Northumbria Research Link

www.northumbria.ac.uk/nrl

Towards a relational ethics: Rethinking ethics, agency and dependency in anthropological research with children and youth

Francesca Meloni; Karine Vanthuyne; Cécile Rousseau

Abstract

While anthropologists have reflected on ethics and power since the late 1960s, the specific dilemmas that arise in research conducted with children and youth have scarcely been addressed. Nevertheless, critical anthropology's reflections on power relations and reflexivity can valuably contribute to the interdisciplinary debate in the field of childhood studies, by complexifying categories of voice, dependency and agency, which are often taken for granted in the ethical conversation. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with undocumented youth in Montreal, this article argues for the importance of a critical understanding of childhood within a wider context of interdependence, and consequently, for a redefinition of ethics as a reflexive and relational space of intersubjectivity.

Introduction

Myra Bluebond-Langner (2000) argues that childhood studies are expected to have a similar impact on scholarly work in the 21st century, as women's studies did in the 20th century. Although perhaps the influence of childhood studies might be less grandiose than what Bluebond-Langner predicts, it is unquestionable that in recent decades, a theoretical and methodological turmoil has arisen in disciplines such as sociology, psychology and geography, questioning our ways of understanding and working with children (see: Christensen and James, 2000). Acknowledging that minors have historically been marginalized and silenced in adult society, these approaches take issue with traditional assumptions of children as passive and dependent beings, and instead put forward a novel conceptualisation of children as articulate commentators of their social world..

However, once we reconceive of children as autonomous and speaking subjects, or even as research co-participants, new ethical ground opens. The ways we listen to children and how we approach them, suddenly become extremely intricate and relevant (see: MERG, 2012). How, for instance, should we contend with power imbalances and relationships between ourselves, the children we are working with, and the adults surrounding them? Whose agenda should we serve when we write about the young people that we meet in our fieldwork?

In addressing these questions, many scholars have emphasized, often enthusiastically, the ethical importance of recognizing children's agency (Barker and Weller, 2003) and of "listen[ing] authentically to youthful voices" (Carnevale, 2004).

From this perspective, adults are often seen, at best, as gatekeepers who open the door of access to children's worlds, or at worst, as dominant subjects who impose their own perspectives. Waksler (1991), for instance, suggests that "adults routinely set themselves up as understanders, interpreters and translators of children's behaviour" (62).

In this article, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with undocumented youth in Canada, we engage in a critical dialogue with this literature, highlighting the ethical complexity of adult-child relationships, and emphasizing the multifaceted and relational nature of voice, dependency and agency - dimensions that are often taken for granted in ethical conversations. Our aim is twofold.

First, we propose, in line with other recent critical literature in the field of childhood studies(Komulainen, 2007; Oswell, 2013; Spyrou, 2011; Schnoor, 2013), to critically rethink notions of voice and agency, and to redefine childhood within wider contexts of interdependence. While we recognize the ethical importance of "giving voice to children's voices" (James, 2007), we also point to the need to critically reflect on how these voices are produced, and where they are located. The preoccupation with children's individual agency and voice, which has been the foreground of many child-centered studies (see: Spyrou, 2011), often looks at the child in abstraction: an autonomous and intentional *individual* child. Yet, this gesture forgets that children's voices do not emerge in a vacuum, but from the interactional context in which they are so deeply entangled: family stories, social landscapes, and relationships of trust.

Inevitably, the ways we define and understand childhood are central to what we consider ethical or not. To be sure, if we define children (their voices, their stories, their silences) as importantly *relational* and contextual, then we also need to redefine ethics as a performative practice of intersubjectivity, as having to do with different modes of

belonging. In this article, we therefore conceptualize ethics as more than merely a principle of conduct in relation to the potential harm and benefit of research. By leading us into a blind alley - the unilateral assessment of a subjects' supposed lack of power or, on the contrary, their relative individual agency - such a narrow definition of ethics may perpetuate the very harm it seeks to prevent. Our aim here is to avoid this pitfall, by considering ethics as an intersubjective and reflexive dialogue: a conversation between ourselves and our research participants; a way of listening children's voices, and silences, as primarily relational.

In our effort to widen, in a relational sense, the definition of ethics and to confront our (partially unresolved) ethical encounters, we also try to generate a dialogue between the anthropological literature on ethics and the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies. On the one hand, childhood scholars from various disciplines often tend to minimize power issues, and instead deliberate on the ethical criteria of good and bad, harm and protection. On the other hand, anthropology has often avoided conversations surrounding what is good or bad, assuming a general and relativist framework of moral evaluation, and focusing more on structures of power (Lambek, 2010).

In this article, we will try to bring these two approaches together: while examining the intricacies of different moral worlds, we would, and could not avoid to take a moral position. Our argument draws on the ethical dilemmas that the first author experienced while conducting fieldwork with undocumented youth between the ages of 12 and 20, in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood in Montreal, a large Canadian city. While ethical questions and anxieties are presented in her first voice, our reflections are the collective product of a dialogical encounter between the three co-authors, who were

members of a wider research team investigating access to healthcare for precarious status immigrants. In the next section, before delving into the first author's fieldwork, we will briefly discuss the history of anthropological research with children and youth in North America, and we will outline a possible explanation for the dearth of ethical reflections in this domain.

