Children and the meanings of work: between personal culture and collective culture

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This investigation is oriented by sociocultural psychology and has arisen from empirical research on meanings of work for children from different cultural contexts. A guiding theoretical question was: "how do people (children) create, maintain and transform knowledge that belongs both to individual cognition and to a sociocultural domain?" (Markova, 2000, p. 110). To understand such processes is also to comprehend the theoretical assumption on the social origin of psychological processes (Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000) – that is, the social nature of the mind. Therefore, I try to answer this question through the articulation of concepts used in semiotic cultural psychology: first, the notion of construction of meanings – meanings as expressions of the mechanism of reconstructing the reality around us. The other two notions are personal culture and collective culture, which are defined, discussed and "translated" into empirical propositions. Through the analysis of two working children's speeches and the meanings they produce concerning work and childhood, it is possible to notice, the dynamic – and semiotic – relationship between meanings from the personal and the collective culture.

KEYWORDS: children, meanings, personal culture, collective culture

INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY AND THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

This article is part of a research project whose central object was the discourse of children and up to 14-year-old teenagers on work and other significant daily activities for them. We are assuming here that it is highly relevant, from psychology´s point of view, to understand how children and teenagers make sense of their experiences, believing, as Bruner (1998) states, that more important than establishing the ontological status of our psychological processes´ products is to understand how human beings construct their worlds. A specific objective of this investigation was to understand how children's personal meanings relate to the dominant meanings from their society. This conceptual relationship is a theoretical assumption, and presents an empirical challenge.

Human psychological processes and the cultural environment are intrinsically and complexly related. Culture is claimed to be an integral part of psychological phenomena, in the sense that it actually constitutes them (Chaves, 2000). Positioning culture in the center of psychological investigations brings up a myriad of different theoretical and methodological assumptions from the field of socio-cultural research. These are linked by the general claim that the higher psychological functions are constituted in a cultural and historical background. This claim and its implications have been developed through the work of George Mead, James Baldwin (Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000), the Russians Lev. S. Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin, the North American pragmatist tradition, as well

as by contemporary scholars, such as Jerome Bruner, Michael Cole, James Wertsch and Jaan Valsiner.

The work of the above authors—most prominently Lev Vygotsky—has led to a re-conceptualization of the relation between culture and psychological phenomena in which culture is no longer considered a secondary "variable" or even an obstacle to reach a broader research goal (Gergen, Gulerce, Lock & Misra, 1996). Instead, culture is viewed as the very core of the investigation. Cole and Scribner (1991), introducing a gathering of Vygotsky´s texts that comprise the book *Mind in Society: the development of higher psychological processes* (In Portuguese: *A formação social da mente*), state that Vygotsky was probably the first modern psychologist to point more accurately at possible mechanisms through which culture becomes part of each human being – the processes of internalization through which the higher psychological functions are constituted (Wertsch, 1985). In a similar line of thought, Wertsch, Del Río, and Alvarez (1998) choose Vygotsky, along with other authors, as the main source and inspiration to what we currently understand as sociocultural research. That claim is reiterated by Cole (1996, p. 36). Apart from different theoretical "labels" (sociocultural, cultural-historical) and the discussion about their possible distinctions, these authors consider Vygotsky as a sort of precursor when it comes to the relevance of culture in studying psychological phenomena.

Chaudhary (2004), in a relevant discussion on the uses of the word "culture" in cultural psychology, reminds us that social scientists have usually used the term to refer to people´s ways of living, including beliefs, values, costumes, institutions, languages, technology, art and other products and processes of human agency, individual and collective (p. 34). She claims that using culture as a synonym of practical activity, as proposed by Ratner (1996), implies looking at culture in psychological research more in the sense of a conduct than of a content. The point made by Chaudhary is important because, within this turn, we start to look at culture not as thing, a product, but more as a mode, a process. Looking at culture as a process becomes important when we view it, as we have previously stated, in its intrinsic relation to human development. The question of precisely how human beings transform themselves over time is a question concerning a process.

