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“UPBRINGING” IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM PARADIGM

Abstract: The article proposes a theoretical model of the phenomenon of “upbringing” embedded in the social constructionism paradigm. On a conceptual level, it refers to the living world shared by adults and children; it comprises both the content of the culture in which this world is situated, and the reality of the microsystem (families, dyads) created through participation and dialogue. In such formative dialogues, the inexperienced partner, i.e. the child, is introduced to the system of meanings used by the adult. This relationship is not symmetrical; it is a complementary one characterised by the constant, emotional relationship between the child and the person acting as agent, usually a parent.

This complementarity is expressed through a diversity of roles characterised by a distribution of responsibilities, which sets various duties and rights for the two partners. Control is enacted by a mechanism based around the self-fulfilling expectations that the adult has towards the child. The most important advantage of the proposed approach, analysing upbringing from a social constructionist viewpoint, is that it examines the relationship between the two participants from a supra-individual perspective.

Keywords: social constructionism, upbringing dialogue, participation, complementary relationship, control.

GENERAL OUTLINE

The most important principle of constructionism is the claim that both the culture and identity of an individual are constructed through a process of social interaction. “An individual becomes a person only when surrounded by other persons” (Schier, Zalewska, 2002). The shaping of current and future behaviour by the influence of direct interpersonal contacts is a key element in constructionism. Hence, as upbringing seems to be a central theme in this paradigm, there is hope that fuller description and understanding may be facilitated through the creation of new, inspiring and necessary content.

Social constructionism should not be confused with *constructivism* (Zwierzdzyński, 2012). *Constructivism* refers to human cognitive competences. It indicates that perception is an active process, and that information is processed using patterns formed as abstractions of previous experiences. Although *constructionism* also emphasizes the active building of cognitive units, it does not simply refer to the elementary psychological functions of a person, but more broadly, to the formation of a symbolic system of

a supra-individual nature. This system serves as a context for the life and development of societies; it is also a source of meaning, and generates not only cognitive effects, but also emotions and various other elements of culture such as values, aesthetic attitudes and customs. The developing individual learns the existing system of meanings and uses it to construct his own psyche, and over time, uses it to co-create culture on a larger or smaller scale.

The symbolic system is language, although in its broader, semantic sense. Natural language, together with all the other subsystems that carry information, constitutes a world of meanings in which “we live, move and are”. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1973) refer to it as a symbolic universe, Janet W. Astington (1990) a community of minds, and Paul Ricoeur (1985) a narrative of culture. Formerly, this layer of existence was called the “world of the spirit”, and was supposed to rule the world of matter. Language transports a human being to a reality distant from the immediate stimulus and the present: it organizes perception, enables recollection and planning, and indicates the criteria for assessing phenomena. It serves as a system that regulates social activities, and sets the location for other people and tasks.

However, there would be no language without interpersonal communication, thanks to which a person enters the world of meanings, led by the “more initiated”: the meaning of upbringing. Even at three months old, a child is capable of participation, with a so-called field of common meanings being created between his guardian and himself (Bruner, 1990). The simplest behaviours acquire communicative significance through their interpretation by adults; such interpretation takes place in accordance with their way of understanding the infant’s behaviour, which in turn, is based on their culture. A six-month-old child responds to pointing gestures forming a common field of attention, and a nine-month child understands intentions (Tomasello, 2002). In the second year of life, verbal communication begins to take shape. It is an adult who teaches language, this being his own language, along with the attitudes, values and patterns of reasoning that language carries. At the age of three, the child can efficiently use speech in everyday social situations, and for self-instruction. At four, the child discovers a world of fantasy and abstraction. At school age (around eight years of age) the child begins to understand metaphors, then irony. A 12-year-old composes narratives, and a 16-year-old can list events from his own life chronologically. At around 20 years of age, the adult can now build an identity narrative: an image of himself, immersed in culture, i.e. the reality derived from the system of meanings constituting his world, which becomes more complex and improves over the following years (Habermans, Ehlert-Lerche, Silveira, 2009). In the meantime, while at school, the individual learns huge areas of social knowledge accumulated over generations and chooses an area to specialize in. Such learning is also made possible by the use of language during interpersonal interaction; if not for this, few people would “voluntarily” acquire knowledge of all school subjects: it would be more likely to occur in the classroom, under the auspices of a teacher.

