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Outbreak over outbreak: children living the pandemic in the aftermath of Chile's social unrest

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ABSTRACT

Children's experiences of the pandemic in Chile need to be understood in the context of the social unrest that started explosively (although with a much longer history) in October 2019. We reflect here on children and young people's social and political participation in this process, the position of childhood in the Constitution and general inequality as the context in which the pandemic developed. The invisibility of children's experiences and practices, their generalised vulnerability and the acute socioeconomic inequalities that affect them are discussed as the key elements shaping the impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic in their everyday lives and spatialities.

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Introduction

In this viewpoint, we reflect about children's experiences living the Covid-19 pandemic in Chile, in the context of the dramatic institutional and political crisis expressed through the Chilean social outbreak that started in October 2019. In Chile, children have not only been historically invisibilised as political and social actors, but they have also been subject to diverse forms of violence and violation of rights on the part of state institutions during the 30 years after the return to democracy in 1990. The social and economic impacts of the pandemic have deepened vulnerability and inequality affecting childhood and reinforced an urgent need to develop greater levels of protection and recognition of children's rights at a national level. In this sense, we argue that the constitutional process currently underway is an untold opportunity for creating a new social contract that takes children into account as key actors with full rights.

Within this context, we reflect on the unequal impacts of the pandemic in children's lives, and the methodological challenges faced by researchers who aim at making visible the particularities of their experiences and perspectives in relation to this global phenomenon. In the frame of this Special Issue, this viewpoint makes a contribution from the particularities of Chile, pointing towards a more general discussion on the connections between political crisis, young people's political participation, inequalities and the geographical and spatial impacts of the pandemic. In this regard, we argue that even global natural phenomena such as this pandemic have differentiated effects on children's lives in different regions of the world and from different socioeconomic groups, and according to how childhood is considered (or not) within national legal artefacts, human rights approaches and cultural discourses.

First, we discuss the political and social context that constituted the movement initiated by secondary education students in October 2019, the so-called Chilean social outbreak, which set the basis for the current constitutional process. Next, we address the national context in terms of the

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effects of the pandemic and the measures taken by national authorities between March and October 2020. Finally, we focus on the particular impacts of the pandemic on children's lives in Chile, considering the previously outlined context and the pre-existent inequalities that affect children and their rights, sharpening the effects of spatial confinement and restrictions to mobility measures.

1. Pandemic in context: Chile's sociopolitical crisis

For understanding the current situation in Chile regarding the COVID 19 pandemic, it is necessary to situate it first in the context of the socio-political unrest that Chile was experiencing since October 2019 as the result of a much longer history: from dictatorship times (1973–1990) and the democratic governments that followed – sustaining the socio economic and political core structures outlined by the dictatorship in its Constitution and neoliberal policies (Moulian 1997). In October 2019, in the context of the right-wing government of Sebastián Piñera, and following an increase to the Metro ticket fare (30 Chilean Pesos, 0.038 US Dollar or 0.029 Sterling Pound), secondary education students began a series of protests in Santiago, the capital city. These included a call to 'evade', meaning not paying the ticket, with crowds of students jumping over the turnstiles at the Metro stations. Authorities were perplexed to see this reaction from students, as the fare increase did not apply to the student fare – not acknowledging the many ways in which children and young people's lives are connected to their parents, families and societies'. These actions, and the brutal police repression with which the government responded, triggered spontaneous protests from diverse generational and socioeconomic groups and quickly escalated into major social unrest not only in Santiago but in most cities/towns in Chile (Emol 2020). Although the fare increase was not huge (but it was from the point of view of people with minimum income or with no salary at all), the 30 Chilean pesos increase resulted in one of the first mottos of the protests: 'it isn't 30 pesos, it's 30 years', meaning the 30 years of 'democracy' after the end of Pinochet's dictatorship, during which structural inequalities established during the dictatorship in health, education, housing, and pension systems, have only intensified (PNUD 2017; Salazar 2019). By the time the government announced that the fare would increase, it was too late, as the protests were aiming way beyond this, towards constitutional change. The following months included regular and massive protests in the streets of all cities; metro stations and supermarkets being burned (with unknown responsibilities); extremely violent police/military repression resulting in systematic violations to human rights: 1362 victims of institutional violence under the age of 18 (Cortés Morales 2020); around 30 deaths, thousands of injuries, hundreds of severe eye injuries, and around 2500 detentions (many of them still imprisoned) of which around 100 were children in the Estate protection system (Defensoría de la Niñez 2020). All legitimated by the president, who decreed a state of emergency and curfew – a figure tightly associated in Chile to dictatorship.