Who's afraid of ethics?

In anthropology, as Benthall remarks, "there are enough studies of children to form a tradition" (Benthall, 1992: 1). Since Margaret Mead, anthropologists have taken different pathways in studying childhood, focusing specifically on processes of socialisation and cultural transmission (see: LeVine, 2007). However, it is only since the 1980s that North American anthropologists have slowly become interested in what children have to say about their own worlds, shifting their conception of children as passive objects to one that sees them as subjects capable of meaning-making, (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998; Bluebond-Langner, 1978).

Yet, while ethical issues regarding power imbalances and (mis)representations between researchers and research participants have been extensively debated since the 1960s (Fluehr-Lobban, 2003), the specific ethical questions related to conducting anthropological research with children and youth have rarely been taken into account. Compared to other social sciences, a relatively scarce number of publications can be found on the subject. A search on the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences Database (IBSS) linking the terms "ethics" and "children" to the subject discipline

"anthropology" yields only 100 peer-reviewed journal articles. [1] Strikingly, the same combination with "sociology" generates 468 results, while the identical search with the first two key words provides 9735 journal articles on the Medline database.

Clearly, this does not mean that anthropologists have never reflected on these issues. Yet, we argue that there has been relatively little substantial debate on the topic, in comparison to other disciplines such as sociology and geography. Let's consider, for instance, Hinton's work (2000; 2008), which uses participatory research methods with Bhutanese refugee children. She stresses the importance of understanding children's resilience, criticizing Western assumptions of children as individual and vulnerable beings. Yet, she does not consider the fact of allowing children to speak for themselves in order to challenge these assumptions, as something that raises particular ethical questions. Instead, she views it as a methodological and theoretical issue, linked to the general, and old known, anthropological intricacies of grasping the Other's experience, rather than to specific considerations of young voices.

Why this lack of ethical reflection? We believe that three main factors may explain this. Firstly, studies of childhood are relatively scarce compared to other anthropological subfields (Hirschfeld, 2002; Hardman, 2001). The anthropology of childhood, as Lancy (2008) has suggested, is sparse and "balkanized", as it often lacks a comprehensive review of the work of colleagues on similar topics. As a result, there has not been enough ground made to date to sustain an ethical debate in this domain.

Secondly, the anthropology of childhood has often continued to embrace cultural relativistic approaches, focusing on how being a child can be culturally defined and

---

[1] The search on the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences Database (IBSS) was done on January 29th, 2013.

enacted in so many different, and contrasting, ways (see, for instance, LeVine and Norman, 2001). This relativistic focus may discourage anthropologists from engaging in ethical discussions that are considered to be too anchored in universal definitions of childhood and children's rights. Indeed, in fields such as psychology, nursing and sociology, it is the very conception of children as vulnerable – a perspective firmly rejected by anthropologists as a Western ethnocentric assumption – that has grounded ethical regulations in research with minors (President's Commission, 1981).

Thirdly, ethnographic studies have developed, much later than other disciplines, new perspectives on children as social agents (Boyden and De Berry, 2004). As a result, the ethical reflections that have been raised in other fields, driven by such perspectives on children as autonomous subjects, have come relatively late in anthropology.

And yet, although anthropologists have shied away from redefining ethical guidelines for research with children and youth, they have provided many relevant insights on the intricacy of power relationships and agency, particularly in contexts of poverty and political violence (Hecht, 1998; Montgomery, 2007; Durham, 1995). With respect to structures of power, anthropologists have observed, for example, how relations of dependence and care may be reversed in communities where children are the caretakers of adults, and the main income earners in the household (Boyden and De Berry, 2004). Recently, anthropologists have also unmasked the concept of agency, which often tends to be "ethnocentric, classist and hegemonic, representing the dominance of contemporary bourgeoisie child-rearing" (Lancy, 2012: 1; see also: Durham, 2008)

If such significant understandings of children's autonomy and agency as being deeply complex and multifaceted have nevertheless failed to spark a comprehensive

ethical debate within the anthropology of childhood, we still believe that anthropology's considerations on power imbalances (which have a long history running through feminist theory, post-Marxist accounts in critical medical anthropology, and post-colonial studies), can significantly contribute to the interdisciplinary discussion of research ethics in relation to age. In what follows, we show the potential contribution of an anthropological perspective on fieldwork with youth.

Ethics in the field

As Durham (2000) has argued, to talk about youth means to pay closer attention to the social landscape, that is, to the topology of power, rights, relationships and social structures youth are entangled with. In this sense, our research on undocumented youth was inevitably linked to the wider socio-political context. Prior to exploring the ethical dilemmas of fieldwork, we must therefore further describe this context, and at the same time, address important questions about the positioning of our research within it. Why, for instance, did we pursue this kind of research? And why did we chose to conduct it with this specific group?

