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Semiotic fields in tension between adolescent and socio-educational agents

Campos semióticos em tensão entre adolescentes e agentes socioeducativos

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Abstract

Objective

This article is a theoretical reflection inspired by semiotic-cultural psychology that aims to analyze the socio-educational semiosphere with a focus on the beliefs of socio-educational agents about themselves, their work, and young transgressors. It assumes that understanding the controversies, contradictions and ambiguities present in human action requires identifying and understanding the system of personal and collective values that guide the agents.

Method

This is a qualitative study, that analyzed utterances constructed within the scope of an extension course in which Eight socio-educational agents participated, all from the same detention center in the Distrito Federal, Brazil.

Results

Through the analysis of the utterances, three themes were highlighted, which represent some of the semiotic fields in tension in the relationship between socio-educational agents and adolescents: 1) The identity of the socio-educational agent: educator and/or security agent; 2) Protective security versus body control; and 3) Symbolic and physical degradation of the adolescent.

Conclusion

It was identified that there is a predominance of work practices that are more committed to safety than to the education of adolescents. This understanding is based on the belief that adolescents are dangerous and should be contained, acculturated (assimilative intolerance), or even eliminated (eliminatory intolerance). Therefore, it is concluded that both forms of intolerance are part of a scope of symbolic violence that impedes adolescents to access the semiotic resources that would help them to re-signify their life trajectory, turning social-education uneffective.

Keywords: Psychology, Developmental; Social Stigma; Socio-Educational Measure.

Resumo

Objetivo

Este artigo visa apresentar, através da perspectiva da psicologia semiótico-cultural, uma concepção a respeito da semiosfera socioeducativa com foco nas crenças nutridas por agentes socioeducativos frente a si mesmos, seu trabalho e ao adolescente que delinuiu, partindo do pressuposto de que a compreensão das controvérsias, contradições e ambiguidades presentes na ação humana requer a identificação do sistema de valores pessoais e coletivos que orientam os agentes.

Método

Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, que analisou enunciados construídos no âmbito de um curso de extensão do qual participaram oito agentes socioeducativos, todos de uma mesma unidade socioeducativa de internação no Distrito Federal, Brasil.

Resultados

Através da análise dos enunciados, foram privilegiados três temas os quais representam alguns dos campos semióticos em tensão na relação entre os agentes socioeducativos e os adolescentes em atendimento pela medida socioeducativa de internação: 1) Da identidade do agente socioeducativo: educador e/ou agente de segurança; 2) Segurança protetiva versus controle de corpos; e 3) Degradação simbólica e física do adolescente.

Conclusão

Identificou-se que há predomínio de práticas de trabalho mais comprometidas com a segurança do que com a educação dos adolescentes. Essa dinâmica foi compreendida a partir da crença de que os adolescentes são perigosos, deveriam ser contidos ou aculturados (intolerância assimilativa), até mesmo, eliminados (intolerância eliminatória). Dessa forma, conclui-se que ambas as formas de intolerância integram uma modalidade de violência simbólica que retira do adolescente os recursos semióticos que lhe permitiriam ressignificar sua trajetória de vida, o que pode tornar inócua a ação socioeducativa.

Palavras-chave: Psicologia do Desenvolvimento; Estigma Social; Medida Socioeducativa.

There are several studies that address social-educational worker's conceptions about their work, themselves, and the adolescents (Andrade, 2017; Barsaglini & Vaillant, 2018; Meireles & Zamora, 2017; Souza et al., 2019; Vinuto et al., 2017), many of which emphasize the divergence between the general principles of social-education and the daily practice within socio-educational facilities. Investigating a human phenomenon by the mere focus upon the conceptions means restricting the understanding exclusively to its cognitive dimension, to the detriment of the affective and axiological aspects that are so important to explain it. An alternative analytical path is one that considers the affective-semiotic bases of the human behavior. Therefore, under the inspiration of semiotic-cultural psychology, this article investigates the affective grounds of the beliefs and values nurtured by social-educational agents concerning themselves, the activity in which they work, and the adolescents they care, who serve social-educational measures after being proven to have committed an act analogous to a crime.

Cultural Semiotic Psychology is a theoretical-philosophical approach that interprets psychological phenomena as a product of the singular encounter between personal culture and collective culture, an encounter mediated by signs (Valsiner, 2014). Signs permeate the process of the subject's inner world construction and its relations with the outer world, playing a key role in the human development over the time (Valsiner, 2012). Culture, as a set of processes that mediate the relationship between subject and reality, allows each individual to construct signs and use them in a particular, singular way. At the same time, the unique encounter between personal culture and collective culture, being mediated by signs, never happens in a linear and direct way. Ambivalence,

ambiguities, and tensions are inherent part of this encounter, that occurs in a border zone, this dialogical space in-between subjects and the sociocultural reality. This border space is characterized by the non-coincidence between the two fields (culture and subjectivity). From Cultural Psychology's vantage point, the focus of interest lies exactly in such phenomena that refer to the touching-point between subject and culture (Marsico, 2016; Valsiner, 2012), for example, communication, interaction, inclusion/exclusion, and the processes of socialization.

