



Children's Involvement in Household Work

VIEWS OF ADOLESCENTS IN SIX COUNTRIES

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This paper is concerned with the often forgotten participants in the unpaid work of the household – children – and with the views held by adolescents about children's work in the house.

Adolescents as a group are halfway between childhood and adulthood. In formulating their views about the involvement of children in household work, adolescents can look back to their own childhood experiences or, as they were asked to do in this project, they can look forward to a time when they are parents. Through their views we can obtain a glimpse of family patterns of the future.

Here, family patterns are not so much to do with how the unpaid work of the house is divided, but about the values embedded in children's involvement in household work. The survey questions were designed to explore the value society places on the development of individual and social responsibility in our children by asking for the opinions of adolescents who have just emerged from their early socialisation experiences.

Although household work is an area not subject to policy intervention, it is nevertheless a key setting for socialisation of cultural values (Goodnow et al. 1995). These are

It is often through views of young people that we can glimpse the family patterns of the future and gain an understanding of a larger picture that reflects general cultural values.

Here, the authors analyse attitudes that emerged from a major international survey of adolescents' views about children's involvement in household work, and whether or not children should be paid for work around the house.

the values that underpin policy decisions concerning families and children in Australia, and as such they need to be recognised, acknowledged and examined by all policy makers.

The focus of the paper is on differences both between and within cultures in adolescents' ideas about when children should begin work in the home, the value of household work for children, and whether or not such work should be paid.

Comparisons are made between six countries and between genders, on two kinds of household task – self-care and family-care. Of particular interest is the picture that emerges of Australian adolescents – a picture that in many ways reflects general cultural values, and that emerges as different from the views of adolescents in other countries.

Prior Research

Available information about what children are actually doing in terms of household work comes mainly from research in English-speaking countries (see Goodnow 1988 for a review). The pattern appears to be that children are involved early in helping their mothers (Rheingold 1982), and most school-aged children are assigned household tasks (Thrall 1978). These tend to be self-care tasks such as making the bed and keeping the bedroom tidy. Children are expected to participate in family-care tasks, such as cleaning the house or mowing the lawns, but they are usually requested to help or expected to volunteer for such jobs rather than be given actual responsibility for them (Goodnow and Delaney 1989).

Research shows that the household tasks children do are strongly linked to gender roles. This is the case in middle childhood (White and Brinkerhoff 1981b; Thrall 1978; Goodnow 1988) and in adolescence (Brannen 1995; Hansen and Darling 1985; Peters 1994). Girls are asked to do jobs inside the house such as cleaning and cooking, and boys to do outside jobs such as lawn mowing and washing the car. Children themselves, when asked which sibling they could ask to do a job for them, said that they could only ask a brother to wash the car and a sister to clean the bath or basin, signalling that they saw some work as girls' work and some as boys' work (Goodnow et al. 1991).

Ideas and values

Expression of expectations about children's household work practices reveal other ideas that appear to embody cultural values. Cultures may differ, for example, in expectations about when children should begin household work and in the perceived value of children's work in the home. For example, in a study of Anglo-Australian and Lebanese-born Australian mothers, Goodnow et al. (1984) found that the Australian-born mothers expected their children to begin doing chores at about the age of five or six years. In contrast, Lebanese-born mothers did not expect their children to begin household work until much later. The Lebanese mothers also gave different reasons for their children's involvement. They cited the parents' need for help as a reason, whereas the Australian-born mothers gave developmental reasons such as training in responsibility.

When White and Brinkerhoff (1981a) in the United States asked mothers why they expected their children to do household

work, they found that the key word used was 'responsibility', with most mothers seeing household work as character building, and many talking about reciprocal obligations ('it is their duty to help the family') and their own need for help with the work.

A similar pattern of response has been found for Australian mothers who placed primary value on development of skills and character through children's involvement in self-care household tasks such as making their beds, keeping their rooms tidy and clearing up toys after they had played (Goodnow and Delaney 1989). A few mothers mentioned how involvement in such work taught 'belonging and sharing', and some cited the usefulness of what the children were doing.

