



Being a Child in Rural Pakistan

AZHER HAMEED QAMAR

*University of Management and Technology, Lahore,
Pakistan / Norwegian University of Science and
Technology, Trondheim, Norway*

Abstract

In the West, childhood is considered a right of children to be free from adult-world responsibilities. However, in a non-Western context, children with gradual progress in their biological age and physical development participate in the adult world according to their livelihood conditions and social context. They are perceived as competent to play that role and contribute to household and livelihood activities. In the rural context, children are seen as active social actors with agency and they are not separated from the adult world. Their participation is perceived as a process of socialization for becoming future adults. Hence, a rural child is an active and agentic 'being' but in connection with its social context it is a 'becoming' for its social upbringing and family well-being. After a review of some recent theoretical developments and case studies from various other parts of the world, this paper presents some findings from my own field research in Pakistan.

Keywords: Childhood, *Agentic* child, Sociology of childhood, Rural childhood, Competence, Childhood and work, Rural Pakistan.

Introduction

Every child has a childhood in his or her own cultural context that cannot be universalized because of the varied social contexts and individual differences of the social competence of the children (James et al. 1998; Jenks 1996; Punch 2002). The new sociology of childhood lays emphasis on studying children as social actors in their own social contexts (James 2007). Being a child is not a universal experience, but it is socially constructed, shaped by a range of social, cultural and historical dynamics (Franklin 1995; James and Prout 1990; Punch et al. 2012). Similar is the case with 'childhood'. The perception of childhood differs across cultures and

societies. In most societies there is a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood, and different norms, values and expectations are attached to them (Franklin 1995; Montgomery 2003). Before the emergence of the new sociology of childhood, academic experts in different disciplines viewed children as learners to be socialized into adults (Montgomery 2003). In a social world constructed by adults, children are identified as non-adults, and adults structure their lives as an object of socialization (Mayall 2012). Early socialization, in this respect, is a process to shape a child to become a functioning member of society. The notion of *agentive* child in the new sociology of childhood shifts the notion of innocence and powerlessness of a child to a child who is a social actor and a childhood co-constructed with adults (Sorin 2005).

Biological age and socioeconomic participation

As an age-specific conceptualization of children is important for studying childhood Halcrow and Tayles (2008:192) identify three types of ages: biological age (depending on the biological changes in the body), chronological age (the time since birth) and social age (the culturally constructed norms of appropriate behaviour). The numerical age description of a child, that may or may not be helpful, is widely used (James and James 2012). The idea of numerical age as a Western calculation method is used as a tool for development in many parts of the world whereas biological and social age are more meaningful, particularly in rural populations (Cleveland 1989). In this connection, legal (that is, as framed by law and policy), biological and social concepts that help conceptualize children as a group are significant in childhood studies. There are several other aspects of a biological description of a child that position it in society and describe its social status accordingly. A child's biological development also indicates the range of activities that he or she can participate in. This participation occurs in the form of imitative and observational learning, and parental reinforcement to socialize a child in its surroundings.

During my research in rural Punjab in Pakistan, I observed that several acts of a child's physical competence to participate in different social activities were related to the child's biological development. When children become capable of performing certain physical activities, these activities are taken as a process of learning cultural and vocational skills to enhance the continuity of the socialization process (Abebe 2007). For example, I saw young girls (9 to 13 years old) preparing vegetables for cooking, kneading flour to make bread, fetching water, dressing younger siblings, washing and cleaning. Similarly young boys were used for preparing animals feed, collecting firewood, shopping for household stuff and irrigating crops. All these domestic chores require a physical competency for them to be performed successfully. During early developmental stages children are curious to do different things. Hence, they experience new things when they are physically capable of doing them. Gradually these activities become a part of their daily routines and their participatory roles in domestic affairs. Understanding competence in a non-Western context is different from what it is in the West. In the West, childhood is considered a child's right to be free from adult-world responsibilities (Holloway and Valentine 2000). However in a non-Western context, children participate in

different activities according to their livelihood conditions and are influenced by social norms leading to a learning process to help a child become a member of society as required. There are several studies where children's physical competencies are valued for domestic activities and other unpaid labour (for example, see Abebe 2007; Chant and Jones 2003; Kesby et al. 2006; Priblisky 2001; Punch 2001). The biological development of the child is seen in connection with his or her social activities.

