The city from the point of view of children: social inequalities in representing and using urban public spaces

La ciudad desde el punto de vista de los niños: desigualdades sociales en la representación y el uso de los espacios públicos urbanos

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Abstract

This paper was written under the research project CRiCity: "Children and their Right to the City: Tackling urban inequity through the participatory design of child-friendly cities" developed in Lisbon and Porto and funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) through national funds (PTDC/SOC-SOC/30415/2017). We focus on two case-studies developed in Porto. Our aim is to present some of the findings of the focus groups and drawing activities developed with children in two institutions. During this research, it was evident that children from middle and high classes are more subjected to *institutionalization, domestication and hyper-protection* processes than those from lower social classes. Also, we conclude that the phenomena of *insularization* and *specialization* contributes to aggravating restrictions on public spaces by producing forms of socio-spatial segregation depending not only on age, but also on class and social status.

Palabras clave

Niños; Ciudad; Desigualdades, Clases Sociales

Resumen

Este artículo se ha elaborado en el marco del proyecto de investigación CRiCity: "Los niños y su derecho a la ciudad: Abordando la desigualdad urbana a través del diseño participativo de ciudades amigas de la infancia" desarrollado en Lisboa y Oporto y financiado por la Fundación Portuguesa para la Ciencia y la Tecnología (FCT) a través de fondos nacionales (PTDC/SOC-SOC/30415/2017). Aquí nos centramos en dos estudios de caso desarrollados en Oporto. Nuestro objetivo es presentar algunas de las conclusiones de los grupos focales y de las actividades de dibujo desarrolladas con niños en dos instituciones. Durante esta investigación, se evidenció que los niños de clases medias y altas están más sometidos a procesos de institucionalización, domesticación e hiperprotección que los de clases sociales populares. Asimismo, concluimos que los fenómenos de insularización y especialización contribuyen para el agravamiento de las restricciones en los espacios públicos al producir formas de segregación socioespacial que dependen no sólo de la edad, sino también de la clase y el estatus social.

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Introduction

Throughout its history, Porto (2nd largest city of Portugal) has experienced processes of urban, social and political transformation. Since the industrial revolution and the creation of its "islands"[1] to the modern times of gentrified city-market, the expulsion

[1] "Islands" (ilhas) are small houses at the back of buildings, built to accommodate the working class.

of the lower classes from the urban centers, the property boom or the densification of the periphery, the city has been the scene of numerous shocks that aggravated social and territorial inequalities (Alves, 2017; Costa et al., 2019; Pereira, 2018; Queirós, 2016).

Childhood is affected by the different ways of enjoying the city (Christensen et al., 2018). The experiences and daily lives of children are different (or, we would say, unequal), depending on whether they are boys or girls; Roma, immigrants or middle-class whites; their parents are owners or tenants; have their own car or depend on public transport; live in the city center or in the periphery.

These are different ways of living the city in childhood that we aim to debate. This paper is part of an ongoing project "Children and their Right to the City", focusing on the case-studies developed in Porto. After an exploratory period, the researchers selected two contexts where the case studies took place, as well as two educational institutions in their vicinity: a private elementary school attended mainly by middle and upper-middle-class children, and a social center integrated in a public housing context.

In this paper, we present some of the findings of focus groups and drawing activities developed with children of both institutions. Not discarding other factors, which we will develop in subsequent publications, we focus on class dynamics since this emerged as the most relevant variable for the interpretation of inequalities both within the groups we´ve interviewed and in the contexts we´ve observed.

We begin with a brief theoretical discussion on childhood in the city, highlighting some of the transformations resulting from the accelerated process of urbanization. Next, we put the two case studies in context from a socio-geographical point of view and briefly explain the methodological approach. Thereafter, we analyze children's discourses on the experiences and social representations of the city: favorite places to play, peer socialization, fears and challenges of walking the streets alone.

With this paper, we seek to discuss some of the phenomena of restriction and constraint of children's rights to the city in contemporary societies, which have as their most visible effects: inequality of access and use of public spaces, a reduction in independent mobility and a sharp decrease in free and autonomous play time. Finally, we seek to bridge a research gap in Portugal, within the framework of sociology studies on urban inequalities, by focusing on children and their relationship with the city.

Inequalities and restrictions of childhood in public space

In recent decades, urban societies have changed in a very obvious way: cities are today increasingly accelerated; violence, marginalization and urban inequalities are growing in number and in different configurations; traffic, noise and air pollution or the lack of green spaces are becoming almost unavoidable (UNICEF, 2012) In the process of "demonization" of the city (Fernandes, 2013) some streets and squares became corridors where people circulate, in the incessant shuttle between domestic, work or leisure spaces. In cities that are increasingly touristic, such as Porto, the overvaluation of the downtown contrasts with the disinvestment in the periphery.

