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Uses and Meanings of "Context" in Studies on Children's Knowledge: A Viewpoint from Anthropology and Constructivist Psychology

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Abstract Though context has yet to receive an unequivocal definition, it is a concept that frequently appears in research in children's knowledge and its construction. This article examines the scope and meaning of context in genetic psychology and social anthropology in order to better understand the relationship between children's construction of knowledge and the context in which it occurs. Meta-theoretical, theoretical and methodological complexities arise when the concept is analyzed in the two disciplines, and these will also be addressed herein. The fields of anthropology and constructive psychology are both affected by the relationship between the building of knowledge and the social practices surrounding this process. Finally, based on these empirical examinations, the article explores how research methodologies could incorporate the notion of context in research focused on the construction of knowledge.

Keywords Context · Children's knowledge · Anthropology · Constructivist psychology

For more than a decade, our research team of psychologists and anthropologists has studied the construction of diverse types of social knowledge among children, focusing on topics like the building of religious knowledge and children's ideas of intimacy and justice. This work has involved an interdisciplinary dialogue between social anthropology and genetic psychology that takes a critical approach to the contributions of Piagetian psychology (1932). In fact, we have addressed the relationship between children's knowledge and social practices in both psychology and anthropology in several of our

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previous works, based on the idea that children construct diverse meanings about the social world and modify them as active participants in social practices (García Palacios and Castorina 2010, 2014; Horn and Castorina 2010; García Palacios et al. 2014, 2015). This work departs from the theoretical assumption that knowledge is constructed *in context*. However, although the vast majority of studies on children's knowledge incorporate the idea of context, we found that the scope and limits of this notion are not unequivocally defined (with a few remarkable exceptions we will discuss in the following sections). In this regard, we believe that it is necessary to clarify how the myriad definitions of context influence research on cognitive construction. To paraphrase Althusser (1967), context appears to be a concept *in a practical state*. For this reason, an interdisciplinary dialogue is imperative to examining the meaning of this category and the unresolved issues it poses for psychology and anthropology researchers at the meta-theoretical, theoretical and methodological level.

With this aim, we will attempt to define context, its scope and its connections to "individual constructions." In general terms, although "context" was a concern from the very beginning of anthropology, genetic psychology initially chose to focus instead on either individual or universal aspects in cognitive construction. We understand, however, that the first groundbreaking studies on cognitive construction within genetic psychology and existing frameworks in social anthropology must be reexamined in light of this new point in question. In this regard, we set out to create a common conceptual framework and a methodological strategy based on the contributions of both disciplines.

To start, we will describe how the notion of context has been understood in social anthropology before delving into the meanings of context in psychology. Based on previous analyses of this concept in both disciplines, we will then analyze possible ways of associating context with the construction of knowledge before arguing that the notion of context can either limit the construction of knowledge or serve as its catalyst. Finally, following this same line of thought and based on our own empirical studies, we will examine how the consideration of context can influence the methodological procedures of genetic psychology and anthropology research and its potential for different types of collaboration between the two disciplines.

The Uses of Context in Social Anthropology and Genetic Psychology[1]

Context in Social Anthropology

At the start of the twentieth century, an idea of context began to develop soon after the founding of social anthropology,[2] an academic field strongly rooted in functionalism.

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[1] Different branches within the social sciences have also approached the question of context, like the works on cognitive sociology by Cicourel (1973). Reflections on context can also be found in certain branches of anthropology and psychology (see notes 2 and 4). While some of these trends are relevant and will be mentioned here, the focus of our discussions is on social anthropology and genetic psychology.

[2] Influenced by the development of pragmatics, the linguistic anthropologist Duranti (Duranti 2001; Goodwin and Duranti 1992) proposed rethinking the notion of context created by speech acts that not only involve saying things but also doing them. Along these same lines, the works by Hutchins and Goodwin (2011) introduce the category of embodied interaction to analyze social interaction and shared cognition, based on the assumption that contexts are comprised of these social interactions and the materiality of the bodies and cultural elements which form them.

This notion became essential for an anthropological analysis of the rituals, the institutions and indeed, the very lives of *others* on their own terms. A common belief in anthropology was that in order to understand the *natives*, it was necessary to travel and live amongst them, studying the different human groups *in context*. Direct observation thus became the only possible research method (Krotz 1988). From the time of Malinowski's pioneering work (1922/2001, traveling to villages, speaking local languages and sharing the day-to-day lives of a people became the basis for modern anthropology. The contexts for knowledge production were at the core of this research, though they were never conceptualized in a systematic way. Even so, we can infer that according to this line of thought, context is closely associated with the laws and norms that regulate a society's institutions. "Context" acquires a homogeneous form in every culture/society that anthropologists study. Subjects appear to have no effect on context, which is external and all-encompassing, and serves as a point of reference for each subject's individual actions.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, the new trend of historical particularism incorporated history to the analysis, producing a novel understanding of context within anthropology. Boas (1981) and his disciples challenged the idea that genetics play a decisive role or condition human development, placing the emphasis on the particular historical development of each group instead. Historical particularists posit that although human thought is universal, the historical development of each group depends on its unique cultural context.

