Young peoples' representations of 'atypical' work in UK society

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Abstract

In this paper we explore young peoples' normative representations of work. In particular we are interested in the ways young people view roles which could be considered 'atypical' such as young caring or language brokering. Interviewed were 46 young people (15-18 years) some who did, and some who did not engage in the 'atypical' work roles of language brokering or young caring. Findings indicated that young people have a strong representation of what a 'normal' childhood consists and that friends, teachers and parents play a mediational role in cementing this contextually. However, respondents presented two alternative representations around engagement in 'atypical' roles, with some individuals holding both views at the same time. On the one hand they felt that engagement in 'atypical' activities would be experienced as a loss of 'normal' childhood. On the other hand a more positive representation of 'atypical' childhoods was also drawn on, in which engagement in 'atypical' activities was seen as a source of pride and a contributor of additional skills to a child's development. This opinion was evidenced by both those who had, and those who had not engaged in 'atypical' work.

Introduction

In our society childhood is assumed to be a time for play, formal schooling and socialisation (Jans, 2004; Hobbs & Cornwell, 1986). Debates about (Western) working children centre on a distinction between work and school in which play and work operate in contrasting ways. Certain types of work (such as the newspaper round) are considered to be appropriate activities and the assumption is that whilst work is a normative activity for children and young people, appropriate work is defined and permitted only within strict boundaries. It should be conducted under adult supervision and should be developmentally enriching. Psychological research suggests that child work is seen as a form of training for adult life and taking part in a limited amount of work promotes self-reliance, disengagement from family and commitment (Mizen et al. 1999). Within the UK context, work is typically held to be activities for which the young person is paid and take place outside the home, such as newspaper delivery and shop work (see survey by Leonard, 2002). In this paper the authors argue that many work activities which

young people engage in are unpaid and often take place within the home community, rendering them invisible to the dominant constructs within society.

In the context of this paper the 'atypical' work roles we are focusing on are language brokering and young caring. These activities were chosen as a focus for this research because they represent activities that are not generally defined as 'work' in that they are normally unpaid and are undertaken for family members or friends within a nexus of obligations negotiated within the family unit. Young carers are defined as children and young people under the age of 18 who "provide or intend to provide substantial amount of care on a regular basis" (OPSI, 1995). Language brokers are defined as children and young people who engage in activities where they mediate between two (or more) different languages. Thus we include activities which are often invisible within definitions of work and which involve young people performing roles more typically viewed as adult duties.

A framework for exploring young people and work

In this paper we borrow from a framework developed by Woodhead (2004) for assessing the psychosocial impacts of work on young people. Even within the UK it is recognised that there are grey areas around normative understandings of work that relate more to the norms of the contexts in which children are situated. For example, a child who brokers for their parents may not see this as 'work'. However the role does place the child outside dominant societal representations of normality. By 'dominant representations' we mean the prevailing societal views, images or beliefs about what a child is, what the practices a child engages in at a particular age should be, and how he or she develops (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992). Dominant representations give rise to notions of what activities are 'normal' i.e. school, play and socialising. It is in light of these complexities that we have found Woodhead's framework helpful. Three concepts for understanding a holistic approach to young people's lives are (i) development, (ii) context and (iii) mediation (Woodhead, 2004; pp.333-334):

"*Development* – recognising the place of work in children's lives within a long-term perspective, from their initiation into work, through various phases of childhood and beyond"

"*Context* – recognising that the circumstances and context of work may be as important as the work itself in determining how far the impacts are beneficial or harmful"

"*Mediation* – recognising that cultural beliefs and expectations surrounding the value of children's work, goals for their development and indicators of well-being will strongly mediate children's perspectives on and experiences of work, and in turn its positive or negative impact on their lives"

If we explore these concepts in more depth it is possible to see the value in borrowing and expanding the framework to aid our understanding of how young people who engage in 'atypical' work represent their experiences.