However, Goodnow and Delaney (1989) found a different response when mothers were asked the same question about work tasks that were of benefit to the whole family – tasks such as setting the table, cleaning the house or washing the car. Half of the mothers thought that these tasks developed skills and responsibility in children; the rest thought that such family-care tasks fostered in children a sense of belonging and sharing.

For these tasks, too, the idea of children making a useful contribution through cutting down the workload of parents was rarely mentioned. This is in contrast to studies of children's household work during the Great Depression (Elder 1974) and in rural America (Straus 1962) where children's contributions were valued highly.

Payment for household work

While payment for household work is discouraged in articles of advice to parents on the grounds that 'children may come to view household work as a paid job rather than as a family responsibility' (Adams 1985:4), parents in Australia nevertheless do pay children for jobs, generally by way of an allowance or pocket money to cover all jobs done, or by paying for only extra or big jobs (Feather 1991; Warton and Goodnow 1995).

Research has shown that the option of piecework or payment for each job done is not favoured by most parents (Warton and Goodnow 1995), but small payments are often used to encourage children in the United Kingdom when they are first allocated household tasks (Newson and New-

son 1976). Australian children regard payment for a big job such as washing the car as reasonable, but older children (11–14-year-olds as opposed to eight-year-olds) think that payment for self-care jobs such as making their bed is absurd (Warton and Goodnow 1991).

The Present Study

To test the hypotheses about cultural and gender differences in ideas about household work and payment for household work relating to two types of task (self-care and family-care), male and female adolescents from six countries were asked a series of questions tapping their views on how early children should begin doing chores; the value of children's involvement in household work; and whether or not children should be paid for household work.

Country comparisons

A primary interest was differences in the ideas of adolescents from six countries – Australia, the United States, Sweden, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.

It was hypothesised that cultures with a more individualistic orientation, such as the United States and Australia, would emphasise self-care household tasks and place less emphasis on family-care tasks compared with countries with a social contract that implies a greater care for others and sees the individual primarily as a member of a group. Former communist countries such as Hungary, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, and countries with a generous social welfare system such as Sweden, may all transmit values of responsibility to the group more readily than responsibility for self, and this may be reflected in the ideas held about household work.

Gender comparisons

In addition to differences in the ideas of adolescents from the six countries, hypotheses about gender differences were advanced. On the basis of a cross-cultural study which found a greater degree of social commitment in adolescent girls than boys Offer et al. (1987), it was hypothesised that girls would show in their responses more sense of responsibility for others than would boys. At least in terms of practices in Britain, it seems that adolescent girls are more likely than adolescent boys to do household tasks which benefit others (Brannen 1995). No differences were expected between adolescent boys and girls in their views on payment for household work.

Design and methods

Adolescents from six countries took part in the study. The countries were selected on the basis of two criteria – the history of their experience as a democracy, and the role of the state in the provision of social welfare.

For the purposes of the analysis, three

countries can be seen as countries in transition (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Hungary) and three as established Western democracies (Australia, Sweden, and the United States). Of the latter, one can be seen as a modern social welfare state (Sweden) and two (Australia and the United States) as countries that hold a more individualist interpretation of the social contract.

In each country, a minimum of 500 young people aged 11 to 23 years participated. Sampling was as representative as possible in terms of school type and socio-economic status of families in an area surrounding a major city in each country. In Australia, the sample was taken from government and independent secondary schools in western Sydney and central Perth. Since many of the other questionnaire items concerned attitudes about society and social justice, sampling was also based on federal electorates and representative of the range of voting patterns in Australia.

The questionnaires

Adolescents completed questionnaires in their classrooms during two sessions separated by a week. A set of three questions was asked twice, once in the context of self-care household tasks and again for family-care tasks. Students were asked to circle one choice only for each question.

The general introduction to the six questions was: 'In the future, you may be a parent.

We are interested in some of your ideas about bringing up children. Some people

think children should do jobs around the house. Others think children shouldn't have jobs to do.'

Self-care tasks were introduced as follows: 'First let's talk about the kinds of jobs when children have to clean up their own things – like putting their toys away, or making their bed, or cleaning up their part of the room.'

