

Damaged Bodies? Exploring Children's Bodily Experiences of Load Carrying in Ghana

Gina Porter¹, Kate Hampshire², Albert Abane³ and Augustine Tanle³

¹ Durham University, Anthropology, Durham, UK

² Durham University, Anthropology, Durham, UK

³ University of Cape Coast, Geography, Cape Coast, Ghana

r.e.porter@durham.ac.uk

This paper draws on empirical data regarding children's bodily experiences of load carrying in urban and rural areas of Ghana. Wherever transport services are deficient, or households lack the economic purchasing power to acquire transport equipment or pay fares, much everyday transport work needed to sustain the family and household is delegated to young people, especially girls. They tend to occupy the lowest rung in the social hierarchy and the carrying they are expected to do can be interpreted as embodied, performed and 'naturalized' social position (since portering is a very low status occupation). Young porters do not merely perform their tasks but, through the bodily positions they take up, are seen to enact their social position as servants to their (adult) masters. Carrying is thus arguably a daily reaffirmation of mobile servility. The complex intertwining of perceptions about physical capabilities and gender stereotyping supports this interpretation: trucks are too hard for girls to push, yet girls are expected to contribute more than boys when it comes to portering. Girls are trained in the embodied skill of headloading because they will be expected to draw on this throughout their lives. The load they carry is increased gradually over time in this careful body management. They can be construed to be building up body capital (Jackson 1997): flexibility, muscle tone and strength will all be developed over years of hard work.

Drawing on in-depth interviews and a survey of 1,000 children aged c. 9-18 years, we examine the scale of children's load carrying activity and consider its potential implications (bearing in mind that there is more to carrying than mere physical weight). The children we interviewed clearly accept their labour responsibilities in household maintenance, but when we enquired about their experiences of load carrying, they frequently referred to head, waist and neck pain and to exhaustion. Nearly three-quarters of the thousand children we surveyed reported pain from load carrying over the course of a week. This paper raises many questions regarding the impact of load-carrying on children's bodies, not least longer-term impacts in adulthood and old age.