

Revisiting the field of kinship from the perspective of the anthropology of children and childhood. Introduction

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This special issue of *AnthropoChildren* has its roots in a shared interest in the topic of kinship, and an ambition to discuss its relevance to the anthropology of children and childhood and, in a spirit of reciprocity, for anthropology in general. This penchant for the intersection of these two concerns has been evident in the long-term ethnographic fieldwork that the coordinators have conducted in Africa, Latin America and Europe, with children in situations of migration, disability or marginalisation, and in extremely varied social and cultural environments (Soninke, Gipsy, Andean, urban Mexican, European populations, etc.).¹

This special issue also extends and gives shape to the discussions that took place in 2018 at the IXth Methodological Seminar on 'Contributions from the Anthropology of Childhood', entitled "Children and Kinship: A 'Simple' Question of Learning?", co-hosted by the University of Liège (Belgium), *El Colegio de San Luis, A.C.* (Mexico) and IRD (the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development).² It is also linked to the international conference "*Geometrías variables del parentesco en el trabajo de milpa con niños*", held in 2024 in collaboration with numerous Mexican colleagues and scientific institutions,³ as well as a number of other previous interdisciplinary initiatives.⁴

Its theme is in line with some of the concerns highlighted in recent publications. For example, those shared by the contributors of the special issue coordinated by Sarcinelli *et al.* (2022) who explore a certain number of blind spots: the role of children in the construction of relations of kinship and affiliation, in generational relations, in transmission etc.

The starting point for this special issue is the observation that, as a result of the criticism and questioning of the anthropology of kinship, and of anthropology in general, two different directions can be identified. The first of these promotes an interdisciplinary approach under the umbrella of *New Kinship Studies*, which has been recognised for its contributions but also criticised in several respects (Peneque 2022).⁵ The second proposes to build on these new perspectives, with the necessary critical distance, and to continue developing a critical anthropology of kinship that takes into account the historical depth of anthropology's contributions, its questioning, as well as recent work on societies of all kinds, including Western ones. In this issue, the coordinators and contributors have adopted the latter approach and, based on several ethnographic case studies from Latin America (Mexico, Argentina and Bolivia), propose to reflect on the anthropology of kinship from the perspective of children and childhood. In this respect it represents an attempt, among many, to overcome what Sarcinelli (2022) calls the "missed dialogue" between the anthropology of kinship and the anthropology of childhood. In addition to this initial orientation, the contributors to this issue share several hypotheses and theoretical and methodological positions, as well as the aim of addressing transversal issues.

In particular, although the anthropology of kinship attaches great importance to children as the backbone of social reproduction, they are more often than not represented indirectly or, more precisely, as simple "objects" or "matters" in processes related to procreation, descent, transmission or alliance. The now classic monographs that founded the discipline are exemplary and instructive in this respect, as are more recent studies.⁶ However, while the role of children in the social and symbolic construction of kinship is certainly a legitimate topic, little is actually known about the transmission of kinship to children, how they learn it, or their active role in kinship, in terms of terminology, systems of attitudes, rules of alliance, kinship networks and practical kinship.⁷

Specifically, this issue explores the hypothesis that the transmission to young children of certain ways of integrating into kinship (uses of terms, attitudes) is more explicit – in the form of discourse and incentives – than in other areas of learning where observation and imitation take precedence.⁸ More generally, the authors explore the role of children in the construction and practice of kinship and whether, beyond the diversity of such practices reflected in anthropological studies, recurring patterns can be identified in the processes of acquisition, transmission or creation in the field of kinship.

How do children come to terms with the complexity of connections and relationships – with the dead and with the living, with ancestors, animals and other beings – and with the cosmologies and conceptions of the person and the body on which they depend? Moreover, how do they deal with the inevitable contradictions contained in these rules, and manifested in the practices associated with them, but also between these rules and practices, contradictions that may become apparent at an early age, for example in cases of incest (Dussy 2013)? How do children cope with local and “international” processes of adoption and fostering (Goody 1982; Razy 2007b; Tarducci 2011; Leblic 2004)? There has been relatively little research on these issues, despite the wealth of studies showing just how early children begin to develop “social understanding”, to paraphrase Dunn (1988).

It is certainly not without significance that questions about the terms of address used by children arise, for example, in Euro-American studies focusing on foster families (Cadoret 1995), blended families (Martial 2003), same-sex and transgender families (Fortier 2017), as well as families made possible by sperm and egg donation and surrogacy, that is, in cases where the connections and relationships to be constructed are not “self-evident,” and the normative repertoire of kinship is no longer sufficient. It is as if, here as elsewhere, the learning of kinship by children in “traditional” contexts (in the sense of conforming to the dominant ideology at a given moment in a society’s history) is taken for granted and therefore not worthy of anthropologists’ attention, with the exception of researchers interested in language learning (Ochs & Schieffelin 1984; De Léon Pasquel 1998, 2005). However, when this “self-evident” learning does not occur, problems can arise (Fogel 2007), and in some cases it is the children who “make” their parents (Fogel 2022).