The question of how we conceive of culture—and by extension, how we conceive of individuals—is also discussed by Valsiner (2007), who systematizes three kinds of relations between person and culture:

- the person belongs to culture;
- the culture belongs to the person;
- the culture belongs to the relationship between person and environment.

In the first relation, it is possible to notice more clearly the conception of culture as a variable – whether an independent one, which acts upon the others operating a direct effect on the psychological phenomenon, or a contextual variable, which is a set of variables that becomes an explanatory framework to a great deal of phenomena. This specification of variables is described by Lonner and Adamopoulos (1996) and was dominant in the field of cross-cultural psychology. About the second kind of relation, Valsiner (2007) claims that it is as if culture functioned in each person´s intra-

psychological system. From this viewpoint, culture is not something that individuals take part in, but something that they have or possess. This relation also implies a notion of culture as a variable.

Finally, regarding the third relation, if we see culture as belonging to the relation between person and the environment, we are no longer talking about an entity, but rather, a process. Furthermore, we are certainly talking about more than one process, i.e., about a "set of processes," in Valsiner´s words (2007, p. 22, our translation from the Portuguese edition).

Viewing culture as a set of processes raises the question of the nature of these processes. What are these processes? How can they be conceptualized? Many psychologists and anthropologists have conceptualized cultural processes in semiotic terms. For instance, Geertz (1973) describes culture as

> *"A set of symbolic devices or controlling behavior, extra-somatic sources of information, culture provides the link between what men are intrinsically capable of becoming and what they actually, one by one, in fact become. Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives."* (p. 52)

Geertz´s definition is reflected in theoretical propositions within cultural psychology. Following a definition of semiotic and processual nature, Rosa and Valsiner (2007) state that culture is the *way* [emphasis added] of nature´s transformation by mankind, and that sociocultural psychology is concerned with studying human actions and experiences in the sense that they are culturally organized. Instead of looking at culture as being something ("culture is X"), we must think of it as a "process of becoming" ("culture leads to X") (Valsiner, 2007, p. 20).

Therefore, we follow this direction presupposing the notion of culture as semiotic and treating it as a set of processes which organizes human experience inter- and intra-psychologically. In doing so, we must address the complex issue of the relation between the inter- and the intra-psychological.

TENSIONS AROUND THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE SOCIAL: TOWARDS THE CONCEPTS OF PERSONAL CULTURE AND COLLECTIVE CULTURE

Sawyer (2003) considers the inseparability between social and individual issue as one of the unresolved tensions among socio-culturalists. She claims that totally adopting the inseparability thesis prevents us from studying individuals´ and small groups´ properties, and only researchers who maintain a degree of separability, at least on the analytical level, have succeeded in some theoretical and empirical advance on matters concerning individuals and their contexts (p. 299).

Differentiation "intra X inter" is, however, controversial within sociocultural research, because it might suggest, at first sight, a split between the person´s "internal contents" and external ones, to which he or she would be subjected. Such a split would prevent problems, or at least serve as an obstacle for cultural processes, which must bridge the

split. Geertz (2001) suggests that what generates this problem is precisely to think that we need to establish a bridge between what is inside our skull and what is outside it – and here we catch ourselves thinking that these are actual separate worlds

Even if we remove the boundary between the mind and the social world, by treating the mind as social, we still must address the question of *how* can mind be social? (Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000). Another way of posing this question is proposed by Marková (2000, p. 110), who asks "how do people create, maintain and transform knowledge with pertains both to individual cognition and to sociocultural knowing"? Valsiner and van der Veer (2000) claim that these questions have often been overlooked; that it has become a common sense assumption to consider human psychological functions as social in their nature; one can simply say "according to Vygotsky", or George Mead or another important theorist, and be "excused" from giving any more detailed explanations about what we in fact mean, when we claim the social nature of psychic functions or when we state that the mind is socially constructed.

Thus, talking about the dichotomy "inter X intra" psychological processes is not an attempt to establish a split between different domains of human experience. We do it with the purpose of trying to understand ways or mechanisms through which people develop, being immersed in environments in which they share information and events, but also producing the singularity that is distinctive of human existence.