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN PARENT AND CHILD

According to the constructivism paradigm, personal development takes place through a process of growing into culture (see: Dryll, 2013). This process is supported by upbringing, and its essence is the dialogue conducted between a child and an adult, who feels called upon to take part. Such dialogue does not only consist of verbal commu-

nication, i.e. spoken language, and as such its influence shapes more than just knowledge, understood as a resource of information. As argued by Lev Vygotsky (1971), each skill appears twice during development: first in the social plane, as dialogue, and then in the individual plane. Passing through the phase of internalized dialogue and egocentric speech (self-instructing), the dialogue undergoes automation and becomes part of a broader operational structure. All properties of dialogue with adults are internalized: both information and instructions, as well as emotions, values and criteria for assessments, together with prototypical relationship patterns. Thus, the way of existence in the world is formed, i.e. the attitude towards oneself and other people, as well as various phenomena and abstractions; this attitude is realised through the behaviour, feelings and thoughts of the individual. After being brought up within a specific dialogue, a person manifests its characteristic features through significant relationships, primarily with adult family members.

The use of the concept of “dialogue” to describe upbringing reality is crucial, in that it emphasises that a relationship is formed through the activities of both participants: its two agents, or subjects. To date, theories describing the upbringing process, although declaratively always referred to as *subjectivity*, were focused either on the actions of the adult, as the object of socialization in this model, or on the child, as an entity surrounded by such “developmental factors” as the presence and characteristics of the guardian. The former approach is based around behavioural and cognitive theories, whose premise was the engraving of experiences on the “unwritten card” of the psyche of the developing individual. The latter is its antithesis, being based around humanistic psychology, with all its arsenal of assumptions about human nature, demanding self-realization in favourable conditions.

The two paradigms share some characteristics. The direction of development is determined by the values held by one of the individuals, either the adult who “shaped” the child, or in the child itself, who in a sense was internally programmed: the grain metaphor. In contrast to these two approaches, the two-agent model implies that values that determine the correct development are external to the individual. The values are located in a culture towards which, and through which, development takes place. Adults act as its agents, but not its creators, and the family world acts as a “filter” for this content. The dialogue used for upbringing serves as a medium for the transmission of cultural patterns.

In the modern world, the dialogue taking place in the family environment is undoubtedly the most important form of intergenerational transmission. There is no indication that the biological bond of parents and their offspring alone guarantees love and attachment (Badinter, 1998), but the awareness of such a bond (“my blood”) fosters a sense of uniqueness and responsibility, which gives rise to the specific obligations and rights of both parties; thus is the parent-child relationship socially defined. The unilaterally-assigned responsibility for the child’s present and future situation imparts upon the parent the right to control the child’s actions, expressed as parental authority with which the child has to comply.

In addition, adults are obliged to take care of and raise the child, and tolerate the ignorance, mistakes and pranks for which the child has the right to engage in during childhood. Of course, parental authority can be exercised in a variety of ways; however, current approaches stigmatize any expectation of unreflective obedience and excessive invasiveness, and it is recommended to base parental dominance on authentic authority, reflected in by the lively care of the adult and the trust of the child.

Even so, although some of its elements are symmetrical, such formative dialogue is most certainly not a symmetrical relationship. Despite this, because it happens in the shared world of adults and children, it is nevertheless highly complementary.

PARTICIPATION

The creators of the common world are adults, most often the parents, and it is their behaviour that sets the framework for the contribution of others and determines the role and place of the child. Following from the concept of the *zone of proximal development* by Lev Vygotski (1971), Jaan Valsiner (1985) proposed two concepts, by which participation may be described. One of them is the *zone of free movement* (ZFM) and the other is the *zone of promoted action* (ZPA). Both are constructed by adults and relate to children. Within the ZFM, the task of the parents is to determine what is not allowed, while in the ZPA, they are to provide learning and support. Both zones are being constantly modified and moved “upwards”: as the child grows, he is allowed more freedom. Despite this, he is never allowed complete freedom – certain limits will always remain. Although the growth in competence also causes changes in the promoted content, the main directions of support may remain constant, i.e. in line with the values and parental preferences regarding the personal patterns prevailing in the culture. In both cases, it can be seen that an important role is played by the values entwined in organizational principles of the shared world, reflected in the everyday dialogue between adult and child.

Within the framework of the zone of free (and restricted) movement, the activities of the adult are reactive in nature. The adult takes action when the behaviour of the child oversteps the agreed boundary, when the child does something forbidden. Typical difficulties that may arise in such case are associated with unawareness of the child’s activities or the inability to effectively cause change. Both of these skills are sometimes considered in the context of control.

