

The roads to exclusion: the analysis of prejudice displayed in children's games

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to understand prejudice expressed by 5 and 6-year-old children when they play. The study was carried out at a preschool based on Vigotsky's Historical-Cultural perspective. Significant findings in the categories of gender and race enabled classifying prejudice into three stages, namely: a) the pejorative labeling of difference; b) discrimination of diversity and c) crystallization of prejudice. Finally, the need for a mediator teacher was noted as a key player to transform prejudice in dialogical and cooperatives social relationships.

Keywords: Child education. Prejudice. Games and playtime.

1 INTRODUCTION

This text encompasses the synthesis and the amendments made to the master's dissertation called *“Educação infantil: análise da manifestação social do preconceito na atividade principal de jogos”* [Child education: analysis of the social manifestation of prejudice in the games they play] that was defended in August 2008 at the Federal University of São Carlos. This study presents some of the main points discussed in the dissertation, where the cyclic and historic nature of prejudice as a sociocultural phenomenon was highlighted.

The analytical explanation of the cyclic and dialectic nature of prejudice gained body under the study on the development of prejudiced behavior displayed by 5 and 6-year old preschool children when engaging in games and playing with toys. Materialistic-historical assumptions were investigated supported by Historic-Cultural psychology, the

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leading figures of which are Vigotsky, Leontiev and Luria. The subjects were selected given that any prejudice displayed by them would still occur in the early stages of their formative years, when it is possible to make gnosiological and behavioral changes are crucial to furthering critical pedagogic mediations, especially when they occur via the core activity, which is the fundamental form through which we relate with and become part of society.

The cornerstone of the philosophic reference that guides us is the notion that human beings detain a series of social relationships built collectively and historically. Humankind is both product and producer of its social context, where work is the main generic activity. Through work humankind was able to conquer nature, create language, culture and determine that human beings are a genus rather than a mere species. At that moment, according to Leontiev, a new development line arises, given that

“in the animal world, the general rules that govern the laws of psychological development are the laws of biological evolution that leads to humankind, where the psyche obeys the laws of social-historical development.” (LEONTIEV, 1978, P.68).

Coherent with this assumption, Davidov (2002) notes that of the many different definitions of what it means to be a human being, the one that he likes best defines human beings as a historical animal. Historically, from cradle to tomb, as humankind is not a unique category; it is not inherited by a biological process but made of a complex construction of interrelationships between the subject and the environment. Given all these characteristics, humankind does not settle for merely reproducing as a species because it needs to take control of the achievements of past generations in order to be part of history itself; this feature denotes the imperative need of taking hold of meanings ensued from its symbolic representation system.

This system of meanings is constantly changing and depicts how human beings historically build their relationships within society in face of generalist conceptualizations that guide the course of gnosiological appropriation/objectivation and a myriad of social relationships attained by human beings in their day-by-day and outside it. However, when some such generalizations are supported by oppressive and discriminating structures they might fail to explain the phenomenon's main characteristics to represent the obfuscation of the phenomenon.

It is within this ideological universe that the series of meanings is inserted, undergirding and justifying prejudiced practices of contemporary societies, which is architected by a group of dogmas that place a derogatory label on everything that is different from a given hegemonic social model. Hence, any specifically human phenomenon, such as prejudice, is also historical, where understanding it requires the assessment of problems and tensions that gave rise and still foster prejudice and development, and possibly ending it in a given sociocultural context. Consequently, it is only by the dialectic apprehension of this constitutive triad that it is possible to effectively understand the essence of this phenomenon as part of a set of social relationships that reflect our own historic totality and not as an epiphenomenon dislocated from the context where it is created.

2 THE CONCEPT OF PREJUDICE

Prejudice is a phenomenon as much disseminated as it is misunderstood. Despite many authors (HELLER, 1970; JONES, 1973; FERNANDES, 1976; FERREIRA, 1986) defining it partially or completely in their works, understanding it in epistemological terms is by no means about to become a common point. Much is said about the phenomenon; however, the relationships that nurture and

support it are often covered by vague and meaningless definitions.

This environment of theoretic indeterminations bring forth problems to the conception and the overcoming of prejudice, where its analytical restructuring should forcibly seek its formative process, thus separating it from definitions defining it as synonymous of preconceived concepts. Let us begin from this starting point.

