

Why are they confined? The knowledge and practices of institutionalised children

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Abstract

The construction of the notion of childhood as an historical phenomenon has provoked the development of a field of studies that is located at a disciplinary crossroads, of psychology, sociology, history and anthropology. This field of work supposes a transdisciplinary construction of an *object-subject* – an object that is studied, but which is also the subject of its own activity – and it is not studied separately but within a system of relationships that it maintains with others. Social context assigns boys and girls different roles: for example, as a child, as youngster, as offender, or as consumer

In Latin America, and particularly in Argentina, the background of exclusion and enlarging poverty, made children socially vulnerable, and confined to institutions.

We describe results from a piece of qualitative research that concern ‘social representations’ utilised by boys and girls who live in private homes who are run under the auspices of government organizations in Buenos Aires city. We illustrate the way in which these institutionalisation processes affects the identity creation.

Keywords: children – social vulnerability - institutionalization

Introduction

The construction of the notion of childhood as an historical phenomenon has provoked the development of a field of studies that is located at a disciplinary crossroads of psychology, sociology, history and anthropology. This field of work supposes a transdisciplinary construction of an *object-subject* – an object that is studied, but which is also the subject of its own activity – and it is not studied separately but within a system of relationships that it maintains with others.

Social context assigns boys and girls different roles: for example, as a child, as youngster, as offender, or as consumer (Lewkowicz & Corea, 1999). These roles usually correspond to the meanings that are given to the places they occupy in relation to their own reference groups. Such social attribution of meanings to roles is the symbolic expression of an historical process that begins before the personal existence of each child, emphasising that personal identity is, at the same time, social identity.

From this point of view and in this article, the confinement and institutionalization of children is questioned from a critical perspective which allows us to make evident the diversity of childhood experiences and to denaturalize the category of 'childhood' as a field of study. This also permits critical appraisal of research practices from the particular disciplinary field of psychology. To this end, we describe results from a piece of qualitative research that concern 'social representations' utilised by boys and girls who live in private homes who are run under the auspices of government organizations in Buenos Aires.¹

The interpretations and, we could say the very process of thinking that the boys and girls glean from their experience, from their own institutionalization in the homes, are mediated by beliefs, values, attitudes, ideas, emotions and actions, organized within 'social representations'. That is to say, they are organised from within the domain of common sense knowledge which is a socially elaborated and given shared definitions by the children so that the social representations that they use become tools for social exchange.

The experience of the child intervenes as a mediator in the construction of these understandings, and this experience constitutes the space in which social determinants and the child's own subjectivity is enacted. This is a complex phenomenon that involves two dimensions, that of knowledge and of the personal psychological commitment; that is to say, we see at work lived experience operating within a specific socio-cultural framework (Jodelet, 2006). In this sense, and in order to take into account everyday life inside the private homes where the children live, we need to describe their social knowledge, the social representations that provide these boys and girls the interpretative schemes needed to orient to the social world, including constructions of their obligations and about what is commonly understood to be desirable for themselves and for their life in society.

**'They don't live with their families, they live in a home':
Institutionalization in private homes in Buenos Aires**

The boys, girls and adolescents whose families are defined as being in a vulnerable situation are, for that reason, viewed as being in danger of moral and/or material negligence or as requiring protection, and they inhabit diverse assistance programs within the legal-bureaucratic sphere which aims to guarantee protection of their infant status.²

Both notions – the danger of abandonment and of requiring protection – warrant the idea that certain aspects of childhood must acquire the status of being a social problem. The argument that children need to be protected legitimises State intervention to ameliorate family functioning. The potential for converting themselves into something dangerous, certainly as undesirable, for themselves as well as for the society as a whole, thereby transforms them into an object of a technology and a form of knowledge of correction and normalization (Foucault, 1978; Donzelot, 1977). In this context, institutionalisation is rendered into a means

¹ Buenos Aires City is a 'Federal Capital', and also the capital of the Argentine Republic. It is located in the eastern-central region of the country on the west bank of the River Plate. It has a population of 2.9 million, and it is the major urban area of the country. Administrative and political management is decentralized into fifteen communes that organize the different neighbourhoods of the city. Since 1996 it has also operated as an autonomous city, which is to say that it has its own executive, legislative and juridical authority.

² Though the difference of meaning between 'infancy' and 'childhood' is recognized here, the use of the term 'infancy' here is confined to reference to a child as subject-object defined through the logic of the legal system of protection which is not limited to that of institutionalization.

of protecting children who are in danger of being neglected or abused. Institutionalization designed for such processes of social support in Argentina is implicated in what has been termed 'processes of infantilisation', through which a particular kind of subjectivity is produced which begins the transformation of these boys, girls and adolescents into objects of intervention through the actions of others (Duschastky, 2000).