Similarly, in traditional societies such as Pakistan where gender boundaries are explicit, the biological growth of children places them as boys and girls, explicitly segregating them as two different social groups. In Pakistan, children at a very young age are seen as a boy or a girl but not segregated as two distinguished groups. With their biological development (generally with the onset of puberty) social and cultural distance between the two genders becomes clear. Religious and cultural concepts that restrict gender mixing are diligently observed. Hence, biological changes in the body are seen as a standard for measuring the physical strength of a child for performing different activities. They also indicate gender roles and structured boundaries. Participation in everyday life becomes segregated according to gender with the passage of time. While performing gendered domestic and leisure activities children learn how to 'do' gender. They learn to incorporate their ascribed gender identity into their prescribed gender roles. I had a chance to attend a doll's marriage where all the children were young girls, and also observe young boys playing in the street with a ball. As all these children were 9–13 years old I assume that my findings are limited to this age group. The connection between biological and social age is context-specific and it makes a difference in perceptions about children and childhood across cultures. A child's participation in domestic chores and other household activities is an invisible form of a child's work that is seen in connection with the socialization process. In agrarian societies and in rural settings, children may be seen less competent human-becoming, but they are active beings and social actors with their own agency who contribute in shaping rural living. According to Abebe (2007: 82):

The indigenous perspective on children's work maintains that children's work in families is a part of household production and a part of the ongoing process of vocational education and socialization. Children are expected to contribute while at the same time learning the necessary skills that will enable them to be active members of their community.

Bourdill on (2006) describes two positions regarding children's work. First, children should be cared for and should be exempted from work undertaken with a view to economic gain. However, they can enjoy work for learning or for their own benefit. Further, childhood should be seen as a response to different cultural and economic situations with reference to the children's age and gender. One such issue concerns children doing paid or unpaid work. Rural childhood, in this sense, gives a complex picture. During childhood, children's activities are meant to socialize them in rural life and ensure their participation in the economic and cultural contexts. With the passage of time, incorporating reinforcements and social learnings in connection with biological development, a child is considered competent enough to participate

in different activities. In this article I draw upon different research studies about child participation in rural living including the one that I conducted in rural Punjab, Pakistan in 2010. A review of these studies suggests that the prevalent numerical age description of a child does not represent global childhood. Instead, biological age establishes a close link with a child's socioeconomic participation. A primary objective of the article is to bring to light a non-Western approach to childhood in relation to child work in the rural context. The following studies are reviewed here:

1. Children's work in rural southern Ethiopia in *Trapped between disparate worlds? The livelihoods, socialization and school contexts of rural children in Ethiopia* by Tatek Abebe (2007).
2. Children's work in rural southern Bolivian *Household division of labour: Generation, gender, age, birth order and sibling composition* by Samantha Punch (2001).
3. Children's work in Nicosia, Cyprus in *An ethnography of children's participation in domestic work in Nicosia* by Loucas Antoniou (2007).
4. Children's work in Rural Punjab in *Challenges associated with primary education in rural Punjab, Pakistan* by the author (2014).

