

Naturalism, Agency and Ethics in Ethnographic Research With Children. Suggestions for Debate

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Résumé :

La perspective ethnographique s’est répandue au cours des décennies passées, en particulier dans le domaine des études de l’enfance. Bien que cette perspective soit très bien accueillie, il n’en reste pas moins vrai qu’on éprouve une certaine inquiétude par rapport au fait que l’expression « donner de la place à la voix des enfants » est devenue un cliché, à la fois dans et en dehors du champ académique. L’article entend contribuer au débat à propos de l’enfance, de

l'ethnographie et de l'agencéité sur la base de certains résultats issus d'un projet de recherche collective initié en 2008 à l'Université de Buenos Aires. Le projet porte sur le lien entre les approches méthodologiques et les approches conceptuelles de l'enfance et des enfants d'une part; entre l'enquête ethnographique, concernant l'agencéité des enfants, et les considérations éthiques d'autre part.

Mots-clés : Agencéité, enfance, Éthique, ethnographie, Méthodologie

Abstract :

The ethnographic perspective has been expanded beyond anthropology in the past decades, particularly in the field of childhood studies. We welcome this new perspective but are also concerned because the rhetoric of "giving voice to children's voices" has become commonplace both inside and outside the academic field. In this paper we would like to contribute to this debate on childhood, ethnography and agency by presenting some results of a collective research project -which began at the Universidad de Buenos Aires in 2008. We will address the profound connection between methodological and conceptual approaches to childhood and children, the ethnographic inquiry into children's agency and some ethical considerations on such ethnographic work.

Keywords : Agency, Childhood, Ethics, Ethnography, Methodology

Introduction

Anthropology has traditionally faced difficulties – mainly methodological ones – when approaching childhood, frequently due to Western notions of childhood implicitly at stake. For example, this is particularly clear in the line of research known as the “ethology” of child behavior, developed in the United States since 1970. From this perspective, behavior has been studied through the exclusive use of direct observation techniques, thus denying the significant role that the interpretations of social actors play in the constitution of their actions. This approach to children “as if they couldn’t talk” (Blurton Jones 1981) has clearly disregarded them as capable and reflexive social agents (Szulc 2004).

Mary Ellen Goodman's work proves to be a remarkable exception to this reification of children in traditional anthropological studies. Drawing on a perspective clearly influenced by historical particularism, Goodman (1957) analyzed values, attitudes and social concepts among North American and Japanese children. Her work argues emphatically in favor of children’s ability to serve as ethnographic informants. However, her approach to childhood did not distance itself from the commonsense notion of “childhood innocence”. Indeed, Goodman explicitly appeals to this conception when justifying children’s qualifications as competent informants (1957: 979), thus assuming their transparency (Szulc 2007).

An interesting reconceptualization of childhood and children has taken place since the 1980s, when children reappeared in anthropology, in other disciplines and in western societies as social subjects who, even when conditioned by their context, develop diverse strategies and interpretations in and of their social environment. This “new paradigm” (James 2007) confronted adult-centered perspectives that discredited children’s experiences and views *a priori*, conceptualizing childhood as a historical and cultural construction and children as social agents.

In connection to this, in the past decades the ethnographic perspective has been rediscovered both within anthropology and beyond. In the field of childhood studies, ethnography has often been signaled as a more suitable approach than experimental research or statistics, because it gives children a more direct voice and greater participation in the production of knowledge (James & Prout 1990). Within this perspective, Latin America’s anthropological production has since grown considerably, mainly through the use of ethnography.

Although we share this new perspective, we agree with James (2007) who has warned that the rhetoric of “giving voice to children’s voices” has become commonplace both inside and outside the academic field. Therefore, in this paper we would like to contribute to this debate on childhood, ethnography and agency by presenting some of the results of a collective research project entitled “Ethnographic research on and with children: A review and exploration”. A project developed since 2008 by a team of young researchers who study different childhood issues but share our concerns and reflections regarding the methodological aspects of such challenging work.

