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Significations Embodied in the Co-Construction of Child Rearing Practices: Outline of a Frame for its Analysis

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Abstract

In this short communication, the sketch of a proposal for the analysis of how children come to embody cultural significations in the process of being actively involved with their caretakers in the instantiation of episodes of social practices that constitute their everyday life, is presented. This process takes place at the action level, which involves interactions that are enacted rather than reflected, and constituted mainly through the way caretakers achieve the involvement of infants as participants in such practices, through their reflexive monitoring of action. Only later, when people start acting at the semiotic level and the meta-reflexive level, they can position themselves vis-à-vis the significations they embody in a tacit or conscious way.

What does it mean to say that the person is culturally constituted? Basically, two things. First, that the person herself embodies certain social significations. Second, that every person is a unique embodiment of the magma of social significations [1,2].

Persons come to embody social significations through a process of changing participation in social practices [3,4]. This means being involved in a network of socially meaningful activities in diverse interrelated contexts, located in specific space and time, where the person participates in specific positions, and from which the person compounds a personal stance "contrasting and comparing understandings and orientations from diverse local participations and concerns" [4, p. 114]. The network of participations among contexts, the positions for participation in every context and the person's stances are not fixed or defined once and for ever, but have a dynamic nature derived from the fact that participation takes place in irreversible time and the contexts themselves are not static [5,6].

From this view, participation is always situated, because "individual subjects always act in a situated, embodied way from definite time-space locations as participants in local social contexts" [4, p. 114]. But, at the same time,

"Although the person is always embedded in a context, yet the personal-cultural system allows for maintenance of a psychological distance from the given setting, while remaining part of it. Psychological distancing is the main accomplishment of the reliance on semiotic mediation that has developed in the species of *Homo sapiens*" [7, p. 286].

So, it seems necessary to clarify the issue of situatedness of every person's participation and the relative autonomy of the person from the specific context, because while on one side it is emphasized that "there is no activity that is not situated" [3, p. 33]. and that disembedding is often confused "with the well-known notion of abstraction as the detachment from any particular place into an ideational nowhere" [4, p. 109], on the other side there is the insistence that: "Through sign-mediated imagination, fantasy, and internal self-dialogues, a person can transcend the immediate social confines of any particular context of the here-and-now." [8, p. 6]. This is the core issue we tackle in this paper, proposing to address it from a developmental view.

I shall come back later to the issue of situatedness-autonomy. Now let's say something about how we understand the embodiment of social significations in persons. Even when it can be said that artifacts and technologies embody certain social significations too, e.g., an i7 microprocessor embodies the signification of "development" as unending growth, where limits must be continually surpassed [9], the process through which significations become embodied in persons is the process of constructing meaningful situated experience. The irreducible expression of the situated and meaningful character of experience is the person's emotional involvement and way of behaving in specific local contexts. It is through this involvement that people contribute to the constitution of an instance of a locally meaningful social practice or activity. In infancy, this never takes place as a solitary enterprise but as an episode of interaction with somebody else, as a mode of child rearing. Child rearing always occurs as a configuration of diverse sociocultural practices involving babies/infants and other people, not necessarily adults, doing certain actions in certain ways in certain situations (generally, with certain objects). Who is involved in, doing what, in what ways, in which situations, has to do with communities' practices and traditions, which varies among countries but also within them (and cannot be equated with nationality). Seen from this view, child rearing and child development are cultural processes [10].

We face a problem linked with the issue of situatedness-transcendence of person's participation, because it has been claimed that bodily sensibilities -particularly emotion and feeling- can be thought of "as a modular detection system through which behavioral patterns are automatically activated", as "something that is enacted rather than something that is reflected upon and by consequence striven for" [11, p.5]. whilst on the other side we find an "emphasis on the developmental nature of actively self-constraining person who is constantly interdependent with the cultural context, which enables the person to be autonomous within relationships, by way of constructing ever-changing hierarchical control systems of semiotic kind" [8, p. 17]. In other words, we seemingly have an opposition between an automatic reaction and the

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semiotic self-regulation of action. But, as said, this opposition fades away when seen in developmental perspective. We agree with Voestermans [11] that: "What needs to be accomplished first is an understanding of meaning in which embodied meanings, which are established in skills, go along with propositionally and argumentatively devised actions or activities." (p. 8).