Beginning from a logic of 'salvation' and from the idea that one must be 'useful to society' since the end of the nineteenth century, institutionalization became a kind of intervention that targeted 'minors at risk' within the framework of the 'Doctrine of the Irregular Situation' which was established with the sanction of the 'Agote' or 'Guardianship Law' (Law 10.903).³

This law enabled, through guardianship, protection and assistance, normative interventions aiming to 'eliminate the free movement of children in order to support future attainment; to avoid their delinquent fate through preventive intervention' (Llobet, 2010, p. 32).

The formulation and implementation of 'Law 26.061 for Integral Protection',⁴ in 2005 and 2006 respectively, which replaced the old 'Guardianship Law', created the context for a process of transformation with respect to legal and social ideas about 'infancy', and this, in turn, orientated the nature of interventions by the State as well as by civil society. This entailed legal and political developments that enabled the emergence of a human rights approach in the design and execution of public policies. Notwithstanding this, the point of view of the old legal paradigms was maintained in some respects, and the emergence of new discourses did not lead directly to the transformation of practices that were reproduced against the background of shared social beliefs (Llobet, 2006). In a recent study (Di Iorio, Lenta & Hojman, 2011) narratives were observed which located the child as subject of 'rights'. However, at the same time, they were still subject to interventions that were defined by kinds of psychopathologisation and interventions that were individualistic.⁵ That is to say, we could see new practices of 'infantilisation' appearing,⁶ including among those who

³ From 1919 to 2006, the protection and control of infancy in Argentina was governed by the 'Guardianship Law N° 10.903' which is also known as the 'Agote Law'. Under this law, boys, girls and adolescents who are abandoned, who face material or moral risk, who are subject to violence or who generally belong to '*bad families*', families that do not correspond to the prevailing moral model of the family, were considered 'minors' in an irregular condition and thereby were transformed into objects of State guardianship by a judge. This positivist institutionalisation process had the aim of controlling for the effects of poverty in the context of the consolidation of the nation-state.

⁴ The signing of the International Convention the Rights of the Child (ICRC) by the Argentine Republic in 1990, and its later incorporation, together with other international treaties, in article 74 of the National Constitution, imposes upon the Argentine State the obligation of rewriting its infancy laws according to the principles, rights and guarantees established by the ICRC, by which boys, girls and adolescents are subjects of 'rights' and the State has to guarantee this in line with the principle of the 'best interests of the child'. It was not until 2005 that the new National Integral Right Protection of Girls, Boys and Adolescents Law N° 26.061 was passed and that the old Guardianship Law was removed, being implemented in 2006.

⁵ Exploratory-descriptive research was carried out which commenced with inquiry into conceptualizations of infancy which were presented in university publications. Research and intervention results have also been presented in the Psychology School Research Congresses between 2006 and 2010. This period was called 'transitional' in that the sanction of the new Protection Law and repeal of the old Guardianship Law were being undertaken at that time. The results of the study were presented in the Inter-American Congress of Psychology (Colombia 2011).

⁶ Antonio Fernando Amaral e Silva from Santa Catarina in Brasil has created the term 'neominorist' (neoinfantilised) to refer to this new interpretation of the stipulations of the ICRC.

actively participated in the removal of the old doctrine of 'the irregular situation' (García Méndez, 2004).

Notwithstanding the existence of new rules which maintain that in no case should these rules of 'integral protection' result in children being deprived of their freedom, there are now about 20,000 institutionalized boys, girls and adolescents (Unicef, 2006). In the City of Buenos Aires, through the Council of Girls, Boys and Adolescents Rights (CGBAR) and the General Administration of Childhood and Adolescence (GACA), the housing of boys and girls in homes are mandated through special and exceptional 'protection of rights' procedures. While the first body determines the institutionalization of the child, the second body prescribes that this may take place in a 'home', depending on the case. Lodging in private homes is controlled by the General Guardianship Office (GGO), and this is designed to honour certain legal principles (General Guardianship Office, 2009).⁷

