

## Introduction: Independent Children and their Fields of Relatedness

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The idea of this Special Focus first came to us while we were carrying out fundamental research about children in two different countries and contexts in Southeast Asia. While Silvia Vignato was enquiring about children's rescue after the 2004 tsunami and the end of a 30-year long conflict in Aceh, Giuseppe Bolotta was in the slums of Bangkok, doing research with children connected to NGOs. In both cases, the young people we met were growing up outside their families, however these are defined, and raised in different institutions committed to leading children towards developing specific ideals of adulthood. For different reasons, these children had to acquire various degrees of independence from parental figures.

Owing to our common, albeit separated in time, first training as clinical psychologists, we were familiar with theories of child development stating that primary relationships, especially with the mother, play a fundamental role in children's and youth's development of a healthy "identity".<sup>1</sup> In their absence, for example according to ground-breaking psychiatrist Salman Akhtar (1984), a "syndrome of identity diffusion" might insurge, leading to a pathologic personality.

The children we met challenged much of our former knowledge. Firstly, they were raised within family structures, which could differ quite radically from the modern bourgeois ideal of the nuclear family postulated as universal by most Western psychology. Secondly, they showed that despite quite early separation from parents or other meaningful kin, and experiences of poverty and educational disadvantage, they were coping quite well – to the point of being able to make choices and behave independently. To our senses, their behaviour and talks testified of sharp social and emotional skills of

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1 In psychological literature, identity is traditionally defined as a unitary inner core of emotion and subjectivity that enables a person to have a coherent reflexive feeling and thinking of what she is and does (Erikson, 1968). Beyond common-sense considerations, theories specifically relating the child's development of a coherent sense of identity to primary relationships range from the positions of psychoanalysis (see for example child psychoanalyst Winnicott, 1964) to the theories of attachment first developed by Bowlby (1953).

adaptment to a variety of simultaneous environments of care, rather than a pathological personality and lack of a coherent identity.

This raised a range of questions. As anthropologists, we have learned to look into “the context” and value its variations and differences as key aspects of humanity. Was our seeing the children as doing well a blindness, a methodological limit? Did children only look as if they were well because our method of enquiry would not lead us beyond a certain understanding of a person’s inner configuration? Or was it a fact to be taken into consideration as relevant in itself, saying something on the kind of society that we were studying? It seemed that, when it came to children, anthropology as a discipline would not cross the line of social determinations in individual behaviour, in spite of the fundamental and very influential works in ethno-psychiatry and medical anthropology and ethnography of subjectivity (Ortner 2005, Quinn 2006, Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007, Moore 2007). How a young human being builds her own cultural and relational world throughout differences and hardships seemed too difficult, and extraneous, a task for anthropology and its methodology, as we knew it. Yet, to make sense of the children’s apparent, extreme or relative independence, we were confronted with a number of general issues connecting the subjective experience of childhood as a time of self-formation<sup>2</sup> to its social and political constructs. More noticeably, we met children who showed critical awareness about both aspects of the question. And these were indeed anthropological themes.

Certainly, our general questioning is common in social studies of children. The tension between seeing the child as an actor or as cultural and social product is the foundation of contemporary cross-disciplinary childhood studies and different schools are inclined to find diverging theoretical and methodological solutions (James and Prout 1997, Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998, Alanen 2000, Levine 2003, Lancy 2008, Montgomery 2009, Allerton 2016). Several anthropologists have carried out cross-cultural studies on mother-child attachment and child-rearing (Leiderman et al 1977, Davis-Floyd and Sargent 1997, Levine and Norman 2001, Levine and New 2008, Quinn and Mageo 2013). Nevertheless, here we are not discussing, or not primarily, the variations on parent-child relationships, nor are we questioning its fundamental importance. We are specifically looking into the contents of a child’s process of growth when it happens outside her kinsgroup. We wonder where the children gain their strength for agency –

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2 We speak of self-formation both in a general acceptance of a process of learning and in a technical, psychological acceptance of “formation of the self”. In the articles of this Special Focus, authors sometimes opt for the less engaging anthropological idiom of “subjectivity”. As neither concept implies an assumption on structures of personality and/or pathological conditions, we stay with “self”. For a thorough analysis of the notion, see Bolotta’s article in this Special Focus.

for example, what constitutes the equivalent of primary relationships for them, how varied cultural models of primary relationships allow for viable solutions, what is not and cannot be accepted. We use ethnography in order to explain, or clarify and describe, independent children's affective and critical landmarks in the cultural and social contexts that they live in.

