

Brazilian children at play: Interactional dynamics as a locus for the construction of culture.

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To begin with, a little story

Jack is three years old and is starting to attend a playgroup in São Paulo, Brazil. He is the only son of an upper-middle-class family; his father is English and his mother is Brazilian; he is a very well behaved and polite little boy, he is always well dressed and neat, and, particularly, he speaks very well, above the usual standards of his age group.

The playgroup is located in a spacious garden, with pleasantly structured play environments both indoors and outdoors. About twenty children aged 2 to 6 attend it and are supervised by two female educators who interfere as little as possible with the children's choices of play and interactions. At the time when Jack begins to attend, the group is composed by four older boys, several girls of different ages and four boys about his own age (two of them are newcomers like himself). Two three-year-old boys seem to capture his interest and attention: Phil, a "veteran", and Nick, a newcomer. Phil and Nick are very active; their verbalizations are childlike both regarding intonation and accent, and they use many gestures and expressive vocalizations. In contrast, Jack's movements are restrained; during the first four weeks, he talks almost only to the adults in order to ask for some sort of help: "*I'd like to play with that truck*", or "*Will you mend this for me?*" He stands close to other children (especially Phil and Nick) and observes them attentively. He does not dispute objects with other children. In his second week, he is seen manipulating sand in the sand pond, and immediately after standing up and cleaning his hands.

A few weeks later Jack sits in the sand pond near other children and plays on his own; now and then he interacts with his partners, usually in a formal verbal manner: "*May I play with this?*" Sometimes it seems he doesn't understand his partners' replies, he asks: "*Pardon?*" He keeps observing closely his partners' activities and interactions. And then he starts to imitate them and especially their verbalizations. The imitation is easy to detect in spite of the bad quality of the audio record, because his accent is still very different from his partners'. For instance, while playing together with Phil and Nick in a small hut, Phil proclaims: "*gich ich oh ouge!*" and he repeats with a similar intonation "*this is our house!*" "*Bye children, get out oh ouge!*" And he repeats "*get out of our house!*"

Four months later it is difficult to recognize Jack. He's engaged in a close relationship with Nick. Upon arriving at the playgroup, he gets rid of his shoes and shirt and moves immediately to the sand pond or to wherever his friends are playing. He engages in imitative and complementary actions, with ludic verbalizations, gestures and laughs. For the first time in the course of the records, a childish accent is detected in his talk: he says, repeating Nick: "*letta wok*" (let's work) and they both laugh. There are still moments in which he addresses Nick as an adult would address a young child: Nick complains "*I hurt me hand*" and he replies: "*you'll be all right, let's go and get the truck, Nick*".

After a few more months, Jack's verbalizations can't be discriminated from his partners'. When addressing them, he uses interjections, body moves, laughs, shouts and other noises rather than formal verbalizations; he uses childlike intonations and accent, simple sentences; he moves around a lot and uses the space in a broader way.

What happened to Jack? Did he lose his verbal competence and good manners? Our suggestion is that he acquired a new language and new communication resources, those shared by his peers, which allowed him to assimilate, to share and to co-construct his peer group's culture.

These – assimilating, sharing and co-constructing culture – are things that children do all the time in their play groups, irrespective of their social status or environmental resources, and depending only on a minimum of access and freedom to interact. A few examples follow.

Brazilian children at play: a few examples

The book “*Play and Culture: Playing around in Brazil*”¹ depicts children at play in several different contexts and ways of life, from a small Indian village in the Amazon region to a metropolis like S. Paulo, probably the fourth or fifth biggest town in the world, with over 10 million people (almost twenty million in the Greater São Paulo). It aims to illustrate and discuss three arguments: the inextricable dynamics between universality and diversity in human activities (and particularly in play activities); the child as an active and competent agent of culture transmission, assimilation and creation; and play as a cultural phenomenon. In order to illustrate how these arguments are developed, a few examples were selected.

We may go firstly to a very poor district (Riacho Doce) in the periphery of Belém, the capital of the state of Pará, in the Amazon region. In the unpaved main road of this district, a group of up to 16 children (12 boys and 4 girls) aged 5 to 14 years plays daily, after or before school-time and domestic chores. Along four months of observation, seventeen different games were identified: games with balls, marbles, old tires, slingshot, kites; hopscotch, jumping and performing acrobatics, make-believe games (thief and police, mother-baby) and so on. One of these modalities of play captured our attention due to its frequency, to the many variations observed and to the rich and diversified use of environmental and bodily resources. *PIRA* is the regional and local name of the game, which is known in other regions as playchase, hide and seek, catcher/ pursuer and so on (the literature on play folklore in Brazil identifies up to 60 varieties of these games, with varied names and rules, including, for instance, treasure quest and blindman's buff).

