Of children’s play, work and idleness embedded in sociality

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Abstract

Play and work are usually perceived as opposed to each other. While play is understood as fun and as an intrinsically motivated process with the experience itself as the end product of the activity, work is understood as goal-oriented and confined to the adult world. This article presents an intersection of work, play and idleness in the everyday experiences of children and young adolescents in Slovenia. With a focus on sociality, it proposes a reassessment of the concept of work as inherently embedded in human relationships.

Introduction

After coming home from kindergarten, six-year-old Jakob ate lunch, played in his room a bit, then went outside with his younger brother Jaka and his mother. In the yard, Jakob and Jaka were raking leaves. Jaka used a toy rake to rake leaves onto Jakob’s shovel, who then put them in a bucket. Jakob used a real shovel and he told me that his younger brother “always wants this one [a shovel], and he helped me work.”

Figure 1: Jakob and Jaka are busy cleaning the yard. Photo taken by Jakob’s mother, 2010.
Afterwards, they visited their grandmother, where they made chalk drawings; Jakob drew a mammoth. The grandmother kept firewood for the winter in the courtyard, and Jakob and Jaka started playing with it. Jakob said: “I brought the firewood to Jaka so that he would saw it.” Jaka sawed firewood with a toy saw while Jakob was bringing him the firewood. They played until their cousin came over after which they continued to play in an improvised sandpit. After Jaka and his mother stepped into a puddle, they all went home. Back home, Jakob stayed outside with his father and helped with his work in the garage. They were putting old windows and furniture on a trailer. Jakob said: “I just held it like that, so that it wouldn’t fall down, because it was so heavy.” Jakob helped his dad until his friend came over and they went to play with Jakob’s toy jeep. In the evening, Jakob drew on his computer, they had dinner, he took a shower, and went to bed.

The vignette above is a description of Jakob’s daily life based on the pictures taken by Jakob’s mother and conversations I had with her and Jakob while watching these pictures. It demonstrates how, during his day, Jakob was going back and forth from playing to working activities, attesting how play intertwines with work in his daily life. Although Jakob’s father would do his work more efficiently and faster by himself, he would often let the boys work alongside him when working in his hobby workshop. He let the boys use a hand saw, a hammer and other tools. He said that Jakob sometimes “holds something for me – I have to let him, so that he feels it is important for him to be there with me.”

In my research I focus on forms of work in the everyday life of preschool children at home and in kindergarten, and primary school children’s participation in work within family settings. In doing so, I pose the following questions: What counts as work? Did Jakob play or work during the above mentioned activities, and how do children themselves understand work?

Play and work are usually perceived as in opposition to each other. While play is understood as fun and as an intrinsically motivated process with the experience itself as the activity’s end product, work is understood as goal-oriented and confined to the adult world (Schwartzman, 1978; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Yet ethnographic studies suggest that it is often difficult to disentangle work, play, and learning in children’s everyday lived experience (Chick, 2010; Lancy, 2018).

In the Slovenian context, play and work are not necessarily perceived as mutually exclusive. For example, Slovenian developmental psychologists define play as a free and voluntary activity, which is not goal-oriented, and work as goal-oriented; yet they emphasize that in early childhood both often intertwine and are difficult to distinguish from one another (Horvat and Magajna, 1989; Marjanovič Umek, 2001). In the Slovene language, the term for a paid job is služba, which derives from the verb služiti meaning to serve (Latin servire) – and thus has connotations of slavery as opposed to free activity. The verb delati, on the other hand, is more commonly used for work in its widest sense. Delati means: to consciously
employ physical or mental energy for the acquisition of goods, to perform a task, to work for pay, to be actively involved in the creation of something, to give a certain characteristic to something, to shape, to create something, as well as to act. The verb delati has a much wider array of meanings, which is evident from the fact that it is commonly used in a Slovenian colloquial greeting formula; instead of how are you, one would often ask Kaj delaš?, which in this context translates to “What are you doing?” and can refer to occupations other than work, such as drawing, playing, socializing, or even explicit non work, such as idling. In addition, delo (noun) is strongly linked to one’s identity as well as to one’s well-being (see Turk Niskač, 2021b).

According to feminist theory, capitalism distinguishes between waged and unwaged work, the latter including housework, reproductive labour, and other family-related work. It is precisely the unpaid nature of child rearing, housework, and other daily labour taking place in the private domain of the household that makes it not work (Federici, 2012). In contemporary “Western” societies, children's work in the domestic sphere is similarly perceived as not-work, and it is commonly assumed that children's work is play and schooling (see Gussin Paley, 2004). When it comes to children and work, US and Western European scholars tend to focus on child labour (see Niewenhuys, 1996) or socialisation and apprenticeship (see Spittler and Bourdillon, 2012; Lancy, 2018) in “non-Western societies”, while some scholars also point to the invisible work in “Western” societies (see Morrow, 1996; Solberg, 1997; Mizen, 2005; Grasseni, 2007). When it comes to children's participation in domestic work (such as housework, care work, the self-provisioning of food etc.), comparative studies have pointed to differences in child-rearing practices across cultures and families (Fasulo, Loyd and Padiglione, 2007; Ochs and Izquierdo, 2009).

