Clues About Conducting Research With Children: Microethical Moments in an Interviewing Experience

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This article reflects on the process of constructing and conducting interviews with children, emphasizing the microethical moments that arise, explored through two theoretical-methodological "clues." It examines the ethical challenges and tensions inherent in research shaped by adult-centric and developmentalist logics. We present strategies to address these limitations, including recognizing children as active subjects, using a registry of informed agreement in video format, engaging in joint negotiation, employing chat-interviews, and encouraging the use of drawing. Through an "epistemological vigilance," the study advocates for a balance between protecting children and ensuring their meaningful participation, contributing to ethical practices in research involving children.

Key words: *children, research ethics, child participation, adult-centrism*

This article emerges from concerns arising from reflections on the construction of a qualitative research study within the scope of the first author's doctoral work. The doctoral research aimed to map the crossings of digital media in contemporary children's play culture. The research was structured in two stages: an initial documentary phase, followed by a second phase involving interviews with children.

In the first phase, we conducted an exploratory study in which we analyzed 100 videos of children "playing" shared on YouTube. We concluded that these videos carried out spectacle-play (Freitas, Gaudenzi, & Costa Andrada, 2024) and that the activity of child YouTubers can, in some cases, be interpreted as child artistic labour, even though the prevailing discourse suggests that they are merely playing (Freitas et al., 2024). Then, we observed that adults set the tone for the interactions, and we noticed the children's lack of spontaneity. This led to a concern that overflowed from the conclusion into the methodological design of the next phase, and made us reflect on how we could ensure more effective participation by children in the research process.

The second phase, which we focus on here, consisted of interviews with children between the ages of 7 and 9 who regularly watched such content. Rather than presenting the findings of those interviews, which are still under analysis for the dissertation, this article reflects on the research process itself, focusing on the methodological and ethical tensions that emerged during the process of constructing and conducting the interviews. Our aim is to highlight the microethical moments that shaped our methodological choices.

Because this project originated from the doctoral research, its conception, design, and initial planning took place during the first year of the doctoral program, which coincided with the most acute period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it was necessary to anticipate and adapt to the significant restrictions imposed by the pandemic. These conditions thus had direct implications for the methodological choices and the overall structure of the fieldwork. Indeed, the study was shaped by conditions of social isolation and emotional vulnerability that significantly limited the possibilities of establishing in-person bonds with children. Although the interviews occurred later, the initial constraints affected the planning and execution of the fieldwork. It was not feasible to conduct interviews in schools, public spaces, or other collective environments, which would have allowed for more time to build trust and familiarity. These limitations required us to rethink our methodological and ethical strategies.

There are two fundamental issues where the ethical dimensions of research with children are situated: (1) globalism and universalism in the scientific production on childhoods (Burman, 2022; Castro, 2021; Oliveira, 2021) and (2) adult-centric practices in childhood research (Burman, 2024; Delgado & Müller, 2005; Marchi, 2011; Moreira, 2015; Oliveira, 2021). To counter this scenario, we sought to maintain an ethical seesaw—balancing, on one side, the right to protection and, on the other, the right to participation—by understanding children as social actors and subjects with full rights.

Throughout the development of this manuscript, the clues we followed were deeply informed by a set of theoretical perspectives that helped us navigate the ethical complexities of doing research with children: in particular, *Child as Method* (Burman, 2022, 2024), decolonial studies of childhood (Castro, 2021; Oliveira, 2021), and the sociology of childhood (Delgado & Müller, 2005; Marchi, 2011, Sarmento, 2007). In this sense, theory and practice remained in dialogue at each step of the way.

Conducting research with children confronts us with pressing ethical challenges, which led us to critically reflect on the methodology we employed. Following this line of thought, we will present the interview process as embedded in a web of theoretical-methodological encounters that informed our "epistemological vigilance" (Fernandes & Souza, 2020), the strategies developed for active listening to children, and the challenges experienced behind the scenes of the research, which constitute microethical moments (Bodén, 2021).

Methodological pathway

The research this article is based on was approved by the ethics committee of Instituto Fernandes Figueira (CAAE: 68194123.0.0000.5269), and the details of the process of constructing, conducting, and pre-analyzing the interviews will be described in the following sections, addressing the "microethical moments" (Bodén, 2021). These moments pertain to the negotiations, adjustments, insights, and challenges that emerged throughout the investigation, highlighting ethics as something that is constructed in contextual and often unexpected interactions.

As Bodén (2021) emphasizes, ethics in research with children cannot be limited to standardized guidelines. These microethical moments reveal the need for an ethical approach that goes beyond predefined categories of right and wrong and recognizes the complexity and dynamism of each context. They allow for a closer examination of

concrete practices and the possibility of developing new ways of conducting research.