Children's work in rural southern Ethiopia

Children are often supposed to assimilate adult behaviour to become successful adults. In societies where children's participation in economic and social reproduction is prominent, they are recognized as competent and the approach which describes childhood as a process for becoming an adult becomes insufficient. Tatek Abebe (2007) did an empirical study on his field tour in the rural areas of Gedeo district in southern Ethiopia. He gives details about children's participation in the household economy and a shift of livelihood with a change in economic circumstances. Rural livelihood in Gedeo is primarily based on cash crops like coffee, *chat* (a mild stimulant leaf) and fruits. Agricultural activities are divided into four seasons and accordingly a farmer's work calendar and children's participation in school, work, play and other social activities is planned. There are certain intensive farming activities which involve children's participation in many ways. Coffee production tasks include picking coffee beans, washing, drying and sorting them, and then transporting them to the market. For all these activities children's participation is required. When the busy season comes, children have to opt for work instead of attending school though even in normal routines they are always engaged in work before school, after school, on weekends and during summer holidays. Boys are also engaged in marketing. Abebe interviewed children who were doing paid jobs in other towns to cope with poverty. Moreover, children work is more than just one activity; this also represents their participation in work as being a part of everyday life and also a cultural obligation. Even in paid jobs, children are paid less than adults but they take it as a contribution to the household economy.

Abebe highlights gender-based disparity, where girls are more involved in household activities and boys perform out-of-home jobs. Girls' jobs are considered as providing them essential skills that they will need in their future home-lives. They perform domestic chores like fetching water, sweeping, washing, cooking, taking care of young siblings and also shopping for their homes. Girls in this way help the elders and boy stopper form their income generating activities freely. Chant and Jones (2003) give a similar picture of West Africa, where girls share the burden of domestic labour thus participating in economic activities indirectly. However, boys do enjoy privileges when participating in school activities because girls are often not taken seriously when it comes to education and their domestic jobs also remain invisible contributors to economic activities.

Children's work in rural southern Bolivia

Samantha Punch (2001) carried out her ethnographic research in a rural community in Tarijain southern Bolivia. During repeated visits she explored the rural livelihood of the children and the kind of work that they were involved in with respect to gender and age. The families, mostly with some agricultural land and domestic animals, cultivated potatoes, maize and other fruits and vegetables. Major activities related to the household economy were traditional farming and taking care of animals. These activities included preparing land for sowing, sowing, fertilizing and harvesting. Animals too had to be taken care of for their food. As no modern facilities were available to do different jobs related to farming or domestic chores, labour requirements were high. Limited economic resources had increased the tasks to be undertaken in domestic labour. Food preparation was time consuming. Moreover, washing clothes at the river by hand, collecting firewood and fetching water were the main home activities that involved children as domestic workers because labour participation from all members of the family was needed.

According to Punch, gender norms are not so rigid in southern Bolivia as compared to Africa and India. In Bolivian rural households, some jobs are generation-specific and gender-neutral. Fetching and carrying jobs (fetching water and firewood for example) are often what children do before going to school and on their return as well. Children also combine school and work. Mostly agricultural work is considered a male task whereas domestic chores are taken to be female tasks. Children's responsibilities increase with age. In her study Punch gives a detailed view of children's participation from age 3 to 14+ years with respect to agricultural tasks, animal care and the domestic work done by them. Here I summarize the details given by Punch to give an idea of children's participation in rural livelihood (Punch 2001: 811–12). In ages 3–6 years, the children perform tasks like harvesting light vegetables, peeling maize stalks off, scaring birds away from the crops, feeding domestic birds (hens, ducks etc.), fetching water, collecting firewood and other small fetch and carry jobs. Between 6 and 9 years they do weeding, sowing, irrigation, looking after and feeding animals, milking goats and cows,

lighting fires and making tea, washing dishes, playing and looking after younger siblings, cleaning and sweeping tasks, simple food preparation and taking food to the farms. In ages 10–12 years they do transplanting, ploughing, harvesting and fertilizing, killing chicken and skinning a pig, tying the oxen to ploughs, making bread and the main food and washing clothes. In ages 13–14+ years they do ploughing in straight lines, getting stored maize up or down from the trees, clearing forest land, cutting plants and fencing fields, killing ago at and then bigger animals, moving cattle to other places, loading donkeys properly and going for shopping in the town.

