

Playing the “pibe chorro” game: masculine skills and legitimate peripheral participation in street culture

Jesús Jaramillo^{a*}

^a Faculty of Education Sciences, National University of Comahue, Río Negro, Argentina

Yrigoyen 2000. Cipolletti, RN 8324. Rep. Argentina. E-mail: jesusnqn@gmail.com

Master in Educational Research with Socio-anthropological Orientation. Professor of Education Sciences at the National University of Comahue.

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In this article I analyse the street learning that a group of boys in a poor neighbourhood in Argentina produce when they play at being “pibes chorros”. Through the observation of interviews, photos and audio recordings made in the neighbourhood since 2010, I show how these games are occasions for boys to learn to pretend they know how to steal and to recreate a masculine image of toughness in order to cope with both street life and local working life. In this way, street culture, which in other studies is often seen as a constraint on available educational opportunities, in this article is a central place for learning by *legitimate peripheral participation* to occur (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The masculine acquisitions and skills of street play allow these boys greater preparation and participation social for life in highly formal spaces such as oil, the police and the local state.

Keywords: play; street culture; masculinity; legitimate peripheral participation; situated learning

Introduction

In this article I analyse the forms of learning about street culture in a group of boys from the “Toma Norte” neighbourhood in the city of Neuquén, province of Neuquén, in northern Patagonia, Argentina¹. In particular, the learning they produce when they play at being “pibes chorros”. This expression is used locally to refer to young people from poor neighbourhoods who steal or, as in the case of this study, dress, act and talk as if they were thieves. Through these games, the boys learn to pretend they know how to steal and to recreate a masculine image of toughness in order to cope with both street life and local working life. In this way, street culture, which in other studies is often seen as a constraint on available educational opportunities, in this article is a central place for learning by *legitimate peripheral participation* to occur (Lave and Wenger

1991). As I show below, the masculine acquisitions and skills of street play allow these boys greater preparation and participation social for life in highly formal spaces such as oil, the police and the local state.

The data analysed in this article correspond to my field notes obtained between 2015 and 2016 in relation to a group of four boys who were, at the time, between 16 and 17 years old. However, for their general analysis I recover a longitudinal fieldwork that began in 2010 and lasted for fifteen months, and continued intensively between 2015 and 2016. The theoretical explanations that I present here recover the point of view of my interlocutors, and dialogue with classic ethnographic studies in Latin America that have recognised the street as an alternative space for personal growth and identity definition for young people in contexts of profound social and economic inequality.

Following this introduction, I develop some classical and recent theoretical approaches to theft and drug use among young people in urban contexts within in Argentina, theorising the concept of the street in the aforementioned studies as a crucial space for *situated learning* (Lave and Wenger 1991; Padawer 2012; Malcolm 2015; Rodríguez Celín et al. 2018; Martín et al. 2019). In a second section, I describe in detail the methodological aspects of the longitudinal fieldwork mentioned above. In a third section, I characterise the neighbourhood and the economic resources of the context. In the following sections, I examine the games around the knowledge of stealing and argue about the production of an image of the “pibe chorro” linked to a culture of toughness that allows these boys to cope with the street life of which they are protagonists. Finally, I address the way in which they are included as legitimate participants in the street culture, and at the same time and with a certain legitimacy, partially and provisionally integrated in other formal labour communities where such a masculine image is also required.

The street culture of the “pibe chorro”

In recent decades there has been a proliferation of ethnographic studies of the south concerned with understanding the practices of theft and drug use among young people in urban contexts of Latin America. Among them, there are pioneering studies in the region that are a reference for most of the recent analyses on the subject, and for this very reason they are taken up in this article. These ethnographies of the Latin American South, framed within what has come to be known as **studies of violence or juvenile crime**, coincide in pointing out that **the street culture emerges as an alternative space for personal growth and identity production in contexts of profound social and economic inequality** (Lomnitz 1975; Reguillo 2000; Míguez 2004, 2008; Kessler 2004; Rodgers 2006; Sousa 2006, among others). Probably indebted to classic ethnographic studies such as Whyte’s (1943/1971) study on *corner boys* in an Italian community in Boston during the Great Depression of the 1930s, as well as the essays compiled by Hall and Jafferson (1975/2010) on post-war British youth, these new studies **see the street as a system of alternative rules that subaltern groups organise in contexts of deep economic crisis, increasing poverty and urban growth.**

