



The irony of immaturity: K'iche' children as mediators and buffers in adult social interactions

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Abstract

In Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan adults constantly face the threat of resentment from other members of their community. Evading others' resentment requires concealing one's possessions, a feat that in turn entails the immoral act of speaking untruths. Children, however, can utter falsehoods that adults cannot because adults do not see children as principals of harmful words. It is argued in this article, therefore, that K'iche' children in Santa Catarina are in the ironic situation of having influence on the adult social world precisely because adults do not view children as influential. The article shows how children's very status as supposedly unimportant individuals gives them the pragmatic power to mediate malicious feelings between adults via their words and actions.

Keywords

deception, immaturity, mediation, resentment, social roles

One morning during my stay among the K'iche' Maya in Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan de Nueva, Guatemala, I took a walk down into the valley with my research assistant Pablo.¹ We stopped outside the gate of an isolated house. 'Helloooo!' Pablo called.² After some minutes, a small boy appeared at the door. 'Where is Wel's house?' Pablo asked. The boy shrugged, 'I don't know.' We were almost out of sight of the house when Pablo and I heard a voice calling, 'Pablo!' Looking back, lo and behold, there was Wel himself! Later as we walked away, Pablo turned to me. 'Did you see that?' he asked. 'That kid said he didn't know where Wel's house was, but that was Wel's house!'

The above story may be familiar to anybody who has traveled through Mesoamerica. In rural towns children seem to be everywhere – playing outside, greeting visitors, running errands, doing chores. Many studies of childhood in Latin America focus on these

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economic activities, stressing children's familial roles as laborers (Green, 1998: 32; Hecht, 2002: 243). Yet, the child at Wel's house was not only, if at all, helping to meet the economic needs of adults. His function when answering the door was not to earn money, produce food, or ease his parents' labors, but to conceal his parents' activities.

In Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan de Nueva adults often try to avoid social interactions. My informants stressed that this inclination stems from their fear that such interactions might cause resentment, and consequently harm to themselves or others (see also Dundes, 1992; Eves, 2000). For the most part, people are said to resent others when they are at a disadvantage with respect to wealth, opportunities, happiness, or reputation. Consequently, my informants needed to avoid people outside of their household if they were to avoid resentment. When they did have to interact, minimizing the malicious feelings of others required deception. The K'iche' call such deception *kub'an tzij* [making words]. But, 'making words', said all of my informants, is 'bad'.

Understanding how adults in Santa Catarina live their lives while avoiding as much as possible others' resentment requires an analysis of Santa Catarina children. Children can travel where adults cannot because adults would feel resentful, seeing each other as invading their privacy. Children can also say things that adults cannot, because adults generally do not view children as purposefully harming adults with their speech. Therefore, I argue in this article that K'iche' children in Santa Catarina are in the ironic situation of having influence on the adult social world precisely because adults do not view children as influential.

Childhood and immaturity

Social and cultural scholars of childhood have asserted that children are not simply individuals whom adults socialize, but are agents who influence their own learning (e.g. Goodwin, 1990; James and Prout, 1990).³ This emphasis on children's agency is an attempt to counter the supposedly adult-centric focus of many of the social sciences. Critics have asserted that many social scientists portray adults as the principal actors in social life and cast children either as irrelevant, or as relevant only insofar as they are going to become adults (Hirschfeld, 2002; Stephens, 1995; Toren, 1993). In contrast, recent work convincingly shows that as soldiers, language brokers, consumers and laborers, children often influence not only their destiny, but also the trajectory of globalization, language shifts, economic development and wars (Cheney, 2007; Kulick, 1992; Leinaweaver, 2008; Porter, 1996).

At the same time, however, this work has largely ignored the fact that all children are developmentally different than adults. Moreover, of necessity adults perceive children to be developmentally immature. Furthermore, adult perceptions of children's developmental abilities presumably affect their interpretation of children's actions. Few scholars, however, have examined the social implications of adults' necessary perception of children as developmentally immature and culturally incompetent.

