

## **Children as caregivers: Ethnographic perspectives and political implications**

**Guest Editors**

**Marjorie Murray, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile**  
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Children all around the world act as caregivers of other children, adults, or animals. Although often overlooked, child caregiving is globally and historically the rule rather than an exception (García Sánchez 2018). For several decades, anthropologists and other scholars in the social sciences have documented the varied ways in which children relate and care for others (e.g., Cicirelli 1994; Harkness & Super 2014; Lancy 2015; Rabain-Jamin, Maynard & Greenfield 2003; Weisner & Gallimore 1977; Weisner 1982; Zukow 1989). For example, the role of children as caregivers has been analysed as a strategy to distribute the burden of childcare and enable parents to engage fully in economic activities (LeVine et al. 1994); as an apprentice system that prepares children for their future roles as parents (Weisner 2017); or to foster the social, emotional, and cognitive development of those children they care for (Scheidecker 2023). Children often combine caregiving with other responsibilities and activities (e.g., Bolin 2006; Casimir 2010; Lancy 2018), which form part of the relational contexts through which their everyday agency is expressed (Abebe 2019).

Children's care is not limited to rural contexts in the Global South; it has also been well documented in urban settings in Western contexts (Mooya 2016), especially in low-income communities (e.g., Boado, Fatyass & Murray 2024; Fatyass & Llobet 2023; Leavy & Nurit Shabel 2022; Luttrell 2019), and in the context of migration (Bauer 2016; McGovern & Devine 2016; Rosen, Crafter & Meetoo 2019; Rosen, R., Chase, E., Crafter, S., Glockner, V., & Mitra, S. 2023). It is within the framework of migration and displacement, or crisis situations such as orphanhood due to AIDS (Yanagisawa, Poudel & Jimba 2010) or the COVID-19 pandemic (Rohde-Abuba 2022), that children's care has gained greater visibility. In these cases, care through children is often framed as part of a broader social problem or an exception, rather than as an everyday practice that is typically taken for granted (Mooya 2016).

Overall, the longstanding research from anthropology and related fields and the insights it produced remain marginal from mainstream developmental science as well as from social policy, children's rights, or child protection and welfare services (Balagopalan 2021).

We assume that this underappreciation is due to the ambivalent status of children's care vis-à-vis the well-established ideological and classed construction of children as those to be cared for, and adults, in particular mothers, as those who care for others. Consequently, with this special issue we aim to confront a double-sided problem to grasp and fully acknowledge children's contributions as caregivers. On the one hand, there is a tendency to overlook or downplay various care activities led by children. This is the case, for example, when in the context of child development and welfare assessments the care of older siblings or cousins is ignored or considered negligible (Scheidecker 2023). On the other hand, when made visible, children's care for other children tends to be pathologized, for example, as child labor or exploitation under the hegemony of Children and Adolescents' rights (Twum-Danso Imoh & Okyere 2020).

**This special issue aims to contribute to the full recognition of children as caregivers—not only for the core readership of childhood studies scholars, but also for scientists and practitioners across relevant applied fields.** Despite its well-established presence in the anthropology of childhood (e.g., García-Sánchez 2018; Weisner & Gallimore 1977), indigenous psychology (e.g., Nsamenang 2010), and evolutionary psychology (Lew-Levy et al. 2020), children's roles as caregivers have received limited systematic attention in mainstream research and policy discourse (Balagopalan 2021; Bauer 2016). A special issue in *Childhood*, as the leading journal in childhood studies, is well-suited to effectively challenge dominant assumptions that cast adults—especially mothers—as providers of care, and children primarily as recipients. In addition to establishing children's caregiving as a central concern within childhood studies, this special issue will emphasize its critical implications for family policy and intervention. Our goal is to bridge ethnographic research with broader debates on the politics of childhood, ensuring that these vital insights reach both academic and policy-oriented audiences.

**We invite contributions from scholars across all relevant disciplines—including, for example, childhood studies, anthropology, psychology, sociology, policy studies, geography, social work, and education—addressing topics and inquiries such as:**

- In which way and to what extent do children care for others across different cultural, socio-economic, and historical contexts?
- How does children's caregiving intersect with dominant constructions of gender, age, kinship, and class?
- How do children define, experience, and make sense of their caregiving roles and how do adult caregivers, for example parents, view children's contributions as carers?
- What are the social consequences of children's caregiving—for themselves, for those they care for, and for those they collaborate with?
- How does children's caregiving shape their subjectivities, moral development, sense of agency, and sense of responsibility? And how does it contribute to their socialization into adult caregiving roles?
- How do processes of social transformation, migration, or crisis, reconfigure caregiving arrangements involving children?
- In which ways can the analysis of children's caregiving challenge adult-centric understandings of care and dependency?
- What theoretical and methodological approaches have hindered or are particularly well-suited to the study of children's caregiving?

- How are children's caregiving roles represented or omitted in legal, educational, and policy frameworks, and with what effects?
- What happens when children's caregiving is rendered visible—as a source of strength, as labor, as exploitation—or ignored, and who benefits or loses from such framings?
- How can interdisciplinary dialogues between anthropology, childhood studies, social policy, psychology, and related disciplines enhance our understanding of caregiving in childhood and inform policies?

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## Guest Editors' Bio:

**Marjorie Murray** is Professor of Anthropology at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and Principal Investigator at the Centro de Estudios Interculturales e Indígenas (CIIR). She is also an Associate Researcher at the Instituto Milenio VIODEMOS. Her ethnographic work focuses on parenting, early childhood, women's subjectivities, and material and visual culture in Chile and Latin America. She has studied the politics of motherhood, indigenous childhoods among the Mapuche, and intercultural tensions in childrearing and education. More recently, her research has examined children's subjectivities and caregiving practices in Brazil. Dr. Murray has advised Chilean government agencies and UNICEF on issues related to childhood, care, and interculturality. She previously served as Director of the School of Anthropology at her university. She is a member of the editorial board of *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* and contributes regularly to editorial and review work in the field of childhood studies.

**Gabriel Scheidecker** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Zurich and Principal Investigator of the SNSF Starting Grant project "Saving Brains?". His research focuses on childhood, childrearing, and the politics of parenting across diverse cultural and policy contexts. He has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in rural Madagascar on children's social worlds and emotional socialization, and in Berlin on the experiences of children of Vietnamese migrants and their families' interactions with child protection systems. His current work critically examines global Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs, challenging dominant scientific assumptions and advocating for the inclusion of ethnographic perspectives. His publications highlight the role of children as social agents and question adult-centric approaches in ECD research and policy. Dr. Scheidecker contributes regularly to debates on childhood and development through journals such as *Current Anthropology*, *Ethos*, and *The Lancet*.



## Schedule:

- June 20, 2025 – Submission of abstracts.
- June 30, 2025 – Invitation sent to possible paper contributors
- November 1, 2025 – Submission of full article manuscripts
- November 2025 – June 2026 – Peer-review process
- Autumn 2026 – Publication of the special issue

*Abstracts (300 words, in English) should be sent by June 20, 2025 to the Managing Editor Ragnhild Berge: [ragnhild.berge@ntnu.no](mailto:ragnhild.berge@ntnu.no). Please include the author's name(s), affiliation(s) and contact information.*

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