Family-care tasks were introduced as follows: 'Now let's talk about more general household work – like doing the dishes, sweeping the floors, or other jobs in the household.'

The three questions and the answer choices for each were as follows:

Q1. *At what age do you think children should be expected to do household work?* (Never; Under the age of six; Around six or seven, but not before; Between eight and ten, but not before; When they are 11 or older.)

Q2. *What would you say is the major value of having children do household work?* (No value; It helps the parents, and takes away some of the parents' workload; It's good training for the child in responsibility and self-discipline; It helps children learn that they're part of a family and everyone should help the group.)



Q3. Do you think that children should earn money (pocket money) for doing such household work? (Yes. They should be paid for each job they do; Yes. They should be paid an allowance/pocket money as a general payment for the jobs they do; Sometimes. They should be paid only for extra or big jobs. No. They should not be paid for the jobs they do.)

Adolescents' Views

Results are presented for each of the three questions in turn, noting the major differences between countries, between adolescent boys and girls in their responses, and differences in response to questions about self-care and family-care tasks.

Age at which household work should begin

Most adolescents thought that children should be involved in household work. The range of response over countries was 1–2 per cent for self-care tasks and 2–5 per cent for family-care tasks. In all countries, the majority of adolescents thought that children should begin self-care tasks early, either from age six or seven (range 29–39 per cent) or younger (range 18–54 per cent). In contrast, as Figure 1 shows, fewer in each country thought that children should begin family-work tasks at the age of seven or younger.

Figure 2 shows the distinction made between self-care and family-care tasks when the two responses indicating an older age of starting tasks were considered. In each country, the majority of adolescents thought that children should begin family-care work at eight years or older.

As can be seen from Figure 3, gender comparisons indicate that, in each country, more girls than boys thought that children should begin self-care tasks at an early age (seven years or younger). In contrast, boys and girls held similar views that family-care tasks should begin later, at eight years or over (Figure 4).

Major value of household work for children

Almost all of the adolescents thought that children's involvement in household work had some value. The range of 'no value' responses over the six countries was only 2–3 per cent for self-care tasks and 1–3 per cent for family-care tasks. Only a small percentage saw the major value as helping parents (7–14 per cent for self-care tasks, and 13–24 per cent for family-care tasks).

The majority of answers in all countries referred to the developmental value of household work for children. Adolescents

saw household work as a way to encourage the development of responsibility in children. As would be expected, in most countries, individual responsibility was the most popular response for the value of self-care tasks, and responsibility for the group as the most frequently chosen value for family-care tasks.

There were, however, different patterns of response for the countries when individual and group responsibility items were considered. As Figure 5 shows, the United States and Australia stood out as countries in which adolescents favoured the development of individual responsibility in relation to children's household work. This was the case for both kinds of household work (for self-care, USA 73 per cent, Australia 63 per cent; for family-care, USA 56 per cent, Australia 49 per cent). Figure 5 also shows the lowest endorsement of individual responsibility as a value of household work was from adolescents in the Czech Republic (40 per cent for self-care, and 28 per cent for family-care).

The Czech Republic, Hungary and Sweden were similar in their high level of nomination of the development of group responsibility as the major value of household work for children (for self-care, Czech Republic 44 per cent, Hungary 41 per cent, Sweden 43 per cent; for family-care, Czech Republic 47 per cent, Hungary 46 per cent, Sweden 40 per cent).

Fewer than a third of adolescents in the United States and Australia nominated group responsibility as a major value, regardless of the type of household tasks involved (Figure 6). Bulgaria lay between the two groups of countries in its responses to the two kinds of responsibility, tending to favour individual responsibility but not to the same extent as the United States and Australia (Bulgaria: individual responsibility – 55 per cent for self-care, and 42 per cent for family care; group responsibility – 30 per cent for self-care, and 36 per cent for family care).

For the group responsibility response, there were gender differences, and these differences were consistent across countries. More girls than boys nominated group responsibility as a major value of household work for children, and this difference was apparent for the questions on self-care and family-care tasks (Figures 7 and 8).

