

## 1 Juvenile Helpers

### 1.1 Overview

This Element was greatly inspired by a 15-minute film titled *Tiny Katerina*, which shows glimpses of Katerina from two- to four-and-a-half years of age. She lives with her parents and older brother in Northwestern Siberia in the taiga. The Khanty-speaking people live by foraging (berries, for example), fishing, and herding reindeer; they are seminomadic. Their camp and its surrounding vicinity show no evidence of electricity or any other public service. These people are very much “off the grid.” From the first, as a wobbly toddler, Katerina is shown being helpful. She carries (and drops and picks up) firewood chopped by her mother into their tent. She ladles food (spilling some) from a large pot over the fire into a tin and feeds the dog. She carries pans with bread dough to her mother to place in the baking oven. When her mother goes gathering in the forest, Katerina has her own toddler-size collecting bucket. She is out in all weather, including deep snow, keeping warm in her animal skin anorak and mittens.

Katerina and her mother treat her myriad helping activities – imitating and collaborating with her mother – as absolutely routine (Golovnev, 2004; Golovnev & Golovneva, 2016). In a visceral way, the film reveals the deep gulf between our *Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democracy* (WEIRD) (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Kline, Shamsudheen, & Broesch, 2018) model of “normal” child development and child-rearing and the view derived from the anthropology of childhood.

As often noted, human life history is unique in encompassing an extremely long (by mammalian and, especially, primate standards) period of juvenility. Bogin (2006: 205) claims that recognizable and unique stages are *added* to the primate life course: child, juvenile (I use “middle childhood”), and adolescent. Many theories account for this extraordinary pattern, such as that children are slowly acquiring “embodied capital” in terms of physical size, strength, immunities, survival tactics, and facility with social relationships (Kaplan & Bock, 2001). But all perspectives emphasize that juveniles are in a state of dependency, unable to meet their own needs – they are “costly.” This costly and prolonged investment in one’s offspring is quite evident in WEIRD society. In fact, even as the birthrate has declined dramatically, the amount of time, effort, and money that WEIRD parents expend on child-rearing has increased substantially (Doepke & Filibotti, 2019). Not only is the investment quite high but also returns, at least as far as children “paying back” by contributing to the domestic economy, are scanty – at least since the 1960s (Goodnow, 1988) or earlier: “The advice literature of the 1920s through the 1940s often sought . . . to encourage the [growth] of the democratically organized family, [where



**Figure 1.1** – Katerina (Russia: Ivan Golovnev)

children] would be *psychologically* incorporated into their families as equals, rather than earn that role through their economic contributions” (Fass, 2016: 107). In fact, in WEIRD society most children’s “work,” such as homework or practicing the piano, is strictly for the benefit of the child and may impose an added burden on parents, who help with homework and pay for piano lessons. But the WEIRD pattern is anomalous and characterized as “one of the worst subpopulations one could study for generalizing about *Homo sapiens*” (Henrich et al., 2010: 79). A critical mass of research in traditional societies has accumulated that uncovers children’s ability and inclination to, at least partially, “pay back” their benefactors (Kramer, 2011). Discounting WEIRD society – where children are viewed as carefree, playful “cherubs” – as an outlier, we should reconsider and see children as helpful and hardworking would-be citizens, like Katerina.

Work maps onto nearly the entire juvenile period, and it is entwined with developmental processes. The juvenile’s physical abilities, understanding of the

environment, technical skill, strength, endurance, and assumption of responsibility all show clear developmental trends that are applied to or activated by participation in the activities of older role models or through the individual conduct of routine chores (Lancy 2018). It is important to stress that – outside WEIRD society – while infants and toddlers may be indulged, having all their needs met and enjoying nearly unlimited playtime, sooner or later they will be expected to shoulder a share of the domestic routine. How much they work and how soon varies cross-culturally, but it is the trajectory that all will eventually follow.

The helper “stage,” which begins as early as fourteen months and lasts several years, is preparatory for a life of collaborative, family/community-based work. As one measure of the centrality of work in the child’s development, we find several societies that apply distinctive terms to characterize each stage. For example,

In the Giriama (Kenya) language the term for a child roughly two through three years in age is *kahoho kuhuma madzi*: a youngster who can be sent to fetch a cup of water. . . . A girl, from about eight years until approximately puberty, is *muhoho wa kubunda*, a child who pounds maize; a boy of this age is a *muhoho murisa*, a child who herds. (Wenger, 1989: 98)

The *helper* stage entails several distinctive characteristics, including that the child’s desire to help may outpace their ability to be useful, at least in the endeavor they have offered to contribute to. Adults and older siblings must, therefore, manage the young helper. Even the youngest helpers may be seen as having unique attributes that make them ideal for certain jobs, such as gossip courier. So, not all work during the helper stage is strictly “developmental.”