In Argentina, it was in the 1990s when the neighbourhood and the street became central as spaces in which social belonging was constructed. With the implementation of neoliberal regional economies, an exponential process of poverty, fueled by drastically reduced opportunities for insertion into the formal labour market and spatial segregation of increasingly stigmatised neighbourhoods, took place during those years and has ever since largely persisted. These experiences, characterised by *social fragmentation* (Isla and Míguez 2001), were concurrent in the lives of young people known as “pibes chorros”. Thus, for example, there are sociological studies that coincide in pointing out the ways in which **young people in Argentina experience crime**

either as an opportunity to solve material problems, or as an instrumental or expressive way by which illegal practices, like many other practices and mediations, provide moral inputs to compose an identity (Míguez 2004, 2008; Kessler 2004; Auyero and Berti 2013). Based on their empirical references, the authors speak of *amateur* crime (Kessler 2004) or “*bardero*” crime (Rodríguez Alzueta 2016) to refer to young people with difficulties that oscillate between precarious work and crime, or between forced leisure and unemployment or social assistance, and “experience crime as an opportunity to solve material or identity problems, respectively” (Rodríguez Alzueta 2016, 22). In both cases, crime is not the only differentiating criterion, as it appears associated with other activities such as drinking, taking drugs, and going out at night; such experiences activate a groupness that is often seen as “one of the securitarian strategies developed by discriminated and stigmatised young people to cope with daily humiliations and to take care of each other” (Rodríguez Alzueta 2014, 129).

The previous remark is similar to that made by other authors (Matza y Sykes 1957/2004, Katz 1988, Ferrell 2004/2010) who suggest that street crime is often committed due to emotion, excitement and groupness rather than for the monetary benefits the participants may obtain. In these cases, urban violence becomes an expressive resource which regulates social relationships, placing the protagonists within a certain social hierarchy established among the youth. This allows them to construct an image of toughness that provides them with a masculinity which agrees with that of the society where they live (Cabral 2016).

In all the above mentioned studies, the street takes the place of the school, family and work; “without implying a disappearance of their representations, but being above all a place for inclusion through identification processes that are given to them and with which they decide to do something” (Míguez 2004, 54). However, as these

authors argue, the identity production and the illegal trade involved in the “pibe chorro” street bring about a cultural gap with respect to the conventional world of society. According to their arguments, the intricate rules and conventions governing the street do not appear to be those needed to achieve success in the middle-class world, or even in the working-class world. Therefore, street culture, which at times includes, separates as well.

According to Bourgois (2010), whose work is among those most frequently cited by these authors, this inclusion process is even more dramatic. As he could observe in the case of Puerto Rican crack dealers in Harlem, street culture appears to drag the youth into self-destruction processes which are difficult to be reversed. This is what Bourgois himself points out as paradoxical:

The illegal trade that the street entails, however, drags the majority of its participants into a life of violence and addiction. Therefore, and paradoxically, the street culture of resistance internalises the rage and organises the destruction of its participants and the community that hosts them. In other words, although street culture arises from a search for dignity and the rejection of racism and oppression, it ultimately becomes an active agent in personal degradation and community ruin" (Bourgois 2010, 40)².

