

**WE RESEARCHERS: UNQUIET PEOPLE DISQUIETING OTHERS.
A COMMENTARY ON DUARTE & GONÇALVES' "NEGOTIATING
MOTHERHOOD: A DIALOGICAL APPROACH"**

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ABSTRACT. This comment aims to highlight some aspects of Duarte & Gonçalves' contribution concerning the researcher's cultural symbolic action. Some aspects of researcher-participant dialogue are discussed under the perspective of the process of the transformative life of myths.

Departing from the relevance assumed by the myth of 'intensive motherhood' in western societies, Duarte and Gonçalves' research (2007, this issue) allows us to critically broaden the scope of psychological understanding of the event of "being a mother".

Amongst the several aspects of their rich and fruitful contribution that captured my attention, I have chosen to focus on our cultural symbolic action as researchers. To this extent, and in few words, my comment can be situated at the meta-theoretical level of discussion concerning the constructive research process through which a myth can be transformatively observed and studied.

Keeping Myths Alive

Myths are constantly both recreated and maintained by social actors for some purposes, at some periods, in some place, giving them an opportunity to fulfill prescribed social roles, allowing them feelings of self-accomplishment, self-enhancement and self-realization, as well as preventing them from other actions and feelings. To this extent, myths are alive and usually have a long life.

Nonetheless, the life of a myth is vulnerable, as it depends on the person's pervasive symbolic negotiations in the cultural field of social actions. As the whole

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mythical tissue of a society is itself in continuous transformation, the life of a myth is maintained thanks to its continuous recreation by the social fabric, in order to answer demands of people in their expectation and actualization of new social roles, organizing their experiences in the belongingness of their groups. This means that myths are not structures above individuals, nor below them, but that they are born and grow up in an intimate bi-directional process: myths are channeled by individuals as well as they channel individual symbolic actions. In this sense, they are co-created by individuals, but at the same time they shape individual symbolic actions and meanings, as discussed, for instance, by Boesch, 1991, 1992; Crossley, 1996; Simão, 2004, 2007; Valsiner, 1999, 2001.

As I have already explained more extensively elsewhere (Simão, 2007), this kind of process is referred to as the *knowledge cycle of culture – individual – culture* by Boesch (1992). It embraces the interplay among selective perception, transformation and integration of cultural messages by individuals. Because of their inherent ambivalence (Abbey and Valsiner, 2005) as symbolic messages, cultural suggestions can simultaneously *both fit and not fit* to the present individual cognitive-affective and actional structures. Myths are always slowly changing over time in order to account for those tensional aspects of personal experiences in culture. On the other hand, and simultaneously, personal experience is constrained by cultural myths in such ways that some aspects are more or less noted, emphasized, explained, felt and assumed in the sight of each particular myth.

According to the perspective I am taking into account, human subjectivity is constructed on the basis of personal cognitive-affective elaborations of cultural suggestions. In such a way, meaningful aspects of human life, like motherhood, are actualized in the collective culture, for instance by the myth of "intensive motherhood"¹. Therefore, the myth of "intensive motherhood" can be understood as an effective semiotic organizer in the tensional process of facing the unknown future of being a mother. On the other hand, as the socio-cultural field also changes in irreversible time (Bergson, 1938/2003; Valsiner, 1994), presenting new appeals and demands for life, it gives emergence to transformed and new myths.

At these moments in the dynamics of the cultural field, the present forms of the organizing myth (for instance, that of "intensive motherhood") can otherwise become a symbolic (dis-) organizer for the experience of being a mother. A new tensional process

¹ The intertwined notions of collective and personal culture are understood here in the sense elaborated by Valsiner (1989), viewing "culture as simultaneously present both in social units (groups, ethnic communities, and countries) and within individual persons. First, at the social group level, we can observe communally shared meanings and norms (collective culture). Second, each individual person carries within him or her the internalized version of the collective culture, which idiosyncratically differs from it." (pp. 47-48).

is then installed, where negotiations (circumventions here included) facing ambivalence are required in the self-dialogical process of transition to motherhood, as described and discussed by Duarte and Gonçalves (2007, this issue). From this bi-directional and tensional process, new forms of the former myth (the one of "intensive motherhood") or even new myths (for instance, "the polyvalent woman") can begin to develop, thanks to reconfigurations within the semantic fields of participants and researchers concerning the phenomenon-theme of their dialogue. The new and/or transformed myths can, in turn, reorganize the tensional experiences now taken into account.

Provoking Myths Through Research

Part of the above mentioned dynamics of maintenance and transformation of myths is held by us, researchers, as symbolic social actors in relationship with the participants of our research, our partners in this knowledge construction. It is worth noting that I am not taking into account that our role as social actors, in the above mentioned dynamics, is necessarily part of our consciously planned goals as researchers. Most of the time, understanding the 'if, how and why' of this role is not part of our concern and should not necessarily be. However, I believe that this role does not cease to be played because, as researchers, we are part of the social-cultural field where the participant-researcher relationships take place. The main consequence of this perspective is that the question of how to keep our 'social neutrality as researchers' shifts to other questions like 'how to develop our research in that tensional symbolic field' and 'how to understand the meaning of our results emerging from that field'.

