

## The Costs and Benefits of Child Labor

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Lancy (2015) provides an elegant and stimulating review of the plasticity and vulnerability of childhood in the anthropological and historical record. In this short comment, we ask how best can this account be extended and applied to the broader context of international development and current attempts to improve childhood experience. Specifically, what does (evolutionary) anthropology have to say about the rapid uptake of formal education in the developing world, and the frequent conceptualization of child labor as a violation of the 'right to childhood'? To answer these questions requires a rigorous consideration of the costs *and benefits* of children's work, acknowledging that payoffs may vary between parents and children, and that behaviors maximizing fitness are often distinct from those that maximize well-being.

Just as economic shocks in the form of subsistence failure, natural or political disasters can truncate behavioral childhood, economic development provides novel incentives to extend juvenile dependence and increase the allocation of children's time to skill acquisition through schooling. Such shifts are generally understood to improve well-being via increased opportunities for capital generation on the adult labor market. They are also unlikely to be fitness-maximizing in the evolutionary sense; in post-demographic transition societies we now pursue levels of education incompatible with high fertility (Goodman, Koupil, and Lawson 2012). Thus, school presents a novel dimension of childhood detrimental to fitness, but good for well-being and therefore to be celebrated, while children's work, as a barrier to education, presents a cause for concern and potential grounds for policy intervention.

This account of the benefits of education and dangers of child labor falters when faced with the reality of many predominantly rural nations in the contemporary developing world. Parents almost everywhere face considerable, well-intentioned, external pressure to send children to school, usually necessitating reductions in children's work, in an effort to meet internationally agreed targets for universal education. Yet, for many, the quality of available schooling is dismal, journeys to school long and hazardous, and adult labor opportunities remain primarily limited to subsistence agriculture. Furthermore, children's work offers its own, potentially more valuable, opportunities for skill-acquisition, and is often indispensable to the long-term maintenance of households. Schooling can be costly for both parent and child, and child labor can be beneficial.

In many regards these cautionary points follow clearly from the scholarship on childhood outlined by Lancy. Indeed, anthropologists have long argued that our high fertility rates coevolved with the recruitment of children as 'helpers at the nest' (Kramer 2011). Yet, as revealed by its absence in the target article, evolutionary anthropologists have been surprisingly muted on the topic of schooling as an axis of childhood of increasing importance (but see Bock 2002), reflecting a traditional disciplinary focus on questions most relevant to our evolutionary past, rather than our ever-changing present (Gibson and Lawson 2015).

What then can evolutionary anthropology offer? Most obviously, it reinforces awareness that children's work is often motivated by their best interests. Such awareness is not altogether absent in contemporary policy. Many differentiate and only seek to eliminate the '*worst forms of child labor*' (Edmonds 2007) - but such terminology unhelpfully stigmatizes children's work, effectively implying that all child labor is to some degree 'bad'. Furthermore, the extent to which children's work is viewed as damaging is often defined by its interference with school attendance; failing to acknowledge that schooling itself may be traded-off against alternative dimensions of well-being. More nuanced thinking can lead to alternative policies that minimize trade-offs between school and children's work most valuable to the household economy (e.g. scheduling school breaks during harvest time), and steer us away from interventions more likely to exacerbate rather than relieve poverty (e.g. fines for poor school attendance).

Lancy discusses many situations of child labor that intuitively appear detrimental for both well-being and fitness. However, even in seemingly extreme scenarios, e.g. child prostitution or work in commercial mines, we must recognize that such activities may represent a 'bearable choice' for parents and children with limited resources (Rende Taylor 2005). Child labor can only be deemed truly detrimental when alternative and more beneficial allocations of time and effort are (made) readily available. An evolutionary focus identifies at least two scenarios in which children may work against their own interests. First, when there is parent-offspring conflict, i.e. pay-offs for parents and children differ, so that parents tolerate costs to individual children in the face of net rewards to inclusive fitness. Second, when there is adaptive lag, including that brought about by rapid economic development, so that preferences guiding behavior are 'out of sync' with their anticipated consequences. Focusing future research on these areas promises a richer understanding of childhood that not only better reflects the realities of today's world, but also has the potential to critique and improve existing efforts to ensure the well-being of the people we study.

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