



Culture and History in Symbolic Play

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Research article

Volume 7 Issue 2

Received Date: March 30, 2022

Published Date: April 20, 2022

DOI: 10.23880/pprij-16000297

Abstract

This text proposes a reflective reading about Symbolic Play, in its cognitive and affective-emotional aspects, in relation to History and Culture experienced by children in their space and time. It brings contributions on the irreplaceable wealth of free and self-motivated Play, which presumes basic conditions of trust and physical and mental security in the environment where it takes place. It emphasizes how the ludic symbolic narratives built by the children become a driving force of their social and cultural experiences, enabling the development of a safe and confident posture and social interaction, which contributes to the formation and strengthening of the historical and cultural sense of self.

Keywords: History; Children; Melody; Thinking; Symbolic Play

Introduction

Addressing the richness and depth of symbolic play implies extending its ties to the trajectory of Memory, History and Culture, because, as Winnicott [1] summarizes, Playing is always an experience that develops in the continuum of life, in its own space and time. It presumes basic conditions of confidence and physical and mental security in the environment where it takes place, based on its own social and cultural experiences, as well as producing a creative activity, whose experience contributes to the formation and strengthening of the self.

Symbolic Play becomes, in a way, a narrative, in which the children represent playing scenes of their lives, bursting with affection and emotion. They relive and re-enact parts of their stories, making their imagination and memory intertwine and reproduce facts they actually lived, told and relived in their plays [2]. Arendt and Kohn [3] remind us that, for Herodotus, the task of History would be to save human deeds from the futility that comes from oblivion, a vision based on the Greek perspective that all creatures consider themselves understood within the scope of eternity, of being forever. Historical narratives, on the other hand, are not part of this

global vision of humanity, but, on the contrary, interrupt the circular movement of life and report unique, lived situations, and, according to the aforementioned authors, the course of History is made of interruptions. The ability to see again, that is, to bring back unique situations, is only possible through remembrance, of *Mnemosyne*, mother of all muses. Such considerations remind us of Rilke [4] for whom, immortality abandoned the world to find an uncertain shelter in the darkness of the human heart, which still has the ability to remember and say: "forever".

History and Memory, Inherent Parts of Human Existence

Older than writing, History is part of human existence, as Arendt and Kohn [3] summarize so well, as History welcomes mortals worthy of their deeds and words and makes them remain in the company of things that last forever. History, like tragedy, would have as its ultimate objective reconciliation with the reality achieved through memories.

Bosi [5] turns to Bergson [6], for whom every perception is impregnated with memories. Therefore, the depth and scope of memory permeate our way of living, of seeing

the world. By bringing the past to the present, memory, according to Catroga [7], also gives us the possibility of envisioning the future, or not being corroded by time. This temporal re-presentification is associated with our ability to associate the time lived with the space lived, forming a dynamic semantic field, which guarantees its symbolic duration. For the author, remembering means re-presenting, com-memorating (remembering again), and it is an essential factor in the construction of the self-other identity, a dialogic relationship, represented by the biblical expression Zakhor, "You will remember". Catroga mentions Walter Benjamin [8,9], according to Cagnebin's view [10], for whom memory is inseparable from the historical condition of man and, in this way, it also becomes projective.

Bergson, in his masterful "Matière et Memoire" [6], reminds us that memories seem real, they imitate perception, but remain linked to the past. They transit between the present and the past, however they do not take us back to the past, unless we go to look for them there. Getting closer to sensations, memories can lead us to movement, passing to the state of present situations, felt and lived as real.

Our conscience presides over our action, clarifies our choices and sheds light on our memories, enabling them to be better organized and effective. The past, however, is not erased when it ceases to be perceived. Consciousness takes us from current experience to experience in time, updating it. The transport of memories from the past makes them a reality that extends into the present, giving continuity to what has been lived; however, it is from the present that the appeal for memories occur, responding to us, because, still according to Bergson [6,11], memory and action are intertwined and leverage themselves, and it is from the present that the appeal departs for answering us. It is the action of the body that provides them warmth and life. In the same way, memory and intelligence also evolve together in human development, and over time, conscious memory loses in extension and makes room for penetration memory, in which the memory of dreams also takes action. In this constant movement, memory and imagination actively participate together with the action.

