



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Learning, Culture and Social Interaction

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/lcsi

Full length article

Developmental trajectories of the Self in children during the transition from preschool to elementary school

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Self
Development
Meaning-making
I-positions
Transition process

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to discuss how do children co-construct their Self developmental trajectories, in the transition process from preschool to primary school. Two approaches, Dialogical Self Theory (DST) and Sociocultural Psychology, were the basis for the analysis. Methodologically, we developed a study about one year in the schooling context, with interviews, observations and semi-structured task of children, parents and teachers. Three children were selected for a microgenetic analysis, Helena, Giselle and Anderson. The analysis demonstrated, that children co-construct their Self developmental trajectories internalizing actively the cultural suggestions of significant social others and in the meaning-making process oriented to the emergence of *I/self positionings*. The children created, each on his/her way, signs or new *I/self positionings* to deal with the transition process.

1. Introduction

The study of Self developmental trajectories of children in transition from preschool to elementary school is a topic of recent interest (Cavada, 2016; Hviid & Villadsen, 2015; Roncancio-Moreno & Branco, in press). Our study of children's Self development and Self meaning-making processes builds on the theoretical contributions of both cultural psychology (Branco & Valsiner, 2012; Bruner, 1990; Valsiner, 2007, 2014; Zittoun, 2016) and the Dialogical Self Theory (DST) (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Although the academic literature concerning children transitions is growing (Dehnes, 2015; Wong, 2015), there is still a gap in the investigation of the meaning-making processes related to the development of Self in children. Methodologically, the use of single techniques as observation of children's actions or the analysis of their narratives is not enough to understand their developmental pathways. Two questions have oriented our research, which we here illustrate with empirical data: How do children co-construct their developmental trajectories? How significant others contribute in the co-construction of a child's account of themselves?

First, we will present some of the theoretical foundations of the research. Then we explain the broader project we carried out to identify and analyze—during children's transition from preschool to elementary school—the meaning-making processes related to the dialogical Self development of three children (Roncancio-Moreno, 2015; Roncancio-Moreno & Branco, in press). The study consisted of the first author's Ph.D. dissertation (Roncancio-Moreno, 2015), advised by the second author. The three case studies consist of the investigation of Giselle, Helena and Anderson, each child with a unique developmental trajectory, or different pathways in the co-construction of their Self development. We analyze these three trajectories by focusing on the relationships with significant social

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2017.05.002>

Received 5 April 2017; Received in revised form 17 May 2017; Accepted 22 May 2017

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others in their family and educational contexts. The study used several data collection procedures—as observation and semi-structured activities—with a particular emphasis on the narratives produced by both children and adults taking part of children's transition processes.

Our aim is to contribute to developmental psychology by providing psychologists with a new theoretical tool concerning self-evaluation processes in children, as we elaborate on dynamic constructs to refer to what has been traditionally conceptualized as self-esteem or self-concepts (Freire & Branco, 2016).

1.1. Self trajectories in children development: a dialogical and cultural approach

In this section, we present the two main theories that sustain our research. On the one hand, cultural psychology (e.g. Bruner, 1990; Valsiner, 2007, 2014) and, on the other, the dialogical perspective on the Self (e.g. Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

Our focus is on meaning-construction processes and the study of human development from a sociogenetic, dialogical and constructivist approach, since cultural psychology sees the individual as an active constructor of its own development (Valsiner, 2014). According to Zittoun (2016), sociocultural psychology bears on four assumptions: 1) it understands the *uniqueness* of human beings, 2) it is a dialogical psychological perspective that studies the individual in interaction with his/her semiotic and developmental context, 3) it focuses on different levels, microgenetic, ontogenetic and sociogenetic; and, 4) it emphasizes individual meaning-making processes. In the current research, we adopt these four assumptions.

