

## Marks of cultural relationships between children and adults: a dialogue with the sociology of childhood

*As marcas das relações culturais entre crianças e adultos:  
um diálogo com a sociologia da infância*

*Las marcas de las relaciones culturales entre niños y adultos:  
un diálogo con la sociología de la infancia*

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**Abstract:** This theoretical essay aims to problematize the understanding of childhood(s) and child, as well as their cultural relationships in contemporary times, seen from the renewed perspective of the Sociology of Childhood. Childhood Studies is chosen as theoretical foundation, nearing in particular the Sociology of Childhood, through selected bibliographical references. The power of the child's cultural relationships with adults is shown as one of the possible ways to make contemporary children and childhoods visible, which must be taken into consideration by the institutions in which the child participates such as family and school.

**Keywords:** Children. Childhoods. Adults. Cultural relationships. Social relationships.

**Resumo:** O presente ensaio teórico objetiva problematizar a compreensão de infância(s) e de criança, bem como das relações culturais, destas, na contemporaneidade, sob um olhar renovado da Sociologia da Infância. Elege como sustentação teórica os Estudos da Infância, com uma aproximação mais potente da Sociologia da Infância, por meio de referencial bibliográfico selecionado. Como resultados apresenta a potência das relações culturais da criança com os adultos como um dos caminhos possíveis, para visibilizar as crianças e as infâncias contemporâneas, o qual necessita ser considerado pelas instituições que a criança participa como a família e a escola.

**Palavras-chave:** Crianças. Infâncias. Adultos. Relações culturais. Relações sociais.

**Resumen:** El presente ensayo teórico objetiva problematizar la comprensión de infancia y de niño, así como de las relaciones culturales, de éstas, en la contemporaneidad, bajo una mirada renovada de la Sociología de la Infancia. Elege como sustentación teórica los Estudios de la Infancia, con una aproximación más potente de la Sociología de la Infancia, a través de referencial bibliográfico seleccionado. Como resultados presenta la potencia de las relaciones culturales del niño con los adultos como uno de los caminos posibles, para visibilizar a los niños y las infancias contemporáneas, el cual necesita ser considerado por las instituciones que el niño participa como la familia y la escuela.

**Palabras clave:** Niños. Infancias. Adultos. Relaciones culturales. Relaciones sociales.

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## Introductory notes

This article is a theoretical essay that raised the issues of childhood and children and the marks of cultural and social relationships between children and adults. The purpose of this essay is to problematize the understanding of childhood(s) and child(ren) and their cultural relationships in contemporary times, from the renewed perspective of the Sociology of Childhood. Therefore, throughout this article, we seek to answer, through the theoretical/analytical lens of Sociology of Childhood, the following problem: what marks are left by the cultural relationships between children and adults and how has the child become visible/invisible as a social category, enabling them to have their own authorship and protagonism about their lives while in childhood?

It is important to emphasize that we intend to analyze this (in)visibility in marks of cultural relationships between children and adults considering that they have had profound modifications in the last four decades. Thus, we recognize Contemporaneity as a very important historical period, especially regarding social, political and cultural issues, which make visible a childhood that values the subjects as participants in the construction of their own story beyond physical development.

To Agamben (2009, p. 59): “Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it, through a disjunction and an anachronism”. In this uniqueness of relations with time, from the 1990s onwards, new research on the child and childhood has been carried out, renewing perspectives and practices, and assigning social, cultural, and generational identities to childhood. As stated by Sarmiento and Pinto (1997), this period has surpassed the traditional limits of research confined to the fields of Medicine, History, Developmental Psychology or Pedagogy, to consider childhood as a social phenomenon of its own.

