SPRINGS

THE RACHEL CARSON CENTER REVIEW

Issue #4 | 2023

October

© Alison Pouliot and Valérie Chételat

NOT EVERY KID IS WEIRD: A CONVERSATION WITH FRANCESCA MEZZENZANA

Francesca Mezzenzana and Brady Fauth

Springs

The Rachel Carson Center Review

4 • 2023

Francesca Mezzenzana and Brady Fauth

Francesca Mezzenzana received a PhD in anthropology from the London School of Economics. Her current research project, LearningNatures, investigates children's human–nonhuman relationships across cultures. In addition to her numerous academic publications, Francesca has contributed to Aeon, Süddeutsche Zeitung, *and* Slate Magazine. *She has conducted fieldwork in the Ecuadorian Amazon since 2011 and in Italy since 2019. Brady Fauth is an editor at the Rachel Carson Center and a writer in his spare time. He has continued to find ways to get lost in the same field behind his childhood home since 1993. Together, they discuss the inspirations and trepidations of a research project spanning three continents.*

A boy is ready to jump in a lake, Santa Croce Lake, Italy. © Elena Palma. All rights reserved.

BRADY FAUTH: The concept of your new project, LearningNatures, seems to be quite novel, bringing together methods of anthropology, psychology, and philosophy to investigate, cross-culturally, how children speak about and interact with the nonhuman world. As an anthropologist, what were you working on before LearningNatures, and what aspects of your previous research led you to this new project?

FRANCESCA MEZZENZANA: Before working on this project, I was a Marie Skłodowska Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Kent, where I researched children's development of something that I call "environmental empathy"—the relationships of care toward the nonhuman world. I was led to my current project by my interest in animism, in particular in the Amazonian region, which was the topic of my doctoral dissertation at the London School of Economics. Animism—that is, a form of knowing and understanding nonhuman others that recognizes their intelligence, emotions, and, ultimately, animacy—is characteristic of many Indigenous societies in lowland South America, including the Runa, with whom I have the privilege to work in the Ecuadorian Amazon. However, this broad depiction might lead to the impression that Indigenous people impute life indiscriminately on all sorts of beings.

BF: This sounds like an interesting way of conceptualizing different understandings of the nonhuman world, but do such depictions become more complicated when you look at actual instances of these interactions in the field?

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-5357

FM: During my own work, I have observed how different people may readily detect characteristics such as life and intentions in some nonhuman entities but not in others. For example, people might claim that some entities, such as certain types of trees, are capable of thinking, whereas different tree species are not. That's when I began to think that I needed more tools, beyond the ones I had as an anthropologist, to investigate a phenomenon of this complexity. And this is how I got interested in cognition and psychology and the precise instruments these fields offer to map the ways in which people reason about the world. Together with anthropological methods, I believe these other fields provide powerful tools to think about these issues. At the same time, another question began to take shape for me: How does this way of relating to the nonhuman world develop? You and I are very likely to have a relationship to the natural world that is pretty different—although not always—from that of my Runa friends and collaborators. The question for me is: Why? How do certain differences—and similarities—evolve? The answer for me can only be found by looking at children and how they are socialized in what, as coined by psychologist James J. Gibson and applied by anthropologist Tim Ingold, is called the "education of attention." That is a way of learning to attend, to perceive, and to notice.

A boy petting a horse, Alto Biobío, Chile. © Elena Palma. All rights reserved.

BF: Thinking about this "education of attention," and not just what we learn but perhaps what we don't learn, there has been a study, published by the World Economic Forum, on what they called "nature-deficit disorder," which reports that 83 percent of children between the ages of five and 16 in the UK, out of a polled group of 1,000, could not identify a bumblebee. Does something like this factor into the research you're doing?

