Understanding child labor depends on both the definition of childhood and social attitudes toward the appropriateness of children working. Each concept varies greatly between human societies, within any one society, and changes across historical periods. In some societies, childhood ends as soon as sexual maturity is reached. Hence, no working person past that point would be a child laborer, even if they were quite young. In some societies, persons defined as children are expected to work. Without thoughtful consideration of these fundamental parameters, the relatively recent rise (in historical terms) of antagonism toward child labor cannot be understood. A variety of historical studies illuminate the historical record (Nardinelli, 1990; Humphries & Horrell, 1995; Tuttle, 1998, 1999; Cunningham, 2000; Hindman, 2002; Zelizer, 1994), and Basu (1999) provides a useful survey of economic research on contemporary child labor.

In lay as well as scholarly usage, child labor has come to mean an illegitimate exploitation of persons who, because they are children, should not work. Such an interpretation would be utterly nonsensical to 18th century Puritans, and remains nonsensical to many adults and children in agricultural societies in the developing world. Even in the midst of the anti-child labor movement in the United States in the early 20th century, reformers made very few criticisms of the often laborious and dangerous work of children on family farms. The negative view of child labor as inappropriate has developed within rapidly industrializing economies, when, ironically, the actual incidence of children as workers declines from the high levels in agricultural economies. Thus, the common conceit that industrialization led to the abuse of children is the opposite of what occurred: approval of children as workers was a pre-industrial assumption, one common to the 19th century United States and to contemporary developing societies. The rise of industrialization led to declines in the use of child labor, to strident criticisms of it, and, eventually, to its abandonment.
Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Scholars in work-family studies ought to contemplate child labor, but not because children are gainfully employed in advanced economies. Paid child labor in the United States is rare and that which does occur can be found among older children, as laws often permit. Farm work remains one area in which children still work, and again under dangerous conditions (Tucker, 2000). Even at the height of child labor controversy in the United States, the proportion of very young children gainfully employed was surprisingly small, and among girls, practically nil. In 1910, about 16% of boys 10 to 13 were gainfully employed, although this figure underestimates those who labored on family farms (for all gainful worker estimates see Gratton & Moen, 2004). Among girls, the rate was about 8%. Moreover these figures are starkly inflated by a hidden fact in American child labor: despite attention by reformers to immigrants who supposedly exploited their children, it was very young African American boys and girls who labored most. This stands in stark contrast to other ethnic groups, where gainful employment among young children was quite low. For example, only 1% of Irish-origin girls aged 10-13 were gainfully employed in 1910. For boys and girls aged 14-17, rates were much higher, reaching 56% and 25%, but defining persons of this age as children, or, if defined as children, as inappropriately working, would be anachronistic (Gratton & Moen, 2004). Most state laws passed during the next 20 years, the period when state-based child labor legislation became widespread, set 14 as the legal age to work.

In sum, apart from the concerns of its contemporary application in developing countries, child labor is rare in the United States and other developed societies. As we discuss below, a historical perspective on child labor, can open new considerations useful to thinking about children. One important observation is that children do continue to work, perhaps even more rigorously than in the past. They do so not in the factory, but in the classroom.

State of the Body of Knowledge

The moral opposition of scholars to “child labor” tends to obscure the great affinity between work tasks and educational tasks, and thus to undermine constructive research on how families demand contributions from all members. The strikingly negative attitude of many children toward school in the early 20th century provides a better guide to researchers on the similarities of adult demands on children’s time (Macleod, 1998; Nasaw, 1985). A boy working in a Chicago factory told an interviewer that he didn’t like school because:

They hits ye if ye don’t learn, and they hits ye if ye whisper, and they hits ye if ye have string in yer pocket, and they hits ye if yer seat squeaks, and they hits ye if ye scrape yer feet, and they hits ye if ye don’t stan’ up in time, and they hits ye if yer late, and they hits
It is clear both from the present and the past that children are part of a family enterprise. In most agricultural societies, parents consider children to be not only useful as workers, but as assets for future protection in old age (Gratton & Rotondo, 1991; Gratton, 1996). Anthropological scholarship demonstrates almost without exception that children in preindustrial societies were thought of as workers, an attitude that extends to contemporary developing countries (Cain, 1983; Friedlander, Okun & Segal, 1999; Kertzer & Fricke, 1997; Caldwell, 1982; for a contrary view of how resources flowed, see Lee, 2000). In most developed, industrial societies, parents consider children to be useful as students and insist that they prepare themselves in schools for independent life. Schools take over the enormous task of supervision for much of the day and, while children are unlikely to directly finance retirement for parents, as a collective, a generation, they are essential to sustaining modern social security systems.

