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Children's Strategies for Creating Playspaces: Negotiating Independence in Rural Bolivia

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Introduction

Recent research in the new social studies of childhood recognises that children are competent social actors who play an active part in their social worlds (Waksler 1991; Mayall 1994; Caputo 1995; Waksler 1996). Yet there are still relatively few studies which document the ways in which children devise ways to counteract adult's power and control over their lives. However, although the agency of children is important in understanding their capacities (Sibley 1991), it must be acknowledged that children also face limitations. The aim of this chapter is to consider how rural children in Bolivia actively negotiate ways to assert their autonomy despite being constrained by adults who enforce boundaries of time and space (James 1993; Ennew 1994; Sibley 1995). Adult-imposed limits confine children, yet children's resourcefulness and competencies enable them to create strategies for controlling their own use of time and space.

This chapter draws on ethnographic research carried out in rural Bolivia which explores how children and young people negotiate their independence, in particular looking at the strategies they form to affirm their autonomy as individuals despite the constraints which restrict them as children in an adult world. Different aspects of children's and young people's lives are considered, including the nature of their social

relationships at home, at school, at work and in the community at large. The research took place in Churquiales, a rural community¹ in Tarija, which is in the south of Bolivia, above Argentina (see Map 1). A sample of eighteen households were visited regularly in order to carry out semi-participant observation and interview all the household members including children, young people, parents and grandparents. At the community school a variety of techniques were used mainly with the eldest thirty-seven school children between 8-14 years, which included: classroom observation, photographs, drawings (see Punch and Baker 1997), diaries and worksheets (see Punch 1998).

This chapter outlines some of the structural constraints of childhood including the unequal power relationships between adults and children, and the work demands imposed upon children in poor rural areas. Subsequently it focuses on how children use the spaces of work and school to negotiate time for play, thus enhancing their spatial and temporal autonomy.

Constraints of children's time

In poor rural households where production systems strive to meet the family's subsistence requirements, labour needs are high. All family members above five years of age are expected to contribute to the survival of the household. Children's work can be vital for survival or can help maximise household productivity levels. It includes domestic work such as food preparation and sibling care (see Plate 1), animal-related work including feeding the animals and taking them out to pasture, and agricultural work such as weeding, planting and harvesting. Hence, children's free time is limited by their household duties. Parents may occupy their time with errands and chores for the household but equally children undertake many responsibilities of their own accord. Many children are only able to play freely at home, when their parents are out, or when all the household tasks have been completed. They also have to combine

their work with school. Consequently, in rural Bolivia, children's use of time at school and work leaves them little spare time. Adults, whether parents or teachers, restrict children's free time by giving them tasks to do and controlling their time both at home and at school.

Children are also constrained by unequal power relationships within the household and discipline from adults and elder siblings. Adult discipline of children in rural Bolivia is based on a system of punishments rather than rewards, which vary from mild discipline such as shouting or threats, to harsher discipline such as hitting or beating. There are many times when refusal to do a job, or attempts to avoid it, provoke a harsh reaction from an authoritative parent: *Me pegan con un rebenque*² ("They hit me with a whip" - Milton, 10 years). The type of punishment which a parent uses varies greatly according to the strictness of that particular parent and the perceived gravity of the wrong-doing. Most often to gain an obedient response, it is enough for parents to raise their voices or threaten the child with a physical punishment: *Siempre amanezco que los voy a pegar para que hagan caso* ("I always threaten that I'm going to hit them so they do as they're told" - Dolores, mother). However, if this fails the child may be hit, or sometimes beaten: *Dale un látigito para que aprende* ("Hit them so they learn" - Dorotea, mother). Thus, children are restricted from acting autonomously in certain situations where the parental response to such independent behaviour is to tame them with a stick: *Mi mamá me pega con un palito* ("My mum hits me with a branch" - Sabina, 14 years).

Adults in Churquiales also often used a well-known local superstition called the *duende* (dwarf) as a control mechanism over children's time to persuade them to work more and play less, in particular to come straight home from school rather than stop and play too much along the way. There were several beliefs concerning who or what exactly *duendes* were. Some people said that they were the rebellious souls of children who had died without being christened. Others said that they were like a

mini-devil. Some people thought that *duendes* existed because of girls who had had abortions. The general image of the *duende* was as a short but plump child-like figure who wore a large, broad-rimmed hat but no other clothes: *Ha sido un hombre gordo y tenía un sombrero grande* ("It was a fat man and he had a big hat" - Cira, 9 years) or *He visto un hombre con sombrero y era como un niño* ("I saw a man with a hat and he was like a boy" - Santos, 14 years). It was generally believed that the *duende* could only be seen by children, and that it only appeared to children who played too much and were easily distracted: *Dicen que aparece a los chiquis que juegan mucho con muñeca* ("They say it appears to children who play a lot with dolls" - Felicia, mother) or who played instead of working:

Los adultos cuentan de los duendes a los niños para hacerles da miedo. Cuando no quieren hacer algo, como una tarea, o para que no jueguen demasiado, cuentan del duende.