From behind-the-scenes memories, we engage in a movement of reflexivity about this research experience. These memories became central to this reflection (Kyritsi, 2019) as they demonstrate how microethical moments "generate knowledge that enhances the craftsmanship of research where the participants are children" (Agostini & Moreira, 2019, p. 3754). In this sense, making these moments public is a fundamental ethical effort that acknowledges that the everyday practices of conducting research are essential to ensuring an ethical research process.

To present the ethical and methodological tensions that emerged in the field, we have organized our reflections based on "clues"[1]. We understand that research processes cannot be totally predetermined from the start; the clues function as "references that contribute to maintaining an attitude of openness to what is being produced and to calibrating the walk along the research path itself—the hódos-metá of the research" (Passos et al., 2009a, p. 13). The clues do not anticipate a fixed path, nor do they translate into rules to be applied or ready-made solutions.

By narrating and reflecting on what we did, we present the collective spectrum of forces that transversed and crossed us, understanding that the spectrum is in constant movement and cannot be thought of in isolation from its procedural dimension (Escóssia & Tedesco, 2009). Being guided by clues implies adopting "an attitude that prepares us to welcome the unexpected" (Kastrup, 2009, p. 39). By narrating and reflecting on the backstage of research with children, we access this plane, producing knowledge that is not limited to describing procedures but is committed to the researcher's involvement and the ethical dimension of the encounters.

This article does not aim to be a manual on how to conduct research with children. Instead, it seeks to translate the movements that composed and reconfigured the research process so that it became what Souza and Viégas (2023) described: "a version, a situated perspective, a co-construction with readings, images, and subjects. A courageous gesture of affirming (im)possibilities" (p. 386).

Thus, the two "clues" emerged from the fieldwork itself, revealing how ethics unfolded through practical tensions, ongoing negotiations, and context-specific adjustments. Rather than serving as mere theoretical illustrations, the clues presented in this article constitute the very substance of the reflection we propose: offering situated entry points into the microethical moments experienced throughout the research process.

Clue 1—Children's participation and negotiation with adults: Creating opportunities for listening to children

In Brazil, research ethics committees were initially established for investigations in the medical field (Prado & Freitas, 2020). Although regulations (Conselho Nacional de Saúde [CNS], 2016) have sought to include the social and human sciences, the biomedical model still prevails. A similar situation is observed in international regulatory documents on research ethics involving childhood, contributing to the invisibility of children as rights holders and social actors (Fernandes, 2016).

We understand that "childhood" cannot be read solely as a biological category or an age group, or reduced to developmental milestones. As Oliveira (2021) states, "the use of the age criterion in an ahistorical manner is an artifice of the colonial/modern machinery to naturalize and disseminate it as a universal criterion for the unequal classification of subjects" (p. 974). Burman (2024) critiques the developmentalist discourse, which is based on a process of abstraction and fetishization of childhood that turns children into objects. This discourse assumes development as a unique and linear trajectory, centered on a Global North model.

Katz (2019) draws attention to the fact that common-sense discourse homogenizes childhood experiences,

reinforcing a singular narrative of childhood protection. She further argues that "the narcissistic ideal of an idyllic childhood goes hand in hand with the romanticized imaginary of the protected, pure, cared-for, and necessarily loved child; it serves more to save adults from their own particular relationship with childhood than to provide protection and care for all children" (p. 88).

The perspective that associates childhood with total dependence on adults reinforces a paternalistic discourse that prioritizes protection and provision over participation. This view not only confines children to the position of objects but also perpetuates generational inequality, silencing their voices and their capacity to make decisions (Soares, 2005). However, by adopting a paradigm that considers the interdependence between protection, provision, and participation, as proposed by Soares (2005), it becomes possible to recognize and respect the inherent vulnerability of children without denying their competencies.

Recognizing that vulnerability should not be confused with being incapable opens up space for a more emancipatory discourse that challenges the exclusion of children as full subjects of rights. As Mello (2016) suggests, vulnerability should be understood as an indicator of social inequality, not as an inherent constraint of the subjects. From this perspective, overcoming it is possible through the inclusion of vulnerable people in the decisions that impact their lives. However, what we have observed is that research ethics committees have adult-centric imprints, as they tend to treat children more as objects of protection than as full subjects of rights, directly influencing research in the field of childhood (Skelton, 2008).

An example of the difficult relationship between protection and participation is the requirement for parents and guardians to sign an informed consent form (ICF) in the case of research with children (CNS, 2016). Bearing in mind that although there is the possibility of requesting that the ICF be waived (CNS, 2016), this rarely happens in practice, which ends up discouraging research that cannot obtain them and thus limits the participation of certain groups of children. We recognize the importance of the ICF, as it guarantees that legal guardians are aware of research proposals and can make informed decisions about children's participation (Francischini & Fernandes, 2016). However, research into sensitive topics, such as domestic violence, shows that child protection goes beyond parental guardianship (Lisboa et al., 2008).

