

Anthropology and Childhood in South America: Perspectives from Brazil and Argentina

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Abstract: Childhood has recently become a legitimate field for anthropological research in South America, a region known for issues related to diversity and inequality. With its renewed inclusion on public agendas, it has acquired visibility at conferences and publications within anthropology. In this paper, we will address some of the main features of this field of anthropological research as developed in South America, because although there have been valuable contributions that focus on the region's own issues and follow its intellectual traditions, few of these studies have reached mainstream anthropological journals. When examining the production of the past two decades, we will look at the significant role of a young generation of researchers who began publishing in the 1990s, and at the important advances in the ethnology, ethnography and anthropology of education that have made this possible.

Keywords: Anthropology, South America, Childhood, Children, Ethnography

Résumé : L'enfance est récemment devenue un champ de recherche anthropologique légitime en Amérique du Sud, une région marquée par sa diversité et ses inégalités. Avec son inscription renouvelée dans les manifestations publiques, le champ a gagné en visibilité dans les colloques et les publications en anthropologie. Dans ce texte, nous soulignerons quelques unes des principales caractéristiques du développement de ce champ en Amérique du Sud ; pourtant, si d'importantes contributions, centrées sur les défis de la région et dans le droit fil de ses traditions intellectuelles y ont vu le jour, peu d'entre elles sont parues dans les plus grandes revues anthropologiques. Lorsque l'on se penche sur la production scientifique des deux dernières décennies, on ne peut manquer de relever le rôle significatif d'une jeune génération de chercheurs qui a commencé à publier dans les années 1990, d'une part, et les avancées importantes de l'ethnographie, de l'ethnologie et de l'anthropologie de l'éducation qui l'a rendue possible, d'autre part.

Mots-clés : Anthropologie, Amérique du Sud, enfance, enfants, ethnographie

Introduction

Childhood has recently become a legitimate field for anthropological research in South America, gaining visibility at conferences and in publications within anthropology, as well as on public agendas. Both academic and policy literature have worked with a definition of boys and girls as active, reflexive social subjects and as the bearers of rights, rather than merely being objects of compassion and/or repression. Nevertheless, up until the 1990s childhood and children were only marginal subjects in anthropology and, more generally, in the social sciences. This was similar to the way in which women were excluded from anthropological

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analysis for many years, making their experiences invisible while silencing their voices. In South America, this lack of attention was manifested in anthropological conferences, where there was no specific place for research on childhood and children until that decade.

In this paper, we will address some of the main features of the anthropology of childhood and children in South America. Despite of valuable contributions rooted in the region's intellectual traditions, few of these studies have reached mainstream anthropological journals. Through examining the range of publications that have emerged over the past two decades, we will look at the significant role of a young generation of researchers and at the important precedents in ethnology, ethnography and anthropology of education that nourished their work.

Latin America is a large region with many countries and different histories. Although these countries share a colonial history that connects them to the Iberian countries, and the presence of numerous native peoples, with particular features and trajectories, the diversity in national histories makes each country distinct. It is thus difficult to speak of the region as a whole. Additionally, the countries vary significantly in size, population, economy, and participation in the global market. Each country is also diverse internally, while economic and social inequalities are rampant in most of the countries. Their ethnic composition differs, as does the number of languages spoken, their migratory processes and the ways in which ethnic diversity has been recognized at both local and national level. These differences undoubtedly affect the lives of children.

Another reason for not speaking of a Latin American anthropology of children is that anthropological traditions vary greatly across the region and within each country. Therefore, this paper will focus on South America, and mainly on Brazil and Argentina where important advances have been made. As anthropologists trained and conducting research in these countries, we are more familiar with the contexts of these countries, their children, and their anthropological traditions. While reviewing anthropological studies produced in these region, we will signal some of the main themes, approaches, methodological and conceptual contributions. We thus hope to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary anthropology of childhood and children, a field where South American researchers have much to offer.

Contributions to the Historization of Childhood

In South America, researchers from the fields of history, the history of education and anthropology have made noteworthy contributions to the historization of childhood, that is, to recognizing its changing nature.