Exploring mediation in development and context

The notion of mediation utilised in this paper is used in its broadest sense, and one borrowed from cultural psychology (see Cole, 1996). For a long time sociocultural theorists focused on the mediating role of cultural tools such as language or the use of symbols. For example, Saxe (1991; 2005) looked at the ways in which particular counting systems played a mediational role in their impact on cognition, and in turn the ways in societal and economic change brought about a shift in the way these tools were altered over time. More recent formulations of mediation have taken into account the practices of communities like school and home within a wider social context (Abreu & Elbers, 2005) as well as meanings, identities and representations (O'Toole & Abreu, 2005; Gorgorió & Planas, 2005). In this sense development and context are appropriated and reconstructed through mediation.

Development

When Woodhead writes about development within the context of assessing psychosocial impacts of work, he addresses the transition from the early initiation in childhood and beyond into adulthood. Normative and socially constructed notions of development lay the basis for and are further reinforced by legal constraints around young people and work and conceptions of "appropriate" childhood activities.

At this point we may also draw on those who critique the notion of 'child' (Kessen, 1979) and 'development' (Burman, 1994; Walkerdine, 1993). For some years now there has been a contingent of critical psychologists who argue that childhood is not a natural state or biological given and that childhood is a recent and local invention (Kessen, 1979; Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 1992). Firstly, the construction of the dependent, innocent child who has the capacity to develop according to lawful stages is such a strong image in our current worldview that it is almost impossible to even think outside those constraints. This 'developmental myth' (Morss, 1992) is so powerful that it pervades and mediates our understandings of childhood and, therefore, the treatment of children and the development of policy governing this age group (O'Dell, 2003). Furthermore, the universal concept of childhood and child development has adverse effects for children who do not fit in with the supposed universality. Children who stand outside the dominant construction are seen as problematic; language brokers and young carers are in this unique position because of their engagement in roles that are typically viewed as adult roles. These activities were chosen as a focus for this research because they represent activities that are not generally defined as 'work' in that they are normally unpaid and are undertaken for family members or friends within a nexus of obligations negotiated within a family unit.

Context

This leads us to question who plays a key role in mediating and shaping the norms since children rarely act alone in these situations (Woodhead, 2004). Parents, teachers, friends as well as society will shape young people's representations of their own work practices. Particular influence is wielded by the adults who tend to have more power and control over the child agent than the child themselves, in the sense that they have the power to forbid (or demand) engagement in work activities.

One of the key issues around context is the loss of time from school which is considered in British society as a fundamental part of childhood. Time away from school is perceived as detrimental and can lead to tensions between parents and the school with the child often placed in the centre. Work on the other hand can be considered both helpful and a hindrance. If work undermines their school education, leading to feelings of inadequacy, then the work could be considered detrimental (Woodhead, 2004). Variations in children's cultural communities underlie what are acceptable practices (Rogoff, 2003). For example, parents from communities that value family obligations over others may not see that they are at odds with societal views when taking their children out of school to perform roles such as language brokering.

Valsiner (2000) suggests that children need to make sense of the context in which their work takes place. Whether the individual sees themselves inside or outside this context is what counts. The school context makes the most demands on children's age-related development, since so much of what children do are measured in these ways. On the other hand, Valsiner argues that age-related home practices tend to be more fluid. Integration into the adult world of work in societies like the UK is slow and gradual.

The research project

The data presented in this paper draws on a wider study which examined representations of what are assumed to be typical roles and activities for children and young people and of roles that conflict with 'normal' childhood activities. We drew on debates within critical-developmental psychology and explored young people's representations of childhood and engagement in work and feminist critiques of the concept of work as an activity outside the home for which the worker is paid. So we included activities which are often invisible within definitions of work that young people are involved in.

In order to find our young carers and language brokers a survey was conducted in six schools and colleges in different parts of the country. Some of the schools/colleges were mainly white with a smaller representation of a linguistic minority group and others were multiethnic with substantial representations of students from linguistic minority communities with a high proportion of recent arrivals in the UK e.g. from EU countries such as Portugal (Abreu et al. 2004) or from Eastern Europe.