In our research, we respected the requirements of the research ethics committee regarding authorization from legal guardians, aware of the tensions this brings in relation to children's autonomy and social expectations of protection. Because this was research with children, we expected that we would receive many suggestions for changes to our proposed project. However, there were few suggestions and approval was fairly easy, which we believe was due to the guarantee of a completed ICF from those responsible. In this way, we maintained a strategic balance between bureaucratic demands and respect for legislation, understanding the place we were starting from and without disregarding the familist tendency and adult-centric logic.

Since technical standards are not enough to guarantee ethics in research with children (Bóden, 2021; Prado et al., 2018), our research methodology did not end with this formal requirement. Understanding, along with Agostini and Moreira (2019), that the authority of the adult acts as a mediator in the craft of research with children, affecting the dynamics of the research itself, we implemented strategies from the time we called for the interview to the time we carried it out, always negotiating with the children and their mothers.

Keeping an eye on the microethical moments (Bodén, 2021) helped us to be ethically confident throughout the process and to calibrate the method according to the doing of the research, recognizing that ethics in research with children is not reduced to predefined norms or dichotomies between traditional and innovative methodologies but emerges in specific contexts. Thus, revisiting and publicizing these decisions and adjustments allows us not

only to reflect on our practices, but also to enrich the ethical debate in research involving children.

These strategies, however, were crossed by some practical limitations, which arose from our decision to direct initial contact to legal guardians, creating a dynamic in which the research had to interest adults first. In this way, children who may have had a genuine interest in taking part were left at the decision of their guardians, many of whom may not have felt engaged or motivated by the invitation, resulting in an indirect exclusion of potential participants.

We sent invitations to take part in the research via WhatsApp[2], with a brief presentation of the study, a link to sign up, and a request that the message be shared with other people who were responsible for children in the profile described. The messages were sent directly from the researchers' personal numbers to various groups, including family members, friends, groups of researchers in the field of childhood, and academics.

This method has similarities with the "virtual snowball" method, which is characterized by a sampling technique that relies on disseminating the questionnaire through social contact networks and "begins by sending/presenting the link to access the electronic questionnaire, via email or some Virtual Social Network" (Costa, 2018, p. 20). In the body of the invitation message, there also was a request for it to be shared with the contacts of those who received it. This spontaneous sharing was evidenced during an interview in which one of the mothers mentioned that she had received the invitation from friends in WhatsApp groups.

Because we had difficulties receiving responses to the forms, we sent out the messages twice: once in June 2023 and again in November 2023. Initially, we planned to interview around 15 children, but the low number of registrations resulted in only 8 registered children who met the inclusion criteria, which were: aged between 7 and 9 years old, watched play videos on YouTube, and whose respondent was their legal guardian. However, only five actually participated (see Table 1), as some families failed to respond to the initial invitation or interrupted communication during the process.

After conducting the interviews, we concluded that the material collected was sufficiently rich to meet the research objectives, so it had reached saturation point, which, according to Martinelli (1999), is when the interviews no longer provide significant new information. We therefore decided to end the recruitment of new participants and not make a third call.

Table 1. The Children Interviewed

Pseudonym[3]	Age	Race	Gender	Interview
Aang	7 years old	white	boy	online
Coalinha	8 years old	white	girl	face-to-face
Alecsander	7 years old	white	boy	online
J	7 years old	Black	boy	online
Mavie	7 years old	Black	girl	online

Source: Elaborated by the authors on the basis of the form filled in by the mothers when they signed up for the study.

Another significant point observed in this research was the predominance of mothers among the people who responded to the registration form. This corroborates the observations of Prado and Freitas (2019), who point out that women continue to be the main interlocutors in studies on childhood in Brazil. The authors point out that this predominance reflects historical and social constructions that associate women with childhood. This is particularly evident in research such as ours, where male participation is low: the researchers and respondents are all women. In addition, Costa (2018) had already pointed out that women are the ones who most often volunteer to answer questionnaires in studies using virtual social networks.

Also, because the first contact was with adults, we observed that some mothers had their own interests and expectations in relation to the topic, not necessarily in getting their children's opinions heard, as demonstrated by a mother's statement at the end of the interview:

> I understand the intention you have with this research. To help us in this fight, right? The harmful effects of the screen. (Mavie's mother)

All the initial contacts were made via the mothers' WhatsApp. We followed a sort of script in which the researcher introduced herself, reminded them about filling in the form, and explained the research objectives. Once they had responded, we sent the ICF, which was an online form (Google Forms) in a question-answer format. After the mothers had filled in the ICF, we sent a video that acts as a registry of informed agreement (RIA) and instructions on how to register the child's interest in taking part. The video-RIA will be discussed in the next clue.