Adults tell stories of the *duendes* to children to make them scared. When they don't want to do something, like a task, or so that they don't play too much, they tell them that the *duende* will get them.

(Nicolás, grandparent)

Not all children took much notice of their warnings: *Yo no conozco el duende* ("I have never seen the *duende*" - Celestina, 12 years) and *Como no se ve, uno no cree* ("As you don't see it, you don't believe it" - Tomás, 13 years) but some children were worried by it: *Tengo miedo de los duendes para ir ha clases* ("I am scared of the *duendes* on my way to school" Rosalía, 11 years). Many parents also believed that the *duende* existed and they made the most of children's fear of it as a way to encourage them to do as they are told:

Les digo a mis hijos que no juegan. La jugada es tentación, mejor es trabajar o hacer una cosa. Los haceres se pasan si están en la jugada.

I tell my children not to play. Play is temptation, it's better to work or do something. Things may happen when you're too wrapped up in play.

(Ignacio, parent)

Thus, children's time for play was not only limited by work and school, but was also constrained to a certain extent by adults who needed children to do tasks for the household and tried to discourage play by instilling fears of the *duende*.

Children's spatial autonomy

Spatially Churquiales is a relatively large community which contains five main zones (see Map 2): the centre, El Mollar (south), Josepillo (south-west, hill area), Pedregosa (far west, mountain area) and La Toma (west, by the river). Households in one of the four zones which is not part of the centre of the community are approximately half an hour up to over an hour's walk from the community square. To cross from the furthest point on one side of the community to the other would take over two hours on foot. The main form of transport within the community was on foot, the other was horseback. Children indicated that they did not regularly use the whole space of their community. They tended to use the area surrounding where they lived and the centre of the community. Children went regularly to the community square as that was where the school was. They also used other facilities found in the square, including the football pitch, shops, the health post (*A aser curar al que esta enfermo* "To make better whoever is ill" - Marianela, 10 years), and the church (*Para ir a escuchar la misa* "To go and listen to mass" - Vicenta, 13 years). They frequently went to the square outside school hours to complete errands, such as to buy goods from the shops or to wait for the twice weekly bus if a member of their household had been to shop in town. Children were often sent to wait for that member's return to help carry back the goods they had bought.

Children went to the river or the irrigation canal nearest their homes on a daily basis to fetch water (except those who had recently acquired drinking water on tap in their homes), and also sometimes to bathe, irrigate crops or to play. They went up the

hillsides nearest their homes also on a regular basis to take goats and/or cows out to pasture, to fetch them in, or to search for a missing animal. Children were mobile and used a wide range of space regularly, often travelling great distances with animals or to carry out errands. Their mobility was closely linked to the demands of their household responsibilities and tasks. Adults considered children to be energetic and nimble, preferring to send them to do errands, or fetch and carry firewood and water. Therefore, children were usually more physically mobile and tended to travel greater distances each day than adults.

Such a finding contrasts with the daily territories of adults and children in the Minority World³ where children are more restricted than adults because of fears for their personal safety. They have a regulated access to modes of transport and more protected domains of home and school rather than a public sphere of work (James 1990). Children in urban societies have a limited use of space within the modern urban environment, which is considered to be threatening and dangerous to children, in terms of traffic, pollution and assault (Kovarík 1994; Valentine 1997). Consequently, children are confined to particular protected spaces which are usually controlled by adults: the school, the car or the house (Ennew 1994). They are rarely allowed to play freely in open urban spaces or out on the streets (Ward 1994). In rural areas in Bolivia children were not constrained by such parental fears for their physical safety and they were free to roam the mountainsides and explore the surrounding countryside. In Churquiales, children's spatial experience of the local environment was not greatly different from that of adults. They had access to wide, open spaces and their use of space was more extensive compared with confined urban children. One family, who had recently migrated to the town of Tarija, reflected on their children's initial reactions to urban life:

Al principio los chiquis no se acostumbraron a quedar encerrados. Aquí es todo encerrado por miedo de las mobilidades. Ellos se quedaron tristes unos dos meses, echados, mirando debajo del portón.