When elaborating on issues of the collective culture, and the role that signs play in it, Valsiner (2014) retrieves the concept of semiosphere, originally used by the linguist Yuri Lotman (1996). This concept was inspired by concepts from biology, mainly 'biosphere', however, by the notion of semiosphere, Lotman (1996) means the historic results of human being's efforts to erect structured semiotic systems that will serve as reference to the processes of socialization as well as to the construction of culture, transforming the environment into a structured social system. According to Lotman (1996), along with the historical process, specific environments tend to be codified, a codification based on functions, uses and meanings that these environments engender, or that are attributed to them; and, these meanings are essential to turn the environment intelligible, shared by social groups narratives, and internalized as part of individual's mental world.

However theoretically productive, according to Valsiner (2014), Lotman's (1996) concept of semiosphere is quite broad, fitting better to explaining the collective culture than the personal culture. In what concerns the sphere of personal culture – the subjectivity – it is required other conceptual elements to reach a cultural-semiotic understanding of how subjects (trans)form, develop, based on their semiotic immersion in social settings, through intersubjective exchanges, considering the different languages and codes (Lotman, 1996; Valsiner, 2014). An important concept is abstractive generalization (Valsiner, 2014). Abstractive generalization means that, based on such cultural codes, abstract categories are created by culture, in which specific features of the objects are retained while other features tend to be eliminated, discarded, or even forgotten. On the assumption that abstractive generalization (Valsiner, 2014) comprises an important part of meaning-making, no matter whether it refers to an icon, an index, or a symbol, generalization is an intrinsic aspect of the use of signs, happening all the time. Generalization operates in the creation of categories or abstract models, which allow the subject to reflect upon the world, memorize certain aspects of reality, and create psychological worlds that remain inside the mind, even when the imagined world is without reach.

One peculiar feature of Cultural-Semiotic Psychology's approach is considering that abstractive categories are conceived not only in terms of cognitive aspects, but of sensory and, mostly, affective aspects as well. Therefore, Valsiner (2012, 2014) offers a taxonomy of abstractive processes that evolve from level 1 (totally sensorial) to level 4 (completely affective), this upper level being where the so-called hyper-generalized signs develop. Hyper-generalized signs are defined as signs loaded with high affective-volitional charge, and they tend to be integrated to one's personal culture in a non-conscious way. These specific signs play a detached role in mediating processes of meaning-making within the other levels (2 and 3), emerging in the form of beliefs and deeply rooted values. Examples of the level 4 signs are the moral, gender, or ethno-racial values.

Based on the above-mentioned theoretical clues, Valsiner (2014) enriches the present discussion with core elements for a broader understanding of those abstract models according to which adolescent offenders are conceived by society, and specifically by the socio-educational agents, our focus in this article. These elements inform about the complex semiotic process through

which the adolescents are subjected to complex processes of meaning construction and abstractive generalization.

Signs (icons, symbols, and/or indexes) are necessary so that human beings make sense of unknown objects. Signs collaborate to challenge individual's original mental schemes and turn them able to go beyond their concrete living realities. At the same time, co-constructed semiotic realities have the potential to super-impose themselves on individual's possible, concrete perspectives. Following this argument, we consider that the socially constructed meanings concerning the adolescents attended by socio-educational facilities contain elements derived from the previous concrete interactions with the adolescents but, beyond that, these meanings are part of a web of abstractive generalization, that conceives of adolescents as part of a collective culture that will define how the object 'adolescent' will be generalized/approached/cared within the youth justice. By this collective, multivoiced process, the concrete adolescents are transformed into intelligible objects, various social meanings and affections being added to them, meanings that sometimes collaborate to turn them better understood by the agents, and the other times, turn their interpersonal transactions more tense and blurred. In short, distant and proximal socio-historic processes are complementary, and they lead to the "emergence of semiosphere around our bodies-in-action in here-and-now contexts" (Valsiner, 2014, p. 15).

