



AFRONTAMIENTO PSICOLOGICO EN EL SIGLO XXI

## WHAT DO YOUNG ITALIANS THINK OF CHILD WORK?

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### ABSTRACT

The research's general aim is to understand Italian youngsters' perceptions, and attitudes towards child work.

This research wants to verify the following hypotheses:

1. Youngsters' mental representation of child work is mainly negative;
2. Youngsters distinguish between child work and exploitation;
3. Youngsters have a positive attitude towards carrying out light forms of safeguarded work;
4. Youngsters think they are able to decide autonomously and independently whether to work or not.

A questionnaire was administered to a group of 1.230 Italian high school students, ranging from 13 to 20 years-old. Results confirmed the hypotheses. The data showed that youngsters have a negative attitude towards child work, since it can jeopardize school results, the youngsters' social life, and the development of a positive adult life.

However, light work is accepted and positively considered, since youngsters see it as an opportunity to become more independent, to have fun and to socialize, provided that the conditions under which this experience is done can guarantee the youngsters' respect and dignity.

Finally, adolescents recognize themselves to be able to decide autonomously about the opportunity and the feasibility of doing a light work.

**Keywords:** child work; attitudes towards child work; youngsters' attitudes.

### INTRODUCTION

International public opinion pays the utmost attention to the child work issue and this is a matter of interest for politicians, trade unionists, and activists of non-governmental organizations for human rights defence. Everybody fully agrees that children under the age of 14 should not have a full time employment or do a job which is unfit for their age (ILO, 2010).



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This information is included within the ILO Convention n. 138 approved in 1973 about the minimum working age; it refers to all the economic sectors where minors operate, independently from the fact that in doing their job they get a pay or not.

Much more discussed is the issue of adolescents' work. The longstanding abolitionist approach is now questioned by those who underline that a work experience, if properly monitored and protected, might offer an opportunity of work and economic socialization (Bourdillon et al., 2010). Surprisingly, there are very few researches aimed at understanding the adolescents' view about this matter (Benevene, 2008). Inquiring into this aspect is important also because when the minor workers from developing countries have been asked about this issue, they have often expressed a more positive attitude about working: for example, they have stated the effectiveness of associating studying and working activities and they have recognized an important formative and moral value to paid jobs (Invernizzi, 2005). On the contrary, the politics adopted so far generally opt for the abolition of any kind of child work, also the forms of economic activities performed by adolescents (Leonard, 2004). If we know little about the opinions, perceptions and attitudes of minors living in the developing countries, we know even less about the view of youngsters living in industrialized countries, despite the fact that almost no country is free from child work, as the data spread by the International Labour Office shows (Dorman, 2001). Understanding the youngsters' points of view might integrate the corpus of knowledge already developed on minors' work, helping to find a better, more effective way to address this phenomenon.

## 1. METHOD

### 1.1 Aim and objectives

The research's general aim is to point out the youngsters' perceptions and attitudes about the child work issue.

We decided to be more precise about some questions specifying that the kind of child work we were referring to was the one done by adolescents; this because the advisability for minors aged 14-17 to do an economic activity is still highly discussed; this does not happen about work involving children under the age of 14; on this issue, indeed, there is a general agreement about its abolition (Unicef, 2011).

More specifically the research aimed at a closer observation of:

- the attitudes towards child work;
- the wish and the possibility to combine study and light work;
- child work mental representation and connotations;
- the possible correlation between a child work negative view and mental representations linked to underdevelopment and poverty ;
- the representation of adolescence as a growth phase and not only as a weakness one.

### 1.2. Hypotheses

*Hypothesis 1: Youngsters' mental representation of child work is mainly negative*

Mental representation of child work among youngsters is quite negative, linked to the images of poverty, lack of education, economic exploitation and constraint on the young. Such a mental representation is to be considered as related to a negative attitude to child work (Liebel, 2007; Ungar, 2008).

*Hypothesis 2: Youngsters distinguish between child work and child exploitation*

Youngsters distinguish between child work in developing countries, closely related to exploitation and detrimental to children's physical, psychological and moral growth and light forms of work



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done by children in industrialized countries. They consider necessary to adopt different measures according to different cultural, economic and social contexts (Hobbs, et al., 2007).