In contrast, structuralists invoke universal mental structures when explaining social phenomena, structures that exceed any contextual examination, historical analysis or particular features of a people. Lévi-Strauss (1977) argued that universal human thought works by categorizing the world in binary terms and that each social group *fills* these cognitive compartments with its own particular meanings. Context here could be considered a cultural framework that produces such meanings, filling categories of thought with specific contents. Structuralists, however, only consider these contents relevant when examining the mental mechanisms involved in thought.

In another branch of anthropology developed in the 1960s based on Geertz's work, symbolic anthropology, the emphasis is on the meaning that *native* social actors themselves attribute to social events. Anthropologists thus began to study symbols as entities of collective meaning without losing sight of the subjects who produce this meaning as the functionalists had. Context here can be understood as the interwoven meanings that a group jointly attributes to *social events*. These shared symbols transform local culture into "a context, something within which they can be intelligibly —that is, thickly— described." (Geertz 2001, p.14). Throughout the 1960s, anthropologists set out to interpret meanings in order to understand diverse cultural contexts. This new take on reality made the notion of context more heterogeneous but provided no insight into the unequal social relations at work in these day-to-day contexts and as a result, each cultural configuration continued to be presented as a single harmonious unit.[3]

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[3] Postmodern anthropology appeared in the 1980s and took this interpretation to an extreme by affirming that every social interaction produces a context of meanings so particular that an external analysis becomes impossible. The context thus becomes a whole once again but for the opposite reason as the functionalism described earlier; here the individual subject becomes the epicenter where meaning is created outside any general social principles. This explains why "instead of context, postmodern scholars speak of intertextuality," (Reynoso 1991, p.55) suggesting that ethnographic narrative is more of a literary work than a scientific text.

In the 1970s, however, Marxist approaches in anthropology systematically focused on social inequalities. This gave a macro-level perspective to the notion of concept, acknowledging the existence of a social structure that generates inequalities associated with class, gender, age, etc. (Boivin et al. 2006; Godelier 1974). In this regard, the Marxist notion of scales made an important contribution to the study of context (Ortner 1984). By placing capitalism at the center of the global scene, researchers began to consider how a dialogue begins within each social group at the local level and is influenced by processes such as colonial relations, imperialism and international trade that necessarily influence the day-to-day lives of each group. To cite Wolf, "The world of humankind constitutes a manifold, a totality of interconnected processes, and inquiries that disassemble this totality into bits and then fail to reassemble it falsify reality," (Wolf 1982, p.3). The idea of context in the discipline was thus modified to include the power relations of each group studied in both past and present, given that any group is part of social contact networks that influence their processes of production and social reproduction.

In keeping with this line of thought, which also draws on the Weberian tradition in the social sciences, the Marxists drew up a theoretical framework in relation to *practice/praxis.* The premise of this approach is that unequal structures foster power disputes, though Marxists also return to the notion of agency as a producer, reproducer and potential transformer of this structure. By focusing on human practices without losing sight of the circumstances of their production, the notion of context becomes profound enough to understand both the material and symbolic conditions of a certain group and the ways in which these form the structures of each society by influencing individual human actions.

As briefly seen here, anthropology is teeming with references to context. Although researchers have explored the different sociocultural aspects of context since anthropology emerged as a discipline, the meanings and scope of this concept—which has been employed in reference to "culture," "social relations," "interactions," "the socio-economic system," etc.—have not always been clear. In order to further develop and clarify context, we will review how genetic psychology has dealt with this concept and identify points in common between the two fields.

Context in Genetic Psychology

In most classical research in genetic psychology,[4] little if any attention is paid to context. According to Lave (2001), although the different branches of psychology may incorporate context in their analysis of individual cognitive processes, this is nothing more than an unsuccessful "enhancement," since all of the assumptions surrounding the concept are based on the study of internal, individual processes. In particular, these

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[4] As indicated earlier, there are mentions of context in other branches of psychology (such as discursive psychology) in which language is understood as constitutive rather than referential of knowledge constructions. This marks an important divide with genetic psychology that merits mention. One influential researcher in this area, Potter (2000), addressed the rhetorical nature of a world defined through the discursive practices among participants in a dialogue. Discursive constructions here are examined as situated constructions in the context in which they occur with a focus on the social action that researchers and participants are describing. According to this perspective, the analysis deals with the way an individual constructs a representation and then acts accordingly, obtaining an invitation, for example, or attributing guilt.

considerations are a red flag for Piaget's constructivist psychology, where the question of how context influenced the development of knowledge systems was overlooked entirely. In keeping with this dialectical approach to subject-reality, the post-Piagetian psychologists successfully introduced context in their theories without it representing a strange or artificial addition (Psaltis et al. 2009).