I argue here that in Santa Catarina, adult perceptions of children as immature or, in Goffman's (1959: 152) words, 'non-persons', give children the social ability to influence relations in a way that adults cannot (see also Hotchkiss, 1967). Goffman asserted that some individuals in society, such as servants and children, are allowed to witness events

because no one cares if they are around. Similarly, many studies hint that children around the world accomplish social acts specifically because their immaturity exempts them from social norms (Haviland, 1977: 189; Lancy, 1996: 158; Mead, 2001 [1930]: 40). In Kano, for example, children 'enjoy a freedom that no other group in the society commands – the right to wander in and out of people's houses' (Schildkrout, 1978: 124). Moreover, many of these studies take place among Maya or Mesoamerican groups, populations where children have been studied relatively intensely.⁴ For instance, Gaskins and Lucy (1987) and Hotchkiss (1967) argue that children in Mexico carry messages, run errands and spy on social events, providing eyes and ears to women who infrequently leave the house. Reynolds (2008: 83) asserts that beliefs about childhood in a Kaqchikel Maya-speaking town 'endow young children with a special status, one that absolves them of full responsibility for their actions, even in instances when their actions could be construed as disrespectful'. Watson-Gegeo (2001) refers specifically to the act of deception, noting that adults do not perceive children to be malicious deceivers in the same way as adults.

The question remains, however, how does children's perceived immaturity and lack of social relevance influence social life as a whole? I suggest that Santa Catarina children's age and developmental stage of life give them a unique social position comparable in influence and importance to other socially distinguishable groups in society such as men and women, elders and youth, political leaders and farmers. Specifically, children's presumed lack of ability to harm or 'make words' allows children to buffer adult-adult resentment. This intervention is central to Santa Catarina adults' abilities to go about their lives.

Fieldwork

Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan de Nueva is a 2250 person K'iche' Maya-speaking rural town located an hour's drive away from Quetzaltenango, the second biggest city in Guatemala. The town is situated just off the main road running from Quetzaltenango to Guatemala City (Adams and Hawkins, 2005: 40).⁵ The town contains one school, a central marketplace, which is relatively empty except on market days, and a small park with a make-shift playground. All homes are complexes of buildings separated by tall fences. There are no intervening yards or public spaces. A complex generally includes a cookhouse, a bathing area, a courtyard and several residences. Children spend much of their time playing in single and multi-gender groups either in the courtyard or on the street. Play on the street tends more toward single-gender groups. In Guatemala as a whole children under 14 years are 38.7 percent of the population. I suspect that in indigenous communities such as Santa Catarina this figure may be larger (CIA, 2010).

All families own some farmland, but many men also work as day laborers on farms located on the coast. Others are teachers, truck drivers, vendors, or weavers. Families keep dogs and lock their doors at night to deter the only real crime of concern, theft.

Like many ethnographic studies, while I was in the field my project changed significantly from what I had envisioned. Therefore, the data I present here were collected through methods oriented toward a different project. I originally intended to study lying among children and adults. In pursuit of such a goal, my research consisted of a mixture of participant observation, recordings of natural conversations and formal interviews.

These methods allowed me to circumvent the inherent difficulties involved in overhearing lies in everyday conversation during my two months in the field.

In the formal interviews conducted in K'iche', I presented adults and children with stories, which I created along with a research assistant, about various types, reasons and methods of lying. I then asked for people's opinions about the stories, the ages of individuals in them, and how children learn to speak in such a manner. Although the stories were the primary focus of the interviews, I allowed interviewees to take the conversation in any direction they wished. For example, all of my questions about lying, or rather the similar but not completely isomorphic Santa Catarina concept of 'making words', led my informants to discuss resentment.

I also participated in everyday life, conversed with children and adults and played with children. I use the term 'informal conversations' to refer to unrecorded casual conversations from which I gained information. My conversations and observations revealed that children often acted as intermediaries between adults. Consequently, my methods led me to transform the project into a study of the ideologies that undergird the ways children interact with adults to mitigate resentment. Due to the original design of the project, 'making words' is the pivot around which these issues turn in this article.