The approach of this article is complementary and at the same time a little different from what is already known, insofar as I use the concept of *street culture as situated learning* (Lave and Wenger 1991). As these authors state, *situated learning* has as its central characteristic a process of *legitimate peripheral participation*, whereby newcomers inevitably participate in *communities of practice*, learning the mastery of knowledge and skills that enable them to approach full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community. In the perspective of these authors, learning is not

merely situated in practice, but is integral to the process by which newcomers become part of a *community of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Accordingly, the learning experiences I present here may well be understood as part of the ongoing participation of young people in local *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991), allowing them to become, over time, more legitimate and less peripheral community members. From this point of view, learning implies not only the capacity to engage in new activities, exercise new tasks and functions, and master new understandings but, fundamentally, a process of becoming a different person with respect to *communities of practice*, involving the construction of identities.

This distinction raises a critical reflection on the discourse of *street culture* that in Latin America is often used to refer to separate public spaces, demarcated by social hierarchies and forms of stigmatisation of poor groups. As shown below, the image of hardness that allows these boys to manage in the world of the street in a poor neighbourhood in Argentina is not linked to a condition of poverty, but to masculine practices and values legitimated in state economies related to oil exploitation and to the police institution.

Therefore, the *street culture* to which I refer in this study is not limited to the street, let alone the street of the poor, but refers to forms of knowledge and learning that are contextualised and are part of interdependent and global processes of social participation (Lave and Wenger 1991)³.

Methodology

This text is based on longitudinal fieldwork that began in 2010 when the protagonists of this study were between 10 and 11 years old (Jaramillo 2015, 2018). At that early stage when they were children, they had already participated in fieldwork through interviews, written and audio records, photographs and the making of a book about the history of

the group (Jaramillo 2022). Since then, I have never lost contact with the Toma Norte neighbourhood and with the boys in the group. Between 2015 and 2016 I intensively resumed fieldwork, managing to collect at that time some 25 field notes, 15 extended notes and 10 photographic records. During this period I studied with four members of the original group: Juan (16), Martín (16), Pablo (16) y Elvis (17).

All these data were recorded through participant observations, informal conversations, interviews and audio recordings. In order to do this, I had to get involved in the spaces of the street, the entrance to their houses, the public squares, the football fields and the neighbourhood community dining room. There, I was able to sit and eat with them during the afternoon and to learn about their activities beyond the neighbourhood, such as handing out friendship cards in shopping malls or washing car windows in the streets of the city centre. In these different spaces where we interacted, it was common to hear them talk about theft and drugs - especially marijuana use. On occasions I could see them smoking “porro”⁴, although I did not join them as they knew I had never smoked and was not willing to either.

This group of four boys were especially interested in my car rides around the neighbourhood. At first to take us from one place to another, but also to play fun games about stealing or, as they called it, going out to “chorear”. As I will show later, the latter consisted of inventing characters of “chorros” (thieves) that we would dramatise with dialogues (Jaramillo 2021). In Bruno's case (23), it was the informal conversations and interviews following the fieldwork in the neighbourhood that helped to evoke these games about stealing. Unlike the rest of the boys, I met Bruno in 2018 in a university class in which, as a teacher, I shared information about Toma Norte. As a student, he approached me to talk about theft, drugs and life in this neighbourhood. Bruno grew up and still lives in a neighbourhood adjacent to Toma Norte, but his two older brothers

and several of his friends live in Toma Norte. He shares its streets, its football fields and its school; it is where he has had get-togethers with friends, where he has participated in sports events and where he had to stay when one of his brothers was killed by a policeman in a couple's fight. Despite the age difference and his subsequent participation in the research, Bruno knows the neighbourhood group and, most importantly for this study, he shares with the boys the fact that he played “pibe chorro” as a child.

The analytical work included the reconstruction of ethnographic descriptions from a continuous process of familiarisation and estrangement from educational contexts (Delamont et al. 2010, Guerrero et al. 2017), seeking to obtain clues to understand the field notes through a sustained exercise of *reflexivity* (Hammersley y Atkinson 1994, Guber 2001, Walford 2008, Rockwell 2009). This involves an analytical process directed not only towards the empirical universe under study, but also, and simultaneously, towards the research subject in order to understand how his or her own position and perspective affects the evidence and arguments he or she constructs (Milstein 2010).