There remains another area that has received even less attention, namely the ways in which children themselves understand kinship (Levine & Williams 1974; Pontalti 2018): how do children “relate” (Carsten 2000) to each other? How do they make use of kinship “between children”, that is in their everyday interactions with each other – when the reproduction of the norm often competes with creativity – particularly in play, but also in the construction of everyday relationships between street children (Suremain 2006) and those who work as prostitutes (Montgomery 2001)? How do children growing up in contexts where kinship is politicised become actors (Sarcinelli 2022), and what registers do they draw on in families with same-sex parents in Italy (Sarcinelli 2020)? Or in transgender families in France (Hérault 2015)? These questions take on a new dimension when it comes to exploring the agency of very young children, coming to terms, for example, with the multiple registers of identification at play in the Soninke regions of Mali (Razy 2007), and getting to grips with manifestations of joking relationships in this context, as well as in residential nurseries in Mali and Mexico (Razy 2021). Building on these questions, the articles in this issue explore different ways in which the contours of kinship can be re-examined from children’s perspectives.

From a methodological point of view, questions arise about how best to access and produce research material. It is significant that in most studies of kinship, the “children” studied are usually

“former children”. It is only when they have become adults that their experiences as children are called upon, which raises certain problems. This methodological approach, as well as the validity of the tools used to engage with children (drawings, kinship diagrams etc.), deserve closer scrutiny, as Sarcinelli (2019-2020) and Sarcinelli & Simon (2021) have argued.

Finally, if children are at the centre of the questions addressed here, we might also reflect more closely on the ways in which childhood – as a period and as a category, in its multiple variations – functions as a “social operator of kinship” (Lévi-Strauss 1949; Fortes 1949).

Clearly, the contributors to this special issue cannot address all of these questions, but our aim is to draw attention to the scope and importance of the work that needs to be done in this field. The case studies provide an insight into the need to “revisit” questions of kinship from the perspective of childhood and children. Each of the contributions, in its own way, offers points of reference for this cross-cutting exploration.

Contributors and contributions

This special issue focuses on the construction of kinship by children themselves. This is the subject of ANDREA SZULC’s contribution, based on her work with Mapuche indigenous communities (Argentina). From a methodological point of view, she points out that only long-term observation and ethnographic research can enable us to properly assess the evolution of the learning dynamics and processes of appropriation that children carry out. Drawing on over twenty years of observation in the field, ANDREA SZULC explores the ways in which children transform the normative frameworks they inherit as members of the communities to which they belong. The author shows that these children are far from the passive mimesis that seemed to characterise the “traditional societies” studied by the pioneers of anthropology. Yet, she also shows that children do not make a radical break with the models inherited from their parents and more distant ancestors. On a daily basis, they reconfigure kinship relationships, both in form and content, according to the various experiences, including emotional ones, that they encounter and share. One of the most important lessons to emerge from this text is that the ethnographic study of the dynamics of kinship construction from children’s perspectives ultimately refers to the circulation of emotions, affects and sentiments accumulated from day to day. In doing so, the author thus pushes back against the mostly normative approaches that place too much emphasis on the prescriptive, vertical, mimetic learning of kinship to the detriment of its progressive, horizontal, sensitive construction.

Continuing this reflection on the construction of kinship, on the one hand, and also on the way in which the children’s perspective makes it possible to revisit its contours, on the other, the example of the “street children” studied by CHARLES-ÉDOUARD DE SUREMAIN in Bolivia opens up new analytical avenues. As in the Mapuche context, children constantly create and recreate kinship bonds with a strong affective foundation, forged through the sharing of daily activities, even if in this case they are “survival activities”. Despite being estranged from their families of origin in the broadest sense, these street children are constantly talking about kinship and positioning themselves in relation to each other by using kinship terms. These terms are borrowed from their common vocabulary: “brothers”, “children”, “compadre”, “brotherhood”... However, their use, and the ways in which they are applied and experienced on a daily basis, make it possible to avoid, or even override, the hierarchies and forms of domination that characterise traditional kinship ties – based on alliance, consanguinity or descent. The author’s hypothesis is that these terms are indicative of the way in which the children deal with the separation from their original families.

Ultimately, he shows that street children's understanding of kinship is at odds with that conveyed in the discourse and operational policies of international institutions and NGOs. While the latter aim to reintegrate street children by trying to reunite them with their family of origin, or with another family, the children attempt to recreate among themselves a family that escapes its "traditional" version. Furthermore, CHARLES-ÉDOUARD DE SUREMAIN concludes that by defining these children as "vulnerable beings" because they do not belong to a family, institutional actors imply a lack of agency, and contribute to the perpetuation of a "victim discourse". Implicitly, the crucial importance of "chosen kinship" is emphasised when considering the capacity of these children to act on their own lives, however difficult that may be.

