity. Marketers, for their part, mainly treat kids as a special category of individual purchasers. The growing social scientific literature, in contrast, has stressed political and moral concerns: to what extent does consumption standardize, commodify, or repress children’s experiences? Are children tools of capitalist interests? Does desire for expensive goods lead children into dangerous behavior? . . .

Here, however, we follow the trail of children’s social relations through consumption. Let us adopt the conventional understanding of consumption as acquisition of goods and services. . . .

Earlier we saw Asia, one of Elizabeth Chin’s New Haven informants, report her uneasy relationship to store clerks. . . .

To understand Newhallville’s children’s practices better, Chin supplemented her 2-year participant observation in homes, schools and neighborhoods with shopping trips. She gave 23 children \$20 each to spend entirely at their discretion (some of the children brought along other children—siblings, relatives, or classmates). Here’s what 10-year-old Shaquita bought with her money: two pairs of shoes at Payless: \$6.99 denim mules for herself, and \$9.99 for a pair of golden slip-ons as a birthday gift for her mother. She spent the remainder at Rite-Aid: \$0.99 for a bag of bubble gum to share with her older sister and \$2.09 for foam hair rollers to give her grandmother (Chin, 2001: 126).

As with most of the other children, Shaquita’s shopping spree did not turn into a wild, self-indulgent experience. Instead, Chin identified two notable features of child shoppers’ purchases: practicality and generosity. They bought useful items for themselves, such as shoes, socks, underwear, or school notebooks, and picked gift goods for family members. Both types of purchases cemented children’s position in the household. They also established or confirmed their social ties with family members.

Lest these New Haven children appear to be impossibly reasonable and altruistic, Chin reminds us the mixture of meanings that flowed from their purchases: obligation to share with

other members of poor families, acting out of responsibility within the household, as well as the pleasure of giving. Chin sums this up:

The deep sense of mutual obligation, and even debt, between family members played a central role. [For kids] these obligations and debts were often not only sustaining and joyful but also painful, onerous, and highly charged. I sometimes suspected that the lesson imparted to children and imparted by them was at times a coercive generosity: share or else. (Chin, 2001: 128)

Not all household relations of consumption, in any case, generate harmony and collaboration. In his study of Philadelphia's inner-city poor African-American children—which also includes teenagers—Carl Nightingale (1993) reports acute rancor and conflict between parents and children in their negotiations over consumption. Parents exasperated by their kids' unreasonable and persistent demands for spending money are pitted against children disappointed by their parents' inability to provide them with material goods. Contest over how to spend limited family monies, including income tax refunds or welfare checks, Nightingale observes, severely strains household relations:

All the kids whose families I knew well lived through similar incidents: yelling matches between Fahim and his mother on how she spent her welfare check, Theresa's disgust when she found out she was not going to get a dress because her mom's boyfriend had demanded some of the family's monthly money for crack, and Omar's decision to leave his mother's house altogether because 'I hate her. She always be asking y'all [the Kids' Club] for money. That's going to get around, and people'll be talking.' Also he felt that she never had enough money for his school clothes. (Nightingale, 1993: 159)

In the course of his fieldwork, Philippe Bourgois (1995) heard similar stories coming from 'El Barrio', New York City's crack-ridden East Harlem. Ten-year-old Angel complained about his mother's boyfriend:

. . . [He] had broken open his piggy bank and taken the twenty dollars' worth of tips he had saved from working as a delivery boy at the supermarket on our block. He blamed his mother for having provoked her boyfriend into beating her and robbing the apartment when she invited another man to visit her in her bedroom. 'I keep telling my mother to only have one boyfriend at a time, but she won't listen to me.' (Bourgois, 1995: 264)

Children's consumption within households takes place in a context of incessant negotiation, sometimes cooperative, other times full of conflict.

Among peers, consumption raises a different set of relational issues. We find unexpected evidence, for example, from recent studies of Chinese children. The success of China's one-child policy means that large numbers of the country's 90 million children under age 15 have no siblings; in urban areas, single children are a majority. These 'little emperors' as observers call them, have gained remarkable economic leverage within their households: young shoppers start spending money by age 4. The social investment of Chinese parents in their children's futures increases that leverage (see Chee, 2000; Davis and Sensenbrenner, 2000).