But where do we start from? We need a view of a person's development which considers diverse but interrelated levels of psychological functioning. Valsiner's [6] following statement could be taken as a definition of these levels and as a starting point for the present purpose: "A cultural-historical theory of human development involves a set of integrated levels. Hence, hierarchy of the organization of the person is implied, and the question is how that hierarchy is organized, not whether it exists. Multiple levels can be distinguished as: (a) Those of current actions –the action level; (b) Reflexivity on that action, including unity of feeling and thinking –the semiotic level; and (c) Metalevel reflection on both the action and the semiotic levels –the metareflexive level. The unity of the semiotic and action levels can be labeled the domain of conduct. Different ways of relating these levels can be conceptualized: mutual feed-in; parallel loose coupling, and so on. These relationships change dynamically and constitute a flexible system for which no general rules are applicable (e.g., a rule that the semiotic level, but not vice versa)." (p. 17-18)

The idea of levels of psychological functioning, as stated in the quote, constitutes an axiom, basic assumption or meta code [12,13] that sets the ground for the way we approach certain phenomenon to produce knowledge about it from a scientific discipline; that is why "the question is how that hierarchy is organized, not whether it exists." Valsiner [6-8] emphasizes the role of the construction and use of semiotic mediational devices as a way of culturally structuring the domain of experience but recognizes that this process goes on with constraints. A constraint... "is a regulator of the move from the present to the immediate future state of the developing organismenvironment system, which delimits the full set of possible ways of that move, thus enabling the developing organism to construct the actual move under a reduced set of possibilities" [6, p. 180]. Moreover, constraints are constructed between persons as well as in the intrapsychological domain of a person, and much of co-construction "entails moving against existing constraints" [7, p. 294]. Our basic idea here is that we should focus, developmentally, on the constraints constructed between the infant and her caretaker(s) interacting in the here-and-now context. So, we could incorporate Voestermans' concerns assuming, in the first place, that some of the very characteristics of the action level can create a constraint against the semiotic reflection on that action insofar as the actions involved become "natural" for the person. Such characteristics of the action level would be related to the situated nature of action, as a specific culturally constituted way of being emotionally involved and behaving (e.g., making sense) of the situation at hand.

But, what about the caretakers? The intuitive or tacit nature of parenting, what we conceive as the caretakers' guidance of infant participation in local practices, has been pointed out by several researchers [14-22], but only sociocultural approaches recognize the non-universal but cultural nature of the tacit assumptions that are brought into play. In addition, according to Voestermans, emotion automatically activates certain behavioral patterns because skill is thought of as macro-operational functioning of the body which "presents directly how one undergoes the situation" and "what is required as a reaction in turn" [11, p. 7]. This raises the question whether caretakers behave mostly in an automatic way in their rearing practices.