From the survey 46 respondents were interviewed (27 female, 19 male) and within that sample 25 engaged in a 'typical' role and 21 in an 'atypical' role (12 language brokers and 9 young carers) . The typical sample were chosen on the basis that they claimed to have engaged in some kind of Saturday job work. There were 16 White-British and 30 ethnic/linguistic minority respondents interviewed for the study. The school year groups which were targeted were Year 11 (15/16 years of age) and Year 13 (17/18 years of age).

The individual interviews were built around four story vignettes, two depicting young people engaged in what might be considered typical work roles such as babysitting and having a Saturday job and two depicting the work roles of language brokering and young caring, which may be considered 'atypical'. We selected vignettes as the stimulus material because stories that

place an imaginary character in a concrete context allow researchers to explore what participants think about sensitive topics while disclosing as much or as little personal information as they feel fit (Rahman, 1996). As the areas for discussion were potentially sensitive for some of the young carers and language brokers it was felt this methodology would be most useful.

The vignettes were designed to represent aspects of children's work that were identified by the research team to be of theoretical significance. The characters were 14 years old, slightly younger than the participants to allow them to identify with the characters and feel that they were familiar. This paper focuses mainly on the data from the 'atypical' vignette stories. Eduardo, who had to sometimes miss school to translate for his mother at the doctors, was said to be proud of what he did but also a little embarrassed. Mary was a young carer for a disabled father who needed help during the day with activities such as getting out of bed, getting dressed and making lunch. Mary is described as loving her dad and is happy to be there for him. However she also misses school some days if her dad has a bad day and needs extra help. Sometimes Mary wishes that she could see her friends. After the interview data was collated and transcribed the text was interrogated in relation to the main research questions (using NVivo) and themes were developed.

Foremost we wanted to understand:
 - How do young people represent 'atypical' work roles such as language brokering and young caring?

In particular we sought to understand the answers to the following questions:
 - In what ways do young peoples' representations of development mediate in their understanding of 'atypical' work activities?

 - In what ways to young peoples' representations of context mediate in their understanding of 'atypical' work activities?

Research findings

We have argued that representations of child development are tied up with views which are dominant in society. Many of the young people sampled used 'normalising' representations of development to mediate their own understandings and experiences. Moreover, age-related criteria fed into these 'normalising' notions as they attempted to understand what was appropriate. It is these two aspects of 'development' that we turn to now.

Normalising development

The young people sampled clearly articulated a conception of a 'normal' childhood against which they judged the vignettes presented to them. A 'normal' childhood was consistently seen as a time for friends, play and school. By implication a 'normal' childhood was assumed to be a time of dependency, without responsibility either within the family or outside the home. At the same time many of the young people, whether or not they had had experience of brokering or caring, were aware of a tension between parents' obligations to a dependent child and a child's own obligations to their family. Some families are in 'atypical' situations and need their children to help in 'atypical' ways:

> I think it's helping his [Eduardo's] family out, which is probably, family is the most important thing to most people, family and friends. So to help your Mum out sometimes is more important than missing a few days' education I would say (Year 11, White-British boy, 'typical').

Although this respondent had not engaged in either young caring or language brokering he maintained a strong representation around family obligations. In the tussle between family

obligations and school obligations the opinion of this respondent was echoed through the majority of the young peoples' accounts. Some might suggest that this is counterintuitive to the dominant societal representations around the overriding value of education. The assumption is that work, arguably even the kinds of 'atypical' work that take place within the home/community "is never a proper substitute for, or complement to, school" (White, 1994; p. 851). However, resistance to these representations was evident in favour of commitment to the family in need of help.

The next quote is from a young carer who clearly articulated the ways in which she thought society mediates in constructing 'normal':

> They [Eduardo and Mary] are extremely different from what, what we as a society call normal. A normal teenager would be somebody who has a mum and a dad, who have full functioning bodies, who speak English who have decent jobs, maybe and couple of brothers or sisters. But they're not typically normal (Year 13, White-British girl, young carer).

She was explicit in articulating what she believed are dominant representations within society. The talk also set up representations which mediate around 'normal' contexts of development. She evoked ideas around the nuclear family, class positions relating to work status and the role of language within UK society (this participant is from an ethnically diverse college). On the other hand, as the paper progresses it will become obvious that 'normalising' is highly dependent on personal experience.