In Slovenia, we can observe a historically established educational value attributed to children's participation in everyday work, both in the domestic sphere and in institutionalized educational settings. Children's participation in work is not aimed at economic contribution, but instead at shaping the children's personalities in a culturally desirable way (see Turk Niskač, 2021a). The resulting culturally desirable personality should, in turn, ideally complement economic contribution in adulthood; therefore, the aspect of socialization and discipline undoubtedly comes into play here. This points to a multi-layered understanding of work, which can simultaneously represent a powerful means of socialization (Rogoff et. al., 1993; Lave and Wenger, 1998), an instrument of discipline (Foucault, 1995), and also, as this article proposes, a meaningful occupation for children and a setting of cooperation, struggle, and negotiations among family members.

Based on an ethnographic study conducted in two kindergartens and on an ongoing study with primary school children, this article attempts to question the dichotomy between work and play. Furthermore, with a focus on sociality it proposes a re-evaluation of the concept of work as inherently embedded in human relationships.
Situating Children's Photography

For my PhD, I conducted an ethnographic study in two public kindergartens in a rural and urban area in Slovenia in 2010, 2011 and 2013, focusing on the relationship between work, play, and learning in early childhood. In total, 6 kindergarten educators (all female), 35 parents (27 mothers and 8 fathers), 3 grandmothers and 38 children aged 2 to 6 years (18 girls and 20 boys) took part in this study. Aside from participant observation in kindergartens, I also filmed 660 minutes of daily occurrences at both kindergartens and conducted semi-structured interviews with parents, grandparents, and educators. This also included informal visits to homes and informal conversations in the rural setting. Additionally, I employed participatory photography and photo elicitation interviews with parents, educators, and children aged three and over. Parents and educators were asked to take pictures of the children’s daily life, while the children were asked to only take pictures of that which they themselves found interesting. For photo elicitation interviews, I also used vignettes showing children at work and play to gain better insight into the children’s understanding of work and play. The study is further supported by an ongoing postdoctoral research project, which examines conceptualizations of work and play among primary school children and their families in rural and urban settings using semi-structured interviews, participatory photography, and photo elicitation interviews. Five grandparents (two male and three female), 23 parents (19 mothers and four fathers), and 26 children (12 girls and 14 boys) aged between five and fourteen years participated in the postdoctoral study.

Participatory photography in research with children is primarily used as a tool to provide insight into children’s perspectives (Rich and Chalfen, 1999; Rasmussen, 2004; Varvantakis et al., 2019). Children’s drawings, photographs and other visual material can gain insight into the world of children and the ideas that children come up with in everyday relationships with adults, peers, older and younger children, and various digital and visual media (Toren, 2007; Hopperstad, 2008). I understand children’s photographs as an insight into their everyday life, their experiences with the environment and the relationships in which they are involved. Photographs often show children interacting with the environment – with the people around them, with animals, toys, tools, and nature; they therefore show what children do, the changes of their location, and with whom they spend their time. At the same time, the photos serve as a starting point for a conversation with the child, as the conversation is easier with the photos. In addition to rational evocation, pictures also evoke aesthetic and emotional reactions, and allow for a broader understanding, as they also include non-verbal communication (Clark, 2011; Varvantakis et al., 2019). Following the auto-enhanced photo-elicitation interviewing approach (Clark Ibáñez, 2008), research participants took photos without much guidance on the part of the researcher, followed by an interview or conversation based on the photos. In this way, I obtained a visual representation of the child’s experiences and oral data, while the children explained the meanings they attributed to the photos (Clark, 2011).
Although this article focuses on information obtained from photo elicitation interviews with children, the analysis and interpretation of the gathered data is contextualised within the scope of information gathered during the study using other methods, namely interviews with parents, grandparents, and educators, participant observation and video filming in kindergartens, as well as on the analysis of the cultural, socio-economic, and historical context of the changing conceptualisations of work in childhood in Slovenia (see also Turk Niskač, 2021a; 2021b). Drawing on anthropological studies of children and childhoods, children can be understood simultaneously as “the subjects and objects of history” (Toren, 1993: 474). Here, children are indeed research participants, yet they are not understood as “individuals who are conceptually separate from ‘society’ and ‘culture’” (Toren, 1993: 474; see also Amit, 2003; Spyrou, 2011). While children make meanings intersubjectively with others in the environing world (Toren, 2009), a double vision is needed to see both the children’s and adults’ perspectives, which provide for a more grounded understanding of the multi-voiced and dynamic nature of the human condition (Clark, 2011: 11).