The historicity of childhood - as noted by Philippe Ariès from the *École des Annales* in 1960 - is a key analytical concept, also for this region. This is because South America began a process to institutionalize childhood similar to that which took place in Europe at the end of the 19th century when “global modernity” swept the region (Carli 2002). As part of this process, the stuts of “childhood” was framed by discursive borders that gradually formed institutions such as nuclear families, nurseries, schools, clinics and other institutions dedicated specifically “to process the child as a uniform entity” (Jenks 1996: 6). At the same time, the growing concern with childhood health and hygiene led to the institutionalization of new clinical disciplines: pediatrics and later, puericulture.

In this regard, the contributions of María Adelaida Colangelo are significant for the case of

Argentina. Colangelo has shown the importance of the new field of puericulture in the construction and normalization of the child and of childrearing practices since the beginning of the 20th century. In a country once considered to be “ill from under-population”, the frequent use of “agricultural metaphors” in puericulture literature reinforced the image of the child as representing mere future while connecting it with the national project of exporting agricultural products (Colangelo 2004). Brazil has experienced a similar process in terms of the medicalization of childhood. In the 19th century, some sub-fields within medicine made motherhood and childhood their focus; families experienced the normalization of their lives, motherhood was reinvented as a natural phenomenon involving love and care (Freire da Costa 1979), and women’s bodies became subject to a new medical category: gynecology (Rohden 2009). Ribeiro shows that these interventions in the family are still defining how motherhood and healthy childhood are conceptualized in contemporary Brazil (2008). As Monarcha (1997) shows in her study, on early 20th century, childhood and its associated norm - the healthy child - were also defined by educators and in schools. Furthermore, the school setting is an important locus of constructing gender and class differences among children (Perosa 2006).

On the other hand, this process of institutionalizing childhood was unique to each country, especially because of the range of socio-cultural realities, which produced diverse historical processes in each country. As a result, several of the South American cases diverge from the hegemonic model of childhood and also in comparison to one another. For this reason, the studies focusing on the historical transformations of childhood in the region are of particular importance (Carli 2002, Cowen 2000, Cezar de Freitas 1997, del Priori 1999), although due to space limitations, we cannot discuss them individually.

One recurring feature across South America is shared with both North America and Western Europe: from the very beginning, the status of “child” has been reserved for a particular segment of the underage population. While “childhood” was applied to individuals who would be socialized and granted protection by the family and educational institutions, “minors” – those not included in childhood and regarded as potentially dangerous – would be the object of social and crime control at different level of society (García Méndez 1993, Alvin & Valladares 1988).

Guy (1998) argues that in North and South America during the first half of the 20th century, there was a major cross-border debate regarding the rights of children, who did not receive protection until state offices were created to provide services for children and their families. Starting in the mid-20th century, the state-family-child triad was gradually replaced by a focus on the child as a legal subject (Schuch & Fonseca 2009), and later the notion of the “universal child” was internationalized (Vianna 2002).

South America was ruled by oppressive dictatorships during the 1970s and 1980s. The repression affected not only adult opponents, who were kidnapped, tortured and murdered by the thousands, but their children as well. In many cases, particularly in Argentina, some of the children were killed or kidnapped after violent attacks on the homes of opponents, some were held in captivity with their mothers, others were born in illegal detention centers, and some were illegally adopted by members of the armed forces and their acquaintances. Interesting research has been done on these subjects. For example, Ana Cortez and Carla Donoso (2006) analyzed the experiences of young Chilean adults who, as children, had been held captive illicitly with their parents, while Carla Villalta (2006) investigated the structures by which children were illegally adopted in Argentina.

Thus, the experience of childhood has undergone significant transformations in recent years. These transformations have been interpreted by some researchers with an excessive focus on

mass media and consumption as a sign of the disappearance of “childhood” (Postman 1982). Such interpretations are imbued with nostalgia and moral regret over this “adultization” of children. This is based on the paradoxical assumption that childhood is a historical construction but should also remain unchanged, singular and univocal. This perspective, as one of us has argued elsewhere, constitutes a frequent misinterpretation within the so-called “central powers”, because these powers are reluctant to acknowledge the contingent nature of their own cultural models (Szulc 2004). We have also argued that it is essential to pay attention to the internal differences in “childhood”, since failing to do so would hinder a full understanding of the complexity of children’s lives (Cohn 2005a). For this reason, we argue that an anthropological approach should always take into account the historical nature of childhood, as the experiences and social representation of the first stage of life have been and always will be subject to transformations over time.