The analytic tension between social and individual, personal and collective leads to an important question for Valsiner (2007). He states that, within a human developmental cultural-historical perspective, which considers semiotic mediation as fundamental, there is notable variability in life courses. People are capable of showing flexibility at each moment, when relating to their environments (Valsiner, 2007). Therefore, the question is how this flexibility and variability is created. We believe that, in order to talk about how these qualities – flexibility and variability – function, one must explore precisely the relationship between social and individual, or personal and collective, relationships. The goal of the current research is to address these issues through a study of word meaning.

A methodological aspect of Vygotsky´s thinking that outlines this research is the proposition of a unit of analysis to proceed in any investigation in psychology. In *A Construção do Pensamento e da Linguagem* (Portuguese translation of *Thinking and Speech*), he states that this unit would be word meaning (2001, p. 08). In another text (1999, p. 188), he claims that semiotic analysis is the most adequate method to study psychological phenomena. These ideas have informed the current research, which is premised on the idea that studying the meanings we construct provides a way to comprehend human reality and experiences. Meaning, Sirgado (2000) asserts, corresponds to the semiotic mechanism responsible for converting interpersonal relations into the subject´s psychological functions. By taking meanings as the unit of analysis (rather than the individual, or the social group), we hope to provide a way to understand the relationship between the individual and the social while avoiding the reduction of either one into the other.

One conceptual proposition that seems fruitful to the study of the intersection between meaning, the social nature of psychological functions, and the inseparability between

individual and society are the two notions of personal culture and collective culture (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003; Valsiner, 2007). Personal culture is the active construction of a personal version of any cultural phenomenon (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003, p. 730). The collective culture is the "living field of the suggested meanings, feelings and actions with which the person interacts over the life course" (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003, p. 726).

It is possible to trace a parallel between these concepts and the notion of social representations, in particular to the approach that organizes the existence of a central core (more shared meanings, or collective representations) and more peripheral (and varied) elements—social representations. The same parallel can be seen with the distinction between cultural practices and cultural worldviews, by Matsumoto (2006). The author claims that *cultural practices* basically refer to the behavioral aspects of human activities in which people engage related to culture, while *cultural worldviews*, on the other hand, are belief systems about one's culture. Although he states that cultural worldviews have a higher degree of sharing than cultural practices, he suggests, in his division, a contrast between *doing* (the practices) and *saying* and *thinking* (the worldviews) which we don´t think is especially productive to our investigation.

METHOD

This research aimed to investigate meanings of work for children from different cultural contexts – that included working and non-working children, and also children living in rural or urban contexts, coming from different socio-economical status. Originally, ten children and their parents were visited and interviewed in their homes, close surroundings (in the rural areas) or at the children´s schools. Semi-structured interviews were used with the children, investigating themes such as childhood, school, work, family and future. They were also asked to describe their daily activities, so that we could get acquainted with their routines. The talk with the kids began with asking for their impressions on pictures that showed children playing, studying or working inside the home. Semi-structured interviews were also made with the adults, exploring themes such as the evaluation of their kids´ routines, if and how work was present in their children´s lives, and also memories of work in their own childhoods. These interviews and descriptions of drawings were all transcribed verbatim, and the corpus of analysis was obtained through hermeneutic-dialectical analysis (Minayo, 1998).

If, as it has already been stated in the previous section, we understand personal culture as a subjectively constructed version of any cultural phenomenon, we believe that, in terms of empirical analysis, it can be "translated" into core-meanings built from each research participant in particular. Core-meanings are a free translation of the concept of *indicador*, proposed by Rey (2005). The author states that a core-meaning is a category that is defined by the combination of direct and omitted information (p. 112, 113). Therefore, core meanings are built on indirect and implicit information by the researcher´s interpretative effort. According to Rey´s argument, our interpretative effort and our dynamic relation with the contents from which we produce meanings inside the theoretical perspective adopted by us are a way of acknowledging the dialectical nature of data.

We focus on the cases of two children from our investigation: Robson, a 9-year-old working boy, and Carina, an 11-year-old working girl. Both children reside in the rural zone of the State of Bahia, in Brazil. It is important to say that we selected, in the research, children with moderate work schedules – "moderate" here refers to children who are usually performing tasks under their parents´ supervision and authorization, and whose work hours do not prevent them from attending school[1]. Robson regularly helps his family in agricultural activities, when not in school, and Carina performs domestic tasks, such as cleaning the house, and helps out on weekends in the family´s business, a local bar.