If I was able to overcome some racial and class prejudices to join in the activities that these boys proposed, it was just for being there, involving myself in the social world. This process was intimately linked to a curiosity felt and nurtured by my becoming a father, a university professor, a researcher and an adult man. This is precisely what the Brazilian anthropologist Mariza Peirano (1995) warns when he says that knowledge reveals itself not 'to' the researcher but 'in' the researcher, who has to stay in the field and relearn himself and the world from another perspective.

The research context

The daily life of the protagonists of this article takes place in the Toma Norte

neighbourhood, located in the periphery of Neuquén city, in the Neuquén province of Northern Patagonia, Argentina. The area surrounding the city is extensive terrain flanked by “bardas”, which are vast plateaus of eroded, clayey soil with heights that do not exceed 150 metres. Some of the equipment used to extract oil and gas, the main productive matrix of the province, can be seen here.

According to local residents, Toma Norte neighbourhood was formed at the end of the 1990s when groups of families from the main city, neighbouring towns, and cities in the north of the country opted to occupy municipal land for the construction of houses. This occupational process, known locally as “toma”, took place in the context of restrictive neoliberal economic policies adopted by national and provincial governments. At the time, the breakdown of the interventionist state’s distributist and planning roles included a broad programme of privatisation of state companies provoking social tensions in a context of unprecedented unemployment rates (Favaro 2000). In the face of the economic and social crisis, Neuquén continued to be an option for the traditional values of land and work. Oil and gas production generated significant royalties - more than a third of the provincial budget - allowing the local state to continue allocating certain amounts to healthcare, education and housing (Favaro 2005). As a consequence, numerous families began to migrate to the capital to settle at the edges of the city in order to live from legally registered jobs or to access informal incomes that would allow them to be included in a profoundly exclusionary context (Perren 2010).

This sector of the city, surrounded by steep slopes and rocky strata that were too hard for vegetation, quickly became a potentially habitable area where the most economically disadvantaged groups eventually settled. As some of the photos taken by my acquaintances during the fieldwork show, these areas consisted of arid, sparsely

vegetated open spaces dotted with rubbish, where half-finished constructions made mostly of discarded wooden and nylon were built for housing.

Photo1

Photo 2

When I first visited the neighbourhood, approximately 800 families were living there, many of them coming from other provinces - mainly from the north of Argentina – but also from neighbouring countries such as Chile and Bolivia. Later, at the beginning of the new century, groups of families from other working-class neighbourhoods in the city occupied land in the area. A few families are supported by state jobs - municipality, schools, police, hospital - and most are linked to temporary and informal construction work and subsidies granted by the municipal or national government. In the case of the boys, Juan Martín, Pablo and Elvis had shared jobs related to masonry and, as I mentioned earlier, jobs handing out cards in shopping centres and washing car windows on street corners. Bruno, at the boys' age, also did masonry work and even land clearing in Toma Norte. However, it is common among family groups and among the boys themselves to express their desire to work in the oil industry and, in some cases, as policemen.

Results: Playing and learning masculine skills in street culture

One morning in 2015, Juan (16) remembered that he didn't have the key to get into his house and somewhat excitedly added: “I have to be quick. I'm going to have to go in through the back, criminally”. A few metres from the wooden fence that separates his house, he walked quickly to the left side of the fence, pulled back and again pretended to hide by leaning his body against the wall and stretching out his arms. He moved his head to all sides as if to control the situation and ran down a narrow corridor that connects to the back of the property. Minutes later he appeared from the back of his

house again, looking around and covering his face. He again jokingly pretended to have a knife in his clothes to “hacerse cagar” one of them⁵.

The comicality around theft had appeared on the part of the boys since the beginning of my fieldwork, in 2010, through jokes that I surprised myself doing with them, such as leaving a shop quickly so as not to pay for half an hour of video games. I also remember the time I was taken to see a popular market and one of the boys started rubbing his hands together as if he wanted to do something with the DVD films displayed on wooden planks. As he looked at the stall manager, he stopped and read out the titles of films. He did this about three times while looking at us for a certain complicity.