In the course of these transformations, children have been the *ugly duckling*. Their minority and vulnerable status and the predominance of "paternalism, ownership and domestication" paradigms, as well as "protection and control" (Tomás, 2007) have fueled discourses and security practices that limit children's freedom and autonomy. "Erected by a gerontocratic hegemony and policed by discipline, the boundaries are legitimized through ideologies of care, protection and privacy." (Jenks, 2005, pp. 74-75).

According to Jens Qvortrup (2008), if we can hardly speak of a universal childhood — in the sense of a generational shared reality — certain phenomena have been clearly affirmed in the western world in recent years, in particular, the increasingly institutionalized, domesticated and organized daily lives; the tendency towards the *specialization and insularization* of cities (Zinnecker 1990; Zeiher, 2003), and the emergence of new regimes of control that undermine children's citizenship rights. Today, much of children's daily routine is spent in structured activities in spaces organized, regulated and controlled by adults, perpetuating and reinforcing their domination and power (Lima, 1989; Leverett, 2011).

According to the annual report of the National Education Council (Conselho Nacional de Educação [CNE], 2019) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCDE, 2019), Portuguese children are among those who spend most time in nurseries, kindergartens and schools, compared with other EU countries. Autonomous free time, without constraints, is thus "captured by adults in an overwhelming way" (Nídio, 2012, p. 205), an "invasive and controlling" mechanism that deprives children of "their own time with an over-activity disguised of opportunities and social privilege" (Araújo & Monteiro, 2018, authors' translation).

Children are transported "from island to island" (home, school, extracurricular activities), often in private automobiles. The experience of the city becomes limited and fragmented, reduced to enclosed and passing spaces. The landscape is what they see from the car window (Malone, 2007). Nowadays, it is almost inconceivable to watch children roaming the streets on their own, or playing with their peers. Expressions such as *bubble-wrap generation*, *paranoid parenting* or *helicopter parents* designate this growing trend for hyper-protection and infantilization of childhood that sharpens in the middle and high classes (Pain, 2006; Ungar, 2009). In a risk society (Gill, 2007), characterized by a widespread and subjective perception of the city dangers (traffic, robberies, kidnappings) and where families are living in an increasingly isolated and fragmented way — since they count less and less with their neighbours or extended family — the *stranger danger*[2] (Pain, 2006; Stokes, 2009) contributes to a culture of mistrust and discrimination against the unknown.

One of the consequences of this culture of fear is a decrease in independent mobility (Fhyri et al., 2011; Kytt et al, 2015; Waygood & Susilo, 2015). A research conducted between 2010-2012 in sixteen countries — based on data obtained forty years earlier — points to a "complete erosion of children's independence" (Shaw et al., 2015, p. 2). Portugal comes in second to last place, despite being considered the third safest country in the world (Global Peace Index Map » The Most & Least Peaceful Countries, 2020). The consequences are multiple: low physical activity and, consequently, health problems; lack of skills to act independently and solve problems; less resilience and a weakened sense of self-effectiveness; reduced geographical knowledge and spatial orientation; fragile emotional bonds with the neighborhood and the city; and limited opportunities for socialization (Lopes e Neto, 2014; Malone, 2007; O´Brien & Tranter, 2006). Ultimately, the more protected children are, the more they are in danger, since they are no longer able to move around the city and learn to manage the opportunities and risks that arise.

Linked to the archipelago-city, we observe what Francesco Tonucci (2009) calls "specialization" — cities are carved out in different spaces, each of these envisioned for a specific audience: children in parks, elderly on garden benches, adolescents on skate parks, the poor on public housing neighborhoods. This specialization, particularly in gentrified cities, has contributed to the expansion of the market of goods and services specifically intended for children, who become the privileged target of marketers (McKendrick et al, 2000). The city ceases to be seen as a "place of encounter and exchange" of intergenerational sociabilities, to become marked by the "separation and

[2] "Stranger Danger" translates a feeling of insecurity stemming from a social construction that attributes unknown people a potentially threatening role.

specialization of spaces and competences: different places for different people, different places for different functions" (Tonucci, 2009, p. 149). Children are thus segregated from the adult world, destined to their "own spaces" (Olwig & Gullov, 2013; Rasmussen, 2004).

