

## Research Article

# Growing Up in the Forest Ethnographic Study on Mbya Childrearing Values and Practices

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## Abstract

Although some cultural analyses still use simplistic dualisms such as collectivism vs individualism or interdependence vs autonomy, a balance between individual and collective goals and values is noticeable in many Indigenous communities. Mbya Guarani perspectives on children's growth and development, emphasizes the balance between interdependence and autonomy as complementary values. This article examines the ideas of reciprocity, respect, autonomy, and interdependence of lives and the impact of these on children's development and health. Using an ecological perspective that recognizes humans' relationship with other living beings that inhabit the forest, this article is based on ethnographic research conducted in two Mbya Guarani communities (Argentina). Respect and reciprocity are key for children to develop as part of the community and the forest and they are related to children's wellbeing and health. I describe Mbya perspectives on children's growth and development, providing examples of environmentally relevant skills to grow up in the forest. These skills are associated with particular ways of inhabiting the forest, including learning how to walk in it and developing entendimiento (understanding). These make possible children's integration in community life through their participation and collaboration in daily activities.

## INTRODUCTION

This article examines the ideas of autonomy, reciprocity and interdependence of lives and their impact on children's growth and development from Mbya Guarani perspective. Central to this article is the idea of balance between interdependence and autonomy, avoiding simplistic dualisms such as "collectivism vs individualism" as cultural values guiding childrearing which result in different developmental pathways [1]. These concepts are under criticism, due to current approaches to child development [2]. On the contrary, a balance between individual and collective goals and values is noticeable in many Indigenous communities in which individuals from different generations share daily activities and children are encouraged to interact in multi-aged groups [3]. Using an ecological approach to Human Development [4] it is based on ethnographic research conducted in two Mbya indigenous communities (Misiones, Argentina).

Child development is currently a topic of concern for scientists, teachers and governments. Ethnography, Cultural Psychology and Human Ecology have contributed to criticize the idea of universal pathways of human development, stressing the intimate relationships between children's development and

specific environments in which children participate in. According to the Ecology of Human Development, children's development is a result of their participation and engagement with their environment; they are both shaped by and actively shape their environments [3-6]. The Ecology of Human Development relates patterns and pathways of development to the enduring and changing environments in which people live [4,7]. In that framework, understanding how people perceive and experience their environments is key for anthropologists and psychologists interested in the particular ways in which physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills develop across the life-span.

Contrary to conventional approaches to child development, based on the idea that the environment influences the child, for the Ecology of Human Development the unit of analysis is the child-in-its-environment as a whole, not as separate entities. In that framework, "environment" includes all those contexts in which children live and have an impact on their health outcomes and the development of several skills. [3,8]. As each ecology emphasizes a different set of "skills" and, consequently, diverse developmental pathways, these learning processes accompany transformations in ecological conditions [1].

Building off these ideas, in this article I first briefly examine Mbya perspectives on children's growth and development in a framework of balance between interdependence and autonomy as complementary childrearing goals and values. Second, I discuss the importance of these concepts in children's development and health in a framework of their close relationship with their environment, the "monte" (forest), by providing some examples of environmentally relevant skills, necessary for "inhabiting" the forest.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Mbya population

Mbya Guarani are one of the Indigenous peoples living in the Argentinian Northeast in the southern extension of the Paranaense Rainforest, one of the major areas of biodiversity in South America. However, during the last decades the Paranaense Rainforest has been under several pressures [9] which has significantly reduced its extent and has led to major changes in the Mbya way of life (*Mbya reko*).

The Mbya presence in Misiones Province dates back to the end of the nineteenth or beginning of the twentieth century, when they moved from the southeast the current territory of Paraguay, to Argentina and Brazil, significantly expanding its territory [10,11]. According to most recent estimates, the Guarani total over 6500 people in Argentina, with high and sustained growth rates [12]. However, according to official sources there are 3975 people in Argentina who identify themselves as belonging to the Mbya Guarani People [13]. Their language belongs to the Tupí-Guaraní linguistic family. The Mbya communities that I worked in are located between Cainguas and Libertador General San Martín Departments (Misiones Province).