As we have briefly mentioned, the fieldwork on undocumented youth was part of a wider mixed-method project,[2] which the three co-authors participated in. This broader project was prompted by the concerns and needs of clinicians, researchers and community organizations surrounding access to healthcare for undocumented children and pregnant women, in the context of increasingly restrictive immigration policies. In recent decades, public funding for healthcare in Canada has been curbed as a result of

---

[2] Project "The migratory status of the child and limited access to health care: Equity and ethical challenges", financed by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR).

policies aimed at reducing national and provincial deficits (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2010).

These reforms in universal healthcare coverage have led to decreased medical services for precarious immigrants, firmly drawing a line between those who deserve health care, and those who do not. It is from within this socio-political context that our project's aim emerged: to analyze the ethical, social and medical dilemmas surrounding the increasingly limited access to health care for undocumented pregnant women and children. These question were approached from various angles, considering: the perceptions of clinicians and health care staff, the challenges of community organizers, and the experiences of undocumented immigrants (Rousseau, 2013; Ruiz-Casares et al., 2012; Vanthuyne et al., 2013). However, this study also had a very practical and political goal: it aimed, ultimately, to elaborate on collaborative guidelines for clinicians, institutions, and decision makers, in order to improve access to healthcare for this population.

Having the chance to work with other researchers, community organizations, and social workers who participated (and believed) in this extensive research, helped us to critically discuss the challenges of fieldwork, and to establish primary contact with people who were interacting with undocumented families. Despite this, unsurprisingly, it took time to gain entry into the world of undocumented youth and establish trust-relationship with their communities. Documenting the undocumented seemed not only to be an oxymoron – a methodological challenge common in studies involving extremely marginalized and hard-to-reach populations (Bilger, 2009) - but also a risky ethical issue due to the young age and social position of our research participants.

In what follows, we will examine issues of power and dependency in adult-youth relationships, through narration in the first author's voice. Her narration will illustrate the

back and forth movement between the anxieties of the researcher in the field, youths' experiences, and the collective voice of the research team. That is, our ethical reflections have emerged not in isolation, but rather from within the space of dialogues between the three of us, our research participants, and the various members of our larger research team. This continuous dialogue as the fieldwork unfolded produced a resonance network, which helped to confront and partially resolve ethical impasses, by questioning the entire research team's practices and responsibilities in relation to the youth, and their various communities of belonging.

Negotiating access: what am I doing here?

Sitting down in a café in Montreal and discussing my research with an anthropologist colleague (one of those moments when we pause, reflect, and take a breath), I was puzzled by the questions she asked me: "Do you think it is ethical to document the undocumented? Do people who hide and try to protect themselves really want to be documented?" I have wondered about these issues for quite a long time during my fieldwork – how should I approach invisible subjects and, more essentially, should I even approach them at all? While the potential paralysis from doubts about the harm our study could cause to undocumented youth could have had the effect of keeping them voiceless by excluding them from the "right to be properly researched" (Beazley et al., 2009), still I felt that questions of access and of the related ethical responsibilities, needed to be carefully taken into account in our research with young and marginalized subjects.

In retrospect, I can say that gaining access to undocumented youth was difficult at best, and entirely impossible at times. During this fieldwork, I felt like a detective (sometimes, even a kind of morbid detective), in search of hidden tracks, footprints that

others were carefully trying to hide. At first, in the hope that they would assist me in accessing undocumented youth, I identified key informants among community organization representatives working with youth and immigrants in a multicultural neighbourhood in Montreal. However, I soon discovered that establishing trust relationships was an extremely difficult task. Indeed, the few organizations or community groups in contact with precarious status youth tended to protect them, taking the position that "research was not the priority of their clients." The leaders of these organizations or groups argued that the young age of participants, as well as their illegal status, were reason enough to shield them from research. As such, their dual position, as *minors* and as *undocumented*, render them potentially doubly vulnerable, keeping them voiceless (Meloni et al., 2014).

I recall, for instance, when I contacted one youth center's representative. Jeff,[3] the person in charge of the center's activities, was from Guadeloupe. When I told him that I was a Ph.D. student from McGill University, he asked me with suspicion: "Did you know that Mr. McGill had many slaves? He was a colonialist!" What he was implying, by looking at me defiantly and by pointing out that James McGill was associated with a colonialist British legacy, was that I was white, a stranger, and entangled in a colonial history. When I replied that neither did I sympathize with Mr. McGill, and that my research was looking at broad power disparities surrounding access to healthcare (and when, ultimately, we found out that we lived in the same low-income neighborhood), he finally agreed to allow me to participate in the center's activities. Nonetheless, when I began frequenting the center, when I was trying to find a way of "being there", I found

---

[3] The names and certain details related to the identity of the subjects have been modified in order to protect their privacy.

that I had no place there and no particular role to play. I felt that I was looking for a needle in a haystack. I wrote in my fieldnotes:

Here comes frustration. I feel I cannot find a place. The fieldwork is long and exhausting. Among all the youth at the youth center, it's hard to find out which ones are undocumented. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack. (…) I feel that this is not the right place, it is hard to be there. They don't need me here. It's hard to find a role to fit in, and a need for them to have me here.

