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## Earning your own money - paid labour among teenagers in Sweden

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### Introduction

Work is a part of many teenagers' lives but we have little information about it.<sup>1</sup> Most studies of paid labour among teenagers are quantitative and the voice of the teenagers themselves is not often heard. In a Swedish survey 75 per cent of the teenagers had worked at some time.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, teenagers undertaking regular wage labour parallel to their schoolwork tell about their life at work and their economic situation. The questions were: Why do they work? How much money do they dispose of? How do they spend their money? Do they save money? Do they express the links between moral values and work? What is their parents' attitude towards their work?

### Methods

Teenagers who distributed a local weekly and fortnightly paper were interviewed. Both papers are distributed in the afternoon. The papers have been distributed by schoolchildren throughout the almost 80 years of their history – it is hard to get adult distributors since the working hours are only 1.5 each week and the income 480 SEK per month. There are 21 districts and accordingly 21 teenagers employed. Of these, seven, four girls and three boys, were interviewed at home, the interviews taped, transcribed and analysed according to the ideas of Grounded theory.

All the teenagers lived in single family houses and with both their parents. Five of them had another job in addition to newspaper distribution. They all attended compulsory school. Among the distributors the gender distribution tends to be even.

### Why work?

The basic reason for teenagers working was to earn money.

*To earn your own money. /.../ if I didn't have this job I could not buy as many things as usual.*

Karl would have enough money even if he didn't work, and uses his salary for surplus consumption. He could manage without working. Some work to be able to afford something particular:

*I want a bike too, it was. It started with that - I wanted money for that.*

Matilda's work means that she no longer receives a regular allowance from her parents. She earns 1500SEK per month and does not see any need for money from them. She has another better-paid job. She can ignore it when her parents think that she buys too many clothes.

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<sup>1</sup> Jens Qvortrup *Barn halva priset* nordisk barndom i ett samhällsperspektiv (Esbjerg 1994) p. 78

<sup>2</sup> Per Nilsson *Fritid i skilda världar*, en undersökning om ungdomar och fritid i ett nationellt och kontextuellt perspektiv (Stockholm 1998) p. 113

*It is my own salary so I can decide on my own how much I spend.*

Earnings give teenagers the freedom to make their own choices, and make them independent. Sometimes purchases are discussed in the family and the parents are asked for advice, but the teenagers themselves make the final decision concerning what to buy or not.

*Yes, it is mostly freedom it is...it is simply fun.*

Five of them describe work as fun but several of their statements show that it is the earning of money that is fun. The jobs they have may be experienced as tedious or hard due to odd working hours. Working is not always fun - other activities may have to be sacrificed - but for Matilda the money outweighs the effort required. The work may also carry other implications. Two girls described how the distribution work also meant exercise:

*and then you get exercise because I have to run all the time almost like that.*

Exercise is not seen as the main reason for working but as an extra benefit to be gained from it. Exercise may also be seen as a motivation for the hard physical work required in newspaper distribution.

To work as a teenager may also be a strategy for success in your adult career. Emma works as a waitress in addition to her distribution job. Her future plans include a job in a hotel or restaurant. That is her interest and she enjoys this work. Experience of the business gives her an advantage in her career, in addition to the money. Erik wants to become an engineer. During his vacation he works in a factory, which gives him experience and an insight into industrial work which he thinks will be valuable later on.

Several informants stress the moral aspects of working, in comparison to other young people. Emma sees her non-working pals as lazy. Sanna comments on non-working young people expecting money from their parents:

*They, like, just ask at home and then they get some money like that - yes you mum, I am going shopping may I have some money - and like that - and yes of course they say and give money like that.*

Sanna has never asked for any extra money. She saves so that she never needs to ask. To her it is important to take responsibility and to learn to manage as an adult.

All the informants do domestic work to a greater or lesser extent at home. They all see this as a self-evident thing to do without being paid. However, they felt they ought to be paid some extra money for tasks such as cutting the lawn or painting fences. According to Erik it is 'will' or 'stubbornness' that are important attitudes for young people towards work, and not all of them have these character traits. He has these himself but doesn't know where he got them from. Parental attitudes on how to bring up children have an impact on the children's attitudes to work and responsibility, he says. Matilda also refers to personal characteristics as crucial for whether some young people work or not:

*It is very much that ... well, how you are that... well responsibility, like that /.../ some don't think about that they have to earn money themselves, that like they just take and take ...and like the money, they get.*