Age-related 'normalising'

Normative understandings of what is appropriate were guided by age-related ideas about what it means to be normal. For example, within dominant understandings of childhood represented by

all the participants in our interviews, certain forms of work were viewed as part of the adult world. The work of childhood was seen as education. This was illustrated when some participants argued that the characters should not be working:

> R: Cause they're only fourteen, its like…really young when you're fourteen
>
> I: So what should they be doing?
>
> R: They should be just going to school and going home and stuff and going out with their friends…not working (Year 13, Dual heritage, Indian and Spanish-Caribbean, girl, 'typical')

For these young people age-related normalising was tied into broader understandings about what it means to be a child. These young people also saw childhood as a time that should be devoted to family, schooling and socialising, much in the same way as dominant societal representations do. However, when set against 'atypical' personal experiences cause the individual to see dominant representations as belonging to the 'other'.

Context – friends, teachers and family

Significant others in young people's lives, namely friends, teachers and parents, play a mediational position in shaping their understandings of the roles they take on. Some significant others, such as teachers, are more likely to mediate representations that reflect those dominant in society. These representations may be at odds with those valued within the home (Hedegaard, 2005). In this next section we will look at the ways the respondents felt significant others would respond to the 'atypical' roles of the vignette characters and at times the respondents drew on their own representations or experiences in an attempt to understand these mediations.

Friends

For those young people who did not engage in any 'atypical' activities like young caring or language brokering there were ambivalent ideas about how friends would react. The representations were varied in the extent of their negativity, but some thought friends would consider these 'atypical' activities strange, that others would make fun of someone undertaking them and that the activity would remove the person from their friends. On the other hand, 'true' friends would just be accepting of their home responsibilities. Particularly in the case of the language broker, being able to speak more than one language would be something friends would admire: "they probably think it's quite cool that he can speak another language" (Year 11, White-British boy, language broker), although respondents still thought it likely that Eduardo would not tell many people about his role.

For those interviewed who had experienced 'atypical' roles their immediate 'context' and the mediational role of friends was highly salient. In the following quote this young carer is asked how friends would react to Mary [the carer vignette character]:

> R: They won't understand because they haven't been there. Like, the only way I got through my first year here [at college], because I was just trying to sort myself out, but there was a guy in this college during my first year called Adam. His dad was disabled… I was chatting to him in the hallway and he asked me what was wrong with my mum and I told him and I burst into tears and he was like 'do you know what, if you need to talk I'm always going to be here for you cause' I know what you're going through' and I mean his dad was in a wheelchair too. And it was a big relief because it was somebody who knew what it was like to have a disabled parent (Year 13, White-British girl, young carer).

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We are cautious about making group generalisations but young carers appear to be more isolated than language brokers, who are often situated within a community context, leading to feelings of 'normalisation':

> My friends all speak Spanish. It's normal for us because everyone has to do the same thing and for others. No, they think it's all right" (Year 11, White (Ecuador) girl, language broker).

Here we can see that context, and indeed community, play a role in mediating 'normalising' notions. This participant re-structured 'normal' within her own personal context. This was harder to do for the young carer because only one friend had shared her experience.

The following quote shows how changes in the local and historical contexts of these young peoples' lives had helped them reconstruct 'normality' within their own lived experience:

> I: What would their friends think?
>
> R: Nothing really because I mean it is not like 10 years ago when you are in this kind of society that there is one foreign people out of a 100. I mean nowadays it is not something unusual to find a foreign person cause I'm foreign, I was not born here, I am actually from Portugal, I was born in Portugal.
>
> I: Right, what age did you come here?
>
> R: I was 3½ years old when I came over here and it's just normal the people that come from other countries just don't understand English. I find it actually good that some people do come from other countries and they actually learn English. (Year 13, White-European Portuguese boy, language broker).