However, "signing" the RIA didn't seem to guarantee the child's participation in the way we were seeking at the moment, in terms of they themselves expressing an interest in taking part. We became suspicious of this aspect based on some of the statements we heard from the guardians. For example, in one of the contacts, the researcher asked if the boy was aware of the research and she replied "no need, he'll want to take part! He loves this kind of thing." So, to ensure that the child was aware of the research and wanted to take part, the researcher asked

the mother and the child to discuss the type of interview (online or face-to-face) and the date and time of the interview, and for the child to send audio messages to the researcher via WhatsApp.

> Hi, Bárbara. Good morning. I think I prefer face to face, and I think I'd feel more comfortable here at home because of the time.
>
> So, here's the deal! Would next week be possible for you? 7:30pm at your place?
>
> Yes, on Tuesday evening, it's a good day and the evening is a good time. Bye and see you Tuesday night.
>
> (Coalhinha, 8 years old)

The issue of children's participation in research contexts is complex and needs to be analyzed from different ethical and theoretical perspectives. The researcher established with the mothers in advance their presence and participation during the interviews, emphasizing that they could remain in the room if the child and she wished, but that the interview would be with the child and therefore their points of view were the priority. Three mothers stayed in the room next to where the interview was taking place, and two stayed in the interview room.

Agostini and Moreira (2019) point out: "If the child has difficulty answering a question, it does not automatically mean that they are incompetent; instead, the researcher needs to examine the situation, including the context, age and, especially, their own role" (p. 3758). We highlight a dynamic that illustrates the mothers' difficulty in recognizing the child as an autonomous subject: in one of the situations, a mother intervened when the child didn't answer the questions in a way she considered satisfactory, paraphrasing the questions or answering for her child. This situation exemplifies how children's voices are often silenced, highlighting the difficulty in providing a space for children to express their own narratives.

Such movements on the part of those responsible, like the one mentioned above, express a difficulty in considering the child as a subject. We know that parental love often becomes a projection of adult aspirations, transforming the child into an object of desire that must correspond to idealized expectations (Freud, 1914/1996). This dynamic not only suppresses the child's autonomy, but also reinforces the invisibility of their voices.

Burman (2022) broadens this discussion by connecting parental narcissism to social and political structures, arguing that the figure of the child is intertwined with projects of power and domination, such as colonialism and capitalism. Freud's (1914/1996) notion of "His Majesty the Baby," which refers to the place and value of the child in the family structure, crossed by the reborn narcissism of the parents, is thought of by the author as the "imperial self," which suggests that the child, as well as being an object of individual desires, also symbolizes a sociocultural construction that perpetuates power relations, hierarchies, and gender ideals.

From the same perspective, Sarmento (2007) argues that historical and civic invisibility are reinforced by scientific invisibility, especially by the dominant modes of knowledge production that place the knowledge produced by children under suspicion, treating it as incomplete, imperfect, and unreliable.

In this sense, we believe that clarifying in advance the type of participation expected from the mothers represented a careful measure in relation to this issue, because if this stance had not been anticipated by the researcher or challenged during the interviews, we would run the risk of perpetuating scientific invisibility, reproducing a model of knowledge production that disqualifies children as informants.

Fernandes (2016) describes this scientific invisibility as an "ethicalcide[4] of knowledge" in which "the ethical ontology of children in the processes of constructing knowledge about themselves is ignored" (p. 762) and children's

perspectives and authorship are devalued, in line with what was observed in the research field.

Clue 2—The interview and ethical commitment: Discovering ways of listening to children

From the discussions so far, we see the importance of finding methodologies that minimize the impact of adult-centric logics in research, even though the asymmetry of power between adults and children cannot be completely erased (Francischini & Fernandes, 2016). Based on these concerns, we aimed to understand what children's participation in research would be.

"Epistemological vigilance" (Fernandes & Souza, 2020) is especially necessary in the field of health because children are often the target of interventions that limit their expression and/or just take adults as their representatives (Agostini & Moreira, 2019; Clavering & McLaughlin, 2010; Corsaro, 2011; Moreira, 2015). These studies are called research *on/about* children (Bodén, 2021), in which the subjects are seen as mere objects. Research *with* children, on the other hand, points to a relationship of collaboration and/or consultation during the investigation, with the aim of listening directly to the children, aligning the methods to their specific needs and particularities in order to understand their voices, interests, and perspectives about their experiences (Corsaro, 2011).

Research with children often uses methodologies such as interviews (Bodén, 2021). Interviews in scientific research come in many types—open-ended, semistructured, structured, life history, focus groups, among others—and are carried out in different ways, the most common being face-to-face interviews and, more recently, online interviews. The chat-interview was our chosen tool, as we believed it would allow us to most easily calibrate the method to the children's needs. It is a research tool that guides the researcher-child interaction based on thematic blocks presented in a fluid manner and respecting the child's modes of expression (Saramago, 2001).