The ZPA comprises all these areas which the parent would like to develop. In this sense, the activities are of a proactive character. Although these activities are directed toward goals, these are not necessarily explicit or even verbalised, not always well thought out, and rarely ordered into a coherent system. Most likely, few parents think about what they would like to achieve and plan their actions accordingly; their aims tend to be driven by images of other children, family relationships and other parents, these being derived from observations of others, media productions, memories of their own childhood and other often accidental cultural influences. These are rather of a preferential-aesthetic nature than a rationally-created, abstract register of desired features.

Proactive parenting activities are more likely to be based on direct learning or modelling. In this case, the parents personally engage in demonstration, instruction and evaluation as well as correction of various activities. The difficulties associated with proactive activities may derive from disfunctions in the template used by interactive learning, for example, the adult is not always able to confirm that the children would also like to learn what they are presenting. An additional problem is that parents do not hear or understand where difficulties may occur, they may not be able to explain clearly what has happened, and most importantly, may experience anger and impatience. The dialogue may take on a taunting or combative character, which may

persist and be generalized to other events, such as functioning in school. Such intentional learning is also associated with the age-old problem of assessment: praising and scolding through rewards, punishments and feedback.

Modelling, (“look what I’m doing”), which often finds its way into the upbringing repertoire of the parent as an intentional teaching activity, may also have an unintentional involuntary aspect when the child naturally mimics the parent when performing various activities. Difficulties arise when the parent issues an instruction that contradicts their own conduct, and then criticises the same behaviour in the child.

Within the ZPA, the parents may also choose to organise the environment without participating themselves. This may affect various objects, such as educational toys, computer programmes, uniforms and everyday domestic objects, as well as their choice of institutions, such as by choosing nursery schools with special programmes and evening classes, and people, for example by the selection of “appropriate” friends and care-takers. When such conduct is predominant in the family, the parent-child dialog is strongly mediated by the context. It may be the case that the only time spent “face-to-face” with the parent is when the child is transported back and forth from further extracurricular activities. In addition, ambitious parents may expect the child to achieve above-average skills in response to their organizational and financial effort; if not fulfilled, this can bring disappointment and possible resentment on their part.

COMPLEMENTARITY

The shared lifestyle, such as that found in the family, and cooperation engaged in between adults and children, are based on principles which shape the cultural patterns observed by adults. The parents are the “directors” of events, for which the scripts are written by culture. Most daily events follow a typical format, and unusual events, such as holidays, are often characterized by permanent features. Children and adults play through such scenarios in certain ways and learn their roles.

According to the theory of symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1981; Mead, 1975; Turner, 2012), the realizations of typical interactions are recorded in the form of schemes: i.e. games, scripts and “choreography” (Praszkier, 1992). These schemes, the most valuable concept that symbolic interactionism brought to constructionism, are action records; they serve as acts of action, a succession of subsequent elements within an interactive event, independent of its actors. This principle can be defined as the primacy of the event scheme (script) over the actor scheme. This thesis is of great importance for the theory of the upbringing process contained within the spirit of constructionism. It can be extended to account for the formation of a certain consistency regarding the behaviour demonstrated by a person playing a role in a permanent social system – in this case, an asymmetrical (complementary) family dialogue. By participating in numerous productions “directed” by adults, the child adopts prototypical patterns of social behaviour. Parental “direction” of these interactive events is based on a phenomenon called the self-fulfilling prophecy effect (the Pigmalion effect).

The Pigmalion effect (Chen, Bargh, 1998; Good, 1980; Rosenthal, Jacobson, 1968; Skarzyńska, 1975, 1977; Trusz, 2010) is also known as the *feedforward effect* in cybernetic modelling (Skrzypek, 1987). It is based on the principle that a speaker sends messages to an interlocutor according to their own expectations as to their contribution, thus unwittingly creating a framework in which the other person must

“sign in”, i.e. adjust their behaviour to allow meaningful communication. These expectations are based on an image of how an interactive event will take place and what the other person’s behaviour will be. Regardless of the content of such an image, it can convey hope or fear: depending on the purpose or function of the event, one can expect a favourable or unfavourable course. Expectations are not subject to conscious control (see: Chen, Bargh, 1989) and cannot be changed by persuasion (Skarżyńska, 1977).

The self-fulfilling prophecy effect is particularly pronounced when one of the partners is assigned responsibility for the course and effect of cooperation. Both the parent-child and the teacher-student relationship (see: Good, 1980) can be counted as such. The adult dominates, not only because of the authority he has, and his belief that he has it, but also because he has a huge competitive advantage (“he knows better”). Parental expectations tend to be expressed with regard to the child, either their permanent features (my child IS ...) or permanent behaviour characteristics (my child ALWAYS ...). Whether these expectations are positive (hopes) or negative (fears) is reflected by their formulation, i.e. their representation of the characteristics of the partner (child), and can thus be diagnosed (see: Dryll, 1995). The use of terms marked by a positive evaluation indicates optimistic expectations (“Jaś is independent, consistent, chatty”), while the negative is pessimistic (“Jaś is wayward, stubborn, mouthy”).

