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**Integrative Psychological and
Behavioral Science**

ISSN 1932-4502

Volume 48

Number 4

Integr. psych. behav. (2014) 48:462-478

DOI 10.1007/s12124-014-9268-0



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Studying Children's Religious Knowledge: Contributions of Ethnography and the Clinical-Critical Method

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Published online: 30 May 2014

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Abstract We analyze different methodological and conceptual contributions of anthropology and psychogenetic theory to the research of children's religious knowledge. We argue that for the study of children's points of view it is possible to build an approach that links aspects studied by both disciplinary fields. With this aim, we revise some of their basic theoretical assumptions and recent reviews as well as their methodological proposals. Then we review the core characteristics of ethnography and the clinical–critical method—proposed by Piaget's psychogenetic theory—with the goal of stressing their potentialities as well as their limitations in research. We argue that within an ethnographic approach, we must establish certain restrictions on the clinical–critical method following basic premises of social anthropology. This approach lets us demonstrate the importance of understanding children's constructions by placing them within social relations that children produce and update in everyday interactions.

Keywords Ethnography · Clinical–critical method · Children's religious knowledge · Psychology, anthropology

Preliminary Issues

Our interest in linking the contributions of anthropology and psychogenetic theory founded in Piaget's analysis of cognitive development came about during the course of two studies on how children construct their knowledge on religion, religious symbols,

This research is supported by the National Council for Technical and Scientific Research (CONICET-Argentina) and University of Buenos Aires (UBA Argentina). Special thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their wonderful suggestions and Daniel Low, the translator, for his meticulous work.

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and religious identification in connection with the social practices in which they participate. The first study focused on a Catholic parish in the city of Buenos Aires, where we conducted fieldwork in 2003 and 2004. The second study involved ethnographic fieldwork in a Toba an Argentine indigenous group neighborhood in Buenos Aires, from 2006 to 2011.¹

In this paper, we account for different contributions, both methodological and conceptual, of anthropology and psychogenetic theory towards the inquiry of children's points of view. We consider that there are common interests between both approaches. On the one hand, one of the most prominent topics of anthropological theory is the problem of production and reproduction of culture and society. More specifically, the social processes that construct and transform knowledge, as well as the ways teaching and learning are socially conceived, have been part of the main interests of anthropology throughout its history (Pelissier 1991). On the other hand, Piaget's psychogenetic theory, from its beginnings, has dealt with the study of the construction of infant knowledge in various fields.

Therefore, we claim that it is possible to build an approach that connects aspects that are variables of both fields. The theoretical importance of creating a dialogue between these two disciplinary fields for the study of children's social construction of knowledge lies in being able to study that which was historically conceived as blind spots in the research of each field. Anthropology concentrated on the diversity in sociocultural practices, which ultimately also affected the perspectives on childhood, but this focus did not include the study of individual appropriations, i.e., what ideas or conceptual elaborations do children produce. On the other hand, genetic psychology studied characteristics of children's cognitive processes, but without determining how they were influenced by social practices. During an extensive first period, Piagetian psychologists researched the construction of social notions, which were understood as a purely individual and domain-general process that happens in an isolated individual and follows a universal sequence in development (Castorina 2005), disregarding the analysis of its socio-cultural context.

Although there has been dialogue between the disciplines since the beginning of psychological and anthropological research, we consider that a different type of convergence can be produced by considering the current theoretical revisions of each field. One of the current challenges of anthropology interested in childhood is to figure out how to turn children into interlocutors in the research process (Goodman 1960; James 2007), trying to explain subject's appropriations. Recently, there have been modifications in psychological developmental studies, making way for a growing consensus on how children's participation in social practices influences their intellectual-construction processes.

¹ The first study led to an anthropology degree thesis (García Palacios 2006). We made observations during the fieldwork. We also carried out informal and semi-structured interviews with the priest and the religious instructors. Finally, we interviewed boys and girls using the clinical-critical method (mostly held in the children's homes). The second study led to an anthropology Ph. D. thesis (García Palacios 2012). As part of the ethnographic approach, we used participant observation in an indigenous neighborhood of Buenos Aires and in the Catholic school that children in the neighbourhood went to. We also conducted two workshops with children (in 2007 and 2009) as well as anthropological interviews with adults and children. Finally, we interviewed forty children using the clinical-critical method.

Currently being able to link these two disciplinary fields derives primarily from the nature of the approach from which one lays out one's research goals: The unit of analysis is delimited by the interaction between the subject and object in the context of social practices and meanings. Analyzing the way in which children construct their knowledge in relation to social practices is highly relevant to the study of religion in childhood, because the few studies that exist on the subject postulate different theories about it: e.g., an "original view" that suggests a more profound religiosity during childhood that is gradually lost (Robinson 1983); religiosity starts in adolescence and children have a "prereligious" nature (Goldman 1965). We think differently and assume a relational type of thinking that tries to overcome insulating approaches (Castorina, J. A. Coord. 2007). These approaches set an individual activity as the unit of analysis isolated from its social conditions, or they consider that social representations or social practices determine individual's ideas. We consider that the individual and society must be analyzed in regards to their dialectic relation.