In addition, we followed Curtin's (2001) recommendations of presenting a few key questions since children tend to respond better when there is some structure in the interview, and we took an informal and flexible tone, emphasizing that they could ask for a break or let us know when they didn't understand something, thus avoiding rigid formats or too many closed questions. The script was constructed on the basis of exploratory research carried out during the analysis of the videos, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of the universe of children, including the identification of popular YouTubers and the types of videos most accessed by them. This knowledge made it easier to create a script that would enable a dialogue that was appropriate to the experiences of the children in the interviews.

In an effort to make the children feel comfortable and motivated to participate, the questions focused on everyday aspects and concrete experiences, avoiding suggestive questions that could lead to answers. For example, instead of asking about the influence of YouTube, we opted for questions such as "Have you ever asked someone in your family to play a game you saw on YouTube?" In accordance with Curtin (2001), the progression of the script followed a gradual structure, starting with simple, concrete questions and moving on to more detailed topics. However, we adapted the order of the topics and, at times, intertwined the topics, allowing the flow of the conversation to be guided by the children's answers.

To motivate the children's participation, they were offered the chance to draw. Since children's verbal abilities may not correspond to their cognitive abilities, we believed that by offering different ways of expressing themselves and stimuli that went beyond the verbal, it would be possible to gain a deeper understanding of children's perceptions (Horstman et al., 2008). Drawing creates a research path centered on the child, as it shifts the focus away from the adult language embodied in the researcher's authority figure (Moreira, 2015). Gobbi (2002) tells us about the

importance of analyzing the drawing in dialogue with the characteristics of the child who draws, the cultural codes to which they are subject, and the culture of childhood in which they are inserted. However, only one of the children used drawing to help express something very concrete: what the channel cover looked like.

However, in an attempt to record perceptions and feelings about the interview experience, the researcher asked the children to draw a picture that could be sent to WhatsApp after the interview was over, so that they could express both possible annoyances and aspects they liked about the conversation. Most of these drawings revealed positive feelings about the experience, such as one girl who explained her drawing as being "an emoji of happiness" (Coalinha, 8 years old) and the drawing in Figure 1 which reads "very cool" in Portuguese.

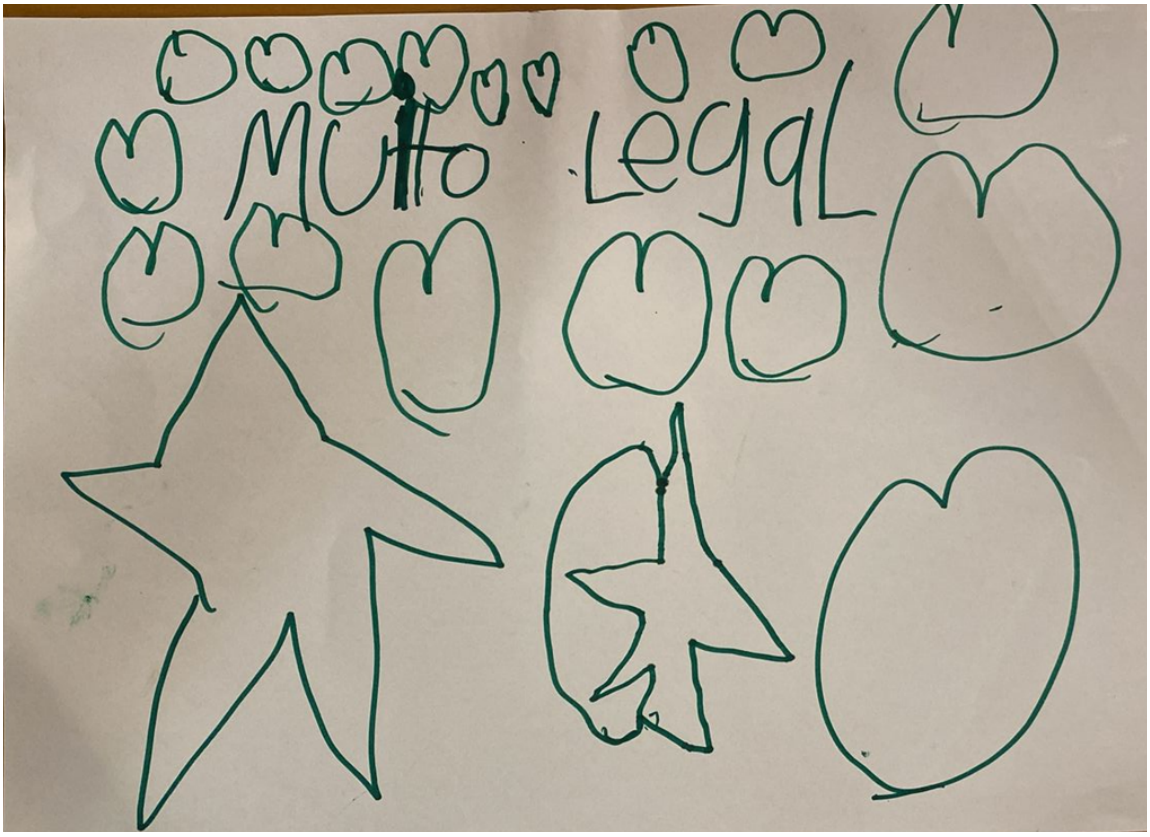

Figure 1. Drawing made by Aang (7 years old).