The very young suffer from quite low status, and voluntary helping is often a key that admits the child to limited participation, which, in turn, raises their social standing. Families may encourage the would-be helper by donating scaled-down or discarded tools for practice. Or, as an example of crafts, a potter may give her little girl a ball of clay to play with and then take her crude results and reform them into recognizable miniature pots. With few exceptions, indigenous communities act as if they fully expect children to volunteer to help out and, unlike WEIRD society (Pettygrove et al., 2013; Dahl et al., 2017), see no need to explicitly encourage, teach, reward, praise, or thank the child for being helpful.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The literature is littered with various terms to designate the sorts of small-scale, face-to-face communities historically documented by anthropologists. Among these terms, which I will use somewhat interchangeably, are “indigenous,” “heritage,” and “traditional.” I find “village” the most congenial and expressive of the contrast with WEIRD society.

The helper stage can also be viewed as a *developmental niche* (Super & Harkness, 1986). The construct describes a system with a confluence of everyday practices (*habitus*, cf. Bourdieu, 1977), parenting *ethnotheory* (Harkness et al., 2010) and practice, and the child's biological growth and development. More specifically, the facilitating behavior of parents and others as workers, such as acting as willing role models to be observed and imitated, the ready availability of tools to practice with, and the plethora of sub-tasks in any undertaking all contribute to an environment that is adapted to the nurturance of eager but clumsy helpers. Elsewhere, I have characterized this interactive program to promote children's development as workers as the "chore curriculum" (Lancy, 2012).

Section 2 discusses three aspects of the infant's early experience prior to the onset of the helper stage. While all young children seem to share a need to be helpful, culturally rooted motives are plentiful. Setting aside the extreme indulgence granted infants in a few foraging societies, most infants and toddlers are subtly reminded of their debt to those who feed and care for them. "Delayed personhood" is an extremely common notion in which the acknowledgment that one is worthy of full membership in the community and the conferral of a "real" name and identity are deferred. In a systematic survey of thirty-two foraging societies, bands or communities were composed, primarily, of unrelated individuals, suggesting that membership is not an automatic right conferred by kinship but must be earned through cooperative, prosocial behavior (Hill et al., 2011). Drawing on several complementary theories from psychology, a case is made that this culturally constructed sense of obligation reinforces the biological imperative to help.

While the socialization of helpers may be quite subtle and nondirective, that is not always true of a complementary virtue: sharing. In small-scale, face-to-face societies – especially those that rely on the uncertain availability of wild foods – a willingness to share is the *sine qua non* of social life. The propensity to share may be what makes us unique as a species, compared to chimpanzees, for example (Hrdy, 2009). The sharing and transfer of food and other valued resources range from the commonplace – feeding the very young and the elderly – to the colorful and ceremonious such as the Trobriand Islands *Kula* or the PNG Highlands' "sing sing" (Barnett, 1938; Mauss, 1967). Apparently, children do not offer to share a treasured snack or other prize as readily as they offer to help. Hence, many societies embrace an explicit program of training the very young to be unselfish. The willingness to share, especially products the child has acquired through their own gathering or hunting, is as highly esteemed as volunteer helping. As noted in this subsection, helping may look somewhat different depending on the nature of work. While gardening, for example, is

typically done collaboratively, gathering or hunting in the forest is typically executed by individuals, even while foraging in groups. Even very young children may find themselves in possession of valued resources, such as baobab fruits they have gathered under the trees. They “help” by sharing the results of these labors.

Helping is also facilitated via an entirely different source – the imperative to engage in make-believe or mimicry. Play is nearly universal in early childhood, and surveys of the ethnographic record note that make-believe or play that replicates the patterns of behavior on view in the child’s family and wider community occupies a significant portion of “playtime.” Unlike make-believe play in WEIRD society, the “scripts” are drawn from reality, particularly scenes of older members at work. While play and work are juxtaposed as antithetical in WEIRD society, elsewhere play is seen as complementary to the work children do or aspire to do. The very young (and their older caretakers) are very inventive when it comes to replicating scenes from daily life – using materials and objects readily at hand. Hence, a little girl’s doll will be carried, cuddled, fed, and cleaned in make-believe play before the girl steps into the role of alloparent, ditto for cooking, food preparation, crafts (such as weaving), herding (using clay animals), hoeing, chopping, hut building, and so on. The great value of play is that it allows the child to advance along the trajectory toward “being useful” without harming valued commodities or the children themselves, and it also avoids the need to interrupt or question an adult to solicit tuition.