According to Carvalho e Silva (2016), in an interview with Fernandes, this renewed perspective came mainly from the movement that originated the International Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>i</sup> (BRASIL, 1989). Since then, research on children and childhood has intensified and, consequently, the theories presented and defended by scholars of Childhood Studies<sup>ii</sup> throughout the world – especially in the Northern Hemisphere at first – have subsequently been expanded elsewhere, including here in Brazil, where we can highlight the Child and Adolescent Statute (BRASIL, 1990) as a sociopolitical mark of visibility and guarantee of children's rights.

As we have seen (international and national) literature indicates that in the last years several fields of knowledge, such as Sociology, Anthropology, History, Psychology, Philosophy, Pedagogy/Childhood Pedagogy, began to investigate the child and childhood by its own characteristics and specificities. We consider it relevant to reiterate that the researches done for this essay are affiliated with Childhood Studies, particularly to the studies of the Sociology of Childhood. In the theoretical/analytical perspective of the Sociology of Childhood, Abramowicz (2011) says that it helps us think about studies about children and childhood not only by the theoretical instrument case or research novelties that the Sociology

of Childhood enables when it marks childhood with concepts such as infantile culture and social category, but rather by seeing it in its protagonism, social authorship, construction and power. In order to broaden our theoretical framework, we seek support in authors such as: Delalande, Dornelles, Fernandes, Martins Filho, Prout, Qvortrup, Sarmento and Pinto, among other contemporary references on the analyzed thematic.

In this perspective of paradigmatic change in research on children, we cite Delalande (2011, p. 67), who states that “[...] (Sociological and Anthropological) investigations are characterized by the fact that they are mainly interested in the children's point of view [...]”, considering children not only as searchable subjects but rather as qualified participants in the research.

Therefore, we can affirm that: “Childhood is more than a phase of transition; is a permanent social category. Regardless of the children who compose childhood at a certain time and place, childhood continues to exist, as well as the regulatory and institutional apparatus that surrounds it” (LIMA, 2018, p. 25).

In order to answer the questions presented in these 'Introductory Notes', we organized the article in four sections, the first one being this and the others being: Child and Childhood seen from the ‘renewed’ perspective of the Sociology of Childhood; Cultural and social understanding of childhood(s): marks of relationships between children and adults; and the Final Considerations.

## **Child and childhood seen from the ‘renewed’ perspective of the sociology of childhood**

The Sociology of Childhood emerges in the mid-1980s and takes a path – not in parallel, because they touch each other, in my opinion – with the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. When the Sociology of Childhood defends the image of the child as a subject, a social actor, it is not defending more than what is safeguarded in the Convention when it says that the child has the right to give their opinion, to become involved in their matters. Therefore, there was an interesting synergy of the emergence of a scientific area that focuses exclusively on the child and the valorization of their social action and the emergence of the Convention that formally legitimizes children’s participation (CARVALHO; SILVA, 2016, p. 188)<sup>iii</sup>.

As noted above, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (BRASIL, 1989) has contributed significantly to the discussions and productions of the Sociology of Childhood. According to Fernandes in an interview with Carvalho e Silva (2016, p. 188) “Participation must be a meaningful action to the subject, and it has to have implications; implications in terms of social transformation”. The author also says that, while recognizing children seems simple, as when expressed in legislations, for example, it is also very complex to be carried out through child participation, which is a sphere beyond the recognition of rights. Fernandes also states that, even if the adult enables a dialogue with the child, sometimes it is difficult to accept, answer and put into practice an opinion when it is contrary to what was expected by that adult. Thus, there is still much to be exercised by adults

regarding the social and cultural participation of the child, which the author names as “representative democracy”, that is, only made in some circumstances.

This implies abandoning an adult-centric perspective, a world seen/lived only by adult optics, and seeking to know the infantocentric perspective, where the world view would occur by a childlike logic, even though it seems like an unlikely reality. There needs to be a paradigm shift, where adults, as mediators (albeit in some moments) of children's relationships with the social and cultural world, create spaces for them to build their experience as participatory subjects and protagonists. Without the strengthening of dichotomies between adultcentrism and infantocentrism, but with coherence and co-participation of both perspectives, since we are considered in fact and in law citizens when we can exercise our social action and when we have space in children or adult collective actions. Seeing and listening to the child beyond the conceptions of care, fragility and becoming is fundamental in any study that really aims to know more about childhood and children, as well as about the social and cultural practices of said population.