As research in anthropology has shown, childhood has not disappeared in South America. Not only does it continue to be relevant, but its level of visibility has also increased as a social category, as a field for intervention and as an experience, though it is one that is constituted in diverse and uneven ways.

Children at School

Anthropological investigations on childhood have been influenced significantly by the sub-field of the anthropology of education. In Spanish-speaking countries many studies have followed the seminal work of Elsie Rockwell (1995) since the 1980s, whose argument remains relevant today. She argued that the school is a dialectic place where much more than the reproduction of dominant relations occurs. Schools are also places where subaltern sectors appropriate knowledge that allows them to improve their situation. This is particularly pertinent in the context of South America where, as Batallán and Neufeld put it, “The right to education has been claimed by the people; education is not just a tool that has remained in the hands of dominant sectors” (1988: 2, our translation).

As such, the anthropology of education in South America has produced an interesting approach to everyday life at schools, one that takes into account the socio-economic and political context of formal education. Starting in the mid-1980s, a number of studies in Argentina have produced interesting material about the tension between families and schools (Neufeld 1988, Cerletti 2005) and the school’s role in promoting nationalism and assimilationism (Díaz 2001, Novaro 2003). Research has also drawn attention to the way in which cultural diversity has been treated in educational policies, in the production of classroom materials and in teaching practices since the 1990s (Achilli 1996, Neufeld & Thisted 1999) when a model of education that was theoretically open to ethnic and linguistic diversity gained consensus at the national and international levels (López 2006). A central point made by these researchers from the start is that the celebration of cultural diversity concealed social inequalities and their consequences for children, as students who embodied cultural diversity, such as migrant children from neighboring countries, were being excluded from many schools. Moreover, the analysis of classrooms materials used in Brazilian schools as late as the 1980s (Lopes da Silva 1987) shows that the country is depicted as homogeneous and united thereby concealing cultural differences. This pattern is also found in more recent studies (Gobbi 2006).

In Brazil, many scholars from the sciences of education are using ethnographic methods to discuss the school and the way in which children experience it (Nascimento 2011).

Anthropologists have turned their attention to studying schools, and in a recent study on art teaching at schools, Tragante (2011) paid special attention to the ways in which children perceive the works of art presented to them by their teachers, as well as the ways they engage in the production of art in this space.

Yet, most of the work done by anthropologists on schools in Brazil is about indigenous schooling experiences, since the school itself is challenged in these cases. Here, the national constitution has recognized that indigenous peoples have the right to a 'differentiated' school that responds to their particular needs concerning their languages, culture and history. As a result, Brazilian Indigenous communities (some of them with no previous schooling experiences) are designing their own school projects. Starting with a seminal study by Aracy Lopes da Silva in the 1980s, this field of ethnological research has expanded and, as scholars have been involved in designing both school projects and national politics, the field is exemplary in terms of combining research and social engagement (Lopes da Silva & Ferreira 2001, Cohn 2005b, Tassinari & Cohn 2009). Important contributions have been made by Ana Gomes (2006), who has studied and supervised research on indigenous people in Minas Gerais, in southeastern Brazil, and the schools they have constructed. This field is also marked by the contributions of some indigenous researchers, such as Darlene Taukane (1999), from the Bakairi people of central Brazil, who analyzed the pedagogical practices of her people both at school and beyond.

Children's social experiences and their conditioning factors, thus, surpass the field of formal education. The focus on childhood and the recognition and ethnographic representation of children's agency developed earlier among anthropologists working with the diverse cultural practices of indigenous children in their multiple social spaces.

Indigenous Children beyond School: an Ethnographical Approach

In both Argentina and Brazil, ethnographic research about indigenous children is a growing field. Although indigenous peoples are a classic theme in anthropological research in Brazil (Peirano 1999) and Argentina, it has taken several decades for their children to be taken into account (Nunes 2002b, 2003). This is despite the fact that some pioneering studies provided interesting descriptions and good insights to indigenous children¹.