DATA ANALYSIS

Using the analysis of two cases, the core-meanings, concerning childhood and work, produced by each child are what we consider meanings from the personal culture. These data were obtained through the execution of interviews, description of children´s routine activities and their impressions on pictures that showed children playing, studying or working inside the home.

Analysis of Personal Culture

Core meanings produced by Robson

1. Childhood – "not yet" age
2. Childhood – school time
3. Work – school work
4. Work – physical strain
5. Work – inherent hardship

Childhood –"not yet" age

In some moments of the talk with Robson and his mother, Neide, the idea of the child as someone who is not ready yet to do certain things, or is not at the appropriate age for something, appear. Neide, for instance, says that Robson is an age when he should study more than work, and that when he is older, both activities can become equally important:

> "*He can do everything, but we think he´s too young for us to push him into the sun and all, and I really want that he becomes more interested in studying than in working in the country; this is for us who are already here, but the ones who are arriving can look for something better*".

When it comes to some of the tasks at their small ranch, she refers to them as something that her son is already capable of doing (like working with the grub hoe), but that she

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[1] The choosing of what we call moderate work schedules is also an attempt to exclude strenuous and unhealthy work conditions to which children have been historically subjected in Brazil, especially in Bahia – for example, children working at coal mines or with *sisal,* a plant whose fiber is used for manufacturing ropes, rugs, bags, hats, and other utilities. For those extreme situations, there have been several governmental and civil initiatives whose focus was on eliminating child labor and keeping children´s attendence to school.

and her husband think that he is still "too young" to do. Robson himself describes the situation of working in the ranch as an activity which is not usually performed by him, and which he does only when he´s on vacation or when the parents need extra help. In Robson's words, "Then, they let me stay at home, and I only go when the bushes are low, I pull the peanuts, (...), I fill boxes with manioc, these things, it´s work."

Childhood – school time

Neide looks at her childhood as very different from her son´s, and an important distinction lies in the role of the school, which is, today, much bigger in Robson´s life. She draws attention to the fact that he is at the "school stage," and school must therefore be his priority. Neide´s testimony illustrates childhood as a time for school. She says:

> "So, I prefer that he goes to school, to be someone, well, be better, be what he wants to be, he´ll discover what interests him. Sometimes he says he will be teacher, then at the time, he says, (..), "teacher, will I have the patience with stupid kids?" I tell him, "don´t say stupid, they are not motivated", and then he thinks about it. Studying is something other than the work in the ranch. To study, go to college and everything, it´s better than in the country, staying here. Here it´s for us, we have nice lives, but if you are arriving now, it´s harder."

Work – school work

Here is the core-meaning that comprehends school as a sort of job. Going to school appears as a pleasant work or obligation; sometimes, we can hear, from Robson, the expression "to play like you´re studying". The complex affective relationship (not exactly incompatible) with school emerges, because the latter is, sometimes, viewed as source of pleasure; and at another times, as an obligation. Robson distinguishes the work at school from other kinds of activities:

> Robson: *Because the school work we do makes us develop, know more things; for us to be able to work, to do anything, for us to learn to work, how it´s done.*

> Lia: *what about pulling peanuts?*

> Robson: *pulling peanuts, we get them, sell them and earn money. But it´s not the same as school; we go, study, and then we can do another work that makes earn even more money.*

Work – physical strain

The core-meaning that links work to physical strain appears because both Robson and his mother claim that when the boy works in the country, he doesn´t perform tasks considered too hard for his age. Tasks that are "too hard" are those that demand physical effort – extracting high bushes to prepare the land to be spread, dealing with the grub hoe and so on. To make a physical effort like carrying weights is a job type negatively evaluated by Robson – a kind of occupation which is too (inappropriately)

hard for a kid, from his point of view. It seems to be an activity of which he himself is spared; but it is certainly common for other working children.

