

Temporal dimensions of childhood, youth, and adolescence experiences: A conceptual discussion

Global Studies of Childhood

1–14

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DOI: 10.1177/2043610616671067

gsc.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This article proposes a theoretical and empirical approach to studies on contemporary childhood, youth, and adolescence, based on the idea that these categories respond to a modern and hegemonic Western expression of classification that accounts for biologically conditioned stages, through which ethnic, class, and gender particularities influence the way these social subjects experience the world. This statement implies establishing a relation between two concepts: “experiences” and “transitions.” I will explore the notion of experience as the way in which children, adolescents, and youth live through and express the world that surrounds them, emphasizing on the individuals going through the early stages of their life as active subjects in a conscious relationship with the world. The transition concept allows questioning the approach of life ages as successive and discrete stages, whether they are defined on the grounds of biology, developmental psychology, or socio-anthropological studies, and understanding ages as an ongoing process, although marked by milestones that define the life stages acknowledged in each institutional, sociocultural, and historical background. I will illustrate my argument by some fragments of my ethnographic fieldwork with children in San Ignacio, a predominantly rural location in the province of Misiones (northeastern Argentina), in the southern part of the Paraná jungle.

Keywords

Experience, transitions, childhood, youth

Children walking in a farm

On a hot November afternoon in 2013, I was walking around the Estrella’s farm with Luciano (9 years old) and his sister Patricia (8 years old), who carried a baby in her arms. As we toured the manioc cultivations, the cornfields, and the vegetable garden, they talked to me about their everyday activities:

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- Patricia: I'm going to look for manioc.
- Luciano: Here's one. There are more over there. Around there there's watermelon, melon, onion, garlic. [...] You buy garlic and let it sprout, then you plant it. It grows faster if you put it higher; if you put it lower it grows more slowly.
- Patricia: [...] My mom and dad planted the watermelon and the melon. Where are the melons, Luciano? (I had been carrying the baby for a while and passed it to Patricia.)
- Andrea: He's heavy!
- Patricia: At home, we always take turns with the baby. When one gets tired, you pass him on to the other.
- Luciano: This is a melon.
- Andrea: You remember where it was? (The plant is really little; we walked a lot to find it.)
- Luciano: I remember and see. (Patricia passes me the baby again.)
- Patricia: The baby likes to walk around the forest and be talked to. [...] We tell him: Look! And he recognizes the birdies. [...]
- Gerardo and Andrea arrive, the youngest siblings (7 and 5 years old), who get around the farm on their own. They chase each other through the plants, tripping and laughing.
- Patricia: We walk every day. We used to play in the woods with our cousins. Not anymore, because they're cutting down the trees. [...]
- Andrea: And if you have to stay here (close to the house)? Don't you get bored when you can't go to the woods?
- Patricia: When I get bored, my mom sends me to do the laundry. [...] We watch Gerardo and Andrea playing in the corn for a while.
- Patricia: They are picking it to take it to the sow (they fall down, laugh, the boy climbs a tree). Andrea, careful of your clothes! [...] see, Gerardo can't get down—Luciano, help him! (Visit to the Estrella family farm, November 2013)

Introduction

Luciano and Patricia were one of the first peasant families I met when I began my ethnographic fieldwork in San Ignacio, a predominantly rural location in the province of Misiones (northeastern Argentina), in the southern part of the Paraná jungle. The study began in 2008, when I was part of a team studying the formative experiences and identities among different ethnic groups in Argentina (Novaro, 2011). Through my fieldwork with families like Estrella, I was able to analyze the gradual participation by the younger generations in the social reproduction of families, beginning when they were very little. Far from the stereotypical images of child labor, the children of the Estrella family climbed trees and picked fruit and vegetables that they learned to distinguish progressively. In this way, the boys and girls wandered around the farm and forest daily, playing and incorporating the tasks that were adult responsibilities, carrying out activities that were socially approved in terms of age and gender.¹

Since the early 20th century, anthropology has studied different life stages—especially childhood, adolescence, and youth—in diverse sociocultural and historical contexts (Gottlieb, 2000; LeVine, 2007). The universality of these categories and the scope of their cultural, ethnic, and class particularities have been extensively debated ever since, but these aspects have acquired new meaning through the notion of globalization, which has renewed the extent of shared and differential aspects among the individuals going through the first ages of life in different places, positions, and ethnic contexts of the contemporary world (Cole and Durham, 2007).