Throughout the six contributions of this Special Focus, the authors analyse a field of relatedness where institutions like orphanages, religious NGOs or rehabilitation centres, and peer groups, all encompassed within more general religious and political ideologies, interact with diversely structured families in the children's care and thus contribute to shaping the children's self-formation. We underline how the children themselves are active participants in the construction and appropriation of this relational field and how the choices that they make are politically shaped. More precisely, we focus on the cultural background that defines what a mother and a father are, which forcedly implies analysing some kinship principles and more general political and religious ideologies of family and gender. We also underline how the children's field of relatedness is constantly informed – in the cases presented by the articles of this Special Focus – by a condition of marginality and poverty, which cannot be treated separately.

Emerging literature on children living outside families mainly focuses on the lives of children who grow up in institutions or with peers in the street (Panter-Brick 2000, Beazley 2003, Burr 2006, Davies 2008, Fujimura 2003, Young 2003, Vignato 2014, Bolotta 2014, Stodulka 2016). Here, we present a range of variations between such extreme possibilities: children and youths who are both at home and with their peers, partly in institutions and partly within families, formerly in institutions and now standing by themselves or, finally, totally enclosed by an institution.

Before discussing the points that emerge as fundamental through the comparison of the ethnographies, a methodological note is needed. Ethnographies were carried out by the authors at different conditions and with different assumptions. Fernanda Rifiotis and Luca Jourdan rely on narrations of childhood. While deeply engaged with their fieldwork, both authors resignify their referents' stories of childhood through a historical and anthropological analysis of their context. Jourdan, more precisely, describes children through the adults they have become, which is an interesting, although biased, methodological approach. Giuseppe Bolotta, Irene Pochetti and Silvia Vignato, on the contrary, knit together a picture of a long but specific period that they spent interacting with the children that they approached. While in this framework the children's voices take a far larger space, the uncertainty of doing fieldwork with children – that they grow up so fast and unexpectedly – lingers in their accounts. Relating of a return to a former intensive fieldwork, Thomas Stodulka resorts to both approaches in the longitudinal analysis of a young man's life trajectory. He spans from the

moment of the boy's aggregation to a peer group to his exit from street life, thus accounting for a large variety of unpredictable life turns.

### **The young and poor population of the South**

All the authors in this Special Focus present ethnographies of poor children in the Global South. This was not our original plan but it so happened that we received hardly any proposals concerning the West, or the North.

Partly, there is the evidence of children being more numerous in the South to the point that they easily constitute a visible, critical mass. As Jourdan underlines for the whole of Africa through his extreme case study in Uganda, due to high fertility rates and the consequent demographic expansion, one just has many more children in the African population than in countries with different demographics. To a lesser extent, the same can be said for Mexico, Indonesia, Brazil, and Thailand: their population's age pyramid has a very large base<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, although poverty is certainly much more generalised and extreme in Uganda, the other four countries concerned by this Special Focus have large poor populations too, particularly in urban areas as described by Bolotta in Thailand, Pochetti in Mexico, and Stodulka in Indonesia. This sums up to many marginalised children living in the Global South and partly explains the researchers' interest.

Partly, though, the configuration of this Special Focus is also influenced by a global construction of the suffering, needy and poor child as a "victim", someone belonging to a less fortunate part of the planet or of the society whose deprived childhood deserves attention – the media's, state's, NGOs', as well as the researcher's (Boyden 1997, Bornstein 2011, Fassin 2013). Poor children exist throughout Western countries but they are not the target of extensive global fundraising and are not constructed into an icon of world poverty, or to a far lesser extent. All the authors describe contexts where poverty is the historical outcome of war and natural disasters and/or economic and political violence against ethnic and social groups in the lower classes. In all the essays, the children constitute an important resource for impoverished parents, families, and communities: they must play the game accordingly. In Bolotta's article, the "slum children" are a typical target of humanitarian intervention and thus benefit the whole community. In Vignato's essay, the Aceh post-tsunami international aid configuration sets the scene of children's care through and around a more traditional system of choranic schools, which is thus funded. Pochetti's account of Tijuana underlines the construction of the needy child as a particular class of "in-