Payment for household work

There was little support from respondents in all countries for the idea of payment for each household job. The range across countries for this response option was 1–10 per cent for self-care tasks and 2–12 per cent for family-care tasks.

The highest support for 'piecework' came from the United States both for self-care tasks (10 per cent of responses) and for family-care tasks (12 per cent). There was some support for payment for extra or big jobs, particularly from adolescents in



Figure 1 Age at which household tasks should begin: 7 years or younger

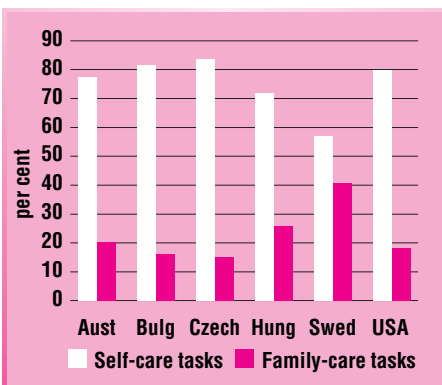


Figure 2 Age at which household tasks should begin: 8 years or older

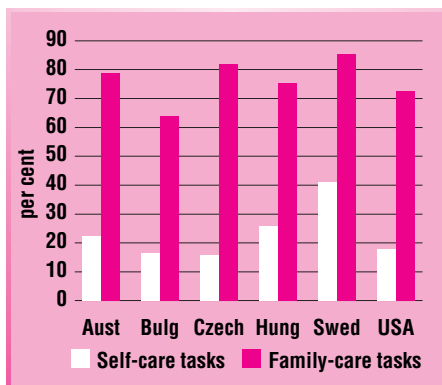


Figure 3 Age at which household tasks should begin: 7 years or younger: gender comparisons on self-care tasks

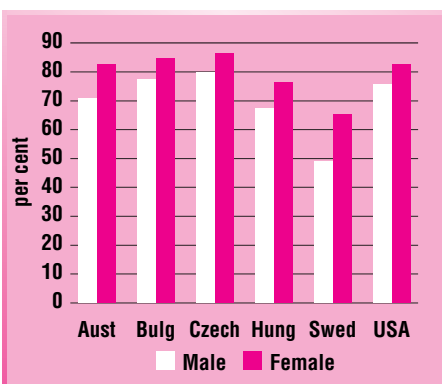
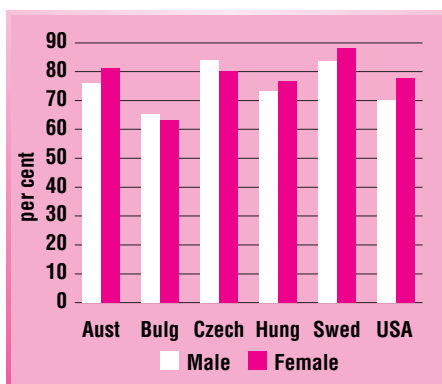


Figure 4 Age at which household tasks should begin: 8 years or older: gender comparisons on family-care tasks



Hungary (42 per cent chose this option for self-care tasks and 41 per cent for family-care tasks).

As shown in Figures 9 and 10, a general payment or allowance was favoured mostly by adolescents in Sweden (62 per cent for self-care, 57 per cent for family-care), Australia (48 per cent for self-care, 53 per cent for family-care), and the United States (46 per cent for self-care, 51 per cent for family-care). In contrast, adolescents from the other three countries were more likely to say that there should be no pay associated with household work: Bulgaria (54 per cent for self-care, 55 per cent for family-care), the Czech Republic (48 per cent for self-care, 45 per cent for family-care), and Hungary (35 per cent for self-care, 38 per cent for family-care).

Discussion

In this study, differences in adolescents' ideas about children's involvement in household work emerged between countries and, in terms of gender differences, within countries. The differences that emerged can be seen as differences in emphasis rather than differences in kind. Adolescents in all countries, male and female, indicated ideas over the full range of options offered in the three questions. They did, however, differ in terms of the emphasis given to the development of individual and group responsibility through children's involvement in household work, and in terms of their willingness to consider payment for children's household work.