In this article, I propose a theoretical approach to studies on contemporary childhood, youth, and adolescence, assuming that the initial ages of life respond to a modern and hegemonic Western expression of classification that accounts for biologically conditioned stages, through which ethnic, class, and gender particularities influence the way these social subjects experience the world. This statement implies establishing a relation between two concepts—"experiences" and "transitions"—that allow understanding the scene presented above neither as a learning situation nor as a child labor one.

The notion of experience allows addressing the way in which children, adolescents, and youth live through and express the world that surrounds them and laying the emphasis on the individuals going through the early stages of their life as active subjects in a conscious relationship with the world, even when we know that the expressions of their experiences partially express the inner lives (Bruner, 1986: 5). The transition concept allows questioning the approach of life ages as successive and discrete stages, whether they are defined on the grounds of biology, developmental psychology, or socio-anthropological studies (Vogler et al., 2008), and understanding ages as an ongoing process, although marked by milestones that define the life stages acknowledged in each institutional, sociocultural, and historical background.

While transitions have usually covered the passages in between the chronological stages of life ages, their connection with the experience concept stresses the active and dynamic processes of life age boundaries, where children, adolescents, and youth undergo horizontal and vertical passages day after day in a constant overlapping and co-existing framework, not deprived of conflict-ridden scenarios. This explains why when living through certain time spans, time seems "to go by much more quickly" than in other cases due to the fact that the subjects are placed in heterogeneous experience structures. Providing examples from my own ethnographic fieldwork, I will problematize how children who are socially and historically located as peasants, whose experiences are related to certain self-independence traits in his or her home (where they take care of small siblings, cook, and work in farms, as the Estrella children do), have at the same time highly heteronomous experiences at school (where they must ask for permission to move around, wait for directions, etc.).

Many other researchers have addressed the way in which experience is understood from an anthropological standpoint (Agar, 1982; Bhabha, 1994; Csordas, 1994; Geertz, 1973; Hastrup, 1995; Marcus and Fischer, 1999), and especially Throop (2003) has focused on the intrinsic relationship between experiences and time consciousness, considering that—from Dilthey's recovery of the hermeneutic tradition—"time consciousness serves as an important window to understanding the variable structures of experience" (p. 228). If the experience notion has a temporal dimension for the subject's conscious evolution, it is possible to postulate that life age transitions allow for the temporally defined consciousness of the experience lived through.

Below I will develop the relation between the experience and transition concepts, resorting in the first place, to Turner's (1986) and Bruner's (1986) anthropological contributions upon retaking Dilthey's theories, as well as to some critical notes of Giddens (1982) in reference to the notion of experience in modernity. Second, with the help of the critical contributions of Vogler et al. (2008) regarding the notion of transitions, I will raise the issue of how the concept of experience allows discussing life ages as discrete and differentiated stages, mostly recalled by the common sense influenced by development psychology and child-study approaches. Third, I will tackle the idea of experience as the learning process inherent to every human activity, which I will lay down from Ingold's (2000) and Lave and Wenger's (2007) perspectives; their ideas on continuous learning over life are consistent with my proposal of analyzing the temporal dimensions of experience during childhood, adolescence, and youth transitions. Finally, I will go back to my fieldwork with

children in farms in the northeastern Argentina to explain how the everyday experiences can be understood as a progressive knowing of environment, “going faster” than the schools ones. The implications for the study of childhood, globally using this approach, is to promote more accurate descriptions about how socialization effectively happens, acknowledging capacities to children that are usually hidden by the protection paradigm and international laws as Convention on the rights of the Child (1989).

About experiences

The notion of experience took on renewed interest in anthropology in the mid of the 1980s, when V. Turner and E. Bruner retrieved the concept from W. Dilthey (1988), who stated as follows: “we lay hold of reality as it is only through facts of consciousness given in our inner experience” (pp. 72–73). From Dilthey’s perspective, experience (*erfahrung*) and lived experience (*erlebnis*) are different concepts: while a temporal dimension associates consciousness with the latter, this aspect is absent in the former. When Turner retrieved these German concepts in English, the distinction was formulated between “experience” and “an experience”: “the former is received by consciousness, it is individual experience, the temporal flow, the latter is the intersubjective articulation of experience, which has a beginning and an ending and thus becomes transformed into a expression” (Bruner, 1986: 6).