However, the comicality that Juan experienced a few years later, when he entered his house, was somewhat different from those past experiences. Juan's action of bending his body and then leaning it against the wall pretending to hide, his head looking all over the place pretending to control the situation, and covering his face with his T-shirt and pulling an imaginary knife out of his clothes were enough clues to notice the “as if” of his gestures and movements. His behaviour exhibited the interpretation of a fictional character that at times seemed real.

To friends and people in the neighbourhood, Juan was identified as a “buen pibe” (good boy). The woman in charge of the community dining room, for example, who seemed to know them well from talking to them at mealtimes, said that Juan was respectful of others, always greeted them, did not have a “mala junta” (bad crew) and did not come to the place “fumado”⁶, something that she did notice in the behaviour of other acquaintances of him. To his friends, Juan was known as the “kid” who could share “faso” but by no means as someone who stole. However, that morning when Juan was with me in his house, he talked, gesticulated and moved like a “pibe chorro”.

Without much preparation nor anticipation, Juan performed a play's act in which he appeared to know how to steal without having stolen before.

Unlike the first time when my interlocutors recognised themselves as children, now these boys claimed to be “pibes chorros”. This self-recognition was conceived in relation to a “pibito” (young children) who had ceased to be, or at least wished to cease to be, in their practices and discourses.

On another occasion it was Martin (16) who decided to play the role of knowing how to steal. While I was in my car with other members of his neighbourhood group, Martin came up to my window, put his right arm against my face and with his other hand pretended to point a gun at me. “Get out, boy, get out, get out, get out” he told me in a firm tone while grabbing the steering wheel. After a brief silence, Martin and his companions began to laugh.

At first I didn't quite understand Martín' joke because even after seeing nothing in his hands, it all seemed very real and I didn't know at what point it stopped being a joke. At that time, Martín was one of my acquaintances who, according his peers, used to go around “fumado” and was into ‘heavier things’ like robbery. Thus, my perception of what I observed that day in the car was more linked to such accounts about Martín, and not so much aware of the funny game he was overplaying. It was precisely the laughter and comments of his friends that warned me that this was a joke in which Martín was acting as someone who pretended to know how to steal.

What these “pibes” were doing was simulating a behaviour or a role that none of them had hitherto experienced in the real world. The explanation approached what Johan Huizinga (1999) theorised about play as a social practice, by positing a state that involves the suspension of everyday life in a sphere that is governed by its own internal logics: “Play is not 'ordinary' life or life 'proper'. Rather, it consists in escaping from it

into a temporary sphere of activity that possesses its own tendency” (Huizinga 1999, 21). In this case, roles and behaviours external to the game are fictionalised. They are not “pibes chorros” but they play at being so and, for that very reason, they behave like real “pibes chorros” (Rodríguez Alzueta 2016).

In December 2016, while I was with Pablo (16) and Elvis (17), I stopped to shop at a supermarket. As soon as I parked the car, I heard Pablo say mischievously: “Well, let's see what we can chorear (steal)”. Looking around, Pablo tells Elvis to grab the “fierro” (the gun) he was pretending to have in his trousers in case he had to “stand on his hands” (confront). At that moment we passed by a security guard and Pablo commented in a defiant tone: “Los ratis (policemen) que son giles (without vivacity)”. They passed by the first aisle looking at the shelves and immediately came across the drinks shelf. “Uh, ready! It was one of these, wasn't it Elvis?” asked Pablo grabbing a bottle of soda which he hid in his arms but quickly put back in its place. “Look at this”, said Elvis pointing to a bag of salty snacks that he grabbed with his hands pretending to pull it down and hide it. “No way, something to ‘papear’ (eat),” Pablo replied. Walking backwards and adjusting his visor, Pablo approached another aisle and noticing that there were biscuits, this time he pretended to grab a packet which he hid under his T-shirt. Elvis did the same with another packet.