**Playing at Work, Working at Play**

In this study, parents and kindergarten educators did not view the preschool children's participation in their work as a real contribution although they approved of it and understood it as an educational endeavour. Even when children took part in the work of adults, the latter described the children’s participation as merely just playing along.

Children at the age of four already distinguished between work and play activities and took their contribution more seriously than the adults did. When they participated in daily work, they thought of themselves as working, not playing. Four year-old Sara, for example, explained that “children also work. I once helped my mum with cooking, we made pancakes.” Furthermore, participant observation in two kindergartens showed that work tasks can also be fun. On two occasions boys aged four to six were engaging in free play with corn seeds. When the preschool educator told the children to pick up the toys and corn seeds and prepare the playroom for lunch, the boys used their Legos as vacuum cleaners to gather the corn. Once they cleaned up, they started throwing the corn seeds back on the floor, which implies that the children enjoyed the activity of cleaning up and the associated companionship so much that they were willing to do it again.

On the other hand, drawing and other joint creative activities that the adults thought of as fun, often represented an obligation to children, an activity they would rather avoid and spend the time doing something else. There was a clear difference between artistic creation (drawing, handicrafts, etc.) when children did it on their own initiative or when they had to draw or craft following educators’ instructions. On one occasion, two boys were engaged in drawing a meadow of flowers for 38 minutes. At first, the children (four girls and two boys sitting at the table) found drawing an enjoyable activity that brought them together. In the course of drawing, they built a relationship through word play exchanges: "Only I know where Sven lives", "I know where Ana lives, but won’t tell you", "I know where my grandma
lives", "I also won't tell you where Sven lives", "I won't tell you where I live". The girls finished their drawings in 15-20 minutes and went to play. Two boys, Sven and Simon, also finished their drawings, but the educators were not as happy with their final products and gave them instructions on how to improve the drawings, e.g. by adding a butterfly. However, though the boys returned to their desk, they did not follow the instructions, but observed the other children instead. The boys then played with crayons, stared at their drawing, played with a leaf, put the crayons in a pot, and then put the crayons in their sleeve. Finally, they managed to turn their drawing over to the educator with minimal corrections and joined the other children at play.

**Children's Sociality**

Adults may perceive certain behaviour of preschool children as pointless, but this article suggests that, from the child's point of view, such behaviour is an important building block of their sociality, which I view as strongly associated with social learning and development. During participant observation in kindergarten, I observed that preschool children devoted a large part of their activities to maintaining sociality and social interaction. While waiting for lunch, they often played with words. One child for example said "I will eat mud", and the others followed: “I will eat the flute”, “I will eat the dinosaur”, “I will eat the poison from the snake”. Faced with adult’s disapproval, verbal communication was replaced with non-verbal communication that included the whole body; for example children started tapping their hands on the table or blinking at each other. Yet children were also very selective and often did not want to respond to their peers’ calls and used silencing, ignoring, and direct refusal to decline these calls. On one such occasion Jakob (six years old) said to Ivan (five years old): “I will eat a snake”, to which Ivan replied: “Stop playing with food, this isn’t a snake, this is bread”! Schwartzman noted that in order to be able to participate in shared play, children constantly communicate their intentions to each other and recognize each other’s intentions (Schwartzman, 1978: 238). The same can be said about other activities and acts of initiating, maintaining, and/or declining social interactions, including work. For social interactions to be successfully maintained, children have to recognize each other’s intentions and synchronize with each other in a shared activity (Tomasello and Carpenter, 2007).

A study conducted with primary school children suggests that the sociality of children in the course of their growing up continually manifests itself through various forms of existence that cannot be defined narrowly as play or work, yet it is situated within their sociality as a form of companionship. As described above, preschool children were often observed engaging in word play, non-verbal communication, and other strategies to initiate, maintain, or decline social interactions. Many of these interactions happened in in-between spaces; while waiting for lunch, or in transitions between activities. As such, they would often happen outside social norms and/or adult social control, which manifested, for example, when children, faced with the educator’s disapproval of their talking during lunch in kindergarten, continued to interact by blinking at each other.
Older children, from around the age of eight onward, who were granted greater autonomy in their mobility, started socializing with their friends in a variety of ways: playing outside or at home, but also wandering around and idling in terms of just hanging out together, i.e. activities that potentially shared the characteristics of aimlessness, play, fun, sociability, and escape from social norms and adult supervision (see Turk Niskač, 2020).

The pictures taken by 11-year-old Iva showed the time she spent with her schoolmates, joking on the way home from school, hanging out in front of the local store, at her home, walking her friend’s dog, and going to a fast food restaurant with her friend (see Figure 2). While looking at the pictures, Iva commented on her photos: "In front of the shop, we just chat, joke around, and so on. Then we went to my friend’s house, we spent some time there and joked around". Here, walking and idling, being together with friends, can be seen as one of the key components of daily life outside the social dominion controlled by adults (see Hunnicutt, 2007) as it took place in the in-between space, both spatially and temporally invisible to the adult gaze.