At the same time, grassroots movements emerged organising participatory spaces such as popular assemblies in neighbourhoods (Radio Universidad de Chile 2019). The purpose of these spaces was to enable processes of collective reflection around possible approaches to the social crisis and to seek ways of mutual support. The main demands that emerged were to radically modify pension and health systems; to guarantee the quality of public education; to (legally) protect the environment; justice for indigenous communities; gender equality, among other issues, all of them synthesised in an urgent demand for constitutional change through constitutional assembly (CNN Chile 2019). The strength of the movement forced the government to call for a referendum on this matter.

It is important to emphasise the key participation that children and young people had in this process, both in the protests as well as in the participatory spaces of dialogue and discussion, some of them specially focused on the expression of the views, demands and proposals of children and young people as social actors and political subjects. Among these, participatory methodologies were developed to promote these spaces, for example by the Children's Advocacy Office and the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Childhood (Núcleo de Estudios Interdisciplinarios de Infancias 2020a). As a result of this movement, the need for constitutional recognition and incorporation

of childhood was acknowledged, as well as the need for mechanisms that guarantee an effective, relational and protagonist participation of children and young people in the constitutional process – the fact they do not have the right to vote should not imply that they cannot participate in the constitutional process (Lovera 2017). To promote and allow their participation, to express and listen to their views in this process is a social-political challenge with the potential to set a precedent in the Latin-American context.

Thirty years after the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Chile is the only Latin-American country with no institutional framework for comprehensively positioning children as subjects of rights (UDP 2020). In the current context, children have not only been historically excluded from social participation and denied the possibility of acting as citizens in the matters that affect them the most, but their rights have also been systematically violated by the Chilean State in the spaces that should guarantee their protection, as particularly demonstrated in the UN CRC 2018 report (Comité de los Derechos del Niño 2018). Altogether, these issues highlight the inequalities that children encounter for their comprehensive protection, citizenship and social inclusion in relation to adults and according to intersectional categories. It is therefore a priority to incorporate children as relevant political actors in their communities, if democracy is to account for equal dignity and justice for everyone. In this regard, the constitutional recognition of childhood is an unprecedented opportunity in Chilean history for establishing a legal and ethical framework according to international Human Rights standards. This would set a frame for the formulation and application of national legislation and public policy in favour of children, at the time that would become a tool for change strengthening and visibilising children as subjects whose rights are constitutionally recognised and protected (Espejo 2017).

A referendum for a new constitution was originally scheduled for April 2020, in which people over 18 would vote whether they wanted a new constitution or not. During the months that preceded the arrival of COVID 19 to Chile the social and political climate was tense in preparation for this, given that for some economic and political groups a new constitution appears as a threat to their privileges and to the current social order. However, in March it was decided to postpone the referendum due to the pandemic, and it was rescheduled for October. The result was a 78.27% of votes in favour of a new constitution, and a 78.99% in favour of an elected constituent convention (SERVEL 2020).

2. Chile facing the pandemic

It is in this context that COVID 19 reached Chile. The first case was confirmed on March 3rd. With 75 confirmed cases and in the midst of discrepancies between central and local governments, schools and all educational institutions shut down on March 16th. There have been no official measures seeking to keep schools or nurseries open for children whose parents are key workers or children who are considered vulnerable, as it has happened in other countries. It is a key to note that the school year in Chile begins in March, so children had just returned to school after two and a half months of summer holidays when schools shut down. This decision remained the same until October 2020, when a total of 442.070 cases and 12.979 deaths had been reported (MIN-SAL 2020). Once lockdown measures relatively relaxed schools and nurseries were allowed to open in some districts. However, only 15% of schools reopened during 2020, and 40% of them are considered to be fit for reopening in March for all students on a daily basis, while 47% of urban schools planning to reopen with a hybrid (virtual/face-to-face) system (La Tercera 2020).

In addition to this, public parks and nature reserves closed, and a 'dynamic lockdown' system was put in place, meaning that some areas within a city can be in lockdown while others are not – overlooking the mobile aspects of city life. The whole Metropolitan Region was in lockdown for two months, and some areas have been in lockdown for over five months. Other towns and regions across the country are or have been in lockdown too, with a general feeling that lockdown has always been decreed too late. In Chile this means that, at least in theory, adults can request a

maximum of two permits per week for going out. This includes permits for shopping for groceries or medicines, attending a health appointment, going to the bank, bringing food to the elderly or walking the dog – but not exercising. There are police and military checkpoints and venturing out without a permit while in lockdown means risking fines or even prison – which has not prevented people who need to move from doing so. It was only on the 17th of August that a special permit for children was created, so that children in lockdown can now go out on a walk three times a week, for a maximum of 90 minutes each time. Some children lived in lockdown with no permits for them to go out at all for around five months. At the end of July a transition plan was put in place, with some districts going out of lockdown phase into transition, which means people do not need permits for going out on weekdays, and they are allowed to go to work if working from home is not possible.