Work – inherent hardship

This is an interesting core-meaning, for its idea appeared only in Robson´s discourse, among all the children interviewed. It´s somehow similar to the core-meaning "school-work", which establishes school as a kind of job, but also as source of satisfaction and something to which Robson feels very motivated. To face any kind of work as an activity that demands a certain degree of effort or hardship is a way of understanding the relationships children constitute with sthe school everyday routines or with any tasks they are assigned to. As Robson says: "When the work is easy, it´s good. When it´s very hard, it´s bad, but it´s also kind of nice, because no job can be too easy. Each job is a bit hard".

Core Meanings Produced by Carina:

1. Childhood – help
2. Childhood – play
3. Work – fun
4. Work – opportunity

Childhood-help

In the interviews, Carina's concern with helping her parents and helping at home appears several times. For instance, "play, study, and help" was her answer when asked about what it is to be a child. Regarding the importance of helping, she says studying is not enough:

> "(...)helping our mother inside our home, not doing, sweeping the house, do everything by yourself, but also help. If your mother is sweeping the floor, "hey, mom, I´ll do that, too", and sweep. If something stains your shirt, "hey, mom, I´ll wash my clothes, this one is finer, I can wash it". (-) not to do everything by yourself, wanting to be good, great."

Prior to stating the above, Carina stated that helping her parents is important because from there, one may start helping other people.

Childhood-play

There are some activities directly associated by Carina to her childhood – she explicitly relates her childhood to playing, studying, helping out and being obedient to grownups, but when asked what is the best thing of being a kid, she first mentions playing. Play also appears associated to other tasks – for her, it´s possible to "work while playing" or "playing like you´re studying." That may extend play to other situations or moments of her day that might not be ordinarily viewed as ludicrous or pleasant. In this case, the meaning the child herself gives to what she experiences becomes very important.

Work-fun

Carina´s week is full of routine activities. Besides school, this includes tidying up the house and helping in the ranch and in the grocery store. Carina faces these tasks in a positive manner. In spite of knowing that some people don´t consider work as appropriate for a child, Carina believes that she has to do it; even out of necessity. She feels good for helping out, and claims she does it by her own will. She says: "also I like helping my mother, my parents, right? I like helping them, I also like this routine. It is good, this routine, it´s good, because it´s fun, and at the same time, work. Work along with fun."

Work-opportunity

For Carina, a working child has the advantage of learning how to be a hard working person, because, through working the child gets into this rhythm and is not "always lazy." Because she thinks that it is important to work, particularly to help out her family, work appears as something beneficial, as a possibility. Carina states: "so, she [the mother] gives me this opportunity, for me, to get familiar with work, with its concerns." The opportunity to work must be considered specifically within family context, in which the child can take initiative in helping his or her parents in household chores. For instance, Carina talks about taking her finer clothes – which constitute lighter work – and washing them herself. In this way, she takes the advantages provided by working – the learning of skills, cooperation and an inclination or diposition towards work .

ANALYSIS OF COLLECTIVE CULTURE

Collective culture, in our point of view, is a concept that demands a complex empirical translation, because of its properties. While it may be considered a relatively stable entity of collective origin (Valsiner, 2007a, p. 63), it is also unstable and heterogeneous. This means we stand before ideas, values or beliefs that seem stable, or that are perceived as homogeneous (Mahmoud, 2008, p. 228), but that are constantly in the process of being collectively re-constructed. One can say, thus, that collective culture is an interpersonal *bricolage* of externalizations made by a varied group of people (Valsiner, 2007a, p. 63), with which we relate in a singular, personal way..

We stand before a complex conceptual definition which, by its eminently theoretical nature, enables the researcher to propose a way of using such ideas in the research´s empirical stage – never losing perspective that methodology works like a dynamic cycle (Branco & Valsiner, 1997). Methodology, for Branco and Valsiner, refers to a cyclic process of knowledge construction, in which different parts of the cycle feed back into other parts – theory, empirical phenomena and also the researchers´s intuitive experience and his assumptions about the world (Valsiner, 2006, p. 175). Particularly, in that cycle, we can highlight science´s theory-driven nature (Valsiner, 2002), which summons us to think about the data we produce as material to renew or refine theory.