Differences between countries

The most startling differences in emphasis between countries were found in responses to the question of payment for household work. While most adolescents from Australia, the United States and Sweden did not agree with payment for each household job, they did support some payment, either through an allowance linked to household work (the preferred option for all three) or through payment for extra or big jobs. In contrast, adolescents in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Hungary were in favour of no pay for household work (the preferred option for all three) or only payment for extra or big jobs.

Such differences between countries may reflect a general difference in values between individualistic countries that emphasise monetary reward for individual effort, and countries that emphasise group values – values that may be threatened by the introduction of monetary rewards.

The lack of distinction made by adolescents in all countries between payment for self-care and family-care work is contrary to previous research (Warton and Goodnow 1991) cited earlier, in which Australian older children and adolescents rejected the idea of being paid for self-care jobs. The linking of money with work

Figure 5 Major value of household work: individual responsibility

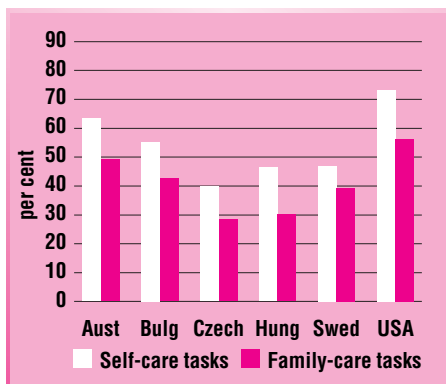


Figure 6 Major value of household work: group responsibility

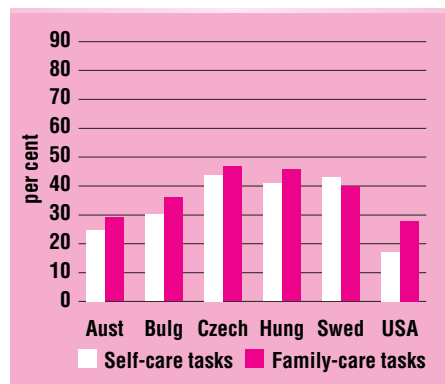


Figure 7 Major value of household work: group responsibility: gender comparisons on self-care tasks

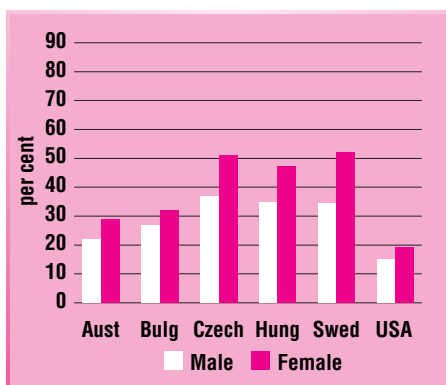
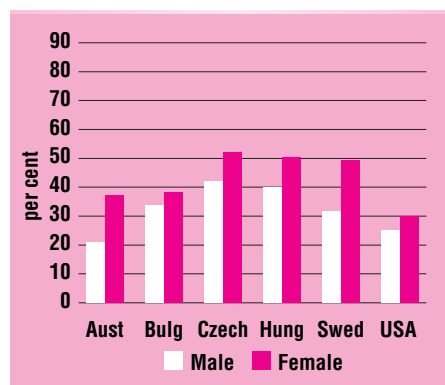


Figure 8 Major value of household work: group responsibility: gender comparisons on family-care tasks



around the house is also at a higher level here than would be predicted from Clark's work on the incompatibility perceived by adults of an exchange model and work within the family (Clark and Waddell 1985). It may simply reflect practices in the countries concerned, information which unfortunately was not collected as part of this study.

Another difference between countries was found in the perceived value of household work for children. Whereas most adolescents in all countries saw responsibility training as the main value of this work, the emphasis for adolescents in

the United States and Australia was on the development of individual responsibility, whereas adolescents in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Sweden placed a higher value on the development of responsibility to the group. All saw family-care tasks as holding more value than self-care tasks for the development of group responsibility.