Symbolic Representation: Fundamental for Cultural Development

The above considerations, when articulated to children's play, become relevant for a better understanding of their cognitive and affective-emotional development, since the representative mental structures, just like the others, develop in two complementary aspects: the logical and the genetic. In symbolic play, the child represents true scenes, in which, at the same time as he creates and develops them, he does so based on his mental organization, dynamically associated

with his memory of what was lived, his historical-cultural moment, full of affection and emotion [2].

Kroeber [12], analyzing the nature of culture, considers that every history aims at a reconstitution, when interpreting the past, in order to seek to integrate the lived situations in a phenomenal cursive context, instead of treating them analytically. He considers that, when formulating a culture, the definition of patterns, configurations or *Gestalten* seems to be the most advisable, and its values become essential. Truly evolutionary Biology advocates the interaction between structural and historical cultural context and organic phenomena. It reminds us that Anthropology for decades has sought to establish possible historical patterns of mental organization and value systems in their relations with the reading of Psychology, aiming to elucidate how such patterns change and/or alternate, with the contribution of memory, in its structural and functional historical conversion, in its patterns of organization and in its systems of values, patterns that originate in its historical depth, and that, at times, alternate.

A cursive historical reading, in which the past and the future are intertwined and acquire a common meaning, was an achievement of humanity because, as Eliade [13] reminds us in his myth of the eternal return, profane time does not yet exist for the archaic man, who still lives in mythical time, with no past and no future. Supported by the archetype of eternal repetition, he imbues his gestures with rituals when he goes to fight, hunt, fish or play. His conquests, victories and new possessions only acquire validity for him when consecrated through symbolic rituals, which have the sacred power to make the lived last forever.

As Malinowski [14] reminds us in a complementary way, primitive man is already able to observe and think about his lived context, he already has rudiments of methodical systems of knowledge, which he remembers integrated in his communication, in his language. In the same way, he is already able to draw maps in the sand, indicate locations, plan expeditions and large tribal journeys. To this end, he uses material mnemonic resources, such as sticks, leaves and stones, to remember the paths. Such findings lead us to conclude the precocity of his rational, temporal and spatial domain, based on the experienced reality, beyond the sacred zone of primordial times.

Life in society, like any culture, needs internal conditions, of a psychic character, as well as external ones, as highlighted by Birket-Smith [15]. Society, the basis of every culture, is based on tendencies and instincts, of which the gregarious instinct emphasizes, the foundation of feelings of union and altruism, family and social, qualities that, together, benefit the development of a culture. Playing, sometimes considered

something superficial, has, however, increasingly ensured its historical, educational and social value, and even Ethnology has revalued its relevance in the evolution of culture. In addition, he considers that games and playing have been considered not only as factors that unite people and as promoters of order and discipline, but also of profound influence in the fields of science, art and language.

Huizinga [16], when analyzing the nature and meaning of the Game as a cultural phenomenon, initially reminds us that Psychology and Physiology seek to explain the great significance between animals and humans, in their different stages of life. He points out, however, that although there are still great divergences regarding the definition of its biological function, there is a consensus that there is a kind of biological purpose in the act of playing/gaming. He even reminds us that its aesthetic and entertaining aspects are highlighted by most authors. Despite not having a single concept that defines it, the existence of the game is undeniable, as he reminds us, since, by recognizing it, we forcibly perceive its immaterial nature, since it predates even primitive cultures, from their earliest origins. The author considers Game as a specific form of activity with a social function, becoming itself as one of the main bases of civilization. As he points out, the game has always been a voluntary activity, however, since its beginning; it has not been part of daily life, being considered by humanity precisely as an escape, an interval from everyday life, reserved for a temporary sphere with its own direction. And, perhaps for this reason, even without being guided on how and when to play, children know perfectly well when they are playing and feel a physical and mental need that they need to play freely in order to maintain their health, and, above all, they feel a great, genuine and contagious pleasure in doing so. This finding, this author, for years and years, as a psychologist had the opportunity to verify, enabling and interpreting the symbolic play created freely by the child as his main lever of physical and mental organization, his most precious asset to enjoy living and living together [2].