Figure 2: Schoolmates on their way from school to a friend’s house. Photo taken by Iva, 2020.

Other children’s accounts also pointed to such forms of companionship, for example an intimate time spent with friends that could take place between class instructions and
afternoon extra-curricular activities, between the end of school and the parents’ return from work, etc. Like Iva, Marta (11 years old) similarly enjoyed the in-between places and spaces in the company of her friends, for example taking a scooter ride to extra-curricular activities with her friend. She also emphasized that, when they had a free hour between classes and extra-curricular activities at school, they would sometimes go to hers or her friend’s place and “we cook something, or we play something, or we just wait in front of the school and chat. It’s fun when you cook together with friends.” When asked what she likes to do most in her free time, Marta replied “I like to cook and sleep.” For Marta, certain forms of work, play, and companionship all constituted her ideal day, which she described as follows: “I would go cycling around with my friends, then we would create something, then I would move all the furniture in my room, then I would make lunch, by myself, I would make Ramen and we would eat it together with my friends, then we would play, listen to music, I would clean my room, then we would watch a movie together and they would sleep over.”

When done in company, walking, idling or just hanging out together also involves observation, sociability, and entertainment, as well as the satisfaction that comes from the sociability itself. Although idling is usually perceived as passive, and as the opposite of work, it is not children doing nothing. Following the context of the Kaj delaš? greeting formula and delati in the sense of “to shape, to create something, as well as to act” even when idling, children are engaged in social interactions of hanging out and simply being together in ways that are meaningful to them.

**Sociality and Work**

While scholars of the Anglo-American tradition tend to focus on play in childhood as opposite to work (Sutton-Smith, 1997), and tend to perceive play as children’s work (Gussin Palley, 1992; 2004; Corsaro, 2003; see also Montessori, 1990), this article suggests that children seem to focus on the sociability of activities, where work can take on the same meaning as play. A culturally specific understanding of play and work in childhood is at stake here, as adult interlocutors of my study, along with Slovenian developmental psychologists, and preschool educators also acknowledge that it is difficult to disentangle play, work, and learning in childhood (Horvat and Magajna, 1989; Marjanovič Umek, 2001; see also Turk Niskač, 2021).

William Corsaro (2003) acknowledged that preschool children define their friends as children with whom they play. Friends play together, share, and do it all on their own, without the help or interference of adults or other kids (see also Schwartzman, 1978). Michael Tomasello similarly pointed out that humans “have a tendency to imitate others in the group simply in order to be like them” (2009: xiv). In both studied kindergartens, I observed children forming social interactions by means of toys and other goods (such as sweets), according to shared characteristics (for example wearing glasses, similar hairstyles and clothes), through joint activities such as play (which also included word play described above), creative activities, sitting together, as well as through work.
In kindergarten, children were often involved in adult work activities (two children were regularly on duty helping distribute cutlery, meals, clean the tables etc.). Children also incorporated work in their play (for example they played that they were cooking, taking care of a baby, etc.). Work took place through acts of solidarity and reciprocity and helped build relationships and a sense of community among children, one which was also promoted by educators. One educator, for example, employed motivational singing to encourage children to help her carry chairs to which all the children eagerly responded and jointly put the chairs away before going outside. In a similar fashion, work represented a joint action through which children resolved conflicts. On one such occasion, Mila and Ana (both four years old) came into conflict. They were in a visibly bad mood during lunch. Then Ana accidentally spilled tea. The educator, reflecting her attitude towards work and the children’s independence, did not make a fuss, but instead calmly suggested that the girls fetch a washcloth and wipe the table. Ana indeed brought the washcloth, Mila, however, took it from her and wiped the table while Ana finished eating (without complaining about Mila’s taking over the cleaning). The girls then continued cleaning tables together and engaging in conversation. Ana said “Let’s clean this table; and this one too,” and Mila continued “Can we also clean this table?” When they were done, Ana noted: “Here is another bit of food,” to which Mila immediately responded: “I’ll do it, I’ll do it.” While the girls were wiping tables, they forgot about their earlier conflict and when they finished, they continued to play together as if nothing had happened. Companionship through joint activity and the enjoying of said activity ultimately brought the girls together.

Examining the children’s pictures revealed that few of them actually showed work, implying that the children themselves did not focus their attention on work as such. While the pictures taken by Jakob’s mother clearly show the interweaving of work and play in his life, none of the pictures taken by Jakob during the day he had the digital camera showed work. His pictures from kindergarten were of other children playing and children’s and educators’ portraits. At home, he took several pictures of his sibling, neighbour, cousins, and a picture of himself in a car’s rear-view mirror, he also took pictures of random objects such as a hat, and of a picture on a wall. Four pictures showed toys (two balls, a frisbee, and a toy truck). During a visit to his grandparents to a neighbouring village, he took pictures of a vineyard, a river, an old river mill, a bird, a walnut tree, and apples that fell from the tree. Jakob also took several pictures of flowers inside and outside, both at home and at his grandparents’. He was most enthusiastic about six pictures of a stuffed lynx and chamois, his grandfather’s hunting trophies displayed on the wall of his grandparents’ home. The lynx with its mouth wide open was particularly fascinating to him, he told me in advance: “You’re about to see something scary. /…/ A lynx! It’s not alive, it’s only a kind of carpet. I like this one. I took a picture of its mouth.”