In addition, what role does the other human being, or better, the self/other relations, play in this intricate process? Valsiner (2012) argues that the gaze of the other is not devoid of intentions, it is definitely not neutral. Instead, it carries guidelines for goals. Therefore, adolescents involved in criminal activity are often the target of a gaze marked by negative evaluation, and this simple fact demands that we proceed a deep analysis of the societal perspective, in a broad sense, as well as the socio-educational facility's actors, mainly because these mechanisms permeate the discourses, and the non-verbal communication, and may even guide mutually addressed behaviors. For instance, in face of the negative evaluation of the other, two possible goal-oriented paths can be adopted, they are: eliminating intolerance, and, assimilating intolerance (Valsiner, 2012). Eliminating intolerance aims to eradicating the other person, be it the real eradication (such as genocide), or the symbolic one (such as social exclusion). Assimilating intolerance means the effort to changing what is negative, or unbearable, in the other person into something considered as positive, acceptable – through punishment, education, discipline, and other forms of acculturation.

Both goal orientations can be activated as subjective responses to situations in which intersubjective conflicts emerge as an effect of the existence of semiotic fields in tension. Intolerance, be it assimilating or eliminating, is usually associated with issues of power, emerging within normative contexts in which there is an imbalance of power between subjects, so that one subject or group recognizes itself as having the right to control/correct/regulate, or even annihilate the other.

The Collective Culture and Adolescence: From Dangerous to Subject of Rights

The expression "delinquent", used to qualify adolescents in conflict with the law, is a legacy of the minorism and the paradigm of the irregular situation, previous to the Statute of the Child and Adolescent. Although legally inadequate (the adolescent *acted* in an illegal way, but (s)he *is not* an illegal person, illegality is not part of him/her), this expression is still largely used in Brazilian culture nowadays, in special, in reference to the adolescent in a socio-educational facility: This persistent use represents a clear example of the semiotic processes pointed by Valsiner (2014),

evidencing a metonymic operation, from which a specific behavior by the adolescent (stealing, selling drugs, depredating etc.) is assumed as featuring the totality of the subject. This operation involves a level of generalization that exceeds the concrete adolescent, and carries with it value judgments associated not only with the subject's behavior, but with a set of cultural, ethical, moral, political and scientific norms about which juvenile behaviors are classified as good or bad, right or wrong. Such norms will guide even the way a person who resembles someone who has committed an infraction should be approached.

In the same aspect, while attending socio-educational measures in the youth justice system, the adolescent is immersed into a semiotic web that was constituted throughout a century-long history of social policies; and, by elements associated with different dimensions of the societal organization. In special, they suffer the historic marks of the different forms of tutelage of children and adolescents by the Brazilian government.

Following B. A. Machado (2012), in the European historical process, punitive rationalities have changed in line with sociocultural and ideological shifts. Initially, in the 19th century, the dominant perspective was that the perpetrator should repay and compensate society for the losses due to his/her illegal conduct; Later, a utilitarian rationale typical of the modern thought turned to be the prevalent one, and the penalties, more than a sanction, should have a preventive function; more important than punishing, the mere threat of punishment is conceived by the modern States as a useful tool to enhance the control of human behavior. This ideology, however, seems to have disguised the disciplinary intention intrinsic to the criminal justice system, on the basis of which the juvenile justice model was conceived in the early twentieth century.

The history of child and juvenile institutional care in Brazil follows a process similar to the European countries. According to Rizzini (2009), lasting from Colonial phase to the Empire (the charitable phase), although minority was an attenuating factor, there are reports of children who were severely punished, a practice that legitimized the dominating values system imposed by both the Empire and the Church. In the following period, that lasted from the end of the Empire (1889) until the 1980s (philanthropic-charitable phase), there was a new concern with the identification and study of social groups in need of protection and reform. Thus, in this period, the minors⁴ became the major target of reforming interventions by the State and other sectors of society, occurring in religious and philanthropic facilities. The interventions by the State in this period, however, had a strong paternalistic and authoritarian bias, being characterized by the mere focus on the adolescents who had broken the law (considered as 'irregular situation'), while the others were not subject to the State's attention. This differentiated approach to young people in irregular situation converged to the stigmatization of working class families that, in some cases, were urged to transfer the guardianship of minors to the State.

In 1964, the *Fundação Nacional de Bem-estar do Menor* was created, with a major vocation to prevention than to sanction. Its intended function was to intervene in the course of family life; foster the healthy integration of adolescents in their communities; and, reduce the statistics of irregular situation. According to Rizzini (2009), new ideas emerged in the years 60, related to abolishing total institutions in the approach to mental illnesses, deinstitutionalization movement, anti-psychiatry, etc. All these movements contributed to problematize the existing model of children and adolescent's social care, based exclusively on the separation of children and their families, and their internment within assistance facilities. As a matter of fact, significant changes were stimulated

⁴Legal category instituted by the Melo Matto's Juvenile Code (Decree n° 17.943A, 1927), which designated abandoned children and adolescents, those living on the streets and/or the offenders (Rizzini, 2009).

in Brazilian youth justice, from then on: The new concerns gravitated from the etiological approach to criminality to highlight its historical-structural causes, considering the role played by the broad sociopolitical and economic conditions of the nation. Nevertheless, Rizzini (2009) notes that the assistance interventions associated with this new explanatory model continued to follow the dictates of classic criminology, characterized by an individualistic, police-oriented and psychopathology-based logic. With the endorsement of the prevailing trend in psychometrics – the use of personality tests – children and adolescent offenders were diagnosed, and nosological reports were offered to explaining, in individualistic basis, the young people’s illegal behavior.