Children move to difficult tasks with the passage of time and they acquire certain skills in that particular age. Some of the tasks require practice rather than physical strength. But even in tasks which involve physical strength, children take part because of their higher energy levels. Tasks which do not require special strengths or skills are considered children-specific tasks like fetching water and collecting firewood. Punch concludes that children's participation is gender and generation specific and age, birth order and sibling composition affect the allocation of work to the children. From an early age children are actively involved in different activities; with growing age and increasing responsibilities, their sense of autonomy also increases enabling them to learn more competencies for individual independence. Children in rural Bolivia move between child and adult jobs and their activities are mixed depending on a particular task and the strength and competency that a child has. Adults who have children are free from certain child-specific jobs and more over the children help in sharing the adults' work load with growing age and skills (Punch 2003).

Children's work in Nicosia, Cyprus

Loucas Antoniou (2007) carried out his ethnographic research in Nicosia, Cyprus. During his research for which he conducted several in-depth interviews, he explored children's perspectives on the kind of work that they were involved in as daily or occasional activities. These activities included:

- Nursing younger siblings, for example clothing, feeding, bathing and playing with them.
- Helping in the household economy like helping in preparing stuff to sell in the market.
- Washing and cleaning, for example mopping, dish washing and helping with the laundry.
- Cooking was done by older children.
- Picking and carrying different stuff.
- Gardening, such as tending to the vegetable garden.
- Providing help in the harvesting season.
- Cutting and collecting firewood.

Antoniou reported that children participated in domestic chores to help their parents. They knew that their parents needed their help when they were either busy in economic activities or not

feeling well. ‘I knew that she would be tired, have headaches, and I was doing all the stuff’, a 12-year-old girl said (2007:12). On the other hand children also understood that they had to learn to do things. Their parents were socializing their lives through participation in domestic activities. They were learning how to care for other members in the family.

‘My mother says “You have to do some chores, not only Mick (my brother)” and we begin fighting until she forces me to do it, not really forces me, you know, and I tell myself “ok, let’s go and do it,” ’said a 10-year-old boy (2007:11).

Antoniou found children doing work either as their daily routine or as occasional tasks. Some children were responsible for cleaning their own rooms. Some children told him about doing certain domestic chores only when their parents were away or not feeling well. For example, a girl, Tina, told him about how she took care of her baby sister when she was sick. Tina helped her mother in feeding, clothing, bathing and taking care of her younger sister. Her mother also expected her to play with her and be with her so that she could do other tasks. Children of working parents expressed a sense of understanding and considered doing household activities as supportive tasks. Children also talked about how they were used to shifting different tasks between older and younger siblings according to their capacity to work or available time.

Children's work in rural Punjab, Pakistan

I did two studies in rural Punjab, the first about primary education in its informal and formal perspectives (2009–10) and the second about early child care belief practices (2010–14). During my studies I spent eight months in rural Punjab and collected data through participant observations, unstructured interviews and questionnaires. I investigated the status of children in Punjabi families, everyday lives of young children and their early childhood with respect to the belief system and social practices. The study I conducted in 2010 was particularly focused on children’s out-of-school activities.

Pakistan is an agricultural country and the province of Punjab has over 60 per cent of the population and the main agricultural land. Cotton, sugarcane and wheat are the main cash crops in this area. Three key aspects of Punjabi rural society are an extended family system with mutually dependent relations, traditional social life and gendered socialization (Qamar 2014). A rural Punjabi Muslim family is an interdependent extended family with gendered socialization and conservative religious and cultural traditions. Farmers, whether they have some land of their own or they hire it for farming always engage their children in farming and in domestic activities. A newborn ‘child’ on the one hand confirms a married mother’s fertility and a divine provision to bear children, and on the other hand it is a ‘human becoming’ born with an inherited religious identity with its biological belonging to Muslim parents. Later, these birth rituals incorporate this inherited identity into a socially established religious identity. Hence, a ‘child’ is seen as a blessing of God. It is pure and innocent and needs to be brought up as a Muslim boy or a Muslim girl. Here the concept of the child as a ‘Muslim human becoming’ endorses the desired

parenting responsibilities. Similarly Punjabis see a child as ‘boy’ or a ‘girl’ at the time of birth. Its sexual identification is associated with its gendered identity and again birth ceremonies and rituals communicate these gendered identities. Naming and male circumcision are two prominent birth rituals that describe these gendered and religious identities. With this early conception of ascribing religious and gender identity, Punjabi Muslims construct the basis of early childhood and a traditional social learning approach is followed to socialize a ‘human becoming’ into a desired ‘human being’.