Although Dilthey’s approach has been reviewed by critical hermeneutics regarding its ontological consequences on the definition of the social world (Giddens, 1982), his notion of experience (*erlebnis*) continues to be a good starting point to put forward the idea that life ages cannot be defined only externally (as social constructions imposed on a socialized subject and/or biological forms where the consciousness of growing subjects is not involved), but rather the consciousness of children, adolescents, and youth regarding their transitional experiences is likewise relevant. In that sense, childhood and also adolescence and youth tend to be seen from the social sciences standpoint on an “otherness” perspective, as subjects in the opposite side of the adult and rational scientist. Although the notion of agency has dealt with this idea for long time (Giddens, 1982), the concept was conceived thinking of adults, and a rather automatic use has been made to refer to former life ages.

The contemporary recovery of the concept of experience is not restricted to the problem of the perception of sensitive data, to cognition or reason, but rather it includes feelings and expectations as well. On the other hand, it is known that we gain experience not only verbally but also in the form of images and impressions, and it is acknowledged that social scientists have paid too much attention to verbalization to the detriment of visualization and have attached more relevance to language at the expense of imagery (Bruner, 1986). Thus, experiences cannot be systematized as observed behaviors (as far as a researcher is concerned, with the capacity to describe the actions of children, adolescents, and youth in their standardized routines or forms of action). Experience bears a personal, subjective dimension, refers to an active “self,” a human being who not only becomes engaged but also shapes his or her actions retrospectively. Thinking in terms of children, adolescents, and youth, having access to their transitional experiences necessarily entails communicating with them, understanding the meaning they attach to their heterogeneous actions in complex and contradictory contexts.

This leads us to a debate about the characteristics of the subjects in modernity and post modernity, where some authors such as Giddens (1996) have defined the “sequestration of experience” (p. 42): the anguish stirred by catastrophes in a globalized world jeopardizes human beings’ ontological safety, the feeling of trust that most human beings lay on the continuity of their identity and of their social and natural scopes of action. The “perverse consequences of modernity” (Beriani,

1996) lays down the fact that although social subjects have their “self” experience in relation to a world of persons and objects symbolically organized that provide them with the basic confidence for “being in the world,” in contemporary times it is necessary to take into account the subjects’ harmonization or mediation of their own experience with a broader world to which they will never be able to access directly, but which has an immediate influence on their “own selves.”

While children, adolescents, and youth join progressively into a public and globalized world, they do so in heterogeneous times and spaces in sociocultural, historical, and political terms. Thus, Giddens’ (1996) “sequestration of experience” is interesting to tackle the extent—in these everyday and concrete worlds where contemporary childhood, adolescence, and youth unfold—to which this mediated consciousness of the global world interpenetrates with the experiences that subjects regularly go through. Alluding to the status of reality that subjects can attach to their friendship relations mediated by social networks on the Internet is sufficient proof to wonder about the new means of sociability that children, adolescents, or youth have, which not only include their face-to-face bonds but also other beings with whom they have never been (and perhaps will never be) co-present. The Estrella children already presented, and the Soares children that I will introduce later, were eager users of cell phones, generally with more mastery than their parents. In 2011, the children over 12 years of age received netbooks from a government educational program, so in all the farms, it was possible to see the little brothers listening to music, playing games, and participating increasingly in social networks, that were expanding their sociability far away from the limits of family farms.

The limitations in the communication of inner experience (already dealt with by Dilthey) lead us to problematize the expressions in the form of representations, performance, objectivations or texts, where language plays a key role. In order to convey an experience, it is necessary to articulate lived experiences intersubjectively, thus adopting a beginning and end in the temporal flow, thus developing into expressions (Turner, 1986). The relationship between experience and expressions is dialogic and dialectic, owing to the fact that experiences shape the expressions—that is, we understand other people and their expressions on the basis of our own experience and self-understanding. However, expressions also shape experiences because the prevailing narratives of each historical time, the rituals, and festivals define and shed light on our inner experiences (Bruner, 1986). This interrelation postulated by anthropologists allows me to pick up Giddens’ (1996) “sequestration of experience” inherent to modern times, to point out the importance lying in expressive mediations that make it possible to understand how some texts, images, or narrations produced in distant settings become insightful to understand the everyday experience of children, adolescents, and youth with whom their daily worlds have nothing in common.