Gradually, an education-oriented model became possible in social care, especially due to the consolidation of the Welfare State⁵ and the creation of protective laws. In this new *zeitgeist*, more than punishing, public policies were expected to ensure basic rights – education, health, social assistance, security and leisure, for instance. This new frame reoriented social policies, highlighting the importance of the Welfare State and its supporting institutions, in special, family and schooling. Therefore, two years after the promulgation of the new Federal Constitution (Presidência da República, 1988), in which the prior right of Brazilian children and adolescents to be protected by the State was affirmed, the *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* (ECA, Statute of the Child and Adolescent) was created and defined the collaborative endeavor by the State, the families and the society to guaranteeing children and adolescent’s rights (Presidência da República, 1990).

The ECA (Presidência da República, 1990) provides a general legal framework that integrates protection and accountability as the basic principles of the socio-educational approach for adolescents who committed infractions. Besides, in ECA (Art. 6), it is defined that adolescent’s cognitive and emotional abilities are different, potentially inferior, to that of adults. Thus under any justification the socio-educational measures should be more rigorous, or last more, than the sanctions applied to an adult in similar conditions (Andrade & Machado, 2017).

The idea that adolescents should not be demanded responsibility beyond their personal condition to understanding the concrete implications of their acts requires a critical criminological standpoint to juvenile offense. This standpoint, however, is not the dominant one within the Brazilian judicial system. In this system, we recognize remnants of a hierarchical and prejudiced culture, in which the criminalization of certain groups, based on their socioeconomic status and even their skin color was naturalized. In this context, punitive policies continue to be seen as more efficient than social policies that converge to promote educational and developmental opportunities, and to prevent infractions instead of just punishing it *a posteriori* (Barbosa, 2018; Farias & Vinuto, 2018; Jacinto & Bonalume, 2019).

On the Criminalization of Poverty

Wacquant (2001) presents the concept of criminalization of poverty in the context of the de-naturalization of constructed phenomena such as delinquency, incivility, and urban violence. For the author, these problems are consequences of the establishment of the penal state together with the dismantling of social policies propelled by the Welfare State. The author (Wacquant, 2001) takes the concept of Welfare State as central to a critical understanding of the current capitalist

⁵Although the Welfare State has never reached its effective consolidation in Brazil, as early as in the Vargas Era (1930–1945) a certain level of state control over the economy was noticed, and reached its peak during the years of military dictatorship (1964–1985). However, those who benefited most from public investment in infrastructure (in areas such as telecommunication, electricity, highways, etc.), and the construction of large public companies were the entrepreneurs, not the population. From 1985 onwards, the transition to democracy, contradictory as it is, concurred to the privatization of numerous former state enterprises and the growing weakening of the Brazilian welfare state (Menicucci & Gomes, 2018).

globalization movements, the neoliberal dictates articulated by different national governments towards the impoverished populations, and the repressive stance demanded to turn the two movements possible. In this scenario, public security offers a repressive police-penal apparatus that is designed to protect the society, exception made to those who disturb the so-called good citizen; those should be continuously supervised and punished (Farias & Vinuto, 2018; Fleury, 2018). According to this logic, the poor, the blacks, and the people from the peripheries, considered as the major sources of threaten to the rest of the society, are the main target of the repressive forces.

The stigma associated with these groups – noticing that adolescents in juvenile socio-educational facilities are mostly black, poor and residents of the periphery – is rooted in Brazilian history itself. The cultural origin of this nation is encrusted with social values that justified the segregation of certain groups (mostly black and indigenous), alongside their slavery as a normative form of labor organization (Daflon et al., 2017). The consequence of this historic process was the institutionalization of racial prejudice and the intent to “sanitize” society, excluding from the enjoyment of human rights those who were not recognized as descendants of the white European colonizers. The problem is addressed by Lopes de Oliveira (2019). Taking cultural-semiotic lenses, she argues that the colonization of this country left a great semiotic heritage that permeates contemporary beliefs and values disseminated in the society, the culture and the various social-institutional contexts. Therefore, the structural violence between groups was socially constructed, sustained throughout history, and shows itself up in the current context, in which economic liberalism invades subjectivities, leading to the growth of individualism and competitiveness in detriment of inclusive postures and social commitment.