In his first works, Piaget (1932) skirted around context without ever proposing a specific focus on the topic. The Swiss psychologist argued that individual thought and social relations were "two sides of the same coin," (Psaltis et al. 2009) that is, two different expressions of coordinated actions. In keeping with Psaltis, Duveen and Perret Clermont, one could argue that thoughts are indissociable from social actions, though Piaget avoided examining the specific features of the social relations in question. By overlooking the cultural contexts which limit yet also enable cognitive processes, Piaget was able to emphasize the constructivist activity of an epistemic subject detached from the fluctuating social and cultural conditions in which knowledge is elaborated. Subsequently, post-Piagetian theorists such as Psaltis et al. (2009) strived to situate cognitive construction in what could be considered contextual settings, identifying three generations of studies that altered the original Piagetian tradition (Psaltis et al. 2009; Psaltis and Zapiti 2014). The first generation of studies emerged in Geneva in the early 1970s, and focused on socio-cognitive conflicts (Doise et al. 1975; Doise 1985; Carugati and Mugny 1988), emphasizing that the conflicts arising from social interactions are as important to knowledge construction as socio-cognitive conflicts. Specifically, these authors showed how dialogue among children—a dialogue that reveals the different levels of conceptualization in children's thought process—invariably helped the less advanced subjects make progress. This cognitive dissonance resulted from an exchange with more advanced children. In other words, cognitive development cannot be explained solely by the conflicts that the subject experiences individually at different moments in an observation; the inconsistencies that appear during interactions with others are equally important.

Another generation of post-Piagetian studies in Neuchâtel (Schubauer-Leoni et al. 1992; Schubauer-Leoni and Grossen 1993) opened up "a black box" of interactions and their contextual expectations to reveal how the context of communicative exchanges between interviewer and interviewee affects how children work through the interaction (Psaltis and Zapiti 2014). Accordingly, interviews can no longer be seen as a culturally neutral interaction and a child interprets not just the questions interviewers pose during a communicative exchange but also their intentions.

During this same period, Donaldson (1979) was conducting studies in Great Britain that would influence that generation of genetic psychologists and the next, reaching all the way to today's discussion. Basing on a critical review of 'Piaget's researches, Donaldson argued that his tested situations were too abstract for the children participating in the interviews and bore no relation to their everyday life. After outlining the effects of different presentations of classic Piagetian tasks on the cognitive stages attributed to children, Donaldson argued that a more genuine approach to what children know and understand required familiar circumstances that made "sense" to them. Context, then, became a fundamental element in the study of knowledge constructions.

More recently, another generation approached cognitive construction by examining the social representations that limit the construction of knowledge. For example, Leman and Duveen (1996) analyzed how gender representations condition the cognitive

process, showing, for example, that a girl more advanced in her acquisition of a certain notion will have to use several arguments to convince a boy who is not as advanced as she is. In the inverse scenario— that is, when a boy who is more advanced tries to convince a girl who is less advanced—he convinces her more quickly. These studies revealed that social representations are part of cognitive development and that they contextualize (limiting or enabling) it; on the other hand, by considering the broader context of social representations and social practices, these studies modified the very notion of the epistemic subject, who went from an abstract being to a social actor with her own expectations and identifications. Cognitive activity structures and is structured by the triadic relationship between the object of knowledge, the social individual and the others (Psaltis et al. 2009).

In schools of thought inspired by Vygotsky, researchers are also concerned with incorporating context in post-Piagetian studies. However, as Cole (2003) notes, the concept of context is polysemic even within cultural psychology, sparking confusion in sociohistorical trends and cultural psychology and yielding highly different approaches. In Cole's first description, context is presented as separate from the individual although she interacts (and can influence) it in different ways. In this regard, it is possible to refer to both the "family context" as well as the "historical context" that influence psychological development. In the author's second version (Cole 2003), child and context are constructed together through their relations with one another, making them two parts of a whole. In this characterization of the concept, it becomes analytically challenging—if not impossible—to separate the child from the context. In any case, there is still no precise definition for context.