It is important to reinstate, here, the effort we must carry in treating these concepts – personal and collective culture – as separated, but analytically interconnected (Chaudhary, 2004); that means they are two complementary concepts which, together, address an important theoretical issue – the relationship between the personal and social spheres. Valsiner (2007a) actually considers this distinction a heuristic device,

whose function is to remind us that each person is connected to a cultural world filled with meanings, through a constant process of externalization and internalization. Therefore, what makes these concepts appropriate to the study of the meanings that are of interest to this particular investigation is not exactly what each one of them outlines, but it is the *relationship* between them. Valsiner (2007) claims there is no isomorphism between personal and collective cultures, and that is what makes all persons unique, yet supported, by collective culture´s broad background. This lack of correspondence between personal and collective symbolic spheres is assured precisely by the internalization of psychological functions process, which involves the mastering of socially available symbolic material and its personal transformation. This means that, while the information people receive might be similar, the ways that different individuals transform and reconstruct these messages will be necessarily unique.

Being member of a society is, therefore, to respond in some personal ways to its demands and expectations (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003, p. 727). It is important to have in mind, especially for the analysis, the "ontological indeterminacy" (Valsiner, 2007a) that characterizes collective culture: since it is constantly in the process of being collectively reconstructed, it cannot be described in the form and shape it exists in the present moment. Any representation of it will be some sort of delimitation of this unending reconstruction process.

In order to construct and characterize the collective culture´s meaning in this research, we started from the general assumptions that have informed (mainly Brazilian) scientific literature on child and adolescent workers and their main research problems. From that review, which covered over fifteen years of research in Brazil (Lordelo & Chaves, 2012), predominately made from Brazilian articles and books, several points arose. First, the modern idea that work is harmful for children (Carvalho, 2008; Chaves, 1998; Dourado, Dabat & Araújo, 1999; Marcílio, 1997, 1998; Rizzini, 1999). Second, the belief that, when working, children and adolescents are forced to act as adults and that this is prejudicial to their development (Asmus, Raymundo, Barker, Pepe, & Ruzany, 2005). At the same time, and conversely, there are activities that are "compatible" with being a child, such as playing and going to school (Franklin et al., 2001). Finally, there is the idea that work is a direct violation of children´s rights (Carvalho, 1995; Cruz Neto & Moreira, 1998).

The primary general value in this literature is a concern with protecting children and adolescents and guaranteeing their rights. Therefore, if a well-lived childhood prioritizes the right to education and the moments of play and fun, work becomes, then, if not harmful, at least extraneous to the routines of children and teenagers. Thus, when dealing with the issue of child labor (including, in our investigation, adolescents up to fourteen years old), we assume, as a general meaning present in our collective culture:

WORK IS NOT COMPATIBLE WITH CHILDHOOD

Or yet, more simply:

WORK X CHILDHOOD

Certainly this group of meanings – or a pole, as we choose to call it – is a great simplification of a symbolic sphere that, according to what we have argued above, is far from being static or homogeneous. Nonetheless, it is necessary to simplify it in order to enable data analysis. Here, we bring again to discussion the idea of "perceived homogeneity" (Mahmoud, 2008, p. 228) and remember Matsumoto´s (2003) claim that there is some consensus among what people say about their cultural worldviews, even if they contradict them in their practices. According to him, this relative homogeneity helps in the communication process among people within their social groups. So, we build the collective culture pole as a kind of momentary symbolic consensus that is particularly useful to data analysis. Therefore, in this apparent homogeneous pole that sees childhood and work as incompatible, there are other specific meanings. In particular, the idea that work is an inappropriate activity for a child and that childhood is a special period in human development, in which the right to education and play, as much as basic rights related to health and social attention, are vital.

RELATIONS BETWEEN PERSONAL CULTURE AND COLLECTIVE CULTURE

From the five core-meanings produced from the contact with Carina, only one, "childhood-play", comes near the pole-meaning WORK X CHILDHOOD. Moreover, in Carina´s routine (see figure 2), this core meaning scarcely appears. This separation of Carina's personal meanings from the collective cultural meanings stands in contrast to Robson, who worked much less. In the picture that outlines the relationship between his personal and collective culture (see figure 1), three among five core-meanings very close to the pole WORK X CHILDHOOD: "childhood – ´not yet´ age", "childhood – school time" and "work – physical strain."