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<sup>3</sup> The proportion of children and young people (aged 0-24) is 44.98 in Mexico, 42.45 in Indonesia, 39.22 in Brasil, and 31.65 in Thailand (*Index mundi* 2017).

corrigible” drug addict in a border city, which is the icon of illegality and social degradation, and describes the institutions that NGOs and the State put up in order to help them and thus, the whole degraded local society. In Stodulka’s essay, the “street children” are an acknowledged problematic large group in the city of Yogyakarta and in Indonesia at large, originating state policies of control, rescue and repression, which they constantly relate to. In Rifiotis’ analysis of care leavers in Brazil, the society appropriates the neglected children through legalistic policies largely inspired by the transnational discourse of children’s rights.

As it has been repeatedly argued in other contexts (Gupta 2011, Roy and Crane 2015), in our cases too poverty is not a static context or an unfortunate economic condition but a dynamic process related to specific configurations of power. More important, it works as a socio-political category, which is produced, codified, and inscribed by different institutions and political agents into the lives of marginal children and their families. As such, it is a crucial object of analysis in all the articles of this Special Focus although specifically analysed only in some. We must then bear in mind that addressing this particular class of children, those who are relatively independent from their families, means considering policies of poverty governance such as social stigmatisation, victimisation and the fuelling of public fear, often matching more specific constructions such as the “ethnic poor”, the “immoral poor” or the “dangerous poor” (Farmer 2003, Fassin 2008). Depending on the institutions involved and the socio-political context, the poor children portrayed in this Special Focus will be seen as either “victims” to help or “social dangers” to subdue. They are an effective category in the governance of poverty.

### **Kinship structures and the normative family**

In studying children who grow up outside “their families” we are bound to be concerned with what their families look like and what to be inside or outside them can mean for both the children and their carers. Although this Special Focus is not a study of kinship principles, in its very definition it raises questions about kinship as the structuring ideology for families to be defined, symbolically inspired and practically enacted.

Vignato and Bolotta explicitly refer to matrifocal practices and some matrilineity as a relevant feature in the children’s self-formation as independent and autonomous subjects. Rather than anomalous formations, woman-centred households in the slums of Bangkok translate into the urban context rural, pre-migration matrilineal practices, which are usually described in relation to the ethnic groups that most slum dwellers originate from. The fact that children are more solidly related to a maternal line than to a pa-

ternal one is not to be necessarily read as the fathers' dramatic abandonment of their offspring and spouse but as an urban reconfiguration which adapts traditional structures to new environmental, economic, and relational constraints. Similarly, in Aceh, Vignato sketches a landscape where a poor mother who separates from some of her children is seen as a responsible person who takes care of her family through a number of strategies, not as a weak parent who cannot cope with the hardships of post-catastrophe times in the absence of a man. Both authors underline that the women who own or control their house, poor as it might be, and their children gain strength from a historical tradition of entitlement. Consequently, the children acknowledge their status as legitimate and not as a source of suffering in itself, although it goes alongside hardships.

It is particularly interesting to compare these two Southeast Asian essays to Jourdan's study of Ugandan families, where a strong patriliney is the base for an often-violent patriarchy. In Uganda, Jourdan relates, a formerly radical custom of polygyny seems to turn into a habit of "multipartnership" where men, disempowered by constant economic decline and increasing unemployment, rely on violence to re-affirm their gendered supremacy. Stepmother's violence against stepchildren, in turn, is read "as a form of rebellion against rigid social norms linked to patriarchy". The children's errance described in this context is dependent on their own mother's one. According to Jourdan, a lonely child who wanders in search of her mother while escaping a step-mother is a common sight in present day Uganda and is considered as an understandable figure of need.

In the two Southeast Asian contexts described by Bolotta and Vignato, by contrast, it appears that a child who looks after herself is not necessarily an abandoned or neglected child. Affective bonds with the parents, especially with the mother, can be reliable and positive in spite of distance or little direct care. In Indonesia, Stodulka too reports of a "street child" in Yogyakarta whose mental illness is finally handled by a cooperation among his biological family, his "peer-group family", and a religious leader.

