

The role of musical resources in childhood social construction

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Abstract The purpose of this paper is to foster discussion about childhood as an ideological and cultural construction where a musical approach to games and verbal interactions between children can be interpreted as a social hallmark of childhood as opposed to a particular consideration of adulthood. This presentation provides ethnographic empirical data about children's social interaction through musical creativity in a playground context. It also aims to link the image of childhood to other childhood images as in 19th century Spanish Zarzuela, so as to lead to an analytical reflection. Among other important issues, a holistic view of childhood focuses on public and private domains, gender relations and power hierarchies. In understanding the meaning of "constructing childhood", the children's view of their own age and the role of musical resources in indicating age categories are particularly significant.

Keywords childhood construction; music creativity; sainete.

Introduction

When they learnt of the purpose of my presence in the playground as an ethnographer, the children pointed out what I should look for straight away. Firstly and on many occasions, they told me "Come here and take a look...", "Do you know this one [skipping rope game]?", "They are playing handclaps on the porch". Drawing my attention to these childhood practices (certainly not the only activities on the playground), children tagged relevant aspects within the field of childhood that were linked to the use of music as a distinctive formula for age categories. These were practices that included rhythm, gesture, chanting, clapping, skipping rope games, counting-out rhymes and dips, riddles for choosing leaders, verbal duels, etc. In selecting these ways of using their words and bodies, they outlined an assessment of age hierarchy.

Fieldwork was undertaken in two primary school playgrounds with children aged 6 to 11 years old between 1999 and 2006, in the frame of my long-term PhD research (Doctoral Thesis: *Pequeños-pequeños, medianos y mayores* UNED 2013) and between 2015 and 2016 for a recent study on Playground Spaces, which is still being drafted. The method of collecting data was participant observation and consisted of formal and informal interviews, written registrations and recorded information. Some of the records were made by children who helped me as co-ethnographers. The historical documents were obtained from the SGAE archive.

The presence of an observer in any context implies an intrusion. This is why what happens at first is also significant, when people learn about the purpose of the research and point out what they consider relevant in the context of social interaction. In the school playground, children (and many adults) drew my attention towards some specific practices linked to music, body gesture and poetic formulas. In disregarding many other practices, they were introducing me to a particular kind of childhood performance. These practices used in games and verbal interaction act as effective tools in social interaction, but are also interpreted as

the result of an age more akin to nature than to culture.

Therefore, attributes supposedly assigned to childhood such as incoherence, embodiment, ambiguity and emotion are linked to a broader ideological context, playing a significant role in the assessment of age hierarchies in children's cross-age interaction. The construction of the image of childhood holds within it a recreation of a continuum from nature to civilisation attached to individuals or social groups defined as incomplete or non- developed. Some of these attributes can be traced back to other childhood images, as in the 19th century Spanish lyrical *sainetes*.

1. Childhood hardcore

In order to explain the relationship between age practices and hierarchies with their associated social interpretations in the school playground, let us imagine childhood as a symbolic space where children can move in and out as regards, for example, the use of speech and musical resources. Certain musical abilities used in verbal interactions and also in games are linked to a particular age category that in playground slang is related to the hardcore of childhood represented by the children known as *pequeños* (mostly related to 1st to 3rd primary school years, 6-8 years old). The path out of infancy is indicated by a *socially perceived* discourse (Bourdieu, 1994, 1997, 2002) attached to children called *mayores* ("older kids"; mostly older children of 10-11 years of age, i.e. the eldest in primary school). The older children's discourse, when performed in cross-age interaction, is taken to be a speech of universal significance without any other interpretation but the true one. As the older kids explained to me, they knew what they were saying and what words mean because they "do not invent them". The contrast between different discourse styles points to the value of language as a human quality *per se*. Taken as an indication of rationality, any type of language socially perceived as non-rational involves an evaluation within a continuum from wildness to civilization.

1.1. Age categories

Pequeño (little one) has to be understood as a biographical division of childhood that makes sense in relation to *mediano* (medium-aged) and *mayor* (older kid) as categories or prototypes that indicate the position of each agent in social performance in context. The category *pequeño* is also related to a dismissive attitude towards *infantil* (childish). *Infantil* and *pequeño* are categories never acknowledged to oneself but pointed out in "others". Used even among younger children themselves, *infantil* (childish) and abilities linked to its semantic field both in and outside the playground implies a lack of agency. In short, we are all aware that anyone calling anyone *childish*, including adults, means to say a person of low status, incompetent, a minor. Thus, younger children prefer to be called *medianos* (medium-aged child). Nevertheless, children can move into different expressive registers depending on the circumstances, as if they were playing the diverse ranges of a piano. Children take a symbolic place close to or far from hardcore infancy depending on the skills they use in social interaction. Shifting one's position from *pequeño* to *mediano* can occur in an instant as with a group of first year primary school pupils who went to complain to an aide, claiming that older children were bullying them because they were *pequeños* (little ones); when I asked them if they themselves were *pequeños*, they promptly stated that in fact they were not *pequeños-pequeños* (very little), but *medianos* (medium-aged) children.