About transitions

From this starting point, I will attempt to approach an aspect I deem less explored from a theoretical point of view: the transition of ages of life mediated by experiences. Indeed, my understanding is that this relation between experiences and transitions allows for a more accurate description of the first decades of human development, questioning the definitions of childhood, adolescence, and youth as discrete and successive stages that follow a biological and psychological development in a structural matrix (defined by ethnicity, gender, and class), as well as the implicit ideas of homogeneous experiences associated with them (Padawer, 2010).

I will refer to the transition concept to debate the hegemonic and historical definitions of contemporary childhood as the time for play and heteronomy, adolescence as the turbulent period of transition, and adulthood as the period of work and autonomy, all three of them leading to the assumption that in each stage of life subjects go through specific experiences and not others, in

view of certain particularities given by the acknowledgement of ethnicity, class, and gender differences (Padawer, 2010). In this sense, I would like to explore the idea that in the transitions all human beings undergo from childhood to adulthood, subjects who may be in a structural and historical context live through realms of experiences that cross these boundaries and call for heterogeneous cultural resources (Rockwell, 1996). In this way, and as we will see later on with the Soares children, all subjects go through socially and historically defined ages of life incorporated on dispositions, by developing variable skills connected with everyday experiences that must not be reduced to a given age or a structural condition of existence.

Transitions have been largely analyzed in research studies about youth, addressing the articulations and disconnections between the world of learning and labor. This has led researchers to speak, for example, about “transition regimes,” starting from the diagnosis of ongoing de-standardization, individualization, and fragmentation of transitions in contemporary (and mostly first world) nation-states. The concept of transition has allowed researchers to explain the diversification on adult status and social positions achieved by the young, in the understanding that these changes call for the analysis of youth transitions in relation to social structure and agency. This means that young people’s biographical perspectives (their subjective appropriation of their own life courses) have to be taken into consideration when analyzing social structures and policies of education and employment (Walther, 2006: 120).

This interest in the relations between agency and structure seems to be more present in the studies on transitions from youth to adulthood than in the research on the passage from childhood to adolescence or from adolescence to youth. According to Rayou (2005), this may be due to an adult-centered outlook that some anthropological studies on childhood have already pinpointed, a sort of “radical otherness” of childhood from the adult standpoint. That otherness has allowed problematizing youth’s agency capacity to a larger extent than children’s capacity, which in turn cannot dissociate itself from the fact that, in effect, the development of human offspring includes a process of growing autonomy (Padawer, 2010).

The studies on transitions demonstrate that the term has a variety of meanings, different approaches within theoretical frameworks and underlying assumptions about childhood and child development that inform them (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; James et al., 1998; Qvortrup et al., 1994; Rogoff, 1990; Uprichard, 2008; Van Gennepe, 1960; Woodhead and Moss, 2007). One generic definition contends,

transitions are key events and/or processes occurring at specific periods or turning points during the life course. They are generally linked to changes in a person’s appearance, activity, status, roles and relationships, as well as associated changes in use of physical and social space, and/or changing contact with cultural beliefs, discourses and practices, especially where these are linked to changes of setting and in some cases dominant language. (Vogler et al., 2008: 2)

Referring to psychological, biological, social, and cultural changes, transitions are related to change and continuity of experiences, mostly described in vertical dimensions (transitions during lifetime), and also associated with horizontal passages (everyday movements of children, adolescents, youth—and adults—between various institutions or domains of their lives like home, school, and others). These experiences structure children’s movement across space and over time, and into and out of the institutions, influencing their “forms of being.”

Although there are several theoretical approaches, it is worth highlighting the influence that developmental psychological theories have had on the studies on childhood, adolescence, or youth, because even when they may not necessarily adhere to Piaget’s theory in the strict sense, many researchers emphasize its object with these presuppositions in mind. As noted by Vogler et al.

(2008), under Piaget's ideas, early child development was seen as a natural and universal process of progressive stages in children's physical, mental, cognitive, socio-emotional, and moral competencies. These stages were conceived as driven by the interactions between maturational processes and children's progressive structuring and restructuring of their experiences, in pursuing equilibrium between schemata developed in the understanding of the outside world, process that allows for a gradual acquisition of more sophisticated capacities for thinking and reasoning. The implication of seeing children development as a series of phases from infancy to maturity is that these stages become crucial reference points for the discussion of the optimal timing for transitions, so Piaget's theory derived in many researchers' naturalization of ages of life, fixing transitions as the stages in between.