The kinship and residential arrangements that are described in the essays by Bolotta, Vignato, and Stodulka are often read by both the state and aid agencies not as solutions to social and economic hardship but as the source of them. This, often discriminatory, judgment stems from a normative idea of nuclear family which nowadays permeates neo-liberal ideologies of middle class in these countries.<sup>4</sup> Although encrusted in different general and religious symbologies in Thailand and Indonesia, the ideal parenthood within

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4 Beyond Indonesia and Thailand, the strength of such ideology is overwhelming throughout the global South. Authors show its multiple roots in colonial discourses of civilisation, modernisation and development (Scheper-Hughes 1989, Bloch 2003, Herzfeld 2007).

the middle class nuclear family relies on a steady, constant presence of both mother and father in the child's everyday life, and fosters an individualised care. That the children spend comparatively more time with peers than parents, are raised by many caregivers, or are left to their own devices is then publicly viewed as a pathogenic and criminogenous deviation or, at least, as a great source of suffering.

For the same reasons, in the eyes of the state and development organisations, communal childcare seems a backward, rural and irresponsible habitus that steps in when the parents (particularly, the mother) cannot assume their role. Communal childcare, on the contrary, as described in the slums of Bangkok by Bolotta, is ascribed as much to residential arrangements as to parental, religiously informed, ethno-theories of strengthening the child through training her not to be too dependent on her mother. Vignato also relates about communal care of infants as she underlines that babies and infants are never left to the institutions, as "someone" always take care of them. Again, there is an ideology of childhood and child raising behind this, because children are felt as a community wealth. Taking a foster child, as is largely described in former literature on kinship, fosterage, and adoption too (Goody and Tambiah 1973, Goody 1982, Carsten 1991, 2004, Schrauwers 1999), is a common practice in Southeast Asia that does not necessarily imply adoption as the origin of a new filiation but as an enlargement and empowerment of the residential group, for good and for bad. Communal care also surfaces in Jourdan's ethnography where stray children are looked after by unknown women and neglected children by their half-siblings' mothers, as in the case of little Moses.

These considerations lead us to identify a field of relatedness, often organised across space and time, which works as a structuring affective and social environment through various notions and practices of kinship and childcare. This is not to imply that children do not need or value their parents. On the contrary, they are constantly at work to construct and reconstruct parents and kins with the affective, protective and often dominating characters they have at hand. In this self-care work, the children situate themselves actively within political agendas.

### **Multiple parental figures: attachment and deliverance**

Within the nuclear family ideology, variations on the father's and mother's ideal role are informed by a model of shared responsibility even in case of the parental couple's separation, as legal conceptions of divorce demonstrate. In the essays of this Special Focus, parents are an intermittent presence in the children's life. This is a core issue: although, as we have seen, the children do receive a certain amount of care, and although they might live in a social

environment where single parenthood, child transfers and communal care are the rule and not the exception, this situation does not reverberate in children's self-formation in neutral ways. Some of the children whose lives are presented in this Special Focus deploy a number of strategies to preserve their emotional bonds with their (differently configured) families. Others turn to different people and ideals. In the fields of relatedness inhabited by the children, indeed, caregivers other than parents might become additional figures of attachment and play an important role in determining the children's process of self-formation. Mostly, the children's institutionalisation and the multiplicity of their care environments enhance their ability to create and multiply, in both space and time, fictive kinship bonds with various "fathers", "mothers", "brothers", and "sisters".