Inspired by Vygotsky's work, other authors (Rogoff 1997; Lave 2001) developed the theory of situated activity. "Contexts are activity systems. An activity system integrates the subject, the objects and the instruments (material tools as well as signs and symbols) into a unified whole (...) that includes production and communication, distribution, exchange and consumption" (Lave 2001, p. 30). We believe that this perspective, unlike Cole's, places more emphasis on the specific relationships between the components of a dynamic whole, that is, an activity system that is constructed historically. Rogoff (1997) focused on a triangular relationship between student, contents and context to study learning. For this author, context was all of the elements involved in situated learning. Here context is not comprised of external factors separate from cognitive activity; instead, the situation or school event is taken as the learning "text." This focus underlines the interdependence of learning components, which are woven into an inextricable whole. In this regard, individual thought cannot be examined separately from actions, circumstances and goals. If context is not external, then, and instead constitutive of human actions, the unit of analysis is guided participation, that is, culturally organized activities where active individuals encourage less experienced members to participate in a more mature way.[5]

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[5] Though he does not belong to the genetic psychology tradition, Engeström (1999, and Engeström and Middleton 1996) influenced the field with his situated cognition approach. According to this activity theory derived from Leontiev's ideas, the activity components are the subject, the tool, the object, the community (those who share the activity), the division of labor and the community rules. Activity theory in this regard "is contextual and is oriented at understanding historically specific local practices, their objects, mediating artifacts, and social organization" (Cole and Engeström 1993, p. 377).

In short, even taking into account these conceptual developments, several questions associated with context and the construction of knowledge—in terms of both operating structures and specific concepts—remain unanswered. What are we referring to precisely when we speak of the context of cognitive construction? How does context affect production? Is this a causal relationship, a simultaneous influence or is it a condition of the *surroundings*? Another question might be the following: if we clarify the notion of context, what consequences will that have for research methodology? To address these questions, we will draw on contributions from anthropology to further analyze the meaning of context and its relationship to cognitive construction.

Relationships between Context and Knowledge Construction

Now that we have reviewed different understandings of context in each discipline, we will introduce our position on how context relates to knowledge construction.

In some of our previous works (García Palacios et al. 2014, 2015), we have emphasized the dialectical framework of context and knowledge construction, connecting individual cognitive processes with the social surroundings in which they are produced at both the macro-historical and micro-social level of each situation. From this perspective, knowledge construction cannot be analyzed "independently from the meaning that the context has for the participants," (García Palacios et al. 2014).

From this framework of relational epistemology, we join Valsiner (2014) in questioning studies that emphasize the division between context and psychological phenomena. These studies, which can be divided into two groups, introduce other theories. In the first group, the focus is solely on psychological phenomena that occur outside the social context, as can be seen in certain literal interpretations of genetic psychology (Delval 1989) and some trends within cognitive anthropology and psychology (Hirschfel 2002). Within anthropology, the evolutionist paradigm and the naturalists took a similar approach, considering cognitive developments separately from context based on the idea that human thought is determined by the so-called "race" of the person in question.

The second group of studies separates contextual conditions from the psychological process, which is determined externally. Here cognitive processes are not autonomous but fully determined by cultural phenomena; this is the position of certain schools within culturalism and sociologism. Thus, studies on socialization, for example, present society as a set of rules and meanings that supposedly exist independently of individuals, who are then passively "socialized" (Pires 2010). This perspective would be compatible with Cole's initial version, as described in the first section.

For our perspective on the relationship between context and knowledge construction, we borrow arguments from anthropology (Toren 2012) and psychology (Valsiner 2014). Inspired by the Vygotskian holistic perspective when examining the conditions for psychological changes within the field of semiotics, Valsiner' emphasizes an interaction, a mutual articulation between psychological phenomena and the sociocultural context in which context conditions psychological life and vice-versa (Valsiner 2014; Winegar and Valsiner 1992; Cabell and Valsiner 2014). Unlike studies that separate context from psychological phenomena with a dualist epistemic frame, this approach posits that catalysis occurs in a semiotic process typical of cultural

psychology. The way in which meanings are transformed varies according to the conditions for such catalysis.

This allows us to posit that context that does not determine development linearly but instead paves a certain path within development; this only occurs when certain material and symbolic conditions are in place, though said conditions do not necessarily guarantee that development will in fact go in a certain direction. One of the most original facets of this concept is that it allows these catalyzing conditions to be defined. By limiting or enabling cognitive activity, then, the context lays the groundwork for the transformation of the meaning garnered by subjects. For Valsiner, "It is important to note that the concept of semiotic catalysis is a process that highlights the systemic relations between parts, and specifies how the relationship of these parts construct, as a gestalt, the conditions necessary, but not themselves sufficient, to bring about a qualitative transformation of a psychological phenomenon," (2014, p. 12). This proposal allows the concept of catalysis to be separated from causality, given that the relations posited here are not linear: instead, catalysis suggests the conditions for possibilities, not for givens (Cabell and Valsiner 2014).