FM: I am not sure I would trust any study carried out by the World Economic Forum, an institution that represents the elites of the world and as such has a very specific political agenda. But let's see: so, we have a great majority of children not recognizing a bumblebee, yet another study I know shows that they are quite good at identifying every type of Pokémon! The results are not very surprising. They really are an indication of what we value as a society. The natural world is obviously not high on the agenda, as we are increasingly seeing with the way the climate crisis is being handled by current governments. However, I profoundly dislike the pathologizing tone that characterizes a term such as "nature-deficit disorder." It reduces what is a product of a social and economic issue to an individual deficit, a kind of syndrome to which parents—which usually means *mothers*—should find a solution. Children are not outdoors because they are going to school. Children are not outdoors, at least among the middle classes of postindustrial societies, because they don't need to help with household work, which, in other contexts, involves doing agricultural work—animal husbandry, fishing, etc. Children do not know about plants or animals because of the way our food is made. This so-called disorder is a product of a historical and socioeconomic shift and should be conceived as such. Right now, the prevailing answer to this perceived deficit is: bring the children outdoors.

BF: And I take it you don't find this answer satisfying?

FM: Increasing time outdoors, having "wild kindergartens," *Waldkindergärten* here in Germany, won't change how we interact with the natural world mainly because this relationship is shaped by larger socioeconomic forces—shaped by the free market, which determines the value of natural resources and thinks of people in terms of profit. Just "going outside" doesn't consider for instance how access to natural spaces is correlated to socioeconomic class: poor children from minority populations are the least likely to have access to natural spaces. And it's not just that. Sure, you

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-5357

can bring children outdoors so that they move around, enjoy the beauty of the world, and discover wonders, but any benefits this might have are only going to be individual and temporary. Honestly, what I find truly concerning is not that some children in the UK might be spending little time outdoors, but rather that millions of children are denied access to water, food, and land, and that in 20 years' time, with the climate crisis, the situation will be even worse. The two things are linked, but in the first case the problem is phrased in a way that leaves no space for a proper analysis of how the roots of the problem lay in capitalism. So perhaps, yes, sure, take the children outdoors, but also bring them to a strike!

> *What I find truly concerning is that millions of children are denied access to water, food, and land, and that in 20 years' time, with the climate crisis, the situation will be even worse.*

BF: That's a good idea. Well, now that you've touched upon some of the complexities your project deals with, could you tell us about some of the places you intend to go, and about the members of your team that will go there?

FM: Well, we are quite a diverse team: there is me, trained as a social anthropologist, James who is a philosopher, Elena who has a background in literature and anthropology, Amey who has a background in art, ecology, and animal cognition, Franks who is a native Runa researcher with expertise in ethnographic methods, and Andrea from Argentina who is a cognitive psychologist. Each of us is going to go to different field sites. Elena is going to do fieldwork in Chile, among the Pehuenche, an Indigenous community in the Biobío Region that is actively seeking to restore their relationship to the Biobío River after the construction of a dam by the Italian energy company Eni. Amey is going to do research in wilderness programs for children in New York State, attended mostly by white middle-class children. I will be doing fieldwork in a few informal ecovillages in the Apennines in Italy and will also continue my work in Ecuador. But it will be Franks, with whom I've been collaborating on a number of projects, who will take the lead on the research in Ecuador. So, we have a very diverse range of field sites. What all these places have in common is that at each site there is a strong commitment to envisioning a different relationship to the nonhuman world as well as to thinking that pedagogy plays a fundamental role in the process.

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-5357

A mantis on a child's hand, Altovicento, Italy, © Elena Palma. All rights reserved.

BF: I would imagine that, before you venture out into the field, there are some basic concepts and methodologies you'll want to settle upon for your research. Have you already begun this planning, and, if you have, do you presently foresee any major obstacles to the process?

FM: We are doing this conceptual and methodological work right now. As an interdisciplinary team, we have people coming from very different backgrounds. This means that we are constantly debating, arguing, and thinking about even seemingly basic questions such as "What do we count as evidence of X?" Of course, these are never easy questions. But if you only work with colleagues from the same discipline, you tend to forget about the difficulty of such questions, because you are more likely to share certain assumptions about what evidence is and how it satisfies certain requirements. This is not at all the case for our group. I would say we are all learning to understand each other—and the specific language of another discipline—and to be humble in face of other people's knowledge. It has been an enriching and challenging journey!