*Hypothesis 3: Doing light forms of safeguarded work is positively considered by youngsters*

Youngsters consider child work acceptable provided that certain conditions are respected: for example, limited economic activities as for time and respect of the rules, established by law, which regulate and protect child work (Libòrio & Ungar, 2010).

*Hypothesis 4: Youngsters think they are able to consider and decide autonomously and independently whether to work or not*

Most scientific literature and researches about child work carried out in the psychological and sociological field tend to show working children as people compelled to work against their will and essentially suffering their families' choices or the adults' ones. Youngsters, actually, think that if in the position to choose autonomously and independently, they can discern the possibilities they are offered and single out the most suitable choice in consideration of their individual needs (Monahan et al., 2011)

### 1.3 The questionnaire

A questionnaire containing 53 statements was given to participants. The interviewees were asked to express their agreement/disagreement degree using a 7 steps Likert scale (from 1 = I fully agree to 7 = I fully disagree)

The questionnaire aimed at gathering information on each of the following areas:

- Representation of adolescents as people able to judge autonomously and to self-determination versus a representation characterized by weakness and essentially limited autonomy;
- Elements which contribute to the creation of positive or negative attitudes towards child work;
- Adolescents' wish/receptiveness to do light work;
- Mental representation of child work;
- Child work's positive and negative consequences;
- Attitudes towards child work in the show business (television programmes, films, advertising and so on).

The questionnaire also included a part gathering socio-demographic data. Informed consent to take part in the survey was asked for all youngsters under age 18 to their parents/tutors, through the school Headmaster. Assurance of confidentiality of survey data was given to all participants and their parents/tutors.

### 1.4 Participants

The participants are 1230 students from Italian upper secondary schools. 500 were male (40.7%), and 730 were female (59.3%). The 50.9% (N=627) attended a grammar school (liceo classico, liceo scientifico), the 49.1% (N=603) attended a vocational schools (istituto tecnico e professionale). The participants' age ranked between 13 and 20 (Mean: 16.33).

## 2. THE RESULTS

The analysis of the Principal Components carried out with an Oblimin rotation highlighted the existence of 7 factors, which explained the 39.6% of the total variance, as shown in table 1.

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Table 1. Extracted factors, Eigenvalue and Variance explained

	Factor	Eigen value	% Variance explained
1	Negative connotations of work done by adolescents	8.85	16.7
2	Acceptability of work done by adolescents in the show business	4.01	7.56
3	Information and representation of work done by adolescents	2.04	3.85
4	Acceptability of light work done by adolescents	1.75	3.30
5	Adolescents' ability to consider and judge autonomously	1.64	3.10
6	Difference between child work in developing and industrialized countries	1.38	2.61
7	and consequent difference in the approaches to adopt Positive aspects and acceptability conditions of work done by adolescents	1.32	2.49

The extracted values did not prove to be significantly correlated (see Table 2)

Table 2. Factors correlation matrix

Factor	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	1.000	-.012	.037	-.234	-.133	-.160	-.235
2	-.012	1.000	.077	.047	.110	-.179	.233
3	.037	.077	1.000	.009	.016	-.175	.099
4	-.234	.047	.009	1.000	.132	-.001	.196
5	-.133	.110	.016	.132	1.000	-.018	.127
6	-.160	-.179	-.175	-.001	-.018	1.000	-.107
7	-.235	.233	.099	.196	.127	-.107	1.000

The first factor called "negative connotation of work done by adolescents" includes 17 items and explains 16% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 885), as shown in table 3.

This factor highlights a highly negative representation of this phenomenon: it gathers, indeed, only items which refer to the problematic aspects of work done by adolescents and those which state the inopportunity of doing a work for adolescents.

Child work is connected to poverty, economic exploitation and school failure.

It's a very close image to the one offered by the media about children living in developing countries.

Child work seems to be mainly perceived as a critic factor for the present and the future of children because it compromises their socialization, possibility to have fun and study, to cultivate friendship and interests. Even more, the results would seem to suggest that work risks compromising the formation of a sense of self because it is connected to the embarrassment felt in front of school-mates and friends.

Moreover, working minors are perceived as victims of family abandonment and adults' constraint. They are perceived as passive people who suffer working activities as a result of school refusal.