Ethnographic and historical studies about Mbya people have emphasized their constant spatial mobility as they make use of the rainforest resources and search for areas having favorable conditions for the *Mbya reko*. In spite of the current reduction in the extent of the rainforest, Mbya subsistence is still based on the combination of hunting-gathering-fishing and "slash-and-burn" horticulture, although dedication to these activities varies according to communities' location and the impact of government policies. Handicraft selling and temporary paid jobs in 'colonias' (small rural areas devoted to agricultural production and livestock rearing contribute to the maintenance of most households. Some individuals receive allowances and some get a salary from being teaching assistants or sanitary agents. The money obtained from either activity allows them to obtain industrially elaborated supplies (flour, sugar, pasta, rice, beans, cold cuts, sodas, candy, among others) and has resulted in a lesser degree of commitment to traditional food-obtaining activities, as well as important dietary changes [14]. The current pressures on the forest environment together with other conditions at micro and macro level, shape the particular ecological setting in which children's life and development occur. In relation to this, research on children's daily experiences could show the inner diversity that depict Mbya communities throughout the province.

### Methodology

The data presented in this article came from an ethnographic

research aimed to characterize everyday childrearing practices and their relation to caregivers' knowledge, expectations and values about children's development and health from an ecological perspective. From the methodological point of view the research design was descriptive and qualitative, based on the combination and complementary use of several techniques for data collection (systematic non-structured observations, structured observations, spot observations and open-ended interviews mainly) and record (audio, video and photography).

During successive fieldwork we used systematic ethnographic observation at fixed intervals, spot observations, day of life and participant observations. They were made in two stages. The first one consisted of extended observations in 5 households of both communities, covering most of the day (8 am to 7 pm), for several consecutive days (7 average). As long as it was possible, we also accompanied people during their everyday itineraries. On a second stage we performed observations at fixed intervals (2 hours) in a wide number of households (n=9) during consecutive days (average 15). Participant observations and spot observations were also made in most of the community households. Households were selected based on the presence of children under 3 years old [14]. Through the observations, we focused on children's daily experiences and childrearing practices within the framework of subsistence activities performed in several spaces recognized within the monte, together with more experienced adults and children could be observed and recorded. Caregivers (parents, grandparents) and local healers (n=16) were also interviewed with the aim to deepen our understanding of local knowledge, beliefs and values around children's behavior and development, developmental milestones and their relation with childrearing practices recorded<sup>1</sup>. Our purpose was to recognize "parental ethnotheories" [15]. Our choice of different-age individuals (between 23 and 75 years old) allowed us to assess similarities and differences in those ethno-theories among generations. As a result, we obtained 286 observation hours and 25 hours of interviews.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ethnographic observations of children's everyday life, accounts for the diversity of childhood experiences in different Mbya communities of Argentina [14,16]. Based on that, we argue that children's engagement in routine subsistence activities which present a high potential for learning of local knowledge and for the process of enskillment continue to be predominant. These processes are directly linked with the individual's involvement in their domestic environment, throughout careful observation and participation in activities performed by multi-aged groups of people [3,17].

As we stated at the beginning, Mbya Guarani perspectives on children's growth and development, emphasizes the balance between autonomy and interdependence of lives as complementary goals and values guiding childrearing practices [2]. Mbya people are acknowledged for their deep relationship with the forest ("*monte*" or *ka'aguy*). They do not just live in the forest; they consider themselves - together with other living beings - part of this environment, which is essential from their

<sup>1</sup> For a complete description of methodological aspects and the Mbya communities under study see [13].

point of view for the continuity of the *Mbya reko*. This expression refers to cultural practices learned and performed throughout generations, including the appropriate ways of “dwelling” [8] in the forest and relating with the forest’s inhabitants. It is thus necessary to understand what it means to “dwell in” or to “inhabit” an environment, which is different than merely to live in it. If we accept this perspective, we must consider development as an emergent of these interactions between children and the environments in which they participate.

The diversity of cultural understanding about expectable ways of interactions between children and others (humans or not) is a central aspect to take into consideration when analyzing human development, as they are the basis of cultural models about life course and development, having an impact in children’s daily experiences and wellbeing. In this regard, it is necessary to situate interactions between children and the environment within the framework of local cosmologies [18], as they define ontologies and the appropriate relationships between humans and other living beings and provide arguments to explain, justify, and control human behavior [2].