Although the word "play" does not appear in any of the core-meanings produced by the boy, three of them are linked to the group of meanings gathered from the collective culture. What we see here is that, while a working boy constructs meanings that come close to an understanding of childhood as time/place for studying and playing, and also that acquaint work as something that naturally implies effort and distress, we can also meet a working girl whose meaning production stands more distant of this childhood comprehension. Looking at the two pictures that represent the meanings produced by each child and how these relate to the pole-meaning, it is possible to see these contrasts:
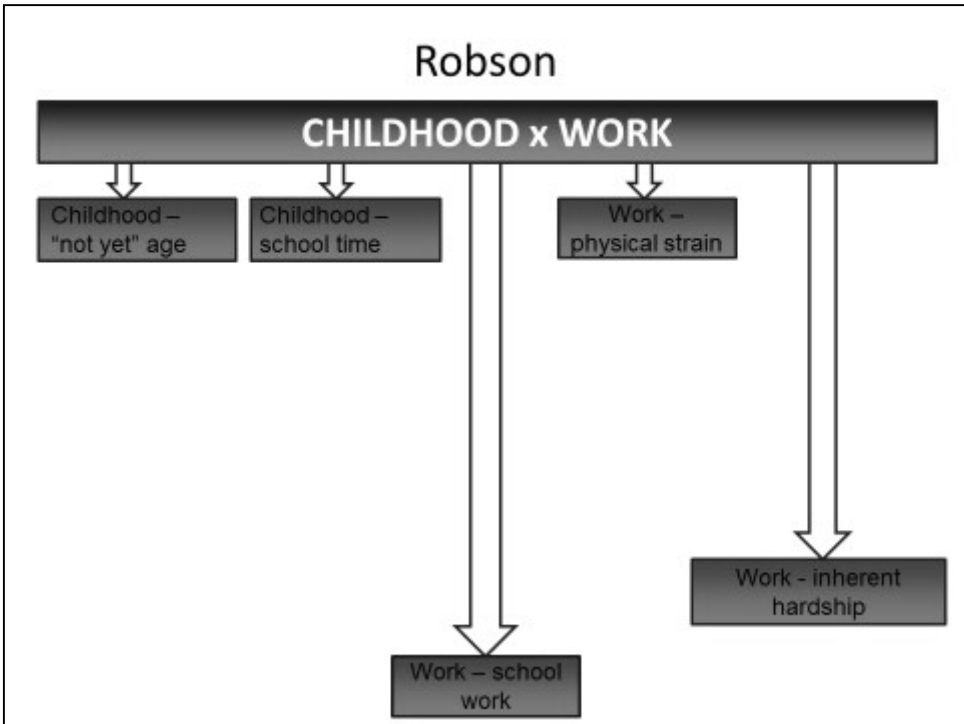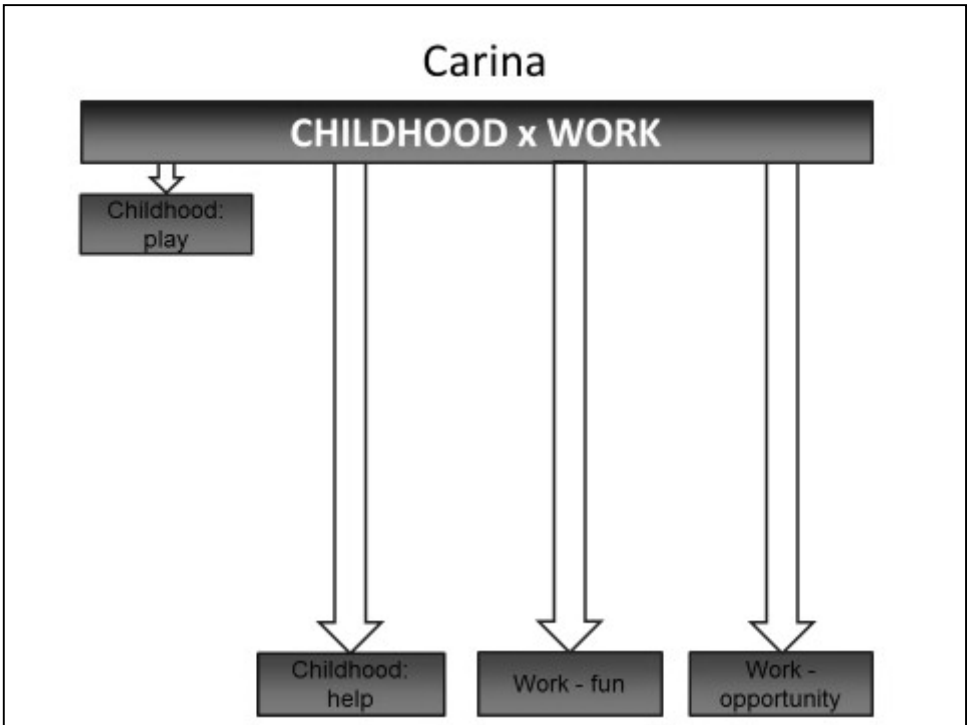
Figure 1 - Robson

