

Cultural Actions in the Play of Preschool Children

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The article is devoted to the analysis of the key mechanisms of children's development in the play – the correlation of cultural actions and the conditions of their formation that arise in the process of children's play. A detailed analysis of the concepts of "situation" and "normative situation" is given. According to L.S. Vygotsky, a special role in children's play is assigned to the imaginary situation, which determines the subjective nature of children's activity, and directs it to the development of the semantic side of actions due to the specifics of the imaginary situation. In other words, conditions are created in preschool childhood both for mastering normative action and for establishing an attitude to normative action. This is possible due to the presence of two spaces: culture and the space of an imaginary situation. Within these spaces, cultural artifacts themselves are mastered and a subjective attitude to various aspects of cultural objects is generated. The relevance of the theoretical analysis of the mechanisms of development in the play is due to the growing interest in the play as a means of purposeful development and education of preschool children.

Keywords: cultural-historical approach, play, normative situation, imaginary situation, cultural action, natural action.

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Культурные действия в игре детей дошкольного возраста

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Статья посвящена анализу одного из ключевых механизмов детского развития в игре – соотношения культурных действий и условий их формирования, возникающих в процессе детской игры.

Дается подробный разбор понятий «ситуация» и «нормативная ситуация». Согласно Л.С. Выготскому, особая роль в игре отводится мнимой ситуации, что определяет субъективный характер детской активности и направляет ее на освоение смысловой стороны действий, обусловленных спецификой мнимой ситуации. Другими словами, в дошкольном детстве создаются условия и для освоения нормативного действия, и для установления отношения к нормативному действию. Это оказывается возможным благодаря наличию двух пространств: культуры и пространства мнимой ситуации. В рамках этих пространств осваиваются сами артефакты культуры и порождается субъективное отношение к различным аспектам культурных объектов. Актуальность теоретического анализа механизмов развития в игре обусловлена возрастающим интересом к игре как средству целенаправленного развития и обучения детей дошкольного возраста.

Ключевые слова: культурно-исторический подход, игра, нормативная ситуация, мнимая ситуация, культурное действие, натуральное действие.

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Introduction

The problem this paper is focused on is related to the analysis of actions performed by children of preschool age in the framework of socio-dramatic play. This topic appears to be of the immediate interest, both for theory and practice. It opens additional opportunities for the studying of socio-dramatic play and its potential in the context of purposeful teaching and development of preschoolers. N.Y. Mikhaïlenko considered the situation where a role is performed as one of the key elements of the structure of play activity [19, с. 183]. Therefore, it seems important to begin with the analysis of the very concept of situation, and the possibility of its use for the characteristic of play activity of preschoolers.

L.S. Vygotsky, in his analysis of child development, suggested the concept of social situation of development. This is how he understood it: “We must admit that at the beginning of each age period, there develops a completely original, exclusive, single, and unique relation, specific to the given age, between the child and reality, mainly the social reality that surrounds him. We call this relation the social situation of development at the given age.” [6, p. 258]

As one can see, this definition of social situation of development includes a child and the reality surrounding him/her (also the social one), and the child’s relation to this reality (emotional experience — “perezhivanie”) [23]. Characterizing a child’s actions implies the detailing of surrounding reality. To this end, it’s necessary to define the units forming the category. We suggest situations as such units. Let us introduce a working definition of a situation, and use classical psychological works that included this concept, as a foundation. Thus, J. Watson equated a situation to a stimulus (a cause situation): “When a human being performs a series of acts — moves

his/her arms, feet, or strains the vocal cords — there must be necessarily a group of preceding factors that form the “cause” of the act. The latter can be conveniently defined by a term “situation” or “stimulus”... Therefore, psychology faces two direct problems: 1) to define potential cause situations that triggered a situation, and 2) to forecast a possible reaction caused by a certain situation.” [15, p. 263]

E. Tolman in his work “Behaviour as a molar phenomenon” analysed the watsonian position and defined a situation as a group of stimuli: “In a psychological laboratory, when we are dealing with relatively simple factors such as the impact of air waves, sound waves, etc. on the human adaptation, we’re talking with a stimulus. On the other hand, when the factors causing certain reactions are more complex, for example, in the social world, then we’re dealing with situations. A situation, through an analysis falls into a complex group of stimuli.” [14, p. 147].

Moreover, E. Tolman clearly understood the limitations of J. Watson’s approach, and suggested viewing a situation in the context of the concept of a purpose: “Behaviour in its own sense apparently is always characterized by orientation of a purpose, or it derives from the purpose object or a purpose situation.” [14, p. 147].

The idea of a purpose as an essential characteristic of a situation was also reflected in Gestalt psychology that introduced the concept of a problem situation [5] as a group of conditions where an individual had a goal to achieve but the ways of doing it were unknown. In that case, the situation was not only considered as a combination of external conditions, but also included the individual’s relation to these conditions determined by the goal. Thus, the understanding of a situation is psychological science included both subjective and objective characteristics.