In the case of Brazil, this field started to develop during 1990s, following the research project led by Aracy Lopes da Silva and Lux Vidal at the University of São Paulo. This project resulted in a book of ethnographic studies analyzing childhood among different indigenous peoples from Brazil (Lopes da Silva, Macedo & Nunes 2002). The work of Ângela Nunes among the Xavante and of Clarice Cohn among the Xikrin (Nunes 1999, 2002a and 2003, Cohn 2000a, 2000b and 2002a) have depicted the ways in which indigenous peoples conceive and experience childhood. This field has seen major development in recent years (Tassinari 2007).

The importance ascribed to children by indigenous people have been noted in earlier anthropological studies, but only in the past few decades serious and ethnographically focused efforts were made to study children's place in society. Such work has fully acknowledged and analyzed children's autonomy and their role as mediators between fields within their social

¹ See Schaden's work (1945, 1976) among the Guarani in southern Brazil, Fernandes' historical narrative of the Tupinambá who lived along the coast of Brazil in the 15th and 16th centuries (1976), and Hilger's detailed account of the lives of Mapuche children in the 1950s (1957).

world and between different worlds, such as between their people and non-indigenous people or between their world and the spiritual world (Alvarez 2004, Cohn 2002b, Lecznieski 2005, Tassinari 2007).

Interesting research with indigenous peoples has focused on educational matters. In Brazil, Myriam Alvares (2004) presents some indigenous conceptions of learning and personhood from her work with the Maxacali, an indigenous people from southeastern Brazil, linking them to their experiences in schools, while Antonella Tassinari (2001) researched what the Karipuna, an indigenous group from the north of the country, desired for their schools, taking into account their experience of schooling in the past and the way in which they conceive childhood and learning. Likewise, the way in which the Xikrin accepted the school project presented to them can only be understood by considering the value they place on schooling, regardless of the many disagreements between their own ways of teaching and learning; their views on children and children's capacities; and their expectations for school itself (Cohn 2002a, 2005c). Although the starting points differed, the analytical approach to the experiences of the Karipuna and the Xikrin permitted a comparison, which revealed two very different ways of engaging in schooling (Tassinari and Cohn 2009). Nunes (2003) has showed how Xavante children- another indigenous people from central Brazil - experienced their school years, analyzing the role school plays in their everyday lives. In Argentina, anthropologists working with indigenous children have also paid attention to their learning experiences at school and beyond (Hecht 2004, Enriz 2011, Szulc 2009). An extension of this work is a comparison of how Mapuche and Toba children experience bilingual intercultural education programs and how the programs fossilize and decontextualize their cultures and undermine their self-identification as indigenous people (Hecht & Szulc 2006).

In the debates about pedagogical practices aimed at indigenous people and their experiences in schools, the idea of “traditional ways of transmitting knowledge” and “informal ways of learning” appear time and again, although for many years these were merely assumptions. Recent anthropological research has provided a better understanding of the ways in which knowledge is transmitted, based on the practices and relations involved in such transmission (Cohn 2002a, 2005c, Nunes, 2003, Oliveira, 2005). Several Argentinean anthropologists have analyzed everyday processes of contextualized learning and peer learning among indigenous children, examining knowledge related to their daily activities, their native languages and their identities (Hecht 2004, Szulc 2007b, Enriz 2011). In Brazil, Codonho (2007) has described what she has termed the “horizontal transmission” of knowledge, that is, what is taught and learnt while the children are alone together, far from the eyes of adults.

Thus, the young generation of researchers has followed the ethnographic tradition but has created new themes for investigation. In the process, they have worked hard to overcome the oversight of issues related to childhood, the silencing of the children's experiences and perspectives that, as pointed out by Enriz, García Palacios and Hecht (2007), characterized earlier ethnography. At the same time, a holistic perspective on childhood has been promoted.

In Argentina, for instance, Andrea Szulc has done ethnographic research on the social construction of childhood and the construction of multiple subjectivities between Mapuche children living in the countryside and those who live in urban settings of the province of Neuquén. Her research pointed the heterogeneous and conflicting nature of such processes (2002), and showed how Mapuche children articulate multiple and contesting subjective positions - such as male or female, Mapuche, Catholic, Christian, Argentinean, rural worker, professional, etc—as active agents in the process of defining their identities (Szulc 2005, 2007). She highlighted how children do not merely absorb the identity messages transmitted by their relatives, teachers, nurses, priests, indigenous leaders and the mass media, but instead define and articulate them in their own way. This kind of processes has also been analyzed by

Mariana García Palacios, who focused on the diverse religious identifications which Toba (*qom*) children produce in an urban setting (2010).