This theoretical approach opens a set of shared problems concerning the study of different relations between social practices and the production of ideas. With this aim, we critically revise some of their basic theoretical assumptions and recent reviews as well as their methodological proposals. The following questions guide our study: How can an ethnographic research incorporate the psychogenetic theory's clinical critical method? Should we establish restrictions on its usage following the basic assumptions of social anthropology?

To answer these questions, we first introduce a methodological-theoretical perspective to construct and address our inquiry. Then, considering the field of anthropology interested in childhood, we present some of the basic premises of the ethnographic method, especially, its necessary relation with anthropological theory. Therefore, we also focus on different conceptual aspects that allow us to link the contributions of anthropological theory with those of psychogenetic theory. Next, we go in depth about our attempt to construct a methodological approach in line with the different actors involved in the field and with our inquiry by using approaches from anthropology and genetic theory. With this aim, we mention the usage of different techniques in anthropological research with children as well as previous studies that have used developmental psychology techniques in their ethnographical approaches. Later, to analyze whether or not we can carry out the clinical critical method proposed by Piaget's psychogenetic theory, we explain its main characteristics and then focus on its inclusion in our ethnographic proposal.

Constructing the Methodological Theoretical Approach: Anthropology Interested in Childhood and its Relation to Psychogenetic Theory

Our key concern is to analyze how children construct their religious knowledge and place their constructions within the social practices in which they are actively involved. As many authors point out (Turner 1980; Geertz 1994a, b; Segato 2005), religion is a form of knowledge that appropriates the world and describes it in its historical context. However, it is important to stress that "religious symbols (...) cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or their articulations in social life, in which work and power are always crucial" (Asad 1993, p. 53).

Children establish meanings about religion in a context defined by different formative experiences. In this respect, although anthropological religious study has been reconsidered since Durkheim postulating that it is not an illusion of the individual mind, but rather a social fact (Ceriani 2008) it seems that some studies with children return to conceiving religion as merely an individual phenomenon. One of the consequences of this way of understanding knowledge about religion (or any other kind of knowledge) is found in the work of Goldman (1965). He claims that children are “prereligious” because they have not lived long enough to experiment the real problems of the human condition and, therefore, they cannot see the meaning of what religion offers them (Lindner 2004). As a result, when referring to children, it seems that scholars return to the outdated notion of the first anthropologists, according to which religion has its roots in the individual consciousness (Ceriani 2008). This warns us about the strength of the widely maintained conceptualization of children as asocial beings.

In fact, as many authors have pointed out, models constructed in developmental psychology have influenced social science studies with and about children (Caputo 1995; Jenks 1996). Some of these models tend to present children as underdeveloped subjects, giving full social knowledge to adults. In contrast, classic psychogenetic theory highlights the active position of children in the construction of knowledge, but does not contemplate how sociocultural contexts influence the process of construction.² As a result, generally speaking, we could claim along with Schwartz that anthropology has ignored children in culture, while developmental psychologists have ignored culture in children (1981, as cited in Stephens 1998).³ Each discipline did their part to recognize only one side of the tension between structure and action; between the social world and the individual. Far from taking into account their mutual relations as we intend to do in our research this approach reinforces the artificial separation between both terms.

In 1960s, anthropologists started to revise the concepts of agency and culture, which renewed the interest in trying to clarify the relation between structure and agency in cultural production. This allowed studies on childhood to take on a new perspective (Cohn 2005b; Caputo 1995). The criticism to the old conception of culture understood as a delimited set of elements from the past highlighted the key role of cultural production agents.

Specifically in childhood studies, the concept of agency the capability to be the source and originator of social actions (Rapport and Overing 2010) was finally embraced partly as a reaction to studies based on models that emphasized “becoming,” “maturing,” “reaching a certain state” (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007; LeVine 2007). Children produce meaning as much as the rest of us (Toren 1993; Cohn 2005a, b). Nevertheless,

² In this sense, one of the first criticisms to Piagetian theory’s standard version is that it is a perspective that focuses on the individual: Individuals do not assimilate “pure objects,” but rather objects transformed by society. There is always mediation by society. According to Castorina (1989), traditional psychogenetic studies show children as subjects that construct their objects in different domains. However, they construct throughout social interactions and under certain social and historic conditions. That version of genetic psychology primarily tends to understand the sources of a subject’s mental evolution as his or her own conduct in the physical surrounding and his or her processes of inner balance without studying the social relations in which individuals are immersed.