Through the perspective of the Sociology of Childhood, children are perceived as a generational and social group that must be respected and valued in its singularities and pluralities. According to Fernandes (2009, p. 25):

[...] children are a permanent social group in society. They have a space and a time that, despite cultural, social and economic specificities, which configures complexities and significant dissimilarities between their elements, mark a phase of life for any individual, and also determine the organization of any society.

Thus, cultural status is attributed to childhood, and this culture is implicitly or explicitly revealed in the midst of society, also affecting public policies, culture and history. Children not only reproduce the culture of the adult world, but also (re)elaborate and (re) signify them, from their relationships with adults and peers. This causes

[...] a current growing interest in cultural issues, whether in the academic sphere or in the political or everyday spheres. In any case, the centrality of culture to think the world seems to grow. But such centrality does not necessarily mean considering culture as an epistemologically superior instance to other social instances - such as political, economic, or educational; it means taking it as crossing everything that is social (VEIGA-NETO, 2003, p. 5).

In this sense, the Sociology of Childhood is summoned to make the child visible as a producer of culture, which can be evidenced through conceptions such as ‘culture of peers’ (production of culture among children) and ‘child protagonism’ (the possibility of the child to live their life from their needs and desires), where both occur through child participation, with the child as the competent subject at the center of social and cultural choices and experiences.

Prout (2010) notes that it is necessary that the Sociology of Childhood does not fall into the idea that childhood is a uniquely social construction to abandon biological reductionism. It is necessary that the child be seen as a multifaceted being, considering its biopsychosocial dimensions. When we explore the interfaces of Childhood Studies, we begin to see other meanings attributed to childhood, such as: power, capacity, connection with

nature, curiosity, among others. Still according to the author, only by understanding that childhood is constructed by heterogeneous elements of nature and culture, which cannot be easily separated, it will be possible to move forward.

The Sociology of Childhood studies oppose the idea of children's passivity, as well as the idea of socialization solely oriented by adults and/or institutions. However, one of these powerful relationships between adults and children is registered to occur in the school, an institution that occupies a space of extreme importance in the sense of the visibility of childhoods and their cultures, developing what could be called a 'school culture', which escapes from a restriction on (only) teaching questions to be interested in the life of the students, the protagonists of the educational process, and recognizing the school as a place of life. According to Delalande (2011), the school becomes a place where the child will socialize and become the protagonist of its own schooling, a space in which the concept of socialization will be transformed, in the way each child relates to themselves, with others, and with their own childhood.

The process of (re)conceptualizing the term 'childhoods' has occurred over the last decades, in which the Sociology of Childhood offered us possibilities, constantly questioning us and disagreeing with already crystallized notions, according to which the child was seen as an incomplete being, and such incompleteness was often associated with inability.

The sociology of childhood proposes to constitute childhood as a sociological object, rescuing it from biological perspectives, which reduce it to an intermediate state of human maturation and development, and from psychologists, which tend to interpret children as individuals who develop themselves regardless of the social construction of their conditions of existence and representations and images historically built on them and for them. But more than that, the sociology of childhood proposes to interrogate society from a point of view that takes children as an object of sociological research in its own right, by adding knowledge not only about childhood, but also about the society as a whole (SARMENTO; CESIARA, 2004, p. 2).

With such problematizations, the Sociology of Childhood have tried to analyze the many changes occurred in contemporary society, such as: the different forms of family configuration; the way the adult conceives and relates to the child; the processes of socialization between adults and children; and the relevance of the adult/teacher in the process of child socialization/schooling; among others. Prout (2010) says that a change in the character of childhood was occurring and still occurs. Families no longer live in a stereotyped pattern. The different family configurations allow for new relationships between adults and children, providing space for a more questioning and curious child with their family life organization, which, consequently, needs to be prepared to present their point of view as well.