Some of the varieties of this game as played by the children at Riacho Doce will be described and illustrated with photos. The main aspects to be noticed are:

- the basic structure (“deep structure”) of the game, which includes a pursuer and several pursued children; those that are pursued actively defy and incite the pursuer, often acting as allies against him/ her; there are rules that define the roles and the limits allowed both to pursuer and pursued children.
- The variants of the game, invented by the children themselves, using the available resources – an empty pet bottle in *Pira-garrafa*, the wood structure of non-finished houses in *Pira na armação* and so on – and a ritualized vocabulary or slang; to create variations seems to be part of the game itself.

¹ Carvalho, A.M.A., Magalhães, C.M.C., Pontes, F.A.R. & Bichara, I. (eds) (2003) *Brincadeira e Cultura: Viajando pelo Brasil que brinca*. SP: Casa do Psicólogo.

- The in-group transmission of these variants and rules, including younger children to whom special rules apply ('little angels', also called "milk and coffee" in other Brazilian peer cultures).

We may now move to the southeast of the state of Pará, where Parakanã Indians inhabit a preserved area. In the village that was the target of this research there are 30 children aged 4 to 12 years, 13 boys and 17 girls. They spend most of their free time (after school) strolling through the village and its surroundings: playing, collecting fruits for themselves and for their younger siblings (whom they usually attend to, away from adult supervision), fishing or swimming in the nearby river.

Some of the games played by the children will be described and illustrated. The aspects to be noticed are:

- All the games are recognizable and can be classified according to classic systems of categorization such as Parker's or Piaget's²; nevertheless, they present regional characteristics in terms of rules, use of objects and of other environmental resources (e.g., climbing trees, bow and arrow, straw weaving).
- Some age and gender differences seem to be peculiar to the Parakanã way of life, such as girls' early start in productive activities like weaving baskets for domestic use, or other domestic chores (several of these girls get married as young as 10 years of age); these activities are sometimes not clearly different, for instance, from playful weaving; the same occurs with boys participation in adult's fishing, hunting and other subsistence activities.

Two other examples will be presented: house building games by middle-class children in São Paulo, and playing with kites in Belém. In both cases, the main points are the notions of play as culture and of children as cultural agents. In the sequence, the questions focused regard how to analyze the dynamics of peer interactions as a locus of culture construction.

Peers' interactional dynamics and culture construction

In the late seventies, when we started to observe children at play in stable peer groups, the notion of culture construction by children was not very well recognized in the literature; but it forced itself upon us as we analyzed make-believe games. Macro-social values and concepts relative to social roles and social groups are "imported" by the children into their games, and are re-constructed along them: for instance, a boy may refuse to play a queen, but accept to play a cook or a "queeno" ("rainho" or "regino", a male queen).

How does this happen in terms of psychological processes or mechanisms? The classic notions about learning, instruction or adult-child transmission of knowledge clearly do not answer this question. So we started to work on the concept of interaction and to explore it through the observation of child-child interactions. Our first move was to abandon the usual concept of interaction – defined by a reciprocated social exchange (emission-response) – as a unit of analysis, and to replace it by the unit "interactional episode", based on a more

² Parker, S.T. (1984) Playing for keeps: an evolutionary perspective on human games. I P.K. Smith (ed.) *Play in animals and humans: an evolutionary perspective on human games*, pp. 271-293. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell; Piaget, J. (1945) *A formação do símbolo na criança*. R.J.: Zahar.

fluid and less defined “interactional situation”. In this move, the operational or descriptive concept of interaction was replaced by a still preliminary concept of interaction meaning something that can’t be explained by the behaviors of the interacting elements, but rather by their combined effects, or something that occurs between them, implying an *inter-individual psychological space*, or inter-individual relationships as units of analysis.

Psychology has been construed as the science of the individual, and this is understandable from a historical point of view, since Psychology as a science was born in the context of the emergence of bourgeois individualism. But the notion of individuality as far as defined by the boundaries of our skins is somehow an abstraction: skins are full of holes through which the world comes in; emotion and communication do have individual dimensions, but are also, and perhaps more deeply, interactional or relational phenomena which occur *in between* – in the psychological space between skins. A well-known Brazilian poet says: “*Oh, you, piece of myself, torn away from me...*” I believe that poets understand human relationships far better than psychologists, and that similar examples are probably found in every language.