The expressions about “chorear” (steal) were accompanied by an upright gait and a light hand movement that simulated taking and hiding a bottle, a snack bag and biscuits under their clothes. The defiant tone with which Pablo pretended to have a gun to confront and the loud derogatory comment to the policeman on the scene were other ways of appearing to control the situation, appearing tough and unafraid.

Through play, boys unwittingly train an image related to certain masculine attributes, such as speaking differently and using bad language, being fast, being witty,

being able to 'pararse de manos' (confront) if necessary, controlling the situation, being tough and fearless. This led me to pay attention also to how these boys define and recognise masculinity. According to Michael Kimmel, "masculinity constitutes a homosocial validation, whose most obvious indicator for demonstrating it, and for it to be recognised by others, is the disposition to violence and confrontation" (in Cabral 2016, 257). The game of "pibe chorro", then, also constitutes a performative practice, a gender performance, where masculinity is sought to be learnt and demonstrated.

Bruno (23), on the other hand, when talking about his life on the street, recalled the time when, as a child, he also played at being a "pibe chorro" with friends from Toma Norte:

Bruno: "We played that we took a toy from the store and I remember looking at the guard and the door, like a game. That boy sold me an air gun. We used to joke that we were going to steal with the gun, I remember that", he said, laughing. (...)

Silence

Bruno: "I never understood why I didn't steal... I don't see it as the right thing to do. What I did do, I used to dress like a thief. I used to wear brand-name trainers, Adidas trousers, socks inside my trousers (Conversation with Bruno, 20 November 2018).

These playful performances are close to the reflections of Erving Goffman (2006) whereby he proposes the study of social life based on the actions or performances that we put into play, in not a necessarily reasoned way, in social interactions. Although here I am referring to an explicit over-acting that is closer to role-playing, what Goffman says about the management of the image when we present ourselves to others is suggestive for the analysis. Referring to the relationship between appearances and reality, the author explains:

Being a given type of person does not simply mean possessing the required attributes, but also maintaining the norms of behaviour and appearance attributed

by the social group to which one belongs (...). A status, a position, a social place is not something material to be possessed and then exhibited; it is a pattern of appropriate, coherent, embellished and well-articulated behaviour (Goffman 2006, 86).

This explanation of the image of the game introduced by Bruno in dialogue with the theoretical approaches of Goffman (2006) allows us to argue about the masculine image of the “pibe chorro”. An image that Juan and Martín manage to construct, surely based on what they know from what they have seen and heard, but also from first-hand knowledge of what others outside the neighbourhood say about them. In Goffman's words, the latter would be the management of the impressions that we as subjects make based on the people and contexts with which we interact. For the media and the general public, the young people who live there are “chorros” or, at least, dangerous. This is an interesting way of looking at the complexity of theft as a multi-causal phenomenon, in which it is also possible to address the processes of stigmatisation and social resentment referred to by the author (Goffman 2008, Becker 2010).

Discussion: the street and cultural access to formal jobs

I had the opportunity to ask the boys about the inscription on the wall in the context photo: “**Andate acostumbrando**” (get used to it). They replied that it was a defiant way of indicating how difficult it was to walk around in Toma Norte. “**Here you expose yourself to danger**”, Pablo told me. “**Here we are the thieves**”, Juan said. “**You have to deal with it**”, they said. In native terms, “**bancársela**” means to say bad words, to have to speak differently, to have to hit someone, to appear tough and fearless.

Playing at being a “**pibe chorro**” seems to have other meanings for its protagonists, different from going out to steal as a criminal practice: **it allows them to perceive themselves as “pibes chorros” and to learn masculine ways of being**

legitimised in the neighbourhood. In this section I focus on the importance of this learning in urban contexts such as those of Neuquén, Argentina.

