

“WHAT IT IS INTENDED TO GATHER”: CHILD CARE BETWEEN THE GUARANI MBYA¹

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ABSTRACT

Aim: to understand the meanings and re-significances of child care among the Guarani Mbya of Rio Grande do Sul. **Method:** qualitative research, it was used participant observation with the preparation of field diaries with adults and children during 2012, in an indigenous Guarani Mbya village in Rio Grande do Sul. Field diaries were analyzed according to Minayo's thematic analysis. **Results:** the analysis revealed that child-care practices shape and are shaped from the mbya conception of childhood. Children are key social actors for the constitution of care as the forming and unifying bond of society: they teach, learn and care through play. **Conclusions:** It is concluded that among the Mbya, care for children permeates exchange relationships and kinship organizations, because to stay together, care must be taken. Finally, they teach us the revaluation of care as the foundation of social life.

Keywords: Child care. Indigenous population. Culture.

INTRODUCTION

To care is to give visibility to the other, respecting their differences, recognizing plurality⁽¹⁾. This way, we can say that promoting care is to enable individuality, in the sense of autonomy achieved and recognized through social relations. At the same time, promoting care invokes the co-responsibility of the individuals involved, creating a political action of collective responsibility, which consists in the development of an ability to be affected by what is public, by what interests others⁽¹⁾. Everyone recognizes himself/herself as part of the whole and has a group identity. Thus, care is an expression of intense social support⁽²⁾.

Care can be set in the contribution to the defense and promotion of life, that is, “the person comes out of himself and focuses on the other with care and solicitude, understanding the complex web of personal, social and environmental interrelations that gives support to bare life”⁽³⁾. Care is of the human being. Caring is an integral action, with meanings and meanings that comprise the “right to be” (the same, p.63). In this sense, for care to be taken, social relations based on alterity are necessary, because, when installed in authoritarian

relationships, care becomes a burden for the caregiver and consequently causes the recipient to be in a position of subordination.

About the native Indian children, until the 1930s, the available data were from travelers and missionaries' documents that were merely descriptive and not always free from the prevailing Christian moralistic judgment at the time. The scene began to change with the works of Curt Nimuendajú, who wrote the first monographs on indigenous cultures in Brazil. Although quite descriptive in relation to children, it is significant because it is less influenced by the Christian moralistic view⁽⁴⁾.

Recently, especially since the 1960s, children have become not only mere recipients of knowledge but also producers of knowledge. In ethnographic studies, they are considered agents of active participation in the life of indigenous societies. Childhood is then defined as a social category that produces and reconstructs the culture in which it is inserted⁽⁵⁾.

If, on the one hand, Western thought (considered quite adult centric) moves slowly towards the relativization of childhood, on the other hand, indigenous thought approaches childhood as a possibility. The natives act in relation of otherness with the children. They are

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placed as mediators between high-yielding cosmological categories. In addition, their potentialities are recognized, which allows them to occupy spaces of full subjects and producers of culture. The concept of culture adopted here is that of Geertz, that is, “a web of meanings which he [the man] even wove” (p.15). Thus, culture is a system of symbols that provides a ‘from’ model and a ‘to’ reality model⁽⁶⁾.

In many ethnicities, because they are not totally assimilated to the human category, children [especially the minor ones] are important mediators of the various cosmological spheres⁽⁷⁾. As the children’s spirits are not yet “fixed” to the body, they require great care since their soul can be lost or captured. They enjoy great freedom and are practically not punished or punished for their attitudes⁽⁸⁾.

This way, when this question was considered for indigenous people, whose conception of childhood and the role of children are differentiated, the following question was asked: how does the Guarani Mbya conception of childhood affect the practices of caring for indigenous children? Thus, the research sought to understand the meanings and resignifications of child care among the Guarani Mbya of Rio Grande do Sul.