Although work was commonly a rather rare motif (in terms of showing other people at work and objects related to work such as tools, housework appliances, agricultural machinery etc.), other pictures, particularly of the children’s parents, siblings, and grandparents, made children talk about what they do together. For example, when watching pictures of her grandmother, 4-year-old Vesna explained that she sometimes makes pie with
her or works with her in the garden. Yet the most common motive in both the urban and rural setting was companionship, or people together unclear on what they are doing, or simply spending time together. I suggest that companionship potentially includes play, conversation, walking, idling, and work, but at the same time goes beyond that.

If we understand the work to be potentially linked to relationships and the motivation of pre-school children to get involved in the work of adults in the context of children’s sociability, it is not surprising that children of all ages took many photos of their everyday life which show companionship. Though the parents of preschool children emphasized that the children wanted to participate in adult chores, it seems that the children themselves were not so much interested in the work as such, as they were in enjoying companionship – doing something together and being together.

Four year-old Lina took pictures when her family visited a family garden near their home in Ljubljana. She took 74 pictures and only four of them showed work in the garden, while 43 pictures showed persons or activities that could be labelled as companionship, and others showed sky, shoes, plants in a vegetable garden, and a wooden garden shelter with a table. Lina explained that the family visited the garden to water the plants and clear the weeds, and that she also watered the plants and planted seeds. She also told me that her dad made the shelter, table, and benches by himself and did not let any of the kids help him. Yet pictures also show that the garden visit was a time, which the family simply enjoys spending together.

Figure 3: A picture taken by Lina showing work in the family garden, 2013.
Similarly, pictures taken by four year-old Simona were focused on companionship. She took pictures during a visit from her kindergarten friend Ana. Simona took pictures of her bedroom, the carpet, lights, doors, wardrobe, her goldfish, toys, Ana, and their legs. Although Simona took pictures of many toys, none of the pictures showed girls playing with them. While watching pictures, Simona introduced me to her plush toys: “These are my toys you don’t know yet: Rjavka (Brownie) and Medo (Little Bear), this one is an elephant, and this one is a tiger. This one is Laja, this is Simba and this is Sija”. Her goldfish also had a name, Taki. Other pictures showed Ana eating candy, dancing, sitting at the table, on the floor, and on the bed. Simona explained that the two girls often visited each other in the afternoon after kindergarten and “play together and do nice things”. While watching pictures, Simona told me that the girls were dancing without music, eating sweets, Ana spilled juice on her trousers and Simona lent her trousers and socks. When we went through the pictures, both girls were present and particularly entertained by the many pictures of their legs (see Figure 5), which incurred a guessing game: “That’s me!”, “Yes, and that’s me”, “No, that’s me, Simona that’s me”, “That’s me”, “That’s me”, until Simona ended the game by saying “Let’s see the next picture”. Like the pictures taken by Lina during the
family garden visit, Simona’s pictures showed the girls simply enjoying each other’s company.

Figure 5: A picture taken by Simona during her friend’s visit, 2013.

Negotiating Relationships, Negotiating Work

The same way the children were selective in their other social interactions, as exemplified by the instance of word play described previously in this article, they were also selective when it came to work (on children’s selectiveness in play see also Schwartzman, 1978; Gussin Paley, 1992). On one occasion observed in kindergarten, the educator reminded Eli and Eva to clear the table before going to play. Eli refused, ”I have to babysit,” and the girls went to the play corner without clearing the table. What's more, they used one form of work (babysitting) as an excuse to avoid another (tidying up).

With preschool children’s participation in work in the family setting, the majority of the parents displayed a great deal of indulgence in letting children participate according to their own will and considered it more important that children participate in work, than that the work get done properly and effectively (see Turk Niskač, 2021a). Children’s early eagerness to participate in adult activities can also be explained within developmental trajectories.
According to Michael Tomasello, when children first begin to walk and talk, they are already cooperative and helpful in many situations, yet their cooperativeness soon becomes “mediated by such influences as their judgements of likely reciprocity and their concern of how others in the group judge them” (2009: 4). Thus, they begin to internalize culturally specific social norms (ibid).

When children start attending school, school obligations and other extra-curricular activities come to the fore, the children’s interest in getting involved in work can begin to decline, or they become more selective of which tasks they like to do and which are superfluous to them. On the other hand, as children grow older, parents’ expectations can also change, expecting delegated work to be done properly, in time and/or assigning children greater responsibility. Yet as examples in this article attest, primary school children are also adept at negotiating work commitments.