To understand the educational dimensions of the processes by which these subjects are constituted, we can turn to the concept of *community of practice*. According to Lave and Wenger (1991, 122), this concept “implies participation in a system of activity about which participants share an understanding of what they are doing and what it means in their lives and for their communities”. These boys were very familiar with the world of the street and therefore fully capable of playing characters and staging scenes related to it. In this simulation, they anticipated a role that had not yet materialised. By overacting in a playful way, they rehearsed and recreated an image of toughness that, according to the boys, allows them to “get around” in the neighbourhood. Or, in other words, to know how to face the local street.

This allows us to think of the game of the “pibe chorro” as the learning of a *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave and Wenger 1991) that is not simply reduced to a condition of masculine belonging, but is in itself a form of development and of social, cultural and economic belonging. In my opinion, for the pibes of Toma Norte the purpose is not to learn the game of “pibe chorro” as a situated practice, but to learn to pretend as key to the process in which they become part of a community of practice. So, if the street is a community of practice, it produces a virtuous circle of increased awareness. As the “pibes” learn to overact in a funny way to know how to steal, they learn the image of the “pibe chorro”; and as they learn that image of toughness and masculinity, they learn the street culture of a society of which they are a part.

Concurrently, the current jobs of the protagonists in the world of oil, police and local state allow us to argue that learning, as a way of achieving greater participation in

this street culture, also concerns **the possibility of accessing other communities of practice linked to this image of masculine toughness.**

To illustrate this process, the attributes of the working subject in the oil community of any Patagonian city in Argentina can be taken as a model. According to Hernán Palermo's ethnography (2015), the young local new workers must stoically endure certain working conditions that are unfavourable to their physical and/or psychological health. In the author's words:

It is not only necessary to have professional technical-productive knowledge, but also a masculine attitude towards work performance: 'to be huevo (courageous)', 'to endure the work', 'to be guapo (proud and haughty)', 'to get the job done come rain or snow', which consolidates a marked factory discipline in accordance with the current demands of work organisation. (Palermo 2015, 110).

This bravery, based on exposure to risk, brings with it a work force that demonstrates physical and mental tenacity on a daily basis. Jokes and sexual games among the young new workers are other ways of producing masculine codes. This implies - the author observes - going through a series of degradations associated with violence aimed at subordinating that which is considered feminine. **It seems, therefore, that permanence in oil work is profoundly influenced by the character of the young men in their capacity to "bancarse" (bear) or not these masculine codes.**

Another example comes from the virility on which the Argentine police institution is based. Having a "strong personality" is among the requirements of the police subject analysed by Argentinean anthropologist Mariana Sirimarco (2009). In this regard:

To learn not to cry, to accept the change of friends, or [...] not to miss, is to learn a new way of being strong. [...] The possession of character is thus defined by the

demonstration of hardness or insensitivity, where what is sought is not its strength, but its hardening (Sirimarco 2009, 98-99).

What I am trying to emphasise is that certain attributes of masculinity referred to in previous studies are homologous to the process produced by the boys of Toma Norte when they play “pibe chorro”. There, they learn to rehearse and recreate a masculine image that helps them to “cope” with the world of the street, and also with the possibility of getting a highly regarded formal job in the local community. Something similar to the educational processes described by Willis (1976/1988) on young people in a school in a factory community in England, and also by Dubberley (1988/1995) in a school in a mining community in the same country. It is not a question of mechanically transferring the analysis of both authors, who are obviously different, to our study. But to point out some points of contact with regard to the meaning that humour and jocular games among peers have in these contexts, in order to learn the male idiosyncrasy of the working class.

In the case of the Toma Norte boys, this masculine image could be thought of in terms of what Pierre Bourdieu (1997) called *symbolic capital* and *cultural capital*, necessary to succeed in the world of the street as well as in the oil industry and the local police.

In this regard, contrary to what anthropology and sociology related to the subject have been suggesting, it is not possible to affirm that street culture always becomes a cultural limitation for professional interactions. On such occasions as those presented here, it is a question of recognising the educational processes inherent to the world of the street which includes the children in their community, while conferring legitimacy on them in working communities where this masculine self-image is also required.