The contribution by GUADALUPE REYES DOMINGUEZ raises the question of the room for manoeuvre within the construction of kinship relations and the meanings and attitudes associated with them among young siblings of Mayan descent living in the urban peripheries of the state of Yucatán (Mexico). This ethnographic study shows that changes take place at multiple levels. In this case, given that parents in peri-urban contexts are often engaged in multiple activities, children take on some of them, such as caring for infant siblings, in novel ways. Key values of the "traditional" Maya model of education – such as "responsibility", "obedience" and "solidarity" – are then reappropriated and reinterpreted. For example, while the central figure of parenthood is usually embodied by the mother is challenged, as are the authority roles usually assigned to fathers. In this context, the new roles assumed by siblings in the daily care of the youngest members of the family are likely to lead to a profound questioning of gender relations and, more generally, of authority. The author notes that the relationships between elder and younger siblings within the same family are more authoritarian than in the traditional model. Building on previous case studies conducted in Argentina and Bolivia, GUADALUPE REYES DOMINGUEZ confirms the significance of shared practices, everyday experiences and the emotions that accompany these complex transformations in the construction of kinship – from relationships and attitudes to the values that underpin it.

The article by NEYRA PATRICIA ALVARADO SOLÍS provides an excellent illustration of the transformations currently taking place in the field of anthropology, particularly with regard to the growing interest in non-human agents. The text examines the construction of kinship relations between the children of a gypsy community in Mexico, the Ludar, and their domestic animals. The flexibility of this study mirrors the itinerant way of life of the Ludar. From the outset, the author makes it clear outset that her ethnographic observations encompass the multiple environments that the encampments traverse along their itinerary, as well as the various areas of immediate proximity with which they engage during their stops. In this case, these are reserved parking spaces, which are vacant plots of land that can be rented out to set up temporary housing structures, unlike the government-regulated sites designated for this purpose in France, for example. The article shows how children develop their relationships with their animals within these changing environments and the local constraints, as well as the rules, attitudes and practices to which they are subjected from an early age. A tension eventually emerges between what the author calls "play and non-play". On the one hand, children establish profound relationships with animals, and on the other, they project onto them demands and expectations that refer to the very serious register of kinship relations with adults. NEYRA PATRICIA ALVARADO SOLÍS illustrates that it is in this permanent tension that kinship relations and emotional bonds between Ludar children and their domestic animals are constructed. Through this example, the article shows more generally how children perceive and experience the complexity of ties and relationships with the living and the dead, with ancestors and with other entities in their environment, in the broadest sense of the term. The gestures, attitudes and

techniques of care that children use with animals are thus implicitly connected to local cosmologies and conceptions of personhood and the body.

For the coordinators of this special issue, the link between the foundational field of kinship and that of childhood represents a significant challenge for anthropological inquiry. It invites anthropologists to return to the roots of their discipline and to examine one of the core themes that continues to distinguish it from other social sciences. At the same time, the numerous recent contributions from *New Kinship Studies* and the anthropology of childhood and children provide further impetus for a fresh look at the discipline. This intersection of fields, themes and perspectives thus reflects, at a deeper level, the changes and transformations that are currently taking place within the discipline of anthropology.

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Notes

¹ Cf. Alvarado Solís (2020); Suremain (2006); Razy & Suremain (2020); Razy (2023).

² Cf. https://www.lasc.uliege.be/cms/c_8059111/fr/evenements-scientifiques-du-lasc-2017-2018

³ Cf. <https://www.iaa.unam.mx/actividad/5234>

⁴ A colloquium organised by Alice Sophie Sarcinelli, Fanny Duysens and Élodie Razy: https://www.lasc.uliege.be/cms/c_8076760/fr/evenements-scientifiques-du-lasc-2016-2017; et une publication: https://www.lasc.uliege.be/cms/c_6015090/fr/espaces-pluriels-de-la-parente-approches-qualitatives-des-re-configurations-intimes-et-publiques-dans-le-monde-contemporain

⁵ Cf. LeVine & Price-Williams (1974); Chambers & Tavuchis (1977); Collard (2000); Déchaux (2008).

⁶ Cf. in particular: Malinowski ([1927]1960), Mead (1930), Firth [(1936]1983), Evans-Pritchard (1940); Leenhardt (1947), Lévi-Strauss (1948 et 1949), Fortes (1949) or Read (1960). Cf. also more recent work on prenatal destinies in Africa: Cartry ([1973] 1993) and Dugast (2012); on brother-sister relationships: Nuckolls (1993), Alber *et al.* (2013), Héritier (2013) or Powels (2015); fosterage: Daugey (2019-2020), and various comparative analyses: Goody (1982), Geffray (1990), Godelier ([2004]2010).

⁷ Cf. Mead (1934), Rabain ([1979]1994), Carter (1984), Héritier (1996), Rabain-Jamin (1998 and 2007), Gottlieb (2004), Razy (2007*a* et *b*, 2012), Toren (2007 et 2015) and Collomb (2008).

⁸ Cf. Lancy 1996 and 2010 on this subject.