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LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

Becoming an adequate child: Learning to relate to others in cultural context

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Honoured custos, honoured opponent, and dear audience members,

As a childhood researcher with a particular interest in the way that early experiences shape children's psycho-social development, and who ended up in this field because of my motivation to improve material and social conditions for children globally, it is impossible for me not to open my PhD defence with recognition that the world is witnessing a brutal genocide that is primarily targeting Palestinian civilians, over half of whom are children.

Exactly one year and two days ago, I signed an open letter along with over 2400 other childhood researchers, calling for an immediate ceasefire in the occupied Palestinian territories; the letter noted that around 3000 children had been killed by the Israeli military in the three weeks since 7 October. A year later, the number of children killed is estimated to be at least 17 000 (UN Human Rights 2024), and this shocking number is likely to wildly underestimate the true impact of Israel's offensive actions (Khatib, McKee, and Yusuf 2024).

Over the course of my PhD, and this past year especially, I've come to realise that conducting research means constantly making choices. In doing so, we seek a balance between ethical, political, moral, and practical concerns, as well as the more theoretical perspectives that guide our work. As researchers, we must justify the choices we make to our institutions, to peer reviewers, ethical review boards, colleagues, funders, and opponents in PhD defences. The institutions we belong to also make choices in how they operate, and I strongly believe that we should hold our institutions to account for their choices.

Take the University of Helsinki's immediate condemnation of Russian military action following the invasion of Ukraine (University of Helsinki 2022), compared to their dismissal of the Israeli invasion of Gaza as a 'conflict in the Middle East' (Lindblom 2023). Consider also the decision they took in June to ask police to remove student protestors who were demanding an academic boycott on the grounds of the ongoing genocide (ICJ 2024) and scholasticide (Dader et al. 2024) being committed by Israel (YLE 2024).

These choices from University leadership demonstrate that, while the University may allow so-called 'decolonising' efforts in theory, they are unwilling to take even small concrete steps against contemporary settler colonialism (Nijim 2023), despite the many calls to do so from within the University community (Forde et al. 2024; RASTER 2024; HYY 2024; OLIVE Project 2024). University decision-makers apparently fail to see the irony in their proclamation that the University is not a political body and, therefore, 'refrains from

making political statements' (Lindblom 2023), when feminist, anarchist, racialised, and activist scholars, amongst them many anthropologists, have long been at the forefront of dismantling the notion that science and knowledge are apolitical or objective entities (Said 1978; Lorde 1984; Ahmed 2021).

While it sometimes feels that there is a limit to what we can do as individuals, I do believe that those of us who can make choices that promote and uphold principles like basic human rights should do so. For this reason, the ongoing genocide is not something I could be silent about whilst I have this platform today. The annihilation of Palestinian lives continues as I speak, through unimaginable atrocities such as the carpet bombing of homes, encampments full of displaced families, and hospitals; the targeted destruction of schools and all of Palestine's universities; direct attacks with snipers and armoured tanks on civilians including children and pregnant people; and the targeted murder of journalists and UN peacekeeping forces, much of which has been openly broadcast on social media.

In the face of this, I call on everyone today to use their own power and platforms to act towards ending the genocide of Palestinians, and the attacks on neighbouring states, as best they can. Involvement in groups such as Students for Palestine (SfP Finland n.d.) and Researchers for Palestine, or tools such as the 'No Thanks' app (Bashbash 2024), which makes identifying items on boycott lists easy, can help us take small concrete steps towards making a difference.

It feels a bit awkward to bring this lectio back to my PhD thesis, a feeling I've been constantly challenged by this year as I try to balance witnessing and protesting against a genocide and carrying on with business as normal, but I will now crudely do so.

My thesis starts with a conversation which I will share part of here. During my fieldwork, I caught up with a Colombian friend, who I call Valentina. She lives in Helsinki, but had just visited Colombia with her daughter, Laura, for the first time since they had left 4 years earlier. When I asked her how everything had gone, she pulled a face, telling me that Laura had seemed uncomfortable and had clearly been happy to return home—to Helsinki. She had been overwhelmed at being hugged and kissed by family members she didn't really know, who ruffled her hair and pinched her cheeks without warning. She also thought her cousins played too rough, made too much noise, and talked over each other too much. 'It's the first time I realised that she's become a real Finnish kid,' Valentina said.