Our next move was to recognize that interactional phenomena occur in time, and cannot be framed tightly. Individual and lonely actions are part of the interactional flow in a group and can be thus also construed as social actions. We essayed then the concepts of regulation and co-regulation in order to define interactional events: an interaction is said to occur when there is some evidence of regulation between the interaction agents.

In the following years, these notions have evolved towards a theoretic and methodological frame in which the notion of interaction is nuclear and is the starting point for other theoretical developments. Three *principles of sociability* emerged from our observations of children’s free play in this context: attention orientation, sharing meanings and persistence of meanings. These are simultaneously constituted by and constitutive of free play activities, through the processes of regulation, co-regulation and correlation.³

We define interaction as the potential of regulation between the components of an interactional field – in our case, a group of children at free play.

The minimum occurrence of regulation in this field depends on a child selecting another child as his/ her focus of attention, which is a requisite for other interactions (*attention orientation*). This regulation does not require reciprocity: a child may look at another or imitate him/ her without being noticed, or can address him/ her and not be replied to; these are, though, regulations occurring in the interactional field. In other episodes, one can identify co-regulation or reciprocal regulation, defined as a mutual adjustment process in which the partners reach an agreement regarding a meaning (*sharing meanings*). In other cases, co-regulation may launch the process of correlation, which implies a synthesis or abbreviation of the information, expressing what is shared and discarding the information that is irrelevant or non-significant for the agreement. Correlation paves the path to the third principle of sociability: *persistence of meanings*. The synthesis allows an action, a gesture or a word to evoke the shared constructed meaning, either between those partners

³ Pedrosa, M.I., Carvalho, A.M.A. & Imperio-Hamburger, A. (1997) From disordered to ordered movement: attractor configuration and development. In A.Fogel, M. Lyra & J.Valsiner (eds) *Dynamics and indeterminism in psychological and social processes*. Mahwah, NJ: LEA.

Carvalho, A.M.A., Imperio-Hamburger, A. & Pedrosa, M.I. (1998) Interaction, regulation and correlation: Conceptual discussion and empirical examples in the context of human development. In M.Lyra & J.Valsiner (eds) *Construction of psychological processes in interpersonal communication*. Stamford, Connecticut: Ablex.

who have constructed it, or between others who have come to share it. The duration of the persistent meaning is not relevant: it can last a few minutes, weeks, months or years; it can even persist as part of the culture of a particular group or many groups, as do traditional games like kites, marbles and so on. The principle of meaning persistence is constitutive of the concept of culture.

Persistence of meanings implies some stability in group composition. The same individuals must meet repeatedly in order to allow meanings to persist. This brings back the concept of interpersonal relationships – in our case, we shall call them provisionally *peer attachments*⁴.

We have explored the occurrence of peer attachments (or privileged partnerships) in peer groups, and tried to understand what characterizes them in terms of interactional dynamics. A few examples of our results will be described. Our suggestion is that attachments are a condition that increases the possibility of sharing socially constructed things, since they create the possibility of repeating and elaborating what is shared. This is by no means the only adaptive function of attachments, which exist under many forms in other animal species. But this particular function seems to be especially relevant in species where the necessary adjustments for social life must be created along ontogeny – including, in human beings, sharing culture.

The proposal of sharing as simultaneously constitutive of and constituted by attachments implies that a supra-individual unit is required for the analysis of social processes in their psychological dimensions, as well as for a dynamic, dialectic and heuristic conception about these processes: sharing creates attachments and attachments create shared things. In this view, attachments are a fundamental resource for a species where sharing must be continually recreated along individual ontogeny and along the history of social groups, because it is not phylogenetically given in the extent required for the species social life. This usefulness may account for the price paid for attachment (in terms of separation, opposition and exclusion among co-specifics) and for its precocious occurrence in ontogeny – for the child, even more than for adults, attachments optimize the possibility of assimilating and taking part in the social world where human ontogeny necessarily takes place.

⁴ An alternative expression could be *peer bonds*. “Attachment” is stronger from the affective point of view, and perhaps more adequate in this respect; but it can induce confusion with the concept of parental attachment, which we believe refers to a qualitatively different kind of relationship.