With positive expectations, an adult promotes behaviours considered good, i.e. those that are hoped for (see: Rosenthal, Jacobson, 1868). On the contrary, with negative expectations, the parent promotes those which are feared. The phenomenon of the emergence of new difficulties, or the exacerbation of existing ones, associated with negative expectations is described by Daphne Bugental (1992) as a series of consecutive, alternating behavioural acts between two partners. The first act is motivated on the part of an adult by a sense of duty, as well as the conviction that he or she cannot influence a child who behaves badly. Such messages are characterized by ambivalence, to which the child reacts by not demonstrating the desired change. The adult feels a defensive arousal, which engages resources and reduces the chance of finding an appropriate mode of communication. Feeling an increasingly marked sense of duty and inability, the adult employs defensive strategies based on coercion or integration. Both are counterproductive: coercion causes opposition, and despite pretending friendship, it is accompanied by uncontrolled, but visible, “leakage” of negative emotions. In both cases, the child withdraws from contact. The adult’s discomfort deepens, and intensifies the expectation of failure associated with controlling the interaction; it also serves as a label emphasising such negative characteristics.

Previous Polish studies have also identified a relationship between the adult-child interaction template and their expectations. The first, in which the experimenter’s assistant acted as a student, found that the type of information provided about a student can significantly modify the interaction pattern in a learning situation, despite the student not modifying their own behaviour between situations (Skarżyńska, 1975). The findings indicate that “pupils” recognized as capable were treated better than incapable ones, despite the latter needing more favourable treatment. Although the participants in the study were Pedagogy students, the results demonstrated that they responded based on expectations, on an automatic level, rather than according to their training.

A similar study by Dryll (1994) examined difficulties in upbringing rather than ability. Parents were presented with different descriptions of children: these were the

same in a descriptive sense, but differed in terms of evaluation and thus generated certain expectations about them. Four types of description were provided: “polite boy”, “difficult boy”, “polite girl” and “difficult girl”. After hearing a description, the parents had to choose from a set of interaction scenarios with the described child in conflict situations. As expected, the results confirm that the responses depended on the content of the characteristics: “good” children are talked to differently than “bad” children.

Dryll (1995) also examined the attitudes of mothers who differ in real expectations for their children. The mothers performed a gap-filling exercise regarding conflict scenarios with their children. Differences were observed in their responses, which indicated the existence of an expectation effect: in the compared groups, conflict scenarios were characterized by features based on negative expectations that clearly exacerbated these differences, or positive expectations that levelled them.

The final key study in this series examined narratives from mothers in response to the stimulus “please tell me about ... (child’s name)”. All mothers in the study had either experienced or not experienced upbringing difficulties with their children. The two groups received the same number of problem behaviour descriptions which did not differ in content. However, while the mothers who had experienced difficulties focused on searching for root causes, while those had not experienced them formulated a series of “golden maxims”: remedial strategies that could be successfully applied when difficulties arise. Content analysis of the maxims found them to be contradictory: no content was important. Knowledge of any strategy at all appears to eliminate the feeling of helplessness and thus bring a sense of agency – the belief that a parent can communicate with and influence her child.

CONTROL

Psychologists typically distance themselves from the concept of an adult controlling a child. This distance stems from the spirit of individualism and humanistic psychology. Both approaches assume that there is a positive potential in man, which only needs to be fostered in conditions of security and love, and any external influence of a modifying nature can destroy or disrupt this process. The most popular tools in current use examining the concept of upbringing attitudes, regard control as a defect in relationships: the opposite of autonomy, freedom or even love.

Within this concept, however, it is necessary to distinguish between cognitive and behavioural control (Kofta, 1989), or the control of outcome and agenda (Kruglansky, Cohen, 1973). Cognitive control is dependent on knowing and understanding what the child is doing, and must constantly be exercised, as required by parental responsibility. This is also how agenda control should be exercised, i.e. rules and regulations regulating the daily functioning of the whole family, including the child. Behavioural control, i.e. actions aimed at achieving change, may relate to a specific result, e.g. “you performed this task wrongly, correct it”, or to some characteristic or repetitive behaviour. It is easier to successfully realise an act of behavioural control if the standard towards which the change is heading is known and accepted by the child. This obviously requires effort on the part of the adult. At this point, it should be noted that control performed merely to serve one’s own ends or convenience, or the sense of satisfaction associated with controlling someone, is unacceptable. In the two-agent model, howev-

er, where values are placed outside the individual, selfish motivations and other standards can be more clearly identified and separated.