These phenomena do not occur in the same way, everywhere, and differ according to social class, gender or ethnicity. Studies have revealed a higher institutionalization, over-activity and hyper-protection of children in middle and middle-upper social classes (Chin & Phillips, 2004). In these social groups, the child is seen as an investment, a "project — soft, malleable and able to be developed and improved, with the 'good' parent presenting a myriad of opportunities and support for the child to have a range of learning experiences" (Vincent & Ball, 2007, p. 1065). The dynamics associated with childhood is therefore highly classist. Not all families have the financial means to fund activities or birthday parties; or the cultural capital to take children to libraries and museums. Moreover, not all social and ethnic groups feel comfortable and welcome in places that are thought-out mostly for middle-class white children (Leverett, 2011). A study in the Dutch context, concluded that social risers and upper-middle classes enjoy family outings much more than lower classes, even when living in the same neighborhood, and even when these are free public spaces (Karsten & Felder, 2015, p. 215). Concern for daily needs, lack of time, money, resources or knowledge to explore the city are some of the reasons for this inequality (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2012). This does not mean that "poor children do not have a rich experience in building their cultures", but that "the dual organization of urban space is associated with social stratification and it is an inseparable component from the former" (Sarmento, 2018, p. 236, authors' translation).

New geographies of childhood emerge, in addition to the *outdoor children*, which characterized childhood historically, we have today: *indoor childhood* and *childhood of the backseat generation* (Karsten, 2005). If *outdoor children* enjoy freedom of movement with the disadvantage of being more at their own risk, the situation of *indoor children* is, for the author, the most worrying since excessive domestication is not compensated with alternative activities. While these children come from low-class families with small apartments and less access to public space, the *children of the backseat of the car* are the most privileged since they have interesting activities at home and simultaneously enjoy alternative spaces outside. In this paper we present such micro-geographies of childhood, based on research developed in Porto, Portugal.

Brief socio-geographical contextualization and methodological options

The advantage of the ethnographic approach with children is that it allows a deeper analysis of the interpersonal and social interactions and the complex processes of socialization, considering the structural dimensions of class, gender or ethnicity and the diversity of childhood social experiences (Ferreira & Nunes, 2014). Exploring the conditions that shape the different worlds of childhood, allow us to understand the impacts that social forces like the State, neoliberalism or urbanization have on their daily lives and as a generational group (Qvortrup, 2008).

After some exploratory raids — in which we visited squares, parks and urban gardens of Porto and established informal talks with key informants — we chose two urban parks to study through participant and non-participant observation, using a field diary to register the results from the observation. We also selected two nearby educational institutions, where we organized participatory research activities with children. Context A is located in a densely populated area, close to the city center, with a lot of trade and services, and well served by public transport. The educational institution is a private school, attended by middle and upper-middle class families with high cultural capital: parents are architects/as, designers, researchers, among other professionals of the small intellectual bourgeoisie, who take their children to museums and theaters, and provide them various extracurricular activities. Context B is located farther from the center and has no metro nearby. It is a place of frontier between classes, since it is surrounded by social housing neighborhoods — many of these associated with violence and drug trafficking — and by a privileged and well-reputed area of the city where mostly middle-class and upper-class families live. In this context, we chose a social solidarity institution that provides support to the most deprived population: kindergarten, leisure activities, school support, psychological care, etc.

To grasp the experiences and social representations of children in both contexts, we developed activities that allowed their voice "to be heard" (James, 2007): focus groups, drawing and walking tours (Driskell, 2002). Beside observations, semi-directive interviews were held with teachers, educators and municipal officials. Although this multiplicity of data allows a broader knowledge on the theme, in this paper we focus mainly on findings from the focus groups with children.

The activities were differentiated according to age groups: drawing and non-structured interviews with preschool children and focus groups with those of the elementary school[3]. Younger children were asked to individually draw their favorite

[3] In Portugal, preschool is from 3 to 5 years old and elementary school from 6 to 10.

place to play outdoors and asked to describe it (who is present, what they are doing, why they like it). The verbal explanation was recorded in writing. With older children, we developed focus groups on two major topics: advantages and disadvantages of playing at home and outside; and preferred public spaces. During the interviews and focus groups, other topics emerged, such as fears about the city, urban transformations and their impact on different generations, among others.

Focus groups can be a valuable method for eliciting children's views, experiences and knowledge on a number of issues, and they can be used also to complement data from other methods such as individual interviews (Morgan et al., 2002). However, there has to be an adaptation of this method in order to match children's cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural and psychological competencies (Gibson, 2012). Thus, we have followed specific guidelines for conducting focus groups with children as developed by several authors. Both the facilitator and co-facilitator had previous experience in conducting qualitative or participatory research with children. Groups were held in a familiar environment (their school context), which was important to build trust and create a friendly environment. Regarding group dynamics, we have attempted to first establish ground rules in order to clarify the role that children will play in the process and prevent distraction and tensions. As suggested by Jennifer Gibson (2012) we have tried to promote enjoyment and creative expression throughout the process by starting with informal conversations to create a relaxed atmosphere.