In Section 3, we look at the helper stage through the lenses of anthropology and psychology. The evidence reviewed for anthropology emphasizes the wide range of societies and situations where child helpers or wannabe helpers have been observed. Particular attention is paid to ethnographic accounts that reveal the great enthusiasm the very young invest in their desires and efforts to be helpful. In developmental psychology, interest in child helpers has been minimal until quite recently. Led by Felix Warneken and Michael Tomasello, a growing series of studies has simulated situations where children as young as fourteen months are afforded an opportunity to be helpful. With each new study, the robustness and reliability of what appears to be a heritable drive to assist is affirmed and broadened. The notion that the child’s drive to be helpful is finite in duration – a stage or critical period – is easier to construct from the ethnographic data than from the lab studies. The samples used in these studies to date have not been older than about age three-and-a-half.

Research reviewed in Section 3 makes a strong case that the helper stage is universal. Indeed, almost all the lab studies have used WEIRD children as subjects; so, we must assume that WEIRD toddlers are as desirous of “pitching

in” as their village counterparts. Yet, while the village kids are solid citizens by middle childhood, contributing in myriad ways to the domestic economy, WEIRD kids of the same age are reluctant participants who are more likely to resist entreaties than to volunteer.<sup>2</sup> The cause, as argued in Section 4, is the failure to accept and welcome toddlers’ helping overtures, which leads to the extinction of the drive to be helpful.

Notwithstanding the early, spontaneous emergence of helping during the helper stage, older children offer varying levels of support for their family and peers. This may range from near zero in at least two societies of note – WEIRD and the Dobe !Kung (Draper, 1976) – to providing vital services (herding, infant care, food preparation) and resources (harvested crops, gathered tubers and fruits) on a consistent, reliable basis. Helpers transition smoothly into self-guided, self-sufficient *workers*. How this variation comes about is the subject of Section 4. The resolution lies in the degree of accommodation that the family and community make during the helper stage and after to children who are eager to participate and learn on the job. For example, in an indigenous Kichwa (Ecuadorian Andes) community, mothers were more effective at supporting the child’s spontaneous efforts to be helpful than were WEIRD mothers from Münster, Germany. As a result, “indigenous children helped more often, helped in a more spontaneous way, and helped in more complex and risky tasks (implying more skillful participation) than Münster children” (Giner Torréns, Coppens, & Kärtner, 2019).

The ethnographic record is replete with descriptions of child helpers being woven into the fabric of daily life, including the full panoply of domestic work – from fetching firewood to butchering game to making tortillas. The would-be helper is not given *carte blanche*, but even the most inept toddler is assigned a task that is within their capacity, and there is great tolerance for the child’s experimentation with the “tools of the trade,” including sharp knives. While child helpers are not lavishly praised or rewarded, milestones of new chores completed or tasks mastered (first animal kill) are celebrated.

Section 4.2 reviews evidence from WEIRD culture for the extinction of the drive to be helpful. Although this research is by no means voluminous, several sources indicate a lack of enthusiasm for infant helpers. Would-be beneficiaries find that allowing children to pitch in makes the task more difficult and slows

<sup>2</sup> As I was writing this paragraph, my daughter – mother of a new baby – sent me the following from a Facebook post. A blogging Mom writes “Y’all . . . I am in total shock. Like push me over with a feather. My 6 year old has a friend over and they were arguing about what to do next. I jokingly said, ‘What if you two clean the whole house?’ They looked at each other. The friend said ‘That’s a great idea.’ My son said ‘Let’s do it.’ They are cleaning. Right. Now.” Those who commented on this post shared her amazement.

down the process. Rather than allowing would-be helpers to become involved in, for example, meal preparation or gardening, the WEIRD parent may refocus the task at hand so that it becomes a lesson in nutrition or botany.

These two broad patterns of incorporating helpful children into the domestic economy versus spurning or trying to postpone the helpful child's debut have different end points. In traditional societies, the desire to be helpful is carefully nurtured. Predictably, these children mature into vital contributors to the welfare of their family and community. For these children, as the helper stage ends, the *worker* stage begins. Children in WEIRD society, by contrast, thwarted in their desire to pitch in, seem to readily adapt to a lifestyle where they are wholly the beneficiaries of others' good works, with little or no obligation to reciprocate. They become excellent candidates for the "failure to launch" syndrome (Lancy, 2017a).