At the beginning, the children could not get used to being enclosed. Here it is enclosed because of our fear of the cars. The children were sad for about two months, they used to lie down and peer out under the gate.

(Celia, parent)

The main parental fear for children's physical safety in rural Bolivia concerned the danger of strong river currents during the wet season (see Plate 2). Consequently, when it rained, young children were not allowed to go to school if they had to cross the river. In general, rural children experience substantial spatial autonomy (Katz 1993). In Churquiales, a child's daily movement to the square for school, to the hillsides with animals and to the river to fetch water, was usually undertaken alone, without seeking prior permission from parents. To travel further afield within the community, such as to a zone furthest away from where they live, most children would ask for permission to go, and it tended to be for a specific reason such as to buy meat from someone who had recently killed a cow, or *A buscar un caballo* ("To look for a horse" - Basilio, 11 years) or *Para visitar mi tío* ("To visit my uncle" - Celestina, 12 years). For such a particular purpose children would usually go accompanied by a sibling or parent. However, not all children told their parents where they were going. Sometimes they might disappear without warning, or might go somewhere else instead. On their worksheets, most of the older children (10-14 years) indicated that they had been to all, or four, of the five zones of the community, but many of the younger children (7-10 years) had only moved between the two or three zones nearest to their home. Unsurprisingly, older children had greater freedom to move all around the community and asked permission to do so less frequently than younger children. However, within the community there was little gender difference of the spaces that children used, which supports the view that:

Girls' freedom to move independently and to encounter directly diverse environments varies considerably across geographic settings, sometimes in ways that differ from commonly held impressions.

(Katz and Monk 1993: 266)

Negotiating the use of time and space to create playspaces

The previous sections have outlined children's use of time and space in the community, indicating how most of their time is spent in the spaces they use for work and school. Children's freedom is restricted: they are constrained by the boundaries of childhood and their lives are mainly mapped out by adults, especially in their use of time and space (James 1993; Ennew 1994). In the Minority World many childhoods are associated with school and play (Hunt and Frankenberg 1990). Play is a characteristic of most childhoods (Ritchie 1964; Stone 1982), but in the Majority World where many children work, the time which can be dedicated purely to play is limited. In rural Bolivia, children's time was mainly taken up by school and work for their household, leaving them minimal spare time for themselves. This contrasts with the literature on children in the Minority World which argues that children's play is curtailed by the imposition of organised leisure (Ennew 1994).

Most research on play considers the meaning and consequences of play, particularly from a psychological perspective of child development (Herron and Sutton-Smith 1971; Pepler 1982; Cohen 1993). Sociological studies of children's culture tend to focus on the types of play or the language which children use (Opie and Opie 1982; 1991; James 1995), but very few studies have considered the importance for children of combining play with other activities, such as work and school. This section shows how children in rural Bolivia combine their use of time and space at work and at school in order to negotiate time to create playspaces for themselves.

When asked where they most liked to play, the children responded: on the football pitch, in the community square and at school (see Plates 3 and 4). They mostly played on the football pitch and in the community square when they were at school. Hence, nearly all their answers indicated spaces connected with going to school because: *En otras partes no ay muchas chicas para jugar a las ollitas y muñequitas* ("In other

places there aren't many girls to play kitchens and dolls with" - Yolanda, 8 years). Since children in Churquiales have many work responsibilities and live in households dispersed throughout the valley they have limited opportunities to meet other children apart from school time. School offered children the best place to play, not just for the physical space of the football pitch which it provided, but more importantly because it was where they met many of their friends: *Qui juego con mis amigos* ("Here I play with my friends" - Juana, 10 years). Interestingly parents, when asked the same question, said that they thought that their children liked to play at home. Some parents mentioned the football pitch but only two parents said that their children most liked to play at school. Only one parent said that the children liked to play in the river, but several children referred to the river as one of their favourite places: *Para ir a pillar pescaditos* ("To go catching little fishes" - Valentina, 12 years) or *Para ir a vañarme* ("To go and bathe" - Oscar, 13 years). Therefore, parents did not necessarily know where their children most liked to play. This demonstrates children's ability to create their own playspaces away from parental control of which parents might not be aware. It is also an example which indicates that parents' and children's views may differ considerably when contemplating the issues surrounding children's lives, since both have different perspectives and that children can be the most appropriate informants to consult about their own social worlds.