For her part, Ana Carolina Hecht has studied the linguistic socialization of Toba children by linking linguistic practices and the ways in which a language is taught and learned with native ideas about childhood, adulthood, maturation and ethnic identification among others. While paying attention to children's practices and perspectives, she noticed the significant role they play as socializing agents of other children, either promoting the maintenance of the Toba language or its shift to Spanish (2010: 250). Another researcher, Carolina Remorini analyzes the practices and representations of growth, development and health of Mbya children and has clearly shown children's active participation in caring for other children (2004, 2008), while Noelia Enriz has analyzed the formative experiences of Mbya children within everyday play practices, religious spaces and schools to emphasize children's active processes of appropriation of knowledge (2011).

Researchers have not only analyzed the formative experiences that occur outside the school setting but also focused on another sort of practices, such as those linked to children's home production and reproduction, religious experiences and participation in their people's claims. These studies have nurtured the construction of childhood as a legitimate field for anthropological research, in which children are relevant agents, a perspective that has been increasingly supported by the anthropologists of education (Novaro 2009, Santillán 2009).

Childhood in Subaltern Populations, Minors, Street Children

Claudia Fonseca's seminal work among subaltern populations in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, has offered valuable insights into the circulation of children among their parents, relatives and neighbors, the judicial appropriation and institutionalization of poor children, and their categorization as minors (1995). Fonseca's work has had major repercussions for anthropological research on childhood in both Argentina and Brazil.

Minority issues were initially studied by sociologists as a "social problem" that became the target of special policies (see Alvin and Valladares 1988, Guemureman 2005). Starting in the early 1990s, anthropologists focused on the complex everyday manifestations of such problems as well as on the experiences and perspectives of the children involved.

In Argentina, for instance, a very interesting study by Maria Gabriela Lugones (2005) examined the actual practices of justice administration and the moral nature of what appeared to be technical reports. The study revealed the key role which non-professional social assistants played in the practical definition of who was a "minor" in the province of Córdoba during the 1950s.

Valuable contributions have also been made to understand the complexity of the processes of implementing new laws on childhood, for instance by Pilar Uriarte in Brazil (2005), and Belén Noceti (2008) and Julieta Grinberg in Argentina. Analyzing the case of Buenos Aires in a period of legal modifications, Grinberg pointed out disputes between institutions and professionals over the conceptualization and application of child protection and children's rights, revealing their influence on the ways in which "children at risk" are dealt with in such complex bureaucracies (2004). Noceti has also worked on the contemporary experiences of institutionalized children (2005), as Jorgelina Di Iorio, who analyzed the construction of social identities among those children from an institutional psychology perspective (2008). Gregori and Silva (2000) closely examined the lives of institutionalized children in Brazil

along with the goals of the institutions themselves. Hijiki (2006) studied an educational project designed to teach music to these children, while Paula Miraglia (2001) discussed the fear and violence at a juvenile delinquent center infamous for the violent treatment of its children. Miraglia also provided an ethnographical approach to the hearings with children and adolescents at the juvenile courts of San Pablo (2005). Similarly, Fernanda Ribeiro (2009) has analyzed the work of the courts that make decisions on children's custody.

One "social problem" in Brazil that has drawn much international attention is "street children". Starting in the 1990s, anthropological works have aimed to understand how street children perceive their own situation and act upon it. Gregori (2000) showed that living on the street is regarded by some children as a valuable alternative, and, contrary to what was expected, that many of the street children maintain links to their families. Her work revealed that these children circulate between the street, services specialized in receiving them for "re-socialization" (i.e., foster homes or other alternatives) and their families. In the process of circulating, children find many ways to connect with others, despite the fact that this may be regarded as contradictory by adults and by the state. Gregori's ethnography among those children threw light on their strategies for living on the street, the ways they organize their lives, organize themselves in groups and geographically, as well as the conflicts they face while living in the streets. Despite being seen as "children" and therefore too young to have a sex life, these street children deal with parenthood and sexuality. They engage in sexual relationships, discuss it openly, and deal with parenthood in many ways, regarding themselves as different to "children raised in homes," whom they consider overprotected and childish (Calaf 2008). In Colombia, Alexander Perez Alvarez has done valuable work on how street vendors of Medellin perceive urban space (2005).