In general, there is a call for people to work from home if they can, and to go out only for essential needs. There is also an emphasis on hygiene measures such as washing hands and cleaning around the house often, as well as modifying or avoiding traditional greeting habits, such as shaking hands, kissing and hugging – all of them very popular in Chile, not only among close friends and families. Finally, there is a general recommendation regarding children not seeing grandparents or any elderly person. Complying with this implies a dramatic change for Chilean families, as it is usual to have close affective and practical interdependent ties with extended families, especially around childcare arrangements. Grandparents play a key role in this regard – complementing, replacing or extending nursery and school care, allowing parents to work longer hours or to work at all.

The high rate of informal work and a significant rate of unemployment in Chile mean that many families depend upon their members moving on a daily basis to collect discarded items, sell things in the streets, public transport or street markets, to recycle, do small occasional jobs or regular jobs with no contract. These precarious economies have been utterly affected by the pandemic, particularly by the restrictions to movement. Informal work and unemployment are expected to have significantly increased during the pandemic and have translated into a significant part of the population not having a secure income during these times. In addition to this, many people have lost their jobs or seen their incomes significantly reduced. With a strong opposition on the part of the pension funds private companies (established by the dictatorship) and after an agitated debate at the congress, the government has allowed people to withdraw up to a 10% of their pension funds. However, this measure only benefits people who have actually saved money through the pension funds system. Other financial measures have been created as an aid for people living in low or middle-income homes, insufficient measures in all respects. Food boxes have been distributed, supposedly aimed at lower income homes, but in reality randomly distributed – sometimes according to the criteria of council employees. For example, many immigrant families have reported to be denied these boxes based on their immigrant status.

In this context, measures based on fixed territorial categories and mobility-constriction constitute a fantasy. As Bhan et al. (2020) have argued

For the majority in cities of the global south, where most urban people in the world live, ‘social distancing’ as prescribed by northern health protocols is just about impossible. It exists in an imaginary world, a projection, in which people have a home where they can be isolated and work from, where children can have classes via zoom, where savings exist on which to survive for lockdown days without new income, and where hands can be easily washed. Calls to “stay at home,” and “work from home,” as well as the design of mobility-constricting “lockdowns” as preventive epidemiological practices draw their imagination from the urban arrangements, built forms and economic lifeworlds of the North and of the elite neighborhoods that brought COVID into southern cities (...) It spread from upper-class neighborhoods to poor areas of the city, not uncommonly carried by domestic workers who contracted the virus from their rich employers. This directionality has created ways of seeing the virus and ways of shaping a response that tracks a northern and elite paradigm (...) In these cities, getting by means being able to move, every day, both alone but also in concert with others, to stay open to the trade, the *skarrel*, the hustle to arrange water, food, work, waste, childcare, data and identity for that day, that week, for just some more time. It is these arrangements that make everyday life possible in the southern urban and they lie at the heart of what we mean by collective life.

This is, however, a reality that the former health minister, Mañalich, acknowledged not to have counted with when planning the first measures for tackling the COVID 19 crisis. The government's management of and attitude towards the pandemic has in general accentuated the distrust that people had of it since the social outbreak. At the same time, many of the grassroots organisations that emerged with it have prevailed during Covid 19, through virtual means but also organising forms of supporting people who need it the most, and mutual support such as 'communal pots' or 'soup kitchens' that have spread as a way to tackle food poverty, as in other Latin-American countries (Alcoba 2020).