Thus, it is not by accident that up to now the general discourses concerning the adolescents who broke the law comprise ontological explanations, which conceive the offense from a reductionist standpoint, in which the phenomenon is usually naturalized, as if it were intrinsic to the nature of the offender, losing sight of the role played by the sociocultural context in which it took place, and the agency of the subjects (Machado, 2016). Even when we address the socio-educational semiosphere, which is designed to collaborate with the development of citizenship and to promote juvenile autonomy, contradictory as it is, the adolescent is abstracted from his living reality, converted into a generic object, whose individuality ends up being silenced (Albuquerque, 2017). All this dynamics occurs because the fields of meanings that mediate the practices within the socio-educational semiosphere are embedded with prejudice and violence, particularly regarding the skin color/ethnic, and socioeconomic status of adolescents (Cunha et al., 2020; Yokoy & Lopes de Oliveira, 2012). Bypassing the international principles that guide the paradigm of human rights protection, assumed by the ECA (Presidência da República, 1990) and the *Sistema Nacional de Atendimento Socioeducativo* (SINASE) Law (Presidência da República, 2012), in the socio-educational care, these prejudiced semiotic fields are perpetuated, disseminating negative values, beliefs, conceptions and signs about the juvenile public, which undermine the establishment of a genuinely educational *ethos*.

On Liberal Rationality and Capitalist Values

In addition to a criminal rationale, discourses on adolescents in conflict with the law also include a neoliberal capitalist rationale, according to which social-education has a redemptive character, insofar as it is concerned with the adolescent’s social inclusion. For instance, the concern with offering the adolescents with professional training is more often a response to the neoliberal logic, markedly meritocratic and based on the promise of social inclusion and economic independence through work, than an opportunity for self-fulfillment. It is noteworthy that most of the initiatives

to enhance professional abilities offered to young people under execution of measures are for under-valued, subordinate, forms of manual labor, in which creativity is absent. Therefore, socio-educational semiosphere is configured as an opportunity to adapt the adolescent to the prevailing economic, ethical, and aesthetic standards of capitalist societies, which means his/her adherence to an ideal pattern of re-socialization which means the submission to the social order. Instead of listening to what the adolescents have to say, the social-education professionals assume as their role to direct the young people according to such parameters, so that they become “what they SHOULD BE, or what we aim they SHOULD BE” (Valsiner, 2012, p. 115).

How such features of the socio-educational semiosphere are reflected in the dynamics of semiotic production of personal cultures, in the encounter among social-education agents and adolescent inmates, is the object of the next sections. Each of the following topics bring, as epigraphs, the voices of social-education agents who participated in a university extension program developed by a state university in the Federal District, Brazil. The cited narratives serve as examples of the semiotic fields in tension that, in each case, may lead to forms of assimilating or eliminating intolerance in-between agents and adolescents. The extension program was designed as part of a PhD project (Cunha, 2021), comprised 20 meetings of three hours each, totaling 60 hours; later, the corpus of data were partially used to subsidize a Master’s thesis (El Khouri, 2021). The program sought to promote a dialogical pedagogic context, with the objective of favoring the revision of the semiotic web that undergoes the labor relations of the social-education agents. Hence, contradictions, ambivalence, and tensions presented by participants along the research were considered as powerful sources of data, consistent with cultural-semiotic methodology. The meetings were coordinated by the second author, with the assistance of the third one. The three of the authors were engaged with the analyses of the meetings, considering the transcription of the audio-recorded material, according to the qualitative methodology.

Interned Adolescents and Socio-Educational Agents: Semiotic Fields in Tension

The conceptual and historical considerations made above confirm the importance of the analysis presented hereafter, especially because the workers of the juvenile detention facilities are not immune to cultural processes, and may adopt, in their work practices, positions that culminate either in the assimilating or eliminating intolerance, concerning the adolescents with whom they work.

The most severe form of custodial juvenile sanction is confinement in an educational facility, a measure adopted when no other applicable sanction is available, “subject to the principles of brevity, exceptionality and respect for the peculiar condition of the developing person” (ECA, Art. 121). During the internment, the constant presence of a professional responsible for the supervision, vigilance and escort of the adolescents is necessary to guarantee their safety and well-being in a respectful conviviality. This professional, in the Federal District, is the socio-educational agent, who, according to the District Law (Legislative Chamber of the Federal District, 2014), must “execute activities related to guarding, surveillance, monitoring and security of adolescents in compliance with socio-educational measures” and “other activities of the same nature and level of complexity determined by specific legislation.