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-5357


Two children looking at a worm on the ground, Altovicento, Italy. © Elena Palma. All rights reserved.

BF: And what age group will your research focus on?

FM: We will be focusing on children between the ages of three and 10, but, of course, what we will be looking at and the methods we will employ for each age group will differ. We will be looking at this age range because profound steps in conceptual development are supposed to occur in this period—for instance, the emergence of anthropocentrism, here understood as the construal of the category of humans as distinctive from other animals. The latter, for instance, has been thought to emerge in early childhood, but recent research suggests that, in fact, anthropocentrism might not be an innate cognitive disposition but rather something that children learn. This is why I think it is exciting to look at different age groups, contrasting especially preschool and school children. Personally, I will be looking at infants too. I find infancy and early childhood, between zero and three, particularly interesting because of the cultural importance these years seem to hold in our own society.

BF: Can I go one, perhaps philosophical, step further, then, and ask how you begin to define what is even understood to be a child, based on the broad array of cultures you intend to survey?

FM: What a child is—what is considered appropriate for a child to do, what a child can actually do—is certainly something that we are thinking about in the team. In fact, we would even challenge the notion that we already know what a child is and instead argue that we should start from a very minimal definition of childhood—one that allows us to have a meaningful conversation with colleagues in psychology! So, in our work we start from the basics: who is called a child, say, in a Pehuenche community in Chile today? What qualities are emphasized in children? What do they do? What do they not do? How are they cared for? Basically, we try to get rid of our own assumptions of what a child should look like to examine on the ground what being a child in a given place means. This is not the approach taken in mainstream developmental psychology where cultural differences are not taken into account and where most of the research is conducted in what are commonly known as WEIRD societies—that is, Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. Yet the results from this group are often applied to the rest of the world. We urgently need to go beyond WEIRD conceptualizations of childhood, and this is important because by looking at children in their specific contexts, we can avoid making normative and patronizing claims about what type of care they should receive.

> *We try to get rid of our own assumptions of what a child should look like to examine on the ground what being a child in a given place means.*

BF: Great that you mention WEIRD societies! In some of your published works, such as the piece you wrote for *Aeon* this summer, you have reflected on your own anxieties in learning to adapt to new methods of parenting that were entirely dissimilar from your experiences and expectations. Do

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-5357

you think the cross-cultural research that LearningNatures intends to undertake might also be useful to parents and caretakers?

FM: The project has a strong focus on childcare practices. In fact, it is not just about how children interact with the natural world but also about how adults or caretakers—who might not be necessarily grown-ups—explicitly or implicitly teach children and how they interact with them. For instance, the way in which an environmental educator teaches a child about plants will necessarily reflect assumptions about what children are, how they should be taught, and how they should not be taught in that given subgroup of the studied population. In the case of Amey, who will be doing fieldwork in the US, I would predict that interactions between adults and children will involve a lot of verbal exchanges, explanations, and what is called "emotion talk"—talk that focuses on interior feelings and experiences. These are not standard universal communication practices but rather patterns of interactions that are culturally specific to Euro-American middle-class child–adult relationships. I think these interactions will look very different in a place like the Ecuadorian Amazon or the Biobío Region in Chile. It will therefore be inevitable to think about childcare practices in a cross-cultural perspective. So, in that way, I hope that some of the work we will be doing might be useful or at least interesting to parents who will read our research.

Children playing on hay bales, Altovicentino, Italy. © Elena Palma. All rights reserved.

BF: Let's bring this idea closer to home. We're currently in Germany. Have you observed any practices or methods from German caretakers or educational institutions trying to teach "nature" that you think are worth noting?