Figure 2 – Carina

Let us remind ourselves that both Carina and Robson live in the rural zone, work and study in a public school. Despite these similarities, their personal cultures relate in different ways to their collective cultural context. They are able to use resources of the collective culture (words such as play, work etc) in their own unique ways, that is, constructing their own personal culture.

CONCLUSIONS

We believe that contrasting the meanings from the personal culture with the general meaning from the collective culture is an attempt to describe the question posed by Marková (2000) of how people create, maintain and transform knowledge which pertains both to individual cognition and to sociocultural knowing. It is in the regulatory function of meanings (Valsiner, 2007) that we can observe the dynamics between personal and collective spheres, and understand the notion of the social mind.

The diversity within the core-meanings and their scattered distribution in the pictures that represent the relation between personal culture and collective culture have showed us something: even if the child has characteristics that make him or her closer to the collective cultural image of an ideal child, i.e., one that plays, goes to school and is protected from anything that might put the living of his/her childhood at stake, the meanings that are constructed almost never correspond, or match this image perfectly. As a result, there is not necessarily much consistency between what people say, and what they do. Therefore, a working child can build very "typical" meanings – and by "typical", we mean related to the collective culture defined by us. In other words, in terms of theoretical generality, the typical or expected childhood doesn´t concretely exist.

If this is a rough attempt to express the relationship between personal and collective cultures, this is due, in part, to the intrinsic difficulty that the study and representation of dynamics and relationships between these phenomena bring, whether from a developmental psychological point of view whose focus would be on change (Valsiner, 2006), or from a social psychological perspective, represented by authors such as Marková, (2003). The fact that we direct our questions towards the relations between cultural and personal issues generates obstacles, especially of methodological nature. For Valsiner, (2006, p. 167), this goal gives rise to the question: how is it possible to produce generality from a constant flow of phenomena? The solution found in this investigation was to "freeze" one of the meanings (from collective culture) and to spatially locate it in relation to the personally constructed meanings.

The difficulty of producing generality from a constant flow of phenomena need not prevent researchers from undertaking studies of such nature. One of the most important methodological reflections brought by Rosa and Valsiner (2007) is the claim that is socioculturally oriented psychology must also think of new ways of doing research, using theories as intellectual tools. These are tentative, experimental ways of doing science – which scarcely resemble what we have traditionally come to consider an experimental psychology.

This research aimed to investigate the plurality of meanings concerning work and childhood among working children. For that, we adopted a sociocultural theoretical approach which focused on the relations between personal and collective cultural dimensions of meaning-making processes. Through this research, we understand that, as much as childhood might be constituted by the practices that circumscribe it in modern days (Castro, 1998), each child can, nonetheless, build for him or herself personal ways of dealing with and making sense of the surrounding environment – that is true for work,

school, social interactions and so on. Listening to each person – each child – becomes crucial for understanding them.

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