According to institutional compilation fulfilled by the TGC in the year 2010, and available information in the official publication of the GBCA, there are 108 lodging institutions registered, distributed in Buenos Aires City (57%) and in Buenos Aires State (43%). These institutions are distinguished by the nature of their population and patterns of intervention: there are '*specials*' (64) related to the integral health care (which were before called 'treatment institutions'), therapeutic communities and special needs care; there are '*living together*' places (40), which include mothering homes and all the non-treatment institutions, and there are '*hostelries*' (4), which are transitory lodging places that do not include institutionalization. Ninety percent of these lodging contexts are non-governmental organizations. The lodging institutions or lodging homes and the hostelries belong to the Children and Adolescent Integral Caring Program for those in a socially vulnerable situation, who depend on the GBCA in Buenos Aires City.⁸

In 2008 the TGC registered 1723 institutionalized boys, girls and adolescents in the City, warning about incomplete data, as in many cases the GBCA or the lodging homes do not provide the required information to the relevant control office. In 2009, although there were departures registered, there were 904 new proceedings coming from new entrants, rising to 1332 in 2010, and confirming in this way the trend of increasing institutionalization as a form

7. The Girls, Boys and Adolescents Rights Council (GBARC) is, since 1998, the office responsible for designing, coordinating and planning the necessary policies to promote and protect girls, boys and adolescents' rights in Buenos Aires City. It is directly linked to the Buenos Aires City main headquarters. It has technical, administrative and financial autonomy. Since 2006, with the sanction of the new law of Integral Protection, it will be the office responsible for applying of the integral and exceptional rules. The General Board of Childhood and Adolescence (GBCA) operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Development of the Buenos Aires City Government, and is in charge of developing direct assistance programs and services for children and adolescents. Since 2006 it has been in charge of executing the infancy programs and public policies in the City. The Tutelar General Council (TGC), depends from the Ministry of Public Education, an institution which belongs to the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, and it is the office which controls local public policy through control, appeal, articulation and guidance as to the performance of State institutions.

⁸ This program was called the 'Institutional Treatment Program for infancy and adolescence assistance' before the administrative changes which were brought about with the passing and implementation of the Integral Protection Law and new care agreements by the National Council for Childhood, Adolescence and Family (NCCAF). The NCCAF was the administrative body which oversaw infancy programmes and public policies until the passing of Law 26.061. Its responsibilities were transferred to the National Council for Childhood and Adolescence. That council is now dissolved and a National Childhood, Adolescence and Family Office (NCAFO) created under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Development, a national office which depends upon the power of the national executive.

of protection (General Counsel Guardian, 2010). It is significant that of this total, about half correspond to institutionalization authorised by the Board of Rights of Children and Adolescents.

In relation to the reasons for this institutionalization, it is recorded that poverty remains one of the explicit reasons, and also is an implicit reason owing to the way multiple forms of violence, drug-taking and psychiatric disorders within the family groups are defined as symptoms of vulnerability and marginality (Guardian General Counsel, 2009, 2010). Significantly, this relationship between the institutionalization of boys and girls, child abuse (in its physical and psychological forms) and socio-economically disadvantage is important, but, as Bringiotti (1999) argues, abuse is present in all social classes. The fact that this is known about and then detected in disadvantaged groups is because they are the ones who access social assistance programs.

‘Home coexistence’ is one of the residential care regimes intended to reproduce the familial space, and comprises a system of internal operations as opposed to the old child institutions which operated as total institutions (Dona & Gómez, 2007). The search for an alternative home, both conventional and through NGOs financed by the state implies that many believe that it is possible to provide a relatively stable environment. However, the situations of lack and deprivation that are experienced in conditions of institutionalization is connected to exclusion, and this determines the social and emotional development of a particular group of boys and girls for whom everyday life is very different from that presumed to be the norm (Winnicott, 1998).⁹

Research with children: From the ‘speech of another’ to the ‘voices of children’

There have in recent years been an increase in psychological studies of child institutions and the child’s subjectivity from the perspective of psychology (de la Iglesia, et al, 2009, 2006; Dubaniewickz, 2006; Llobet, 2006, 2010; Minicelli, 2004; Peloroso, 2007; Pérez, 2007). There has also been recognition of the discipline of psychology as a matrix of meanings in relation to children’s institutionalization. According to Llobet (2010), this is a function of the fact that on the one hand, most professionals working in care or criminal institutions belong to the ‘psy’ professions. On the other, those who are not from this area of work also use ‘psy’ beliefs and notions to interpret and understand the field of institutionalized childhood. In addition, this work also draws on psychology as a tool to legitimize those kinds of interventions (de la Iglesia & Di Iorio, 2005).