This proposal has points in common with Toren's research in anthropology (Toren 1990, 1993, 2006, 2012). This author argues that we are all active subjects in cognitive constructions "Other people have structured the conditions of your existence (…) but it was you who made meaning out of the meanings they presented you with" (2006, p.8). This information, however, is always mediated by the social relations in which we are immersed. In our view, these conceptualizations contribute to the historical debate within this field on the relationship between nature and culture; affirming that our ability to produce culture is innate but also that everything we know about our own nature is cultural. It is thus necessary to abandon the binary terms of the debate to produce a more encompassing perspective for studies of knowledge construction. Furth explains that for Toren, knowledge is "endogenously acquired in development" (1994, p. 977), in other words, not innate or imposed externally. In keeping with constructivism, men and women thus have the ability to symbolize, and human minds generate knowledge and base their interpretations of the world on this knowledge. These interpretations, however, are always associated with the way that we "make meaning out of meanings that others have made and are making," (1993, p. 267) and must therefore be analyzed at their convergence point. The focus on socialization is at stake here, since the analysis has shifted from abstract concepts like "culture" and "society" to people, who are both active and historical subjects as well as the object of others' actions; they are the products and producers of signifiers that can be infinitely diverse but never arbitrary (Pires 2010).

Based on these reflections, we can assume that while children learn "grownup culture," they also have a hand in reshaping it. Children are thus attributed with a whole new role in building the social world, and we believe that this should be a tenet in future research in both disciplines. Context can thus be thought of as *sociality*—a concept that includes the dynamic social processes in which people are immersed (Pires 2010)—opening up a dialectic between subjects. Rather than forfeit agency as knowledge is constructed, subjects are influenced by social processes that allow them to generate meanings of the world, meanings which they then use to build knowledge in a necessarily creative effort. The meanings culled through *sociality* are not replicated but appropriated with minor, gradual and always historical changes (Wagoner 2008) that

develop and evolve through social relations; social meanings can also be modified in a similar way.[6] The knowledge construction processes pose the question "of what we are capable of discovering" as social beings (Toren 2012, p. 22). This departs from an analysis centered on possible information-processing mechanisms that the individual human mind utilizes, given that the mind itself is an ongoing social production.

This notion of context leads us to posit that the meanings constructed in any social scenario vary according to the subject but are never arbitrary because they bear the mark of their origin. At the same time, this analysis is not limited to the social relations and objects at present but instead assumes that children are historical subjects with a collective past in their respective communities. This past materializes in circulating meanings—even when adults avoid explicitly stating things—that children then appropriate to form knowledge. In this schema, history is presented as "what is past, but persistent, as inhering in the products of human action," (Toren 1990, p. 979), which adds a time dimension to context that must be considered when analyzing knowledge construction because it affects the production of meaning in specific ways. What represented a problem, conflict or damage within the group will have some negative charge for the next generations, even if no one talks about it in a clear or conscious manner. That negative charge, however, will be resignified to a certain degree by the present-day events.

In this regard, Toren says that "humans are dynamic and transformative products of their past, which comes to bear on every aspect of their being. Moreover, humans are situated in relation to others (young and old, alive or dead), whose ideas and practices help structure the conditions for their existence in the present," (2012, p.22) Context, we insist, has diverse diachronic and synchronic scales that must be considered in cognitive studies, as suggested by the Marxist anthropologists cited above (Wolf 1982). In this regard, Achilli underlines that the notion of "context" goes beyond the *external* surroundings of everyday relations and processes, insisting on the need to consider in relational terms "...the interaction between different mutually configured contextual levels that also establish the conditions and limits of the processes and relations that interest us," (2013, p. 44).

Dialogues on Research Methodology between Social Anthropology and Genetic Psychology

The approach to the concept of context in the previous section has consequences for our research methodologies and analysis units. It is important to note that the choice of methodological procedures depends not only on the issue at hand but also on the meta-theoretical framework chosen for the research. In studies centered on individual activities independent of their discursive contexts or, depending on the theme, of the social practice contexts, there is a certain type of unit of analysis. However, if a framework of relational epistemology is used, the units of analysis have components

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[6] In the field of anthropology and education, Rockwell (1995, 1996) proposed the concept of appropriation, which draws attention to the network of meanings constructed from the different knowledge circulating in a certain space (school, family, etc.) and to what subjects do with these meanings, consciously or otherwise, based on their own needs and possibilities.

which are defined in a system of interactions. In this regard, in both genetic psychology and social anthropology, the emphasis is on articulating previously dissociated components such as individual knowledge, social practices and cultural contexts. These articulations reveal the interrelations and/or contradictions resulting from the researcher's approaches and units of analysis should thus also be considered part of the topic of study.

As proposed in this article, the reference to context implies a transformation in the methodology with regards to several factors, including the units and scales of analysis. The units of analysis for the relationship between knowledge and context are particularly complicated, as they are not limited to the interactions between subject and object but instead include three components: the subject and object of knowledge, and the social practices that situate its production. In other words, it is necessary to construct units of analysis that consider the particular aspects of children's ideas in terms of the processes of constructing meanings in a dialectic of integration and conceptual differentiation; the object of this knowledge, which may or may not emerge from the subjects' own social experience; and the social practices carried out at a certain institution, based on certain norms, or in a social context, which also includes social representations (García Palacios et al. 2015), though we do not address these to any length here.