³ Vigotsky and his socio–historical school should be excluded from this criticism.

some studies on childhood have exceedingly emphasized children's agency and autonomy by studying different matters having to do with children and the meanings they construct, but in an isolated way, without considering the context of relations in which they are immersed even postulating the existence of "children's cultures." Although currently no one can claim that children's lives only bear meaning in regards to their future adult life, we cannot study their experiences without considering their social relations either. The risk would be analytically isolating children from the social practices in which they participate, but this time because of a completely autonomous production of meaning upon the world (Pires 2007).

The understanding of the social context is fundamental to study which role children have within that symbolic system and how they recreate it. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize their agency, but also to place their constructions in the context of social relations and to analyze the mediations that these present. This approach lets us rethink some of the dichotomies that many discussions continue to use (Pelissier 1991; Toren 1993). In this sense, studying childhood and children's points of view questions the way we conceive core problems of social sciences. For example, the relation between subjects and sociocultural models and the consideration of appropriation processes that continue throughout life.

What we have illustrated so far is compatible with current updates of psychogenetic theory that state that analyzing infant knowledge entails a dialect relation with its social conditions. The study of social knowledge covers institutions and economic relations all the way to religion and children's rights. It entails certain key theses from a developmental psychology point of view in its constructivist perspective (Castorina 2005). On the one hand, children develop concepts that belong to a specific field of phenomena, but they are constituted while they interact with knowledge during social practices in which they participate. On the other hand, children construct ideas about objects of knowledge that follow an elaboration process that includes abstractions as well as distinguishing and integrating meanings. Collective beliefs (social representations) and the culturally-transmitted social practices in which they participate condition this individual construction. In short, against psychologism and sociology, the construction of social knowledge in children (the formation of social ideas in different fields) is studied by placing it in its sociocultural contexts. Moreover, social practices place objects to be known in previous systems of social meaning (Castorina 2005). Current constructivist theory tries to fully grasp the complex dialectic relation between the individual and society, between the originality in the construction of ideas and the limits and possibilities that are imposed by social conditions. Therefore, the incorporation of social contexts to analysis does not eliminate epistemological constructivism, but rather presupposes it when studying individual elaboration of knowledge.

Conceptual revisions in the field of anthropology and in genetic epistemology are compatible not only because the hypotheses of one field do not completely cover the hypotheses of other field, but also because they do not contradict each other. Furthermore, they share an epistemological framework constituted by the assumption that the individual and society are necessarily thought of in regards to their dialectic relation. Keeping this understanding between both approaches in mind, we will now analyze the possibility of constructing a methodological approach that also links the possible contributions of each theory. Therefore, first we will review the techniques commonly used in ethnography with children as well as some previous attempts of connecting

them with techniques from developmental psychology. After, we will pay attention to the clinical critical method proposed by psychogenetic theory.

Children's Inclusion in Ethnography

Current studies in anthropology account for the importance of conducting ethnographies with children (Nunes 1999; Szulc 2005; Cohn 2005b; Enriz 2006; García Palacios 2006; Hecht 2010). Here we review the core characteristics of ethnography. However, as we will see next, it was only recently that anthropology started to be concerned about the active participation of children in social practices and the production of cultural meaning.

The Ethnographic Method in Anthropology

The majority of reviews on the history of anthropology as a discipline consider that the works by Malinowski are the founding milestones of modern ethnography, beyond the fact that some authors date its origins back to Herodotus (Stocking 1993; Willis and Trodman 2000). As a methodology, different anthropological schools have appropriated ethnography, turning it into the most characteristic methodology of sociocultural anthropology; we cannot use ethnography for all anthropological research, and ethnography does not displace other methodologies (Rockwell 2009). It has had to face different challenges throughout its history: from the urgency of having to confront the implications of its use in the context of colonial domination to the questioning on the so-called "ethnographic authority." After all these necessary debates, defining ethnography is difficult, even within anthropology itself; especially when we consider that it was appropriated by other social sciences. However, we can establish some of its basic premises that we feel define this approach.

According to Willis and Trondman: "Most importantly it is a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience" (2000, p. 5). Although we sustain that ethnography is more than just a series of techniques to collect data in the field something we will come back to later, it is possible to list some of the most used techniques. Fieldwork based on participant observation tends to be the key tool in an ethnographic inquiry. The systematic observation and participation allowed us to construct specific data of a certain context, which will hopefully lead to a more universal interpretation using the comparative method (Hymes 1993). Other commonly used techniques are open or semi-structured interviews. At times, so are questionnaires and documents. However, these techniques are not exclusive to ethnography: Other qualitative approaches use them as well; the theoretical framework is what makes them ethnographical.