"Being there" involves integrating oneself into the communities one is researching, and as such, it is an "ethical experience and quest" (Rabinow, 2007: xv), where discomforts and uncertainties are experienced, negotiated, and never entirely resolved. In the context of this vulnerable population of undocumented youth, these discomforts were even more acute, since adults protected youth from the great risk of being found and, eventually, deported. Could youth trust me and get involved in the project for their own advantage? And what, in the end, were my ethical responsibilities towards them?

Slowly, things began to change as I broadened my research focus and adopted a more engaged role. The turning point was when a woman from the Latin-American community, who was also the leader of a community organization, introduced me to many undocumented women she was working with. Following this, I started to volunteer at this organization and make contact with many undocumented families. I took part in daily activities with undocumented women: I cooked and ate lunch with them, and spent time with them and with their babies. Unexpectedly, while myself and another study team member, were carrying out interviews with some of these women with respect to their experiences in accessing healthcare during their pregnancy, another important concern emerged: the barriers to accessing education for this group's children. In order to address

this issue, we became involved in establishing and coordinating a working group with community organizations, institutional stakeholders, and researchers, with the aim of developing policies to include undocumented children in the education system.

Like other researchers who have adopted a participatory approach (McIntyre, 2000), the research process was then completely subverted. Not only did the objectives of our larger study and my own become defined by research participants, but the process of gaining access was also reversed. In fact, community groups and undocumented youth started requesting to meet with me, recognizing that the study was not merely research, but also a venture that they could significantly benefit from.

To a certain extent, my role became even more ambiguous: I was not only a fieldworker, but I was also coordinator of a working group on access to education. Inevitably, this new role brought its own kind of violence: I deliberately decided to follow, and to hear, certain voices in my fieldwork, while I neglected others that were equally, or perhaps even more important. My ambiguous positioning also raised new ethical questions. For instance, did this participatory approach transform my research into a form of engaged or militant anthropology, which was supposed to be more "ethically grounded" (Scheper-Hughes, 1995)? Or was this only a means to gain my research participants' confidence?

To these questions, there is not a straightforward answer. For more militant organizations, I was not militant enough. My ways of complexifying youths' positioning, beyond tales of political resistance, often disturbed some members of militant community organizations I came in contact with. For other researchers, my dual role as researcher and coordinator of a working group, affiliated with a university and a health center, was too messy. As such, it emerged as neither militant anthropology (which I do not

particularly believe to be more ethically grounded than a non-militant one), nor a simple means to gain access to the world of youth. To be sure, given the unbearably silent violence of the *status quo*, it would have not been possible to conduct this fieldwork, in this particular socio-political context, without becoming meaningfully involved in the action. We took a position – which was both a political and a *moral* position - while acknowledging the complexities of different ethical perspectives. But taking a stand was more than just a way to make our research possible by gaining youth's trust. Equally, it was also something different than an already-set, taken for granted, militant research. It was, more precisely, a way to treat youth, and their communities, "as protagonists of research, not as mere repositories of data" (Hecht, 1998: 8).

That is, the resistance, mistrust, and suspicion of the other, slowly opened a dialogical ethical process. A reflexive dialogue with myself, my anxieties, my imaginary. A silent dialogue with an underground world of undocumented immigrants who hide and protect themselves. A constant dialogue with other members of the research team, who shared and discussed their similar experiences and challenges in research. Finally, it was a process that profoundly marked the entire research process, and slowly shifted the research priorities, from access to health care to access to education - in the act of waiting, in the act of acknowledging and understanding the resistance of the other.

Interestingly, taking action also meant that the ways I was now perceived had also changed. When I came back to the same youth center where I had met Jeff, Julian, a community organizer from Trinidad and Tobago, welcomed me at the door with a smile. As soon as we sat down in his small and messy office, where a Jamaican flag hung on the wall, he took out a notebook and a pen. Then, he began asking me questions concerning

our working group and access to education, attentively listening to my responses. I was taken aback when upon leaving his office, he thanked me, and then hugged me warmly. I wrote in my fieldnotes:

It's such a strange feeling. I remember when I went to the youth center for the first time. I remember how Jeff was suspicious about my research. And now, Julian is asking me questions, and he is listening to me. He is even taking notes! It's as though our roles have been reversed: he is now the one who has the notebook and he is writing down what I am telling him. And he is interested in what I am saying because he thinks I could be helpful to him and the youth at the center. I can be helpful to him, as he can be helpful to me. He tells me: "you know, it's pretty cool what you're doing."

My involvement in a working group on access to education for undocumented children thus allowed me to have a meaningful role within the community, and as a result to be recognized as a potential ally by undocumented families, community organizations and youth. And none of this would have been possible without the trust relationships I first established with undocumented women. Indeed, in order to be recognized by the youth, I had to first be recognized by the adults surrounding them, and to identify the concerns of these adults (in this case, over difficulties accessing education for their children). So, if we stick to our metaphor, finding the needle in the haystack was only possible because I acknowledged that the needle was part of the haystack. That is to say, I was only able to gain access to youth once I identified adults and youth as part of a wider community of belonging.