But transitions are more than a stage in between: they are a permanent condition possible to occur all over the maturing process, based on changes in the academic perception of childhood sparked by anthropologists like Lave and Wenger (2007) and Rogoff et al. (1993), in turn grounded on other developmental psychologists, mainly Lev Vygotsky. As pointed out by Vogler et al. (2008), one of the main contributions of these approaches was the idea of children as human "becomings" rather than human "beings," as competent and active participants in society from birth. These positions not only recognize children's agency to build the social world (instead of limiting these capacities to young people and adults) but also emphasize the plurality of developmental pathways, the multiple times, spaces, and activities in which subjects understand the world. There is a way to see Estrella children's activities, like the Soares', as formative experiences that progressively introduce them as competent persons in the world.

From my point of view, the significance of Lave and Wenger's theoretical approach is that it allows understanding transitions as sociocultural, historical processes, centered on the heterogeneous and contradictory ways in which caregivers and communities, experts and legitimate educators enable children, adolescents, and youth to achieve the mastery of culturally valued knowledge. In this regard, I use Vogler et al.'s (2008) notion of transitions as an approach to look at "key moments within the process of socio-cultural learning whereby children change their behavior according to new insights gained through social interaction with their environment" (p. 16), but referred to all the social process of learning entailed in the fluency of experiences (*erlebnis* in Dilthey's terms) in everyday life.

Experiences in transitions and learning

Based on social anthropology, the discussion about the human understanding of the world has been renovated in the past years by means of approaches that critically incorporate cognitive perspectives with material-structuralist outlooks inspired in Bourdieu (2007) and his debates on phenomenology. It is in this framework that it is possible to pinpoint Ingold (2000), who acknowledges the importance of Bourdieu to provide a theory of practices where cultural knowledge comes to life in people's involvement with others in the course of their daily lives.

The dispositions and sensitivities acquired in the social practice provide guidance for subjects to dwell in the sociocultural environment, in response to their characteristics. In direct criticism against the notions of social representations as mental models, Ingold (2000) claims that skills are linked with the practical knowledge, geared across activities that involve postures and gestures: as we will see later with my fieldwork, a way of walking or using tools turns a subject into an expert practitioner and a person in the world.

Ingold regains Merleau Ponty's viewpoint claiming that being immersed in the world is the mind's precondition to perceive, as much as it is of things to be perceived. Just because we are inserted in the world, we can imagine an existence out of it, or in other terms, for objectifying

thinking to exist, an immediate preobjective experience must take place first. Thus, skills are not universal capacities that take on particular forms through the transmission of cultural contents to children: they are not passed on from generation to generation, but rather they are “rediscovered,” incorporated in the “modus operandi” of the developing organism by means of training and the experience in the execution of particular tasks. But mostly, rediscovery implies relationships among subjects. According to the evolutionary psychologist J. Gibson, Ingold (2000) proposes that learning is primarily “education of attention”: placed in specific situations, newcomers are instructed by the experts, predecessors in the “path” outlined through the experience in the world, to perceive and, hence, understand by means of the contextualized action.

Like most of the critical readers of phenomenology, Ingold attaches an important role to language in the transmission of knowledge through practice. Let us recall that according to Schutz and Luckmann (2009)—who will be largely reconsidered by Giddens (1982) to address the linguistic preconstitution of the world—language allows for objectivation that becomes independent from the situation, having as a requirement the command of a common knowledge given by the linguistic code.

In my opinion, the contributions of Lave and Wenger (2007) allow broadening the scope of the discussion that Ingold proposes to the cognitivists, problematizing knowledge as a social practice that takes place from the early ages of life and on the basis of the subjects involved (children, adolescents, and youth). Their distinctive inputs vis-à-vis the preceding author constitute a reflection more attentive to the doctrine of evolutionary psychology, in particular L. Vygotsky, and to the Marxist-oriented practice theory, deep diving into the relations of power and inequality implied in every social intersubjective relationship.