Section 4.3 speculates on the end of the helper stage. The end point may fall earlier or later, depending on the demand for the child's labor, but it is broadly encompassed by the period of middle childhood, roughly ages six to ten. During this period, a variety of subtle changes will occur in the child's involvement in the domestic economy. They will act more independently in reliably completing chores, and these will be more demanding in terms of strength and skill than chores taken on earlier. Children will have become more competent as gatherers or hunters and are able to make a significant contribution to their own and the family's diet. In WEIRD society, the child-worker role is eclipsed by the role of student. Increasing numbers of WEIRD children are expected to become strivers academically, athletically, socially, and artistically. They may be every bit as hard working as their village counterparts but just not very helpful.

Throughout this Element, I try to keep the question of benefits in view. These are not only not obvious but can even be counterintuitive. Why should playful children without responsibility *volunteer* to work? Why should the targets of potentially meddlesome helpers tolerate them? Section 5 provides two significant responses. First, the very basis of humanity is argued to be our capacity for collaboration. When toddlers seek to pitch in, they are making a bid to collaborate. Unlike the lab paradigm, where the help is aimed at a specific act (picking up a lost item) for a specific person with a specific need, in the village setting the helper has a more complex agenda. As Hrdy's (2016) analysis shows, acting effectively as a collaborator is extremely challenging and completely beyond the ability of nonhuman primates. The helper stage sets up the "classroom" to nurture the skills essential to effective collaboration. A second benefit of the commitment to being helpful identified in Section 5 is the practice and development of social learning skills, such as learning through attending to others' speech (over hearing). Once helpers have been taken on board the team, so to speak, they will be able to closely observe others who are competent; imitate what they have seen;

and judge, from the way their work is received, whether their performance is adequate.

## 1.2 Reconsidering Juvenile Dependency

One of the cornerstones of human life history is the recognition of a uniquely extended period of juvenility (Bogin, 2006). Aside from delayed reproduction, juvenility, in most theories, is defined by juveniles remaining largely dependent on others for most of their needs for up to two decades. As there is little consensus on how to stage childhood or how to name the stages (Grove & Lancy, 2015), in this Element, I use “juvenile” to describe the entire period of dependency, or the period when the individual is at least somewhat dependent on others for provisioning, shelter, and so on.<sup>3</sup> The juvenile is, effectively, *subsidized* (Kramer & Greaves, 2011). Of course, the period of greatest dependency is infancy, followed by childhood or early childhood, from ages two to six. Next comes middle childhood, from ages seven to ten, followed by adolescence. The age ranges are approximate. In societies where the domestic economy requires high labor inputs from family members, children may move on to the next stage more quickly. While helping is characteristic of the entire juvenile period except early infancy, I argue that the helper stage is associated with late infancy and early childhood, ending in middle childhood.

The extended juvenile period in humans, relative to other mammals, is a costly reproductive strategy in terms of the need for prolonged parental investment coupled with the risk that one’s offspring will expire before reaching reproductive potential. One solution to this quandary is for juveniles to help out, leading to a “bidirectional transfer of resources and labor between juveniles, mothers and others” (Kramer, 2011: 535). However, seeing human juveniles as making a significant contribution to the pooled labor of the family has only been acknowledged and documented relatively recently. Among indigenous people, of course, it is taken for granted and unremarkable:

When Maya children from the Yucatan Peninsula were asked why they helped, they seemed surprised by the question; the answer seemed obvious to them. One child responded, “I help because I live there,” and another mentioned, “Helping is everybody’s responsibility.” (Rogoff et al., 2017: 881)

Among the Tikopia (Melanesia), the ideal child seeks social participation and interdependence . . . the motivation to work . . . lay in the situation itself

<sup>3</sup> As a small caveat, I would note that elderly women have been referred to as helpers because their work is now directed at the support of their extended kin rather than their own nuclear family (Blurton Jones, Hawkes, & O’Connell, 2005), and they are also dependent on others for at least some of their basic needs. These helpers lie outside the scope of this Element.



with the worker embedded in society and thereby gaining social value. (Lee, 1961: 29)

There are several reasons for earlier views that saw the juvenile period as a unidirectional transfer of resources from adult to child. First, the Harvard studies of the Dobe !Kung of the Kalahari (Botswana) offered one of the earliest and most comprehensive studies of hunter-gatherer (H-G) childhood and concluded that !Kung “children do amazingly little work” (Draper, 1976: 213). Research with other H-G societies and, indeed, further studies of the !Kung as well suggest that this statement cannot be widely generalized. H-G juveniles vary in their contributions, but some degree of involvement in the domestic economy appears to be universal.