Focus groups were transcribed and content analysis was performed.

In context A, 69 children (41 boys and 28 girls) between four and ten years old participated in the activities. In context B, we had 57 children (40 boys and 17 girls) aged from five to eleven. Female gender is under-represented in both contexts, but it has not been possible to circumvent this, since we could not exclude boys from the activity just to maintain this balance. The conversations and interviews lasted about 40 minutes, each took place in the institutions and, except for the focus groups, educators were always present.

Therefore, it is important to read the results in the light of the spatial and temporal limitations (Ferreira & Nunes, 2014; Spyrou, 2011). To deal with such limitations, adults were asked not to intervene in the focus group dynamics; and the researchers were solely responsible for the written records in the drawings. Additionally, we tried to ensure an informal and relaxed environment that would allow spontaneous interventions. The children were informed of the research objectives and asked about their willingness to participate. The limited time to develop the activities did not allow us to make them co-researchers (Alderson, 2008).

Thereafter, we present the perceptions and representations of children about the city and public spaces, differentiating between two contexts: the first, constituted mainly by children of middle and upper-middle classes, and the second by children of popular classes.

Middle and upper middle classes: the "proper spaces" for play and the need for control and security (context A)

Asked where they prefer to play, 52% of the children answered outdoors, 33% indoors and 15% stated it depended on the weather conditions or the kind of space. This preference (outside or inside) did not reveal gender differences, but girls presented a larger range of reasons. When questioned why they prefer to play outdoors, most children stressed having *more space for physical activity* (running, climbing, jumping) and for games that are not allowed or possible inside because the space is small or upsets adults. Expressions like "wider", "more open" or "the whole space of the world" show this need for body expansion. A fairly frequent argument is the possibility of enjoying *greater contact with nature*: playing in the grass, interacting with animals or "getting fresh air". Another aspect mentioned was the *diversity of games* that open spaces allow:

> We can be with nature, we can meet new friends and we don't need to be always at home, stuffy (...) locked in the house or watching television or playing with toys.
>
> I like the outdoors (...) I can make new friends, play, run, jump, at home you get depressed or you're dependent on the phone or the TV, or you're ALWAYS playing with dolls and it's not cool, cool is to run. (Children from private elementary school, focus group, July 2019)

In these discourses, two other arguments emerge: the *contact with peers* and the *feeling of well-being*. Children criticize the excessive use of technologies and their addiction, and understand "being outdoors" as a possibility to do different activities and make friends. These and other participants associate outdoor space with joy, fun, relaxation and freedom that contrasts with boredom, depression and the feeling of suffocation related with staying at home:

> One day I was home all day (...) I was feeling super bad, I wasn't feeling well, I wanted to run, I wanted to break the walls and leave the house and I couldn't, because my parents were working. (Girl from private elementary school, focus group, July 2019)

Regarding the arguments for preferring to play indoors, the vast majority of children — mainly boys — stressed the *access to toys and technological devices* as the main advantage*:* "I have a lot of toys, if I'm always playing outside, I can't play with these"; "outside we don't have internet". Other aspects mentioned relate to *feelings of security and well-being in the domestic space*: "I feel safer"; "I am more protected"; "I feel more comfortable". Children often used terms related to private property (my room, my toys, my family, my garden) to justify their preference for indoor activities, which contrasts with public spaces and equipment that are shared by all.

On the favorite places to play outdoors, children mentioned mainly urban parks, playgrounds or private spaces: patios, terraces or condominium gardens. Participants often referred to the slide, the swing and traditional games such as hide-and-seek, races or football (in the case of boys). These spaces seem to prolong the feeling of "safety" and also of property enunciated about playing at home. In the parks there are often fences and parents are permanently vigilant and prepared to immediately interrupt any disruptive play (e.g., down the slide upside down). An educator of Environmental Education Center (EEC) of the urban park reinforces this idea:

> Before there was greater freedom (...) kids were trying to climb a tiny tree... it would never hurt them (...) and parents were saying: "don't climb the tree" (...) the paradigm has changed a lot. (Educator from EEC, interview, June 2019)

In their own gardens, children enjoy greater freedom, not requiring so much monitoring and enabling adults to maintain their activities, whether domestic or professional:

> It is the garden in Grandma's house. And then the cat went running and I followed him. My parents were inside working, because I wanted to play with the kitten (...) Grandma was making pasta. My dad only makes sauce. (Boy from private preschool, oral records on drawing, May 2019)

Among elementary school children, only the oldest (9/10 years) mentioned some independent mobility: small errands (e.g., buying bread in the café next door) or very short distances, usually to ease the way from home to school, as well as to extracurricular activities. When parents are in a great hurry, there is traffic or cannot park, children are given "permission" to follow the sidewalk or cross a crosswalk to reach the destination. And even so, with several warnings: "hey, Sara[4], look at the cars (...) look both ways, look at the signs".