The contribution of the legitimate peripheral participation’s concept (Lave and Wenger, 2007) is to identify learning situations in their human and social specificity, where learners acquire knowledge in their everyday experiences through observation and practice. Learning is constituted through the process by which the subject becomes a full participant in a given sociocultural practice, which involves apprenticeship: the latter is no longer understood as an activity linked with crafted production, the use of simple tools and the division of work based on individual adjustment, but rather it is the relationship between apprentices and experts that takes on different forms in accordance with the sociohistorical context.

The notion of apprenticeship offers the chance to address practical knowledge from its space-temporal coordinates as well as its intersubjective and contextual production nature, defining it as “situated activity.” Practical and situated learning is not opposite to abstract and general knowledge, since from Lave and Wenger’s (2007) perspective, abstract representations always acquire meaning through the context and they themselves are apprehended in specific circumstances. In this discussion about Piaget’s scheme of developmental psychology, legitimate peripheral participation is closely connected with guided participation (Rogoff et al., 1993), which grounded on Vygotsky’s developments, and has enabled to reformulate the study of children’s knowledge in different sociocultural contexts. In the viewpoint developed by the Soviet psychologist, children move forward in their understanding along a creative process through which they transform what they know and their own world while gradually turning into participants of the activities of their community.

Unlike the more ahistorical approaches that prevail in the use of the notions of transmission and internalization, legitimate peripheral participation and guided participation enable understanding the learning process by sharing the conflictive nature of social practices; therefore, the relations between apprentices and veterans are part of social transformation processes that take place on a daily basis. It is not just about being capable of engaging in new activities or mastering new fields of knowledge, but rather being able to build new relations qualified by that mastery, through which

the subjects take part in the production and reproduction of the structures of the communities of practice where they are involved (Lave and Wenger, 2007).

This approach seems to be particularly consistent in thinking of the relations between experiences and transitions along the early stages of life because it acknowledges that children, adolescents, and youth gradually participate on a daily basis in ordinary assignments through which they understand their environment increasingly more, contributing to its configuration as well. Although there are milestones sanctioned by rituals, determined by sociocultural and historical definitions that delimit ages of life (times and places for playing, studying, or learning), these boundaries extend across the experiences of children, adolescents, and youth in multiple ways, being the consciousness of this evolving process—a constituent part of their own understanding of the world in which they live. A scene from my ethnographic research conducted since 2009 in rural areas of San Ignacio (Misiones, northeastern Argentina) will illuminate some of the ideas presented above.

Experiences and transitions of children in a farm

San Ignacio, a predominantly rural location, is in the southern part of the Paraná jungle. For more than a century, these rural areas were a place of interaction between an ethnically diverse population composed of indigenous *Mbyà-Guaraníes*, *colonos* (descendants of European immigrants who came between the late-19th and mid-20th centuries), and a majority of *criollos* (whose ancestors were considered mestizos, as the offspring of Spaniards and indigenous people).

As I will show in the next fragment of my field notes from a visit to a criollo family, the Soares, the children learned about plants and animals through play on the farm with their older siblings, gradually increasing their repertoire of knowledge about their natural surroundings through their involvement in activities on the land, where they went from peripheral and subordinated participation to significant dominion and responsibility over an activity in very few years. As I have pointed out, in this process the children achieve progressive comprehension of the outside world, which came from the learners' intention to do.

Through my fieldwork with families like the Estrella and the Soares, I was able to analyze the gradual participation by the younger generations in the social reproduction of families, and their central role in the historical construction of contrasting identities. Thus, the criollo and colono children refer to themselves as “farm kids,” while their Mbyà Guaraní school and playmates called themselves “forest people.” By the participation in everyday activities, the kids would acquire certain typically criollo ways of inhabiting the rural space, marked by distinctions in terms of ethnicity and social position.

According to the modern and hegemonic western expression of classification that accounts for biologically conditioned stages, the Soares children are expected to transit between home and school, between play and lessons. Their learning about country work is mostly invisible, and from a regulatory standpoint on the issue of child labor, their participation in farm activities could not be viewed as formative experiences. But from the theoretical perspective already presented, their everyday activities can also be analyzed as part of the progressive process toward acquiring the autonomy needed for self-sustenance, where differences in ethnicity, gender, age, and social position establish certain activities and knowledge as belonging to the peasant childhood. This knowledge about the world is what allows them to understand and also to transform, through their daily chores, the world around them.