Among other influences, the newly empowered child consumers have turned 'trendy food' snacks, especially western style, into highly desirable goods. Interviewing 8- to 10-year-old only children in Beijing, Bernadine Chee (2000) found the *xiaochi* or

snacks marking children's network position. Thus, the affluent Shen Li, one of Chee's interviewees, despite the dishonor of having his father in prison, achieved peer inclusion with his food purchases. As Chee describes it:

Shen Li often bought different foods to eat. . . . He would taste it, and if he did not like it, he would give it to his classmates. 'Because I often give them something to eat,' Shen Li explained, 'they will also give something to me when they have it.' (Chee, 2000: 55)

Not that children democratically included every child in these distribution systems. In fact, Chee found they systematically excluded apparently rural children, who ate alone while others were sharing. However, as we learn from Gao Tianjun's experience, inclusion mattered greatly to individual children. Gao's father recalled one of their outings, when Gao unexpectedly asked him to buy the expensive Wall's ice cream. Considering their meager household income, the father was at first reluctant but, seeing his child's eagerness, he relented. He later discovered the reasons for Gao's insistence:

His son explained that once when he was at school, his classmates had asked him: 'Gao Tianjun, have you tried Wall's?' He had told the classmates that he had tried it. The classmates then asked him: 'How did it taste?' He had replied that it tasted very good. Gao Tianjun's father remarked: 'Actually, the child had never tried it before.' (Chee, 2000: 54)

Chee's observations show us children not simply enacting their parents' social position and category but creating networks of their own.

As with production and distribution, consumption . . . reveals children as active, inventive, knowledgeable consumers. More importantly, it shows us dynamic, differentiated, social relations in action.

## THE PRICELESS CHILD REVISITED

Does all this discovery of children's economic activities mean that the economically useless, emotionally priceless child was just a historical mirage? Far from it. To be sure, other parts of the world, with rampant paid and informal child labor, never had the luxury of establishing a priceless child. In the US, however, household economies were indeed transformed between the 1870s and the 1930s in ways that revolutionized children's economic practices. Just as middle-class women withdrew from paid employment, children were put out of wage work. Increased attention and concern with the emotional value of children's lives led to a growing uneasiness with their practical contributions. Children's worlds, it seemed to most observers, were to exist outside market concerns, in classrooms, playrooms, playgrounds, or summer camps. Indeed, child labor laws pushed most children out of market employment while new principles of domestic economy redefined their household contributions as worthy lessons, not real work.

*Pricing the Priceless Child* (Zelizer, 1985) traced this transformation by focusing on adults' changing evaluations of children and childhood. But there is more to the story that we can only capture by shifting our attention to children's experiences. When we do so, we discover that the creation of an ostensibly useless child never segregated children from economic life in general. Under changed symbolic and practical conditions, the priceless child remained a consumer, producer and distributor. What's more, as we have seen repeatedly

throughout this article, children engaged actively in bargaining, contesting and transforming their own relations with the economy.

Rereading the book today suggests further questions. For instance, has the era of the priceless child ended? Focusing on the US alone, if we consider the growing inequality of national income, the extent of child poverty, as well as the largely undocumented child labor of immigrant and migrant workers, we could argue that the priceless child is being wiped out among the poor and near poor. The evidence is mixed. Despite strong evidence of child labor among some immigrant populations, observers of contemporary life, such as Carl Nightingale (1993) and Kathy Edin, and Laura Lein (1997), emphasize how even very poor parents make an effort to provide consumption goods to their children in order to match those of their peers.

In our middle and upper classes, meanwhile, the expensive priceless child still reigns. Certainly the cost of raising a child continues to escalate, starting with increasingly high tuition for nursery schools and tutoring for entrance exams to private elementary schools. Parents also subsidize the growing consumer clout of their young children. For 60 percent of American children, McNeal (1999: 69) reports, the no-strings-attached allowance constitutes the largest single source of income. Working parents, as Arlie Hochschild (1997: 216) found, engage in 'time-deficit "paybacks"', by buying their children gifts. It continues to be true, furthermore, that middle- and upper-class parents justify children's paid work not on the grounds of economic utility but its contribution to their moral upbringing.