Interviews are so present in our society and so widespread in general culture and in research in the humanities and social sciences (Kapp, 2020) that some authors, such as Atkinson and Silverman (1997), characterize ours as an "interview society." In this context, the practice of interviewing has become a widely used space for exchanging experiences and sharing perspectives, but for children, the question-answer type of interaction is generally associated with school contexts, where the logic of verifying learning predominates, rather than the idea that they can express their experiences and opinions (Ramos, 2005).

Building on the widespread presence and importance of interviews in society, we found new information during our research that confirmed the methodological and political choice to interview the children. Some children chose to take part in the research precisely because they were going to be interviewed, as we saw when we asked: "Why did you want to take part in the research?"

> There are several things. My mother asked me to help you and I'd never done an interview before.
>
> You've never been interviewed? So you found it interesting that I wanted to know what you thought?
>
> Yes!
>
> (Aang, 7 years old)

There were also reports that children were already familiar with the method because of school projects in which they had interviewed their parents or school staff. Others talked about interviews they'd seen on television or in YouTube videos. For example, Coalinha (8 years old) asked: "Did you know that I've already done an interview at school with the staff?"

The use of chat-interviews allowed the children to express their experiences and interests, and they often brought up topics that went beyond the initial focus of the study, such as soccer, gossip, or playing in the building's courtyard. What was initially seen as a challenge by the interviewer, upon reflection, gave way to an understanding of how contemporary play culture already carries within itself this blurring between online and offline (Scott, 2019).

Therefore, the children's supposed difficulty in sticking to the main topic of the interview—YouTube play videos—did not seem to us to be related to a flaw in the chat-interview methodology but rather to the nature of the topic itself. As we observed, when talking about their experiences with online videos, the children naturally moved on to other forms of "offline" play, pointing out that it no longer made sense to separate these two forms of play in the contemporary world.

The investigation of the digital play culture, through the analysis of YouTube play videos and interviews with children who watch them, provides an understanding of the continuum between online and offline in children's experiences. In this sense, cyberculture is not an isolated phenomenon and children have their lives profoundly crossed by new digital technologies, using them both to interact with other children and to access informative and playful content, or even to encounter narratives about what it means to be a child—narratives produced by adults, official media, and also by other children (Couto, 2013). Jerusalinsky (2017) points out that "the Internet has transformed the way we relate to each other because it has an effect on the discursive ways we represent our experience of living" (p. 17).

This characteristic of a continuum between online and offline overflowed from the analysis of play culture and directly influenced the construction of our methodological path. With regard to the interview modalities, during the first contact with the mothers and children—which was covered in the previous section—we offered the option of being online or face-to-face. Most of the children opted to do it online, and the reasons they gave were that it was more convenient in the face of a busy routine.

According to Yamada-Rice (2017), the growing accessibility of digital technologies, both for researchers and children, has enabled new ways of thinking about methods, data collection, and analysis in the context of research with children. This is perfectly in line with our study, in which the children's familiarity with the use of screens was already a starting point for their inclusion in the research, since one of the selection criteria was the frequency of viewing videos on YouTube.

In addition, the children interviewed had recently been through the COVID-19 pandemic, during which time their school and social activities were shifted to the online environment. This experience had increased their familiarity with the use of digital tools. In fact, none of the children showed any difficulty in using Google Meet for the interviews. This accessibility to digital technologies, combined with their daily experience with these media,

led us to opt for online interviews as well.

Hence, the choice of a methodology that integrates the use of digital technologies is ethically and epistemologically aligned with the very nature of our subject of study, since investigating contemporary play culture requires methods that recognize the integration of online and offline in children's daily lives. This is in line with the way children themselves experience their play cultures, merging the online with the offline.

The time the children would spend talking about the same topic was very short, and sometimes there was a jumble of topics that was difficult to manage. However, in general, the children said they liked to talk and tell people about their lives, as one boy who was interviewed said explicitly: "I like talking much more than doing other things" (J, 7 years old). In fact, the children had no difficulty in giving more details when the interviewer asked them to, despite quickly jumping from one subject to another.

