

Mini Essay

Childhood experiences of work: Reflection 9 (UK)


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I want to recount the small amounts of paid work that I did in the mid-1960s as a boy aged around 9-12 in the prosperous commuter suburb where we lived. This was about 30 miles north-west of Central London in Buckinghamshire, one of the ring of 'Home Counties' which surround the capital.

Cleaning cars for Mrs Norton

On one side of us lived Mr and Mrs Norton, a retired couple. She was proud of her car, a Morris 1100 runabout, and as a little boy I was passionate about cars, so I was delighted one day when she asked me to wash it as she was short of time. This soon became a regular job for which she paid me 2 shillings and sixpence (or 30 old pence) per time. This sum became 12.5 pence when Britain adopted decimal currency in 1971, but in the 1960s it could probably buy as much as £2 today. As a rate of pay, it did not compare badly with beginners' rates for unskilled formal manual employment.

At the time, my older sisters sometimes mowed Mrs Norton's lawns at twice the rate, or 5 shillings a time. I envied them because, besides the higher pay, this seemed like a grown-up, responsible job in comparison. However, in due course, they moved on to other things and Mrs Norton asked me to do her lawns too, which felt like a real advance – a promotion, if you like. After a while, our neighbour on the other side, Mrs Amar, also asked me to wash her car a few times. I remember less of that, except that the rate of pay was different – a little less, I think.

Naturally, I did chores for my parents too, including car-washing, lawn-mowing and, as a teenager, sawing and chopping up logs my father had pruned from his apple trees for use on the winter fire in the house. My knuckle still has a scar from the time when the saw slipped on the wood; it made me bleed prodigiously.

Although some of my friends were paid by their parents for similar jobs we were never paid in our family. This was a little disappointing, but we had to accept it. I think my parents, brought up as conservative rural people, saw it as a family duty for children to help out. Moreover, our family was large, and my father received only a middle manager's salary, and my parents were determined to purchase private educations for as many of the five of us as they could. Therefore, money was short for everything else – including pocket

money, of which we received less than any of my friends: from six years old, it was one penny per week for every year of our age up to 12.

Thoughts of paper rounds and Boy Scouts

Some of my friends did 'paper rounds', delivering newspapers to people's homes every day on behalf of local newsagents. This paid more than I got for my neighbours' chores. I envied my friends the extra money and their participation in what seemed something like an adult job. If I had had the chance (I never did), I would probably have done it; however, I did not like the idea of getting up before breakfast to deliver papers.

I was also a member of the Boy Scouts, and at Easter every year we raised funds under a national scheme called Bob-A-Job Week. This entailed knocking on people's doors in our scout uniforms to offer to do a household task, for one shilling (12 old pence or 5p) per job, which was signed for and we then paid the money to the scout group. The Girl Guides had a similar scheme called Willing Shilling.

In our village I remember that a frequent task was to remove weeds from flowerbeds, which I did not much enjoy, but you had to do whatever was requested. A few years ago, the Scouts abandoned Bob-A-Job Week for child safeguarding reasons. However, I never encountered any form of abuse and when I was 11, I was proud to win a small prize for raising the most money in my scout troop that year from Bob-A-Jobs.

I do remember one incident from the car-washing for Mrs Norton with shame. When I had finished the job one day, she took me into her kitchen as usual to pay me, but found she did not have enough cash in her purse. She was very apologetic and asked if two shillings would be enough on this occasion. But with the insolence of youth I said 'No'; we finally settled on 2s 3d instead of the usual 2s 6d. I still feel very embarrassed by my show of rudeness and greed (especially towards an old woman).

This mini-essay is part of the 'childhood experiences of work' series. As we prepared to launch ACHA we asked partners to reflect on their own childhood experiences of work. The prompt was simple and open: approach it in however you like; write as little or as much as you like, in whatever form you like; try to put yourself back into your frame of mind as a child; use 18 years old as a rough cut-off age, and think about harm.

Eighteen reflections were received from ten women and eight men aged from 29 to 70 years, who grew up in the UK (7), Ghana (3), Netherlands (2), Canada (2), Argentina (1), Brazil (1), Denmark (1) and US (1).

If you would like to share your childhood experiences of work please send a short narrative (under 1,000 words) to ACHA (ACHA-Enquiries@ids.ac.uk). All narratives that are published on the ACHA website will be anonymised.

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