[4] Fictitious name.

The only exception was three boys who live on a particularly quiet street, known for their associations and community "spirit". Proud of their street, they recalled the festivities of S. João when they helped to "decorate it with ribbons" and walked alone to "play with hammers"[5] . The boys relate this freedom with the trust and closeness among residents: "we can walk there alone because we know well the people there and we also make new friends".

For the others, the possibility of greater autonomy is experienced when they go to the village during holidays since the context is smaller, with fewer people and is perceived as "less dangerous". Aware that they enjoy public space much less than their parents did, children present several reasons for this change. First, the increase in the number of inhabitants: "before, the cities had very, very few people, we knew almost everyone and there were not the things that there are today". By "the things that there are today" they mean: traffic and the risk of being run over, partly explained by tourism: "there are more and more electric cars and scooters because of the tourists"; but also, and above all, kidnappers, thieves, killers, teenagers, drunks and smokers. If thieves and murderers are abstract "strangers", teenagers are nearby elements who attend some of the places frequented by children, such as the playground. In some focus groups and observations, teenagers are seen as "rude" and disturbing. Another reason has to do with access to technologies that did not exist in their parents´ childhood and this "encourages" them to stay at home. Finally, another motive is that the street is not "a proper space" for them:

> - There are no people controlling you (...) here on the [school] playground you have much more security...
>
> - We have the fences (...) we have teachers watching us (...) while in the street we have no one. We may have people watching what we're doing, but they're not looking after us, saying what we can do, what we can't do. And on the street, I think playing in the street isn't very prohibitive and we don't have the fences either, that's not a proper place to play. (Children from private elementary school, focus group, July 2019)

In these discourses, children do not assume the power to act on the risks, assigning to adults the task of protecting them, even if this implies "fences", rules and restrictions that they seem to accept without resistance.

Although children are limited to "proper spaces" and to the supervision of adults, the latter try to "compensate" them by providing a "cosmopolitan" experience of the

[5] During S. João people go out on the street with plastic hammers and hit each other on the heads.

city, through visits to cultural events or facilities, as the principal of the school explains.

> [Parents] are culturally educated persons who care (…) You have many families who leave here and go to the park (…) on the weekend you can go see Indie Junior (Film Festival) with your son and you can go here and you can go there (…) So I can't tell you that at this level children lock themselves back into spaces, can I? (Private School Principal, interview October 2019)

Lower classes: the "places of everyone", the street games and the adult world (Context B)

Among the children who attend context B — almost all from lower social classes and living in nearby public housing — 64% prefer to be outdoors and 18% prefer being at home. Almost all girls chose the street as the privileged place of play. The remaining 18% could not choose between indoor or outdoor, since they link each space to different activities: at home, quieter games (e.g., tablet) and in the street, more dynamic activities (e.g., football).

When asked about their favourite places, children presented a diverse range of options, mentioning not only the nearest playgrounds, the beach or the river, but also community sites shared by all (streets, courtyards, lawns, football fields) where children, adolescents and adults gather. In their discourses, we could find evidence of place-attachment to the neighborhood, such as: "the field behind my house", "by the café", "near my grandmother's house".

The reason for preferring outdoor spaces is based on two major arguments, mentioned equally by boys and girls. One is having more space for physical activity, mostly justified by the limited size of their homes: "out there I can play with my dog more, because at home, as it is a small house, is not good for throwing the toy for the dog to catch". The other, repeated constantly, is the *contact with peers and adults*, that the street offers

> I can play with my sister, with my mother, with my father and my brother, with everyone, with my cousin who comes sometimes (…) and I can play with my brother's friends if they are there. (Girl from social center, focus group, July 2019)

Arguments related to *nature, well-being or the diversity of games* were less significant and were vaguely described as "play with more joy"; "play more games"; "play

what we want". The few children who said they preferred to play at home have previously mentioned the advantage of using toys and technological games.

During the focus groups, the reference to abductions has been significant, although it appears to be no real justification for this. When referring to public spaces *within* and *outside* the neighborhood, children considered that "inside" is a safe place, showing a strong sense of belonging. For some, the stigma associated with the neighborhood even works as a protective factor: "[Here], the kidnappers don't even enter, because it's the neighborhood, it's the neighborhood[6]", "They go in there, they get beat". The interviewed educator agrees that there is a "territorial sense" that acts as a "source of protection": "we are the ones who frighten others, others are afraid of us".