Every day, children are exposed to a "sensory bombardment" of fragmented and frenetic images and sounds (Jerusalinsky, 2017), which promotes a change in narratives—increasingly fast and with a reduced capacity to elaborate on what is experienced (Meira, 2003)—which was very clear in the contrast between the online and face-to-face interviews. In the one face-to-face interview, the girl could spend more time focused on the topic, and the online interview in which this characteristic was most observed was with a boy who described his parents' very strict regulation of screen time.

In addition, the online interviews were influenced by an attention regime with multiple stimuli in the medium. As an example, one child became distracted when she received a call from a friend at the end of the interview:

> My friend is texting me. (...) He was calling me. (...) Now he's sent a voice message. I'm wondering what it's going to be. (Mavie, 7 years old)

Interviews are a method with both potential and challenges. On the one hand, they help to discuss topics that are not debated with children on a daily basis (Corsaro, 2011), and on the other, researchers need to be aware of the possible imbalance of power between them and the children, due to the difference in age and status and because it is common for children to answer what they believe the adult would like to hear, for fear of "getting it wrong" and other crossings resulting from the asymmetry of power that many of them experience in interactions with adults (Corsaro, 2011; Mafra, 2015).

In addition to the points mentioned, we believe that the children's lack of familiarity with the researcher could intensify the effects of the power asymmetries present in the interview (Curtin, 2001), especially with young children, for whom this issue is even more pronounced (Guczak & Marchi, 2021). One of the interviewees said:

> Have you ever interviewed a child who was shy?
>
> Shy? Oh, I don't think so. Do you think children get shy when they're interviewed? Why do you think that?
>
> Because children get shy when they're being interviewed by someone they don't know.
>
> (Coalinha, 8 years old)

One of the ways we thought of to take care of this lack of familiarity was to include a presentation of the researcher in the interview script in which she stated her name, age, and profession and briefly explained what a doctorate is, in an attempt to create an initial connection and reduce the formality of the meeting, as well as opening up space for the children to ask the interviewer questions. In addition, as the interviews were to be one-off meetings, a video

invitation was produced which we chose to be starred in by the researcher who would be conducting the interview, which also functioned as an RIA.

An RIA is described as an agreement requested from children, adolescents, and other people who cannot legally consent to their participation in research (CNS, 2016). We understand that the RIA is not just a bureaucratic action but an important instrument for guaranteeing children's rights, as it affirms their moral right to self-determination and considers their point of view in decisions that affect their lives. Furthermore, it is a matter of providing, from the outset, active involvement in the process of deciding to participate in the research, because without information about its nature, there is no way of ensuring that it is voluntary (Costa et al., 2024; Gaches, 2021, Lobato et al., 2016). In this sense, one of the main objectives of the RIA is to provide children with information about the research, such as its objective, methodology, benefits, and risks (CNS, 2016; Curtin, 2001, Lobato et al., 2016).

Because we were concerned that the research should be aligned with the children's specificities, we aimed for language that would be familiar when we constructed the RIA. The way in which we invited them was also important. Because the first contact with the children would be mediated by their guardians and via WhatsApp, the RIA would need to give the children a certain amount of autonomy to access the content. Given their age (7 to 9), the youngest children would be in the early years of literacy, so a written text could be an obstacle to proper comprehension.

Considering these issues and that the children would be selected based on their familiarity with online videos, we had the idea of creating the RIA in video format so that it could be shared with them at the beginning of the WhatsApp contact. From the start, we established that if the children didn't agree to take part in the research, we wouldn't proceed with the next steps to schedule the interview. This was not the case with any of the participating children.

We wrote an initial script which was presented to three children in the study's age group who were part of the researcher's personal network. They helped us calibrate the vocabulary and made suggestions to make the video more attractive. For example, words such as "doctorate" and "transcription" were considered difficult to understand, and they suggested it would be interesting to use some questions and comments "talking" to those watching the video, as well as using animation resources in the video. With these adjustments, we sent the script to the research ethics committee. After receiving their response, whose only suggestion was to include the institutional logo and header, we went on to record the video. The RIA video was filmed on the researcher's smartphone using the front camera and with the help of an app that displayed the text to be read on the phone screen. We used a free, easy-to-use application to edit and include graphic elements and a soundtrack.

In the final script, we explained the objectives and methodology of the research, that those responsible had filled in the ICF beforehand, what the dynamics of the interview would be (the subject of the questions, the option of drawing, the possibility of interrupting or not answering, etc.), the request for authorization to record audio, the anonymity of the participants, how the results would be disseminated, and the importance of listening to the children on topics that were pertinent to them. At the end of the video, we asked them, with the help of an adult, to fill in a form and, if they wanted to take part in the survey, to mark an "x" in the place indicated. We noticed that some children felt invited to take part and indicated they understood what was being said, as in the case of one boy who, after sending the video, sent the following audio:

> Yes, I want to take part in the research. In that video you said about some plays I learn on YouTube. (...) But when we meet I'll explain it to you. (J, 7 years old)

To ensure that the children began the interview informed about the conditions, we reminded them of topics we considered essential, such as authorization to record, the possibility of interrupting the interview or not answering certain questions, and the objectives of the research. The children remembered what had been said in the video: "The one you sent to my mom's cell phone? Yes, I remember" (J, 7 years old). Another said she remembered that "there were little drawings on the screen" (Aang, 7 years old).