The transition away from employment in the labor force toward employment as students occurs especially as societies industrialize. It is likely that the rate of child labor begins to fall with the rise of industrialization (Gratton & Moen, 2004), and it surely falls as industrial systems become more advanced. With certain notorious exceptions, children are not efficient workers, neither particularly strong nor skilled, and they demand very high levels of supervision, as parents know. Nonetheless, in the early stages of industrialization an attitude toward child labor as perfectly appropriate is carried over from the previous, agricultural, family farm traditions. Hence, children can be found at work, particularly in niches where their inefficiencies are less damaging (migrant farm work, service, mining, textiles, and crude food processing). Moreover, poorer parents, especially those coming from rural economies where child work was a given, see children at work as a natural way to increase family income and prosper. In the early twentieth century United States, measures of relative poverty, or the absence of a male head of household, invariably increased the probability that a child would work (Gratton & Moen, 2004). These hardworking children do not help us understand the general trend away from child labor, nor do they represent the bulk of children workers on family farms, but they became in the United States and other countries the focus of child labor reform movements.

What prompted the protest was the current application of an ancient practice, not an increase in the proportion of children working. Much of the perception that industrialization increased the use of child labor, particularly in the United States, came about precisely because child labor was a common and expected practice in pre-industrial and agricultural economies. Separating the home and place of work through industrialization, did not make child labor, particularly for pay, more widespread, but it did make it more apparent (Hareven, 1982). Compounding the problem empirically was the tendency for census enumerators to be more likely to record a child working for someone else as having a gainful occupation.
A child working on the family farm was less likely to have an occupation recorded in the census, because such work was considered a traditional or normal part of life and not an occupation. In more urban settings, a child working in a family business or a girl doing housework were also likely to be ignored as gainful workers by the enumerator.

The movement against child labor in the United States failed to achieve its principal goal of a national child labor law. By 1915, however, state legislation outlawed the most abusive form of child labor, especially among children younger than 14, and states also required school attendance to higher ages. It is debatable that these laws had much effect on the already low level of exploitation of children, and similar legislation has had dubious consequences in contemporary societies (Moehling, 1999; Walters & Briggs, 1993). The primary causes of decline in use in the United States and elsewhere were that more efficient systems of production required adult workers and that rising average income for male breadwinners made it less likely that families needed income from children to do well. Nonetheless, Americans in general, and immigrants in particular, very quickly adopted the negative views that reformers had about child labor. These views encouraged parents to set their children to schoolwork and may have contributed to the virtual abandonment of paid work for children. Contemporary studies show that social opprobrium has some effect in persuading parents not to send children into the labor force.

Implications for Research and Practice

The history of children as workers suggests that practitioners of work/family studies could profit by contemplating the continuity, rather than the dissimilarity, between past forms of work and contemporary applications. In both cases, children fulfill the desires of adults that they contribute to the family enterprise. Adults in agricultural economies see children as useful workers, and they may continue to think so if they migrate to an urban, industrialized setting. Opportunities for children to work are lower there, however, and there arises considerable pressure to not use children in this way. Moreover, the opportunity to place them under the supervision of other adults in schools becomes increasingly attractive, both for their futures and those of their families. As adult earnings rise during industrialization, the relative contribution of child earnings to household income diminishes, as does the urgent desire to send them off to work. Parents increasingly can indulge their preferences for altruistic behavior towards their children and send them off to school to improve their “quality” (Becker, 1991). Children become a consumption good rather than a source of income. Therefore, improving adult earnings is a vital path to eliminating the worst forms of child labor in developing nations today (Basu, 1999). Higher satisfaction for adults comes from their children doing well and, at the same time, education becomes a prerequisite for the ability to earn any meaningful level of income. Children are thus enjoined to work hard at school.
References


Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. (More about the Matrix ...).

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry's topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.
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<thead>
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**Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains**
About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network
Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.
Process

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu

Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:
1. Our use of the word "family" refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term "work-family" to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves. Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term "work-family" (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word "family" continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word "family" to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver/caretaker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.

Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:
1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

**Work-Family Experiences:** The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

**Antecedents:** Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
- Workplace Antecedents
- Community Antecedents
- Societal Antecedents

**Covariates:** The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see
Column C in Table 1).

- Individual Covariates
- Family Covariates
- Workplace Covariates
- Community Covariates
- Societal Covariates

**Decisions and Responses:** The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

- Individual Decision and Responses
- Family Decisions and Responses
- Workplace Decisions and Responses
- Community Decisions and Responses
- Public Sector Decisions and Responses

**Outcomes & Impacts:** The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

- Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
- Outcomes & Impacts on Families
- Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
- Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
- Outcomes & Impacts on Society

**Theoretical Foundations:** The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

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