Although they show fear, children consider themselves competent to play outside, spontaneously enunciating protection mechanisms and neighborhood surveillance: walking in groups, taking care of each other, not playing certain games at night, leaving the house accompanied by a dog, or having adults watching over them by the window.

> — We can play, but we have to be careful. (...)
>
> — Whenever I go to play, my father always stays watching over me. Or else I take my dog with me. If someone comes towards me, he starts barking right away, when my dad sees that, my dad comes right out to peek.
>
> — There are games that cannot be played at night.
>
> Researcher: What games can't be played at night?
>
> — Hide and seek.
>
> Researcher: Why? Is it dangerous? Because you can be lost or because...
>
> — No, we may be kidnapped.
>
> — At night, we can't see anything and they can kidnap us. (Children from social center, focus group, July 2019)

Another aspect stated was the disruptive behaviors of some adults, namely aggression and abusive consumption, sometimes involving the family: "my father is the one who breaks everything [in the neighborhood]" or "my mother's boyfriend is drunk and hits me and gets all crazy, just yesterday he began to call me cow and those names". In addition to the drunks, mentioned several times, they also talked about junkies.

[6] In Portugal, the word "neighborhood" is usually related to housing estate.

These speeches indicate that children have a great knowledge of the adults' world, a proximity that sometimes generates insecurity and tension. Although it was not mentioned during the focus groups, drug trafficking and the consequent police repression — which in recent months has taken considerable proportions and has been widely mediatized — are also realities about which children regularly talk, as the educator of the social center explains:

> [Police forces] invade homes, and if there are children (...) they often... see the police at full strength, don't they? And often using brute force. (Educator from social center, interview, December 2019)

Other reports, however, showed a joyful crossing between the two worlds. The common courtyards and lawns are the places where parents, grandparents and neighbors live, rest and work.

> I have a kitchen and there's a door and my mom, when she goes to iron, it's a terrace and there's a car with a baby and there's balls to play ball, and there's a car there for me to ride [And that place is yours alone, your family's?] It belongs to everyone. (Recording, preschool boy from social center, oral records on drawing, July 2019)

Although these collective spaces belong to "everyone" and are thus intergenerational, children seem to occupy a privileged place as all neighbors "can play there, but only if they have children." They are provided with toys, equipment and land to expand. When asked about what they do when they are on the street, children reveal an intense socialization between peers, whereby cousins, brothers and neighbors get involved in lively games. They ride bicycles, scooters or overboard, play with dogs and invent new games:

> — Sometimes we play the ball or the little witch.
>
> Researcher: What is the little witch?
>
> — We have to have a ladder...
>
> — Some stairs and there has to be a person on the stairs and then me, when they shoot all the balls and don't hit, we have to run to other stairs. (...) if they hit, you're the witch.
>
> — In front of my block there is a little corner of grass and we make football marks and we play there.
>
> Researcher: I get it. What do you mark with?

> — With stones or bricks or pavement blocks. And no one takes the stones away from us.
>
> — (...) it's a courtyard, it's not really a football field. (Children from social center, focus group, July 2019)

The spaces are thus adapted and conquered in order to serve their purposes and children enjoy a considerable freedom. In these episodes, adults are absent or not interfering, fulfilling the role of distant protectors (e.g., at the window). This freedom is also expressed by the independent mobility given to some children according to their age or when older children are present.

According to the urban park educator, the neighborhood resembles a village, where everyone knows each other: "there are several eyes to look at several children", "always a neighbor in the window controls them". However, this "freedom" is "confined to the neighborhood".

Even though, during focus groups, children have highlighted the interactions and the play on the street since not everyone has that privilege. Many children spend a substantial time at home, usually playing with technological devices, in a sedentary and unstimulating way, as mentions an educator of the Social Center:

> It begins to have impact in their development, [children] spend a lot of time at home and out on their own (...) because if they have a videogame they are fine, they are calm, they are happy. (Educator from social center, interview, December 2019)

The same idea is corroborated in two informal conversations, one with a park watchman and another with a neighborhood resident, when they say that today's children "wear pajamas and stay at home"; "the kids are only in front of screens now".

Final remarks: differences and inequalities in urban experience and representation

The transformations that have taken place in the world of contemporary childhood — with which we started this paper — have specific features and implications according to different social realities. Among the children of context A and context B there are similarities and dissimilarities in the ways of perceiving and enjoying urban spaces. We organized them around three axes: their relation with peers and the games they play; with the adults and the "strangers"; with the street, the neighborhood and the city.