Who are you? Deconstructing adult-youth relationships

If the relationships between adults and youth then became a crucial ethical issue in our research, it is also important to make some clarifications about the social and cultural category of "adult" which has often been taken for granted by many scholars (see: Punch, 2002). When we talk about power differentials between adults and youth, what kinds of adults and youth do we have in mind? And, most importantly, how do youth perceive us? These very questions are crucial to understanding ethics as a dialogical encounter, rather than an opposition between two alterities.

At stake here is who we are to each other, and how we come to recognize, and belong to, one another. In this section, I briefly explain how, during the meetings and conversations I had with youth, we mutually assessed and reassessed our multiple roles. As different were the contexts in which we met, as diverse were the relationships I established with the adults these youth trusted. As was the case with adults, the fact that I was engaged in a working group on access to education often allowed me to be seen by youth as a potential ally. I remember, for instance, when a community organizer introduced me to a young boy, on a lazy summer afternoon at a youth center. The boy looked at me curiously, and asked me a direct, pointed question: "So, what are you doing here?" When I told him that I was part of a working group on access to education for undocumented children, he exclaimed: "That's pretty cool! I bet many people would be interested in telling you about their experiences." I also remember how surprised I was, given the difficulty I first experienced in accessing undocumented youth, when I received an email from a girl who wrote me that she was "so happy to know that there were people interested in studying what was happening to youth living without legal status", and that, "if possible, [she] would like to meet [me] and contribute [her] point of view on these issues".

Youth also recognized me because I had become close to their parents and to the community organizers they trusted. However, at times this could also be a source of misunderstanding, since I was encapsulated in pre-determined roles. For instance, I remember meeting Pablo, a young boy from Colombia, through a social worker. I met him and his family at his home, and the role he assigned me was very much related to the fact that I knew his social worker. While sitting in his living room eating chocolate cookies, he asked me if I was a psychologist. "You know, Rebecca once told me that I needed a shrink because I had troubles at school. So I thought she sent you here". When I told him that I was not a psychologist, he breathed a sigh of relief, and sank into the sofa.

Moreover, I believe that many categories of identity, such as my age, ethnicity, and social class, significantly influenced the ways in which youth perceived me. Let's take for instance, age. If this is a socially constructed notion, how age is perceived is certainly also related to questions of social status and power (Cohen, 1994). To many youth, I was a different kind of adult who was, in my dress and ways of communicating, not so intimidating, or at least less intimidating, than other adults. I recall, for instance, that, while sitting and conversing on the stairs at a youth center with a young boy, he suddenly pointed out to me: "Hey, your shoes are cool!" To my surprise, I suddenly realized that we wore the same kind of shoes– a pair of All Stars sneakers. This is not to say that wearing All Stars sneakers will help researchers build relationships of trust with youth – I wish it was so easy! Rather, I suspect that being seen as a different type of adult, someone who could wear your same kind of shoes, may have helped me to establish an initial contact with them.

An additional element, my cultural background and identity as a non-Canadian, often triggered the curiosity of many youth. To a number of those I met, it was clear that

like them, I did not belong to Canadian society - English or French was not my mother tongue, my migratory status and settlement were precarious and fragile, and part of my family lived on the other side of the ocean. This non-belonging or, to be more precise, this partial belonging we had in common created space for an intersubjective encounter, through which we shared meaning and knowledge. Where we experienced our different sensibilities, our limits, and the failures of our words. In this sense, the product of my fieldwork did not simply discuss undocumented youth as such. It also talked about myself, and about the very dialogical process of fieldwork - a process that impacted me because I was an inescapable part of it.

Of course, my non-belonging to Canadian society was not, by any means, similar to the non-entitlement of many undocumented youth. I enjoyed many privileges that they could not benefit from. I was a foreign student with a study permit, while the youth I met with had uncertain migratory status and limited access to education. As a young girl who could not go to school because she did not have legal status pointed out to me, "international students *always* have a lot of money, so it is not a problem for them to pay tuition fees." I may have felt that I constituted an exception to this "always", as an international student who did not consider herself to have "a lot of money". However, from her point of view, my position was more secure than hers. My fieldwork (like all fieldwork), was inevitably the setting for shifting roles, understandings and misunderstandings, mutual expectations and imaginaries, along with all of their productive potentials and possible pitfalls.

But to encounter youth not only meant to position myself and to assume shifting roles within wider relationships and misunderstandings. It also meant, as I will explain in

what follows, to find youth within social lives and webs of belonging in ways that matter and relate to them.