In the light of this distinguishing of two aspects of a situation, the following words by A.F. Losev are of special interest: "Even a toddler knows that there is something internal and external in everything. This is the most basic and universal antithesis of thought and being. In fact, before any philosophizing, before any methodical reasoning, we can already notice that these two sides are present in things, and they are in different relation to each other... There is no reality without an external material base, implementing and embodying some internal content; and there can be no reality without an internal, immaterial image and shape, or, a meaning that forms and conceptualizes the matter, and makes it real." [9, pp. 805–806].

Z. Freud [16] focused on the moral aspect of a situation, where individual's behaviour was determined not only by external conditions or internal tendencies, but also by the system of moral values dictating certain way of behaviour.

These mandates can be clearly observed in social psychology in the theory of role. Thus, T. Shibutani wrote that a role in a play could be understood as "... the idea of a proper behavioural pattern expected and required from a person in a certain situation, in case his/her position in a joint action is known." [18, p. 46].

As a preliminary conclusion, let us indicate that a situation can be analysed from two perspectives, the objective and the subjective one. The latter is defined by the attitude of the acting subject, and depends on his/her individual characteristics, values, emotional reactions, feelings, goals and purposes, etc. [1; 4; 12] The objective aspect of a situation includes objective features, such as mandates, requirements, or rules. Objective situations have two components – an external (visible) aspect, and a rule (hidden). These two elements, despite being opposite to each other, are still objective. This objectivity manifests itself in their existence independently from a particular individual.

Normative situation and child's actions

In the social environment, it is the artefacts that determine the situation where each object, feature, or circumstance has a standard behavioural pattern or action assigned to it. Therefore, when a person approaches an object, he/she finds him/herself in the framework of pre-set mandates and indications, and the society expects them to be complied with. In this case, the behaviour will be considered adequate. This is why such situations can be viewed as the units of social space. They are not random but normative situations due to the existence of standard behavioural rules or actions with the given object, in them. [3] In this case, norma-

tive situations can themselves be considered as cultural units. An individual facing such a situation is supposed to act following the indicated cultural pattern. Therefore, we can assume that a cultural action is an action dictated by a normative situation, and it complies with the accepted cultural norms that are mandatory for everyone finding him/herself in such a situation. Obviously, a normative situation is the space where cultural actions exist.

Let us emphasize an important aspect related to children's actions in a normative situation. One should keep in mind that the actions that are the result of objective characteristics of a normative situation, and the actions determined by the personal characteristics, do not only differ but are also located in different fields. The specifics of a child's behaviour reside in the fact that his/her actions can fall within the framework of a normative situation, or stay beyond. The intrinsic quality of a normative situation is that of all the multitude of possible ways of acting and behaviour, only one particular option of activity is suggested as the most appropriate and desired under these circumstances. In other words, in a particular normative situation, even though culturally, many ways of action or behaviour exist, but only one pattern would be acceptable. It can be also called a cultural action, accentuating the fact that this action is a normative one, i.e. a standard way of action accepted by a particular society which was not invented by the child but is the result of his/her mastering of social norms of behaviour. Obviously, performing of this action can be more or less successful, and children meet the expectations differently, varying their behaviour. Nevertheless, the socially dictated action will remain the same. It is not determined by individual's own will, but by the mandates existing for this normative situation. Thus, the structure of a normative situation includes a certain objective cultural action.

It is notable that children of preschool age can distinguish play actions and the actions dictated by a normative situation, or cultural actions. This differentiation was described by D.B. Elkonin in detail [19, p. 196]. Preschoolers were suggested to "play themselves". The particular interest of this situation resides in that a play situation is replaced by a normative one. As it was mentioned before, the specifics of the latter requires that a child reproduces certain expected actions, i.e. the actions that are multiply repeated in his/her daily life. The children's response was a paradoxical one, because it was not technically complicated to perform the task, since this is what they did on a daily basis. However, psychologically the participants could not understand the instructions of the experimenter as a play situation because of the drastic difference between a play and a normative situation.

According to L.S. Vygotsky, a cultural action possesses the following characteristics: mediacy, consciousness, arbitrariness, and systematicity. [6] If we compare these two definitions it is valid to ask if they both describe the same action, or two different ones. We believe that it is the second option. First, a cultural action acts in its external form as a cultural pattern, and further, as a result of the mastering of this cultural pattern by the child in the process of learning under the adult guidance in the zone of proximal development as an action possessing the characteristics indicated by L.S. Vygotsky.