In this sense, following Rockwell (2009), we consider ethnography to be the process and the product of anthropological research that is theoretically-informed by definition on social realities delimited in time and space with the goal of analytically describing its singularity. To claim that ethnography is the product and the process of a theoretically-informed research does not imply that it is a deductive-based methodology. In Fact, it is an empirical approach by nature. It does imply that ethnography

should not be taken for a long fieldwork or simply another qualitative study. Rather, ethnography includes the complete process of knowledge construction that starts with fieldwork, but exceeds it. Thus, anthropological theory contributes not only as a conceptual backbone to research, but also by recognizing the way these techniques are going to be used: Theory is the precursor, but also the outcome of an ethnographic study (Wilcox 1993; Willis and Trodman 2000). As Hammersley and Atkinson (1994) sustain, this position for theory in ethnography has not always been recognized. However, this is what brings Geertz (1992) to establish that when anthropologists are doing “thick description,” (i.e., ethnographic description) they do not study villages but study *in villages*: the concern for analytically describing the most local detail of local knowledge and then putting it in a dialect tension with the most global details of the global structure makes anthropology give an empirical lure to social theory debates. This takes us to one of the core problems of anthropological inquiry that can illustrate the relation between ethnography and anthropological theory: An analytical description entails the establishment of a dialectic relationship between analytical and native categories. The native or social categories are frequent in people’s discourse or actions that we observe and can point to differences between things that were supposedly indistinguishable in theory. The interrelation between social categories and analytic categories does not entail taking on the former as an attempt to see the world as natives see it nor ignoring them because they supposedly lack meaning (Rockwell 2009). According to Geertz (1994), being able to grasp the “native’s point of view” is about understanding concepts that are close to experience for other people, putting them in tension with concepts that are distant from experience; the concepts that analysts construct to account for the general features of social life. It is in reference to the method’s dialectic nature that Hymes (1993) claims that the general mission of anthropology consists in helping to overcome limitations of theoretical categories and the ways of understanding human life that come from the specific view of a single society.

In this way, it is the ethnographic encounter carried out over time that allows the surprise and the suspicious view even about that which can appear somewhat familiar (Neufeld 1999; Ceriani 2000). In the case of our research, this exercise of defamiliarization allowed us to denaturalize categories and social institutions like childhood, school, and the Catholic Church regaining their essence of social constructions defined by history and power relations. The characteristic tension in ethnography between social and analytic categories which Willis and Trodman (2000) call the “dialect of surprise” is potentially capable of producing knowledge that is not prefigured, and it can be the starting point for theoretical refinement and revisions. In this sense, these descriptions test the researcher’s own assumptions and create theory (Hammersley and Atkinson 1994).

We stated that anthropological theory guides ethnography by defining the way different techniques are to be used. To clarify this point, we briefly characterize the anthropological interview. A vast amount of studies place it in the context of an ethnographic fieldwork (Guber 1991; Briggs 1986). For now, it is enough to mention that we need to be aware of the categories, norms, and social values that are at stake before structuring an interview. To avoid assuming that the interviewer’s questions belong to the same universe of meaning as the interviewee’s answers, it is convenient that the interviewer start by recognizing his or her own questioning framework (Guber

1991). We should try to correct the imposition of the researcher's framework, to take his or her reflectiveness and that of the actors into account. Thus, even though many qualitative studies use interviews as part of their methodological customs, its use in ethnography makes it acquire certain features that tie it to the main concerns of anthropological theory.

Another basic premise of ethnography is the emphasis given on context reconstruction by incorporating cultural significances into the analysis that give meaning to that network of social practices and relations. Although searching for this network of relations does not mean that there is not a limit to this research. For instance, during our first time in the field, we observed that children participate in other social practices during Catholic religious instruction as are family and educational practices. During our second fieldwork experience, we observed that the children from the Toba neighborhood have diverse religious formative experiences in the Catholic school, in the neighborhood's churches, during trips to northern Argentina for religious purposes, and also while they interact in different ways with near-by neighborhoods that are not Toba. We will return to this aspect when analyzing the mutual contributions made between ethnography and the clinical critical method.

Although listing a series of key aspects of ethnographic work is possible, it is important to point out that the ethnographic practice necessarily varies according to each case and context (Velasco and Díaz de Rada 1997). Since it is fundamental that the methodology is appropriate for the interlocutors in the field and the object of study, the process of constructing a specific way of doing ethnography (where we determine the technical procedures and the researcher's interactions) explicitly or implicitly accompanies the development of each research (Rockwell 2009).

Up until now we can infer two interrelated conclusions. First, just as we anticipated, ethnography is neither a mere set of techniques, nor a paradigm that excludes the implementation of other methods. On the contrary, one of its main contributions is the possibility it offers for the triangulation of data built with different techniques (Hammersley and Atkinson 1994). Second, if we have postulated the existence of certain "inseparability" between ethnography and anthropological theory, understanding the latter is fundamental for an ethnographic study. In the following section, we briefly account for the techniques used in ethnographies with children.