Rule games, when transmitted historically, from generation to generation, become a tradition, as Huizinga [16] points out, in which repetition and innovation coexist, according to the time and place where they take place. In their historical trajectory, however, they maintain their order, with which they are constituted, which maintains a basic balance between tension and relaxation, present in games, as well as variation and repetition, and also their possible spatial and temporal demarcations, with clear criteria of beginning, middle and end, as well as possible forms of engagement between participants and respect for the rules. Possible occurrences of tension between participants provide them an ethical and social weight, since they evaluate and judge the player besides his dexterity and strength, but also in his ethical commitment when playing, in his loyalty to the other

participants, in knowing how to lose or win.

On the other hand, according to Eliade [13], some rule games can still bring with them a mysterious atmosphere, charm and secrecy, which sometimes put their laws and customs on hold, as revealed by the remaining evidence of archaic sacred games, performed in honor of a god, in which consecrated virtues, such as *time* (pronounced "teemeh", which, in short, refers to Honor and respect for the duration and passage of time) and *arete* ("areteh", which means the search of excellence, to get the most out of oneself), both present in the games, virtues that are respected, honored and valued by the players and by those who watched them. The historical development of sacred games is always cyclical, rotating according to the primordial rhythm of life, in its "creation – destruction – new creation", that is, such games at the dawn of time, already in their wisdom, favored the renewal of life that occurs with each destruction suffered in its infinite cyclic repetition, a condition for the renewal of lived history, in its sacred character.

Next, in order to try to transcribe into words all the emotion, fascination and risk of games of chance, which persist to this day, we transcribe below excerpts from "The Gambler", by Dostoyevsky [17]. The character, Alexei Ivanovich, a compulsive gambler at casino roulette, reflects: "if only you knew how fully I myself comprehend the sordidness of my present state, you would not trouble to wag your tongues at me! (...) Well, wherein lies my difficulty? It lies in the fact that by a single turn of a roulette wheel everything for me, has become changed. Yet, had things befallen otherwise, these moralists would have been among the first (yes, I feel persuaded of it) to approach me with friendly jests and congratulations. (...) What am I? I am zero - nothing. What shall I be tomorrow? I may be risen from the dead..." And, further on: "Ah, the evening when I took those seventy gulden to the gaming table was a memorable one for me" (...). "I had always had a sort of predilection, yet I lost my stake upon it. (...) selected zero—beginning by staking five gulden at a time. Twice I lost, but the third round suddenly brought up the desired coup. I could almost have died with joy."

From then on, Alexei starts winning again and again, which inexplicably happens sometimes with players. And he goes on thinking: "Ah, at such moments one forgets both oneself and one's former failures! This I had gained by risking my very life. I had dared so to risk, and behold, again I was a member of mankind!" His luck, however, would not always accompany him...

Commentators say that Dostoyevsky was inspired by his own lived experience, being a gambler himself. The fact is that he impregnates the text with so much emotion, in fact, as he always does, that makes us feel viscerally the attraction,

the challenge, the risk and fascination of the game, so it is not by accident that it has accompanied man since its beginnings. Given the depth and complexity of the so-called games of chance, whose sample of a situation was transcribed above, the psychological literature on this theme is still current, but which has accompanied man since his beginnings.

A text that presents an analysis of psychic and social-family behavior from the experience of the compulsive gambler, considered pathological by the author, is developed by Omais [18]. Based on the text by Dostoyevsky, above, a situation was briefly described that evidences the fascination of the player with the number zero of Roulette in a casino. However, an article by Andrade [19] sheds light on the tiny mathematical probability of a bet on a certain number being confirmed by the spin of the roulette, since there are 37 numbers on the board and roulette (from zero to 36). However, here we also reflect on the immense emotional strength invested by the player in the belief of Luck, which sometimes, without any plausible reason, accompanies even a player in his day, a fact that has already been proven countless times and that would also deserve further research on the subject.