METHOD

Research of qualitative nature, with participant observation and confection of field diaries. It was carried out in an indigenous Guarani Mbya village in Rio Grande do Sul. The suggestion of the research to be carried out in the Tekoá Porã village came from the National Foundation of the Indian of Porto Alegre, since the technical responsible of the time considered the village as being easier to access.

Initially, an uninterrupted period of six months was planned for field work, but this proposal was not possible. We were the first research group in this village and the stay for so long proved to be a nuisance to the residents. Thus, it was opted for a period of four months divided into four stays - Jan/2012, Feb/2012, Aug/2012, Jan/2013.

Fieldwork in a cross-section was a community placement. While on the one hand this way of work required greater effort to

capture and describe all the details of Mbya life, on the other hand it has documented crucial changes and transitions in the lives of children over the course of twelve months. Another obstacle for those working with indigenous populations is language. For the Mbya the language is a symbol of the identity of the group, so that although all of them speak Portuguese, in the village the conversations are in Guarani. This difficulty was overcome by the unlimited patience of the cacique, the principal interpreter for the research, and the rest of the inhabitants.

At that time, the village had approximately 200 inhabitants, and almost half (n=96) were children under 14 years of age. The village was characterized as an indigenous land reserved for the BR-116 highway, 100 km from the capital of Rio Grande do Sul. They were, in all, twelve years of settlement. Its formation is linked to the Mbya worldview of receiving in dream an indication of Nhanduru on a good land to live where one can practice the *teko*, the Mbya way of life.

The village had a Basic Health Unit (UBS), which serves all villages along the BR-116. The existence of an Indigenous Post in the village would facilitate the monitoring of the population. However, the current precariousness of indigenous health care has hindered care. If there is any success it is certainly the result of the efforts of the teams and not of the public investment. Added to this the fact that Mbya generally understand that biomedical health service is needed only in the absence of a good Mbya shaman. The analysis of the material was done through the Thematic Analysis⁽⁹⁾.

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee in Research with Human Beings, according to current resolution, under the number of opinion 33957. Resolution 196/96 and 466/212 of the National Health Council and its complementary were observed and followed throughout the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic categories found in the analysis are described below with excerpts from the field journals, along with the discussion substantiated in the area literature.

The children's organization

Before entering the theme of care, itself, it is necessary to quickly describe the organization of Mbya children. In the field experience, it was possible to observe two children's organizations that distinguished themselves according to the kinship: groups formed by children of the same family nucleus and groups formed by children of different families. The pairs formed by children of the same family nucleus were composed of brothers and sisters. The activities they performed were no different for boys and girls. Another characteristic of this kind of child organization is that there is no leadership in the group that directs the activities: these were carried out inside or close to the house.

The scenario changes when child pairs are composed of children from different family backgrounds. First, the division between boys and girls is visible. If they used to carry out their activities together, the insertion of children from other family nuclei into the group causes girls to play with girls and boys with boys, and to add another innovation: the presence of a leader. Not necessarily the oldest child, but perhaps the one whose family has the greatest influence in the village. Thus, the chief's eldest daughter usually played the role of leader of her group, even though the children who composed it were not the same. When she was present, she assumed the direction of the jokes and decisions. His leadership was in the mbya way, that is, he did not impose his will, even with full awareness of his position. Her leadership was also evident to adults, so they took responsibility for it with the other children.

A similar aspect to both modes of organization is the creation within the group of rules made by the children themselves: it is between peers that they manage to escape, even for a short time, from adult control. What has been observed goes against what some ethnographic works have on indigenous children: that they have infinite freedom, particularly when they make a comparison between the mobility of indigenous and non-indigenous children (from urban centers).

In that sense, reprimands for some bad behavior were not uncommon, such as when they "disappear" for a long time. There is also

concern of adults about the intensity of children's contact with what comes from outside, that is, with Juruá (non-indigenous) things. The researcher has been included in the children's groups as an atypical adult, which, according to studies⁽¹⁰⁾, is a kind of large child, that is, a person who, although possessing almost the same physical characteristics as the adults that make up that child's society, possesses behavior, especially in the sense of having no authority over children. As attempts to escape adult control were not uncommon, several of these minor transgressions were witnessed: children used this to negotiate with their parents; these in turn understood that 'they needed a break from the charges'. Another curious fact is that what happens among children, is among children: when they are caught transgressing, there is no complaint of guilty.