The second factor called "acceptability of work done by adolescents within the show business" includes 5 items and explains 7.56% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 4.01) (see table 4).

This factor shows a first, important distinction between the negative representation of work done by adolescents, highlighted by the first factor, and a positive work representation when done within the show business. When the show business is taken into consideration, indeed, adolescents' work is considered acceptable because it is funny and because it is connected to getting fame, popularity and money. Doing a professional activity in this field would seem linked to one's self-esteem promotion because of the admiration aroused in his/her friends.





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Table 3. Factor 1: Negative connotation of work done by adolescents

Item	Factor loading
1 A working adolescent can't cultivate friendship even though s/he does light work	.712
2 Behind a working adolescent there is always family abandonment or indifference	.711
3 A working adolescent is a boy/girl refused by school	.675
4 A working adolescent is a synonym of poverty	.668
5 A working adolescent feels embarrassed in front of his schoolmates	.648
6 A working adolescent can't expand his interests	.633
7 If an adolescent wasn't forced to, s/he wouldn't work	.626
8 Working adolescents are always exploited even though they do light work	.621
9 To be an adolescent working implies giving up fun	.606
10 Adolescent girls should never do any sort of work, even the light ones	.595
11 Adolescents, both boys and girls, should never do any sort of work, even the light ones	.591
12 Adolescents' work is connected to a wicked functioning of the work market	.569
13 It's more difficult for a girl to combine working and studying activities	.545
14 There are no jobs which allow an adolescent to combine working and studying activities	.519
15 A working adolescent runs the risk of compromising his/her future even though s/he does light work	.495
16 It isn't up to students to decide whether to work or not	.489
17 An adolescent who did a work, even a light one, would feel embarrassed in front of his friends	.465

Table 4. Factor 2: Acceptability of work done by adolescents in the show business

Item	Factor loading
1 I envy adolescents working in the show business	.693
2 I consider acceptable for an adolescent to work in the show business	.682
3 A job offering fame, popularity and money can be considered acceptable for an adolescent	.674
4 Adolescents working in television or cinema productions have a great fun	.643
5 Adolescents working in television productions are admired by their friends	.624

The third factor called "child work information and representation" includes 5 items and explains 3.85% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 3.85%) (see table 5).

This factor highlights that the child work issue is considered relevant and connected to the market and production internationalisation.

With regard to child work representation, it is noteworthy that multinationals are wrongly considered as the main responsible for juvenile exploitation. This in the light of the datum notified by Unicef according to which only the 5% of juvenile manpower is used in the export goods production (Unicef, 1997). Moreover, the statement according to which child work developed because of globalization is wrong too; at most, it is true that only beginning from the Industrial Revolution child work has become object of social stigmatization and abolitionist campaigns, as shown by the few studies broaching the child work issue from a historical point of view (Cunningham, 1995).

It is possible to suppose that this child work representation is linked to the ways the media deals with this issue often showing it as a phenomenon present in developing countries as a consequence of poverty.

42% of the interviewees declare to "fully agree" or "almost fully agree" about the statement according to which "the information I have about child work mainly derives from newspapers and television". If to these answers we sum the ones of those who "really agree" and "sufficiently agree", the percentage increases to 79.5%.

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Table 5. Factor 3: Child work information and representation

Item	Factor loading
1 I think that the child work issue is a matter of primary importance	.645
2 Multinationals are the main responsible of child work exploitation	.560
3 Child work is a phenomenon which developed with globalization	.478
4 The information I have about child work mainly derive from newspapers and television	.477
5 Adolescents must be protected by adults	.410

The fourth factor called “acceptability of light work done by adolescents” includes 4 items and explains 3.30% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 1.75) (see table 6). This factor once more highlights that not all work done by adolescents is negatively considered. Not only work in the show business but also light work is accepted and positively considered.

The respect for the law is one of the conditions connected to light work acceptability, as it is a assurance that the way this experience is carried out guarantees the adolescent’s respect and dignity.

It’s important to notice that the interviewees show a greater receptiveness when we do not refer to work in general but to economic activities which can be defined as “light work”. “Light work” seems to have an educational function and to be gratifying, if properly protected by law, since it is considered an opportunity to have fun and to enhance one’s self-esteem.