Listening for silence in adult-youth relationships

One evening, Maria called me to tell me that after hearing about my research from a community organizer, she was interested in meeting with me, and so we arranged an appointment at her house one day after school. When I arrived at her apartment, in a residential suburb of Montreal, her mother welcomed me at the door. She warmly greeted me and invited me to sit on the sofa with Maria in the living room while she prepared coffee for the two of us. She came back with two cups of hot coffee, and sat on the sofa next to me while her daughter sat in an armchair. She then ask me several direct questions about myself. "You're not Quebecoise" she guessed. "No, I am Italian", I confirmed. "Ah, we understand a little bit of Italian". She paused, and then continued: "You look young to me." "Yes, I am… you look young too!" I laughed. We discovered that we were about the same age, although I did not have any children. "That's why you look younger than I do, you don't have children!" she cheerfully laughed.

After this series of questions, and once my identity was fairly assessed, I finally began speaking with Maria. I offered her some coconut cookies, which she eagerly ate, and asked her some general questions about herself and her school. Maria was 14 years old, with brown, bright, and expressive eyes. She had arrived from Colombia three years earlier, along with her mother, as refugee claimant. When their refugee status claim was refused, her single mother decided to stay in Canada illegally, with the intention of marrying a Canadian citizen in order to obtain residency.

19

Although Maria's eyes were bright and communicative, words strived to come out. She remained very shy, and often kept silent. Moreover, her mother was present all through our conversation, commenting and replying to questions on behalf of her daughter. During the course of our meeting, her mother twice asserted firmly: "my child has adapted really well to Canada, she really has. It is only this uncertainty… *(long silence)*". When she uttered these words, it seemed as if she wanted to convince herself that the adaptation process hadn't been so hard for herself and her daughter. But the silence that followed her words, and the tears in her eyes when she pronounced the word "uncertainty," seemed to reveal the adversities and sacrifices that had likely been involved.

From the way she remained silent and moved uncomfortably in her armchair, Maria appeared to be holding different perceptions about her experience of migration. Yet, when I asked her if it had sometimes been difficult for her to adapt to living in Canada, she laughed softly and coughed. Then, she murmured: "I'm going to drink some water", before leaving the room to have a glass of water in the kitchen. Avoiding this particular question may have been a way for her to demonstrate her discomfort and uneasiness about both our conversation and her situation. Since she probably felt that she could not betray her mother by contradicting her in front of a stranger, she chose not to express that it had been difficult for her to adapt in Canada, nor to lie by affirming the opposite, instead avoiding the question altogether by leaving the room.

The words that she did not utter, given the fact that her mother was present throughout our encounter, point to how Maria's life was inescapably and closely dependent on adults' decisions. The choice to migrate, and the resolution to remain in Canada illegally once their refugee claims were denied, were not hers but her mother's.

As a child, she could hardly have escaped such decisions made on her behalf. So entwined was her life with her mother's choices that it was not possible for me to conduct a conversation with Maria without her mother's presence.

By explicitly asking how she had adapted to life in Canada, I wanted Maria to clearly express herself or, in other words, to enact her agency and make her voice heard (a *different* and *individual* voice). Reflecting on what had happened during our conversation, I later realized that, I was chasing an illusory idea of voice and agency: certain and discursive *individual* entities that it was possible to entirely grasp. But, rather than a discursive and clear certainty, what mattered most, in my conversation with Maria and her mother, was what Mazzei calls "the voice in the cracks" (Mazzei, 2009): the unsayable and the silence, the hesitation and the fracture in Maria's language. What mattered most was, more essentially, how these impossible words were produced: not as individual words, but as words which were impossible to utter *within* a particular family context, and an intimate relationship of dependence with her mother.

Once I recognized the frailty (and non-existence) of individual voices, I also came to understand the need to consider novel ways of interacting with youth and representing them. The painful migration experiences they may have gone through, and the structural and family constraints they may have lived with or may still be living with, place researchers in a delicate position. They urge us to acknowledge youth's lives as embedded within the family dynamics they are entangled with and allow us to understand why youth may avoid a particular question or choose not to participate in our research. And silences, as withdrawals, need not to be treated as non-data. On the contrary, we should be "listening for hesitation – listening for that which persistently disrupts the security of what is known for sure" (Stevenson, 2009: 56). We may learn much more

from interpreting these silences and hesitations than from analyzing what more vocal research participants have to say about a topic (Vanthuyne, 2008; Yong, 2006).

Conclusion

Cohen (1994) has aptly argued, with respect to anthropologists working with elderly people, that age is a new kind of "hearth of darkness" in anthropology and social sciences, where we encounter the natives in a classic anthropological fashion, and we exchange meaning. And we so desperately lack meaning that, to paraphrase Cohen with respect to research with youth, we search among our young informants for what it really means to be a child or a youth, "[t]hen we extract this meaning like Indian cotton to Manchester mills and refashion it, for both them and, ultimately, us". (143)

Sometimes the shift in perspective from children as objects to children as subjects has not impeded this desperate search for meaning, nor the extraction of Indian cotton – that is, individual children's stories and agency - from their inter-relational context. Instead, what we have proposed in this article is to try to define a relational ethics: to imagine youth's stories, and ourselves, within different communities of belonging and interdependence. In the context of our fieldwork, it was possible to gain access, and perform research relevant to marginalized youth, because we recognized them as part of a wider community of adults. We could not have entered their worlds without also recognizing the concerns of their families and their ties of interdependence with their community. We could not have fully understood their lives within a model that assumes a universal opposition between childhood and adulthood, or a straightforward progression

from dependency to autonomy. Youths' agency and voices – their choices, dreams, and interpretations – must be considered as intimately intertwined and conditioned by the very social worlds in which they live, a task for which ethnography is crucially important (Bluebond Langner and Korbin, 2007).