⁹ Winnicott (1956) uses the concept of ‘*deprivation*’ to describe the experiences of failure or lack of satisfactory primary home experience which give rise to the appearance of antisocial behaviour. This is not a diagnosis in itself, in the sense of a nomenclature, but it is closely related to the lack of an enabling environment, of support and the emergence of the deprivation complex: ‘the child has lost a good thing that, even up to a certain date, had a positive effect on his experience and that has been removed, the dispossession has lasted for so long a period that the child can no longer keep alive the memory (...) it includes early and late events, the trauma in itself and the sustained traumatic state itself, the almost normal and obviously the abnormal’ (Winnicott, 1956, p. 148). He also clarifies that ‘it is not a simple deprivation’, that is to say, something that was never had, but a loss that has persisted for a long period of time, so that he cannot keep the memory of the experience. What is produced then is ‘antisocial behaviour’ (Winnicott says it has two orientations; theft and destructiveness) that actually have to do with an expression of hope (pp. 146-147).

However, despite studies that are trying to position themselves in such a way as to 'give voice' to the child, subjecting these voices to adult-interpretation and normalizing frameworks make the child once again into an object that can be captured and held (Di Iorio, Lenta & Hojman, 2011). Against this, we require approaches to the experience of the protagonists which enables them to maintain their position as active subjects of both everyday experience and with the process of research.

There is no neutrality in science because the methods and designs not only show us how to understand or evaluate what we find, and they reveal the logic of production of meanings that guide the process of building knowledge. Taking this into account, in this study some results will be reviewed and reinterpreted from a study of the social representation of institutionalization that children living in homes construct. This exploratory study which uses a qualitative approach was conducted in two non-governmental aid organizations, in homes located in the City of Buenos Aires and in Greater Buenos Aires,¹⁰ both homes being run in partnership with government agencies.¹¹ These homes were focussed upon from to a homogeneous sample chosen according to purposeful selection criteria (Patton, 1990). The age of the children were between 6 and 12 years, of both sexes, based on the institutionalization that match cases of a 'non-criminal' type of care and institutionalization due to prosecution process as part of the old Board Act, or implementing a special protection rule, according to the new current Integral Protection legislation.¹² The participants had been institutionalized for at least three years in private homes under the jurisdiction of the State. The size of the sample was determined by the criterion of conceptual saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The children participated voluntarily, accepted by informed consent signed by the responsible adults as well as by each of the participants.¹³

The data collection process was divided into two stages, one ethnographic and the other social-psychological. During the first stage, which lasted two years, a strategy was used that articulated participant observation and group workshops including various recreational activities (verbal, graphic, dramatic) that helped us to analyze the social interaction in which social knowledge and identity are constructed and negotiated. In the second stage, in-depth interviews and individual case studies were carried out, in which the main axis of the inquiry concerned the historical nature of the process of institutionalization and its impact on processes of identity construction. An ethnographic and multi-methodological research programme was implemented because it is in the time and the space of everyday interactions

¹⁰ Greater Buenos Aires is the generic term used to refer to the natural extension to the north, the south and the west but not the administrative responsibility of the City of Buenos Aires for various districts of Buenos Aires Province. This extension of Buenos Aires is organized by way of 24 districts, from higher to lower levels of urbanization according to three zones. In our case, the institution involved in the study is located in the district of 'Tres de Febrero' within the first zone of Buenos Aires.

¹¹ Since the enactment of the Law 26.061 all NGOs that provide shelter and comprehensive care for children and adolescents operate with the agreement of and are funded by the area of the NGO of the General Administration for Children and Adolescents.

¹² In most cases, this institutionalization occurred using the legal protection model of 'Protection of Person' in the context of the ancient law of Trustees. With the new legislation on children it is carried out from the implementation of the 'Integral Protection Rules'.

¹³ To conduct a study from the perspective of the protagonists involved starting from the consideration of children as active participants in social life, as formally recognized in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to the 'Guidelines for ethical behaviour in the Social Sciences and Humanities' (National Council for Scientific and Technical Research, Argentina, 2006), which are the current regulations, all research must be adjusted to take account of the needs of participants who are children.

that children build and use social representations. The material was recorded in audio form, by video and through photography. We built our analysis inductively, starting from the data and finding emerging categories which were analyzed technically with the support from 'Atlas-ti' software.

Accordingly, the research did not involve the mere description of phenomena, but put into action an intentional process that sought to bring about social change. It is a type of action research because it not only points to knowledge of reality but also identifies practical solutions to specific problem areas (Liebel, 2007).

'Why are they locked up?': Knowledge constructed about institutionalization from the perspective of the participants

'Social representations', forms of common sense knowledge produced collectively, acquire the role of facilitating the understanding of those situations that, when fragmented in everyday life, are classified as foreign, and they provide the necessary tools to interact in this *new world* with a pragmatic approach.