Difficulties specific to the field site forced me to base my data on interactions with a limited number of people: my host family, members of their extended family who lived next door and the family of one of my research assistants. As Shoaps (2004: 155–67) has argued based on her research among Sakapultek speakers, life in rural Guatemala is very private making it difficult to interact with people outside of one's family. Around half of the adults in my sample were teachers. Therefore, they and their children were better educated than the majority of the population. Although my investigation is clearly a case study and is subject to the limitations of one, it suggests intriguing hypotheses about the role children play in adult social lives in Santa Catarina.

Ideologies of children and their speech

Children as harmless

In Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan, no coming-of-age ceremonies formally mark the transition from childhood to adulthood. From observations of everyday conversation and records of these observations in my fieldnotes, however, it is clear that in natural discourse the Santa Catarinans applied the word *ak'al* [child], to individuals between the ages of 4 and 13. Dona, a 13-year-old, was sometimes referred to as an *ak'al*, and at other times referred to as a *q'opoj ali* [young woman].

Individuals in this age group were distinct from adults not only in name but also in behavior. Specifically, *ak'al* played. All the children that I observed between the ages of 4 and 13 played every day. Moreover, when I asked about what made children different than adults, many Santa Catarina adults noted play as a distinguishing feature of childhood. As one woman said when asked why she claimed that children do not gossip, '*It is their life, the games, playing . . . all they feel like doing is play.*' As becomes clear later in the article, this concept of children as individuals who are oriented toward play helps to index them as individuals who do not resent adults.

Specifically, children's status as people who play is relevant to their position as socially immature and therefore socially unimportant members of society. When I asked informants if children engage in actions that the informants had previously evaluated as bad or wrong, they would answer either 'no' or 'yes', with the proviso that child sins revolve around games and play and/or are directed at other children. As one informant said during an interview, children might 'make words', but they only do so '*about games, about toys*'. Another said that children do 'make words', but '*only about the games, only with the games*'. Their responses imply that they did not see children's acts of 'making words' as important in the world outside of play. In a society where, as I show, speech is very dangerous, children's supposed habit of lying only to other children and within the world of play marks their speech as irrelevant to the concerns of adults.

Adults' assumption that children lack malicious feelings toward adults reflects adults' view that children ignore the adult world. All the adults with whom I conversed both formally and informally agreed that children do not resent adults. For example, one woman argued that only some children feel resentment, such as '*when [a child] has new shoes . . . [and] when someone has a new [shirt]*'. One man, in fact, said that '*children do not resent others*' at all. He later qualified his remark to state that children do resent other children, just not adults. As he argued, while an adult might feel resentful of him because he has a girlfriend, a child would be '*happy when I am with [my girlfriend], because I like [her]*'. These responses imply that Santa Catarina adults perceive children as too socially immature to have malicious feelings, and consequently malicious intentions, toward adults.

Innocent speech

These ideologies of childhood are consistent with the apparent harmlessness that Santa Catarina children's speech carries in the eyes of adults. Many adults believed that children do not 'make words', an act that, as the next section shows, is a common method of harming someone whom individuals resent. One adult argued that children '*say the truth*'. Another woman asserted that '*the children, they don't really make words . . . they always say the truth*'. Similarly, her husband said, '*the children, the small ones always . . . say really what they do. . . . Generally the children say the truth.*' These statements, drawn from interviews with adults, seem to suggest that adults view children as truthful.

These statements, however, appear inconsistent with how the adults actually reacted to children's actions. I repeatedly observed children saying what I considered to be lies, as well as both children and adults accusing other children of 'making words'. For example, the 11-year-old sister in my host family once told me it was my turn to take a bath. Her mother interrupted, saying that the girl was 'making words' and the bath house was occupied. From this example one can see that adults can evaluate children's speech in a specific context as deceptive, although not necessarily as harmful.