The teaching of care

Children in the village learn care through the body. Since the first bath, which marks social birth, the intensity of bodily contact with others, especially with the mother, is great. Proximity and communication are done through skin-to-skin contact, producing affective learning in which sensitivity is triggered as the main axis in the guarani person's making⁽¹¹⁾. Among the Kaingang, bathing newborns is also one of the first practices of care that ensures the child's health⁽¹²⁾. Corporality is a symbolic language par excellence, used by the indigenous populations in the social fabrication of the person and the social and cosmological universes. Corporality is also central as a language for learning and constructing the world and for itself in indigenous processes of production, incorporation and re-elaboration of knowledge⁽⁵⁾.

The Mbya say that children learn in practice and know how to take care of themselves, so that it is great to stimulate the experimentation of things and care. Thus, intergenerational care operates to provide the children, gradually, to develop their own care and take care of society.

In this sense, in the educational process of care, for the most part, there are no formal spaces. In the village, children do things together, which means that they are inserted into daily activities, sometimes bathing the younger

ones, washing dishes, or observing the making of an artifact. It is not required more than age and their body can, just as there is no punishment for trying: what is important is to experience, so that the attentive observation of the adults is not for the product itself, but for the sensations that the act of producing causes. Thus, there is never a single child in the village, because in the process of Mbya care one must stay together.

Because it is intrinsic to all aspects of daily life, teaching care only takes a formal form in counseling children. Children are usually advised at two moments: in the morning, when the family of a residence meets specially to share the dreams of last night; and at the end of the day, when counseling is not restricted to the family nucleus but occurs in small groups in which the children are present.

On the second night of fieldwork, there was opportunity to observe one of these counseling sessions.

We were talking on the porch. As the parents discussed a certain subject, the children would enter and leave the house. They were joking. At this moment, one could tell by the tone of voice that the content of the conversation was light: they would tell some event, exploring in detail the theme. At a certain point in the conversation, all the children sat around the fire to listen. They were not invited, the tone of the speech even though it was low and without exaltations, was more serious. One of the parents explained to me that there was a problem in the village and that after analyzing it they realized that it involved their children. So they chose to wait for things to happen and advised the children, who did not need to be called because they understood that they were part of the problem: they knew what they had done (field diary, July 2012).

After baptized children practice their own care, discovering their limits and potentialities. Self-care drives autonomy and child individualization. Individualization arises from the perspective of the idea of a chosen identity rather than a prescribed identity and allows to consider the recognition of children as rights-holders like any other Mbya. The child is respected as the subject of his own care. It is not a story of the child alone, but another individualization. Perhaps because of the

thinking circumscribed to our non-indigenous cultural context this seems so inconceivable.

Many children in the village travel without their parents. They visit relatives in other villages, usually accompanied by someone from their mother's or father's family. It is a negotiation between those involved: parents, relatives and children. Even when advised and not doing something, children can choose to do it. The point that allows such freedom is precisely because it occurs within the Mbya society. Children are encouraged to be autonomous, but they do not lose the bond with the whole, they do not deny the whole.

For the Mbya, the individualization of children is only possible because "socialization occurs in an integrated way, that is, undifferentiated processes intrinsic to community social life, referring to the mechanisms by which those born within a particular socio-cultural system, become full members of it"^(13:16). Adults respect the particularities and observe the child's behavior, accepting the characteristics that are inscribed by the soul.

Care differentiates and integrates, because while they are guaranteed the possibility of expressing their personalities, giving children autonomy and freedom, they are expected to be accountable to the consequences of their decisions. It does not mean lack of adult care for the mbya children, but rather another kind of care. If we think of care as a gift, it can be understood that care developed between the Mbya generations builds relationships of reciprocity and thus, children are able to care not only for themselves but for others, including other children.