Another early idea was that humans required an extended period of subsidized or “sheltered learning” to master the myriad and complex skills and beliefs that would allow them to fulfill their role as adult members of the community. Children were seen as learners, unable to apply their nascent skills until they and their skills had more fully matured – much the way WEIRD children apply school learning only years later in work. Village technology (with rare exceptions such as that of the Inuit), however, tends to be quite simple and transparent. Kramer’s research demonstrates that children’s skill level is driven by the time logged exercising the skill, which suggests that children “learn by doing” (Kramer & Greaves, 2011; Kramer, 2019; see also Koster, Bruno, & Burns, 2016). Even with the most rudimentary skill and understanding of how to use a bow and arrows, a mortar and pestle, a sharp knife, or a digging stick, juveniles can supplement or support the efforts of others (Blurton Jones, & Marlowe, 2002).

The Hadza (Tanzania; Crittenden et al., 2013), Mer Islanders (Melanesia; Bird & Bird, 2002), and the Mikea (Madagascar; Tucker & Young, 2005) are three well-documented cases of societies where young children master their environments to the extent of being able to acquire wild edible resources, such as small mammals, birds, shellfish, and wild tubers. Successful child foragers not only supplement their own diet but also share their catch with others, particularly younger siblings, consuming it on the spot or carrying it back to camp to share with the family. Sharing “food may act to build and maintain social bonds” (Crittenden, 2016a: 64).

But even these very thorough studies do not convey the complete picture. In addition to food acquisition, children strive to reduce their burden on their seniors by performing various domestic services, such as fetching firewood; caring for younger siblings; and assisting with food processing, cooking, and so on. Far from seeing children as costly dependents burdening their caretakers for years, Kramer asserts, “Children’s help . . . minimizes demands on parental care

and maximizes maternal time and energy available for reproduction and infant care” (Kramer, 2011: 537; see also Stanton et al., 2017). Taking it further, I found clear evidence that juveniles can quickly ratchet up their contributions to family and community in response to times of critical need, such as the death of relatives and periods of food scarcity, warfare, and plague (Lancy, 2015a). Children pitching in to help or taking the initiative to learn useful skills on their own are the earliest signs of a precocious effort to lessen dependency on others and to act (and be treated) like a contributing member of the group. It is just possible, however, that focusing on dependency as *the* attribute of the juvenile period has led to a failure to appreciate the young child’s critical role as helper.

### 1.3 The Helper Stage in Child Development

The idea that juveniles should be viewed as helpful to others (taking care of baby brother while mother works, sharing food they have collected) pervades this analysis. Here, however, I want to introduce a central issue, namely helping during a period that I label the “helper stage.” This stage in a child’s development spans fourteen months of age to, approximately, seven years or middle childhood. In Section 3, I discuss research from anthropology and psychology aimed at demarcating the onset of the stage and detailing some of the characteristics of the helper in late infancy/early childhood. In Section 4, I discuss the end of the helper stage. Taken together, this research suggests that the helper stage encompasses a critical period where the would-be helper must be made welcome, else the helping motive is extinguished. Cross-culturally, this termination of the desire to be helpful is rare but appears to be a growing phenomenon among WEIRD families with juveniles.

The lab research on child helpers now being carried out with WEIRD samples (to be discussed later) obviously requires a brief, concise operational definition of the behavior of interest: “Helping is here defined as an action that primarily serves to facilitate the acquisition of another person’s goal” (Dahl, 2015: 1080). But an anthropological lens reveals many facets to the phenomenon. This is a sampling of inferences I have drawn from fieldwork and published accounts of children helping. Obviously, the helper stage emerges at a very early age – in late infancy, in fact. Margaret Mead observed on Samoa: “The *tinkest little staggerer* has tasks to perform – to carry water, to borrow fire brands, to fetch leaves to stuff the pig” (Mead, 1928: 633, italics added). Mead’s observations would find many parallels in the notes of field anthropologists (see Table 3.1).

Children who have moved into the helper stage are usually volunteers. These young would-be workers are, in effect, on probation. There is a clear risk of