Table 6. Factor 4: Acceptability of light work done by adolescents

Item	Factor loading
1 Doing a form of light work can be a formative opportunity for an adolescent	.686
2 Doing a form of light work can be an opportunity to have fun for an adolescent	.562
3 An adolescent doing a work, even a light one, acquires a greater self-esteem sense	.549
4 It’s fair to let adolescents work if their working conditions are properly safeguarded by law	.536

The fifth factor called “adolescents’ ability to consider and judge autonomously” includes 7 items and explains 3.10% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 1.64) (see table 7).

This factor highlights that the interviewees recognize adolescents as able to express critical judgements and considerations about the choices concerning themselves, even the one about whether to work or not. So, despite child work is also associated to such aspects as adults’ constraints, actually it doesn’t always absorb all of the adolescents’ decision-making faculty and autonomy. They are considered able to face their difficulties, recognize and express their needs and express critically about given cultural models.

With regard to this, it is important to notice that the 76% of the interviewees “fully agree”, “almost fully agree”, “really agree”, “sufficiently agree” to the statement according to which “adolescents should decide by themselves whether to work or study or combine working and studying activities”.

Table 7. Factor 5: Adolescents’ ability to consider and judge autonomously

Item	Factor loading
1 Adolescents can understand what they need	.636
2 Adolescent can express their needs	.590
3 Adolescents can be critical towards given cultural models	.517
4 Adolescents should decide by themselves whether to study or work or combine studying and working activities	.422
5 Adolescents have a limited judgement autonomy	-.418
6 Adolescents can’t overcome difficulties by themselves	-.412
7 I think I am sufficiently informed about the child work issue	.315



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The sixth factor called “Difference between child work in developing and industrialized countries and consequent difference in the approaches to adopt” includes 4 items and explains 2.61% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 1.38) (see table 8).

This factor highlights that the interviewees connect child work to developing countries, whereas in the economically developed countries, such as Italy, this phenomenon is perceived as extremely reduced.

The interviewees agree about the statement according to which the existing differences between economically advanced and developing countries seem to justify different intervention measures.

Table 8. Factor 6: Difference between child work in developing and industrialized countries and consequent difference in the approaches to adopt

Item	Factor loading
1 In industrialized countries working adolescents have almost completely disappeared	.705
2 I think child work involves a reduced number of children in Italy	.698
3 It's impossible to deal with the child work issue at the same way in developing and industrialized countries	.438
4 Thinking about a working adolescent reminds me developing countries	.364

The seventh factor called “positive aspects and acceptability conditions of work done by adolescents” includes 10 items and explains 24% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 1.32) (see table 9).

Among the positive aspects: the possibility of making new friends, gaining a greater economic independence and a sense of responsibility, and the acknowledgement of a positive role within the family.

Among the acceptability conditions: the importance of helping the family economically, the compatibility with study, the satisfaction for the activity done, the possibility of integrating study with a connected practical activity, and the fair remuneration.

Table 9. Factor 7: Positive aspects and acceptability conditions of work done by adolescents

Item	Factor loading
1 It's fair for an adolescent to work to help his/her family economically	.621
2 A working adolescent has further opportunities to have new friends	.617
3 Adolescents should be encouraged to do a light work if this doesn't compromise study	.591
4 It's fair for an adolescent to work to earn his/her own economic independence	.579
5 A working adolescent is positively judged by his/her family	.520
6 If an adolescent likes the work s/he does, s/he doesn't feel the burden of working	.518
7 A working experience can positively integrate studying activities for an adolescent	.494
8 I would agree to let an adolescent work if s/he was fairly paid	.490
9 Doing a light work makes an adolescent aware of his/her responsibilities	.464
10 An adolescent doing a light work can make new friends just as any other adolescent	.449

### 3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

*Hypothesis 1: Adolescents' and young peoples' child work mental representation is mainly negative*

A quite negative connotation of child work strongly comes out from factor n.1, called “negative connotation of work done by adolescents”. It shows that the representation of child work is con-





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nected to quite negative aspects both in the socio-economic context (economic poverty, work market dynamics, schools inefficiency) and in the family context (family abandonment or indifference).