Rifiotis tackles an aspect of this question directly: how do institutional care leavers conceive of their "faulty" parents, particularly their mothers? How do they elaborate an image of motherhood, which they can relate to? In her essay, she emphasises how a general well-grounded idea in Brazil, that "the mother is always the mother" – i.e. that the biological link needs to be acknowledged – is actively and consciously reworked when the young women leave childcare institutions and face independent choices. Her respondents call this active process of re-fabricating a viable figure of mother, both in an affective and in a social understanding, "a turning point in the game of kinship relations". They underline that biology is meaningful but needs reinforcement by other factors, money and material care being significant. Rifiotis highlights the inner struggle between dominant ideas of motherhood and alternative ones, and acknowledges that fathers are less involved in the reflexion about blood. One of her respondents looks for elective stepmothers, another one resignifies her stepfather to make it possible for her to be at a safe but not excessive distance from her mother. A third one moves away from her foster parents, who grant her money and support, to be able to incorporate both filiations. Rifiotis suggests that "affection" and "care" are decisive in her respondents' emotional and moral re-conceptualisations of proper parenthood. Non-biological caregivers who provide "affection" and "care" can substitute biological parents in daughters' subjective experience. Thus, they can come to be considered as if they have always been the "real parents". Yet, blood relationships remain ghostly presences in these by now adult womens' memories of childhood and the self.

Vignato describes the ambivalent figure of the strategic mother, who tries to preserve her children through separation, noticeably at remarriage. Although her children feel "dumped", they also know that this does not mean that they are abandoned by a "motherly" home and group. If they are mother's orphans, children's process of making sense of their condition of independence becomes more difficult and painful, as we can see in the ethnographic accounts: given the matrifocal characterisation of family in

contemporary Aceh, the mother's death often goes alongside a more general disrupture of the whole kins' network. Moreover, as the institutions are conceived as "fatherly" places where children grow away from their "mothers", or their cajoled infancy, they do not provide a motherly, primary care for mothers' orphans.

A remarkable role can be played in the process of reworking parental figures by the carers whom the children meet and decide to identify with in institutions, as well as within peer-groups. Authors relate the role played by religious or semi-religious agents, mostly connected to religious rescue structures, although, not necessarily (we see in Stodulka's essay the important role played by an ordinary Islamic teacher in Yogyakarta). In Bolotta's article, Father Nicola, the Catholic priest in the slums of Bangkok, incarnates both an alternative ideology of fatherhood, rooted in a Christian egalitarian ideal, and the figure of a reliable carer as the leader of his NGO. The children conflate the two roles and consider him as a father, thus enacting a kind of spiritual kinship. This allows them to contrast the ethnic stigma that they, as urban poor in Bangkok, are exposed to within mainstream, state-supported royal Buddhism. Jesús, in Pochetti's account, is a less clearly defined religious leader, insofar as he derives his authority from the fact that he was, himself, an addicted child like his wards. The rehabilitation centre that he runs in Tijuana is not overtly religious but its configuration, inspired by the Alcoholic Anonymous (AA), considers God as a fundamental power in the rehabilitation process itself. Because "the example", as Pochetti shows, is a strategy of cure which promotes identification with the sober ones, Jesús is the designated figure of the one who has grown so much in the detox to be able to promote it.

There are of course deep differences between the modes of attachment that the two men provide the children with. While Nicola is inspired by an idea of fatherly God and by a theological-political construction of the ethnic poor's children as "God's beloved sons", Jesús, as Pochetti brilliantly details, presents himself as a sort of outgrown peer. Nevertheless, he is there for whole families of "incorrigible" children (one of the home's guests is brought there because his uncles had already been in the institution) and thus provides a steady figure of identification beyond the walls of the shelter. Both men allow the children to play with a fatherly model, which is also a political model of alternative masculinity. Nicola hugs poor children, generally behaving in a way that challenges Thai proper hierarchies of class, as well as mainstream, Thai, Buddhist ideals of fatherhood. Jesús' commitment and sobriety provides an alternative, although extreme, example of masculinity in a violent environment such as Tijuana. The children can internalise such models and use them to relate in new, original ways to their families and to the wider society, as both authors detail.

## **Institutions, deviance and the politics of childcare**

Institutions play an important role in the articles of this Special Focus. With the exception of the Ugandan case, and to various extents, all the children presented in the essays are identified by local and international, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders as in need of protection and/or correction. Partly, of course, this happens because children are intrinsically needy; but partly, too, because the children we describe here constitute a conceptual challenge and a practical denial of the global notion that the proper place for the “healthy and happy child” is in the nuclear family. Institutionalisation constitutes an important response to this challenge. In the essays, we see different institutions playing a major role in the independent children’s lives and survival: state-run structures of childcare (Rifiotis), orphanages and Islamic residential schools (Vignato), Catholic NGOs (Bollotta), international secular NGOs (Stodulka), and rehabilitation centres (Pochetti).