Undoubtedly, the ultimate goal of upbringing is to achieve self regulation in the child, but in a form that is in line with basic values and upbringing: raising a highly self-regulating thief is not a desirable outcome. Hence, the child must assimilate the standards of the guardian and be guided by them in the process of self-regulation. They should be able to behave in the manner taught by the adult without external monitoring. How can this be achieved?

Self-regulation and self-control are two of many skills. Of course, some children have less effective executive functions, but the same can be said for many predispositions which act as the foundations for a range of complex skills. Contrary to popular belief, when teaching self-control, it is not enough to simply withdraw adult activity. Analyses on cooperation patterns in studies on self-regulation and ways to help children (Dryll, 2002; 2001), indicate that the most self-sufficient children are those who tend to receive help to an extent appropriate to their needs, not those who do not receive help (“do it yourself”), or who are given too much of it. Contrary to popular observations, self-sufficient children ask for help, while those who are not do not ask, and are reluctant to accept help when offered. Upon deeper reflection, this is completely understandable. To ask for help, a child needs to identify the element of the activity that requires assistance. Therefore, the child must take responsibility for a specific part of a task and ensure its personal implementation.

In terms of cooperation, all mothers, i.e. those whose children are self sufficient and those whose are not, perform a variety of operations. For example, rather than correcting errors, the former tend to indicate sources of standards, encourage the structuring of activity (performing preparatory, finishing and control operations), and direct the child’s activity using subtle signals and questions, and demonstrate a lot of patience; Such an approach fosters self-regulation, or “freedom to”, which is the opposite of simple independence, i.e. “freedom from”.

A direct example of the relationship between upbringing success and the model of dialogue in which an adult dominates and exercises control over the relationship can be seen in correlation studies (Szymańska, 2007), in which the severity of upbringing problems and difficulties (both subjectively felt and observed in kindergarten) was found to be inversely proportional to parental directiveness. This applied not only to mothers, but also to fathers, and the effect was more pronounced when direction based around negative pressure was distinguished from that based on friendly emotions. Here, the effect was even more pronounced. Control is not the same as applying pressure. Lack of control is often perceived as abandonment or lack of interest by an adolescent, and its presence associated with care, concern, positive expectations and acceptance (Lubiewska, 2019). It is possible that modern parents refrain from controlling their children in a friendly way, as based on the prevailing message of popular psychology, they decided that it was inappropriate.

CONCLUSION

Raising children, especially in the home environment, is an extremely important issue for societies. Although it would seem that this phenomenon is so basic and natural that it is not influenced by culture, it is in fact strongly dependent on predominant ideologi-

cal trends and colloquial knowledge (Koops, Kessen, 2017). To a large extent, psychology plays a role in this. Unfortunately, such beliefs become a source of “holy truths”, repeated in the media, guidebooks and, worse, in clinics. These truths, which are in fact changeable, depending on their semantic context and immediate context, are treated as discoveries of natural sciences. Absolute truthfulness is ascribed to them, regardless of situation and addressee, as if they were derived by medical studies. Psychology, however, is not a natural science, but belongs to the humanities. Such disciplines do not formulate exceptional laws, and their findings do not explain the world, but help to understand it (Straś-Romanowska, 2008). It is impossible to describe any case of a child being raised using one or even several discovered, timeless psychological laws. Our understanding of a particular process, however, is based on an awareness of a register of possible factors that may be of significance, depending on the interpretative constructs available in scientific discourse. These contexts are created in the course of interpersonal communication; just as in the dialogue between adults and children, an understanding of the world is created in subsequent generations. Hence, in research on upbringing, it is important to maintain a distance from “holy truths”; this may be achieved by considering cultural context as a factor exerting a decisive impact on the quality of the upbringing process, thus placing Psychology among the humanities.

The most important and, theoretically, most promising aspect of the phenomenon of upbringing in social constructionism is the supra-individual nature of its description. This is reflected in the simultaneous interest in the two main actors: the adult and the child. The defining feature of this relationship is the diversity regarding the status of the two partners and their rights and obligations. At the centre of the model lies the dialogue between the adult and the child: the process and effects of communication studied at many levels, especially that of meaning. Meanings, in turn, refer to the semantic context – the narrative of the culture in which this dialogue is immersed. Culture is changeable and “living”, therefore the upbringing practices and the descriptions of this phenomenon must both be fluid.

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