Seeking to broaden the understanding of 'childhood', the Sociology of Childhood instigates us to reflect on multiple childhoods, in the words of Dornelles (2005, p. 71):

I believe that one still lives under the effect of the production of modern childhood, however, it is no longer possible to deal with just one childhood like the one advocated by Modernity. It must at least take into consideration that there are many other childhoods. There are poorer and richer childhoods, childhoods in the Third World and richer countries, childhoods of technology and of holes and sewers,

overprotected, abandoned, rescued, cared for, neglected, loved, armed, and other childhoods.

What we can establish in the narrative above is that there is no single way of portraying childhood, but until very recently, what prevailed was the tradition of children's life history to be told only by the adult, a mechanism that has made children socially/culturally invisible for so long, even by Sociology, which has only recently expanded its investigations to study childhoods, thus establishing the power of this new field of study, the Sociology of Childhood.

Tomás (2011, p. 134) argues that

[...] to write about childhood [children], it is necessary to read and understand it, even if it often shows itself illegible, incomprehensible, perhaps even inaccessible in the first approach. Writing about childhood is, after all, an attempt to map the multiplicity of senses, the multiple voices, and the different scales where children move and are moved.

From this paradigmatic turn of the multiplicity of meanings and voices, the researchers of the Sociology of Childhood begin to offer us subsidies for a renewed perspective on children and childhood, which enables us to make new questions about cultural and social understanding, a topic we will explore in the next section.

### **Cultural and social understanding of childhood(s): marks of relationships between children and adults**

Childhood as a cultural understanding can be understood as the children's construction of their own knowledge, their memories and recollections, their practices and possibilities of creating and re-creating the social (and cultural) reality in which they are inserted (QUINTEIRO, 2002, p. 141).

When we propose ourselves to discuss the cultural and social understanding of childhood, it is opportune to announce that this is our view, which, as previously stated, considers the theoretical investments of Childhood Studies and the Sociology of Childhood, whose great differential happens to be the bias by which childhood and children are considered as potent beings capable of producing culture and not only of receiving and/or consuming it.

It is possible that the child and childhood acquire a similar status in many societies, despite the cultural particularities of each of them. However, we must realize that the cultural and social process brings with it a new configuration of being a child and having a childhood, "[...] once childhood [and child] is perceived as being culturally constructed, whole new fields for study are opened to scholars. It also becomes easier to mount a radical critique of thinking about children in their own society" (HEYWOOD, 2004, p. 24).

Therefore, we understand childhood in the plural, considering its manifold forms of manifestations and social and cultural productions, demystifying some crystallized discourses of what it is to be a child and how to live childhood, often rooted only in biological



development. Nascimento (2011, p. 200), in ‘Presentation: Nine theses on “childhood as a social phenomenon” – Jens Qvortrup’ reports “[...] childhood as a category in the social structure and defends as [idea of] generational category that defines the place occupied by childhood in society, therefore, the element that underlies the field of Sociology of Childhood”. In other words, even though childhood as a biological dimension has a predetermined time to occur, the generational character points out that other children will come and occupy this place, permanently consolidating childhood and its patterns in contemporary society. Sarmiento (2008, p. 24), “[...] in some way, societies are what is proposed as possibilities of life, for the present and for the future, for their children”. Therefore, theoretical and analytical work on childhood is also a way of knowing society.

This renewed perspective on childhood, explored in the previous section of this article, allows us to reflect on the relationship between adults and children today and, most importantly, to question the marks left by these relationships. “From the tamed child to the subject child, they become a person, an interlocutor” (DELALANDE, 2011, p. 63-64). If, in the recent past, relationships between adults and children occurred, in some situations, through austere and vertical ways, today we have the possibility of living more understanding relationships, where there is dialogue and search for spaces of protagonism for children.