Children who take care of children

In these groups, care is exercised and reinvented by children. The care experienced from birth is a source of inspiration for the relationships among the child's peers. In other words, the infantile universe is not fully independent and autonomous of the adult universe that surrounds it. In this sense, the approach to socialization in childhood that Corsaro⁽¹⁰⁾ calls interpretative reproduction is taken as the theoretical reference. In the author's words:

"the term 'interpretive' captures the innovative aspects of children's participation in society, indicating the fact that children create and participate in their unique peer cultures by appropriating information from the adult world to suit their own interests while children. The term 'reproduction' means that children not only internalize culture, but actively contribute to cultural production and change. It also means that children are circumscribed by cultural reproduction. That is, children and their childhoods are affected by the societies and cultures of which they are members(10:31).

From this perspective, the research assumes that children produce a series of local cultures that integrate and contribute to the wider cultures of other children and adults. From an early age, children understand (and make understand) elements of mbya care. In this sense, care becomes important also among children. However, they use other mechanisms when they are caring for other children. The section of the field diary gives some ideas of how this is operationalized:

the children were playing imitate. They walked in a row, the child in the front made a move that should be imitated by others. For the most part, they were foot movements. At one point, the youngest child in the group (a two-year-old boy) was ahead. To everyone's surprise, he got onto his knees, innovating the joke. Some children looked at each other and suddenly they began to fall: they tried to imitate the little boy without success. For me, who was watching the scene and had already seen them make much more complex movements, it was easy to understand that they were staging. When realizing the difficulty of the others, the youngest child sympathized, got up and changed the movement (field diary, September 2012).

This short passage allows us to visualize important points that will be discussed ahead: children use games to care for; because "the child does not know less, he/she knows something else"⁽⁸⁾; and among the infant pairs the circulation of knowledge is through the body.

The games are central in the interest of understanding the care developed in children's cultures, since play presupposes social learning⁽¹⁴⁾. Thus, in Mbya society it is complex

to try to make any distinction between what is joke and what is work.

Play, which is so eloquently expressed at this stage in the life of children, is evidenced as a way of knowing and knowing oneself, having own internal and external movements of transmission and reception, and which is revealed if it is given the right space and time. Immersed in this participation, consciously or not, there is an ongoing educational process in which everyone is interested and whose results all depend⁽¹⁵⁾. For all these reasons, children's play is considered a privileged locus for reflecting on the (re)significance of child care among the Mbya.

Since the announcement of the child, the child-directed care is aimed to walk and stand. Thus, the child, from very small, lives (in the sense of experience) care. More than that, they experience that care supports relationships.

Observing Mbya children's play contributes to contradict the idea that the child does nothing while playing, or at least nothing that is important or worthy of attention. On the contrary, everything that occurs while the child is playing is important and deserves careful attention. In playing, the child relates simultaneously to his/her world from within and from the outside, establishing and elaborating fundamental bridges for the understanding of life.

Much more than a list of activities that the child performs in his daily life, play is a state of mind that permeates this peculiar way of being in life, allowing him/her wholeness, integrity, invention and a calm effervescence for the discovery of oneself, of others, of everything⁽¹⁶⁾.

Because it is characteristic of childhood and its playful aspect, play is associated with a lack of responsibility. Still in reference to the section of the field diary, one can understand that the opposite occurs: there is much responsibility in the game. To care is to become responsible for another. Children take care of play, play caring. Children who care for children are building social relationships of reciprocity. Through play, children introduce new elements to culture: a great variety is drawn from the drawings and songs they watch on television.

In play, nothing is more used than the body. "Children's bodies appear in a variety of roles in

building social relationships, meanings, and experiences between their own children and adults, as products and resources for leadership, action, and interaction, and as places of socialization through the body”⁽¹⁵⁾.