3. Children living in pandemic times in Chile

The context in which the pandemic reached Chile has particular implications for childhood, bearing in mind the extreme inequality that characterises the health and education systems, divided in public and private institutions with acutely different resources and qualities, as well as the levels of poverty that affect children in all realms. According to the latest report by the Chilean Observatory of Childhood and its COVID 19 report, 13.9% of children live in income poverty, and 22.9% are affected by multidimensional poverty. Considering all forms of poverty 31.2% of children live in poverty. This means 3 out of 10 children (ONA 2020, 9). Poverty affecting children translates into different dimensions. For example, 17.1% of children live in precarious housing from a material point of view, with 17% of children living in overcrowded homes. In addition to the characteristics of housing itself, neighbourhoods vary greatly in terms of their infrastructure and recreational/green spaces, with poorer areas being affected by 'green poverty' too. In terms of access to water, there are 400.000 families with no access to water and 147 districts experiencing water shortage (ONA 2020, 9–10). With schools expecting children to continue their education through online and virtual means, it is particularly serious to note that 73% of homes in Chile do not have mobile broadband connection and 59.6% do not have home broadband connection. The distribution of connectivity is highly unequal and territorialised, so that in Santiago, while in some districts 100% of homes are connected to the Internet, in others only 30% are (ONA, 2020).

It is also relevant to highlight that one of the main causes for social unrest was the extreme inequality that characterises the Chilean health system. Divided in public and private affiliations, the quality of health attention is highly unequal. In this regard, it is important to note that 81.3% of children are affiliated to the public system (ONA 2020), which implies a big disadvantage when seeking medical attention or hospitalisation.

In this context, it is clear that the main aspect shaping children and young people's experiences of the pandemic in Chile and its long-term effects is social, economic and territorial inequality in diverse aspects of children's lives: housing and habitat; access to water, Internet, education, health services; risk of violence, mental and physical health issues, among others. This means that children are experiencing these times very differently according to the resources their families have access to, the district and kind of house they live in, the health system they are affiliated to, and so on. Considering that Chilean cities are characterised by acute socioeconomic residential segregation, inequality is tightly linked to territorial categories. However, as pointed out by ONA, the data relating to Covid 19 that municipalities have made available is not disaggregated by age/districts, therefore a spatial analysis of this kind is not possible (2020).

Overlooking the many ways in which children and young people are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of COVID 19, the government's strategies and media discourses have once more made children invisible, both in terms of the direct effects that this illness can have on them, as well as in terms of its implications for their everyday present and future lives. Regarding the impact of the illness itself on children, the idea that they are scarcely affected by it was spread in Chile. Based on this, less testing was performed among them. However, according to ONA (2020), until June 12th there were 12385 reported cases affecting people aged 0 to 19. From these, 38% were 15–19 years old, 21% were 10–14, 17% 5–9, and 24% 0–4 years old. From all these cases, 509 had been

hospitalised (ONA 2020, 2–3). Chile was the second country with more cases among children after Peru (13.014 cases), followed by Italy (5.676), Spain (3.191), United Kingdom (2.666) and México (4.359). If these numbers are considered in relation to the total number of cases per country, Chile is top of the list, with 7.9% rate, meaning that 8 out of 100 cases are children (ONA 2020, 6).

In terms of the impact of the pandemic on children's everyday lives and experiences, children have appeared in the public discourse variously as: vectors for the disease, therefore a risk for the elderly; voiceless receptors of virtual education and debates around whether this school year needs to be repeated or not; as an extra load parents have to cope with when trying to work from home without the usual childcare; passive victims of mental health issues as a result of confinement; and more recently, when permits were granted for teenagers to go out on their own, as irresponsible people who will probably cause new waves of contagion when meeting friends and getting drunk. Altogether, a series of stigmatising discourses around children and youth have been created rendering their views and experiences during the long months of confinement invisible.

Paradoxically, they constitute the most vulnerable group in terms of the social impacts of the pandemic, and the group that has seen their rights restricted the most – education, play, recreation, participation of public and cultural life, and so on. However, the government has not suggested any specific measures for supporting children during and after the pandemic (Cortés Morales 2020). Their care and protection has been completely circumscribed to families' individual efforts, resources and capabilities, transferring to them roles that other institutions used to have in relation to children, with no concerted support for working (from home or in person) and caring for children at the same time. From this perspective, in addition to a health crisis, COVID 19 constitutes a crisis of care, of the precarious in/formal networks that used to sustain it (CEPAL 2020). It has unveiled the inequalities that shape it in a realm where the individual and private has prevailed over the collective and public; competitiveness over collaboration. The pandemic has evidenced the need for understanding care as a social, collective responsibility that involves the participation of different actors, all of them essential for children's wellbeing and comprehensive development (Blum and Dobrotić 2020).

The question about how the pandemic is affecting children and young people needs to be approached from a perspective that considers their everyday experiences in (different degrees of) confinement/social distancing (Morales 2020). In Chile, and possibly elsewhere, an approach has predominated limited to or focused on the psychopathological effects of confinement. This approach overlooks the resources and capabilities that children and young people have and the agencies they can develop with others when coping with the circumstances that have restricted their rights. This does not mean in any case to ignore the inequalities, discomfort and violence that they may be encountering, as previously discussed, but to argue for an approach that does not reduce children to vulnerable and passive subjects, acknowledging them as actors and agents.