Matilda stresses that she is working even though the family isn't short of money. Filippa is 13 years old and distributes bread in addition to the newspaper. This means that she gets up at five a.m every Saturday morning in order to deliver the bread. She initiated the job herself and says that it is the money that is the driving force. She could manage very well without her earnings and can easily get extra money from her parents. In spite of that she is working to earn money. To her, work is a way to spend her spare time. Many of her friends are working and those who are not:

*They have something else to do. For instance one friend would certainly like to distribute ads or something but she has a horse and that demands a lot of time. So that is the reason.*

The other teenagers offered several different answers to the question why some young people work and others don't. Jonas and Karl say that many teenagers want to work but cannot find a job. Only one informant showed clearly that his work outside home was an act of solidarity with his family. He said on several occasions:

*Parents are not made of money, you know.*

By earning his own money he spares his parents an expense. They do not have to give him as much money as they otherwise would have done. Emma started working because she got too little pocket money and knew that she could not get more. By working, her need for money from her parents decreased.

#### **How did they find a job?**

Some teenagers heard about the newspaper distribution job from friends who were already working there, or got the job because they knew someone at the company. In some cases either they or their parents had seen an advertisement for workers. Generally the teenagers had to be pro-active to get the job. Only one had been asked by the employer as a result of his connections. Making a telephone call on the advice of friends was also the strategy used when looking for other jobs. Several said that they had called the paper, asked for a job and put themselves on a list. New employees often started as substitutes. This was a kind of test by the employer to see whether they were suited for the task.

*During a summer vacation the one who distributed in ... wanted two weeks vacation Then I worked those two weeks and then that was all good, and when he started again he didn't distribute all but skipped some and then I got the job instead. That was how I got it*

Several of the teenagers stressed the importance of connections and of being active yourself in looking for a job. Erik referred again to stubbornness as a positive individual characteristic in relationship to work.

All the teenagers' parents had a positive attitude towards their work. According to the teenagers, parents had an important role to play both during the search for a job and during its performance. To what extent parents were involved varied, however. Some actively assisted in job searching. They pointed out advertisements, accompanied the teenagers when they applied for a job, or gave support when the teenager told them about their plans or their job.

Erik had found out by himself that he wanted to work. Ever since he was young he had known that the opportunity to earn extra by working existed. Both his parents had been working in parallel with their studies when they were younger.

*They supported me when I started talking about phoning Magnus and asking there. Because then I was very nervous about phoning and asking for a job. I was very nervous in the beginning and then they supported me very much and said: 'Of course you will call', but maybe he gets angry, I thought like that. 'But no'... so they supported me very much.*

Sometimes parents took on a more active role. They collected the papers that the teenagers were to distribute. They could also act as substitutes if the teenager got sick or faced some other obstacle. Siblings could also play this role. This often happened without the newspaper's awareness. The teenagers took responsibility for the paper even when they could not do the job themselves. In this way the payment stayed in the family.

None of the teenagers lived under difficult conditions. They all had opportunities to get money from their parents or could spend the child-allowance or study-allowance. Nevertheless they worked. The support of the parents did not seem to depend on whether they saw the work of the teenager as economically important. In families where the parents were most active in finding a job there were also siblings who were working. In these families there seems to be an attitude that teenagers should learn to take responsibility for their work and for the money they earn. The activity of the parents can be understood as a strategy to socialise the teenagers into an adult attitude towards work and money.

#### **Money and consumption**

The teenagers were able to dispose of 700SEK to 1500SEK per month, including both wages and pocket money. The variation is mostly due to differences in work. All but one got additional money from their parents. All said that they had a lot of money compared to their friends and other teenagers. They put themselves in the middle of a scale from poor to rich, or at the rich end.

*I don't have so much money. But I feel rich anyway /.../ I feel rich even if I am not rich in comparison to older people. But if you compare with friends I think that I am rich. I earn 1000SEK per month and that is good I think.*

Erik includes the child-allowance under his earnings. Erik has to provide for his own everyday needs except for food and housing (probably including the telephone bill and the like). Some teenagers can identify a clear borderline between what they ought to pay for themselves and what their parents provide, while others have vaguer borderlines. All of them had to pay for what they call amusements, including cinema, disco and visits to the school cafeteria, and girls had to pay for cosmetics and perfume. Those who had to pay for clothes used the child-allowance and had an agreement with their parents about what to pay for themselves. It did not seem natural to them to ask their parents for more. Some parents contributed to more expensive purchases of clothes.

The main driving force for Filippa's work is earning money for her hobby of snowboarding. She does not have to provide for what she calls 'real needs', for example clothes - her parents do that. When she places herself in the middle on the poor-rich scale it is because she bases that only on the money teenagers get from their parents, which in her case is 240SEK per month. Erik, however, looked at all his income.