This does not imply that all boys get jobs in these spheres. But at least all of these boys seem to be prepared if that occurs. I was able to understand this better from Didier Fassin's (2016) ethnographic account of police action with young people in the Parisian urban peripheries:

Is undeniable that the notion of play allows us to highlight the way in which both sides attribute roles to each other, with the police playing the bad guys and the youngsters playing the good guys, where provocations are responded to and amplified on both sides, and the scenography “of the gendarmery and the thieves” seems to reproduce endlessly the succession of altercations and chases (Fassin 2016, 147).

Just as Fassin documents the interactions between police officers and young immigrants from the French suburbs, in the “pibes” of Toma Norte in Argentina the learning of these mutually constituted roles is also at play. This way of learning to cope in the street can later lead to professions that highlight this image of masculine toughness, such as being a professional “chorro”, as is the case of Martín in his most recent experience; police personnel like Elvis; an oil worker like Juan; or a state cleaner in green spaces like Bruno. In all these activities an image of “toughness” is required in order not to appear “sensitive” and, on the contrary, to appear tough and brave. In all these activities, an image of “toughing it out” is required in order not to appear “sensitive”, to show oneself tough and fearless. In this role-playing required by the culture of toughness, there is a simultaneous learning of skills identifiable by the fact of participating in relationships with people and actions of other communities of practice that are mutually constituted.

Conclusions

The analysis thus far demonstrates that, as described by *situated learning* theories (Lave

and Wenger, 1991), playing at being a “pibe chorro” is not something that is learned through explicit and systematic teaching. Rather, it is about learning that has parallels with what was pointed out more than fifty years ago by the literature in the anthropology of education about enculturation processes away from formal education (Stephens and Delamont 2010). The boys in the group do not tell each other how to play “pibes chorros”, although they all learned to do so on the street and with their peers. The group's continued participation in the street *community of practice* allowed them to achieve at least three simultaneous educational processes: a) recognising themselves as “pibes chorros”, b) assuming masculine ways of feeling, thinking and doing that are specific to the place where they live, and c) becoming full members of the social life of which they are a part. They did this at first peripherally, as apprentices, and later legitimately, as experts, as Lave and Wenger (1991) pointed out. Therefore, the street culture is not simply a stage or support for the game in question, but a constituent part of it and of the construction and transformation of what has been learnt.

In this sense, the theme of irony and the joke around the game “pibe chorro” is also a deliberate displacement of the everyday and its real conditions of existence. It is a mocking way of showing themselves, if only for a moment, to be quick, cunning, tough and fearless. This connects them directly to a type of masculinity valued not only in contexts of poverty such as those of Toma Norte, but also to a way of life legitimised in the local job culture.

In line with Bourgois' (2010) analysis on crack dealing in Harlem, it could be argued that this continued participation in street culture ends up limiting the types of learning opportunities available and, consequently, the access to other types of *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger, 1991). However, in the case of the “pibes” of Toma Norte, they seem to have achieved legitimate participation in the street culture

environment, and to attain also, at the same time, a certain legitimacy in other communities of practice, albeit in a partial and provisional way. Where Bourgois sees a limitation of street culture by excluding learning opportunities that might otherwise be available, in the “pibes” of Toma Norte we see a possible access to formal jobs that also legitimise this image and culture of hardness.

Ethics Declarations

The requirement for approval was waived by the ethics committee.

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Notes

- ¹ The name of the neighbourhood is real, but the names of the protagonists have been changed for confidentiality purposes. I use inverted commas to highlight the use of native words and italics to reference concepts of authors.
- ² Translation of the Spanish version.
- ³ A recent review of the concept of *street culture* (Ross 2021) suggests the development of a dynamic and heuristic process model, in multiple domains and through different practices and forms of interaction.
- ⁴ “Porro”, “faso” and “churro” are used as synonyms among my acquaintances in the neighbourhood to refer to cannabis or marijuana cigarettes (joints).
- ⁵ Confronting and threatening someone.
- ⁶ Being high from smoking marijuana (*stoned*).