Twelve-year-old Mia, who grew up in the countryside, spent much of her free time (time after coming home from school) riding her bicycle, visiting friends who live elsewhere, or riding with friends to the nearby river for a swim in the summer. Her family cultivated land and kept pets such as horses, rabbits, and chickens. Mia’s mother explained that one of the reasons she did not involve her children in domestic work very much was because she preferred to do things herself: “I get things done faster if I’m alone. And I’m always pressed for time. Many things, I just prefer to do on my own because they get done faster and more accurately.” At the same time, she confessed that she “should” include children in work more: “Because of their working habits. They don’t have them, and you need them in life. To be persistent, to be aware that nothing comes from nothing, that you need to work hard if you want to have anything in life.”

While we were watching her pictures, Mia told me that she enjoyed harvesting potatoes (see Figure 6): “I like to pick up potatoes by hand because it’s fun” – harvesting potatoes are also a rare task in the countryside that still requires collaboration, causing friends and family to come help with the harvest. Mia also likes harvesting kohlrabi; she explained: "it’s interesting because you can cut it with a knife". Mia defined potato picking as play because she enjoyed it. On the contrary, she did not like stacking wood or practising the clarinet, both activities, which she defined as work. She said that it "got on her nerves" to play the clarinet and attend music school, which she did on her parents’ initiative. Mia also often argued with her parents about housework, for example vacuum cleaning, which she did not feel like doing. Her mother also emphasized that both Mia and her younger sister liked to work with kohlrabi because they fancied using a knife, and that they loved to ride a tractor, yet their dad only took them for a ride occasionally, for safety reasons. Here, risk and safety can acquire various meanings. In the rural area, preschool children were more commonly allowed to use various tools such as a hammer and cordless drill on their own. In the rural area, activities deemed inappropriate for younger children for safety reasons included working with a chainsaw, a line spool grass trimmer, and larger agricultural machinery (e.g. for wood harvesting).
In this family, the relationality between work and sociality manifested on several levels among family members: between Mia and her four-year younger sister – their rivalry was also obvious during our meetings, and between parents and children. Mia told me that she likes to cook and bake, but her mother would not let her do it: “she is never satisfied, I always try so hard, and she is, like, what did you do [angrily]? /.../ my mother drives me out of the kitchen, she says I never clean up, but I always try so hard to clean up, and she comes, but she sees a crumb and just [sighs] where do you see crumbs [angrily] /... / so I already gave up”.

On the other hand, Mia’s mother stated in a separate interview that Mia knows how to prepare a couple of dishes and that she likes to bake muffins and cakes, which she makes entirely on her own. Yet in her observations of the family dynamics with regard to work, she also emphasized the difference between the two girls’ characters: “Here I really have to hold back, because Mia doesn’t know how to clean up after herself, she’s always been like this: I will clean up. Ooooh no, she just throws everything together into the dishwasher, there are egg shells, everything is thrown there. No, she doesn’t know how to clean up after herself. Jana [her four years younger sister], on the other hand, was home alone and she washed the dishes. Also, she hand washed the dishes she could have washed in the dishwasher.” Jana, who also took part in participatory photography, took a picture of
washing the dishes (see Figure 7) and explained that she liked to wash the dishes by hand, because she liked the foam and rubbing the dishes, although she too, like Mia, was sorry that her mother often wouldn’t let her wash the dishes.

![Image of a sink with dirty dishes]

Figure 7: Photo taken by Jana (8 years old), who liked to wash the dishes, 2020.

That some part of the children’s motivation to participate in work is tied to relationships, is attested also in Mia’s mother’s observation that, when she asks Mia to do something, Mia always feels the need to quarrel with her, and that she prefers to help their neighbours: “I kept asking her the whole week to cut the shrubs, and she didn’t. When a neighbour asked her to help, she immediately went to do it. She will go to the neighbours, but wouldn’t do it at home”.

**Animals, Sociality and Work**

Children often demonstrated a particular affinity for animals and animal-related work. Lenart (11 years old), for example, enjoyed taking care of his friend’s family’s animals; he brought them leftovers, he and a friend groomed them together, and he helped clear the manure. Mia’s younger sister Jana (8 years old) also liked to take care of their animals: she fed the rabbits, collected the eggs, groomed the horses. Mia too had a special affinity for horses (see
Figure 8). If she perceived music school and practising clarinet as work, she saw attending horse riding lessons as play, an activity she enjoyed and did on her own initiative. However, horse riding lessons required a lot of effort on her part, as she had to pay for the lessons herself and could only come see the horses when she saved up enough money: “I get pocket money for practising clarinet. I said I wouldn’t play it anymore and they said they would give me 10 EUR if I played it. When I save 200 EUR, I go to the riding course; I need ten more hours to finish the first level”. Needless to say, Mia also had a special relationship with the family’s four horses, and enjoyed doing work associated with them such as feeding them, taking them to the stables, and grooming them. The girls’ father took care of the horses and wouldn’t let the girls lead them from pasture to the stables, as he too preferred doing things by himself. Well, that was until recently, according to Mia’s account: “I once said to my mum to step aside, that I would take them to the stables; and I took the horses, and now I bring the horses in from the pasture… if Jana doesn’t come. They let her do everything earlier, things I wasn’t allowed to do at her age. Now I only take one horse to the stable, and dad takes the other three.”