At school play and having fun was not restricted to break time, it could also take place in the classroom, as well as by playing along the way to and from school. On the way to school children were less likely to play since they were supposed to arrive in time for lessons. However, they often met their friends along the way, in which case their arrival at school might be delayed. By going to school alone, children experienced the freedom of physical independence rather than having to depend on being chaperoned (see Plate 5). Children could be particularly resourceful when in search of fun and games. For example, on occasions, some of the pupils would meet on the way, and stop to play on the grass football pitch which was about twenty

minutes walk from the school. They would arrive late in class with excuses of having had to carry out chores at home. Sometimes they would never even come to school but would stay and play by the river between their homes and the school. They would wait for the other children to return and would join them on their way home, pretending to their parents that they had been in school all day.

Semi-participant observation revealed that another strategy which children used as an opportunity to play with friends was to arrive at school before lessons commenced and play in the square until the bell was rung. Children who lived closest to the school would often go early on purpose to play for a while, and sometimes the boys in particular would arrange to meet each other fifteen minutes early to play a game of football. When the bell was rung at the start of school or after breaktime, the pupils initially continued playing. They took five or ten minutes to gather and enter their classrooms. Sometimes when they were particularly immersed in a game, the teacher had to go in search of them and tell them that lessons were about to start.

On the way home from school, it was observed that children took particular advantage of their time together by playing along the way and delaying their return home. They would stop and play in the river when it was hot, or look for *chasquitas* (a plant with many long thin leaves which could be plaited and made to look like dolls' hair) when they were in season. The boys often stopped to play marbles, or football on the grass pitch. The girls would see who could find the prettiest plants or flowers. Consequently children nearly always returned later at their homes than really need be, and their parents often complained to them about this. They often arrived half an hour later, but sometimes they would appear as late as four or five in the afternoon when their parents expected them home by two.

When children were not at school, their play was carried out either where they work or at home. Occasionally children went to a neighbour's or a nearby relative's

household in search of friends or cousins to play with, but such a custom was rare because of children's responsibilities which they perform for their households. Sunday was when this might occur but it was by no means common practice. The spaces of their household and work were vast, including the patio area of their house, the surrounding land and hillsides, and the areas where they went to fetch water or firewood and look after animals. The temperate climate and the work demands of the rural lifestyle meant that much of children's time was spent outdoors rather than confined to the house. Such physical freedom in their natural environment not only allowed children spatial autonomy (Katz 1993), but also enabled them to command more control over their use of time. Since their use of space was extensive and often away from the gaze of adults, children had more opportunities to self-determine what they did in such spaces and how much time they spent there. Rural children's use of time was more restricted than their use of space, but children's spatiality enhanced their physical independence from adults and allowed them to gain more temporal autonomy.

Since the time which adults allow children to dedicate to play is limited, children devise ways of extending that time by combining play with work. In the Majority World there is no clear dividing line to separate work and leisure, and in many instances the two overlap. Children, in particular, merge the two activities, so that their work is completed but is also fun and allows them the social freedom to play. Certain jobs in Churquiales could easily be combined with play, such as looking after animals. Most of the children described this as a potentially boring task as they just had to accompany the animals out to pasture to make sure they did not wander, enter fields and destroy crops, or get lost. Consequently, the children often sang whilst taking the animals out or rounding them up, as they found themselves in wide open spaces where they could sing loudly and amuse themselves. Most of the children enjoyed singing, both girls and boys could be heard up the mountainsides singing loudly. Sometimes they took something with them to occupy themselves, such as a

doll or a truck to play with. Other jobs could also easily be integrated with play. Fetching water could include playing for a while in the river, and banging home-made drums to scare birds away from crops was more like having fun making music rather than a chore. The ways in which children combine work with play has frequently been overlooked in the literature on children's work. Work of young children tends to be perceived negatively as a burden for the child, yet here it has been shown how children fuse the boundaries of work and pleasure, as well as counter the time and space boundaries imposed by adults.

Therefore, children are versatile and often extend the limited time which adults allow them for a particular activity by playing at the same time, making the most of snatched moments and being prepared to risk punishment if caught. Since time for play is short, children need to be inventive to enhance their possibilities for asserting their social autonomy. Children know to what extent they can stretch adult rules by prolonging play; they know how long they are expected to take to walk home from school or to take animals out to pasture or to respond to the bell rung for lessons. Yet sometimes they feel that it is worth breaking the adult-imposed rules for a particular game or social activity, and subsequently facing the consequences. Sometimes they find a suitable excuse to account for the extra time spent, such as having lost an animal for a while, or having helped someone else with a particular task. Such excuses can be useful strategies to avoid punishment if they feel it may be given. Therefore, despite children having limited command over their daily use of time, they develop ways to control the amount of time they assign to their social world of play by manipulating the spaces they use for work and school.