The Brazilian Aurélio Dictionary (FERREIRA, 1986, p.1380) defines prejudice as “a preconceived concept that was not based on facts; a preconceived idea. Judgment or opinion that does not take into account a fact that would contest it”. In our opinion, the author is defining a preconceived notion rather than prejudice, as the concept that defines prejudice includes the aforementioned definition and other perceptions that classify it a human discriminating and alienating phenomenon. One such perception lies in the fact that prejudice embodies a symbolic and material perception that qualifies in a derogatory manner everything that breaks away from a given social model considered hegemonic, based on a set of stereotypes that are incorporated into a wide range of communicative processes that are part of our daily life.

Under the practice of prejudice, these stereotypes are maintained not only when one fails to take into account the facts that contest it, but also when such facts are known. For this reason, more than the phase of that precedes knowledge or a pre-established opinion, at least in its final trend, prejudice represents the untrue crystallization of a given piece of knowledge and its compromise to ideological interests of dominant groups.

Under special circumstances, i.e. discrimination without actual understanding of the reasons for one's behavior, prejudice is very similar to preconceived ideas, not only in sweeping generalizations about a social phenomenon that lacks higher levels of abstraction. Such generalizations are directed not towards the appropriation of the surrounding

reality (as in preconceived ideas), but aim at discriminating and excluding diversity, e.g. prejudiced generalizations are disseminated and become permanent in an inappropriate and misled manner from the point of view of logical dialectics.

Hence, this study notes that the supposed similarity between preconceived ideas and prejudice is built superficially and is wrongly supported during its embryo phase as if it were the sole existing factor, disregarding the multiple grades that can arise even as early as its origin, which is a phase characterized by unconscious discriminating attitudes already evidenced during preschool. Externally, it has the appearance of prejudice, which extends to the crystalized and dogmatic forms of the stage where discriminating attitudes are resistant to changes – they greatly differ from the psychological structures of these grades.

In this manner, although prejudice affects all social groups, as it imposes limits and narrows the scope of actions and options for the development of the higher psyche functions of human beings, the discriminated groups have to bear the oppression and discrimination; that said, transforming their differences in inequalities and social exclusion, and due to these factors, denying that prejudice exists from a fundamental element to change the social-communication relationships established by human beings, where their materialization overcomes barriers that were imposed in terms of establishing democratic and fraternal communication.

However, these changes cannot take place during the preschool phase before a critical mediating nexus is set up by a third party that will elevate the children's mindset to a higher qualitative level. This will be conducive to transcending the crystalized meaning and to reach a human-generic meaning. In terms of preschool, contesting prejudice calls for valuing differences as the fundamental component of human beings and building more cooperative and fraternal objectives to carry out the proposed pedagogical activities, as during this stage

games and recreational activities are laden with transforming activities.

3 METHODOLOGY

The overall purpose of this study is to understand the cyclic structure of the manifestation of prejudice expressed by 5-6 year old preschool children when carrying out their core activities. To this end, this study addressed three complementary or specific objectives: 1) to observe and assess children's interrelationship when engaged in games and playtime; 2) to investigate how these activities influence the acquisition and/or contesting of prejudices; 3) to explain how mediation carried out by teachers can interfere in the type of social relationship between the studied subjects.

This study was carried out in a preschool located in the interior of the State of São Paulo near the Araraquara region, involving three hundred and fifty four 5-6 year-old children. Methodology applied to obtain data was observation, video recording and the children's conversations (recorded in a field log book) while they played freely in the park surrounding the preschool facilities, and in activities supervised by the teacher.

Analytical procedures were developed in compliance with the principles under Vigotsky's historical-genetic method (2004), although indirectly, given that our actions did not create new mediating pedagogical contexts. During this process, data was divided into short excerpts reporting the context and how the games and playtime activities were carried out, as well as the statements given by the children and teachers. Data was divided into two categories and analyzed individually, namely gender prejudice and race prejudice. Thus, this study endeavored to identify how the gender and race categories are present in the production of prejudice in the preschool milieu, investigating contradictions contained in the overall historical context that could dialectically help to overcome and transform prejudice.

4 FINDINGS, ANALYSES AND DISCUSSION

Given that this study was based on the focus of our master's dissertation, we deemed it necessary to include part of the structure where the academic study was devised to support the hypothetically creation of a cyclic architecture comprising the manifestations of prejudice. To this end, to excerpts were chosen for their relevance in data collection, related to understanding the race and gender categories as they reflect the different stages of the prejudice cycle, expressed more comprehensively under the aforementioned analyses.