The fact that since the 1970s, anthropologists have reflected long and hard on their fieldwork (perhaps even too much, at times), contributes valuably to the interdisciplinary debate on ethical issues in research with children and youth. These reflections can help to complexify categories of power, agency, and dependency in adult-youth relationships. Power should not be fixed in the rigid categories of "adults" and "children", but rather in the mutual representations of the subjects, the intricacies of the research process, and the negotiation of roles and identities. As Carnevale (2004) has pointed out, the ethnographic practice, in which issues of misunderstanding, expectations, and power thrusts are inevitable components of the research process, may help to create dialogical trust relations as well as negotiate power roles. Moreover, due to the long-term and extensive nature of ethnographic fieldwork, anthropologists may have the time to really gain a sense of the potential harms of their studies, as well as the power dynamics at play between the researcher and the researched, if they pay particular attention to these issues.

Anthropological reflections could also help us think through questions of ethics as a process of reflexivity. In the context of our fieldwork, ethical concerns emerged as reflexive collaborations and negotiations within a resonance network: the reflections between the members of our research team; the stakes and needs of the youth; and the multiple voices and concerns of youth and their network of adults. This very space of collaboration was helpful in establishing trust-relationships with the young people that

we met, as it led us to co-construct meanings and research objectives with them. The defensiveness of the youth, their families and the community organizations working with them, drastically diminished after the research team partially changed the objectives of the larger study in order to address the issue of access to education, a concern voiced by the youths' mothers.

If we therefore cease to understand ethics within traditional models of intactness, as a mere issue of power differentials between two alterities, fieldwork may become an "ethnography of collaboration" (Marcus, 2007). A dialogue between researchers and youth, and between youth and adult networks, now epistemic partners and meaning-makers, who together co-construct a third space - that is the very space of a mutual ethical encounter. It is in this dialogue that we will be able to experience and trust one another, recognizing that "there is no innocence, only the navigation of ambivalence" (Butler, 2000: 26).

References

Barker J and Weller S. (2003) "Is it fun?" Developing children centred research methods. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 23: 33-58.

Beazley H, Bessell S, Ennew J, et al. (2009) The Right to Be properly Researched: Research with Children in a Messy, Real World. *Children's Geographies* 7: 365 - 378.

Benthall J. (1992) A Late Developer? The ethnography of Children. *Anthropology Today* 8: 1.

Bilger VaVL, I. (2009) Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas in Research among Smuggled Migrants. In: Van Liempt IaVB (ed) *The Ethics of Migration Research Methodology : Dealing with Vulnerable Immigrants.* Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 118-140.

Bluebond-Langner M. (1978) *The Private Worlds of Dying Children,* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bluebond-Langner M. (2000) Opening Remarks. *Public Opening Reception, Center for Children and Childhood Studies.* Rutgers University, Camden, NJ.

Bluebond Langner M and Korbin JE. (2007) Challenges and Opportunities in the Anthropology of Childhoods: an introduction to "Children, Childhoods, and Childhood Studies". *American Anthropologist* 109: 241-246.

Boyden J and De Berry J. (2004) *Children and Youth on the Front line: Ethnography, Armed Conflict and Displacement*: Berghahn Books.

Butler J. (2000) Ethical Ambivalence. In: Garber MB, Hanssen B and Walkowitz RL (eds) *The Turn to Ethics.* New York: Routledge, 15-28.

Carnevale FA. (2004) Listening Authentically to Youthful Voices: A Conception of the Moral Agency of Children. In: Rodney P, Storch J and Starzomski R (eds) *Toward a moral horizon: nursing ethics for leadership and practice.* Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall, 396-413.

Christensen PM and James A. (2000) *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices,* London: Routledge Falmer Press.

Cohen L. (1994) Old age: cultural and critical perspectives. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23: 137-158.

Durham D. (1995) Soliciting gifts and negotiating agency: the spirit of asking in Botswana. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*: 111-128.

Durham D. (2000) Youth and the social imagination in Africa: introduction to parts 1 and 2. *Anthropological Quarterly* 73: 113-120.

Durham D. (2008) Apathy and agency: The romance of agency and youth in Botswana. In: Cole J and Durham D (eds) *Figuring the future: Globalization and the*

temporalities of children and youth. School for Advanced Research Press, 151-178.

Fluehr-Lobban C. (2003) *Ethics and the Profession of Anthropology: Dialogue for Ethically Conscious Practice,* Walnut Creek, Ca: AltaMira Press.