What about my predictions of a contemporary useful 'housechild'? Here, as we saw earlier, studies suggest that as a majority of their mothers work, children are in fact starting to participate more actively in household economic activities. However, whether they are participating more in production, consumption, or distribution remains unclear. An important study of American 3- to 12-year-olds' time use in 1981 and 1997 indicates that among children of single parents household work increased from 42 minutes to 2 hours and 42 minutes (almost a fourfold rise) and shopping time from 1 hour 11 minutes to 1 hour and 57 minutes (a 65 percent rise). But in two-parent households average household work dropped from 4 hours and 11 minutes (far greater than the single-parent households) to 2 hours and 52 minutes (a bit more than the single-parent households). In those same two-parent households, meanwhile, shopping rose from 1 hour and 57 minutes to 3 hours and 8 minutes (Hofferth and Sandberg, 2001: Table 4). Judging from participation in shopping, American children's involvement in consumption is increasing not only in terms of dollar volume, but also in terms of time expended.

Evidence . . . suggests that . . . a significant share of the 26 hours 48 minutes American children spent at school in 1997, of the 12 hours 12 minutes spent at play and of the additional 8 hours 53 minutes devoted to church, youth groups, sports, outdoors, hobbies and art activities will turn out to consist of economically consequential production, consumption or distribution. Adults may consider children priceless and economically useless, but they cannot deny children's substantial economic activity.

Thus, a new agenda for research on children's economic experiences emerges from the old.

## **CHILDREN, NEGOTIATION AND ECONOMIC EXPERIENCE**

Let us examine some possibilities for that new agenda. Here are some sample questions that follow from the literature that we have reviewed.

- How do children negotiate the amount, timing and compensation for household tasks with their parents and with siblings?

- What sorts of issues become matters of dispute, and how is conflict settled?
- What changes in bargaining should we expect if the reported increase in children's domestic work continues?
- Do children in ethnic businesses have more leverage in their bargaining than children in other households?
- How does the bargaining change in households where children earn more than their parents, e.g. child models, actors, singers, or athletes?
- How do changes in these respects affect children's relations with other children and with outside organizations?
- How do children's earmarking practices vary: do children spend money from different sources (allowance, gift, wage, found money) for different kinds of goods?
- How do sources and uses of children's money vary internationally?
- Which other kids do children consult about their purchases: best friends, close friends, or acquaintances?
- How does their consultation vary by type of purchase (toys, computers, food, clothing) and by site of purchase (shopping mall, neighborhood store, Internet, catalogue)?
- When are children likely to engage in theft, such as shoplifting? With whom and where? In supermarkets, shopping malls, neighborhood stores, school stores?
- How is trust established in children's school distribution networks? When and why do children give or accept loans of money or food?
- How, and when, do adult third parties—parents, teachers, clerks, shopping mall security guards, janitors, playground monitors and employers—intervene in children's economic practices?
- How, and why, do all of these vary by age, class, gender, race, nationality, religion and by household structure?
- What part do children's production, distribution and consumption play in the national economies and how does that part vary from one country to another?

Remember the terrible fourth vignette, the Liberian child soldiers and their gunpoint breakfast? It should remind us that the great bulk of recent research on children's economic lives concerns relatively protected capitalist enclaves. The full agenda for research on children's economic relations must reach outside those enclaves in three directions: toward the variable and unequal experiences of children within high-income capitalist countries; toward the enormous variety of children's circumstances in the lower-income regions where most of the world's kids actually live; toward the historical changes that are transforming children's economic relations in rich and poor countries alike.

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. What common assumptions do many people make about children's relationship with consumption?
2. How are children not just consumers, but producers too?
3. What does the author mean when she describes children as "distributors"?
4. Thinking back to your own childhood experiences, what was your relationship to money like?

## Note

1. For other kids' strategies, see also *Consumer Reports for Kids*, at: [www.zillions.org](http://www.zillions.org) (accessed 25

July 2001) and *Kid's Money* website, at: [kidsmoney.org](http://kidsmoney.org) (accessed 25 July 2001).

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