Race Excerpt: A group of six 5-year old girls were 'playing house' in the park and for some 20 minutes they had no conflicts. However, when the girls decided to swap their social role in the game, i.e. cook, woman of the house, daughter, doctor, dentist and hairdresser, the existing camaraderie was replaced by arguments and conflicts, where Julia (white) made a prejudiced remark to Jennifer (black); Julia believed it was wrong for Jennifer to be a doctor or hairdresser (roles that the former wanted to take on) because "there's no such thing as a black doctor, and how can you be a hairdresser with such bad hair?" (actual words spoken by de Júlia). Jennifer was clearly upset and quit playing, removed herself to sit all by herself on a bench and refused to take part in the game if she never could take on the role she wanted, as she never was able to be what she wanted. When Jade contested Júlia's petty behavior, she replied "but I didn't want to be mean, everybody knows that's the ways things are, I didn't want to make her cry".

Discrimination in the relationship between blacks and whites is a common occurrence in the Brazilian social context, as the hierarchy in our society is still based on the color of one's skin. History changed, slavery was abolished, but black people are still discriminated against for their phenotypical

characteristics, e.g. color of skin, texture of hair, as observed above in the role-play of the preschool children.

Hence, according to Fernandes (1976), the abolition of slavery did not actually lead to better life quality for the blacks, who were still discriminated against and performed underpaid menial tasks, living in houses far from the downtown area. This process of historical discrimination and of belittling the physical features of black people can be observed in Júlia's statement against Jennifer (both 5 years old), who clearly declares that a black person cannot be a doctor in their role-playing because there are no black physicians.

Manifestations of prejudice in the relationship between black and white preschoolers show how this type of behavior is deep-rooted in different social practices. They are also revealed in activities considered children's games as they do not interfere decisively in the individual's 'real life', such as in the case of children's role-playing. Júlia's behavior shows how some supposedly natural attitudes ensue from historical fundamental explicitly built on discriminating and excluding assumptions.

This set of materialized forms of oppression of the blacks from society is transferred to games, which often times are expressed without thinking. In this case, what is displayed is the cycle of prejudice typical of the preschool phase, where differences are given derogatory labels and later become inequalities (1st and 2nd phases). However, it was observed that this type of attitude is not maintained when justifications are destroyed in the bud, i.e. dogma formation (3rd phase and end of cycle). Therefore, Júlia was only reproducing a social situation and imitating it; she actually had no intention of making Jennifer cry, but it were her very words that brought her friends to tears.

Analyzing the aforementioned excerpt calls attention to how the prejudice issue is dealt with as early as preschool. It is a known fact that children build their concepts through the

social relationships displayed by adults; in the case of essentially segregating and class-oriented environments, these relationships take on discriminating, hierarchical and excluding aspects, which exclude the social stand of blacks in the job market. However, in the case of the role-playing by the preschool girls racial prejudice arose in a different environment, as all participants shared the same social position and their behavior did not affect the individuals' real life.

Therefore, even in the case of a supposedly horizontal dialogue, prejudice was established in the communication between black and white people. The fact that the manifestation of prejudice is deeply-rooted in different social milieus stands out and cannot be associated only with economic and class-related aspects, but rather with physical features of the race, skin color, type of hair, and physical appearance. Coherently, the materialization of all these prejudices is no longer associated just with slavery of the past but with new forms of control that are actually etched on the body of black people.

Prejudiced arguments become phenotypically ingrained in people's mindset, and for this reason, the body – which retains a myriad of meanings – is also the home of countless marks and prejudices. The body is the medium of the most visible classifications of an individual – his or her skin color, height, type of hair, weight, the shape of the nose and lips, the quality of the clothes they wear, tattoos, muscles and odor, carrying many naturalizing meanings of prejudiced and discriminating stands; hence the importance of mediating practices that will appreciate the diverse body standards, intuiting that all children can effectively expand their bonds and social relationships, the materiality of which may embody games and activities as early as in preschool, provided they are duly mediated.

In this manner, racial prejudice is not a problem that affects only black people but all humankind, as according to Vygotsky (2004) we build ourselves up based on the social

relationships established in our communication with other people and when the contact with other cultures is hindered and consequently human development does not reach all its potential. For this reason, fighting prejudice changes the way we perceive differences, which cease to be seen as inequalities – the pillar of the prejudice cycle, representing the wealth of humankind.

