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-reflective 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 childish involvement that people contribute to the constitution of an instance of a locally meaningful social practice or activity. 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 striving 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...
But where do we start from? We need a view of a person’s development which considers diverse but interrelated levels of psychological functioning. Valserin’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 metarefexive 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 always controls the action 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” [6]. This outlines the role of the 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 organism-environment 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 other caregivers, interacting in their 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 set of constituting ways 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 with which “one understands and sustains the construction” 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 intervening, 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 get the infant to respond adequately. U.S. middle-class adults do not trust children below about age 5 to throw spears and use small pointed digging sticks and miniature axes with knives, among the Efe of the Democratic Republic of Congo, infants routinely use throwing small spears and use small pointed digging sticks and miniature axes with knives, the Efe of the Democratic Republic of Congo, infants routinely use throwing small spears and use small pointed digging sticks and miniature axes with knives, the Efe of the Democratic Republic of Congo, infants routinely use throwing small spears and use small pointed digging sticks and miniature axes with knives, the Efe of the Democratic Republic of Congo, infants routinely use throwing small spears and use small pointed digging sticks and miniature axes with knives, the Efe of the Democratic Republic of Congo, infants routinely use throwing small spears and use small pointed digging sticks and miniature axes with knives.

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” or “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 others’ 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 (specialty 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 co-construction of independent (autonomous) infants is for them to have their own rooms where they sleep alone. Letting aside the issue that this practice is conceived as “cruel” or “merciless” for people from other cultural groups [10,30], what is important for the present discussion is that the reasons for producing this practice are less related to the infants’ age or size of the room itself than to the caretakers’ desire to co-construct the infant as independent, even 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 parent-baby 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, 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 kind of touchy connection” (p. 586) via a message that conveys meanings of “autonomy, efficiency, safety and connection,”invoking a discourse of baby ‘self-improvement” (p. 589).

Diurnal use of the device also troubles what constitutes “adequate” (against “invasive”) touch for a parent the device “could make you put baby in their own room earlier” (ibid.). 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 parent-baby touch, the very notion of connection between them, the interpretation of babies’ bodies and the formation of subjectivities [31].

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