In Mbya language child development are designed as “*kakuaa*” that is, “to grow.” It is viewed as a process that involves the development of several skills which are simultaneously physical, cognitive, social and perceptual. Moreover, “*kakuaa*” implies a progressive process towards understanding (“*entendimiento*”). In this sense, a mature child is one who has achieved understanding. As the child develops understanding, she/he is able to collaborate with others and to perform different activities [2].

The expression *mitãñemongakuaa* literally means “to make the child grow” and is used to refer to rearing practices. The process of growing up is recognizable by transformations in children’s competences which justify changes in the way they are named in the community. For example a child that is breastfed is called “*mitãokambu*” whereas a child who is able to eat is “*mitãikaru*.” Similar distinctions are made for the child who crawls (“*mitãopoñi*”) versus the child who is able to walk (“*mitãoguata*”), and the child who is able to talk “*mitãijavu*” [2,19].

From Mbya perspective, this process of growing up (“*kakuaa*”) requires adult care, guidance and support, because it is full of risks for the children.

According to Mbya people in the forest “everything has a spirit” this means that “natural” entities (species) have will, desire, and intention. The interactions between all of these entities are affected by specific rules having to do with reciprocity and respect. These values are key for children to develop as part of the community and the forest and they are related to children’s wellbeing and health. As described in several studies [14,19-21], humans’ health and wellbeing depend on appropriate interactions between them and their environment, including respect of taboos and proscriptions regarding entities considered harmful. Regarding this, our ethnographic research [14] showed that a wide range of children’s illness affecting their development and their integration in community life are explained and justified based on lack of respect and reciprocity with other forest inhabitants. Adults’ or other relatives’ lack of respect and reciprocity for other living beings may have serious

consequences for children’s wellbeing. In that sense, we notice a strong interdependence of lives, as they depend on each other for living, growing, and/or being healthy.

Mbya children are taught early that they are part of the “*monte*” and of the “*teko’a*” (community-kin group) and they learn rules to interact with other inhabitants by observing and taking part in others’ behaviors and attitudes from a very early age. The actual experiences children have with their environment during their participation in collective activities, such as hunting or gathering, are an important source of learning of these rules. As many other hunting people around the world, Mbya men explain success in hunting by combining personal technical abilities with the idea of a necessary collaboration or cooperation between the prey and the hunter [8,18,22]. For this collaboration was possible, people must follow some script, such as to ask for permission to the prey’s owners in order to be respectful with them. As children participate in collective activities, such as hunting and gathering, they take part in the actions that are deemed necessary in order to be respectful to the spirits or “*dueños*” (guardians) of other species, in order to avoiding risks for people’s wellbeing. For instance, infants are considered vulnerable and they can fail to achieve the human condition if they are harmed by spirits. This can happen when their parents or siblings do not behave in an appropriate way during the first months of child’s life. In other words, when they do not respect specific taboos or they do not show respect to the spirits.

Infants and young children are viewed as being particularly vulnerable, especially in the first years of life, until they are baptized, i.e. they receive their personal sacred name [14]. A healthy child is easily recognized by the absence of physical symptoms of distress and behavioral disorders like irritability, weakness, listlessness, and excitement. These states are expressed in the vernacular in categories such as *pochy* (angry, aggressive) or *achëramo* (“weeping baby”). As a consequence, “(s)he doesn’t want to grow” (*ndokakuaa*) or “s(he)doesn’t stand up” (“*no levanta*”), meaning he/she doesn’t walk [20]. If children cry a lot and without any reason parents say they are “*caprichosos*” or “*malitos*” (impulsive, fussy, bad). They are becoming “*pochy*” and “*calientes*” (hot). These are considered to be symptoms of illnesses which put children at risk of losing their human condition. In those cases, the intervention of the religious leader (Opyguã) is required to cure the child [14,21].

Once baptized, children begin to be educated in “*pochy*” control. Since then, they will be in a condition to “understand” what the elders teach them. It represents an important transition between life stages, bringing a change in children’s status. As children gradually develop “*entendimiento*” (understanding) and parents show greater concern to educate children in the self-control of extreme emotions like anger, temper, or senseless crying. These behaviors are not only associated with serious illnesses, but also limit children’s opportunities to participate in community life.