Ethnographic Fieldwork With Children: Methods from Anthropology and Developmental Psychology

Within the broad field of ethnographic analyses that include the points of view of children we encounter the use of different techniques and methods in agreement with what each one intends to investigate.

The main technique continues to be participant observation. We used this technique during the ethnographic fieldwork for both studies in different spaces simultaneously. For the first study, we made observations during religious teaching and other related events (e.g., religious instructor reunions; parent meetings; First Communion ceremonies; infant pilgrimages; and "coexistences," a reunion with children that are in their second year of religious studies held before the First Communion). For the second study, we made observations in the neighborhood (e.g., visiting different houses and collective spaces and

participating in religious rituals of the Evangelio⁴), in the school, and during the lectures about “Toba culture” that Toba neighbors offer in schools in Buenos Aires.

Other resources used in multiple combinations tend to complement this technique. Thus, in many anthropological works, children are told to make drawings for its later analysis. Margaret Mead started using this technique in the late 1920s. She analyzed drawings produced by Manu children in relation to the participant observation of their daily activities (Mead 1985; Cohn 2005a). Christina Toren (1993), Clarice Cohn (2005a), and Flavia Pires (2007) also use children’s drawings as a way of constructing data in the field. Starting with the collection of drawings, Cohn and Pires follow two kinds of work. On the one hand, free or “spontaneous” drawings, which children make with total creative freedom; on the other hand, “controlled” drawings, elaborated from a topic given by the researcher and later interpreted by the children in an interview. What is interesting for Cohn (2005a) is not deciding between one kind of work or another, but rather taking advantage of the possibilities that each provide to disclose boys’ and girls’ points of view.

Other techniques are interviews, stories, and audiovisual media (Toren 1993; Pires 2007; Caputo 1995; LeVine 2007). All of these produced materials are interesting sources in and of themselves. Produced in the context of an ethnography increases their analytic value when being conducted in a setting that can complement the constructed data and put it in tension. Throughout the second study, we used these techniques in two workshops (carried out in 2007 and 2009) with children from the Toba neighborhood (García Palacios and Hecht 2009).

Since there can be many answers to how do children turn into interlocutors in the research process, it is important to also remember that each ethnographic research defines the adequate methods and techniques to better suit the construction of its inquiry. In this regard, since we are interested in studying the relations between the construction of children’s ideas and social practices, we consider that incorporating constructivist psychology methods to our ethnographic approach is enlightening. There are precedents when it comes down to analyzing the association between psychology and anthropology proposed in this work. However, it is important to point out that many anthropological research findings that link methodological tools from psychology with those of anthropology import psychological techniques, but do not revise them from the discipline’s own theoretical assumptions. Clear examples of this are works destined to analyze the “deviations” or “delays” of so-called “normality”, constructed by the stages of cognitive development that were reflected in the socialization process of children from non-Western societies (Nunes 1999). Enriz, García Palacios and Hecht (2007) question studies that primarily focusing on the behavioral and cognitive development of indigenous children. As they have already pointed out, one of the main problems with this series of works is that they do not incorporate the epistemological basis that is the pillar of psychogenetic theory. Rather, they reintroduce only certain psychological developments (especially the commonly called “stage theory”) that social sciences and even the genetic school have widely criticized. However, the most import aspect to point out (taking into account the interests that we have developed in

⁴ Evangelio literally means “Gospel” in Spanish. This socio-religious movement dialectally links elements of Pentecostal evangelism— notions of healing and spiritual gifts, glossolalia or the “gift of tongues”, and preaching about an individualized religious experience—with “traditional Toba socio-religious baggage” or “ancient beliefs” tied to shamanism (Miller 1979; Wright 2008).

this paper) is that we understand that an anthropological research that incorporates techniques from psychology must focus on the restrictions that anthropology's theoretical premises necessarily impose on these tools.

Next, we introduce the method traditionally used by genetic psychology. In agreement with our inquiry, we consider that it will be productive to incorporate this method in our ethnographic approach.

The Critical-Clinical Method

Piagetian psychology came out of the need to find a way to empirically test the epistemological postulates brought forward by constructivism. With “genetic psychology,” Piaget tried to introduce experimental verification in the same epistemology, which both empiricist and rationalist theories lacked according to him. Therefore, he proposed a constructivist alternative to the thesis of innately formed knowledge, but also an alternative to the view of knowledge as a product of mere cultural transmission. Thus, the key aspects of genetic theory are the mechanisms that subjects use to construct knowledge (they do not passively “acquire” or “incorporate” it from the environment). Children are thought of as active subjects, capable of constructing knowledge and interpreting the reality that surrounds them.