Conclusions

Children in Churquiales negotiate ways to assert control over their social world, especially their use of time and space which is largely restricted by adults. They find

strategies to prolong play, and combine it with both school and work in order to play when and where adults may be unaware of their actions. These findings contribute to a sparse literature which considers the overlap between different childhood activities of work, school and play. In rural Bolivia children's household duties of work provide them with an opportunity to acquire more spatial and temporal autonomy. Children's work allows them greater physical movement within their community, which is relatively unrestrained and where they experience quite a wide range of physical freedom. Their mobility is rarely motivated by leisure reasons and usually fills more practical specific purposes of work rather than pleasure.

Children's use of space in rural Bolivia is therefore not very restricted and enhances their physical independence from adults. However, the time available for play is more limited and this encourages children to negotiate ways to make their own time for their social world of recreation. Thus spatiality rather than temporality is the vital component of children's strategies to create their own play spaces. This chapter has shown that children do have boundaries set by adults that limit their possibilities for freedom, yet within these constraints they assert their autonomy and play an active role in their social worlds. Children may be physically dependent on adults, yet socially they can actively assert their independence in the everyday activities of their lives.

Although this chapter is based on the daily lives of children in one rural community in Bolivia, it should not be forgotten that most of the world's children live in the Majority World. In a global context, the majority of children work and go to school rather than have a childhood dedicated purely to play and school. Therefore the experiences of children integrating work, school and play as described in this chapter reflect the majority experiences of childhoods. Paradoxically, Majority World childhoods are considered to be deviant when measured against the ideal image of Minority World childhoods which are perceived as 'an idealised world of innocence

and joy' (James and Prout 1990: 4) where children are 'obliged to be happy' (Ennew 1986: 18). This image of carefree childhoods is perceived as the ideal norm to which all childhoods should aspire.

It has been argued that the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has introduced universal standards for children which were based on the middle-class model of Minority World childhood (Boyden 1990). Children who do not live up to such idealism are perceived as being deprived of childhood (Save the Children 1995). Majority World children should not be labelled as having abnormal childhoods, instead it should be recognised that Minority World children tend to experience more privileged, protected childhoods compared to most of the world's children. Therefore childhoods of the Majority World where children combine work, school and play should be the barometer against which the minority experiences of play are measured. This could lead to a rethinking of ethnocentric childhood policies such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which tries to impose a minority view of play onto the majority of children (Article 31). If policies for children are to offer effective support, they need to redress this imbalance of the perception of childhoods in the Minority and Majority World and be based on the realities of children's everyday lives.

¹ The community has a population of 351 which is spread amongst 58 households. It is 55km from the regional capital, which takes one hour in a private vehicle but between 3-5 hours on the local twice weekly bus. Most of the families own 2-3 hectares of land, which they mainly use to cultivate potatoes, maize and a selection of fruit and vegetables. They also tend to own a small amount of pigs, goats and chickens, as well as a few cows. Most of their agricultural and livestock production is for family consumption, but any excesses are sold in local and regional markets. The community has a small main square, where there are three small shops, a church, a medical post and the village school, around which there is a cluster of households, and the other households are more dispersed throughout the valley, which can be up to about an hour and a half's walk away from the village square.

² Quotations have been extracted from interviews and task-based methods carried out with children. When children have written their comments on worksheets or in diaries, the spelling has been left in the original to reflect the regional flavour of the Spanish language.

³ Minority World refers to the 'First World' and Majority World refers to the 'Third World'. This is because the Majority World has the greatest proportion of the world's population and the largest land mass compared to the smaller size of the Minority World. The use of these terms recognise that people who live in the Minority World tend to experience more privileged lifestyles (access to more resources, higher standards of living etc.) compared with the majority of the world's population. In addition, present terms used to differentiate the economically richer and poorer regions of the world are either incorrect (East-West; North-South) or have negative connotations for the poorer countries by emphasising what they lack (since they are developing, less developed, low-income, undeveloped, always striving to be what the First World already is). The terms Minority and Majority World are the only ones to shift the balance so that the richer countries are described in terms of what they lack (population and land mass) which causes the reader to reflect on the unequal relations between the two world areas.

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