Working adolescents seem to be perceived as people passively suffering a detrimental condition for their present and future life, since work is associated to economic exploitation, difficulties in socialization, in having fun and going on with their studies successfully; it also complicates an individual's formation of one's self since it is connected to the embarrassment felt in front of school-mates and friends.

It is possible to suppose that this child work connotation is strongly correlated with the images given by the media.

*Hypothesis n.2: Adolescents and young people distinguish between forms of acceptable work in industrialized countries and children exploitation, which is unacceptable and typical of developing countries.*

From factor 6 "Difference between child work in developing and industrialized countries and consequent difference in the approaches to adopt" it is possible to suppose that the interviewees distinguish between child work in developing countries, negatively connoted and widely present, and child work in economically advanced countries, such as Italy, where it is a limited phenomenon.

Moreover, the interviewees generally agree about the importance of adopting different intervention methods according to the context differences.

A further element which seems to confirm this hypothesis can be singled out in factor n. 2 called "Acceptability of work done by adolescents in the show business". This factor, indeed, highlights that child work in the show business (not recurrent and definitely less characterizing child work in the developing countries), seems to be positively considered and even promoting the adolescent's self esteem.

*Hypothesis n.3: Doing light forms of safeguarded work is greatly valued by youngsters*

The fourth factor called "Acceptability of light work done by adolescents" highlights that the interviewees tend to distinguish between "child work" and "light work". As we have seen, the first one is a phenomenon negatively connoted; the second one seems to be acceptable mainly if it is done by respecting the laws. Light work is not only acceptable but even positively connoted since it is correlated to the possibility of doing a formative activity which can be an occasion to have fun and, even more, to promote adolescents' self esteem.

The seventh factor called "Positive aspects and acceptability conditions of work done by adolescents" highlights, indeed, that through work an adolescent can make new friends, get a greater economic independence, responsibility sense and a positive role within family.

Besides, also Factor 2 "Acceptability of work done by adolescents in the show business" pointed out that the interviewees would seem to consider this specific form of work acceptable, and that this experience can be a gratifying one. The seventh factor highlights that in addition to the adolescent personal gratification, the interviewees consider other acceptability criteria for the work done by an adolescent, for example: the importance of helping family economically, the compatibility with study, the satisfaction for the activity done, the possibility of combining study with a connected practical activity, and the fair remuneration.

*Hypothesis n.4: Adolescents and young people think they are able to consider and decide autonomously and independently whether to work or not*

From the fifth factor called "Adolescents' ability to judge and consider autonomously" comes out that the interviewees recognize adolescents as able to consider and judge autonomously. Consistently with this general framework, the interviewees seem to think adolescents can





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autonomously consider working advisability and practicability when they can freely exert this choice, without any pressure or constraint coming from adults. To the item "It's not up to adolescents whether to work or not", 77.9% of the interviewees stated his/her disagreement; 49.1% even affirmed to "fully disagree".

From the collected data it's impossible to deduce clearly if the final responsibility about this choice must depend on the adolescent exclusively; despite this it's important to notice that what comes out is in line with the art.12 of the International Convention about childhood rights approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20 November 1989, according to which children "have the right to freely express their own opinions about any issue concerning them and these must be properly considered, obviously in consideration of the asked childrens' age and maturity" (Unicef, 2007).

The results coming out from this research suggest the advisability to go on with the surveys within this field, mainly restating criteria and methods to better define the light work acceptability scope or that of work in general. One of the limits of this research is, having referred to such terms as "child work" or "light work" in questions, knowing that behind these concepts there are no clear and universally shared meanings (Anker, 2000).

A further limit of this research is the absence of data about the interviewees' possible previous working experiences. It could be supposed that the direct work experience could have an impact on the representation, perception and attitudes regarding this issue. Such a choice was motivated both by the difficulty in defining "child work" and "light work" and by the impossibility of asking information considered confidential by the Italian law and which could have caused problems in giving the questionnaire.

A further development of this research could go towards qualitative and quantitative findings about adolescents and young people not belonging to problematic family or social contexts and doing a sort of economic activity combining study and work; in this way, it could be possible to gather the perceptions, representations and attitudes towards doing a real economic activity and not a hypothetical one, and at the same time to restate more detailed hypotheses about the formative, socializing and gratifying role of work done by adolescents (Cussianovich & Marquez, 2002).

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