In an attempt to manage these challenges and understand these interrelations, in our respective empirical research we have incorporated methodological strategies which are uncommon in the traditions of our respective disciplines, specifically in studies in the field of psychology on how children construct their right to intimacy (Horn 2013) and anthropology research on the construction of religious knowledge (García Palacios 2012).

As noted by Weisner and Gallimore (1977), one of the main challenges associated with articulating the knowledge produced by psychology and anthropology has to do with the range of methodologies employed in the two disciplines. Most literature in psychology is based on indirect measurements (often tests and questionnaires) of very specific phenomena, while anthropology produces general ethnographic data based on direct observation and interviews with informants. Despite the disparities in the research variables, a few important works have contributed to understanding children's constructions by focusing on traditional topics of analysis within both disciplines. Whiting and Whiting (1979) authored a pioneering study of this sort, treating cultural values as crucial variables to be examined both on their own and in conjunction with other variables in cognitive development studies. Other interdisciplinary efforts between genetic psychology and anthropology have analyzed "deviance" from so-called normal states of cognitive development, as reflected in the socialization processes of children from non-Western societies or different social classes (Feldman et al. 1984). As we have noted in earlier studies (García Palacios 2012), one of the biggest problems of these works—which harken back to Piaget's research—is that they only offer a linear interpretation of the four states of cognitive development, and they discount the epistemological arguments that form the backbone of Piagetian theory. In addition, by basing their studies on the theoretical universe of psychology, the methodological approach to social reality fails to capture its complexity (Nunes 1999).

The relationship between ethnographic analysis and developmental psychology continues to be problematic (LeVine 2007) and there is a clear need for anthropology

to do more than warn against universalist pretensions. We believe it is necessary to move from the "anthropological veto" to a more productive, mutual exchange between disciplines. In other words, interdisciplinary exchange cannot be based on the belief that anthropology only serves to place limits on psychological theories (LeVine 2007; García Palacios 2012). On the contrary, we argue that anthropology should instead base its contribution on a long tradition of studying sociocultural contexts and in the specific methodology—ethnography—anthropologists developed to approach such contexts. Conversely, perspectives that draw on anthropology but use contextual explanations for subjects' cognitive constructions are equally limited. Such approaches underestimate individual productions of knowledge and lose sight of the multiple dimensions that are equally critical to these processes. The intra-mental and inter-mental should not be merged in studies: instead, the relationship between the two should be one of the research aims (Valsiner 1998, in Psaltis and Zapiti 2014).

We believe that the methodological strategies of social anthropology and genetic psychology can be articulated in a productive way, generating a dialogue between ethnography and the clinical-critical method, as our team has noted in earlier works (García Palacios and Castorina 2014).

A basic premise of ethnography is that above all else, it is a family of methods involving direct and substantial contact with social agents as well as a process of writing about this encounter. Ethnography textualizes elusive human experience, mostly on its own terms (Willis and Trodman 2000). The final goal of the process and the product of anthropological research (which are, as a matter of course, *theoretically informed*) on social realities occurring in a specific space and time is the analytical description of their particularity (Rockwell 2009). In this regard, ethnography has always studied unique sociocultural expressions among humans (Guber 2008). This goes beyond intercultural analysis and also encompasses the differences that arise within a single group of studies, turning the familiar into something exotic and fostering reflection on the continuities and transformations of one's own cultural practices. This approach gives researchers insight into how subjects conceive of the categories that construct their day-to-day reality within the framework of specific relations that take place in the field, enabling the study of "relations between the construction of children's ideas and social practices" (García Palacios and Castorina 2010). The researcher is positioned in the interstices of this dialectic, forming a particular social relation with the other actors that also contributes to the knowledge constructed in the field (Rockwell 2009; Guber 2008).

The clinical-critical method (Piaget 1932) represented a methodological innovation since it differed from pure observation and psychometric techniques (Castorina et al. 1984). From Piaget to current-day critical perspectives, genetic epistemology has been the basis for the clinical-critical method. Subjects do not acquire knowledge, according to this perspective, but instead build it and the researcher—originally a psychologist—has the task of interpreting that which the connections a cognizant subject makes within her world of meaning. In other words, "researchers gradually approach the object of study by actively reformulating their hypotheses" (García Palacios and Castorina 2010). Interviews carried out with the clinical-critical method consist of asking the informant questions, "giving her the time necessary to make any associations she sees fit, while the researcher focuses on the connections she is making in order to formulate the next question based on her

answer" (García Palacios 2012). The counterarguments researchers propose at each step in the process allow them to delve deeper into the justification for each piece of knowledge brought to bear in the explanation, thus recovering the social nature of thought. Immersed in the sociocultural contexts the ethnography seeks to understand, this method is a particularly useful tool for approaching the questions examined herein.