As we will explain in the following pages, there is still a long way to go before children are effectively recognized as social agents. On the one hand, anthropologists have to treat children as competent interlocutors in the research process. On the other hand, this incorporation of children’s actions and views should avoid the romantic perspective that neglects their socio-cultural context. Instead, we will argue here that in order to define children as social agents, their agency –

their strategies and interpretations - must be considered linked and conditioned by the social and cultural world in which they live, a task for which ethnography is vitally important. In the following sections we present some of the collective reflections and concerns that arose from our research practices, mainly about the profound connection between methodological and conceptual approaches to childhood and children, the ethnographic inquiry into children's agency and some ethical considerations on this ethnographic work.

Why do we choose an ethnographic approach?

First of all, we choose an ethnographic approach because it allows us to pay attention to what happens in each context as well as to the meanings it has for the different subjects involved. "The goal is to become familiar with the significances, perspectives and definitions used by actors to interpret, classify and experience their world" (Batallán & García 1992: 86, our translation), displaying a premeditated ignorance, because "the more a researcher acknowledges what he does not know (or the much he comes to question his certainties), the more prepared he will be to understand different realities on their own terms" (Guber 2001: 16, our translation).

For instance, in her ethnographic research with children diagnosed with Attention Deficit with or without hyperactivity Syndrome (AD/HD), team member Pia Leavy (2011) has noted how hegemonic parameters of "normality" constructed by medicine and psychiatry are in fact reinterpreted by teachers in their daily activities at school, as they deal with subject singularities, using and reconstructing certain model of a normal childhood, which is profoundly connected to the persisting widespread ideal of the "good student."

In the second place, ethnography turns childhood into a phenomenon that is not taken for granted. In this way, it enables anthropological research into how each society constructs this stage of the vital cycle, considering its historical, contingent and heterogeneous nature (Szulc 2004). This is a key feature of ethnography as an approach: to confront concepts believed to be universal and natural - as is the case of childhood - with the diversity of human experience (Guber *op. cit.*), incorporating the meanings different social actors build around them.

Therefore, an ethnographic approach encourages the elicitation of the social practices and representations that constitute childhood in each context. In other words, it covers not only the actions of institutions and adults but also the ways in which boys and girls experience their reality (Szulc 2008). Both aspects are considered by M. Celeste Hernández in her graduate research on the ways different children from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds use and represent urban space, as well as on how those practices and ideas configure urban childhood experiences.

Flexibility and our discipline's tradition in carefully listening to others are the features that explain why ethnography is currently considered the most appropriate method to give children a direct voice and allow them greater participation in the production of knowledge.

The ethnographic approach is thus complex, constituted by intertwined field experiences and analytical interpretations, as Fonseca (1999) argues. Therefore, we concur with Lambert and McKevitt (2002) in their concern about the misinterpretation of ethnography as equivalent to the mere application of qualitative techniques, isolated from their theoretical foundation. Ethnography develops from an understanding of social reality as historical, heterogeneous and conflictive, and from the acknowledgment of social agency. Also, ethnography means taking into account the

constructed nature of knowledge, as well as the complex relationship between speech and practice.

We are particularly interested in stating that ethnography should not be limited to conducting open interviews. That is because we are aware of how, specially in the field of childhood, interviews may frequently elicit only idealized or nostalgic notions, which strongly diverge from the actual conceptions and practices that constitute childhood in each context (Szulc 2008: 10). As argued by Lambert and McKevitt (2002: 211), “actions speak as loud as words”.

Therefore, we consider participant observation a key technique, since significant aspects of social actions are not expressed in verbal language. Some investigations can even forego interviews, such as Noelia Enriz’s work on the knowledge that circulates through Mbyá children’s play (2006, 2008).

The challenge of carrying out fieldwork with children has often been addressed by designing and applying innovative techniques, either as an aim in itself or as a way to produce materials to be discussed later in an interview. Some of those techniques involve asking children for drawings, diagrams, written texts, carrying out workshops or different games, or working with audiovisual materials (Cohn 2005; Donoso 2005; Hecht 2007; Pires 2007; Szulc 2011; Toren 1993; Trpin, 2004; Van der Brug 2011; Vogel 2006). As a team, we are committed to exploring, discussing and consolidating techniques for ethnographic research on childhood, with the children themselves.