Garber MB, Hanssen B and Walkowitz RL. (2000) Introduction: The turn to ethics. In: Garber MB, Hanssen B and Walkowitz RL (eds) *The Turn to Ethics.* New York: Routledge, 15-28.

Hardman C. (2001) Can There be an Anthropology of Children? *Childhood* 8: 501.

Hecht T. (1998) *At home in the street: Street children of Northeast Brazil,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hinton R. (2000) Seen but not heard: Refugee children and models for intervention. In: Panter-Brick C and Smith MT (eds) *Abandoned children.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 199-212.

Hinton R. (2008) Children's participation and good governance: Limitations of the theoretical literature. *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 16: 285-300.

Hirschfeld LA. (2002) Why Don't Anthropologists Like Children. *American Anthropologist* 104: 611-627.

James A. (2007) Giving voice to children's voices: Practices and problems, pitfalls and potentials. *American Anthropologist* 109: 261-272.

Komulainen S. (2007) The ambiguity of the child's 'voice'in social research. *Childhood* 14: 11-28.

Lambek M. (2010) *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action,* New York: Fordham University Press.

Lancy D. (2008) *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings*: Cambridge University Press.

Lancy D. (2012) Unmasking Children's Agency. *AnthropoChildren* 1.

LeVine RA. (2007) Ethnographic Studies of Childhood: A Historical Overview. *American Anthropologist* 109: 247-260.

LeVine RA and Norman K. (2001) The Infant's Acquisition of Culture: Early Attachment Reexamined in Anthropological Perspective. In: Moore C and Mathews HF (eds) *The Psychology of Cultural Experience.* Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Pr, 83–104.

Marcus GE. (2007) Collaborative imaginaries. *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology* 5: 1-17.

Mazzei LA. (2009) An impossibly full voice. In: Alecia Y Jackson LAM (ed) *Voice in qualitative inquiry: Challenging conventional, interpretive, and critical conceptions in qualitative research.* London: Routledge, 45-62.

McIntyre A. (2000) Constructing meaning about violence, school, and community: Participatory action research with urban youth. *The Urban Review* 32: 123-154.

Meloni F, Rousseau C, Montgomery C, et al. (2014) Children of Exception: Redefining Categories of Illegality and Citizenship in Canada. *Children & Society* 28: 305–315.

MERG C. (2012) Ethical principles, dilemmas and risks in collecting data on violence against children: A review of available literature. New York: Statistics and Monitoring Section/Division of Policy and Strategy, UNICEF.

Montgomery H. (2007) Working With Child Prostitutes in Thailand. *Childhood* 14: 415.

Oswell D. (2013) *The agency of children: From family to global human rights,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

President's Commission ftSoEPiMaBaBR. (1981) Protecting human subjects: The adequacy and uniformity of federla rules and their implementation. Washington, DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, HHS.

Punch S. (2002) Research with children: the same or different from research with adults? *Childhood* 9: 321-341.

Rabinow P. (2007) *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco,* Berkeley: Univ of California Press.

Rousseau C, Laurin-Lamothe, A., Rummens, A., Meloni, F., Steinmetz, N., Alvarez, F. (2013) Precarious Immigration Status Children at Canadian Paediatric Emergencies: Disparities in Help-Seeking Pathways and Service Delivery. *Paediatrics & Child Health* 18: 465-469.

Ruiz-Casares M, Rousseau C, Derluyn I, et al. (2010) Right and access to healthcare for undocumented children: Addressing the gap between international conventions and disparate implementations in North America and Europe. *Social Science & Medicine* 70: 329-336.

Ruiz-Casares M, Rousseau C, Laurin-Lamothe A, et al. (2012) Access to Health Care for Undocumented Migrant Children and Pregnant Women: The Paradox Between Values and Attitudes of Health Care Professionals. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*: 1-7.

Scheper-Hughes N. (1995) The Primacy of the Ethical. *Current Anthropology* 36: 409-420.

Scheper-Hughes N and Sargent CF. (1998) *Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Schnoor O. (2013) Early childhood studies as vocal studies: Examining the social

practices of 'giving voice to children's voices' in a crèche. *Childhood* 20: 458-

471.

Spyrou S. (2011) The limits of children's voices: From authenticity to critical, reflexive

representation. *Childhood* 18: 151-165.

Stevenson L. (2009) The Suicidal Wound and Fieldwork among Canadian Inuit. In:

Borneman J and Hammoudi A (eds) *Being there: the fieldwork encounter and the*

making of truth. Berkeley: University of California Press, 55-76.

Vanthuyne K. (2008) Ethnographier les silences de la violence. *Anthropologie et Sociétés*

32.

Vanthuyne K, Meloni F, Ruiz-Casares M, et al. (2013) Health workers' perceptions of

access to care for children and pregnant women with precarious immigration

status: Health as a right or a privilege? *Social Science & Medicine* 93: 78-85.

Waksler F. (1991) Studying the social worlds of children: Sociological readings. London:

Falmer Press.

Yong KH. (2006) Silences in history and nation-state: Reluctant accounts of the Cold

War in Sarawak. *American ethnologist* 33: 462-473.