FM: It's not exactly teaching about nature, but I think there is a more relaxed approach to the "risks" inherent to playing and being outdoors. German parents, or the ones I have met here in Munich, seem to tolerate a certain degree of risk inherent to playing outdoors. The playgrounds, for instance, do not seem to be designed to eliminate every possible risk of falling or injuring oneself—at least in comparison to my experiences in Italy and the UK. And risk is really important because it raises a lot of questions both in relation to child–nature relationships and to childcare more broadly. Particularly as we live in a society averse to risk, and especially when it comes to children, it is

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-5357

interesting how this idea of allowing minimal risks is associated with a kind of nature-oriented education. For instance, *Waldkindergärten* often emphasize that being outdoors necessarily brings some risks and that children should be free to experience them—and, in fact, that this is good for child development. I wonder how much of this higher tolerance for risk here is related to a German romantic idea about spiritual strength through physical resilience. And I am thinking now of the idea of *Naturmenschen* like Gustav Gräser or Otto Gross, who lived nearby, here in Munich Schwabing, more than one hundred years ago, and who often trekked to Switzerland together with people like psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, bathing in cold rivers and dressing themselves scantily in the hostile weather in an effort to become stronger and more resilient! I find this kind of socially influenced performance of identity and interaction with nature really striking and fascinating, and definitely worth investigating.

> *Risk is really important because it raises a lot of questions both in relation to child–nature relationships and to childcare more broadly.*

BF: It seems like LearningNatures is starting in the right place then—from the bottom up—which brings me to my last question for you regarding the potential outcomes of this project. Namely, what societal impacts are you hoping for, and to whom will you try to convey the findings of your research?

FM: Well, on the small scale for now, we hope to be able to offer to interested people here in Munich an "Open Day," during which our team will present our research results and take time to listen to the concerns of parents, educators, teachers, and so on. I think that there is then the potential to generate further insights—for instance on environmental care—that could then be adopted by institutions such as schools or kindergartens. As I mentioned before, another aspect of this project looks at childcare practices, and I am also currently interested in how ideas about "optimal child development" inform early childhood interventions in the Global South. In a paper I cowrote together with colleagues, we argue that early childhood interventions in the Global South—by ignoring ethnographic evidence and basing their claims on developmental research undertaken almost exclusively in the Minority World (Europe and the US)—end up depicting childcare practices there as "deficient." Our critique has already received a lot of attention from policymakers and colleagues in psychology. We are currently making an effort to be intelligible to different communities of experts.

BF: It sounds like you're headed in the right direction. Thank you so much for your time, Francesca. I am sure this will be an exciting research project.

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-5357

Francesca Mezzenzana is an anthropologist with expertise in child socialization and the Amazon. She is the principal investigator of a Volkswagen Foundation Freigeist Grant, based at the Rachel Carson Center, that explores children's understanding of the natural world in different cultural settings. Francesca is particularly interested in psychological anthropology, children's socialization, and human–nonhuman relationships. When she is not at work, you can find her bathing in the Isar river, like a true *Naturmensch*.

Brady Fauth holds degrees in English literature and Germanic studies from the University of Maryland, College Park. He is currently pursuing graduate work at LMU Munich with a focus on the roles and representations of gardens and the curated natural world in the short stories of Katherine Mansfield.

Cite this article

Mezzenzana, Francesca, and Brady Fauth. "Not Every Kid Is WEIRD: A Conversation with Francesca Mezzenzana." *Springs: The Rachel Carson Center Review*, no. 4 (October 2023). https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc-springs-5357.

Springs: *The Rachel Carson Center Review* is an open-access online publication for peer-reviewed articles, creative nonfiction, and artistic contributions that showcase the work of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) and its community across the world. In the spirit of Rachel Carson, it publishes sharp writing with an impact. Surveying the interrelationship between environmental and social changes from a wealth of disciplines and perspectives, it is a place to share rigorous research, test out fresh ideas, question old ones, and to advance public and scholarly debates in the environmental humanities and beyond.

Springs is available online. To view, please visit
https://springs-rcc.org

ISSN 2751-9317

SPONSORED BY THE

Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research