Once the children come out of early childhood, although they keep their gendered and religious identities intact, they tend to actively participate in the adult world. With their biological upbringing and body growth they are perceived to offer their help as younger family members in several domestic and supporting economic activities. During my research in 2010, I found at least 30 domestic activities that 6 to 12 year old children were performing besides their school activities. These activities ranged from taking care of younger siblings to participating in the home economy. Nevertheless, these activities were not independent of their gendered identities. All children participated in different domestic activities before and after school and spent a significant amount of time in their daily lives in these activities. I met a 10-year-old school boy who attended to his father’s grocery shop in the village when his father went to the city for necessary shopping. Similarly, some young girls helped in households when their mothers were busy in other economic activities. While talking to these children I realized that they were well aware of the importance of their participation in domestic chores; as the child attending his father’s shop said, ‘When father goes to buy things for the shop, I spent my time in the shop dealing with every day customers. In this way my father does not need to close it for the whole day.’ Discussions with parents revealed that they considered school children capable of participating in domestic chores. ‘They are not too young that they cannot do certain things. Doing is learning,’ a father commented on children’s participation in domestic activities.

Children go to school and their parents want to get them educated, though they don’t have any idea why they actually need education, but to them it is enough that their children can read, write and calculate. A child’s morning starts quite early and he/she goes to the nearby mosque to learn to read the holy *Quran*. On their way back some children (boys) also go to the fields to collect feed for the animals (if the stock at home is over). In homes, girls sweep floors and help their mothers in making breakfast. After breakfast, children go to school. Usually each home has a hand-pump for drinking water; therefore the girls go to nearby canal or tube-well only when they need to wash clothes. After returning home, girls get busy in cooking and in other domestic chores while the boys feed the animals and often in the afternoon take them to a nearby pond. Boys who are relatively older (above 14 years approximately) go to the fields to help their elders in irrigation and other farming activities. As the canal system is the main source for irrigation, each farmer gets a periodical turn to irrigate his land. Young boys have to go for irrigation sometimes at midnight for their turn. Young boys also have to go to town to buy necessary things for farming (some tools, fertilizers, seeds etc.). Young girls at home usually learn embroidery and do it as a paid job. Sewing and knitting are also undertaken for earning

money. There is no trend to get girls educated beyond an early stage but they are supposed to learn home-economics (sewing, embroidery, cooking etc.). If a family has cows and buffalos, young girls or women in the house milk the mandal so make butter. But if the animals are kept somewhere else (in farms or other places specified for animals) boys usually go there to milk them. Deep cultural roots also influence decision-making for children. Girls, even if they get high education (provided that they get some easy opportunities, like distance education or a college nearby) are not supposed to do jobs. In case a job is needed for some economical purposes a girl is allowed to do a teaching job in the same school or in a girls' school in a nearby village. Boys can go far to the city for higher studies, if their parents can afford it economically because young boys play a vital role in the household cultural economy when they are at home. Some parents do manage this by engaging boys only in the harvesting season and freeing them at other times for studying.

Thus, early childhood does not depend on chronological age, and children enter into participating childhood according to their biological development. Conceptualizing a rural Punjabi Muslim child in the 'being-becoming' debate we see a dominating traditional perspective during early childhood, that later seems to slightly shift towards the new sociology of childhood with certain cultural limitations. After leaving early childhood, rural Punjabi Muslim children participate as *agentic* and competent children; however, their participation is limited and dedicated to the best interests of the family and the community. They are active social actors, yet not independent of adults' perspectives and the socially constructed world. Hence, their meaning-making of the world that they participate in is valued unless it comes into conflict with collective interests and values.