A Study on Genetic Psychology

In keeping with a critical approach to genetic psychology, Horn and colleagues research focuses on children's ideas about the right to privacy, in a public school of Buenos Aires (Horn 2013; Horn and Castorina 2010; Ferreyra et al. 2012). This right, recognized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef 1989), is unconditional and Horn's analysis shows that children between 6 and 12 years old have different ideas about it. For example, younger children (between the ages of 7;3 and 8;6) acknowledge the existence of personal space but not the right to any protection of such space. In other words, in the mind of young students, school authorities have the right to infringe upon an exclusively personal sphere of their lives. Other children (many between the ages of 8;6 and 12;6) have begun to expect adults to respect their privacy, but condition the right to this privacy on good behavior (on the part of the students) or on the teacher's tact. The child understands that their personal information should be safeguarded from grownup meddling; however, they believe this privacy depends on good school performance and can be violated in cases in which a teacher's intervention ostensibly aims to benefit the student. Finally, only a few students, generally a bit older (ages 11;6 to 12;6), seem to understand the right to intimacy independently of a student's adherence to school norms and of the positive or negative consequences the violation of this privacy may have. Even among these subjects, only a few consider this right to be unconditional and only at certain points in the interviews, revealing how students can view this right as both conditional and unconditional.

In addition, Horn (2013) reveals that certain degrees of abstraction can be found in the building process of children's ideas within the parameters of the social practice. The scarce references to notions of an unconditional right to privacy among the students interviewed are compatible with the limited recognition of this same right at the schools they attend. This suggests that ideas are not independent from the social context in which they take shape and that context limits them. In the words of the researchers, "Without the institution's interventions, it would not be possible for any ideas on authority to form. At the same time, this intervention directs the children's construction of knowledge towards notions consistent with the duty to follow school rules," (Horn et al. 2013, p. 201).

Privacy, then, is not an idea that children copy and paste from reality, from the discourses they hear or from a convention they are usually unaware of. Instead, children form their own idea of privacy in relation to a particular object of knowledge (and its history), their own prior knowledge, and the context of production of the new knowledge: "The knowledge children produce and the privacy they build depend on the recognition of their right to these spaces as part of the social practices in which they are immersed," (Horn and Castorina 2010, p. 197).

In order to analyze the characteristics of the social context in which ideas are produced and the forms these acquire in relation to context, we decided to do a series of clinical interviews, presenting students with summaries or narratives of everyday school events in which a school authority invaded a student's private space.

In any case, the issue of context requires further research. In the first place, the context of the interview continues to be artificial to some degree, as it is never the same context in which the ideas are produced. It would be naïve to base a subject's ideas regarding his or her right to privacy on what he or she says in an interview in response to certain questions about that particular object, without considering that such ideas are necessarily mediated by the interview situation and the presence of the researcher.

This recently led us to accompany the interviews with observations at the schools attended by our subjects in order to start to analyze the relations between children's ideas and institutional practices.

A Study on Social Anthropology

In a study based on an anthropological approach to the topic, García Palacios (2012, 2014) analyzed the meanings that children from an indigenous (Toba/*Qom*) neighborhood associate with going to church. As part of the ethnography, interviews with children were conducted using the clinical-critical method. From the research, it is clear that although going to church is part of everyday life for all the neighborhood residents, children attribute different meanings to the activity than adults. For children ages eight and under, going to church is associated only with singing and dancing. Although these activities are mentioned by the next subgroup of children (ages nine and up), the older children also begin to mention the Bible, Jesus, God and prayer when asked about churchgoing.

One important aspect of the study is that children are exposed to prayer, the Bible and the figure of Jesus from a very early age, long before the age of nine, when they begin mentioning them during the interviews (García Palacios 2012). In this regard, it is necessary to consider children's developmental experiences, like church worship and other activities, the music that neighborhood residents enjoy, the videos shown at homes, the presence of the Bible, and prayers. By using ethnographic research tools, especially participant observation, to examine these experiences, it becomes clear that children learn to pray from a very young age, for example, when they are frightened. Thus, the fact that the children under age nine did not mention prayer or the Bible when talking about what they did at church does not necessarily mean they aren't aware of them but that they may not associate it with churchgoing. Given that a subject's construction of the proposed social objects is based on their experiences interacting with them (Castorina 2005), it is not surprising that children do not initially associate prayer as a social object with the church—or at least not exclusively—because prayer could be something that belongs to different spheres in the children's own experience. The process that appears to take place over time here is that of associating the church and its activities (singing and dancing) with religion (the Bible, Jesus, God, prayer). Thus, children effect a reconstruction (Castorina 2005) in which they associate church activities with new meanings which adult believers would take as a given.