Before addressing them, it is important to note that there are marked differences between the two contexts. Context A is a private school, located near the city center, concerned with participatory methods and art education. It is frequented by families of the small intellectual and scientific bourgeoisie, with significant cultural and social capital. Context B is a social center in the periphery of the city, with preschool and leisure activities, that provides support to the nearest public housing neighborhoods and hosts, mostly, children of the lower social classes.

In the focus groups, a significant difference in content and in the way children express themselves was observed: in the vocabulary used, in the development of ideas and arguments, in the capacity for expression. The work of translation, interpretation and mediation, especially when developed with children, is a complex task and requires a set of ethical and methodological concerns (Morrow & Richards, 1996). Therefore, we seek to analyze the collected data taking into account these disparities and trying to balance the contributions of children in both contexts.

Relation with peers and games

The reports presented here about the games played portray what we can designate as *childhood cultures* or *childhood typicality* that crosses social classes, ethnicity, genres and sometimes even nations. Riding a bicycle or playing hide-and-seek are almost universal activities. Most children expressed great pleasure in exploring outdoors over indoor activities where their movements are more limited. This preference persists during adolescence and youth, presenting itself even in the construction of *interclass* spaces such as contemporary urban cultures (Lopes et al., 2019). However, peer dynamics and the degree of autonomy and freedom are substantially different.

Middle and upper-middle-class participants relate with friends mainly in the school and in extracurricular activities, contexts organized and supervised by adults. These are spaces children consider safe and adequate for them: “their own” spaces (Olwig & Gullov, 2013, p. 2). Some mentioned that sometimes they invite friends to go to the playground with their family. “In so doing, playing outside becomes an adult controlled and arranged affair (as opposed to a spontaneous one), an activity performed by a small group (which often comprises only two members) of good friends of a similar background age and school” (Karsten, 2005, p. 287). In these spaces, play is limited to the rules of use of the equipment and well-defined spatial limits. It is in the domestic space that children manage to have some autonomy, escaping from their parents’ control (Karsten, 2005; Solberg, 1990). In our study, children expressed feelings of well-being (joy, relaxation, freedom) in relation to outside spaces, as opposed to the isolation and boredom experienced inside home.

Children of the lower social classes expressed several opportunities for peer socialization, outside the institutional context and in public space. They interact with friends and relatives of different ages and schools; play games driven and invented by them; use various spaces of the neighborhood and transform them to give substance to their games; show solidarity and group protection; and enjoy considerable freedom and independence, aspects that are in line with previous research (Araújo, 2019; Pinto & Bichara, 2017). Playing at home does not seem to have the same importance for them as for children of higher social strata. Although not mentioned in the focus groups, the adults interviewed reported that many children spend a long time indoors playing electronic games or watching television, often in "self-management", and do not show interest in exploring the outdoors or other spaces of the city.

Relation with teenagers, adults and "strangers"

Some children of the upper-middle classes reported being afraid of teenagers, whom they consider rude and aggressive. This negative portrayal is echoed by other studies, where teenagers appear as disturbing "public order", both by children and parents (Cahill, 1990; Harden, 2000; Veitch et al., 2008). Regarding adults, children clearly differentiate between those considered to be their caregivers (family and educators) and the "strangers" they find in public spaces: "drunks", "smokers"; or simply, those unknowns that cannot be trusted. The caregivers have the "mission" to provide them with spaces to play, protect them from dangers and place limits on their activities. In the case of unknown strangers, children tend to keep their distance, even if there is no risk: they are not the ones "taking care of us". It seems, therefore, that a culture of distrust and fear towards the other is intensified in the case of "strangers". This distrust is accentuated by the *specialization* of spaces, since the playgrounds are not seen as spaces for teenagers, who are thus considered intruders. In their narratives, it is also clear the fragility or even the absence of neighborhood ties. As if each family were an impenetrable island, surrounded by streets that are just corridors to reach a certain destination.

For children of the lower classes, public spaces they occupy are characterized by intergenerational exchanges, mixing people of various ages and engaging in different activities. Unlike children in context A, for them, the street is not just a place of passage. The street is a place to "be", a place for discovering others and the world, a place of joy, but also of conflict and tension. In the courtyards they occupy, adults have fun and talk, work and argue. Children circulate among them, sometimes close and attentive and at other times following their own agency, distracted from what is happening in the "world of adults". Although they did not explicitly mention adolescents, their

reports indicated the presence of older friends. Researchers' observations in the park confirmed this. Neighbors, cousins, brothers who "subtly" teach them games, rules of interaction, ways of appropriating space, etc. Some children expressed negative ideas towards certain adults they associate with alcohol consumption and aggressive behavior. In other episodes, adults (parents or neighbors) are either absent and non-interfering elements, or vigilant and protective "assistants" when some problem or danger occurs. A sense of community and solidarity is thus visible, although confined to the boundaries of the neighborhood. In this case, the neighborhood is the island, disconnected from the rest of the city, limited by walls even if they remain invisible.