1.2. Music, body and gesture

Those who were pointed out as *pequeños* were outstanding performers in using teasing

intonation, sing-song chants, rhymes, dips, verbal duels and games where music and poetic resources as well as body gesture are fundamental. In this style of nonsense discourse, words can mean nothing because it does not matter if they are stating the truth; they are used to create bonds in the peer group—and it works. The effectiveness lies in the context; that is to say, who produces the sing-song, when, and among whom (Corsaro, 1985, 1997). Younger children enjoy the power of the poetic-musical links hidden in the sound of words. Musical resources in speech are especially adaptable. Some melodies have a short range pattern, mostly using 3 notes similar to many traditional popular melodies; other chants use melodies taken from TV or from older children; many are not even a melody but an intonation. Nevertheless, they all aim to create links among the group of participants and should thus be interpreted as ways of constructing social life (Cetrangolo, 2015, 1992; Finnegan, 2008; Rimmer, 2017).

Thus, clapping games with usually nonsensical lyrics can be interpreted as a cohesive form of expression that deals with bonds related to gender, age levels and power negotiations (Thorne, B., 1999). The fact that girls in a wide age range are excellent performers of clapping and other similar games, while younger boys often join them, helps point to a downgraded evaluation, associating girls with childishness as a whole. Boys and girls share the same vocal range until they reach puberty. The ambiguity involved in singing may explain why some boys pretend they cannot reach high pitch tunes and do not usually participate in girls' chanting games that involve melody and risky body gesture. Nevertheless, I have seen some clapping games played by boys even close to the 4th year of primary school.

There are many examples of serious grievances in the peer group caused by practices that use gesture, rhythmic patterns and a half-speaking/half-singing intonation that are interpreted as unacceptable. Often the simple intonation without words is enough to state the offence. The reaction is plainly explained: "If he hadn't chanted it..." Sometimes these ritualized forms of provocation turn into mock-fights, consisting of two parts: a challenge and a reply that ends when the opponent remains speechless.

Other practices are aimed at choosing partners, producing dips that eliminate participants one by one, like pointing out feet while singing or reciting the words in *zapatito blanco*, *zapatito azul* in order to be fair and avoid mistrust and problems (Figure 1).

Zapatito Blanco



Figure 1. Zapatito blanco, zapatito azul.

1.3. Cross-age confrontation

The shifting, dynamic boundaries of childhood are negotiated daily as children confront different social interaction codes. Music skills are often used in power negotiations. When different cross- age categories interact, although a *mayor* (older child) may be well aware of speech music formulas, (s)he usually doesn't replay them in the same expressive style. *Mayores* (older children) avoid the risk of venturing into the hardcore of infancy in order to affirm their age rank. Despite their complexity, these sing-song skills, which are real ritualized expressive forms, are considered childish ways of communication and hence connected to the depths of childhood.

Therefore, older kids may ignore younger chants, turning a deaf ear. I saw boys and girls using some cardboard boxes to set out a game place; very busy building up the place, they literally chanted the prohibition: "*Aquí no se puede pasar, aquí no se puede pasar*" ("No trespassing here"). *An older boy came in, listened to the chanting, but nevertheless trespassed. When asked to "pay" for entry, he didn't do so. Afterwards, he said to me in a patronising or arrogant way, "They are so cute"*.

His point of view was very significant; even though he heard them chanting not to trespass, these words were not to be taken seriously as a prohibition stated by individuals with agency (Kockelman, 2007). The *pequeños* (younger ones) were to be considered as a homogeneous entity that needed to be treated gently, but not listened to.

Though *mayores* argue that *pequeños* do not know how to speak, claiming that they get into a muddle with words and particularly don't even know how to insult, the evidence produced in context shows that nevertheless practices are associated with each age category they do not represent individual skills. The eldest kids do chant and play mock-fights, but they do so among their peer group where no risk of age confusion can be made. Younger kids can seemingly change tone and use other discourse formulas in order to insult accurately.