Ideologies of family and practices of childcare, as well as interpretations of poverty, children’s marginality, and education, vary considerably in the institutions that we consider here. Sometimes they match the families’, the local communities’ and the state’s conceptualisations of the same subjects and sometimes they diverge from them or are overtly against them. This plurality of moral constructions necessarily has a political dimension as it relates to the “futuraity of childhood” (Jenks 1996, p.13) and to the conflicting cultural politics aimed at shaping children as responsible, future members of a desired society (Goddard et al 2005).

In Vignato’s and Pochetti’s essays, there is a certain convergence between the kind of work that the childcare institutions do and local society’s moral interpretation of children. Vignato shows how, in the case of post-tsunami and post-conflict Aceh, the category of “orphan” becomes a moral filter through which Acehnese society thinks and reworks both childhood at large and its own historical identity. The institutions that the author describes are an expression of this moral construction. This takes the shape of a delegated “fatherly” function whose task is to form children in reference to a pious Muslim ideal, within a matrilocal society where fatherless children are all but an exception. It is relevant to underline, as Vignato does, that the institutional categorisation of children as father orphans (*yatim*), despite its putative meaning, coexists with a range of different situations as most of the children have persistent affective ties with their motherly kinsgroup and sometimes also have a living father. It is well known in anthropology that institutional categorisations neglect children’s individual, class, and ethnic differences (Glaser 1997, Goodman 2000, Ennew and Swart-Kruger 2003). Unlike in other contexts, though, in Aceh being categorised as a father orphan can also bring forward social advantages for both children

and their mothers or carers.

In Pochetti's article, we see rehabilitation centres, both state-run and NGO-based, reproducing a national and international rhetoric historically portraying the Mexican border city of Tijuana as the epitome of drugs dealing, violence and criminality. The condition of poor children, rather than being analysed as the outcome of deep socio-economic inequalities, is depoliticised and pathologised by both state and non-state actors as the result of youth's widespread drug abuse. Once placed in rehab centres, Tijuana's street children "become" drug addicts – regardless of their actual use of illicit substances. Pochetti underlines that in her case study, the apparatus deployed is what Goffman calls a "total institution" (Goffman, 1961). Secured by peer-to-peer reciprocal control, the internees' self-transformation is promoted through emotional narratives of past damnation in drugs abuse and present liberation in abstinence. Such approach is not a state-versus-society condition: public authorities often send children to rehab, so Pochetti reports, with their parents' full approval. The public representation of poverty and the institutional responses to it have been internalised by the children's families, to the point that the whole societal approach to street children is grounded on the lexicon of drugs.

Institutions, however, can also challenge both national and international dominant ideologies and policies on proper childcare. The Catholic NGO described by Bolotta in the slums of Bangkok provides the slum children with an alternative venue of socialisation and a strikingly different interpretation of their condition as poor ethnic subjects with respect to the stigmatising discourse of the Thai state. As Bolotta highlights, at the Saint Joseph Centre, children are exposed to a religiously shaped model of childcare that allows them to walk on new, subversive pathways of self-formation, against hegemonic Thai socio-political hierarchies.

In all the cases mentioned so far, children are not passive spectators but actively engage with the childcare discourses and practices that they encounter within institutions. They elaborate on them and use them to grow up, as we have seen in their efforts of kinning.

### **Peer groups: Stigma, integration, and strength**

Anthropological scholarship on friendship and peer cultures, in and outside institutional contexts, has been gaining momentum as it points to a fundamental dimension of children's and youth's social worlds (Corsaro 1992, James 1995, Adler and Adler 1998, Hirshfeld 2002, Maynard and Tovote 2010). For children who grow up outside their families, however, peer groups assume an importance which goes beyond the usual. Several authors contributing to this Special Focus tackle the subject.