Differences within countries

One clear within-culture difference was in terms of gender, with girls showing greater social responsibility than boys. First, girls favoured an earlier start to self-care work

Figure 9 Payment for household tasks: general payment: country comparisons

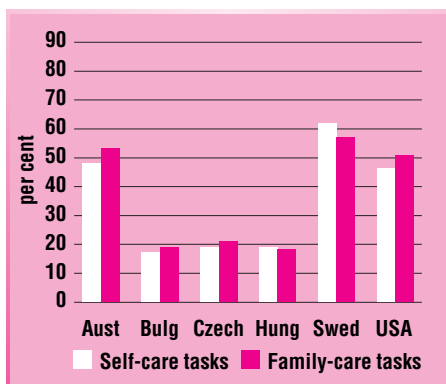
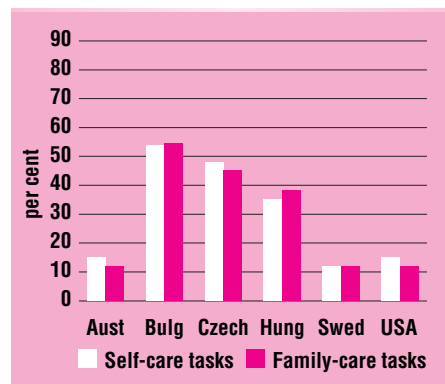


Figure 10 Payment for household tasks: no payment: country comparisons



than did boys. This may be a reflection of a higher sense of responsibility for themselves or towards the family on the part of the girls, or it may simply reflect practice – differences in the ages at which boys and girls are expected to begin to contribute to work in the home.

More compelling is the evidence that girls, more than boys, see family-care tasks as a way to promote responsibility to the group. This finding indicates that girls may place a higher value than boys on this aspect of social responsibility.

The differences in emphasis between cultures and within cultures may reflect both differences in cultural values and differences in practices that involve children in household work. Indeed, as Goodnow et al. (1995) have argued, it may be that such everyday practices as the allocation of household work tasks are one way that cultural values are transmitted.

Views of Australian adolescents

Australian adolescents emerged in this study with views about household work that were closer to those of adolescents in the United States than to those in Europe. Most thought that children should begin self-care tasks at the age of six or seven years, and that work done for the benefit of the family should begin later, over the age of eight years. These views are in line with current middle-class Anglo-Australian practice (Goodnow and Delaney 1989; Bowes and Goodnow 1996).

Adolescents in Australia, like adolescents in other countries, saw self-care tasks as important for the training of individual responsibility, and family-care tasks as more important for acquiring group responsibility in children. Their responses, however, placed more emphasis on individual than on group responsibility and this was particularly so for boys. The ideas of Australian adolescents were not compromised by the idea of payment for household work, although they saw a general payment (pocket money) as more appropriate than payment for each job.

In their responses, Australian adolescents reflected practices related to household work in this country, but they also valued individual responsibility (or self-reliance) more highly than responsibility to the family. These relative values were different from those of European adolescents, who placed a higher value on responsibility to others.

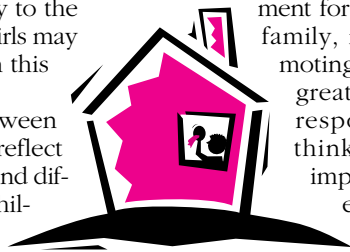
Household Work Practices and Children's Developing Social Responsibility

The research raises the question of the values we wish to transmit to our children in Australia, and the ways in which those values might be passed on.

The adolescents in this study have shown that we are doing a good job in transmitting values of self-reliance and individual responsibility. If we wish also to

promote concern about and responsibility towards others, one way may be to allocate more family-care tasks to children, a practice linked by Grusec et al. (1997) and Brannen (1995) to pro-social behaviour in children.

More emphasis on family-care tasks through more involvement and at an earlier age, and less on payment for work done for the family, may assist in promoting in our children a greater sense of social responsibility. If we think such values are important in our society, encouragement of social responsibility as well as self-reliance might also be considered in the formulation of social policy and in the design of programs for families and children.



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