According to the relational nature of the production of knowledge (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1995), our premise is the impossibility to produce knowledge on the “others” without actually producing it with the “others”. Therefore, we maintain that research arises from comparison and articulation among different types of knowledge that the different (and unequal) social actors have, not only in terms of the renowned dichotomy among the researcher and the researched, but also regarding the heterogeneity of perspectives among the different subjects within each of the members of the aforementioned dyad (Hecht 2010).

In the case of research with children, this is exacerbated by the generally asymmetrical relationship between adults and children. Notwithstanding, we believe it is possible to overcome those distances by implementing several alternative methodological strategies and supplementing them with ethnography in its strictest sense.

For example, when researching the process of the linguistic shift from Toba to Spanish among children of a Toba neighborhood in the suburbs of Buenos Aires, Ana Carolina Hecht designed a workshop on the Toba language for children. Thanks to the workshop, the ethnographer was able to establish relationships and ways of interacting with the children that differed from those prevailing at home and school. Furthermore, this research strategy allowed the ethnographer, as Rockwell (1987) states, to “document undocumented aspects of social reality” (our translation). In this case, that undocumented aspect was children’s linguistic competence in the indigenous language, which Hecht achieved through games and other practical activities, instead of asking children whether they knew the Toba language or not (2010).

However, traditional techniques such as participant observation and open interviews can also be fruitful to research with children. Therefore, based on our own experience, we recommend not selecting a strategy in advance. Instead, methodological decisions should be taken in each case based on the goals of each investigation and the specific situations we face in our fieldwork. Following Szulc, we suggest “not placing too much emphasis on the otherness of children or underestimating them by foregoing traditional ethnographic resources, which are usually valid and

productive" (2011: 83, our translation).

"Naturalist naivety" and "subjectivist overflow"

From our perspective, fieldwork should not be considered a stage of direct observation without theory; it should not attempt to produce an unmediated replication of reality. Instead, we regard fieldwork as a particular approach rooted in the intersubjective and relational nature of anthropological knowledge (Szulc 2008). As Szulc has stated in a previous paper, the ethnographer's subjectivity is not necessarily an obstacle, but in some cases rather a tool to reveal the unexpected aspects of a certain matter. As Szulc recounts, a ten-year-old boy once told her that he already knew certain words in Mapuzugun before his Mapuche teacher mentioned them in class. Although she was not aware of it at the time, she applied common sense when she asked him:

A: Oh, did you? And who taught you those words?

F: Well... I taught them to myself together with the boys, at the ruka.

His answer brought up the concept of learning implicit within the question, according to which a child learns everything he/she knows from adults. That concept, although incorrect, allowed the explanation of a different way of learning, which went on to become very important in her research (Szulc 2008: 2-3).

At the same time, from our point of view, working in a reflexive way with our own subjectivity does not mean exacerbating subjectivism to the point of omitting what is outside us, those social matters that we set out to research. As Rockwell points out: "Although the author is present in every (ethnographic) record, what was observed also has to be present" (1987: 5, our translation). Therefore, when conducting ethnographic work with children, an attitude of reflexive watchfulness should be adopted, avoiding acts of imposition by which a researcher can put words into the informant's mouth (Jociles Rubio 2005: 200). Furthermore, considering the subordinated position children frequently occupy in our society, we should be even more careful when eliciting their views.

Childhood is not just what children do and say

In order to recognize children's social agency, we must stop viewing them as passive objects, the mere "bearers of structures". However, this does not involve overlooking the socioeconomic factors, political constraints and shared relationships that shape agency in each specific socio-historical context (Szulc 2004: 14). This is our main objection to conceptualizing children's actions and representations in terms of "children's cultures" (i.e. Caputo 1995), one which is shared by Szulc (2004), Cohn (2005) and Hecht (2010). We believe that this concept may lead to the mistaken idea of a universal or homogenous viewpoint among children, one that disregards socio-cultural and historical particularities and isolates children from adults and from the social world they share. As Szulc and Cohn have suggested, this is one of the main contributions of South America's anthropological approach to children (2012).