We think that even when emotional involvement can "prime" action in a specific direction as suggested by Voestermans, the performing of action never takes place in a completely automatic way but involves the sustained attention to the flow of one's and the other's ongoing actions, according to the specific context, or, in other words, the "know how" required for the instantiation of a local social practice in the interaction with other people, what Giddens [23] calls the Reflexive Monitoring of Action (RMA). In the case of rearing practices, we should focus mainly on the reflexive monitoring of action performed by the caretaker (which doesn't mean that the infant plays a passive role), which allows the intermingling, within the same episode, of deep involvement in the ongoing practice and some reflection on the action in progress in terms of understanding what is going on, what to expect from the infant and how to gear the infant's and her/his own contribution in the ongoing episode. From this view, caretakers co-construct infant's action as participation within the given local practice through the reflexive monitoring of action, just because this warrants the cultural sensitivity to the changing course of the ongoing actions and the ability of improvising and using the available resources in the setting. So, for example, when one is helping an infant to walk and let her on her own for a moment, if the infant loses equilibrium and falls (without harming) we can control our immediate emotional reaction of startling surprise –which led us to approaching, comforting, and holding the babybecause in our previous experience one realized that this very behavior contributes to signify the event as fear evoking for the infant. One can contrast this understanding of parental guidance of infant experience through RMA with the category of "maternal sensitivity" in studies of mother-infant interaction [21].

Reflexive monitoring of action is linked with the routinized character of everyday life. An infant can only co-construct her participation in a local practice if the latter has enough regularity for her to gear her action to the ongoing activity of other people. The action flow of the caretakers towards the infant is never the mere following of some set of prescriptions but requires a certain degree of routine to be efficient. These routine aspects of activities with infants (feeding, bathing, sleeping, etc.) form the basis on which she co-constructs a specific, culturally legitimate, way of participating in such activities at the action level. So, both for infants and for their caretakers, predictable routines. As stated by Giddens [23, p. 64]. "The routinized character of the paths along which individuals move in the reversible time of daily life does just not 'happen'. It is 'made to happen' by the modes of reflexive monitoring of action which individuals sustain in circumstances of co-presence."

But routines themselves embody certain cultural significations, both in the details of the reflexive monitoring of action by the caretakers as well as in the specific mode of infant's participation. For example, among the Zinacanteco indigenous people, it was observed that infants are continually carried in a sling by their mothers and eye-to-eye contact is less frequent than in Western couples, giving a baby objects or toys was not valued, mother-infant play was more likely to occur when she was in the company of other women and children or close male family members (whilst when other male visitors or strangers arrive, infants were covered and put on the mother's back), infants were not put on the ground to explore on their own, and were frequently nursed – up to 9 times during a four hour observation period and among 60 to 80 times along the day [24,25]. According to these authors, Zinacanteco infant rearing emphasizes reduced motor activity and uneasy infants were treated as if were sick. This kind of interaction was based on the cultural signification that younger people must respond to the initiative of the older ones, not vice versa. In other words, there is an assumption of legitimate inequality as for initiative taking among the participants in an activity.

In the case of nursing, Greenfield et al. [25] point to the fact that mothers not only nursed infants frequently but offered the breast quickly after infants showed signs of uneasiness. "In frequent nursing, infants found their needs satisfied probably before they were aware of them and could take the initiative to express them." (p. 207). This quick attention to infant's signs of uneasiness –which are mainly nonverbal– is based on the practice of carrying the infant in the sling. In quickly responding to infant's nonvocal behavior, mothers set the stage for not allowing the child to take the initiative. In a short period, the same authors report, Zinacanteco infants become still and quiet and easily soothed. Note that infants are not passive, but rather their behavior is very subtle and responded to in such a way as to avoid it to become a true initiative taking. This is a good example of how a cultural signification (subordination to adult's initiative) is embodied in the details of mother's childcare and in the mode of infant's participation.