I believe it's clear to Valentina and to all of us here today that Laura was learning to engage and interact with other people in ways that were strikingly different to her cousins, and that the expectations that adults had for and of their children were very different in these two places. This idea, that there are different ways of being a *proper* or *appropriate*—or, as in my title, 'adequate'—child (Ulvik 2018), underlies my PhD research.

The thesis essentially asks how, why, and when these differences emerge, exploring these questions through a comparison of children in two very different field sites: Helsinki, Finland, and Santa Marta, Colombia. Now, it might not seem particularly difficult to answer this question: we all know it's because of the 'cultural differences' that Valentina herself identified. It might seem quite common-sensical to us, that children learn to behave in ways that imitate or conform to the norms and values of society, and that these differacross time and space. However, as a scientific community, we know relatively little about how this process of learning to

behave 'appropriately' actually unfolds in real life or of how it is shaped by children's broader social contexts.

This is partly because anthropologists—who are so skilled at developing the deep, sensitive, nuanced understandings of social relations and intimate lives that would be helpful here—have typically not been that interested in children. This is quite ironic since it is during childhood that we truly learn to become 'proper' or 'adequate' cultural and social persons. However, as Lawrence Hirschfeld (2002) argued in an article titled 'Why don't anthropologists like children?' over 20 years ago, the study of childhood has long been marginalised within anthropology and the field has tended to underestimate both how active a part children play in their own learning, and how important a role they play in shaping cultural change (Levine 2007; Lancy 2022) or with specific marginalised groups in urban contexts, such as children living on the streets (see, e.g., Kaime-Atterhög and Ahlberg 2008). While these perspectives are very valuable in themselves, and have laid the groundwork for my own research, it means that children living in contemporary urban contexts—a growing group, globally—continue to be under-represented in the ethnographic literature and theory.

Alongside this, the field of developmental psychology exists with the purpose of understanding child development, but is primarily focussed on quantifying concrete outcome measures, and defining 'normal' or apparently universal stages of child development. In addition, within psychology traditionally there has been little recognition of the importance of cultural context on child development (Levine, Caron and New 1980). Although this is slowly changing, 'culture' is still often treated as a single variable or explanatory factor in psychological studies rather than examined in any detail (Weisman and Luhrmann 2020).

Interestingly, many of the questions that anthropologists and psychologists ask are similar in essence—they just use different approaches and have different assumptions underlying their research, which leads to different focuses and different strengths and weaknesses. The premise of the mixed-methods and interdisciplinary approach of my thesis is that integrating perspectives from both anthropology and psychology allows me to draw from the strengths of each and, in doing so, to develop more holistic understandings of children and childhood (Levine et al. 1980; Weisman and Luhrmann 2020).

Somewhat unusually for a PhD thesis in anthropology, I did this through a series of articles rather than a monograph. Each of the articles, which I will now describe quickly, focussed on slightly different concepts and took slightly different approaches to address the broad question of how children learn to become adequate social actors within their particular cultural contexts.

The first article is called 'Fairness, partner choice, and punishment: An ethnographic study of cooperative behavior among children in Helsinki, Finland' (Sequeira 2023b). In this article, I examine how the behaviours that cooperation researchers are interested in tended to play out in real life amongst children in Helsinki. Research into human cooperation typically relies on findings from economic games or experiments and many of these have highlighted that punishment is particularly important for maintaining cooperative relationships and reducing conflict in human societies (Boyd and Richerson 1992). In this article, I explore how findings from cooperation research align with the everyday behaviour of the children with whom I spent time.

I found that both adults and children in Helsinki were very hesitant to punish, and, instead, they typically relied on *avoiding* and *disengaging from* overt conflict. Children were also discouraged from using aggressive, dominant strategies with their peers, and this reflected the relatively non-authoritarian relationships that adults had with children. I suggest that childrearing goals that emphasise children's independence and autonomy promote a focus on partner choice strategies instead of punishment, since strategies such as telling another person too explicitly what to do, punishing them, or using dominance to 'force' them to do something against their will, all infringe on their autonomy and are, therefore, undesirable. Interestingly, these strategies are similar to those typically observed amongst hunter–gatherer societies (Baumard 2010).

