

SHALL WE COOPERATE OR COMPETE?

MEANING CONSTRUCTION IN PRESCHOOL CONTEXTS

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MEANING CONSTRUCTION from a Sociocultural Constructivist Perspective:

**Semiotic & Affective processes along
communication and metacommunication**

**COMPLEXITY throughout the different
levels of an open-ended systemic
organization:**

**cultural-historical frameworks, culturally
structured contexts, situational characteristics,
specific social interaction and communication
dynamics, as well as individuals' subjectivities
and goal orientations**

OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To contribute to the investigation of meaning construction processes related to social motivational constructs such as **cooperation, competition and individualism**
- ◆ The heuristic value of **microgenetic studies** to unveil the dynamic features and strategies found in metacommunication processes
- ◆ An **example** within the context of two preschools of how often conflicting messages are being constructed in everyday activities at the levels of both structure and social interactions

THE EXAMPLE

Two different preschools (Londrina, Brazil) → to investigate the social structure and dynamics of the activities promoted by the teachers

2 groups: 13 children (4-6 years-old) plus one female teacher

➤ **to identify and analyze indicators of promotion and/or inhibition of cooperation, competition and individualism along their interactions**

➤ **to identify and analyze teacher's related conceptualizations, beliefs and values**

METHODOLOGY

- Initial Ethnographic approach
- 15 Naturalistic Observation sessions aiming at recording the kind and duration of the activities developed along the daily routine (30 hours)
- Microgenetic analysis of a Videotaped Session that was structured by the teacher specifically to promote *cooperation* among her students
- Semi-structured Interviews: teacher's concepts, beliefs and values (a) regarding human social interactions and social motivation (b) regarding the activity **they structured and developed "to promote" cooperation**

RESULTS

→ Time spent in ***COOPERATIVE*** activities was MINIMAL (between 4 and 5 %)

→ **Preschool A** → ***COMPETITION*** prevailed, at both structural and dynamic levels

→ **Preschool B** → ***INDIVIDUALISM*** was prevalent at the level of activities, but not in the discourse of the teacher.

**BOTH TEACHERS → quiet and organized group,
DISCIPLINE → prevention of child-child
interactions**

In both preschools ***INDIVIDUALISTIC
ACTIVITIES*** occurred for most of the
time, frequently leading to different
forms of competitive interactions
among children.

However, different teacher's goal
orientations and ways of interacting
with children

PRESCHOOL A'S STRUCTURED ACTIVITY:

INTERGROUP COMPETITION: children were organized in four groups of three + one group of four. Balloons were tied to their ankles; the first group to blow up their balloons would WIN

INTRAGROUP COOPERATION ???

Time: 15:30:50 to 15:32:03 → Duration: 1'13''

Sandra addresses the group, using a kind of threat tone in her voice:

- Look, I am gonna give you an activity...but if you don't pay attention then you cannot complain to me about the group having losing it. You pay attention, this is a group activity and it is for serious no!.

One of the **boys** asks her:

- Are we gonna blow them up? [referring to the balloons]

She responds with enthusiasm in her voice [finally, she caught some attention from the unruly group]

- The group that blows all balloons first will be the winner; it's going to win!

Some kids excitedly clap their hands and shout:

- *Wow! Boohoo!!*

[.....]

Bruna smiles and claps her hands, then she says aloud with a lot of enthusiasm:

- *Yeas!* [she actually uses the English word "yes"!], and she goes on non-verbally celebrating while sit in her chair.

Sandra notices Bruna's enthusiasm, and friendly talks to her:

- *Cool down, let the auntie explain.*

Putting up a serious face **she** goes on explaining the rules for the activity:

- You'll have to hold your peers' hands in each group, all right?

While speaking, Sandra's gestures demonstrate how they should give hands to each other.

[.....]

(...) **She** speaks loudly as she explains her words with gestures:

- When I give you the sign...when I give you the sign, the group, always holding hands, don't let them go, will blow up the balloons using your feet. A friend may help the other to blow it up, in the same group, Ok?

Lucas immediately replies in a decisive voice:

- I don't need help!

Sandra looks at him, points at him, and asks with surprise and curiosity:

- Don't you need help? Why?

Many **children** now frantically scream :

- Neither do I! Neither do I! Neither do I!

- Children are again agitated and they shout at the same time. They are very excited, they stand up, leave their seats, climb on the tables and jump, as though reinforcing with their active behavior their power, and the absence of need to be helped by anyone to do anything.

Sandra stands still in front of the children, and seems to be weary as she tries to convince them to accept some help from each other. Looking disappointed, **she** hesitantly says:

- "But you...but you...but you will be in group!"

Lucas pretends to fiercely blow up a balloon with his foot. Andrew and Joseph do exactly the same. **Lucas** says with angry determination in his voice:

- "Because I get the balloon and blow it up like this!!!"

ANALYSIS

Sandra uses and stresses competition to get their attention and to motivate the group. Also, as children seem to be used to participate of competitions, they appreciate it.

..."it's for serious now!"

"...if your group ends up losing due to lack of attention, you cannot complain to me later..."

Sandra emphasizes verbally **and** non-verbally the value of competition (**winners versus losers**) all over the session. When she suggests the possibility of helping inside a specific group, it clearly sounds like **"a friend may help you only if you need it"**.

The words “**may**” and “**help**”, and the way she says such words (paralinguistic meta-communication) have the effect of stressing the absence of a child’s competence to perform the task.

This message prompts immediate denial and indignation → lack of competence, **weakness**, failure to be self-sufficient.

Sandra’s surprised reaction: “***But...but...you’ll be in group...***”

Children’s chorus: “***I don’t need help! I don’t need help!!!***”

Conflict between helping and competing →
AMBIGUITY, AMBIVALENCE

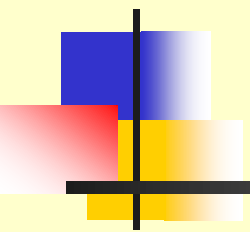
PRESCHOOL B → Teacher suggests a
“non interactive kind of cooperation”:
one child after the other should draw on
a poster that would be put up on the
preschool wall.

No need to interact with each other, but
she opens the possibility for them to
exchange materials. However, when
they do that, she interferes... →
AMBIGUITY, AMBIVALENCE

THE INTERVIEWS

- Sandra and Laura revealed **difficulties in conceptualizing “cooperation”** → children’s obedience and willingness to collaborate with them, not child-child interactions
- Furthermore, both confessed ignorance regarding **how** a cooperative activity could be planned and supervised to promote actual cooperation among preschool children.

Those ambiguities and contradictions found at the levels of both structure and interaction dynamics consist of an example *par excellence* of the **complexity of meaning construction processes**

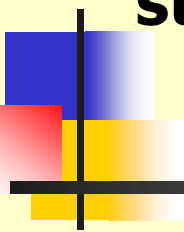


**Educators → promote activities to encourage
specific social interaction patterns that may
facilitate the:**

**INTERNALIZATION OF BELIEFS
AND VALUES RELATED TO SOCIAL
MOTIVATION**

CONCLUSIONS

The **INTEGRATION OF METHODS** (initial ethnographic approach, naturalistic observations, microgenetic analysis & semi-structured interviews) was very effective to study **meaning construction processes**



The need of elaborating scientific knowledge to support people to become aware of the **ROLE OF COMMUNICATION and METACOMMUNICATION within the contexts of everyday life ACTIVITIES** in encouraging human development in particular directions

THANK YOU!