In contrast with the Zinacanteco infants, Brazelton, Tronick, Adamson, Als & Wise [26] noted long ago that American infants 2 to 20 weeks old, whose mothers were asked to remain completely unresponsive but sitting before and looking at them, ended turning their faces away from mother after "long repeated attempts to get the interaction back on track" (p. 146). These little babies already embodied -even if in a simple way- significations of independence, initiative, and so on. How did they come to embody such significations? Being allowed to participate with caretakers in practices where the latter's actions treat infants as separate persons, conversational partners, active explorers, and so on and so forth (all the things that Zinacanteco mothers didn't do). It is important to note the embodiment of the signification of infants as independent beings, for example, takes place not only through the details of their face-to-face interaction with their caretakers but also involves other cultural practices, e.g., babies have their own rooms where they are put to sleep alone, etc. Such significations of independence and initiative, however, are not embodied in other child rearing practices of US middle-class families. Rogoff [10] points out that: "Although U.S. middle-class adults often do not trust children below about age 5 with knives, among the Efe of the Democratic Republic of Congo, infants routinely use machetes safely (Wilkie, personal communication, 1989; see figure 1.2). Likewise, Fore (New Guinea) infants handle knives and fire safely by the time they are able to walk (Sorenson, 1979). Aka parents of Central Africa teach 8- to 10-month-old infants how to throw small spears and use small pointed digging sticks and miniature axes with sharp metal blades..." (p. 5).

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This contrast allows us to point out an important issue: cultural significations do not exist or operate in isolation but as webs or networks. Infants at an early age (and even not so early, as Rogoff mentions in the quote) may be co-constructed as independent or explorers, but they are at the same time co-constructed as immature, impulsive, non-responsible, etc. To say that children "are co-constructed" as such and such, means that adults' and other caretakers' relationship with infants has to be conceived firstly in terms of practices where both are involved in, and not merely as "ideas", "attitudes" or "ethnotheories" [27]. This allows us to understand that American and European infants are left more or less "freely" to explore the immediate surroundings but always under close caretaker's supervision and support (and even with previous arrangements of the environment to avoid risks due to the infant's lack of maturity or skill), while in other cultural groups infants are co-constructed as careful observers of other's activities, who do not take "spontaneous" initiative to perform actions for which they are not yet proficient, that do not require to be rewarded for actions performed adequately (much less for unskilled actions), and so forth [10 (specially chapter 6), 28, 29].

Moreover, child rearing practices embody cultural significations for the caretakers themselves that are intertwined with the ones for infants: "good mother/father", "modern parent" (not old-fashioned, not traditional), "millennial parent", etc. Let's show it in detail with an example.

As said before, for American middle-class families a practice involved in the coconstruction of independent (autonomous) infants is for them to have their own rooms where they sleep alone. Letting aside the issue that this practice is considered as "cruel" or "merciless" for people from other cultural groups [10,30], what is important for the present analysis are their implications for parents. If infants are left out of parents' sight, the need arises then for a way of monitoring the former's state, on suspicion of carelessness or negligence that at the same time allows the caretaker to perform his/ her other tasks or responsibilities. So, by the mid-20th century were created domestic monitors for listening at a distance to the sounds produced by infants. These devices became an essential part of the practices for co-constructing infants as independent as well as good, modern, and balanced (e.g., functional) mothers. Letting aside the use of diverse sorts of cameras for the same purpose, nowadays there are devices that monitor in real time even non-visible physiological states of infants, mediating parentbaby touch, the very notion of connection between them, the interpretation of babies' bodies and the formation of subjectivities [31].

Jewitt et al. [31] have shown through a rich methodological study how such technologies -tracking infants' movement, breathing, sleep patterns, body position, heart rate, body temperature and oxygen levels- turn the babies' bodies into objects of surveillance, measurement and monitoring, and transform/problematize the way parenting is co-constructed in the process. Even the packaging of the device is systematically analyzed through a multimodal approach showing the strategy involved in creating "consumer desire for a new kind of touchy connection" (p. 586) via a message that conveys meanings of "autonomy, efficiency, safety and connection, echoed in the Owlet website images of alert, smiling babies lying alone in a cot or on the floor." (p. 587). The marketing materials of the device construe its use as relaxing way of managing the physical separation between parent and infant (jmuch beyond the stav in different places within the household!), but its actual use involved in some cases "obsessive checking having the inverse effect of providing freedom, raising questions of parental identity, why would you not check when it is so easy to do so?" (p. 589), but for a parent the device "could make you put baby in their own room earlier" (ibid.). The use of the device also troubles what constitutes "adequate" (against "invasive") touch of babies and even intends to substitute real physical contact for the reading of the screen in the mobile app, something that was strongly rejected by some parents. The issue of co-sleeping, as could be anticipated, also emerged with contested views: "Some parents located co-sleeping in relation to creating a secure, independent and happy baby. Others situated it as a temporary problematic solution, or felt it is important for baby to 'start enjoying his own space and feel safe' without immediate parental presence or touch, invoking a discourse of baby 'self-improvement" (p. 589).