Works such as these are helpful in showing how children themselves are active in forging their own paths, even when these are not the paths planned for them by their caretakers i.e. their parents or relatives, the state and the institutions that serve them.

Social Notions of Childhood

Anthropological studies with indigenous children were among the first to show how social conceptions of childhood and personhood are crucial to understanding practices of caring and education, particular features of indigenous children's experience of childhood and the autonomy showed by those children. Anthropologists followed the tradition of this field of research, which has shown how bodies, conceptions of personhood and self are important concepts for understanding social practices, especially those involved in forming new persons and caring for children (Cohn 2000c, 2002b). Clarice Cohn's work among the Xikrin showed how the caring and educational practices of children can only be understood in relation to Xikrin theories of personhood and body, and revealed, for example, how decorating children's bodies could be understood as a formative practice as well as an expression of childhood in this society (Cohn 2000a, 2000b, 2002a).

The same point emerged from other studies. Eunice Nakamura (2009), for example, studied how children's depression is diagnosed and showed that it is defined by comparing and contrasting it with an image of the 'normal' and healthy child. In the same way, Rafael Fioravanti has drawn attention to how voluntary work in a hospital for children with cancer aimed at restoring childhood for children who were thought to have "lost" it to the disease, and how volunteers considered children's smiles as the payment for their volunteer work (2006). Rafael Wainer has also done interesting research in a pediatric hospital in the city of

Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he explored the social and medical processes that create, support and surround the relationship between children and death among terminally ill children, their families, and healthcare providers (2008).

Methodological Approaches

Many efforts have been made to include children as capable interlocutors in ethnographic research, bringing together their practices and points of view about their social world. For instance, in order to understand how children from a small, rural place in northeastern Brazil come to develop their own ideas about religion, Flavia Pires (2007) has developed many methodological strategies to reflect on ‘being an adult and doing research among children’. Her approach combined writings and drawings made by the children along with photographs and videos. Hijiki and Miraglia (2001) have written about their filming experiences while researching among children kept in penal institutions.

Cohn (2005b) has examined drawings by indigenous children and argues that if we take into account how these drawings were made and for whom, they can reveal much about what children think of their worlds, i.e., how they understand and picture them. In this way, she has researched how Xikrin children conceive their "culture" at a time when indigenous culture is constantly defined and redefined by public opinion and many actors (2010).

In the above-mentioned study of the language socialization of Toba children, Hecht (2007) designed and held a workshop as an alternative way of accessing children’s views. Subsequently, she developed a set of interesting reflections with García Palacios on how a workshop could be a research strategy (García Palacios & Hecht 2008). Similar reflections appear in an interesting study by Trpin (2004) with the children of Chilean migrant families in a rural setting of the Argentine Patagonia. Another methodological development emerged in, Carla Donoso’s work in Chile with children living with AIDS who had not been informed about their health condition. She started to implement role play as a research method at the suggestion of one of the children. This experience allowed her to learn how much the children actually knew of their illness through their daily experiences of medical treatment (2005).

Szulc has also explored the value of life histories and innovative strategies for ethnographic research with children, such as group interviews and discussing “archetypical” cases with them². However she has pointed out that traditional ethnographical techniques, i.e. participant observation and open interviews, should not be ruled out in advance. Doing so, she argues, would be equivalent to exoticizing children, treating them as a different kind of subject for whom only particular procedures are appropriate (Szulc 2001).