Moreover, this idea that children do not 'make words' is consistent neither across speech contexts nor across individuals. In all of my interviews and informal conversations with my host mother, she insisted that children do not 'make words'. Her sister-in-law, however, in response to interview questions, insisted that children do 'make words'. One of my research assistants had conflicting opinions, explaining one day that children do not 'make words', and on the next day stating that they did.

I assert that these seemingly inconsistent responses resulted not from contradictory ideologies, but from differing interpretations of my questions. Briggs (1986) has argued that interpreting interviews requires analyzing how informants perceive the interview setting and the question being asked. In the case of this research, individuals carried multiple definitions of 'making words'. An analysis of individuals' responses in different speech contexts suggests that despite these seemingly diverse responses all informants held the ideology that children do not 'make words' about anything relevant to, and malicious within, the adult world. Specifically, children were not seen as principals or authors of words that are harmful to adults. Using Goffman's (1981) terminology, not just one but three people can produce an utterance: the principal, author and animator. The principal is the person whose social interest is vested in the utterance, the author is the person who literally writes/creates the text and the animator is the person who speaks.

Adults who argued that children do 'make words' seemed to understand the term to mean that animators are capable of 'making words', meaning that 'making words' refers to any false statements, regardless of the speaker's intentions or knowledge of the accuracy of the utterance. This definition of 'making words' is consistent with the way scholars understand speech among Mayan groups as a focus on the words themselves as opposed to the speaker's intention to deceive (Shoaps, 2007; Warren, 1995). These adults were likely using this definition given the way they responded to previous questions in the interview.

For example, in the beginning of all my formal interviews I presented the following story to adults and asked for their opinions:

Maria is very mad at Manuela because Manuela stole Maria's boyfriend. So Maria said to another woman named Catalina that Manuela is seeing two boys, but this is not true. Maria said it like that. Then, Catalina, the other woman, talked to her sibling. Catalina told her that Manuela is seeing two boys. Catalina said it like that.

All of the individuals who later in the interview said that children 'make words' also said that that Catalina from the story above 'made words' when she passed on false information. As one person argued, '*whether she knows it is true or not true, she said a made word*'. Their responses indicate that 'made words', unlike 'lie' in English, refers to any false statements. Consequently, when adults stated that children 'make words', they were most likely suggesting not that children lie but that they make mistakes, errors in speech and jokes for a variety of reasons that do not necessarily include deception or harm.

A contrasting definition of 'making words' held by the other half of my informants supports this hypothesis that adults who say that children 'make words' are not necessarily suggesting that children lie with the purpose of harming or deceiving. Some individuals did define 'making words' as uttering false statements with the intention to either deceive or harm. But, these individuals also argued that when Catalina from the story presented above passed on false information she did not make words. Specifically, they argued that Catalina actually told the truth when she passed on words, since she did not purposefully lie. As Jose said:

What is important is that, like that it was told to me. So, I say what was told to me. So, I am like the third person. And I continue to say, the truth [*verdad*], the truth, [*usaqil tzij*]. Even though what the other person says is a lie.

In this statement, we can see that Jose stresses the point that the speaker, as the third person, was not the author of the words and therefore was innocent of wrongdoing. Animators, according to this definition of ‘making words’, cannot lie.

All of these individuals who argued that animators cannot lie also said that children do not ‘make words’. One might argue, therefore, that their statements that children do not ‘make words’ should be interpreted as assertions that children do not author ‘made words’. However, I frequently overheard these adults evaluating false statements children made in just as ‘made words’. Children were authors of these statements, but they did not intend to harm or deceive.