In this scenario, researchers' cultural symbolic actions happen during the research-participant dyadic relationship, which is part and parcel of the process of psychological knowledge construction:

(...) as comprehension of information implies the contribution from who is receiving the information, each interlocutor continuously transforms the meaning of information communicated to him by the other (...) part of the information given by the subject to the researcher are verbal reports about the target phenomenon. These reports are products of interpretations about experienced situations. Therefore, what is reported involves the subject's conceptualizations according to his / her own logical system of comprehension. (...) However, reports change under contextual factors, among which researcher's actuations themselves are included. (...) To the extent that reports concern, in a great amount, the target phenomenon which is the theme of the dialogues, the information about it is also transformed, as a result of trying to understand it (Simão, 1989, p. 1201).

In this dynamic of researcher-participant relationship, researchers' and participants' symbolic actions are informed by beliefs, knowledge, opinions and values,

which sometimes are felt by them as sharable, sometimes not, leading them to experience *sameness and strangeness* in respect to the other's symbolic actions. In such a way, research is constituted by a symbolic action field where various I-positions of at least two persons (researcher and participant) are in conversation, tension and negotiation about a phenomenon, the theme of their dialogue.

This dynamics belongs to the broadest kind of Ego-Alter-Object ontological relationship, as epistemologically and theoretically proposed by Marková (2003, 2006). According to her, this triadic relation refers to joint or social construction of knowledge and, as far as it concerns meaningful communication about something, it also applies to subjective dialogicality (see Marková, 2006, p. 137).

Moreover, the dialogical character of Ego-Alter-Object relationship has two important features:

First, dialogicality and dialogical subjectivity are not concerned with the Ego and Alter as abstract or schematic notions but with their concrete manifestations, for example, with the self versus another self, the self versus group, the group versus another group, the self versus culture and so on. In each case, one component of the dyad is interdependent with the other one. And second, dialogical subjectivity is not reducible to the Ego versus Alter in the sense of the Ego's 'taking the role of the other' or the Ego being solely an actor in that interdependent relation. Instead, it is conceived in terms of multiple symbolic social representations that the Ego takes in relation to the Alter and vice versa (Moscovici, 2005) (Marková, 2006, p. 125).

The researcher-participant relationship here in discussion can be understood as belonging to this kind of relationship of mutual interdependence, in which joint constructions of knowledge about the event of being a mother can emerge as concrete manifestations of women's and researchers' selves, sometimes one versus another, sometimes versus the group, either represented by the researcher's questions, or by voices of the internal Alter of those women.

To this extent, the research-participant relationship here at issue, is a field dwelling ambivalence, giving place to the expression of conflicting meanings about motherhood, as Duarte and Gonçalves clearly show us in their article. This aspect concerns the fact that, during the interviews, researchers can provoke disquieting experiences (Simão, 2003) and ruptures (Zittoun, 2005) in the already established semantic field of participants (here included are myths that organize experiences, like the myth of "intensive motherhood"). Researchers can also provoke opportunities for quieter voices, already present, related to some divergent I-positions, trying to speak louder, challenging the more established I-positions, calling them to negotiations.

WE RESEARCHERS

As for Duarte and Gonçalves' research here in focus, the above briefly discussed aspects of provoking myths appears from the beginning when, for instance, they explain their aim:

More precisely, we intend to dissect the tensions and conflicting demands that this new I-position may cause within the previous existing repertoire and analyse the way each woman negotiates and deals with this developmental challenge, considering possible changes and accommodations observed in the I-positions repertoire (Duarte & Gonçalves, 2007, this issue, p. 253).

In this formulation, the objectives of dissection and analysis can be related to the researchers' compromise of highlighting aspects that cannot be done unless throughout the theoretical-methodological procedures developed in our scientific-cultural collective field. However, their concern is not to highlight every aspect, but only specific ones, concerning tensions, conflicting demands, negotiations, changes and newness. These specific aspects can be viewed as emerging from the dialogue between the researcher's personal and collective culture (Valsiner, 1989), here included are their scientific options. In this way, from the beginning, Duarte and Gonçalves configure the symbolic action field (Boesch, 1991) where their research will take place. This is a field of quest that is dialogically settled, where theoretical-methodological procedures should fit to values and curiosity.