Stodulka's article is entirely dedicated to peer groups for the street children of Yogyakarta. In his rich ethnography, he describes the initiation rituals, values, and norms that regulate membership in the homeless children's and young people's "street-related community". While exposure to mockery and physical violence works as a necessary liminal condition for newcomers to be accepted as part of the group, once their membership is acknowledged, children establish family-like affective bonds with their peers, within a community of solidarity that becomes the members' main socio-emotional horizon. In the slums of Bangkok, too, as Bolotta's article shows, friendship and peer-to-peer relationships assume a remarkable importance.

In both cases, peer-to-peer relationships are publicly discriminated against and become object of social stigma. The two authors underscore two different, yet complementary, dimensions of the process. Bolotta shows how, besides the mainstream global representation of street children as wild and uncultivated subjects, peer-to-peer relationships are a particular target of stigma and institutional correction as they embody a political threat to the primary attachment children are expected to form with parents, conceived in Thailand as politicised moral symbols of religious and state authority. Stodulka, in turn, illustrates that the street-related community of peers protects children from the very stigma that they are exposed to as street-children, and provides them with "emotional rewards" through group solidarity and a unifying ethos.

While Stodulka and Bolotta examine peer groups in informal contexts, Pochetti and Vignato analyse how these relationships emerge in the context of institutions. Peers and parity are officially at the base of the rehabilitation centre described by Pochetti. Once in the rehab, previous identity differences are all encompassed by the common actual status of drugs addict. What makes the difference is rather the advancement one reaches towards a sober condition of abstinence construed as liberation from the "hell" of a past, guilty and miserable self. Newcomers are entrusted with peers who have already achieved emancipation from drugs and expected to represent positive examples. At times, peers will provide emotional support; at others, they will rigidly confine one's individual expression to the institutional totalising pedagogy, which appears as the ultimate super-structure in control of peer-to-peer interactions. A group of peers does not necessarily mean a group of equals. Along the same lines, Vignato emphasises how, within charities for orphans and Islamic residential schools (*pesantren*) in Aceh, a system based on age organises relationships between younger and older children. This draws on an ideology of brotherhood/sisterhood, older/younger siblings (*kakak-adik*) which is acknowledged throughout the Indonesian *pesantren* system (Lukens-Bull 2001).

It is important to underline that in all the essays, peer groups are not substitutive of family ties and in many cases run parallel to all kinds of kinship

configurations. Children's relationship with their (many) "mothers" and "fathers", however these figures are conceptually and subjectively handled, remain a core reference when the children come to make sense of their self.

### **Children's multiple fields of relatedness**

It is important to wrap up what has so far been said in one last consideration. All the societies that have been examined in this Special Focus have agreed to extend the legal and cultural period of their children's childhood according to a same, global model of scholarised minor who does not have to substantially provide for herself. The children who do not fit the model, for all the reasons that we have mentioned in this introduction and that will be further detailed in the essays, grow up out of their legally defined childhood and at the margin of this central societal and productive model. The process takes years and shapes them deeply.

We have tried to show how they set up and elaborate a field of relatedness where typical figures of attachments like a parent or a close kin are actively reworked and often largely replaced by other characters. Whom they chose depends as much on local cultural and historical configurations as on state-controlled policies and interactions with other carers, such as religious residences or NGOs. This suggests that the affective ties that the children rely upon in the elaboration of their selves are not only vectors of psychological development but also micro-political formations embedded in inter-subjective and bodily patterns of interaction.

All the authors, with more or less explicit emphasis, point to the kind of subjectivity that the children develop while making sense of themselves through their own affective and practical strategies. Their growth is constantly including diverging and sometimes, incompatible positionments. A God's beloved child plays an adult role when talking back and up to his elders. A young internee in a Mexican rehab centre takes the program as a path towards a better use of drugs. A mother's orphan shuns the importance of a mother's home. Their bodies are cared for in self-organised ways, which sometimes include violence or harshness and hunger while some other times call for a suspension of child-like expectancies such as hugs, treats and other forms of indulgence – not a renounce, though.

Stodulka relates of a street child who develops a psychiatric affliction, but he also shows that the young man's efforts to see himself as his mother's son, his peers' unjudged brother and as a pious Muslim, as well as a sick person, help him cope with his difficult situation. What Bolotta calls a hybrid self, the lively subjectivity that the children develop while growing up far from their families is as much made of imagined continuities as of sharp criticism before the clashing requests of the world.

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