Gender Excerpt: At school, a group of six year old boys decided to play soccer. After the teams were called they realized that one of the sides was one-player short, so they asked the rest of the class if anyone would like to play. Samanta quickly raised her arm and said she would like to join because she could play soccer. The boys dismissed her offer saying that “girls can’t hit a ball” (Hugo’s words), so it would be impossible for Samanta to play with them. Pedro thought that all girls played really bad and would get ruin the match. This opinion was shared by Hugo, Jorge, Renato and José. The lack of acceptance of Samanta by the boys was complemented by a derogatory nickname, as she was constantly called a tomboy because she liked soccer. After being fiercely shunned by the boys form the team, she took the ball and started playing by herself kicking against a wall until the teacher intervened and persuaded the boys to let Samanta join them. She gathered the students without explaining why she was interrupting the class and determined that every child was entitled to join in any activity and that “the first to try to keep another kid from playing would also be out of the game – enough with the fighting, everybody is here to have a good time” (the teacher’s words). What is interesting is that right after they started playing Samanta proved to be the best player and scored many goals, passes and dribbles. Ultimately, the girl that was considered a loser was called “Ronaldinha” by the very boys that had shunned her. Interesting enough, at least

from the standpoint of trying to understand prejudice, after the game Hugo and Jorge, who were from the team that lost the match, unaware of the researcher's presence, were talking about how important it was to prevent Samanta from playing because everyone knew she was the best player and she could make them look bad "it's not right, who ever heard of boys losing to girls..." (actual words spoken by Hugo). Jorge immediately spoke up saying "you want to blame me, but the problem is Samanta, don't you see it? All the other girls must be softies".

This excerpt shows that in certain school games, as in the case of soccer, instead of maximizing the relationship between boys and girls there is a strong feeling of prejudice based on gender, consequently overriding the possible preference of human beings to having a freer relationship with people of the same gender to deal with the same type of issues that take place routinely in order to be part of a field of conflicts between opposite groups.

Since a very early age, boys and girls are gradually set apart in different ways: what they wear, how they behave, favorite colors etc. When the universe of games is mentioned, social archetypes are also part of it, where women are usually raised to avoid activities that involve physical contact. The ideals of femininity are built based on this perspective, which are guided by alleged physical frailty, opposed to male virility (LOURO, 1997). Therefore, the body of both men and women and how their role in society is the product of a historical-cultural construction that originated with strong gender traces.

That said, we understand the concept of gender as a social construction that addresses the study of inequalities between men and women in their process of insertion into the scenario of history. However, instead of explaining these inequalities by a biological and naturalist variant, although the gender category does not disconsider the biological differences between men and women, it believes that other categories built upon the original ones are supported by a set of values

considered dominant. These radically interfere with social inclusion and possibilities of education offered to men and women routinely, i.e. transform gender diversity into social and cultural inequalities (LOURO, 1997).

Therefore, building the perception about children's body and movement is also an educational process that requires the intervention of a mediating, contesting and emancipatory agent in order to break away from the pre-established roles for men and women in society as something natural and irreversible. Within this scenario laden with stereotypes and derogatory labels preconceived ideas have fertile ground to flourish. Its inception, development and incorporation undergoes three different stages.

The beginning of any manifestation of prejudice presupposes the deprecation of diversity of each group/individual, particularly in relation to a group of elements determined by society as the dominant ones (1st cyclic phase). Therefore, this initial pejorative definition may comprise the elements of a wide range of genders, races, social classes, religions and physical standards. The deprecation of differences actually begins to materialize as prejudice (or the embryo phase of prejudice) when these differences become inequalities (2nd phase) and are regarded as justification not to include those that display them within any given activity, as observed with Samanta. Finally, the incorporation of prejudice in social relationships takes shape when as well as the pejorative classification of diversity and its transformation into inequality, the empiric and accurate deconstruction of stereotypes and justifications that support the manifestations of prejudiced are not enough to transform these relationships, e.g. when labeling differences becomes a dogmatic and crystalized mindset (3rd phase of the prejudice cycle).

Hence, the cycle that comprises the manifestations of prejudice includes three interlinked phases, where in preschool – with rare exceptions – only the first two actually take place when children play their games (although this excerpt

addresses the complete cycle), which shows how important it is to have educational mediation to prevent the prejudice cycle completing its oppressive and discriminating path. After it is closed, it tends to resist critical mediating actions that would dismantle its structure.

The way to prevent this cycle from materializing in school inevitably depends on both valuing diversity and the fact that no student should be banned from any social practice, whether it is for fun, artistic or any other purpose, and first and foremost, for the critical historicization with children of the many social phenomena and constructs. Their purpose is to demolish the possible crystallizations of the human way of thinking, which should not be based on dogma but rather on the ever-changing transformation process.

Hugo's statement has the main elements of what we consider a prejudiced behavior, as it relates not to a mere generalization but to inappropriate-untrue generalizations that cannot be proven empirically but still are kept intact. Hugo knew that Samanta was a very good player but just the same he would say she had two left feet. He said she would jeopardize the match because girls could not play with boys. In other words, even knowing that Samanta had great potential, Hugo did all he could do to keep her from playing. This behavior was accepted by the almost everyone – only Átila when against it in a group of 10 boys – and was only banned when the teacher intervened by practically forcing them to accept Samanta in the team.