However, identifying and describing thoughts, emotions and practices that institutionalized children build during the course of their own institutionalization, does not itself account for the production and circulation of social representations. We require a process of transformation which has been termed the 'construction of the research object' (Pereira de Sá, 1998). This construction of the research object, as understood by the framework of social representations theory, involves the following:

1. Stating precisely what the *object* of representation is, because social representations are of something, and here we are considering the social importance of the object: 'the lived experience of home institutionalization of children who are there for reasons of their welfare. This object is contextualised by way of social exclusion and expansion of poverty, with a continued expansion of domains of the vulnerable and the marginalised (Castel, 1991, 2006). This situation encourages some stability protected through institutional care, consisting of a focused set of practices, which fall on a specific group of people defined by their shortcomings. In this sense, institutionalization is defined as a care device registered within the legal-bureaucratic care protection circuit.
2. To identify the *subjects* of discursive events (visual and verbal) and behaviour, since these representations are of someone: the protagonists, the institutionalized children, who from the experience of concrete experiences build ideas of what shall be and what is desirable, not only for themselves but for social life. This group is defined objectively as being at risk of moral and/or material neglect or who require comprehensive protection from having experienced situations of hardship and deprivation (Winnicott, 1956), coming from failures or faults in their home experience. The lived situations, meaning the experience of the institutionalization, become for these children in a normal social abnormality that causes impacts on their social and emotional development.

3. To explicit the socio-cultural *context* so as to clarify the formation, maintenance and possible amendment of the social representation; the emergence of new discourses about children and their compatibility with older models, to put children in the public agenda, leading to the eventual problematisation or not, of legal and bureaucratic protection devices. The declarative repeal of the ‘Agote Law’, from the enactment of the Law on Protection on, leads to the coexistence and the emphasis on the practical level, and of opposing paradigms regarding the children by way of what was termed ‘The Situation of Irregular and Integral Protection’. This created the conditions of possibility for the problematisation, in some quarters of legal-bureaucratic devices of childcare, including deprivation of liberty as a measure of protection.

From the accounts of participants, this was an approach to the everyday life of institutionalization, considering this as social membership that determines not only social interactions and identifications with others and ways of understanding reality, but also the construction of personal and social identity. In this sense, those who defined themselves as living in a home, learn group patterns that define them as a part of a group, and it is through that membership that they relate to the surrounding, legitimizing certain ways of understanding and acting on it:

Misbehaving or ‘hacer Quilombo’:¹⁴ home situations related to breaking things, disorder, disobedience or anger. These are defined as being initiated by any person and as being events that generates all the others to join in.

‘(...) E. [Referring to a worker who resigned] *he left because here he did not feel respected, especially L. And N. (other girls who live at the home) he sees that they are in compliance, disrespect him, and then he said that he was tired and was not going to come over, he told us all, and that is because how we behave, because one starts and we all continue (...)*’ (A. 12 years old, male)

‘(...) *The issue is that the other day we made disorder. We broke the windows, bah! non-glass [E: And why have you broken them?] because we were angry because they hit B_m [another child living at the home] and we were all in the disorder, the little ones more (...)*’ (D. 7 years old, female)

Behaving well: home situations related to meeting the daily targets defined by the institution (putting things in order, doing homework, not breaking things, etc.)

‘(...) [Referring to who gave them some sweets as a reward] *they must take a bath every day, behave well, do the homework (...)* all go to the assembly and we all have to do those things, and also the clothes is necessary to be clean, this is well behave, don’t misbehave (...)’ (A. 8 years old, male)

‘(...) [Referring to a sticker that a worker gave during the interview, and she puts into an album] *I have 50! (...)* if I reach 50, they have to buy something, because I get the little stars [stickers] if I have ordered the closet (...)’ (D. 7 years, female)

¹⁴ According to the Royal Spanish Academy, this term is a common way to refer to situations of disorder, mess or fuss. It is commonly used in Argentina and in some other countries in Latin America.

Being crazy: term that children use inside the welfare home to identify others who misbehave – who break things, get angry, make a mess or disobey; the solution involves the participation of some organization or area related to mental health.