Therefore, I interpret these adults’ assertions that children do not ‘make words’ as beliefs that children do not try to deceive or harm adults with their speech. This concept of ‘making words’ corresponds roughly, although not completely, with the English concept of ‘lie’ (see Coleman and Kay, 1981). My informants did not contradict each other, so long as one interprets statements that children do ‘make words’ as indicating that children joke and lie about other children, but do not purposefully slander adults. Similarly, in the Solomon Islands, ‘adults say that children may report falsely because they mishear, misjudge, misinterpret, or are misled . . . and they may lie to protect themselves . . . [but] adults do not believe that children maliciously lie’ (Watson-Gegeo, 2001: 143). This ideology of childhood behavior that stems from adult beliefs that children are immature and irrelevant to adult social life actually, and ironically, results in making children into essential members of adult social circles.

The danger of resentment

Specifically, the ideology that children do not purposefully harm adults makes child–adult relations supposedly immune from a danger that lurks in most adult interactions in Santa Catarina: resentment. I use the English word ‘resentment’ to gloss a related complex of K’iche’ terms that people used, often within the same sentence and interchangeably, to explain a person’s reasons for harming another. Although an in-depth analysis of these terms is beyond the scope of this article, their use reveals a general preoccupation with the danger of resentment.

Resentment

Informants made clear to me in formal and informal interviews that to be a Santa Catarina adult is to face in any adult interaction the danger of others resenting one’s possessions, good fortune, social knowledge and opportunities. This view is well illustrated by an incident my host mother, Angela, reported to me during a casual conversation. Angela was fighting with her younger sister, Magdalena. ‘Why?’ I asked. Well, Angela said, Magdalena was ‘making words’ about Angela, slandering her. Again I asked, ‘why?’ Resentment’, Angela responded. When I asked why for the third time,

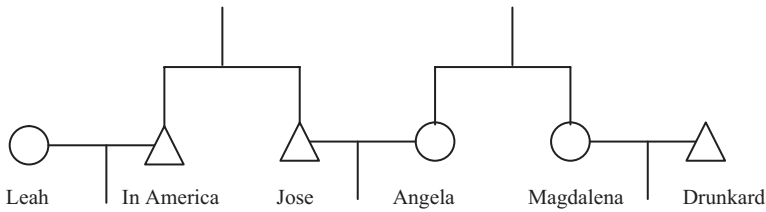


Figure 1. Kinship diagram

Angela said that one night Magdalena's husband got drunk and harassed Angela's sister-in-law, Leah, at Leah's house.

Pressed further, Angela explained that Leah, whose husband was in America and lived next door to Angela, sent for Angela's husband Jose to help her extract the drunkard. 'So what?' I asked. Well, Angela continued, she herself went to Leah's house with Jose and saw the drunken husband (see Figure 1). As a result, she said, Magdalena resents her.

When I asked about resentment in formal and informal interviews, informants stressed inequality as its source. As one argued,

Someone . . . feels resentment when . . . he or she doesn't have a partner or doesn't have things or doesn't have an opportunity so, he or she causes harm to another person. So, he or she resents it if someone has things or food, or a wife, or two boyfriends so he or she resents it.

In this individual's words, the lack of material possessions, a spouse, or opportunities causes one to resent another. Other adults supported this position. One told me, when I was asking about why people resent others, that people resented him for having a job that often allowed him to leave the village. A third said, '*If I do well they resent me*'. Even simply showing happiness, such as walking with one's wife and children to church, my research assistant told me during a discussion, can cause resentment. The positions these individuals took suggest that, to them, the appearance of any sort of inequality between two people causes resentment.

At the same time, however, inequality in and of itself is not sufficient to produce resentment in Santa Catarina. Clearly, children are not suspected of resenting adults because the adult has a wife and the child does not. The child, after all, is not supposed to have, or want, a wife. One can extrapolate that, similarly, Magdalena should not and would not resent Leah's children for witnessing her shame. Hence, when I asked Angela if Magdalena resented either Leah's children or Jose, who also witnessed the incident described earlier, Angela said no. In this way, resentment in Santa Catarina, as scholars have argued for the emotion of envy, operates between people of supposedly equal rank (Alicke and Zell, 2008; Leach, 2008). Leah's children and Magdalena were not peers, and therefore were not competing with each other for goods, happiness, or status.