These transformations took place because the formative experiences did not mean merely transmitting identical knowledge from one generation to the next through imitation, but rather entailed appropriation of knowledge. In other words, the peasant children as apprentices drew upon the

knowledge held by those with expertise in their immediate environment, in a process in which the predominant factor was the heterogeneity of a person attempting to engage in an activity, rather than the homogeneity of someone merely copying.

Participation by the Soares children in activities on the land began with simply walking around the farm: learning how to “be careful” not to step on seedlings, gathering seeds, fetching water for the animals. In this sense, they learned through guided rediscovery in which verbal explanations, that is, descriptions about the basics of the activity through knowledge of the world, did not come from mental representations but rather from the experiences held by their activities in countryside. The Soares children did not receive abstract information about plants (such as a description of their anatomy and physiology might convey), but instead learned to look at and identify crops in a broad natural setting, and then beginning to be guided in the process of knowing how to approach them.

While the Soares children participated daily in the family farm activities, their position in the sibling order, by age and gender, played a role in the tasks assigned to each. Since the older siblings had left the family home, the ones in the domestic group with most responsibilities were Damián and Irene, 16 and 14 years old, respectively, and Damián was the one in charge of the most skilled tasks: “He’s my champ on the farm,” said his father, while in reference to his daughter, he said, “She’s the one who helps out the most.” This auxiliary position of girls was a result of structural positions: it was their gender that placed them in that subordinated position from the adult ideals projected onto the everyday task on farms, while access to sites of formal education (such as agro-technology courses) was reserved for the boys, as were the main organizational tasks related to the crops.

When I visited the Soares farm, I was able to observe the role-played by the older siblings as guides in the process of acquiring skills and education on how to observe, differentiated in terms of gender. As shown in the following fragment, while we walked around the family property, the older children pointed out isolated plants among the capuera (fallow land) or pinetree lines, while the younger ones showed their eagerness to acquire that knowledge by calling their older brother’s or sister’s attention to some plant they hadn’t noticed.

We walk through the rows of pines and there are manioc branches propped on the ground, ready to “take root.” In the middle of the irrigation canal, there are rows of seedlings all ready for planting. The smallest ones wander between the rows, slipping on the wet soil and laughing:

- Martina: Look at the manioc [points to a seedling]
 Researcher: Why do you plant them between the pines?
 Damián: The earth is nicer here.
 Researcher: And how many rows do you have?
 Damián: There are nine.
 Researcher: Do you have a vegetable garden?
 Irene: We had planted one more at the back, lettuce, cabbage [...] Careful; don’t step on the branches [to the little ones]. What’s this plant called, Damián?
 Damián: Melon ... my dad planted it with my mom.
 Irene: Look out for the little plant [to her brother, Carlos, who was about to step on it].
 Damián: Over there I cleaned the onions. They were planted last year. We cleared out the brush and they’ll come back in three or four weeks. And over there is corn we planted three months ago.
 Martina: And there are some beans ... (Visit to Soares family farm, November 2010)

This fragment shows how Damián was the one in charge of explaining the logic of the crops available to them through everyday language (“The earth is nicer here”). It was the boy who had

been given the responsibility of planting and recalled the experience of that (“Over there I cleaned the onions”), who had accounted for the rows planted (“There are nine”) and could more easily identify the seedlings; this is why his sister asked him about it (“What’s this plant called, Damián?”). Damián knew about methods, spaces, and also about times and processes: at what moment crops were planted (“they were planted last year”) and when they would be harvested (“they’ll come back in three or four weeks”) according to variety (“corn we planted three months ago”).

During our walk around the garden, Irene also participated based on what she knew, but by asking her older brother (“the champ”), and especially in watching after her younger siblings: she warned them not to step on the manioc branches, to look out for a melon sprout (“watch out for the little plant!”), that is, while taking care of them, she was also guiding them to notice things in their environment they hadn’t identified yet. And her younger sister, Martina, also went about identifying some crops on her own (“look at the manioc”; “there are some beans”), which she mentioned at different times. The identification of plants “lost in the capuera” allowed the children to display their abilities to perceive shapes, colors, texture, and processes that they had acquired by appropriation of knowledge from their siblings, although none of this came in the purposeful form of explicit schooling.