The clinical critical method (Piaget 1984) constituted a methodological innovation in the field of developmental psychology up until the moment characterized by pure observation or psychometric experimental techniques (Castorina, Lenzi and Fernández 1984). As of this method, psychogenetic theory aimed to collect the data that was necessary to establish the psychogenesis of different children's ideas. Its implementation basically consists of an interview, paying attention to the permanent interaction between the interviewer's questions and children's answers. The interviewer (having collected a considerable amount of interviews) tries to systematize the information emphasizing the recorded cognitive transformations and reconstructions.⁵ At present, this method is still considered as part of the core that defines the tradition of genetic epistemology. This means that the method's use does not entail the validation of certain genetic psychology formulations that we have critically analyzed here, but rather the constant problematization of genetic psychology's epistemological postulates.

Within psychology's approaches, Piaget's method is the one that most resembles ethnography's method because of the dialectic relation that it establishes between the researcher's interpretation and the empirical materials (Duveen 2000). One of the method's most fundamental features consists of the gradual approach to the inquiry: through the revision of the researcher's hypotheses, of the problems to be analyzed, and research instruments. Accordingly, an important part of research consists of the dynamics of suitability between investigative mechanisms and the problems that arise. In other words, the problem being researched is redefined according to certain unexpected answers by those being interviewed (Castorina, Lenzi and Fernández 1991).⁶ Hence,

⁵ For the historic variations of the clinical–critical method, see Castorina et al. (1984) and Duveen (2000). For more recent revisions, see Barreiro (2010).

⁶ Duveen (2000) also stresses the narrative style with which Piaget presents his work. This can be thought of in relation to the final presentation of ethnography as a product of research.

the possible coordination between both methods does not only stand on the compatibility between their epistemic frameworks that were previously mentioned (the conceived dialectics between the individual and society), but also on the researcher's position: that characteristic "being there" of ethnography. Subsequently, we point out an important clarification regarding observation contexts that both approaches are capable of constructing.

The description of the clinical critical method interview does not seem to differ substantially from the anthropological interview: The interviewees are asked certain questions and are given enough time so that they carry out all the associations that they see fit. Simultaneously, the researcher closely follows these connections with the purpose of asking a new question based on the answer he or she receives. However, when incorporating this method to an ethnographic approach, certain restrictions are necessary: this method will not, by itself, insert us in the universe of meaning that comes into play in everyday interactions; the clinical critical method is necessary but not sufficient to understand the place of social practices in the construction of knowledge.

Mutual Contributions between Ethnography and the Clinical Critical Method in Our Research

In this section, we establish what each research method contributes in our study of the connection between the construction of religious knowledge and social practices.

We asserted that ethnography is the product and the process of a theory-informed investigation. This implies recognizing that anthropological theory not only provides the research's conceptual framework, but also the way the mentioned techniques are going to be used. Consequently, we observed that in anthropological interviews it is necessary not to suppose that the interviewer's questions belong to the same universe of meaning as the interviewee's answers. Likewise, in genetic psychology, with the aim of designing interviews, it is important to create an approach considering the conceptions children have on the question's topic to avoid letting the researcher's common sense configure the interview (Castorina et al. 1984).

However, we consider that within an ethnographic approach anthropology can provide a restriction to the clinical critical method through a theoretical framework that guides and accounts for the inquiry, but also through the consideration of the interview as a moment that one arrives at in an ethnographic research after trying to reconstruct the context of relations in which the interviewee participates. This is essential because, as Nunes (1999) points out, without previous knowledge of the group as a whole, one takes the risk of excluding observational and analytical elements that may be fundamental because there are no conditions that allow one to identify their relevance beforehand. In fact, the very choice of variables that guide research can be questioned, considering that the value or the place of certain behavior varies in each society. If we think in terms of anthropology research methods and the preparation of collected data in the field, small details constitute significant ethnographic contributions and allow a more adequate perspective for the comprehension of the studied universe (Nunes 1999). In this sense, even when other works provided suggestive approaches to children's religious knowledge (Gottlieb 1998; Toren 2003; Pires 2007), if the goal is to acknowledge the influence of socio-cultural aspects in the very process of constructing

knowledge, important adjustments must be made in the use of any technique. For example, Pires (2007) made children draw about “my religion”. In our last research, using this approach with children from the Toba neighborhood was not advisable, because in many occasions “religion” is used socially to establish a difference with “(ancient) beliefs,” and our goal was to access the meanings children gave to both aspects of the Evangelio and the tensions that arise from this. Hence, in order to gain ethnographic specificity, every method and technique must not immediately be made universal.