This point is crucial in the research carried out by Melina Varela and Lorena Verón (2008) on the transition from *Kindergarten* and elementary school. The authors made it clear that children's experiences regarding this transition have to be taken into account along with the representations

produced by teachers and parents about formal education, the teacher-student relationship, and the notion of “child” applied by those who plan and undertake the activities which aim to articulate the two educational levels. In this way, the researchers managed to identify a still widespread standardization – derived from developmental psychology – of what should be expected from a child according to his or her age.

Ethical issues

Developing ethnographies with children entails a series of ethical issues and we would like to share some of our reflections in this regard. Considering the ethnographic approach to children and childhood we support, we consider Christensen & Prout’s (2002: 482) notion of “ethical symmetry” quite interesting. According to this notion, the researcher should approach the ethical relationship with his or her informants equally, with the same precautions and respect, regardless of whether they are adults or children.

Thus, it is of utmost importance to ensure the confidentiality of the people involved, regardless of their age. In the case of children, it is particularly important to exercise this precaution throughout the research process and not just when publishing the results, bearing in mind that children usually play a subordinate role to adults. In the words of Szulc, “respect for the subjects should be constitutive of any research practice” because “passing on information provided by one person to another, informally, can cause even more harm than wide scale release” (2007: 59). As Morrow and Richards have argued, “Ethical considerations need to be ongoing throughout the research process...” (1996: 92). According to Carla Donoso, who worked in Chile with children living with AIDS but uninformed of their condition, an ethically correct methodology should “ensure that it does not involve any harm to the children or their families” (2005: 2).

Moreover, we have observed that the issue of “consent” raises much more concern when children are the focus of research. This is sometimes due to an implicit or explicit exclusion of children from the status of full subjects who are able to consent. Thus, research with children usually requires authorization from the parents and/or institutional staff in charge of the children. This requirement frequently provokes criticism about this sort of studies, because the rationale of these “gatekeepers” could hamper researchers’ access to the field. However, field access to children is not always more difficult than research done among adults. Further, the obstacles encountered in the research process should in fact be analyzed as signs of the social notions of childhood at stake (Szulc 2007).

Finally, we would like to highlight the risks of trivializing consent. Indeed, a signed authorization from children and/or their parents – though often necessary – may turn out to be no more than a technical requirement. A researcher may obtain permission or consent from the parents and not from the children or, conversely, from children but not from their parents. Moreover, while written consent may be considered an unalterable document in some social spheres, in others verbal agreement is usually the means for validation. In such cases, a written request may create suspicion and mistrust, given the historical experiences of expropriation many communities suffered and collectively remember as a direct consequence of having been “made to sign a document.”

The latter was the case in Inés Finchelstein’s research among a Quechua speaking community of Bolivian immigrants in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Argentina (2008). Her study centered on children’s views and valuations of the Quechua language. Given that many of the adults in the

community were illiterate, asking them to sign a document would not only have been inappropriate: it could have jeopardized her research. Thus, her option was to explain the purpose of her visits to both the adults and the children, not only at the beginning of fieldwork but throughout the research.

Hence, it is important to consider the social and institutional context in which fieldwork will take place, so as to choose the most applicable way to ask for authorization. Further, this “initial permission” is often far from actual consent. Based on our own ethnographic experience, we argue that consent must be constantly renewed, as it is jointly built with the different social actors involved during the ethnographic process, one that involves interaction and the formation of a bond.

Concluding remarks

As we have stated above, recognizing children’s agency requires its operationalization, that is, incorporating them to scientific research as competent social actors. It is necessary to clarify, however, what being a competent interlocutor means.

Through our ethnographic work with children, we have been questioning those who conceptualize children’s statements as mere “fantasy” or “beliefs,” invalidating a priori any record obtained through ethnographic work that takes children as its subjects. As we have shown, research with children enriches social investigation by including voices that have been kept silent.

On the other hand, we also disagree with the naive argument that children “always tell the truth.” Through ethnographic work, children have often proved they are also active builders of their “self” presentation (Goffman 1992).

Ethnography is an appropriate way to correct those mistaken notions by including children’s experiences and points of view, but not as the unique source of information. It also enables researchers to contextualize what children say and do, considering the actions and interpretations of the diverse social actors and institutions linked to children, including researchers. In such a way, it is possible to portray children’s agency in a situated manner, bearing in mind that children are not the only ones who have “a lot to say” about childhood.

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