'(...) Children attacking me where it hurts most, I was mortified, I feel very bad (...) I unloaded my anger on the wall, hitting the wall. I thought 'why am I hurting myself? I did not know why I hit me, I was afraid to say it because I was afraid that they would take me to a different home, because I learned that when kids are hurt alone, they are taken to a different institution (...)' (A. 12 years old, male)

'(...) I fought with a girl because she was with a flute, I asked her to stop playing, and she continued, then I took it out, and there I hit her. I whizzed things, and almost the director call the SAME – the city medical help -, because they thought that we 're crazy (...) crazy is when you cannot be reassuring. And when one gets angry, and misbehaved, and the rest of the children do the same (...)' (D. 7 years, female)

Rules: Refer to things that can and cannot be done at home.

'(...) [Referring to a blackboard that is in the dining room of the home, where there are the names of those who live there and numbers below each name] These are the points, and according to the points that you have earned for things you didn't do or, because of misbehaving, you have a weekend penalty (...)' (L. 11 years old, male)

'(...) For us, the older children, we are reprehend, not like the babies (...) they reprehend you if you do poorly in school, if you don't do homework, if you hit someone, if you don't order or you don't want to take a bath. We have regulations, which we did, about what we can and cannot do (...)' (Y. 8 years old, female)

The descriptions of the things that children can and cannot do at home allows them to construct an image of a group of children whose behaviours are described as actions that deserve punishment. According to this image, children can be qualified as 'abnormal' or 'normal'. This opposition is also expressed in the descriptions given by the children about the reasons for living at a welfare house:

Reasons for institutionalization: the reasons that, according to the participants, they live in a welfare house:

'(...) We were draw away from our parents because they did things wrong and we need to go when they want or when they come [referring to the families] (...)' (R. 6 years old, male)

'(...) Before [institutionalization] I was with my mom and my cat, and I'm here now and I do not know why (...) two policemen came and took me out of my house and took me to B. [Other institution]. They said it was for 10 days but it was a lot of time without telling me why I was there, and then I came here [referring to the welfare house where she is living now] (...)' (D. 8 years old, female)

Lack of money: Reference to a lack of economic resources in the family of origin.

'(...) at the weekend we go to my grandmother's, and that makes me very happy. Last year, we were going to live there with her, but then we could not because my sister got pregnant and had no place in her house for us all. Besides, her boyfriend lost his job and my sister did not have money (...)' (Y. 8 years old, female)

'(...) [Referring to visits from his mother] it makes me feel bad that she doesn't come as often now (Interviewer: Do you know why she doesn't come so far?) Because she can't. She didn't get the money to come (...)' (R. 6 years old, male)

'Judge's hands': term that children use to refer to those matters their family that cannot decide about in their daily life.

'(...) A judge take us out of our family home because they got things going wrong [referring to the families] (...)' (C. 13 years old, female)

'(...) I am in welfare houses since many years ago. First, when I was little, but my mom took me away, because I wasn't 'in judge's hands'. Then I was taken to another place, she took me, and she could visit me and take me away when she wanted. We started to live together again, until one time she was bad again and took me to the police (...) I went to another home and then here, and now who decides is a judge (...)' (D. 7 years old, female)

Family Settings: representation of the child's household and daily life before institutionalization.

'(...) We're here because my mother died, we wanted to go to live with my sister in my grandmother's, but she could not take us because she has a son now and she cannot take care of us (...)' (C. 13 years old, female)

'(...) Their mom doesn't come any more. The problem is that here they tell them that she is dead because their mother abandoned them. For example, when she'll be older, if someone adopts her, she is going to name as mom someone that isn't her real mom. (...) She came malnourished and we recover, everything is fine now (...)' [referring to another girl who lives in the welfare house with her] (J. 8 years old, female)

'(...) [Answering questions about whether or not she sees her mother] (she continues shaking his head, while still drawing) because it is in heaven [another girl answers] I tell you something everyone knows, and that all speak about. I think that they are going to be adopted because the mother doesn't come any more (...)' (Y. 8 years old, female)

In addition, analysis of verbalizations, graphic productions, games and observations of activity in the welfare home as the setting in which daily life unfolds allowed us to analyse this as a space with three different meanings:

1. As a *physical space* which they represent as covering basic needs such as eating, sleeping, playing and studying. The physical space fulfils some needs that are not

satisfied in their original households. There are some difference between *things that are possible* (sleeping at home, taking care of you, being with other children) and *those that would not be allowed* (to live with the family of origin, to go when they want with the parents). This representations also enables them to distinguish between those activities that can be done indoors (eating, playing, resting, doing homework, being with other people) and those that are done outdoors (walking, family strolls, school, sports). All of these actions are possible to be done alone, as individual, or with others, as collective activities.