Discussion

The concept of an '*agentic* child' (Sorin 2005) challenges the notion of a child dependent on adults because of its vulnerability and powerlessness, and considers children as social actors and childhood as a co-construct with adults (Corsaro 2010; James et al. 1998). Viewing children as social actors and childhood as a social construct emphasizes children's agency. Children are not universal natural beings but are rather constructed socially depending on the context within which they are (James 2007). This argument focuses on the context-specific description of childhood. The ways in which a society conceptualizes a child greatly influences the nature of childhood in that society. The new sociology of childhood insists on understanding a child in his or her social, cultural, economic and political context. It lays emphasis on children as social actors who are beings in their own right and thus offers a shift in conceptualizing children from being passive human-becoming to active human beings (James 2007). The dichotomy of seeing children as 'being' and 'becoming' in the sociology of childhood and considering them as 'beings' in the new sociology of childhood is a formulation which has been contested in recent debates (Prout 2005). The new sociology of childhood contrasts with the traditional perspective

on a child as incompetent, weak, incapable and passive who cannot contribute actively unless he or she becomes capable to act. The new sociology of childhood also conceptualizes a child as independent of adult perspectives and as an active meaning-maker whose views should be valued as much as an adult's views.

Further the new sociology of childhood conceptualizes children as competent social actors and *agentic* children, and gives serious consideration to their voices (Sorin 2005). Considering a child as a 'whole' and 'complete' human being does not mean that a child is indistinguishable from adults, but that he or she should have the same values as adults (Nilsen 1990). Moreover, competency cannot be seen in terms of age, and thus children cannot be differentiated on the bases of childhood and adulthood in their numeric age definitions. Social, psychological and physical competencies that progress with the passage of time are perceived differently in different socio-cultural contexts. A child with its biological development enters from a passive early childhood to an active childhood. He or she contributes in domestic life with active participation and also remains an object of socialization. 'Socialization occurs while going through social interaction in different settings. These settings are formally or informally institutionalized to make the learning happen. Rural livelihood is a combination of adopted and adapted efforts that are made to cope with poverty and crisis' (Qamar 2014:62). A child's participation though valued in rural living remains invisible in its social learning perspective. Children offer their services in several activities as stated in the studies mentioned above and hence they cannot be perceived as incompetent. They are dependable for their valuable support. A child's participation in interdependent societies places his or her status as a 'being' and a 'becoming' simultaneously. In this sense rural childhood should be observed in its social context where Western theoretical constructs are not necessarily applicable. There is a need to understand the social fibre of rural societies where every member of a family is connected to each other for the family's well-being. Hence none of the members are independent of the best interests of the family.

Conclusion

The conceptualization of children as weak, vulnerable and incompetent separates their childhood from real adult life, and lets adults practice an authoritative role to discipline and protect children. A shift offered by the new sociology of childhood liberates children from the conceptualization of incompetency and vulnerability, views them as competent social actors and places them as 'beings' in their own right. An adult's role is no more authoritative in deciding a child's needs, and the whole process of childhood is seen in the perspective of adult-child negotiations. However, in the rural context this theoretical stance does not best fit even if the children are seen as active social actors with agency. Children are not separated from the adult world while they are supposed to be future adults. As adults they are seen as a product of the socialization process that occurs as soon as a child participates in the adult world. There is a need to understand children as 'beings' in their own right but in connection with their existence as a 'becoming' for their social upbringing and family well-being. The theoretical status of a

rural child in the global South in this connection is particularly interesting. During early childhood they are seen as 'becoming' following the traditional perspective of children and childhood, but as they enter into childhood with sufficient physical growth and biological development, they are perceived as competent social actors and participants in domestic activities. Children's participation in rural livelihood is vital in an agricultural economy with increasing pressure on rural households. In countries which are mainly based on agricultural economies, the rural areas are of much significance due to their ability to produce cash crops. Children's participation in domestic chores and the family economy there is significant. This perception, however, does not best fit in the new sociology of childhood and adults continue to play their role in prescribing childhood for desired adulthood. Nevertheless, the new sociology of childhood has opened a valuable discussion about children and childhood with critical and analytical views arising from diverse global cultures.

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