

Learning respect in the mountains  
*Children's perception of nature and its master spirits in a  
Pehuenche community*

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Figure 1: The field site is a Pehuenche community located between rivers, mountains and araucaria forests

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### **Introduction**

On a warm spring day in Lonquimay, my three little host nieces (aged 6 to 10) and I go out looking for wild mushrooms in a small patch of forest near the house. They run around and climb the trees, racing each other. They play, sing, joke, and constantly direct my attention to the things they like: trees, flowers, birds and streams of water. Their contagious laughter is echoed by the surrounding mountains.

As we head towards the house with our bounty, the girls become visibly serious and point to a tree not far from the path. Speaking fast and interrupting each other, they explain to me that people once saw a naked woman standing on top of the tree. They say she must certainly have been a witch or an evil spirit, and is probably still around, even if we can't see her now. They suggest that we keep our distance from the tree and walk quietly until we get home.

The girls' abrupt change in attitude catches my attention as it signals the importance assigned to this information, and it is also a common trait in the conversations I have had about supernatural beings with both Pehuenche children and adults in the region.

### **Research Context**

My research deals with childcare ideas and practices among the Pehuenche people of southern Chile, focusing on kinship, emotional development and personhood incorporating children's perspectives and learning processes. My work will explore how childcare is related to the creation, strengthening or dissolution of kinship ties, how emotional life is handled, and how care contributes to the acquisition of personhood. By attempting to answer these questions, I hope to understand the potential role of care in fostering sociability among the Pehuenche, and to explore the underlying ideas and practices of kinship and personhood that are involved therein, with a particular focus on the lived experience and emotional lives of children.

Initially, since my focus is on family life, the issue of children's perception of landscape and environment was not included as a research topic. However, through my involvement in children's daily experiences, and through engaging with adults in conversations about children and childcare, I have come across a range of ideas and practices that highlight the importance of the environment and its relationship to people as a means to understanding Pehuenche ideas and practices about personhood and sociality.

### **The Field**

I'm currently carrying out fieldwork in a rural community of roughly 2000 people in southern Chile, located in the Andes foothill region near the Argentinean border. Here, Pehuenche family life exists among hills, rivers, streams, araucaria forests and pasture lands (Figure 1). Through the year, the weather conditions vary from heavy snow in the winter to burning sun and long periods of drought in the summer.

As a way to spend some time with children during the summer holidays and weekends, I accompany them on their trips to the places where they take their animals for pasture, to go foraging for mushrooms in the forests, and for a swim in the river (Figures 2 to 5).

It is in these moments that we engage in conversations about landscape and nature. The children enjoy scaring each other (and me) by telling stories of the supernatural beings that one could encounter in the forests and lakes. In my talks with grownups, the stories are often repeated: not to make me afraid but to instruct me about the proper way to enter spaces dominated by nature, such as mountains and rivers, to avoid





Figure 2: One of the children's favourite activities is foraging for mushrooms

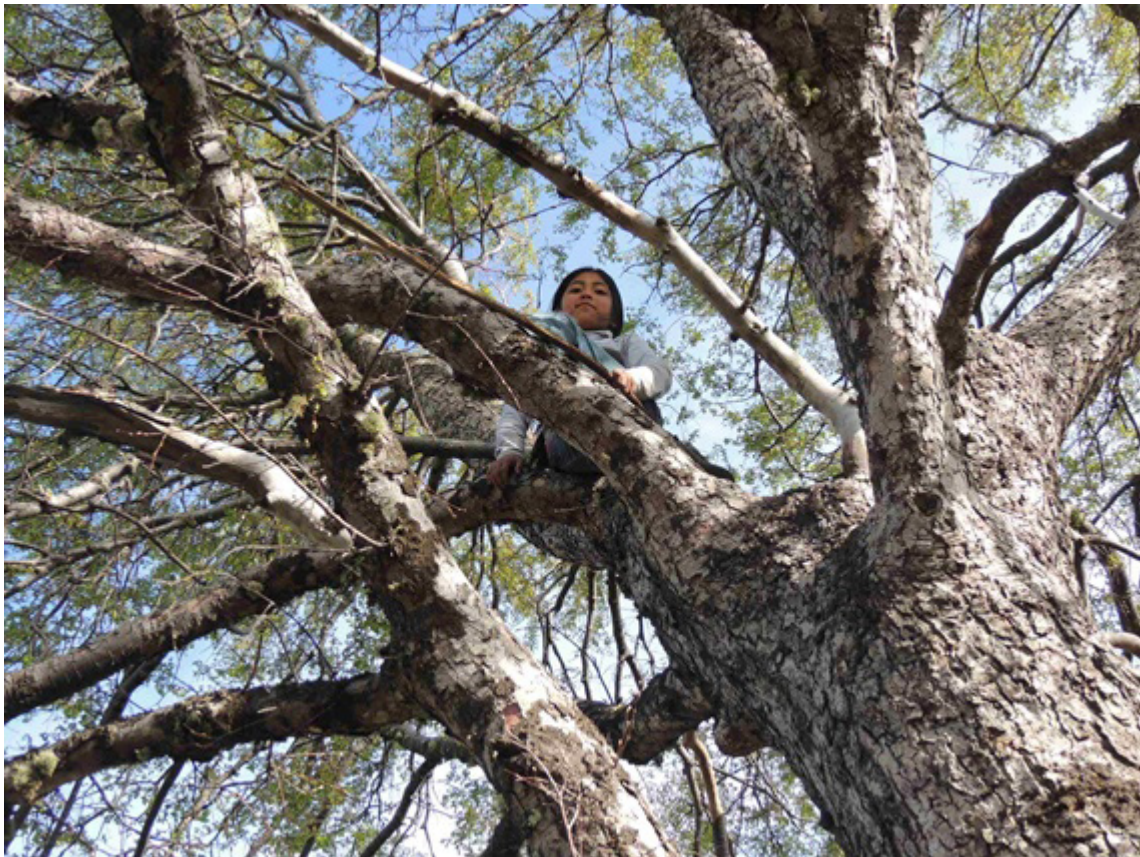


Figure 3: They have to climb trees to look for mushrooms





Figure 4: On hot summer days, children enjoy swimming in the river



Figure 5: Children play in the forest

the revenge of the *ngen* in the forms of ill health or bad weather. Pehuenche tradition emphasises the respect one should show to natural entities. When entering a river or a lake, for example, one should ask permission from the *ngen*, stating that one comes with respect and good intention. Children are especially prone to upsetting the *ngen* because they haven't learned to restrain themselves and are often too loud and playful.

In learning to interact with nature and its master spirits, children learn to engage in productive and respectful relationships with others outside their kin group, which is a key element in the constitution of Pehuenche personhood. The scary stories are cautionary tales about the ill consequences of being discourteous. They teach children that they are not exempt from rules and that, just like adults, they can be held accountable for their actions. In a society that emphasises individuality and self-determination over hierarchical structures, passing on the value of respect is key in organising social life.