As seen in this example, the co-construction of child rearing practices through artefacts like this device embodies diverse cultural significations for both parents and infants, in a controversial or contested way that also embodies the struggle between "lay" and "expert" knowledge: "Knowing baby via Owlet is re-presented as an internal invisible matter with the potential to remove or lessen the value or trust in parental felt and/or observed sensory knowledge of their baby's body to assess critical aspects of well-being..." (p. 593). We completely agree with Ochs & Schieffelin [32] when they assert that: "The capacity to express intentions is human but which intentions can be expressed by whom, when, and how is subject to local expectations concerning the social behavior of members." (p. 306). But from a developmental perspective, the core

issue is not only which intentions can be expressed but how such particular intentions are co-constructed from participating at the action level in specific local practices, which are not merely subject to local expectations but are themselves an embodiment of diverse cultural significations. As seen in Jewitt et al., this is far from being an easy and harmonious process.

The specific kind of infant's emotional involvement and way of participating in specific local contexts embodies –in the word's most literal sense– core cultural significations. These embodied cultural significations constitute a specific mode of co-constructed agency. When the child starts using semiotic mediational means later, her emotional involvement and way of participating in specific local contexts operate simultaneously as the basis on which semiotic negotiation takes place and as a constraint against reflecting on certain actions because these have become obvious or "natural". Dreier [4] has pointed out a similar issue, noting that when one (even as an adult) is a full participant in a particular context "we easily take for granted and no longer see particular key premises and functionalities of that social practice" (p. 114). But these constraints are not insurmountable, and this takes us to the last feature of the proposed framework.

Semiotic mediation is no less situated than other kinds of action. But it allows us also to see, think and feel our participation in one context from other contexts that are part of our everyday life [4]. The uniqueness of semiotic mediation lies in its ability to link in a stance the diverse contextual participations constituting the structure of personal social practice in certain moment of our life: The ground of stances is thus the person's complex and diverse participations, and their telos is the orientation of the person's participations in and across –more or less comprehensive reaches of-social contexts. Stances do not (primarily) rest on some –imported– pregiven higher grounds. Making up one's mind and taking a stance rather occurs by relating and comparing on a shifting set of premises taken from the very same components which are thus related and compared [4, p. 117-118].

So, semiotic self-regulation within contextualized participation in shared practices, is the way psychological distancing and relative autonomy from any specific context is accomplished. That's why we must analyze participation not in an isolated context but in the network of social practices a person participates in, to see how they allow the person to contrast and compare experiences from those diverse positions and the consequences that ensue for the (not necessarily conscious from the start) positioning concerning the embodied significations that constitute her. This is an endless process along the life course, with diverse features at different moments.

Summing up, we assume that ontogenetically, infants are, firstly, culturally constituted in terms of their emotional involvement and their active contribution to the production of specific instances of local cultural practices, within their interaction with caretakers who guide this process through the reflexive monitoring of action. In this process, children come to embody cultural significations through the way they become socialized as unique persons. Along her later life the person, at the semiotic level, will reflexively link her transcontextual participations and through the stances she so elaborates will position herself with regards to those significations, mostly in a tacit way (i.e., without thematizing the positioning), but sometimes, at the meta-reflexive level, the positioning takes the form, when it is linked with a social movement, of a conscious assumption or rejection of certain core cultural significations.

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