Final Considerations: On Political Participation, Children’s Agency and “Children’s Cultures”

In the Western model, the only connection between childhood and politics should be protection and assistance, but nevertheless, childhood is a political construction. This is clear

² Szulc refers to certain cases as “archetypical” when they have repeatedly arisen in the open-ended interviews and daily conversations of each social observation context. She argues that used as material for discussion with children and adults, such cases turned out to be truly useful in revealing and comparing the representations of diverse actors and their positions on a certain issue (Szulc 2011).

when children reveal their political position and their deep understanding and involvement in political disputes, as Andrea Szulc's research among Mapuche children in Argentina has indicated (2002, 2011). Anne Marie Smith's work with indigenous children in México (2007) has made a similar point, offering a very interesting problematization of "participation" along with studies carried out by the team conducted by Graciela Batallán and Silvana Campanini in Argentina (2008).

Recent work by Flavia Pires (2010) has shown how the 'Bolsa Família' - the well-known grant policy implemented in Brazil eight years ago - can have an unexpected empowering effect on children. Her research revealed that some families believe that the money they receive (which is based on the number of children in each family) is the child's own money, thus giving children the right to decide how it is used. Antonadia Borges (2010) has been working with young researchers from Recanto das Emas, a small town that neighbors Brazil's capital city, and her work with this team also draws attention to how children understand politics.

Thus, as we have stated above, in South American academic and political discourses, a consensus has been reached in terms of defining boys and girls as active, reflexive social subjects and as the bearers of rights, as opposed to the mere objects of compassion-repression.

Acknowledging children's agency requires reflection and the reconsideration of the definition of the child as merely a pupil. As Antonella Tassinari has boldly asserted, all researchers carry the image of school children with them in their work, since that is the experience we ourselves had as children, regardless of whether we loved or hated our time at school (2009). Thus, as Tassinari points out, we have to acknowledge the importance the school system has had in defining childhood, but at the same time, we need to be especially careful in order to see childhood outside of school and beyond the model produced by recent Western history and, thus, to see young people as much more than school children. We hope that this will be possible not only when considering "other" children - indigenous children, some of whom have never been to school, or the children of the subaltern population - but also when focusing on the experiences of middle or upper class urban children, whose childhood is also anything but "natural" and is not restricted to life with the family or at school.

Another interesting point has been introduced by Angela Nunes and Rosario Carvalho (2010), who argued that anthropological studies on childhood issues should not only "give voice" to children, but also take into account the effects of their practices within their society to fully acknowledge children as active social agents. It is no coincidence that children's agency has been mentioned more frequently by non-indigenous researchers whose ethnographic work is done in indigenous contexts. It is possible that the ethnographer's cultural incompetence in that context is precisely what allows him/her to notice children's competences in cases where children are frequently regarded as capable subjects (Szulc 2011). That is why the ethnographical approach is crucial for this sort of research, as it challenges our own common-sense notion through daily intercultural interaction.

At the same time, however, research in this region has revealed that children's agency should not be overestimated. As we have been insisting, recognizing children's capacity for action and reflection should not make us overlook the structural, social, economic and political conditions that limit such agency in varied ways. At the same time, taking into account these limits should not involve turning children into passive objects (Szulc 2004). It is also necessary to acknowledge the weight of the conceptions of personhood and childhood that guide different actions toward children, as the studies of indigenous childhoods have shown.

Therefore, recognizing children's agency should not lead us to isolate their practices or representations or to seek "their world" - world understood to be autonomous. For this reason,

we have warned against analyzing what children do and think as “children’s cultures” because this may suggest either a universal point of view shared by all children, or the idea that children inhabit their own specific sociocultural world, which artificially separates their experiences and views from those of other subjects and institutions, with whom they usually have asymmetric relations (Szulc 2004, Cohn 2005a). Similarly, we have argued against the isolation of anthropological research on childhood and children from the broader traditions, debates and research strategies of anthropology as a whole (Szulc 2007a). In the words of Clarice Cohn, “to do anthropological research with children is, first and foremost, to do anthropological research” (2005a, our translation).

This effort is made by anthropologists all over South America. As we have shown, research has increased not only in quantity but also in terms of its analytical and ethnographic focus, stressing that childhood is a social and historical construction, which is diverse, changing and socially disputed. In this regard, many social scientists have worked hard to advance a view of children as social agents and cultural producers, capable of providing valuable clues to understanding complex sociocultural realities. We hope this brief outline of this region’s main research themes, approaches, methodological and conceptual contributions will increase interest in the challenges facing anthropologists who research childhood in South America and in how we are responding to these challenges in varied yet complementary ways.

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