Memory and Imagination Come Together in Symbolic Play

In symbolic play, children, in a way, also act within a field governed by memory and imagination, in which their desires, fears, dreams and fantasies interact. The exhaustive repetition of a certain theme already signals the risk of acting compulsively, of not trusting themselves and feeling as if forced to repeat, over and over again, a certain action, which would protect them from greater damage, generated by an unknown guilt; acting like a robot programmed by forces beyond their control, and which therefore indicate the need for psychological support. However, it is important to remember that sensory-motor or even symbolic play, alone or in groups, preferably outdoors, with the possible use of water, sand or modeling clay, in a quiet environment, also provides the children a great sense of well-being and promotes their freedom to act without guilt, to trust themselves. Respecting a child's play implies not wanting to supervise, guide or direct him. Also, it is not advisable to ask him what he played with, as this is a child's private matter and must be respected. Most important, perhaps, is to give him time to play, with comfortable clothes that can get dirty, as well as, discreetly, observe if when he finishes playing, he starts to present a more relaxed and happier aspect, and, if he wants to speak, listen carefully but without converting this listening into an inquiry.

Playing, alone or in a group, allows the expression of emotions lived and stored in their memory, many of which

need to be remembered and relived, including through playing, in order to be better elaborated. As Chateau [20] points out, in his great richness and versatility, Playing is an inherent part of our self-affirmation as a person, contributing to the updating and development of our potential, autonomy and creativity, as well as our awareness of reality, in search for our deepest, most lived and meaningful Self.

When playing scenes from his life, the child, an inherent part of the culture and the historical moment to whom he belongs, combines his way of thinking and feeling, his memory and his imagination, supported by the security that gives him the pleasure and confidence which supports him to tell, narrate playfully, through symbolic means, what he thinks, what he feels in his deepest depths. The ludic symbolic narrative differs from the narrative based strictly on memory, since it does not have the effective and conscious participation of the imagination. Regarding the structural basis, however, no significant differences are observed, since, in both, the elements can be basically classified into: plot (occurrence of events or facts); people (real beings or fictional characters); the place where the facts take place (environment or space) and the narrator (who tells the story and talks about his feelings about it), according to Faraco [21].

In symbolic play, the child, by combining his imagination with his memory, makes the represented people act and speak according to what they think and feel in the situation, as well as, according to the child's perception, when reproducing scenes he witnessed, as he saw them, understood and felt them. A ludic symbolic narrative can refer to different subjects and plots, but it always represents the lived history, including the child who has marked sensorimotor problems [22]. It is the child who is the author, it is he who chooses *what* and *how* he will narrate in his symbolic play, that is, he will choose its content and form. The characters in his narratives, whether real or imaginary, have emotions and feelings, as well as attitudes, speeches, postures and actions. The child, when playing make-believe (as symbolic play is also called), his body and facial language reinforce the context of the situation, as well as enhance feelings, postures and speeches of the people represented, in their way of acting and being, in the way the child perceived them and recorded in his memory [2].

According to Ricoeur [23], a narrative does not aim to abolish the temporality of what happened, but to deepen it. It preserves the dramatic unity that characterizes the narrated action, maintaining its form as a whole, with a beginning, middle and end, linked in a causal chain, which composes its plot. The structure of a narrative forms then a totality, which is supported by the internal relationship of the action in its sense, in its meaning, in its dramatic unity. To understand a

narrated story is to understand at the same time the language "of what happened", as well as the culture and historical time of the represented situation, which is preserved precisely through its narrative and is inserted in the person's history, in the cultural tradition he lived.

Historical Narrative and Fictional Narrative

The historical narrative, in turn, differs from the fictional narrative, in which the configuring act is an operation of the imagination, and the historical narrative is a true narrative, which seeks to remain faithful to the action that occurred, and, on the other hand, the fictional narrative also introduces the imaginary. Both, however, introduce emotions, according to Ricoeur [24], an author who even mentions Aristotle for whom *Pathos* (feeling) becomes an ingredient that is part of the imitation, or representation of *Praxis*, of the lived experience. The pleasure of imitation or representation would be supposed to learn from what has been lived, to conclude, to recognize its form and to reproduce, since, through imitation, the reproduced events often acquire new light, are clarified and become intelligible.