Our definition of Self derives from the Dialogical Self Theory (DST) proposed by Hermans and collaborators (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), and is in tune with the sociocultural approach: “Self and culture are conceived of in terms of a multiplicity of positions among which dialogical relationships can develop” (Hermans, 2001, p. 243). From this perspective, the Self is not one single psychological stance, is not self-contained, on the contrary, it is dialogical and its construction depends on the culturally-contextualized significant social others with whom the individual is related. The Dialogical Self is, then, dynamic and can transform itself in the irreversible time all along individual's experiences in the life course. In accordance with the definition of Self provided by the DST, we consider that individuals can *position and reposition themselves* along their development. We have named these positions as *I/self positionings* (Freire & Branco, 2016; Roncancio-Moreno, 2015), because of the dynamic nature all positions within the context of the Dialogical Self System (Branco, 2015). As we argue in this paper, the notion conveyed by the concept of *I/self positionings* (Branco, Freire, & Roncancio-Moreno, 2016; Roncancio-Moreno, 2015) is central to make sense of the individual—in our case children—as active and constructive subjects. This concept was inspired by Herman's I-Position's concept (Hermans, 2001), but it is more flexible, complex and dynamic. It fits better a developmental approach and builds on the dual nature of the dialogical Self, *active and reflexive*. The inclusion of the term *I/self* instead of simply referring to the ‘I’ is due to the fact that such positionings may take both an *active* stance (the *I*, as proposed by Mead, 1934) as well as a *reflexive* stance (the *self*, as proposed by Mead, 1934). Individuals can, therefore, move from one *I/self positioning* to another easily the Self System is dynamic and in constant development, as it interacts with different social others in different cultural contexts. For instance, in context A, a child's ‘bright-student’ *I/self* positioning prevails (as in Math classes), while in context B, a ‘clumsy learner’ positioning may dominate (as in soccer classes).

From our perspective, the development of Self (Lopes de Oliveira, 2016; Roncancio-Moreno & Branco, 2015) occurs, particularly, during transition periods (Zittoun, 2016). Transition periods are moments in the life course in which the Self is especially transformed (Zittoun, 2014). Individuals' life courses are not characterized only by regularities and continuities, for there are many points of bifurcation in which their development can be reoriented, taking another path (Zittoun, 2009). Consequently, repositioning and reconfiguration processes occur, allowing for the transformation of the very sense of identity, and, from such reconfigurations, novelties—and new ‘*I/self positionings*’ (Branco et al., 2016; Roncancio-Moreno, 2015)—can emerge. When significant changes take place in the subject's socio-affective interactions as a whole, the transition can turn into a rupture, promoting more significant self-configuration changes, i.e., causing actual shifts in the relationships between the individual, the objects, and social others, rearranging personal meanings. Zittoun (2009) emphasizes the need to study the dynamics of these reconfigurations. In institutional transitions (for instance, from preschool to the first grade of Elementary School), we can often identify developmental ruptures in the flux of children experience. Children, while coping with a new educational setting, can transform the meanings of many things, and particularly those about themselves, leading to changes in their dialogical selves. As developmental researchers, we should, then, be able to analyze the microgenesis of such processes, and to investigate the different ways by which children co-construct their dialogical Self along their life experiences.

1.2. About trajectories: a life course perspective

The study of developmental trajectories in children is not a new topic. In recent years, psychologists have examined developmental trajectories in order to assess different aspects of children's lives: competence and value beliefs (Fredricks & Eccles, 2002), acquisition of academic skills in transition processes (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002), bullying (Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2008), aggressive behavior (Malti, McDonald, Rubin, Rose-Krasnor, & Booth-LaForce, 2015), among others. However, most researchers have focused their attention on quantitative measures that leave aside the central role of individual sense-making processes that takes place along children's experiences throughout time (Hviid, 2012). We argue that children's Self trajectories should be investigated from a life course perspective, and some researchers have carried out studies in this direction (Freire & Branco, 2016; Mattos & Chaves, 2015; Roncancio-Moreno, 2015). The interest in the study of Self developmental trajectories in children appears, then, as an opportunity to explore the emergence of relevant processes concerning children's *I/self positionings* along their experiences.

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