Hence, the teacher's intervention made it possible, even if somewhat superficially, to change the opinion of most boys about Samanta's performance in the match. However, Jorge still thought that girls could not play soccer as "Samanta was the problem, not the other girls". Consequently, the generalist nature of his considerations was clearly noted, which cannot be supported by any heuristic perspective, consistent with the naturalization and individualization of an essentially historical and collective phenomenon.

Therefore, the notion that everyone is prejudiced or the belief in the alleged timeless and non-historic universality of relationships is both wrong and misconceived. Its materialization is not shared by individuals in the same manner, as prejudice takes on different forms for different people. On a daily basis, society does not treat the same way if a boy or a girl is a bad soccer player. In the first case we have the exception, in the second the rule. Coherently, Jorge actually thought that Samanta was the problem.

The observation of preschool children displaying typically prejudiced behavior does not mean this is a birth trait. One should dismiss any naturalistic assumption when interpreting the genesis and development of prejudice, given its content is essentially historical and social. No child is born prejudiced but develops this behavior based on what they learn from excluding and oppressive social relationships. Given all these characteristics, the historicization of inequalities stands as an interesting pedagogical venue to question the manifestations of prejudice. This is one of the core tasks to be carried out in preschools, namely bringing Science into the classroom through different teaching activities in order to banish groundless dogma and transforming vertical-based and asymmetrical relationships into effective dialogues that in their epistemological root are horizontal and solidarity based.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We hope this study generates food for thought on the phenomenon of prejudice and stresses the need to historicize its genesis and teleological purpose, which are diametrically opposed to the proposal of an effectively democratic society and school.

Hence, we investigated prejudice in that we believe it can be overcome by incorporating historical contradiction dialectics, highlighting the fundamental role played by school and teachers in terms of criticism and the transformation of

this social and collective phenomenon. However, this does not mean transferring yet another collective and social problem onto the shoulders of teachers, but rather to value their arduous job that is to mediate and not to be passive, as often observed in preschools and in the condoning of free and spontaneous child play. Free of what? Free for what?

Coherent with libertarian and humanistic assumptions, we note that prejudice affects not only the individuals who suffer discrimination but all humankind, as our development is based on social relationships via communication with other human beings. Our peers help our development as we can only grow when we know diversity first-hand, which is extremely wealthy and productive in the case of human beings. It is not deviation or inequality as there is not established norm, where when it is impossible to establish contact with different cultures human developments fails to attain its qualitative fullness. For this reason, fighting prejudice and its ideological representations provides us with a view of cooperation as a fundamental relational category to the very development of human beings, as well as providing subsidies to going beyond the mere acceptance or tolerating differences, but first and foremost, to valuing it.

Caminhos da exclusão: análise do preconceito em sua manifestação nos jogos infantis

Resumo: O presente texto objetiva compreender a estrutura componente das manifestações preconceituosas expressas por crianças de 5 e 6 anos na prática de jogos e brincadeiras. Este estudo, realizado em uma pré-escola, orientou-se pela perspectiva Histórico-Cultural de Vigotsky, cujos resultados, impressos fundamentalmente nas categorias gênero e raça, possibilitaramnos a derivação da constituição cíclica do preconceito em três etapas, quais sejam: a) rotulação pejorativa da diferença; b) discriminação da diferença e c) cristalização do preconceito. Finaliza destacando a premência da atividade mediadora docente como elemento basilar na transformação do preconceito e na possível materialização de relações sociais dialógicas e cooperativas.

Palavras-chave: Educação infantil. Preconceito. Jogos e brinquedos.

Camiños de la exclusión: el análisis cíclico de La tríada de los prejuicios a través de la base de los juegos en la educación del niño pequeño

Resumen: El texto busca comprender la estructura Del manifestaciones de prejuicio expresadas por los niños pequeños en la práctica de juegos. Este estudio, hecho en espacio pre-escolar, fue planteado por la Psicología de Vigotsky, e sus resultados, impresos en las categorías de género y raza, nos ha permitido comprender los prejuicios en su constitución cíclica en tres etapas: a) caracterización peyorativo de la diferencia b) la discriminación de la diferencia, y c) la cristalización de los prejuicios. Cerrando las analisis, ponemos la necesidad de la mediación del profesor en la transformación de los prejuicios en relaciones sociales de diálogo y cooperación.

Palabras clave: Crianza del niño. Prejuicio. Juego e implementos de juego.

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