The identity of the socio-educational agent: educator and/or security agent

[...] in the law, if you take the job description, the activities, it's security. [...] I talk to the adolescents, I provide orientation, but without neglecting security at any time. (Participant D., 06/06/2019 - 2nd meeting)

In different Brazilian states, the function of social-education agent receives different nominations and includes different attributions, having no one consensual list of the position's attributions. In the Federal District, the Joint Ordinance (Secretaria de Estado de Gestão Administrativa e Desburocratização & Secretaria de Estado de Políticas para Crianças, Adolescentes e Juventude, 2015) lists the attributions of the socio-educational agent concerning security, that range from the reception of the adolescent in the detention facility to the moment of his/her liberation, accompanying and supervising all daily activities. However, it does not clarify which pedagogic attributions the agent is responsible for, limiting to mention the duty to participate in activities related to the planning, execution, and supervision of socio-educational activities with the adolescents. Therefore, there are controversial aspects regards the functions, and the very professional identity of the social-education agent, who is demanded to perform activities related to the sanctioning dimension – restricting freedom, controlling bodies – and, at the same time, the emancipatory, educational dimension inherent to such measures.

The reconciliation of these two opposing fields of practice–control and liberate –impacts negatively the quality of the affective bonds that unite agents and adolescents, a topic previously addressed by several studies (Meireles & Zamora, 2017; Silva et al., 2020; Souza et al., 2019). The results of these studies point out that agents disbelieve in the very possibility of adolescent's positive changes and, therefore, mistrust the power of their own work to enhance youth responsibility and citizenship. As an effect of the low expectations in regard to their work, agents end up keeping themselves in physical and emotional distance, protecting themselves from forming bonds of identification and empathy, and to exchanging personal experiences with the confined adolescents. In general, they avoid establishing genuine, close and intimate affective bonds, under the allegation that this would make them more sensitive to the subjective conditions of the adolescents in care, and impact the neutrality necessary to keep everybody secure. In sum, the discredit in the developmental potential inherent to adolescents turn professionals impotent to fulfil their educational mission, limiting their own actuation to activities of vigilance and restraint.

Protective Security versus Control of the Bodies

I've seen agents being held hostage. They [adolescents] will get whoever is most vulnerable (...) I take care of my safety all the time. I don't let teenagers go behind my back. I don't get too close, but not even for this reason I stop talking, orienting. (Participant D., 06/06/2019 - 2nd meeting)

Studies (Andrade, 2017; Pimentel et al., 2016; Vinuto et al., 2017) highlight that the core semiotic tension of the socio-educational semiosphere resides in the opposition between danger and safety: the danger attributed to adolescents and how the interns should be kept under strict control so that the other persons are kept safe. This dual semiotic field, however, is contradictory with the mission of socio-educational care, which states that socio-educational facilities should actively promote and protect all human beings.

Following the cultural-semiotic approach (Valsiner, 2012), each subject internalizes the signs of his/her own culture and, mediated by them, positions himself in face of the other subjects in a concrete interactional situation. What happens in social-education is that the transactions between subjects and groups is mediated by a system of signs, in which some individuals deserve being kept safe, while the others represent in itself the danger to be eliminated. This means a clear deviation of objectives to be better understood, since it reflects a rationale closer to public security than to educational facilities semiosphere.

Currently, there is a growing military, policealogue and weapons-based social logic spread in different spheres of Brazilian society. One clear example of this is the transference of the administrative management of some state schools to the responsibility of public security state bureaus (Insfran et al., 2020). The so-called militarized schools denounce the state of punishment that has embraced the collective culture, on the ground of an authoritarian, conservative broader political context. Turning back to the position of social-education agents, by prioritizing their attributions related to security functions, the facilities' rules privilege aspects associated with surveillance, containment, silencing, and discipline, while the educational aspects are left aside. The hyper-generalized signs associated with security, and the idea that adolescents are the danger to be fought, subordinate the subjectivity of adolescents and limit their development potentials. These signs lead to hierarchical, unequal, and distrustful interactions that may block the formation of positive bonds, capable of channeling the intentionality of the cared young people towards creative forms of citizenship and coexistence. On the contrary, the unbalanced power relations configured as such turn the goal to reform of the adolescent, to mold his/her psyche to pre-existing social norms, as the major orientation pursued by socio-educational facilities. This goal-orientation, however, weakens the adolescent's agency and may even reproduce forms of discriminatory experiences continuously being faced by them (Cunha et al., 2020).

In short, the exclusive focus on security imprints in the socio-educational practices a broad set of misconceptions and punitive actions with the risk of eliminating the very educational characteristic of such practices. The unstable balance between proceeding a sanction and educating, what is an implicit character of the socio-educational measures, was addressed by Lopes de Oliveira (2014, p. 90):

Conceiving the mere complying of a sentence as an educational act is a controversial issue, that contributes to heat up the debate around the respective roles of the justice system, the executive facilities, and civil society in regard to the social-education. Besides, this, leads to a concern about the legal and the psychosocial sides of the intervention work, what is an issue whenever the field of socio-educational measures is at stake.