At the level of procedural strategies, this articulation was done through the previously developed Dialogical Articulation Task (DAT, Duarte, Rosa & Gonçalves, 2006), inviting the participants:

(...) to deal with the dualities of the dialogical self, exploring the way people think and construct meaning, both about possible dialogues among their different discursive I-positions (Hermans & Kempen, 1993), and about the dialogues between those and the "voices" of significant interlocutors (see Duarte, Rosa & Gonçalves, 2006, for a more detailed exposition). In order to accomplish that, we ask participants to identify their most descriptive and relevant self-dimensions, which usually correspond to social roles, personal interests and idiosyncratic characteristics (e.g., Me as a professional; Me as a mother; The emotional me) (Duarte & Gonçalves, 2007, this issue, p. 254).

Another important aspect of this symbolic articulation embraces negotiation and selectivity. Researchers and participants form a duality, featured by an asymmetric and complementary relationship (Valsiner, 1997). Myths are narrated in a polyphonic dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986; Holquist, 1990), by the voices of otherness. These voices are actualized in the different participant's and researcher's I-positions, facing a myth and its counter-myth, negotiating and designing possibilities and limits about his / her I-world

relationships. This process of negotiation can be a potent reorganizer of "concrete and real" life experiences, like the experience of motherhood.

This is one of the transformative dimensions of the research here in focus, which happens when elaborations on life experiences open themselves to us, through the reconstructive movement of the participant's symbolic actions, channeled by the provocations of the research procedures. At this level of research, symbolic endeavor changes in participants and researcher's beliefs, feelings and rational knowledge about the target issue (women's I-positions facing motherhood) can be experienced. The same applies to our beliefs, feelings and rational knowledge concerning our I-positions in research-participant relationships.

To this extent, researchers play the role of the third party from inside of the dialogue, in the sense proposed by Marková (2006). Here the relevance

of what speakers convey to one another cannot be reduced to knowledge, thoughts and words they acquire as individuals. Instead, it is traditions, institutions, friends and colleagues, political parts and so on, who speak through dialogical participants (Marková , 2006, p. 133)².

In the dynamic socio-cultural whole of research, participants are the actors who have privileged information about the phenomenon which is the theme of the dialogue. The researchers are the actors who have the privileged strategy of psychological interpretation concerning that information (Simão, 1992). They act by 'ventriloquating' others, configuring strategically a tensional field demanding that the participant tries to reconstruct meanings related to the target phenomenon.

As Vygotsky's theoretical-methodological perspective taught us, it is expected that these transformations can be caught under the form of data interpretations, reflecting the process under study. In the present discussion, this concerns a process of negotiations among I-positions, at the sight of the organizing, (dis-)organizing and reorganizing myths, as shown by Duarte and Gonçalves.

Under this perspective, the collected data represent what could be constructed and made explicit by the participants, concerning their I-positions in dialoguing about the phenomenon theme (motherhood) under the constraints established by the research set (Valsiner, 1998). Results, in turn, represent how the researchers understood the participants' reconfiguration or reconstructions of meanings about the target issue under the dialoguing circumstances of the research. In this frame, discussion represents how the researchers could re-imbed their personal comprehension about the phenomenon-

² For the role played by the third party from outside of the dialogue, see Marková, 2006, p. 132.

WE RESEARCHERS

theme in the collective culture of the area. It also represents a proposal to reconfigure the collective culture in the area, in order to make sense of both the new understandings and the socio-ethical issues they imply.

The results and discussion presented by Duarte and Gonçalves show us that the reconfigurations of meaning the participants could make were clearly related to transformations in their approach to the social prescriptions about motherhood. These kinds of results and discussion allow us to go beyond the strictness of a careful description tied to particular circumstances of that dialogue only. It challenges us to deepen some issues from our own insight, like for instance, the role taken by I-positions that deal with the alterity of the 'born to be' child and, later, to the alterity of the 'newborn' child. I think that this kind of possible unfolding from Duarte and Gonçalves research is due, at least in part, to the sensitivity of their options, understood as symbolic actions in researching: working to understand a very challenging and appealing event of human existence (motherhood), they have selected the "in tune" dimensions of ambivalence and strangeness in facing newness as their meta-theoretical axle.

In sum, in this commentary I have focused on some aspects of the complex whole of research-participant relationship aiming mainly to highlight the fact that, by researching, we transformatively keep a theme alive, by allowing it to take the stage of ours and others' concerns. This does not mean only to develop efficient instrumental methodologies for empirical data collection, but also to take our methodological strategies as options implying symbolic cultural actions concerning theoretical-methodological and socio-ethical selections.

From this perspective, as important as the increase in our knowledge about the target psychological process is, the researchers' contribution is to reveal the (trans)formation of the participants' personal culture (Boesch, 1991; Valsiner, 1998). Taking this view, epistemological and ethical issues are forcefully added to our reflections. The issue shifts to the "if and how" we, as researchers, are able to accomplish a research-participant relationship through which we can keep both sides of the coin: negotiations generating new reconstructive perspectives in the participants about their personal experience, which is, at the same time, privileged information in respect of the target issue of our research.

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WE RESEARCHERS

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