The historical narrative addresses the different ways of inhabiting the world. Still according to Ricoeur, there are several structural approaches to historical narratives in relation to the issue of the time lived, which distinguish them from achronicity, that is, from the absence of respect for the course of time, in fictional narrative. The author also mentions the reflexive dimension of historical narratives, which distinguish the time of telling from the time of things told, that is, the refiguration of the lived, which he calls "The world of the work". Regarding such considerations, it is believed that a certain parallel can be drawn between the historical narrative and the symbolic play, since the child represents what he has lived through a ludic narrative. In short, they would be temporal ways of inhabiting the world. Ricoeur, when approaching the understanding of narrative in its epistemological order, suggests that the paradigm of order characteristic of tragedy could be applied to narrative, since the dramatic unit is characterized precisely by a single action, which forms a totality with a beginning, middle and end, united by a causal chain, the intrigue of tragedy being a model of this structural agreement.

Also, for Redfield [25], the pleasure of imitation and representation suppose learning from the past. Lived events, when represented, often become more intelligible. And here, it can be observed that, in the same way, the child, when imitating a situation through symbolic play, playing, may be able to understand it better.

When imitating a situation, the child does so in an articulated and meaningful way related to the experience,

using the richness of his ludic or graphic representations. The plot of a symbolic game includes an order that makes it form a totality, with a causal chain. This structure is based on the internal relationship of the action, in its sense. Through this structuring, when composing a symbolic game, the child makes it possible for his ludic representation to become intelligible, and sometimes it represents actions actually lived, which caused him strong emotions.

When dealing with the configuration of time in fictional narrative, Ricoeur [24] emphasizes that the historical narrative differs from the fictional narrative, since the configuring act in fiction is an operation of the imagination, in which convergences and divergences regarding occurred facts coexist, while the historical narrative seeks to be faithful to what actually happened. And here, at the same time, the great richness and challenge of the symbolic play of the child can be seen, who intimately and dynamically articulates his life story to his imagination, by creating a symbolic play based on what he has lived and will come to represent it with all his heart.

On the other hand, still according to Ricoeur, the question of time in fictional narrative acquires a new approach, as far as narrative semiotics manages to provide an *achronic* status to the deep structures of the narrative, disclosing new questions, opened in an original dimension, more reflective one. When transposing considerations related to the textual world, from History to Symbolic Play, it is verified that this is also a narrative representation of the experience, made by the child. Temporal ways of inhabiting the world, if on the one hand, they remain imaginary as long as, in the reality of the here and now, they exist only in the text or in play, on the other hand, they become a "kind of immanence", that is, they are inseparable from the lived experience and allow it to be recalled.

The stream of consciousness in a text by Virginia Wolf that addresses the diversity of levels of consciousness, which comprise the living force of unformulated desires and the evanescent and developing character of affective formations, leads Ricoeur to question the possibility of talking about the unity of the plot in the narrative, since the abyssal depth of human consciousness defies language to bring them together and give them form. It reminds us, however, that the unfolding of the narrative is the field of action, with the complexity of life, in its moral, ethical and affective-emotional aspects, in its constant transformations. This reflection leads us to value the strength of the children's ludic narrative, which prepares them since then to live and deal with their feelings and emotions, which, in adolescence, will have a new and great resurgence and impact, and so will need a resilient emotional mental structuring.

Every narrative presupposes, in principle, a configuration, including a temporal one, in which the past can be seen as a source of order. On the other hand, entering the field of fiction, by breaking with real time, makes it possible to create personal temporal measures. The narrative function, however, is part of human nature, in its most varied forms and will not disappear, since cultures are built precisely through narratives, as Ricoeur [24] concludes. Present in hundreds of ethnic cultures, identified by Cultural Anthropology, where different forms of narrative expression are found, such as oral, written, plastic, graphic and gestural, to which we would include the ludic ones. All of them, however, are built, maintained and expressed by conserving their internal structural forms, which coordinates and gives a meaning to their most varied units. In the same way as a Discourse, a narrative maintains its internal organization, which keeps a sequence and makes it understandable and capable of being represented in the most varied ways.