From these new perspectives, fighting for a quality public space, capable of promoting the integral formation of children, gains strength in society and political proposals. We quote two legislations that brings the agenda of the education of the young child. The first is the Law on Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDBEN 9394/96), which, in its Article 29, recognizes early childhood education<sup>iv</sup> as the “first stage of basic education”, which “aims to promote the integral development of the child up to six years of age [nowadays, five years of age], in its physical, psychological, intellectual and social aspects, complementing family and community engagement” (BRASIL, 1996). And the other legislation is the National Education Plan (PNE Law No 13.005/2014), which establishes compulsory enrollment from the age of four and therefore expands the debates on institutionalization/schooling, as well as on the relationships between children and adults in these spaces (BRASIL, 2014).

Compulsory enrollment of four/five-year-old children is a commitment of their guardians, but with implications to the municipal administrators, who need to offer enough places at schools. We still do not have measurable elements in the academic scenario of this policy, however, the great challenge, besides guaranteeing enough enrollments, is the pedagogical work to be developed. We believe that educational extension is successful if it considers the reality of enrolled children, their needs and curiosities, especially in what concerns the culture of children. We believe that the educational extension is successful if it considers the reality of the enrolled children, their needs and curiosities, especially regarding children culture. Martins Filho (2015, p. 25) states that

[...] it is possible to see children based on their experiences and manifestations, especially those built through relationships with adults and their peers, and no longer as passive subjects and mere recipients or consumers of cultures even though it is recognized that they are interdependent on adults or other social groups, such as family and institutional and educational spheres.

That is to say that, through this perspective, children are seen as history-maker individuals and that a path to follow is to observe and respect the way children explore their spaces. Thereby, we attribute meaning and sense to their own culture, since culture can have many interpretations, from what is seen and heard, yet it does not allow for neutralities, it requires that there be interlocution and that the way of analyzing is enunciated.

And as a perspective, some researchers have used the methodology of ethnography. According to Vasconcelos (2016, p. 19): “It is necessary to conceive ethnography not as the experience and interpretation of another circumscribed reality, but rather as a constructed negotiation involving at least two or more politically significant subjects”. The ethnologists’ perspective observes the life and experiences documented by the cultural and social anthropology of childhood; therefore, it conducts investigations related to the culture and acculturation of the child’s conviviality with other children, observing the child and the other child in their cultures. The cultural dimension is mainly developed by the investigations of ethnologists, heirs of a strong attention to what constitutes ‘the other’ in its alterity, in its culture (DELALANDE, 2011).

Creating spaces so that the child can also exercise social relationships is to allow them to express their opinion, their feeling and their desire, in their own time, understood as a social relationship built through participation. Carvalho and Silva (2016, p. 188) affirm that “participation must be a meaningful action for the subject, and it has to have implications [...], they can be punctual changes in the subject itself, in the group itself, but this subject has to feel that intentional action”. It is important to regard as legitimate the way children relate to adults or to children, so that participation can be experienced by the child and that the child becomes an active subject in their social and cultural relationships.

We believe that cultural relationships between children and adults promote different brands, which enable a peculiar kind of learning, where culture is the product of the social environment while social experiences produce new cultures.

Thus, it is no longer possible to think of an institution, especially the school, in a homogeneous way, where it is possible to ‘fit’ the child into tight and standardized programs. We strive an institution which is able to dialogue, listen, understand and stimulate children’s protagonism, valuing the construction of the other. We insist on the need to study social and cultural relationships between adults and children as a two-way street, where both will produce cultures and enjoy the culture of the other, reinterpreting and reaffirming each other.

Children are an active part in children’s cultures and, consequently, in adult world cultures, for both are intimately connected. Valuing the children cultures is a strategy to make childhood visible as a social category, always considering the relationship with others.