We emphasise here that we should attempt to understand these kinds of activities as an accepted part of their lives – rather than repositioning them as 'not-normal'. It is clear from these quotes that these young people have repositioned normality because of their community context. There is also reference to this being a historically shifting position within UK society. He implies that this repositioning would not have been possible in previous decades.

Some of the 'typical' participants drew on a variety of possible negative responses that friends would have towards young people undertaking 'atypical' roles, although 'true' and committed friends were said to accept a person for who they are. 'Atypical' participants were more likely to draw on their immediate friendship context to position themselves as either inside or outside normality. This supports the position described earlier by Valsiner (2000) that the role is not necessarily a key aspect of the context but rather whether the individual sees themselves as inside or outside that context that counts.

Family

Family, and the activities undertaken for family members such as language brokering and young caring, may form a central feature of young peoples' lives. It then follows that the way young people represent the mediating role of the family is of salient importance to learning more about the context of their lives. We attempted therefore to understand how those who did, and those who did not undertake 'atypical' role represented the parental figures in the vignettes.

As reported above, obligations towards the family were strong for many of the respondents sampled. However, when asked to specifically comment on the parental roles of the vignette characters the reflections were more critical. Furthermore, the ways in which the vignette characters of the young carer (Mary) and the language broker (Eduardo) were represented by the respondents was qualitatively different. Mary's father was positioned as someone who had little

choice in his disability so that little choice remained for Mary either. The talk around the role of Eduardo's mother positioned her as an 'inadequate parent' for many of the participants, even those who engaged in brokering for their families. The general consensus among both those who had acted as language brokers themselves and those who had not, was that taking Eduardo out of education for this purpose was not fair on him. As one interviewee suggested "she could ask someone else who isn't in education, who wouldn't have to sacrifice anything to help her" (White-British 'typical' boy). On the other hand a variety of questions were raised by the young people as they attempted to grapple with the complexities of the characters' lives.

This next quote is from a 'typical' respondent who, in the process of dialoguing with himself, attempted to tease out the tensions created for the young language broker and his mother. Although this respondent told the interviewer that he did not know anyone who had to broker for their family, he imbued Eduardo's mother with a complex set of emotions surrounding her role:

> R: Doesn't mention his father. Well, she probably feels trapped because she can't speak English, so he's [Eduardo] like her link to the world, in a way, cause' it's the only way she can communicate with anyone else around aside from any other family that are there. Um, she probably feels like she really needs him but she also feels like a little bit frustrated with it herself. I don't know whether she's trying to learn English, doesn't say if she wants to or if she can't be bothered or what, but she's probably; because he's her only link, she feels like she's putting a lot of strain on him and it's not fair on him, especially since he's missing his education for it. And it would be her only option really (Year 11, White-British boy, 'typical').

He presupposed feelings of guilt, inadequacy and helplessness on behalf of Eduardo's mother. He did not include in the options the possibility that language brokering is just an extension of

everyday family activity, in the way the language broker participants did. In the end, this respondent saw school as the key aspect of the character's childhood.

In this next quote we see how this young carer had a strong notion of what is normal within society but felt emotionally obligated to her family to manage the role she had:

> R: I like helping out with my sister, cause' I don't like leaving my mum to do it all cause' she has to look after my sister a lot.
>
> I: Do you think they [the school] realise what you have to do and what goes on and how difficult it can be?
>
> R: No, they don't really, they think I just have to look after her sometimes. That's how they see it. But I got to help out a lot more. So sometimes I come to school knackered, and they wonder why (Year 11, White-British girl, young carer).

So here, caring is not just an additional problem but part of who she is. This is where attempts to understand the fluidity of the role is important. There was self-recognition of the impact on school life but this young carer wanted to help her mother because she wanted to take away some of the burden. To separate her role from her social context is to deny her values.

Within the family context these 'atypical' roles allow the young person to move themselves into positions of power. One of our male language brokers described how he felt when the family no longer needed him after his sister joined the family in the UK and took over as the main language broker:

> R: I feel like they don't need me any more (laughs). So I don't mind doing it sometimes [language brokering] but they prefer her now (laughs) (Year 13, White-European, Portuguese, boy, language broker).