Finally, Magdalena's resentment of Angela seems to have stemmed not only from inequality or even from Angela's knowledge of Magdalena's shame, but from Angela witnessing her shame. Magdalena must suspect that, even had Angela stayed at home,

Angela would have heard about the incident. Her husband and sister-in-law were both involved. Resentment, therefore, seems to result not from inequality itself, but from situations in which people are forced to openly admit that someone else knows of their shame or that they know of another's prosperity.

Avoiding resentment

People perceived resentment as a very potent and ever present danger. Every time I asked why an individual would purposefully harm another, the answer would be because of resentment. When I asked, during formal interviews, about why a woman slandered someone, people told me that the first woman resented the second. When another woman told me that people used to say that she stole children and I asked why, she responded that they resented her. When a man told me about a child who lied and said that her sister had stolen money, and I asked why, the man said that the child resented her sister for eating an orange. In fact, I was astonished by the consistency of responses across individuals and across contexts. Similarly, scholars studying different Maya villages have noted the prevalence in those villages of a fear of envy (Shoaps, 2004; Warren, 1995). My informants' responses do not demonstrate that resentment is actually the reason why Santa Catarinaans harm each other. But, their responses do reveal that my informants viewed resentment as a frequent and plausible underlying cause of human-initiated harm.

Therefore, to protect themselves from harm, Santa Catarinaans need to hide their possessions, their actions, their whole life from the view of others. As mentioned earlier, a number of researchers in other Maya and Mesoamerican villages were also struck 'by the extreme privacy of peasant social life' (Haviland and Haviland, 1983: 341; see also Foster, 1965; Hotchkiss, 1967; Shoaps, 2004). The tall metal fences and covered windows hide household activity from all. Both men and women use the household complex as a sanctuary from peering eyes, but women in particular rarely leave, said two consultants, for fear that people would 'make words' about them.

However, it is impossible to completely avoid interpersonal contact. If one must interact, how does one protect oneself from resentment? Many Santa Catarinaans do so by being as uninformative as possible. I frequently overheard people answering questions with stock answers that conveyed no information: *maj* [nothing], *tajkil* [errand], *biaj* [trip], or *weta'm taj* [I don't know]. Again, such a practice has been observed by ethnographers of other Maya villages. As Watanabe (1992: 101) argued 'it may be this diffuse fear of the jealousy or envy of others that creates the reserve found in Chimalteco [Maya] interpersonal relations'.

In addition, people told me that 'making words' about one's actions was prevalent. As one woman argued, people 'make words' about their family members' whereabouts and '*they don't say where he/she has gone. They don't say it, it is to say, they just hide it.*' This response, like others, suggests that one way of avoiding resentment is to 'make words'.

Although 'making words' may allow people in Santa Catarina to hide the fact that they are buying a car or going to a party and so avoid resentment for a while, 'making words' is also seen as an immoral act that, if discovered, leads to a loss of reputation. 'Making words' was described as a characteristic of people who are *manyos*, a pejorative used in natural conversation and in some of my interviews to describe people who get

into fights, spread gossip, make words, scold others, or sleep around.⁶ Furthermore, two people in an interview argued that a boy who made words to hide his father's whereabouts from other men in town acted immorally not because he 'made words', but because of what might happen to his father when people discovered the lie. This immorality of 'making words' was more present in ideology than in practice. In everyday life, I frequently observed people laughing at the fact that someone else 'made words'. Nevertheless, adults who were known to 'make words' were censured in conversation as liars, untrustworthy and shameful.

Consequently, the dangers of resentment create a social situation filled with tension. Outside of the house, Santa Catarina need to create images of themselves as moral people who do not 'make words', sleep around, have drunk husbands, or possess more goods than they are supposed to have. When sources of prosperity or shame become blatantly obvious (e.g. Angela sees Magdalena's drunken husband), resentment seems to result. Politeness and harmony, therefore, require the illusion of secrecy.