Transitions in ages mediated by experience: a conclusion

The theoretical framework presented above acknowledges young individuals as subjects in the process of understanding and transforming the world. From the early stages of their life, children are defined as active participants in a conscious relationship with the world, even when we know that the expressions of their experiences (specially the verbalized ones) partially express the inner lives. The transition concept allows questioning the approach of life ages as successive and discrete stages, where children are expected to play and attend to school, while other formative experiences remain invisible. When understanding ages as an ongoing process (although marked by milestones that define the life stages acknowledged in each institutional, sociocultural, and historical background), we can recognize autonomy processes that coexist with heteronomy developments.

While transitions have usually covered the passages in between, the chronological stages of life ages, their connection with the experience concept stresses the active and dynamic processes of life age boundaries, where children, adolescents, and youth undergo horizontal and vertical passages day after day in a constant overlapping and co-existing framework, not deprived of conflict-ridden scenarios. The temporal dimension of experience is the way the subjects placed in heterogeneous experience structures can navigate from one to another: waiting for directions in the classroom, directing siblings in the farm, and changing all positions during lifetime.

The relation between experiences and transitions in the first stages of life acknowledges childhood and also adolescence and youth to be seen no more as an “otherness,” subjects in the opposite side of the adult and rational scientist. Despite the human offspring developing as a fulfilled, active, and reflexive subject by a particular spatial and temporal progress in the course of each individual’s life, the relation between experiences and transitions allows understanding how agency and objectivation capacities are gradually acquired in the first two decades of human life in transitions that occur not only vertically but also horizontally.

Because of his explicit interest in educational processes but mainly because of his studies on practical sense, Bourdieu’s (2007) contributions about practical knowledge enabled conceptually addressing how the inscriptions of class are corporally included as dispositions, developing at the same time into ways of doing and understanding the world. With these contributions—even when his interest in social difference has been lesser in degree—it is possible to tackle experiences and transitions in relation to learning by retrieving Ingold’s (2000) inputs, which allow for the

understanding of learning through experiences acquired over life based upon the links between human beings' biological and social developmental phases.

These positions open up a debate with the developments of cognitive anthropology as well as with Piaget-based developmental psychology. These contributions explore the relation between experiences and skills: going back to the forms in which we—as social subjects—progressively understand the world, emphasizing in this case the process of knowledge understood as education of attention, where learners keep following the paths paved by the most experimented individuals. This perspective, which picks up Bourdieu's and Ingold's views owing to the importance of the embodied perception of the surroundings, is essential for my argument that human offspring is incorporated into a preexisting world, in permanent and multiple transition processes mediated by experience, through which children, adolescents, and youth understand and transform the world at the same time.

In this latter aspect, the contributions of J. Lave and E. Wenger (2007) are critical inasmuch as they enable understanding the subjects as experts of the world on the basis of the constitution of communities of practice that shape the world through their ordinary activities, which always imply learning. Although this perspective is not grounded on the phenomenological notion of experience, but rather it refers to practices and activities, I would like to suggest that its roots in Marxist tradition allow establishing links with the preceding contributions, especially with Giddens' (1996) viewpoint about agency and his debate on the status of experience in modernity.

From Vygotsky's perspective, Lave and Wenger (2007) address how at diverse settings individuals learn through actions, indicating that the bonds between newcomers and experts are relations of power in permanent change, where subjects gradually acquire learning about the world and at the same time transform it. Their vision enables us to conceptualize children, adolescents, and youth as subjects that join a preexisting world and who go through these processes of transition by means of experiences that are not ascertained by age, class position, gender, or ethnicity solely, but rather by relations defined around the command of socially enacted skills.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the editors and reviewers for their support in editing this paper. Also, she acknowledges the families of San Ignacio for their warmth and patience during my fieldwork through many years.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported, since 2009, by the National Council of Scientific and Technological Research (CONICET), the National Agency of Science and Technology Promotion (ANPCyT), and the University of Buenos Aires (UBA).

Note

1. The names of the people represented here are fictitious in order to preserve their anonymity, but the locations are real. The latter is due to the fact that the land conflicts are a concern of my interlocutors, and the socio-anthropological studies constitute a basis for land ordinance processes in course. The fieldwork included participant observation in schools, farms, and indigenous villages, as well as open interviews, statistical and geo-reference analysis. All field fragments were obtained personally.

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