### Loans and consumption

All teenagers could do some shopping or visit a cafeteria during their school day. Some often brought money to school, others rarely did:

*Yes, most often, sometimes I don't either and then I do not borrow from some friend either because... because then I think that I made up my mind at home not to buy anything today.*

Several of them described the opportunity to borrow from friends if they had not brought any money, and how they themselves lent money to friends. It can be hard to get money back according to Jonas. It usually takes some time and it often happens that you have to nag to get it. Emma did not have problems getting money back, but on the other hand she was quick to pay back money she had borrowed. The teenagers borrow small sums from friends, to buy a cup of coffee or some sweets.

There are also more long-term loans. When Matilda began working to earn money for the purchase of a bike she borrowed money from her parents to buy it and then she started paying them back. Jonas worked to pay back a loan from his grandfather that he took on when he bought a moped. In four months he paid back 9500SEK.

*Well, I asked him, signed a contract then that if I borrowed the money I shouldn't start smoking or taking snuff and drinking but I should pay him.*

Jonas created the conditions of the contract. He admitted that he had strategic thoughts when doing it. He expected that it would be easier to get the loan if he promised, for instance, not to start smoking.

### Other opportunities to earn money

Several of the teenagers saw it as a good idea to get money for not smoking or as a reward for good grades. Money can be a carrot or a motivation for trying to be better at school or to stay away from dangerous stuff:

*You should tempt them by telling them that the better grades they get the more money you can get from us and things like that.*

Filippa did not agree:

*But I don't think it's OK when you get money for the grades. Because if you sit at home studying and do your best then /.../ if you find it hard to learn, it shouldn't affect what you get, money from the parents anyway.*

Nothing indicates that she is talking here from her own experience.

Boys described, as a means of getting a new and expensive moped, buying an old one in bad condition and mending it so it can be sold for profit, buying a better one, and doing the same all over again. Karl has a second job mending bikes. He combines an interest of his with work. He did not see this as work at first since he is not paid for it, but changed his mind since he gets spare parts corresponding to a wage of 20SEK per hour.

### Saving

All teenagers wanted to save money and they have all tried to, but with varying success. The purpose of saving was to buy an expensive item they wanted, or just to have money

in case they suddenly would like to buy something. Some saved for a more distant future, in order to be able to obtain a drivers license, buy a car or buy a flat. Some were aware of that in addition to their own saving their parents were saving on their behalf. Emma, who cannot save because she always finds something she wants, thought that teenagers in general do not manage to save. The saving of teenagers was mostly short-term, towards a particular goal. For Sanna, however, saving was a pleasure.

*...but I save and save and save and save and save and then when I am about to buy something then...no I want to save a little more.*

The other teenagers are not eager savers like this. To Sanna it is important to have control over her income and expenditure, and a buffer in case of unplanned expenses, since the child-allowance and her earnings are the only money she can get. She is aware that her parents expect her to take responsibility for her consumption but she also seems to enjoy taking that responsibility. Filippa is also saving, but relies on her parents to contribute:

*It is not that I get all I point at but if it is something I really want I will get it.*

#### Summary

The teenagers had chosen to work mainly in order to earn money. The wish for a particular thing may be the factor that makes a teenager decide to enter the labour market. It was common for this participation to expand. Five of the seven teenagers had more than one job. The pay compensated for the sometimes-heavy work. Some girls saw exercise as a benefit of work. A job could also be a step up on their career ladder. Some of the teenagers had their own theories of why young people work or not - personal characteristics, the attitudes of parents and connections are some factors mentioned. They found their jobs with the help of friends, advertisements and connections. They mostly had to be active in their searching. All parents had been supportive towards their work, a strategy to socialise the teenagers into an adult attitude towards work and money.

The teenagers disposed of between 700 and 1500 SEK per month. The three main sources of income were paid labour outside the home, contributions from parents in terms of pocket money, and contributions from the state as child- and study-allowances. Several of them were given incentives, such as pay for good grades or for a promise not to start smoking.

To borrow and lend money was a method for access to small sums between friends. The experience of payments from others varied. Large sums were borrowed from close relatives in order to buy expensive things. The regulation was only that they ought to pay back as they could.

How much of their own expenses the teenagers were expected to pay for varied. Parents seemed to have less influence on teenagers' consumption based on their own earnings compared to that based on contributions from the parents and the state.

The teenagers were positive about saving, but saving was often short-term and geared towards a particular purchase. Long-term saving was for a driving license, car or flat. Saving could also be a pleasure for some, mainly depending on the degree to which they were expected to take responsibility for their own needs and their own economy.

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