In this way, we did extensive fieldwork before interviewing children. In our research, the majority of questions we asked the children came to us by observing children interact with each other and with adults in different formative spaces. Other questions arose from the documented material gathered during research; for instance, books and workbooks that the children use in their classes and the church’s pamphlets. As a result, when it was time to consider the questions that would initially structure the interview, a large amount of material was available from which to extract questions that would trigger children’s viewpoints on different matters and situations that they are part of in their everyday life. Furthermore, understanding local conceptions regarding the stage of childhood and the different periods that it covers were essential: It allows the inquiry to be sensitive to the diverse characteristics that are socially expected to be present in children and not to be structured beforehand by an arbitrary age division imposed by the researcher. Following the constitution of childhood in Toba groups, we organized the children that were going to be interviewed into two large groups, considering two stages within *nogotshaxac*, “the way of being a child or young person” in *Qom*, the Toba Language, (Hecht 2010). The first stage covered those characterized as *nogotole/c*, “boy/girl” in *Qom*: from speech until the menarche and voice thickening; the second stage covered those called *qañole* and *nsoqolec*, “young men and women” in *Qom*: from the menarche and voice thickening until the arrival of the first born, when the *nogotshaxac* is finished.⁷

In other words, developing a first phase of fieldwork was necessary as an introduction to the universes of meaning of the subjects with which one interacts in the field, to later dig into some of the more prominent features that are interesting for research. Precisely, the clinical critical method allows us to specify some of the core aspects of research that attempt to look into the construction process of certain points of view. An example is the role of justifications and counterarguments in interviews (Duveen 2000).

⁸ This allows greater precision in knowing if children hold a certain point of view. By

⁷ The first period within the *nogotshaxac* refers to gestation: The *Qom* term *huete’o* is used for the first few months and *hueta’o* for the next few. At birth, the person is considered an *o’o’* (“baby” in *Qom*) until the arrival of speech (Hecht 2010). Since the clinical–critical method involves doing interviews, we had to focus on the following periods to do so. However, religion is already present in these first two periods of a person’s life, which is a reminder that it is impossible to trust data obtained solely from oral interviews. We contemplated this in our research.

⁸ For example, if a child in an interview says that he or she goes to church “to sing and dance,” the child is asked to explain his or her reason and other answers and reasons given by other children. It is interesting to point out that counterarguments are usually constructed resorting to other interviewed children’s points of view, which implies a recognition not only of an unequal relation between the interviewer and the interviewee, but also the power relations between adults and children. Some anthropologists also analyze these important methodological precautions (see Pires 2007; Caputo 1995). This last author could receive criticism for infantilizing children by stating the need to wear “colorful clothes,” which warns us about the power of our common-sense notions on childhood).

way of illustration, during the 2006 research, we could distinguish that some children in Catholic religious instruction believed that god had created human beings, unfamiliar with the hypothesis that we evolved from primates; others knew about this hypothesis, but still defended the former; finally, others believed both hypothesis at the same time (either by relating them or defending them alternatively). Ethnography can likely account for opposing points of views, but it probably cannot, on its own, delve into the relations between these ideas if they aren't reflected in a concrete practice.

However, the history of the clinical critical method (Duveen 2000; Castorina et al. 1984) shows us that it cannot analyze something different from what it originally sought: the underlying conceptual systems that organize children's thoughts. In this respect, according to James, Jenks, and Prout (1998), Piaget's theory gives an active role to children in regards to the construction of knowledge, but denies the socially constructed nature of childhood and children's agency, their active contribution in producing the social world. Moreover, this criticism can be done with more precision and analytic reach if we consider that what does not appear in Piagetian theory is not simply the active contribution of children in the production, reproduction, and resignification of the social world, but also (as we mentioned before) the social world itself. That is to say, in epistemological terms, the key participation of social and cultural aspects in knowledge construction. Furthermore, while this theory does not incorporate cultural aspects into the analysis, the specific contribution of the psychogenetic approach is having adopted the point of view of the knowledge subject. Thus, it studies the individual processes through which culture is resignified and cultural tools are rebuilt (Castorina 2007). Nevertheless, what needs to be added to the analysis are the ways in which social agents not only resignify, but also produce cultural tools. If not, one takes the risk of viewing culture solely as something already given before social action. Revising the criticism in this way allows us to go back to the epistemological basis of genetic theory, opening the challenge of examining it with an anthropological approach and paying attention to sociocultural factors that condition the construction of points of view. Since our intention is to analyze the relations between the constructions and social practices, the clinical method is not enough. In other words, even agreeing with its epistemological postulates, the method cannot grasp the sociocultural aspect: With this method, we can only analyze the context of the interview (i.e., the interviewed child and the researcher's context). Thus the method is only able to study the construction of certain ideas, but not the influence of sociocultural aspects in the process of this construction; for example, in our research we cannot use this method to study the social constraints related to stages of childhood that they are going through. We analyzed that genetic epistemology currently recognizes the need to incorporate into its analysis the restrictions that sociocultural contexts indeed produce in individual constructions. However, this conceptual twist has not yet provoked the modification of the method with which we intend to study this relation. Therefore and associated to the object of this anthropological research, the method must be framed in a methodological approach like ethnography with the aim of studying the social practices in which children interact with one another and with adults. If not, one runs the risk of analyzing one of the terms of the equation lightly. A clear example of this problem comes from research done by Youniss and analyzed by Caputo (1995). Youniss (as cited in Caputo 1995) extends the ideas of Piaget, explaining that social development occurs as a result of children's interpersonal