Confinement/social distancing have radically transformed the ways in which we relate to others (humans and more-than-humans), the use of public space, our understandings/relations/positioning in relation to nature, and the ways in which affect and emotion circulate, with ICTs taking on new and sometimes unexpected roles. For children and youth, the closure of schools, parks and restricted public spaces has come in tandem with the separation from others and discontinuity of social and emotional links. In this regard, it is essential to understand the tactics that they have developed based on situated practices and knowledge to look after themselves and others, while sustaining the links that are important to them; and which agents (materialities, people, technologies) have come together with children allowing/blocking the expansion of their perception and action spaces beyond the boundaries of the spaces they are confined to. Approaching these questions is essential in the context of this crisis, so that we can see children's agencies, their experiences as potentially transformative, and the resources they need in order to become agents (Vergara et al. 2015)

It was in this spirit that the research project 'Childhood in confinement times' (Núcleo de Estudios Interdisciplinarios en Infancias 2020b) was developed, aiming at registering children's creations during their lives in lockdown. This was an open invitation for children, families, educational communities, among others, to share their experiences through the creation of drawings, videos, pictures, audio, writings and so on. The idea is to register their experiences, make them visible and create a collective memory, bearing in mind that children not just reproduce discourses and practices, but they produce their own meanings, views and perspectives through means not always acknowledged or noticed by adults and institutions. From these experiences we have learnt that children create or find objects that allow them to represent the world they inhabit. Their creations enable them to produce new ways of relating to an historical experience like the pandemic, and to open a space for sharing with others these experiences and meanings. Drawings, pictures, writings about the pandemic express what they have lived, but also situate them in relation to others, enabling the emergence of a collective experience. In a moment in which the effects of the pandemic threaten the social fabric, networks, democratic and collective life, it is utterly important to create a collective history and memory, so that this time we do not forget, as it has been the case with previous pandemics in Chile (Espinoza 2020).

Understanding the effects of the pandemic in children's lives according to their positions as social and historical subjects requires approaches that despite the current circumstances do not quit to focus on the minutiae of everyday life. The pandemic challenges us as researchers to not overlook the smaller scales of the phenomenon, those details created in the private spaces of affect, emotion and action, so that these aspects are not overrun by exclusively economic, epidemiologic or social control perspectives.

As a corollary, as we prepared for submitting this viewpoint, and as Covid restrictions had relatively softened and the referendum approached, on Friday 2nd of October 2020, in the middle of a demonstration in Santiago a 16 year old boy has been violently thrown into the Mapocho river, according to many videos and testimonies pushed by a policeman (The Guardian 2020). The boy, who fell 7 metres into an almost empty river, has survived with multiple fractures and wounds. The images of the event have gone viral, among other things making literally and metaphorically visible the way in which the Chilean estate relates to children and young people's political participation. This dramatic event reinforces the need for institutional changes guaranteeing the protection of children's rights in all realms in Chile.

4. Conclusions

The current pandemic situation in Chile reveals the absence of public policies that protect children's rights in times of crisis. It has also unveiled the lack of acknowledgement of children as citizens and social actors who can contribute to and participate in political and social life, for example not being able to participate in the referendum that their own actions enabled, or not being allowed to go out of their homes for over five months in some cases during the pandemic. The health crisis highlights the need to change the dominant approach in social protection policies that views children as incapable and vulnerable beings, therefore situating them as passive receptors of health measures. An approach focused on their particular needs as children, and the inequalities that affect them too is needed, but also highlighting their collaborative agencies and resources. Paying attention to their experiences and views is key for effectively guaranteeing the protection of their rights in all realms. In this regard, the pandemic crisis has revealed how little we know about children's everyday lives, and therefore how little we know about how children are experiencing the impacts of confinement, restrictions to movement and the use of public and natural spaces, and their involvement in remote education. Instead, the limited knowledge we have in this regard is based on adult-centric perspectives with information gained from what adults have to say about these matters, not taking into account or seeking to approach children's views. It is fundamental then to develop research methodologies and projects that respectfully approach children's subjectivities, experiences

and opinions, considering them as co-creators of knowledge in these research processes, generating space for their perceptions, meanings and experiences to be seen and taken seriously around this historical phenomenon that is impacting their lives and will probably impact them for life.

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