This leads us to understand why children are so intent on claiming that older kids do not listen to them, and why older children may suspect that nonsensical chanting, speech-play, rhymes or repetition formulas might hide ulterior motives. Mistrust is often justified. Those called *pequeños* (younger ones) by adults and elder children but who declare themselves to be *medianos* (medium-aged), explained to me how they act to push the *mayores* (older children) to the limit. One of these strategies is to repeat the same sing-song words over and over like a kind of crazy mantra until they leave them in peace. *Pequeños* (younger children) define their strategy in cross-age interaction literally as “acting the fool”.

Childhood is not only a stage of life but also a social construction (James and Prout, 1990) rooted in deep core cultural beliefs reintroduced in the notion of individual development (Díaz de Rada, 2010). Infancy is linked to the body and therefore to nature, irrationality, ambiguity, inconsistency and emotion. On the contrary, adulthood means culture, rationality, individuality, consistency and self-control. Childhood performance in itself challenges western dualisms.

2. Stereotyped Childhood. *Gente menuda*.

The image of childhood is constructed and reconstructed using different elements as if they were bricks taken from the current situation, the institutional context, mass media and the historical background. It is also present in other expressive contexts. Let us look at the image of childhood in the Spanish Zarzuela, particularly in the lyrical *sainete*.

The lyrical *sainete* is a musical genre that involves a particular view of 19th century Spanish society, in which traditional characters portray a kind of common identity. Lyrical *sainetes* are short plays that combine speaking and singing parts and may even include children's songs that are well known to the audience (Encabo Fernandez, 2002). These plays are not intended for an upper class audience but for a working-class family audience, mostly aimed at adults.

In the *sainete*, childhood is often taken as a homogeneous group without individualities, plainly referred to by the common noun “child”, who plays and chants and shouts, sharing a stereotypical role with other background representative groups like soldiers, *chulapos y chulapas* and maids. They mostly act as representatives of a social group that behaves in a particular standard way since they are not taken as individual identities.

We can find this treatment when looking at the cast list in some *sainetes*. For instance, *El Coche Correo*, 1896 (libretto by Carlos Arniches and José López Silva, music by Federico Chueca) with “*un niño*” (a kid) and also “*una vieja*” (old woman); *El Amo de la Calle*, 1910 (libretto by Arniches and López Silva, music by Rafael Calleja Gómez, Enrique García Álvarez) with “*un chico*” (a boy); *El Aduar*, 1918 (libretto by Julio Pellicer; music by Pablo Luna Carné) with “*Niños, danzarinas, músicos, esclavos, pastores...*” (Children, dancers, musicians, slaves, shepherds...); *Al fin se casa la Nieves*, 1895 (libretto by Ricardo de la Vega, music by Tomás Bretón Hernández) with “*monaguillos y chicos*” (choirboys and children).

In many *sainetes*, children mostly play secondary roles, remaining in the background as a mere accompaniment of the largely social activity, with young women sometimes acting as children. However, the significance of children as agents representative of marginality is actually important. Children's clear embodiment is relevant, because it cannot be hidden.

Therefore, their presence as an accompaniment to adults may act as a symbolic reminder of the social condition of human embodiment (Bourdieu, 1997, 2002; Csordas, 1999; O'Connor, 2016). Childhood as an age stage that can wander freely, often following the adults' performance, even singing and playing an obscene repertoire involving bodily supremacy, has already been spotted by Gagnivet (Gagnivet, 1974). A clearly moralistic intention in *sainete* texts does not allow children's characters to perform these kinds of songs and games, but their participation is often subtly linked to embodiment and aimed at a peculiar image lack of self-restraint. In the initial act of *Agua, Azucarillos y Aguardiente*, 1897 (libretto by Miguel Ramos Carrión, music by Federico Chueca), washerwomen, soldiers and nannies with children gather in a choir group that makes sense as social markers of a clichéd view of 19th century Madrid society. While the choir sings a children's potpourri of songs, including *Alirón* and *La Carbonerita*, one child breaks away saying, "I need to pee".

La Revoltosa 1897 (music by Ruperto Chapí; libretto by José López Silva and Carlos Fernández Shaw) begins in the central patio of a *corrala*¹, an emblematic building that summarises the spirit of most people's daily life. The music starts while Cándido and other neighbours are playing cards while his wife scratches her son's head looking for lice. The mother slaps her son while protesting: "¡Toma, cerdo!" (Take that, pig!). From time to time the child shouts, "Mamá" and "Ay, ay". His father mediates and says that anybody can catch lice. But the role of the mother points to another perspective, a cultural perception of the body: childhood is an especially corporeal age and the body must be tamed (Velasco, 2009).