## Final considerations

If we were able to create schools where the respect for children’s listening and participation was a generalized professional habit, we could make a change in a way that serves the children, families and cultures (FORMOSINHO; FORMOSINHO, 2016, p. 10).



We begin these final considerations by reiterating our understanding of the contributions made by Sociology of Childhood in the last decades. In our essay, through the references cited, we showed that the relationships between the child and the adult are constantly marked by social and cultural relationships that need to be widely considered in the institutions in which the child participates, such as family and school.

Therefore, the need to make the marks produced in these relationships visible becomes evident. Regarding the marks left in children's relationships with adults in institutions, we recognize that these are possible through participatory processes. In the family or at school, there is always an adult with the function of teaching; in these relationships learning occurs through dialogs, 'learning' is seen/regarded as one of the marks of the adult-child relationship. However, it is necessary for institutions to observe their functioning, valuing previous knowledge and children's cultures, so that this relationship involves, in addition to cognitive issues, social and cultural issues. Cultural relationships at school take place through pedagogical practices, which lead to the development of a school culture, where a process of transformation occur in which children become students, thus interconnecting school culture with childhood culture and vice versa.

We highlight below other marks of relationships between children and adults, which were possible to highlight from the reflections originated by the references of this study, and which we believe are pertinent to remain on the agenda of future research and texts: The way the child sees the adult in the midst of the relationships established between them directly influences the child's identity and worldview, including their knowledge of history and politics; Recognizing the child as a culture producer, beyond the aspects of socialization, making their ways of social organization visible, in the midst of their own childhood culture, taking as an example the organization/hierarchization of games between peers; Questions about the structural emphasis often associated with the child, such as being helpless and devoid of ideas about themselves and others, or when one sees children and childhood solely through of their biological dimension of care and development.

We emphasize the fact that the relationship between the child and the adult is marked by different social and cultural dynamics that must be considered in institutions, especially to understand what has been produced about childhood and children in contemporary times. It is necessary to give visibility to the way in which children constitute themselves as constructors of meaning, because we understand that the child is the subject of their history and, thereby, builds the culture in which they live.

We recognize that children have much to say and participate in the world. Quinteiro (2002, p. 21) says that: "Perhaps little is known about them because little is heard and little is asked to the children". What happens is that, in some circumstances, children are still silenced at school (or in their family), either through frequent work, the restricted moments of dialogue, or even the lack of credibility of what is said by children.

Researching about child and childhood is challenging, throughout this essay we brought evidence of renewed perspectives and understandings about children and contemporary childhood through the theorists of Childhood Studies and Sociology of Childhood. We believe that the marks of these cultural and social relationships between

children and adults take place right at the moment they occur, that is, in the continuous processes of participation, experiences and learning. That is why it is so relevant to live the daily life of these powerful ‘relationships’ with sensitivity.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> International Convention on the Rights of the Child is a treaty for the protection of children and adolescents from around the world, adopted in United Nations General Assembly Resolution no. 44/25 on November 20, 1989. With Brazil signing the document, as evidenced by the publication of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent the following year (BRASIL, 1989).

<sup>ii</sup> Childhood Studies comprise a range of areas that are concerned with understanding “the child, the childhood and the society” in which they live, such as: Sociology, Anthropology, History, Psychology, Philosophy and Sociology of Childhood, among others. focusing on discussing the issues in an interdisciplinary way.

<sup>iii</sup> According to Fernandes in an interview with Carvalho e Silva (2016, p. 188).

<sup>iv</sup> Law No. 12,796/2013 (BRASIL, 2013) amends Law No. 9,394/96 (BRASIL, 1996), which establishes the Guidelines and Bases of National Education, with the following text in its fourth article: I - **Compulsory basic education free of charge from four (4) to seventeen (17) years of age**, organized as follows: a) preschool; b) basic education; c) high school; II - **free child education for children up to five (5) years of age**.