In the next section we are going to focus on the role of teachers in the contextual representations of 'atypical' work roles.

Teachers

We asked the participants what the teachers would think of the roles the characters in the story vignettes were taking on. Some thought the teachers would sympathise with the characters' roles but would maintain a strong stance against any role which took time away from school. The participants engaged in complex verbal debates which put the family in opposition to the school:

> I: What would their teacher think?
>
> R: …it's helping out family and you need the help, so it's not a decision you make easily. You've got to decide what comes first your family or education, and if you take education first in the future you'll be able to get a better [education] to support your family then, but if you don't help your family early in life, for instance at the doctors… then they might not be there later to support with the money you need for going to school so it depends what you want to do (Year 11, White-British boy, 'typical').

Even though the respondent had not engaged in any 'atypical' roles, he recognised the juxtaposition of the young carer role. He also drew on projected futures to assess the long-term impact of the character's current context.

On the whole, the respondents themselves would advise that students should not miss school but where accounts focused on personal choices, family obligations came first. Quite often the respondents did not tell the teacher the reason for missing school rendering the role even more 'invisible'. The following excerpt is an example of one interviewee's experience of trying to

mediate her role between the home and school context. In the end she felt forced to make the role invisible in the school context:

> R: I don't think the teacher would understand cause it happen to me once, I had to bunk off school to go with mum cause' she had to see the doctor for her eyes. But when I came to the college and I explained, they didn't actually believe me…they won't believe me, they just said 'don't do that again, let your dad do it' or…
>
> I: So they don't understand it's your responsibility
>
> R: They don't understand, no, they don't understand unfortunately. But they should understand.
>
> I: Have you had any teachers who do understand?
>
> R: Yeah but they still mark me absent, as in, they won't understand. Even if I call them and said 'um, I'm' you know, 'I can't come today cause I have to help mum' or something, I just say I'm sick and instead, it makes more sense and they might believe me more when I say that. So they don't actually understand (Year 13, Black-African, Moroccan, girl, language broker).

This young woman's teachers are the ones who mediate her ideas around what is normal. Her obligations to her family are put at odds with valued expectations of what are acceptable 'work' practices. By marking her as absent when she acted as a broker the school was essentially devaluing and undermining her home context.

When the talk revolved around the 'other' in general terms, these participants told us that school should not be missed, in effect sharing dominant value representations within society. This perspective shifted for many when respondents were asked to comment on the specific experiences, either their own personal experiences or those of the vignette characters. Instead

interviewees felt compelled to grapple with the complexities of family obligations versus school obligations.

Implications of the research findings

This paper raises some important implications for attempting to understand the mediating role of development and context in the lives of those who undertake roles outside of school which are not within the scope of 'normal' childhood activities. Representations around development and the contexts in which young people are situated (including the significant others who occupy those contexts) both serve as mediators in their understandings of the activities that are undertaken

On the one hand when respondents drew on representations of 'otherness', engagement in atypical activities was seen to lead to the loss of 'normal' childhood. Those who did, as well as those who did not, engage in 'atypical' activities drew on societal representations of 'normal' as a backdrop to the activities of the vignette characters. In doing so, ideas around appropriate 'development' and the role of significant others in the characters' 'contexts' emerged. On the other hand when asked to comment on the specifics of the vignette characters many of the young people in the sample showed deep insight into the complexities of their lives. A second, more positive representation of 'atypical' childhoods was also drawn on in which engagement in atypical activities such as language brokering was seen as a source of pride and as providing additional skills and qualities to the child's development. The development of a theoretical framework that represents contemporary childhoods more satisfactorily will involve taking account of the more fluid and 'atypical' family situations that are increasingly common in contemporary society.

This study suggested that there is a need to develop ways of conceptualising some childhoods that attend to their being both within and outside dominant representations of normal childhood. Some of the young people in our research, particularly the language brokers, articulated a sense of their roles as both typical and atypical, typical in their own communities and atypical when interacting with the mainstream majority culture, usually at school. Further work is needed using other examples of children whose development takes place in atypical contexts within the family or community.

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