Reciprocity and respect are promoted daily in order to allow children to be aware of interdependence of all forms of life in the forest, including among people. This kind of education promoting self-control and awareness of other’s interests and needs allows children to collaborate in activities that require reciprocity and

responsibility such as care of siblings and older relatives. Another way of promoting this idea is to share food. In every household I visited, there was always food prepared and available (e.g., in a pot on the patio) for people to eat as they wish, and visitors were invited to share mate and the local type of bread (*chipa*). If someone has no food, his/her relatives are supposed to bring it to him/her, expecting reciprocity in the future. If a child or adult has access to certain kinds of food, for instance the meat of certain animals such as peccaries (*kochi*, considered a sacred animal), they must bring it to the *teko'a* to be cooked and shared with relatives and neighbors. When someone breaks this rule, for example by not sharing the product of hunting and eating it alone in the forest, the peccary's *dueño* (guardian) may be offended. As a result, the hunter could suffer serious illness. In some extreme cases, hunters may be reached by an evil spirit and, as a result, be transformed into a jaguar, losing the human condition (via *djepota*: metamorphosis). Symptoms of this are visible changes in his appearance, including changes in his teeth [14,21].

Together with developing *entendimiento*, learning to walk (Figure 1), is a crucial skill to be considered a human being [21]. The transition from crawling to standing up and walking upright is one of the most important developmental milestones and is promoted by several daily practices, such as daily massages, use of several amulets, and motor training using specific objects like a special cane frame installed in the courtyard to support the child in practicing standing and walking (*mitãamba*) (Figure 2) [14,19]. However, walking is not merely a physical or motor skill. Walking is a way to experience the world, as *Ñamandu Ru Ete* (Our Father, the main deity) created the *Yvytenonde* (The First Earth) through walking on it [21,14]. For Mbya people, walking means to create and transform the forest, through everyday subsistence activities [9,19]. Learning to walk in the forest implies putting into play a variety of sensory and cognitive skills such as keen observation and active listening, but also the ability to recognize differences in smell and taste. It is especially important because girls and boys participate from a very early age in gathering and horticulture, accompanying adults and doing some “simple” tasks such as helping to clean or to put the seeds in the holes made by adults with the digging stick. In accompanying adults in gathering, children develop sensory and perceptual skills such as taste and smell involved in the recognition and collection of medicinal plants. Hunting is probably the activity that requires the most complex abilities; it involves different tools, such as traps, bows and arrows (less frequent today) and firearms (more recently). Each technological choice implies a deep knowledge about the habits of prey, their vulnerabilities, and the environments they frequent [22-24] (Figure 3). Children's gradual involvement in activities with different levels of complexity allow them to develop environmentally relevant skills over time. In sum, learning to walk through the forest is a crucial skill for both girls and boys for growing up in the forest environment.

Observations of daily life and people's narratives show that interdependence between children and their environment is a central aspect of child rearing and education. However, balance between interdependence and autonomy is acknowledged. Parents consider children's autonomy to be crucial for their participation in the community life. Children's engagement in household routines and their responsibilities regarding



Figure 1 Mbya child learning to walk.



Figure 2 Mbya child in the “mitãamba”.



Figure 3 A girl teaching her little brother to keep the fireplace.

relatives and elders are combined with a strong respect for self-determination and autonomy. Parents' daily attitudes and narratives about goals and values of childrearing fit with practices that I observed that demonstrate respect for children's interests, initiative, and preferences. Parents consider children's autonomy to be crucial for their participation in the community life. As children get older we see other examples in the allotment of household chores to children based on their preferences (whether they prefer to take care of siblings, cook, or participate in hunting or gathering) and the respect for children's initiative in collaborating. Parents and other relatives carefully observe children's individual preferences and promote the learning of specific skills (to be a skillful hunter or to know about medicinal plants) (Figure 4,5).

In summary, Mbya childrearing values and practices promote children's integration to community endeavors which require the learning of valuable skills that are considered crucial to growing up in the forest. Mbya parents see children's development as a process of *transformation* by participation in routine activity settings which implies a balance between interdependence

and respect for children's autonomy, in a framework of adult guidance and holding.

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**Figure 4** Three brothers going fishing in the stream in the forest.



**Figure 5** A girl cooking some fish.

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