But it is not so easy to keep information secret or to create this illusion. The best way for residents of Santa Catarina to avoid resentment is to stay inside the house, but they need to sell chickens, buy food and go to work in the fields. They need to stay protected in the house but they must go out; they need to 'make words' while at the same time performing a positive social image. These opposing needs would make living in Santa Catarina while avoiding resentment extremely impractical were it not for the presence and actions of children.

The pragmatic power of the Santa Catarina child

I have argued that adults perceive children to be harmless. Children supposedly do not feel resentment toward adults and nor do they maliciously 'make words' to harm adults. As Angela's difficulty with Magdalena demonstrates, child witnesses of inequalities or sources of shame are not considered dangerous. This presumed lack of maturity gives children the ability to mediate adult relations, thereby minimizing the possibilities of resentment.

Freedom of movement

First, children's freedom of movement allows them to ease the tension between adults' need to hide and their need to socialize and trade. The children in my host house spent most of their time playing outside in the courtyard. Therefore, they were the first people a visitor would see, and consequently the person who would field, and often deflect, inquiries. Children also played in the street without worrying about public scrutiny. If a visitor called at the gate, an adult sent a child to find out who the visitor was.

In addition, adults constantly sent children on errands that put them in the public eye. I almost never saw my host mother or the women next door run an errand themselves. The children in our house, however, were sent out at least five times a day on any number of errands.

Children were also sent into private places, people's homes. In this respect, children had more freedom than not only woman, but also men. When I accompanied Rose (age

11) on her errands, generally to relatives or friends, she often went right inside the central courtyard without knocking. She also entered houses in the courtyard, although in these cases she might knock. On another occasion, my family and I went to a neighbor's house to find out if they had a laptop that we could borrow when mine broke. We all waited outside the gate while a 9-year-old ran into the courtyard to find out if anyone was home. By running errands and traveling around to places where their parents do not go, children mediate between the need to exchange and the need to hide.

'Making words'

Children also ease the tension between adults' need for privacy and their need to interact while avoiding the shameful consequences of 'making words' by themselves hiding, 'making words' and concealing information. On their errands children often run the danger of others accosting them and questioning them to get information about their families. Rose, for instance, once accompanied me back to our house. An older woman stopped us in the street and asked Rose where her father was. 'In the city', Rose responded sullenly. The older woman continued to question Rose about the details of her family life, while Rose responded as monosyllabically as possible. 'And your mother?' the woman asked. 'Gone', Rose said. Such a response was technically accurate, but vague, as her mother was across the street at a party to which this other woman had not been invited. Had Rose's mother accompanied me home, she would have been forced to speak with the woman and either 'make words' or tell her about the party. Instead, however, Rose was in that position, saving her mother the social problems that might have resulted.

Children often acted as proxy speakers for adults, both under instruction and of their own accord. One clear example is the boy mentioned at the beginning of this article who was in the habit, it seems, of declaring that he did not know where his own house was even when his father actually wanted to speak to the visitor in question. When I asked about children 'making words', all of my consultants told me that many people teach their children to hide their parents' whereabouts. As one person said:

Maybe the mother owes something to another woman. So the woman comes to the house and asks for what is owed her. And the mother tells her child not to say [that the mother is home] and the child makes words.

Another explained that around the age of 5 or 6 children begin to say things like, '*no my mother went to do her washing. But then her mother is in [the city]. And they make words.*' Hence, this adult argued that children 'make words' about their parents' locations. Still a third individual said that parents have to instruct young children to 'make words'. But, around the age of 10, the child starts to think that '*if he says the truth [about where his father is], he is scared that the man could kill his father or hit his father; so*' the child 'makes words' on his own. Consequently, data from interviews and observations suggest that children hide their parents' activities through 'making words'.