This finding also takes us back to Roland Barthes [26] who, when dealing with the identity between language and literature, fertile fields of narratives, emphasizes in both their organic character, which, through their complex underlying organization, manage to express thoughts and emotions in a configurative way, that is, forming totalities full of meanings. For the author, narrating is already reflecting on.

Narratives sometimes combine the lived historical time with the imagined time, a conjunction that is very present in the child's Symbolic Play that narrates a situation representing it in its play. By not being subject to the impositions of chronological time, symbolic play has a positive counterpart, since it allows for variations in situations created by the child's imagination, when playing, which can be applied to the central theme of the ludic representation.

The representation of the past is not observable, but memorable, as Ricoeur [27] clarifies, and the reconstructions of lived history are like a *vis-à-vis, an encounter between the present and the past*. The fictitious temporal experience, which characterizes the symbolic play, makes this encounter possible, as well as, in this way, it marks the opening out of its time, as well as, to the world of the other, openings that are possible thanks to the intersection of history with fiction, which allows a new interpretation of what was lived in reality.

The narrative of what is lived through its representation, which can be carried out through symbolic play, makes it possible to expand knowledge about oneself. Reflecting on the past and by being affected by it also supposes having a future perspective, with a possible horizon of expectations. Symbolic play can be seen precisely as an instrument for exploring the occurrences and temporal variations experienced in the present and in the past, as well as expectations and dreams

related to the future. In other words, it controls an extremely rich fabric, colored by feelings and emotions, desires and frustrations, enabling its dynamic cohesion through the child's memory and imagination with his time lived and to be lived. In the case of symbolic play, the fictitious temporal experience created when playing makes it possible to open up outside one's own time, as well as into the world of the other. With the internal structure of a representation, it begins and develops in a personal, intentional and original way. The author also reminds us that the mediation of the body in the connection of the present with the experiences lived in the past, retrieved from memory, is fundamental.

Health Psychology and Play

Such considerations are extremely important in the theoretical reading of symbolic play, since it emerges little by little, grounded and fed by the sensorimotor activity of the child's body, a thesis according to which it is the child's development in its interaction initiated via the body with the environment that, in its large scale, will enable the emergence of symbolic manifestations, including language and make-believe play, relevant to Health.

A book organized by Pais Ribeiro [28] sought to establish the relationship between Health, Quality of Life and Well-being, establishing the link between health promotion and disease prevention, emphasizing that agile communication between Health systems and Psychology is essential, including for people to adhere to treatment. In short, it finds out that the effective support of Health bodies in constant contact with Psychology, as well as the preservation whenever possible of autonomy and freedom of expression, verbal and ludic by the children, are vital foundations of the process of conservation and maintenance of their health.

Body memory supports and accompanies historical, symbolic memory. The child, when narrating situations experienced while playing, does it so with plenty of affection and emotion and, in a way, it can be seen as a historical narrative. It enables the child to somehow relive his past and, therefore, be able to reflect on it. And in this way, expand his consciousness, since, according to Ricoeur [27], historical consciousness requires the individual to search for the movement of return to the past, which sustains it.

Conclusion

Symbolic play can be seen as a narrative of life and dreams. One of its greatest contributions is to make it possible to walk in time, to go back to the past, as well as to imagine the future. It also allows the child to move in the lived or imagined space, and return to the earth where he walks, from which his life story springs, based on his roots

and raised on his wings. This is all thanks to his immense ability to imagine and combine the lived with the desired, feared or dreamed of, via ludic symbolic representation. It is the representative play associated with language that allows the child to take his great sensory-motor flight to enter the human world of verbal and ludic symbolic representations and, consequently, to follow, in the same path, toward the concrete operational thinking in his glorious climbing in search of abstract reflection. It is by playing that we learn to navigate in time and space, as well as achieving formal thinking, as astronauts do today, in their incessant search for the outer space.

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