We also requested that the children choose the name that would be used to refer to their statements when the results were published. This is a practice that has been adopted in many studies and seeks to respect children's right to confidentiality, recognizing the importance of protecting them and valuing their autonomy in the ethical context of research (Kyritsi, 2019). The names followed very diverse criteria: their parents' second choice, the initial of their name, an anime character, favourite singer, and nickname on school transport. The guarantee of anonymity helped to give the participants a greater sense of security, as one of the interviewees explained:

> Why do you think that if we had been filming and not just recording the audio, you would have been more shy?
>
> A lot! Because I don't like it when something of mine goes online.
>
> (Coalinha, 8 years old)

From a position of epistemological vigilance, we reflect here on how the interview can be thought of as an ethically informed methodological path for research with children, especially considering the power asymmetries that mark the interactions between adults and children. In this way, the interview transcends the role of data collection, as well as placing the RAI beyond its bureaucratic-formal aspect, transforming it into an ethical commitment that respects and values children as subjects of rights and considers them social actors with agency.

Final thoughts

The clues we followed throughout this article led us along a path of implications, shifts, and ethical learnings that emerged through the very process of conducting the research. The microethical moments experienced in the field created space to reflect on the modes of listening, negotiation, and presence that permeate research with children. As the research progressed, the theme of participation became more robust, prompting us to develop new strategies that allowed us to glimpse methodological practices better suited to recognizing children as full subjects, including the use of video-format informed consent, joint negotiation (mother-child) via WhatsApp, the chat-interview methodology, and the encouragement of drawing as an expressive tool.

It was by navigating the tensions and microethical moments in the field that we arrived at insights that now guide us toward rethinking how future studies might be designed. In hindsight, we recognize that involving children from the very beginning—whether by inviting them to codevelop the interview methodology or by including them in the video invitation—could have brought us closer to the participatory approach we initially envisioned. Such strategies might have increased parents' confidence and offered children more engaging and meaningful ways to relate to the research from the outset. These realizations do not diminish the value of what was done but rather open up possibilities for future research to more fully embody the ethical and methodological commitments we continue to pursue.

To move beyond adult-centered practices in research with children, it is essential to reformulate research methodologies. This change requires both critical reflection on the power dynamics that operate in the relationships between adults and children and allowing children to express themselves, not just as informants, but as full subjects

in fact and with rights. Normative ethical requirements must also make room for the unexpected (Fernandes, 2016) with practices that are less rigid and more flexible (Kyritsi, 2019), enabling ethically informed research with children.

Following the clues that emerged from the field, we seek to contribute to ongoing conversations in contemporary childhood studies by offering a situated reflection on the ethical tensions that permeate research with children. Rather than proposing universal prescriptions, we remain close to the specificities of our encounters, allowing ethical questions to unfold through experience. In this way, our work aligns with broader efforts to rethink what it means to care with children in research contexts.

While this study is grounded in a specific context (Brazil, during a post-pandemic period and concerning digital play culture) the reflections it offers resonate beyond its immediate setting. The microethical moments we encountered and the strategies we developed in response underscore the importance of relational ethics, flexibility, and child-centered approaches in research practice. Therefore, we call for future research that cocreates spaces where children are not only listened to but listened with. By foregrounding the relational, situated, and often unpredictable nature of ethical decision making, this manuscript invites researchers to consider ethics not as a checklist but as a dynamic process that unfolds in practice through microethical moments, negotiation, and care. We argue that ethical research must move with, not around, complexity.

1 The concept of clues is widely developed within the framework of the cartography method, which inspires the approach of this work. We recommend reading *Pistas do método da cartografia: Pesquisa-intervenção e produção de subjetividade*, edited by Passos, Kastrup, and Escóssia (2009b).

2 WhatsApp is an instant messaging app that allows users to exchange texts, images, videos, audios, and documents via smartphones and computers using an internet connection.

3 The names in Table 1 are pseudonyms chosen by the children during the interviews.

4 Ethicalcide, as proposed by Fernandes (2016), is inspired by the concept of epistemicide—the erasure and devaluation of local and cultural knowledge in favour of dominant knowledge. Ethicalcide highlights the neglect of the ethical dimension of researching with children, ignoring their perspectives and agency and treating them as objects in research, which has the effect of silencing children's voices and perpetuating adult-centered practices.

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