The children themselves reported to me that they 'make words' for adults. All of the 12 children between the ages of 7 and 12 with whom I spoke said that '*many*' children

'make words', particularly about their parents' presence or absence at home. '*Why do children say these words?*' I asked one 11-year-old. '*They just make lies*', she responded. An 8-year-old, moreover, said that if a child told the truth his father would '*punish him*'. His statement, as well as the other children's responses, demonstrates that the children themselves recognize that they should not, in many cases, say the truth about their parents' actions.

Everyone knew that children often 'made words' about their families. For example, once Angela's father came to visit and asked Rose where his daughter, who was Rose's mother, was. She said that her mother was not home. The grandfather tickled Rose asking her, 'true?' 'True!' Rose replied. 'True?' the grandfather asked again. 'True.' Rose asserted. The grandfather here clearly suspected that Rose's mother was indeed home and that Rose was simply hiding that information.

Considering that everyone knows that children often 'make words', one might wonder how such an act manages to protect families from resentment. It seems that, even though everyone suspects that children make words, children's role in speaking lessens the insult that might occur were the adult to 'make words' him/herself. First, having an intermediary, regardless of age, distances two people and softens a possibly hurtful interaction. Second, however, in Santa Catarina if children are present, they are chosen over adults to be the animator manipulating the social situation. This preference for children as animators implies that although people know children are not speaking truthfully, they are less likely to take these untruths as insults if they come from the mouths of children. Child emissaries allow adults to interact politely through saving face and maintaining an illusion of secrecy.

Two levels of irony: Children's potential role in ethnographic and theoretical inquiry

Children therefore form a physical buffer zone between adults when they play in the yard or in the street, when they answer the door or are sent to other people's houses. Children also buffer adult interactions with their speech, as they make and/or animate words for their parents, concealing information and shielding the household from the evils of resentment. When adults drop the veil of secrecy or have to admit that they know of each other's shame and good fortune, resentment results. This polite illusion of secrecy would be impractical to maintain, in Santa Catarina, without the activities of children.

Children are able to play this role precisely because, due to their perceived age and developmental capabilities, they are treated as socially irrelevant. This influence of individuals at an immature developmental stage, moreover, is not necessarily a unique characteristic of Santa Catarina children. The nature of children's perceived social incompetence is likely to differ in every society. The crucial point, however, is that if immaturity gives children social roles in Santa Catarina, their immaturity may give them social roles in other places as well.

These roles are ironic on two levels. First, at an ethnographic level of analysis, children in Santa Catarina are important because they are perceived as unimportant in given social situations. Second, at a theoretical level of analysis, it may be the case that, specifically because our informants do not recognize them as such, children are relevant to

many research questions traditionally investigated among adults. One might extrapolate, moreover, that scholars have had difficulty incorporating children into their social science research because they have not unraveled the ironies presented here. Scholars interested in emotion, kinship, social networks, politics, or religion may overlook children precisely because their informants do so themselves. Scholars may need to analyze the very fact that informants overlook children to understand how children may be comparable in their influence to other social distinguishable groups, from women and men to politicians and priests.

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Notes

1. All people are real but all names have been changed.
2. To distinguish quotations that are taken from my recorded interviews and conversations from remarks that I did not record, the former are either set in italic type within single quotation marks, or set as displayed quotes, in the case of longer extracts. Quoted comments or conversation I heard and wrote down in my fieldnotes later are set in Roman (non-italicized) type. Interviews were for the most part in K'iche'. Underlined words or phrases represent a code switch to Spanish.
3. Socialization in anthropology is considered to be the process by which one is taught, often by adults but also by peers, to absorb the beliefs and lifestyle of a culture. This process may be formal, informal, or (more often than not) inadvertent (Ochs, 1990).
4. For general studies of Mesoamerican and Maya children see Brown (2002), De Leon (1998), Gaskins (2003), Greenfield (2004) and Rogoff (1981).
5. The town is called *de nueva* [new] because the original town was destroyed in a landslide some years ago, and much of the population resettled to the present location.
6. *Manyos* seems to be a K'iche' word derived from the Spanish *manyoso* [tricky]. It does not appear in any K'iche'–English dictionaries.

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