In this context, *Gente Menuda* (Little People) (Delgado, 1885) gains relevance. This is a *sainete* in which children play the leading roles. There are four siblings whose mother has died and whose father has abandoned them. They represent different age levels; the oldest is an 18 year-old boy, then a 15-year old girl, an 11-year old boy and finally the little one, presumably under 10.

In this *sainete*, Sinesio Delgado indicates the use of a peculiar half-singing/half speaking intonation linked to children's speech. The actor that plays the role of an 11 year-old child has to speak "*con un tonillo de estudio, peculiar en los niños*" ("with a particular study tone specific to children"). This rhythmical intonation might be similar to what elderly people remember as a common method for studying multiplication tables or prayers (Manzano, 1986), which children use today in the school playground when choosing partners or teasing someone.

In the play, the kid is studying for an exam and it is obvious that he is memorizing words as if they were no more than sounds. The musical tune helps him to remember and emphasizes that he does not know what he is saying. The words are empty of significance, or perhaps we could say that they are filled with another significance, another interpretation that points towards the image of childhood in the audience's mind: "*[con un tonillo de estudio, peculiar en los chicos] Cuando en esto España se vio invadida...[Mira el libro] por los vándalos, los suevos y ... [con el tonillo de antes]*" ("[with a particular study tone specific to children] When Spain was invaded [He looks at the book] by the Vandals, the Suebi and...[with the same tone as before]"). (Delgado, 1885, escena 1, p. 7)

Moreover, the links between nature and childhood as opposed to culture and adulthood are present in *Gente Menuda* when children play a specific role of naivety, speaking with many grammatical mistakes, confusing words and meanings. Nevertheless, like Rousseau's *bon sauvage*, the children are speaking from the heart. This is a quality of fairness performed

partly because they are innocent, partly because they are ignorant, and possibly because through infancy adults can contemplate bygone times before the corrupting effects of civilization. (Fabian, 2002; Taylor, 2011)

Childhood's linguistic incompetence is understood as a testimony to the lack of rationality. Likewise, incorrect speech is related to lower social classes and also associated with a kind of noble innocence. Hence, in *Gente Menuda* childhood and poverty share a humorous style of speech and a lack of agency.

Nevertheless, a new approach concerning children and the theatre appeared along with a rising middle class. Important writers like Jacinto Benavente (1866-1954) were interested in creating theatre plays for children (Tejerina, 2007). This concern was shared by Sinesio Delgado, who wrote many short plays for children in the early 20th century, such as *El Rey Mago*, *El Paraíso de los niños*, *La Infanta de los Bucles de Oro* and *Cabecita de Pájaro* (Gonzalez Freire, 2008).

The coexisting approaches to childhood can be seen in Sinesio Delgado's plays by comparing the cast of characters between *El Paraíso de los Niños* (Children' Paradise) and *Gente Menuda* (Little People). The former was especially created for children, while *Gente Menuda* is a *sainete* in which children play important roles as emblematic characters that point to poverty and innocence.

While in *El Paraíso de los Niños* the characters are mostly taken from fantasy such as fairy tales, guignol puppet theatre or toys (*Bebelinda*, *La Madre Cucú*, *Pepona*, *La Diosa de los Bazares*, *Muñeca*, *Pierrot*, *Don Nicanor tocando el tambor*, etc.) in *Gente Menuda* all the characters are taken from experience of daily life (Casimiro, Señá Genoveva, Catalina, Perico, etc). The only reference in *Gente Menuda* to a fantasy character leads to a humorous play of words that is especially dramatic in the play's context of discomfort, cold and poverty. The eldest brother is writing a variety show named *El hada del calor* (The warmth fairy); at the same time, his younger sister complains that she is always "icy cold" ("*helada de frío*") (Delgado, 1885, escena VII, p. 16) . The identical phonetics in the two phrases (*el hada/ helada*) produces an ironic contrast between fantasy and cruel reality.

Thus, the image of childhood is also linked to fantasy, illogical thinking and poetry. There is a clear intention behind this, which can be traced back to many poets' declarations and works such as those by the surrealists (Gamonedá, 2013; Breton, 1992). Children's thinking is also related to primitive and magical thinking, far removed from rationality and closer to wildness (Cazeneuve, 1967; Taylor, 2011).

Music, body gesture and poetic resources play a significant role in constructing age hierarchies in children's social interaction, forging an image of childhood connected with a dualistic interpretation of reality. Ethnographic research and historical data may throw some light on the construction of childhood and the relationship with the contrast between nature and culture.

Notes

1. A traditional, communal tenement block surrounding a central courtyard.

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