Figure 8: Mia’s family horses. Photo taken by Mia, 2020.

Preschool children also took many pictures of animals, cultivated and non-cultivated nature. In a rural area, undomesticated animals could also cause damage. While looking over the pictures, Blaž (5 years old) explained, “We have a fence so that roe deer don’t eat the
lettuce.” I observed during fieldwork how children from a rural kindergarten often went for a walk with their families to a nearby field where horses were grazing. They fed them grass or apples. The children all knew where these horses were: “They’re on a field if you go near the factory.” They also knew to whom they belonged and knew their names. Preschool children also often placed their domestic animals, or even plush toys, in the same category of friends as their peers (see Turk Niskač, 2018).

**Developing Independence Through Work**

The fifteen-year-old Jan’s pictures mostly showed him hanging around at home and the city park with his friends (see Figure 9). At the park, they celebrated a friend’s birthday. Jan and another friend baked a surprise cake; as he explained, "we like special things". This group of friends likes to hang out together, have fun, they also take pictures and make video clips with their mobile phones, listen to music, go to the second-hand shop, but mostly they just talk: "We all talk a lot about politics and about racism, and speak about everything, about gender, about LGBT, about everything, all these things happening". Although Jan stressed the importance of being politically aware, to him even thinking about his profession overlaps with play and fun: "If I imagine having my own firm to design clothes, I would want to be surrounded by funny people whose way of thinking is similar to mine. /…/ I think it is important to be surrounded with people with whom you can be playful." Jan also stressed that when he is with his friends, they always have lots of fun and "have more confidence to act strangely and we don’t care what others think of us". When asked about the role of play in his life, Jan replied: "For me it's all a kind of play because it's very rare that we are very serious, but when we're serious, we're so totally serious, and we look each other in the eye and we totally tell each other whatever we want. Otherwise we make fun of all kinds of things /… / and we're all so relaxed and just pretend-play some funny moments".

![Figure 9: A photo of friends celebrating a birthday at a city park, taken by Jan, 2020.](image-url)
Jan emphasized that he very rarely participated in the housework at home. Sometimes he cooks for himself: "and then I am motivated to clean up. I also like washing and ironing my clothes, I take care of my clothes. My room is always tidy too. I also tell my boyfriend to clean up after himself, because I like to keep my room clean. When my mum says I should do something, I sometimes do it and sometimes don’t, but then she gets all crazy and then I do it. But I think I could help more at home. I think it’s important to take care of things as much as possible, so that you’re ready to live alone one day. And it’s also compassion for my mum [emphasis added]". Jan particularly enjoys shopping for groceries and running errands for his mother in the city: "Because I like to ride my bike. Especially when I have to go out and I have a set destination, it’s fun. I feel free, I become very calm, I listen to music and it is great”.

Jan’s mother, a single parent, told me that when her children were younger, she did not particularly include them in the work within the family: “It is important to be persistent, to repeat things, I was too lazy for that, because it’s really hard work to introduce children to work and insist on it.” Now, with her children 18 and 15 years old, she started to delegate some of the housework tasks to them, particularly taking care of their own clothing, groceries, cooking etc.: “I think it’s part of growing up, it’s part of being equal. They go to school, but I have a job. We’re equal, we all need to help. But it’s also about being independent, they will soon go and live on their own, it’s important that you know how to take care of yourself.” Yet she sometimes still cooks for everyone “I see this as an act of love and attention, that I prepare a meal and we are together. /…/ It’s about our relationship more than obligation, and I see that it means a lot to them.”

Participating in work at home as a building block of growing up was also present with one of the more affluent families that participated in my study and the only one that employed a cleaning lady. And yet, all three of this family’s children: two university students and 11-year-old Marta, had assigned obligations such as cleaning their rooms, bathrooms, stairs, and vacuum cleaning. Their mother explained: “I think it’s important that they participate in work; it’s harder when they are teenagers; we reduced our cleaning lady’s workload because the older kids need to help, they also wash their own clothes.”