2. As a *social space* in which it performs the functions of responding, lodging and taking care, and this because of the inability of original family groups. These also show us the child as deprived, watched over and isolated. And this shows us that children define the institution (living at welfare home) as the place where people do the things that their parents cannot do: taking *care* of them. But at the same time, while meeting this task, they *deprive* them from their family life and require them to behave in certain ways.
3. As a *subjective space* in which the value of the institution as locked space – enclosure (with locked windows and doors and reinforcing bars) – allows the child to represent the space as one in which they are ‘watched children’. That is, according to the comprehensive protection system, certain aspects of childhood are watched over as with them positioned as a ‘minor’ or watched child, while others, because of different life experiences, are socially enrolled as ‘children’.

The confinement situation and the family separation, while being shared experiences, are elements that unify them but separate from the others, asserting that in the social representations concerning institutionalization there is, for the child a dichotomy, a ‘themata’ between ‘us’ and ‘other’. ‘Themata’, while operating as antinomian pairs, refer to common themes rooted in belief systems, values and traditions, archetypal images of the world (Moscovici & Vignaux, 2000). They express the relationship with the dominant or hegemonic groups, leading to various forms of social classification. The pair ‘us’/‘other’ is present in the knowledge of institutionalization that children built in their daily experiences, and it appears through different oppositions:

To be cared for / to be enclosed
Living at Home / Living in a Welfare home
Good family / Bad Family

That is, if you have a ‘good family’ you live in your own house, and that means that you are being cared for. But if you have a ‘bad family’ you live in the welfare home under the supervision of a judge, and this means that you are locked up. This pragmatic knowledge built by the children as a form of understanding reality appears to be supported by other social skills that are transmitted during the socialization process, in this case inside the institution, specifically in relation to family and care practice. There are two different models of the family, and therefore different childhoods at work: in the case of the bourgeoisie there is protected liberation, and for lower-class families there is monitored liberty. The latter operates from the implementation of pedagogical techniques that continually push the child back into spaces of surveillance (Donzelot, 1977). The ‘watched child’ is a product of the judicial agenda which has as its clientele persons belonging to the poorest sectors of society.

The existence of a protected childhood and other monitored subjects are held today under new forms of terminology that in the case of institutionalized children is perpetuated in the pair 'us'/'other' present in the social representation of institutionalization. This dichotomy allows to visualise how children slide between two poles, those that are 'infantilised' and those of regular 'childhood'. The difference between a 'minor' and a 'child' is given by 'minoritising' (or infantilising) process, and prosecution of the child here does not end with the coming of legal age. It is a process that is not limited to being received by and being cared for within institutions for 'minors', but it also 'subscribes to and installs, through social practices, a subjectivity that transits a predestined path' (Costa & Gagliano, as cited in Duschatzky, 2000, p. 85).

These issues also relate to the construction of identity, which is the product of the membership of a particular group and a comparison is then made between membership group and foreign groups (Tajfel, 1981): Those who cannot live with their families (and are therefore in a welfare home) and those living with their origin families. The construction of identity is the product of social comparison, therefore the evaluation made by the children of themselves does not depend only on the knowledge they have of the groups they actually belong to, but on the relative valuation that they make about themselves in comparison with other groups. This difference is due to their need to give meaning to the situations in which they find themselves. This can be seen in the quotations we have presented here; they constitute an attempt to understand the everyday experience of institutionalization, from the point of view of certain differences.

New questions: From the particular situation of a welfare house to the universality of social policies

The approach presented here concerning childhood institutionalization and the processes of identity construction aims to move away from reductionist explanations that come from psychology or sociology. In psychology, daily life at these welfare homes is explained by way of the personality characteristics of each child. In the case of sociology, the problems would be reduced to the variables determined by structural forces. Therefore, compared to inadequate conceptions of the human as lacking and simply repeating their social conditions (in psychology) or as a structuring of responses to external circumstances (in sociology), in this article we presented one of many childhoods as a socio-historical construction.

Social representations are linked with identity, and the creation and maintenance of identity is one of the functions of social representations. In addition both are constructed, maintained and modified in the course of interaction. Individuals, as such, are constructed in social interaction; they are not born, but *become* such subjects in and through social games. The exchanges that occur within welfare homes are defined here as ongoing processes of meaning construction. These institutions, like any institution, are embodied in the everyday experiences of children, resulting in an order that legitimizes common interpretations of them that then circulate as stereotypical representations.