Embodiment consists of the gradual and learned process of internalization of rules, precepts, habits, by which certain forms of behavior become automatic because they are rooted in bodily practices⁽¹⁶⁾. Among the Mbya, verticality is a good example of how care builds social relationships through the body. Through corporality, children teach the youngest child; also, through the body, of the sensations that the various stimulus, they learn and express knowledge in elaboration.

The ludic component is what characterizes child care. Caring for children relates and builds bonds. Through care, children teach and learn how to be Mbya and ways to periodically escape from it. They understand that they should take care of the younger ones and learn from their elders. Finally, children who care for children are creating relationships of reciprocity in the recognition of the other.

Mbya, it is no exaggeration to say that among the Mbya, *everything* is care.

In the teaching of care, whether inter- or intragenerational, the body is a privileged instance, from the bath that marks the social birth, through the sharing of food. During everyday activities, children are encouraged to participate, experience and live their care by performing real activities. Among children's groups, experience is a source of inspiration for the re-signification of care, and play is the main way of circulating knowledge.

Finally, care as a gift maintains social bonds. Each donated gift creates two obligations: to receive and to retribute. In this way, exchanges create a total social fact, for it is during this ritual that social life is established, and social bonds are updated and reaffirmed. Therefore, what is at stake is the maintenance of the whole, of society. The Mbya show us that in order to stay together one must take care of the other. Mbya society is a caring society, that is, a society of commitment to recognition with the other.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In order to understand the meanings and re-significances of child care among the Guarani

FINANCING

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“O QUE ESTÁ DESTINADO A REUNIR”: CUIDADO INFANTIL ENTRE OS GUARANI MBYA

RESUMO

Objetivo: Buscou-se compreender as significações e ressignificações do cuidado infantil entre os Guarani Mbya do Rio Grande do Sul. **Metodologia:** Foi realizada pesquisa qualitativa, cuja coleta utilizou-se de observação participante com confecção de diários de campo, com adultos e crianças, durante o ano de 2012, em uma aldeia indígena Guarani Mbya do Rio Grande do Sul. Os diários de campo foram analisados de acordo com a análise temática de Minayo. **Resultados:** A análise revelou que as práticas de cuidado às crianças moldam e são moldadas a partir da concepção Mbya de infância. As crianças são atores sociais fundamentais para a constituição do cuidado como o vínculo formador e unificador da sociedade, elas ensinam, aprendem e cuidam através das brincadeiras. **Conclusão:** Conclui-se que entre os Mbya, o cuidado às crianças permeia as relações de troca e organizações de parentesco, pois para ficar junto é preciso cuidar. Por fim, ensinam-nos a revalorização do cuidado como fundamento da vida social.

Palavras-chave: Cuidado da criança. População indígena. Cultura.

“LO QUE ESTÁ DESTINADO A REUNIR”: CUIDADO INFANTIL ENTRE LOS MBYÁS GUARANÍES

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Se buscó comprender las significaciones y resignificaciones del cuidado infantil entre los Mbyás Guaraníes de Rio Grande do Sul-Brasil. **Metodología:** Fue realizada investigación cualitativa, cuya recolección fue constituida de observación participante con confección de diarios de campo, con adultos y niños, durante el año de 2012, en una aldea indígena Mbyá Guaraní de Rio Grande do Sul-Brasil. Los diarios de campo fueron analizados de acuerdo con el análisis temático de Minayo. **Resultados:** El análisis reveló que las prácticas de cuidado a los niños moldean y son

moldeadas a partir de la concepción Mbyá de infancia. Los niños son actores sociales fundamentales para la constitución del cuidado en cuanto vínculo formador y unificador de la sociedad, ellos enseñan, aprenden y cuidan a través de los juegos. **Conclusión:** Se concluye que entre los Mbyá, el cuidado a los niños ocurre en las relaciones de intercambio y organizaciones de parentesco, pues para quedarse junto es necesario cuidar. Por fin, nos enseñan la revaloración del cuidado como fundamento de la vida social.

Palabras clave: Cuidado al niño. Población indígena. Cultura.

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