Relationship with the street, the neighborhood and the city

For Jeni Harden (2000), children build their "landscapes of risk and safety" around three concepts: private (home), local and public. If the former represents the "safe haven", a kind of sanctuary where nothing can happen, the public is associated with risk and vulnerability. The local is the intermediate sphere between the house and the public space, characterized by proximity and familiarity. The social and affective relevance of this space simultaneously of frontier and extension is quite evident in the discourses of the children of the lower classes that expressed a strong sense of belonging, seeing in their neighborhood a safe, welcoming and protective place, which they fully appropriate, actively contesting and negotiating their spaces (Christensen et al., 2015; Massey, 1994). According to them, in the neighborhood they can walk alone, but not outside the neighborhood since it is dangerous.

For children of the middle and higher classes, the fortuitous moments when they buy bread next door; the boys who live in a street where they know the neighbors and can play in group; or the holidays spent in the village where they can ride a bicycle, are configured as "special reserves of autonomy". These are probably their "local": spatially restricted spaces where familiarity and intense sociability can be built. The externalization of risk is, to some authors (Harden, 2000; Valentine, 1997), a fallacy, in the sense that it is in the domestic environment that most accidents and violence occur. The idea that danger is "out there" has largely prevailed because of the attention given by the media. In Portugal, cases such as Rui Pedro, kidnapped more than twenty years ago, or Maddie, the British child who disappeared while in holiday in Algarve, were and continue to be amplified, contributing to a diffuse and subjective *stranger danger*. This fear is shared by children of both contexts, but for children of the upper middle classes, the urban fear *menu* is significantly higher. It is interesting that, despite living in very different contexts, in both groups, a city narrative associated with risk prevailed. Finally, these children showed a wider awareness (or enunciated it

more clearly) about the changes of the city and society, namely the increase of inhabitants, explained partly by tourism, and the harmful influence of technologies on children's leisure.

In short, during this research, it was evident that children from context A are more subjected to *institutionalization, domestication and hyperprotection* processes than those from context B (from lower social classes). Their independent mobility is quite limited, and they show less agency to face the dangers, delegating their protection to adults. Nevertheless, children from higher social strata enjoy the various experiences of the city provided by the family and by the school. They are the *backseat generation* and the most privileged. Children from context B, one of the segments of the lower classes portrayed here, represent an *outdoor childhood* (Karsten, 2005) that enjoys greater freedom and mobility, demonstrating a sense of agency, mastering common spaces and interacting within the "adults' world", with the risks this entails. Another group, within the lower classes, is, however, confined to their apartments, showing traces of "social anomy" and abandonment. We believe, like Lia Karsten (2005), that this is the most disadvantaged social group regarding socio-spatial rights.

The phenomena of *insularization* and *specialization* — which have been mirrored here — contributes to aggravating restrictions on public spaces by producing forms of socio-spatial segregation depending not only on age, but also on class and social status: children in playgrounds, adults in cafés, poor children in neighborhood yards, rich children in museums. Thus, the ideals of public space, as a place of exchange and encounter with the other and with the difference — that one would associate with a gentrified city, like Porto — become a mirage.

As Lahire wrote in his most recent book on childhood class inequalities, "children live in the same society at the same time, but not in the same world" (Lahire, 2019, p. 11). There are many socializing instances that contribute to the perpetuation of inequality of conditions, resources or experiences. If it is true that the family offers the child a certain "vision of the world, a perception of reality and, in fact, a field of possibilities" (Lahire, 2019, p. 34), it is no less true that the places where people live contribute to reproduce, intensify or mitigate those differences.

In this sense, "the spatial withdrawal of children, or their restriction, is also a departure from the possibility of production by the child of a self-awareness as being of the city and as a participant in common life" (Sarmento, 2018, p. 235, authors' translation). It is therefore important to emphasize that cities are not only places of control, but also places of opportunity (Olwig & Gullov, 2013), since the child is not only submitted to the structures, but is also a transformative agent (Lopes, 2019; Tomás, 2007).

From the reflection presented here, we believe that it is by listening to children's voices and including them in the definition of their times and spaces that we can aspire to the full right to the city.

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