Institutionalized children are, we believe, active participants in the construction of ways of life, which can only be understood from submitting to their daily routine. It is this coexistence of the subject in relation to its social representations that allows us to describe permanent situations of tension and conflict, which mostly are designated as pathological from the dominance of the logic of the deficit, while the relationship difficulties, the tendency to isolation, the indifference, the widespread use of physical aggression, behavioural problems such as 'wrong answers', not following the rules, leakage, and difficulties at school, among others, lead to the implementation of corrective-repressive strategies with the help of dominant psychology that simply serves psychopathologisation.

To think in the frame of community mental health about the process of institutionalization with their own protagonists is to focus on the characteristics of social relations where our subjects are based, built and developed. This requires no mere abstract description of individual organisms, but the challenge of thinking through strategies to sustain the tension between individual and social rather than suppress that tension, to move from positioning to question the obvious, to provoke new ways of thinking. This is possible since the implementation of devices that tend to the replacement of certain social relations, rather than pursuing prefabricated formulas that do nothing to strengthen the domination ways: 'The underlying problem is not the individuals, but the relations of a traumatogenic system ... [Therefore, interventions] should be directed also, and primarily, to the relationship, to those group bonds that constitute the normal abnormality' (Martín-Baró, 1990, p. 246).

In this sense, in the research we have presented, the play space or workshop, is not just for the collection of information, it becomes a possibility that the institutionalized children can go through processes of deconstruction-construction of their experiences, facilitating the deployment of a dialectical process that starts from the collective exteriority to the individual interiority, generating new ways of participation in social situations.

In Latin America NGOs working with children appeared during the 1970s, created and almost supported by civil society organizations belonging to developed countries. From this emerged organisation that were really para-state agencies whose funding came totally from the State that protects them. In the context of military dictatorships, social policy unlawfully reproduced the essence of illegitimate brutality; authoritarianism, centralization, bureaucratic and the favouring of the institutionalization of poor children. Some NGOs now, on the contrary, have reconstructed themselves as a critical conscience and are representative of civil society as a whole. There have emerged more democratic projects, decentralized, non-bureaucratic that refused to institutionalize any form of child protection, representing the needs of a well-intentioned stronger and hegemonic alternative culture. And cutting, apparently, any link between government and civil society, NGOs still upheld the dualism according to which the government concentrated on 'harm' and society focused on 'wellbeing'.

Nowadays this relationship is itself in tension, making it necessary to problematize the relationship between the State and the civil society regarding childhood policies. Political democratization, State retrenchment and economic policies have redefined, from the 1970s, the boundaries between public and private. NGOs involved with children can be defined as private civil associations involved in the public sphere; that is to say, they are evidence of

how the private has become public. It seems that they aim to rescue for the citizens responsibilities of solidarity, producing some recovery of civic fraternity.

However, this relationship between civil society and the State presented as dichotomous, in some cases is functional to the reproduction of the capitalist system. While the State is conceived as a form of specific social and historical relationship, it is only capable of sustaining itself over time if it is reproduced in its opposite pair, that is to say, in civil society itself. According to Gramsci (quoted by Piotto, 1973), the State, in a broad sense, is the dialectical unity of civil society and the political society, which differ in their respective roles: hegemony and domination. While the first is characterized by the imposition of rules – a legal system to which individuals must submit – and coercion, the second – dominated by private institutions – is exercised at the level of culture and ideology.

This invites us to reflect on the factors that determine practice with institutionalized children. As Jovchelovitch (2000) has indicated, the social engenders, in its dynamic, historical, political and economic determinants that even if it has limits, also a place to cross institutionalized borders and to establish new frontiers. And therefore, only through the exploration of cultural meaning systems – in this case, ‘childhood’ supported in the tension between ‘tutelage’ and ‘protection’ – and its relationship to local historicized context, can we identify that dynamic and possibilities for transformation. Discourse about the ‘minor’ and the process of ‘infantilisation’ is not limited to institutionalization, but it also maintains an order of control and domination, because the sphere of the ‘minor’ is not only welcomed and protected within its own institutions, but is also subscribed to and installs through its social practices a subjectivity that is maintained along its own predetermined lines of activity (Duschastky, 2000, p. 85). This process involves the transformation of those in moral and/or material risk or who require protection into the objects of intervention by others. This invites us to think about the limits of citizenship for the poorest classes, since after legal equality, it conceals inequality and economic differences. It is that moment in which ‘rights’ are interrupted after ensuring its continuity, which is what Agamben (2004) calls a ‘state of exception’. Legal conditions are created so that the dominant power creates citizens as ‘bare life’ and this becomes a biopolitical device. That is, a concern with childhood is not only a moral or pedagogical matter, but it constitutes a political problem.

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