It should be noted that adding value to the educational function of the socio-educational measures does not mean abdicating to take care of security at all, but it requires a new security paradigm in which, according to Konzen (2015), education and security go hand in hand. Security here, instead of focusing on the infraction and/or on the goal of erasing the supposed danger posed by adolescents, must be committed to respecting and dignifying them as human beings; it is embodied in practices that aim for peace and that are oriented to a successful pedagogical experience.

The adjective 'socio-educational' was introduced in the text of the ECA (Presidência da República, 1990), in order to emphasize the protective and educational character of the sanctions adopted in response to juvenile infractions. Nevertheless, the text of the law does not make it clear how to introduce practices in line with this intention. Bisinoto et al. (2015) emphasize that, nor the

professionals who deal directly with adolescents, neither the managers of the juvenile facilities have any certainty about how to care these adolescents. Uncertainty is due to a conceptual and theoretical gap concerning the principles of social-education in this context, and such opacity ends up leaving room for “discretionary practices tied to political, societal, and/or corporatizing views” (Bisinoto et al., 2015, p. 577). Cultural psychological perspectives informs that, along the historical process, such procedural gaps have been filled in by a web of beliefs and values that converges with simple punishment instead of the true commitment with the social reinsertion of the adolescent, in terms of accountability, professionalization, citizenship, and active participation in society.

Symbolic and Physical Degradation of the Adolescent

And then, we get into that question of torture, right? It’s not enough [to take away his/her freedom], so, wait a minute, we’re going to continue torturing this person because (s)he have not undergone a transformation, (s)he did not realize what (s)he have done. So, let’s take away the candy, take away the food. (Participant M. 04/07/2019 - 5th meeting).

The issue of getting angry with the boy. Because he is a criminal [...] [and, at the same time] having to feed the boy, having to do I don’t know what to the boy, having to care the boy, whatever [...]. I wish this boy was dead, because he is a criminal. (Participant M. 06/06/2019 - 2nd meeting)

In these excerpts, we see fragments of two interpersonal dynamics, both characterized by asymmetric positions in the relations. Despite the commitment the agent is compelled to assume when he first joined the career as social-educator, the ambivalent professional scenario and the feelings of dismay and exhaustion enhanced by the institutional contradictions make them less tolerant, more and more impatient, mentioning their desire to eliminate the adolescents, if it was within their reach. As it is not, a menu of exaggerated, unacceptable punishments are day after day applied by them, as mentioned in their narratives over the course of the program: suspension of school attendance, deprivation of their access to meals, sunbathing, physical education activities, and even, the access to the toilet flush.

In this quite asymmetric, tensioned semiotic field, the social-education agent’s empathy and solidarity are weakened, and they become less capable to recognize the adolescents as the alterities with whom their work is collaboratively constructed, and for whom it should be considered as meaningful. Yokoy and Rengifo-Herrera (2020) point out that by not recognizing the adolescent as the main counterpart of their work, agents can become more and more indifferent to them, culminating in the adoption of dubious responses from the ethical, aesthetic and moral point of view. Valsiner (2012, p. 120) argues that “in a given society, educational goals are constructed within the existing stratification system and, in principle, they reinforce its maintenance”. In this sense, the voice of these agents expresses components of a collective culture that seems to be at the service of the retributive logic, through the practice of reproducing forms of symbolic violence.

Not coincidentally, in addition to the clues pointing to the presence of eliminating intolerance, as portrayed above, indicators of assimilating intolerance were noticed among the agents that participated in the study as well (Valsiner, 2012). In this case, instead of exploring devices that protect the adolescent’s life and prevent their effective elimination (in peer conflicts, gangs, etc.), agents use their institutional superiority and power to mold the adolescents, in search to eliminate, if possible, all the aspects disapproved or disliked by the social-education agents. There were several reports

of intolerance by the participants when faced with the preferences/tastes of the adolescents: From their language, to their music, including the images tattooed on their bodies, many of their values and cultural aspects were criticized by the agents. This attitude suggests, besides intransigence, the idealization of the characteristics of the public served by the juvenile justice system, seemingly based on images of a white, educated, middle-class adolescence. Instead of the concrete young person they meet (with a colloquial language, uncompromising with grammar, of “doubtful” taste in music, and with drawings stamped on their bodies related to transgression and crime), it would be probably easier to deal with adolescents whose linguistic resources, musical preference, and aesthetic parameters, for example, were closer to the ones shared by the agents themselves.

Works by Andrade (2017), and Silva et al. (2020), which investigated social-educational agents in service, found out that there are those who seem to consider themselves as morally superior to adolescents. Indeed, such perception of moral superiority turn them confident to belittle the image of adolescents, for instance, refrain from calling them by their first name and, in the extreme, disregard the adolescents as subjects of law protection. As part of this problematic interactive dynamic, the agents tend to attack and disqualify the laws (mainly ECA and the SINASE), which are evaluated by them as rather soft laws when contrasted with the highly complex objectives of social-education. So agents bypass the rules, and may go so far as to allow themselves to create their own punishment mechanisms and penalties.