Reflecting her mother’s attitude, 11-year-old Marta specifically referred to work as an activity which “you don’t enjoy so much, but it’s your obligation, at play you enjoy it. Also at work you sometimes enjoy it, but it’s your duty to do it, while play is not your duty, it is you, who wants to play”. Marta particularly liked garden-related work: “because I love plants, I like being in the garden and helping mum” and shop classes at school “it’s fun when we make something, I feel like I’m playing with wood, or when they give us tasks, I like it.” Marta also helped her mother cook by cutting the vegetables etc. The strong link between cooking and sociality is apparent from Marta’s vision of her ideal day described previously in this article, in a section on Children’s Sociality, where work, play, and companionship overlapped.
Conclusion

The presented examples demonstrate that work is embedded in human relationships, which compels us to rethink the function and meaning of work beyond the economic rationality, which is itself not a new idea (see Gorz, 1999; Polanyi, 2001). The children’s work presented in this article can be thought of as invisible work. It is quite marginal compared to children’s other activities - play, school, and extracurricular activities. More importantly, it is publicly invisible, lacking public recognition. In Slovenia, this hasn’t always been the case. For example, a generation or two ago, throughout the 20th century, children have participated in work alongside other household members within the domestic economy of both the agricultural as well as small industrialist society. Furthermore, in socialist Yugoslavia, work, particularly socially useful work, played an important role both in children’s schooling and their leisure activities (see Turk Niskač, 2021b).

According to Michael Tomasello (2009), from an early age, children are driven to cooperate; this can be applied to our understanding of their motivation to participate in the work (or any other activity) of their carers. As children grow older, they become more selective, with other activities (schooling, extra-curricular activities, peers) taking more of their time. Yet, as this article aimed to demonstrate, work remains embedded in a web of relationships, negotiations, and struggles.

Four-year-old children already had a good sense of which activities fall in the realm of work and which in the realm of play. Children at the age of eleven already gave culturally appropriate definitions of what is play and what work. They thought of work as an activity that represents obligation, an activity in which you have to follow someone’s instructions, and which is often boring. In this regard, school was often related to work, although some children also found school homework fun and interesting. Play, on the other hand, is an activity one does based on their inner motivation, an activity in which one can do what (s)he wants and is fun. Yet from the children’s perspectives, the categories of work and play are not straightforward, and they subjectively categorized activities depending on how they felt performing them; thereby riding a tractor or potato harvesting could be labelled as play, and practising clarinet as work.

Eleven-year-old Nik, for example, explained his everyday activities in the work-play continuum: “For me work is play, for example sawing wood, driving a tractor, that’s all play to me. But things I have to do for school, that’s work. I do the vacuuming, I like to cook, I make different sauces, that’s my hobby. My hobby is also driving a tractor, a hobby is something that I do every day that I enjoy, for example archery is also a hobby for me.”

To preschool children, work was often tied to being grown up. In this respect, children approached “being like adults” through work, which was attested also by their explanations such as “I once transplanted a rose, I was alone and I did it, yes because I was grown up, I...”
did it”, “I observed my grandpa making a cake, so that I’ll know how to do it when I grow up”, or a girl who replied to whether she ever used a screwdriver by saying “Yes, I did, you know I once drank real coffee?” – coffee being a regular social event reserved for adults. In a similar vein, Jan and his friends using wine glasses during a birthday celebration (containing an energy drink, as Jan told me, further explaining that, although they all already tried alcohol, they’re not really into it) and discussing politics might be perceived as linked to approaching adulthood and independence. As this article demonstrated, participation in work within the family setting can also be associated with preparing for autonomous and independent life as an adult.

The sociality of children’s participation in work also manifests in the intertwining of the parents’ beliefs and practices, in the living environment itself (the differences between urban and rural surroundings), and in how children make meanings intersubjectively through their social interactions in the environing world (Toren, 2009). In Slovenia, the old prevailing cultural evaluation of work within the family setting persists, despite the changing political, economic, and social conception of socially acceptable work, which is being transformed under the neoliberal ideology along the entrepreneurial work ethic (see Turk Niskač, 2021b). The majority of the parents and kindergarten educators alike, believed children’s participation in work to be educational; that it would help the children develop independence and autonomy, learn how to take care of themselves in adult life, develop a sense of responsibility, a feeling of belonging, a sense of being equal and valued parts of the family, develop self-esteem, working habits (nothing happens by itself, learning to do things we don’t necessarily like or enjoy which nevertheless need to be done), life skills, solidarity (helping each other). Here, work is understood as an inextricable part of life itself, and embedded within the relationships.

In this sense, we can position work along other children’s activities embedded within their sociality, such as play, leisure and idling. Carrithers noted that sociality is directed towards other individuals: “Humans are available to each other, and their abilities are only developed and transformed by others and in a respect of a social environment. The capacities of sociality may be in individuals, but they are completed only between them in intersubjectivity” (1990: 201). Participant observation in kindergartens and the photographs taken by preschool and primary school children point to the importance of sociability in all aspects of children’s interactions. It stands to reason that relationships established through joint activity can play an important role in the children’s motivation to participate (or not participate) both in play and in work. Here, work can be perceived both as a meaningful occupation and as a source of cooperation, struggle and negotiation. Finally, from sociality which is at the centre of it all, creative ideas and joint activities arise, whether playing, working, or simply idling.
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