interactions in the social world. He argues that with children, the interactive relations among peers give development an innovative direction. However, his research is based solely on clinical interviews. The same problem comes from research done by Goldman (1965) who analyses children's religious knowledge, but his research is also based solely on clinical interviews. Therefore, the social aspect would appear as a factor taken into account, but added afterwards. To clarify this point, we present one of the key aspects of the second study we did while we account for the mutual contributions of ethnography and the clinical critical method.

During research, we analyzed the meanings children of a Toba (*Qom*) neighborhood of Buenos Aires give to “going to church.” Even when “going to church” is part of children and adult's everyday life in the neighborhood, each group gives different meanings to this activity. Following the meanings of “going to church” that children gave in the interviews, I found two subgroups within the smaller interviewed children (*nogotolec*). The first subgroup consists of children of up to approximately 8 years old. They associated “going to church” solely with singing and dancing. Although these activities continue to be mentioned in the other subgroups of interviewed children over nine, references to the Bible, Jesus, God, and prayer begin to appear.

Carrying out interviews using the clinical critical method can make certain formative experiences be overlooked because of their everyday nature, such as worships and other church-related activities, evangelical music listened to in the neighborhood, videos played in different houses, the presence of the Bible, and prayers. Children relate to prayers, the Bible, and the figure of Jesus before the age of nine; however, children younger than nine did not mention these topics in the interviews. The ethnographic approach, on the contrary, requires reconstructing formative experiences, which reveal that children learn that they have to pray at a very young age (i.e., before the age of nine); for instance, when they are afraid. This means that if we had concentrated solely on what we could rebuild from clinical critical-method interviews, we would not have observed that children are involved in everyday religious activities since birth, which we did observe thanks to the ethnographic approach. As we stated before, young children did not associate these religious activities exclusively with going to church and, therefore, they did not mention them during the interviews.

Furthermore, the fact that children under nine did not mention prayer and the Bible when speaking of what they do in church, does not imply their lack of knowledge, but does imply that they are not necessarily associated matters. The constructive activity that subjects carry out regarding socially-proposed objects is based on their interactive experiences with them (Castorina 2005). Therefore, it should not surprise anyone that the object of “prayer” does not appear first as something “of the church” for children or associated to it exclusively; because according to their own experiences, praying would belong to a different realm. The process that appears to develop here over time is the association of church and its activities (e.g., “dancing and singing”) with “religious contents” (e.g., the Bible, Jesus, God, and prayer). Therefore, thanks to the clinical critical-method interviews in the context of an ethnographic approach, we were able to observe the reconstructive activity done by children. Over time, they associate the church's activities with new meanings that are “naturally” presumed by adult believers.

If we recognize that the intervention of different social conditions put into play in different contexts (e.g., school, neighborhood, and family) constitute children's constructions in the sense that it has a bearing on them, then it will be necessary to have an

integrated and articulated view of these different contexts. The current challenge for anthropology and genetic psychology is refraining from interpreting the complex context of social life relations as if they were merely “institutional ‘factors’, simplifying the different contexts as ‘independent influences on people’s experiences’” (Díaz de Rada 1995, p. 127). As Toren (1993) explains, we humans show ourselves as social beings in our every act because there is nothing we could do that would somehow not be mediated by our relations with others. This is why it is important to understand children’s constructions by placing them within social relations that are produced and updated in everyday interactions. We consider that without an ethnographic approach we would miss the possibility of unraveling this complex scheme of relations between the social world and individual constructions.

Final Comments

Due to anthropological research experiences that try to incorporate children’s points of view into analysis, a series of questions regarding the possible ways of approaching this have come up. Following these concerns, we have tried to account for some of the mutual contributions that we believe can exist between ethnography and the clinical critical method. We have shown that it is possible to incorporate the clinical critical method in an ethnographic approach under the conditions developed in research and stated in this paper.

However, there are still some paths open to inquiry regarding this connection. For instance, the possibilities that both methods offer through the dialectic construction of their data and the way in which the mentioned results can be combined in the analytic process. Although we have made some mention of this, in this paper we have explained with greater detail the implementation of both methods in fieldwork. We consider this path of research of great significance due to the fact that ethnography and the clinical critical method involve not only taking place “in the field,” but also involve the entire process of analysis.

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