By positioning themselves this way, the agents demonstrate that their work is not committed with collaborating with the social inclusion of the adolescents; rather, their major concern is self-protection, saving their own lives and that of the other professionals, from the danger they see in the adolescents. Within this distrustful semiosphere, the social-education agents tend to recognize in the adolescent a supposedly innate criminal profile, whereby breaking the law would be a natural, inner tendency, or even, the expression of a voluntary choice. The deterministic view implicit in their main positioning certainly finds echo in the hegemonic subjectivist principle that permeates most of the Brazilian cultural background, including its legal tradition. Within this tradition, according to Santos and Lucas (2018), a model of criminal justice is adopted that favors retributive or expiatory conceptions of punishment, while the genesis of crime is associated with the individual will, agency, and goal-orientation, clearly grounded in the free-will liberal principle. Authors criticize the subjectivist ground of the local legal system, supporting a contextualized view of violence, which includes the symbolic and systemic forms of violence encrusted in the social domination present in our economic and political system.

Therefore, the image of a dangerous subject, persistently attributed to the adolescent in conflict with the law, blocks the socio-educational service to fulfill its purposes. The developmental process of these adolescents will be guided by signs that reify what is immoral, incorrigible, and malicious in them, and not their potential to activate innovative development paths.

Despite the deep contradictions within the socio-educational system, Andrade (2017) and Meireles (2017) report some timid movements and experiences that diverge of the trends reported above. These positive examples were found in juvenile detention centers located in the Federal District and in Rio de Janeiro, respectively, where authors identified socio-educational initiatives mobilized by the vision of the adolescent as an integral human being and a citizen. In such ethos, the socio-educational agents tend to engage more actively in developing a genuine and respectful relationship with the adolescents, an attitude that enhances the agent’s belief in the potential of the adolescents for self-transformation and social development. In the experiences reported in the research, the improvement of social bonds is an important strategy at work, one that favors a

more fruitful performance, which also contributes to enhance everyone's safety, by promoting the deconstruction of dynamics inspired by the 'jail culture' (Yokoy & Lopes de Oliveira, 2012) within socio-educational facilities, while opening room for adolescent's accountability, citizenship and autonomy.

Conclusion

This article sought to present, through the conceptual lenses of semiotic-cultural psychology, an approach to interpret the semiosphere of a socio-educational facility. The focus was posed on the beliefs nurtured by socio-educational agents regarding themselves, their work and the adolescent in conflict with the law. The semiotic web formed by the collective culture of the investigated group, identified through the thematic analysis of the participant's narratives along the sessions of a University extension project, evidences the core role played by the sign 'intolerance' amidst agents-adolescents interactions. In this sense, the concepts of 'eliminating intolerance' and 'assimilating intolerance' offer relevant interpretative possibility regarding the relationships that occur among individuals and groups who recognize themselves as endowed with different levels of power, as is the case of the relations involving social-educational agents and adolescents.

Through the historical approach of children and adolescents legal conceptions and social policies, we searched to highlight how much the current collective culture continues to carry traces of a past in which children and adolescents were mere objects, submitted to the guardianship of the State, deprived of most of their rights. Juvenile Justice has also been influenced by semiotic wastes of the penal system, embracing its character of retributive justice. Taking these aspects into account, our attention was directed to internment, the socio-educational measure applied in cases of grave infraction, or criminal reiteration. Social-education agents who work in internment facilities deal with deep tensions and contradictions, related to the challenge of integrating two apparently opposite goals inherent to socio-educational semiosphere: sanction and education; reprimand and new life alternatives.

Social-education agents, the group under analysis, occupy an important position among the professionals in charge of the socio-educational care in internment facilities for adolescents, since they perform at once the roles of vigilance, security and monitoring with the adolescents, together with fulfilling quasi-parental functions (orienting, dialogue, counseling, etc). To illustrate the tensions and contradictions that mark their working activities, and the impact of these contradictions over the cared adolescents, in terms of mutual intolerance, the analysis included statements constructed during an extension course offered to socioeducational agents in the Federal District.

The semiotic tensions inherent to the collective culture of the investigated internment facility led to many examples of assimilating intolerance, which is associated with the techniques of acculturation of the adolescents (by devaluing his own culture and identity) as well as by eliminating intolerance, which means the maintenance of the subjects under conditions of social exclusion, be it through symbolic or real means.

Both forms of intolerance represent a type of symbolic violence that removes from adolescents the semiotic resources that would allow them to re-signify their life trajectory, turning social-education innocuous – if not harmful.

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