The second article, 'Cultural Models at Play: What Miscommunication Reveals About Shared Social Norms' (Sequeira 2023a), is a short article that also draws upon ethnographic data from Helsinki. I reflect upon the difficulty of researching something you cannot observe; the cultural models, values, and norms that I was interested in are, after all, impossible to 'see' in any real sense (Antweiler 2019). However, during my fieldwork, I noticed that moments of tension between children served as windows into understanding them better. I explore what happened when a group of children were faced with a particularly dominant and aggressive player during a game of dodgeball. The children's extremely disapproving yet non-confrontational reactions revealed their assumptions and 'taken-for-granted' knowledge about how someone *should* act in the game, and also about how they should react to inappropriate behaviour. I argue that paying particular attention to *miscommunications* and *tensions* between interlocutors can be a fruitful way of accessing normative knowledge, particularly with children.

In the third article, 'Learning shame, learning fear: The socialization of hierarchy through emotion among children in Helsinki, Finland, and Santa Marta, Colombia' (Sequeira 2024), I examine and compare the types of emotionally evocative experiences that children faced in their normal lives. I draw upon the idea of *socialising emotions* to frame the article; this refers to the use of emotion to reinforce certain types of behaviours and ultimately to guide children to learn certain ways of acting and interacting with others (Röttger-Rössler et al. 2015).

I describe common disciplinary practices that I observed in each field site and argue that these tended to elicit different emotions in children, which I characterise as *shame* in Helsinki and *fear* in Santa Marta. I demonstrate that common emotionally evocative practices are shaped by the specific cultural schemas that parents and adults draw on in each context and cultivate specific types of behaviours in children (Fung and Thu 2019). I then examine what kinds of modes of interactions shame and fear serve to promote, and highlight that *compliant autonomy* appears to be particularly important in Helsinki whereas *respectful obedience* is emphasised in Santa Marta.

The final article, 'Prestige and dominance in egalitarian and hierarchical societies' (Sequeira, Afshordi, and Kajanus 2024), reports the results of experiments that I ran together with collaborators in Colombia, Finland, and the USA. The experiments are based on theory which postulates that there are two ways to achieve high status: through dominance, referring to bully-type power-grabbing behaviours, or through prestige, implying being skilled and knowledgeable and having status granted to you by others (Cheng and Tracy 2014). We were interested in how children

in different cultural contexts thought about dominance and prestige, and the development of these skills with age. We collected data from almost 500 children, and then analysed children's answers to understand how they thought about dominance and prestige.

We found a shared tendency to favour prestige amongst children from all three countries, which increased with age. However, there were also cultural differences. For example, we asked the children a set of questions about who they would assign leadership to between a dominant and prestigious character—children in Finland showed a stronger tendency to assign leadership to the prestigious character than did children in Colombia. Overall, we argue that socio-cultural factors, such as levels of societal inequality and the degree to which children are exposed to overt dominance in everyday life, shape how they think about social status, dominance, and prestige.

By examining children's intimate lives in two very different sociocultural contexts, my thesis offers both an in-depth analysis of particular childrearing practices and childhood experiences in these two cities, and a broader comparison across them. Through this approach, it examines how normative ways of interacting and relating to others are learnt through the repeated childhood experiences that are so 'normal' to those who exist within these worlds that they are unquestioned, or 'second nature'. In doing so, it also examines how these everyday practices are connected to broader structures, norms, and value systems.

The articles each spotlight a different aspect of children learning to be 'culturally adequate' (Ulvik 2018); they explore how children learn to manage conflict, play games, and know their place in social hierarchies in ways that are considered appropriate in their local contexts. Common to each of them is the understanding that children's ability to learn to navigate social relationships is built upon shared human bio-psychological capacities and tendencies to do so, and that these are also shaped by the cultural context within which they are learning such skills (Boas 2008; Röttger-Rössler et al. 2015).

Through this mixed-method, comparative approach, my thesis, therefore, makes contributions to the anthropology of childhood and learning, but also holds broad transdisciplinary relevance across the study of child development, human cooperation, and hierarchy.

Honoured opponent, I now call upon you to present your critical comments on my dissertation.

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