Methodologically speaking, it is critical to note that the anthropological study on religious knowledge was an ethnography and as such, participant observation was planned right from the start. Before conducting the interviews with the children, extensive fieldwork was done, so most of the interview questions stemmed from prior observation of the children and children-adult interactions in the different situations in which knowledge is constructed. Other questions were based on the materials collected during the research such as the children's textbooks, church brochures, etc. What is more, understanding local beliefs surrounding childhood construction proves fundamental, as research is thus sensitive to different social expectations of children and not constructed beforehand based on an age division arbitrarily imposed by the researcher (García Palacios 2014). Thus, in the study on religious knowledge cited above, the children were organized in two large groups and then subdivided into *nogotshaxac* ("children or youth") based on the Toba/*Qom's* conceptualization of different phases of development (Hecht 2010).

In keeping with the tenets of anthropological theory, our first fieldwork phase was an introduction to the universes of meanings of our subjects before delving deeper into some of the themes that stood out and were most compelling for our research in a second phase. After reconstructing the social practices involving children, we opted for the clinical-critical method, since it allowed us to define key aspects in a study focused on the process of constructing certain knowledge. One example of this is the role of justifications and counterarguments in the interviews (García Palacios and Castorina 2014), a role that helps to establish the degree of certainty children express in their points of view. Ethnography may reveal contradictory perspectives but is unlikely to allow for a deeper examination of these contradictions unless both methodologies are put into practice in a specific case.

Ultimately, the lines of research in genetic psychology and social anthropology have gradually adopted methodological tools that were traditionally uncommon in either field. In the case of the study on the Toba/*Qom*, instead of the classic approach of considering either children's constructions or social practices, the focus was on understanding the relationship between them. In both disciplines, the same epistemological framework is used to select the units of analysis, making them methodologically compatible: units of analysis are built on the theoretical assumption of a dialectical relationship between subject and context. In this way, the construction of individual knowledge and context can only be understood in their relation to one another and not as mere aggregates. In this regard, the dialectic is not strictly a theory but a methodology for approaching one's research topics (though theory could produce dialectical explanations, according to Castorina et al. 2005). This way of examining the developmental processes does not stand in for specific empirical research methods in psychology and anthropology; instead, it is an instrument for devising theory, a perspective that guides scientific research and reshapes its results. From this point of view, researchers must be aware of the interrelations and contradictions of the object of their research in order to effectively approach it. For this reason, the study of a knowledge process in context must address its shifting relationship, reconstructing it according to its own history and complex connections. The value of research strategies "in the field" is therefore enhanced since these strategies can reveal people's social relations and the necessary effects of social interactions on individuals as they construct knowledge (Pires 2010). At the same time, this perspective obliges us to recognize that individuals do not merely reproduce learned cultural patterns but rework them as part of human praxis and their personal reshaping always depends on the material and symbolic context in which these cultural patterns circulate.

Conclusions

This article has reviewed one of the key issues for contemporary social and human sciences, the systematic analysis of context within knowledge construction. Specifically, we have reached a definition of context for genetic psychology and social anthropology. Based on the arguments and analyses presented here, we argue in favor of a dialectical relationship between context and knowledge, and a methodology that uses dynamic units of analysis to examine its interrelations.

Based on the points in common between the two disciplines, we have compiled certain theoretical assumptions on the processes of children's knowledge construction *in context*. We argue that context functions as a catalyst, enabling and limiting subjects' construction of knowledge; we also show that a good analysis of context goes beyond "visible" social relations to encompass dimensions of space and time which, though not in plain sight, do have concrete effects on reality. In addition, we noted that as construction processes take place in context, subjects transform that context with the knowledge produced therein, yielding a dialectic that obliges us to consider the importance of agency in cognitive developments. Context can be considered a set of social relations in constant movement; it can be argued that "social practices are what situate the future objects of knowledge in existing systems of social meaning" (García Palacios and Castorina 2010, p.94). These practices limit or enable the construction of knowledge, sparking interest or dissuading subjects from delving any further. Our thesis is compatible with Toren's notion of context as sociality (Toren 2012) and Valsiner's idea of catalysis (Valsiner 2014) and leads us to affirm that context not only influences that meanings we give the world but also the definitions of what is (or is not) worth knowing, what draws (or does not draw) attention, what sparks (or does not spark) curiosity.

As part of the epistemological and methodological discussion, we have established that in both disciplines, a single epistemological framework can be used to define units of analysis, making them methodologically compatible: units of analysis are chosen based on the theoretical assumption that there is a dialectical relationship between subject and context. Even so, many aspects associated with context continue to be problematic and open to conceptual and methodological revisions, especially those related to the construction and analysis of the empirical research data used to contextualize subjects' activities. On the other hand, context is difficult to analyze due to its multiple meanings and its uses in diverse disciplines and branches, and because of the myriad analysis dimensions that it entails. The dialogue between disciplines makes an essential contribution to defining the different characteristics of context and establishing its differences based on the nature of the research questions.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest   The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Ethical Approval   This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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