Play and child's actions

There is another aspect to be taken into consideration. As it is known, L.S. Vygotsky emphasized that the zone of proximal development emerges in a play. He said, "play-development relationship can be compared to the instruction-development relationship, but play provides a background for changes in needs and in consciousness of a much wider nature. Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development." [7, p. 65]. Therefore, in a play a child also masters cultural actions. However, according to A.N. Leontyev, play actions differ from perfect cultural actions in their operational composition which is related to the use of substitute objects. It is the opportunity not to reproduce the operations or to only reproduce them partially, in a simplified way that distinguishes play from other activities. The result of this particularity is also of special interest [11; 20]. Apparently, in a play a child acts within the zone of proximal development, but independently from the adult guidance. Then, what is this activity? Is it a cultural form of action, or a natural one? D.B. Elkonin believed that in a play, children mastered the meaning of human behaviour in different situations. Since the acquisition of the operational aspect of adult activity does not take place in a play due to the complexity of its operational composition, a child has to deal with the motivational and meaningful aspect. Thus, a play is a totally new framework, different from the social scope of culture consisting of normative situations as its basic units. In this case, play becomes a semantic space, and, therefore, a subjective one. This is where play actions aimed at building the relationship with cultural artefacts, are implemented.

Now, we have approached to the definition of two frameworks or scopes, one of which is related to the mastering of perfect standard forms (the patterns of cultural actions). It is objective and is, in fact, the social cultural space. Its mastering takes place in the zone of proximal development. The other framework or space is the one of

play. It is subjective and allows building a relationship with different cultural objects.

Two frameworks where the actions exist

L.S. Vygotsky considered play actions in the context of an imaginary situation. In the cultural-historical approach, an imaginary situation is the space where play actions exist. He wrote: "Thus, in establishing criteria for distinguishing a child's play from other forms of activity, we conclude that in play a child creates an imaginary situation." [7, p. 62].

In order to understand the specifics of play actions, it is necessary to analyse the phenomenon of an imaginary situation. As L.S. Vygotsky emphasized, its emergence "...becomes possible on the basis of the separation of the visual field and the field of meanings—the ability that develops in the preschool age." [7, p. 63].

From our point of view, in psychological perspective, the phenomenon of imaginary situation is a merging of two different fields, of perception and of imagination. In this union, the meanings of both components are taken into account. [22]

In this case, according to L.S. Vygotsky, the specifics of a play action in an imaginary situation are the following: "An action in a situation that is not seen, but only conceived mentally in an imaginary field (i.e., an imaginary situation), teaches the child to guide his behaviour not only by immediate perception of objects or by the situation immediately affecting him but also by the meaning of this situation." [7, p. 64].

For more accurate understanding of play actions taking place in an imaginary situation it would be convenient to juxtapose its structure with the structure of a normative situation. As it was mentioned above, the latter typically contains an object and rules (or mandates) of action with this object. However, one should keep in mind that in a normative situation, the rule doesn't just exist but in fact, dictates the individual the need to act in a certain way. In other words, a normative situation is a space of the subject's activity. It is no coincidence that D.B. Elkonin indicated that "... the connections of the actions with the object and the word that means it form a single dynamic structure." [19, p. 242]. From our point of view, this structure can be called a normative situation.

To our opinion, an imaginary situation possesses the following features. First, it contains a normative situation determined by the external characteristics of an object located in the perception field and the rule related to this object. Secondly, it contains a representative image of another normative situation with another object and corresponding rule. Thirdly, the rule from the imaginary

normative situation substitutes the rule of actually perceived normative situation. This replacement is reflected in the use of substitute objects. Otherwise speaking, an imaginary situation is the result of the transfer of desired behaviour from one normative situation to another. [22] The results of various research works on renaming the objects confirm the validity of our assumption. In particular, D.B. Elkonin described an experiment where such renaming was studied on children of preschool age. First, the child was asked to name the objects that were placed in front of him/her, and then rename them in accordance to the names suggested by the experimenter. The data, obtained for 5-year-old children is of a special interest for us. The author discovered that some of them "... made immediate attempts to handle the objects in compliance with the new name." [19, p. 235] This evidence confirms that, indeed, each object has certain rules of acting with it which is the characteristic of a normative situation. Children's handling the objects in accordance with the new name indicates the emergence of an imaginary situation, because the rule of one normative situation was transferred to another one.

As mentioned above, in a normative situation, it is expected that the subject would act in a certain way. Therefore, the very fact of activity is an intrinsic feature of an imaginary situation. E.O. Smirnova who understood preschool play to the ground up wrote in this regard: "It is impossible to think of a child who after taking up the role of an adult would remain idle and only act in the mental plane — in his ideas and imagination." [11, p. 270]

This is why, compliance with the rule transferred to the new situation seems crucial to us. It is the rule that determines the meaning of an imaginary situation and, therefore, of the entire play. It is the rule that makes the child act. Multiple research works dedicated to play emphasized the significance of the rules in this context. For example, L.S. Vygotsky indicated that "it is absolutely impossible to imagine that a child doesn't follow any rules in an imaginary situation. If he takes up the role of a mother, then, there are the rules for a motherly behaviour. The role played by the child, his relation to an object that changed its meaning will always derive from the rule, i.e. an imaginary situation will always contain rules in it." [7, p. 66]. J. Huizinga, the well-known culture expert, also mentioned the absolute necessity of following the play rules: "play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life.'" [17] Another play expert, R. Caillois added: "Any play is a system of rules. They define how the play should be

"played" [de jeu], and how not, i.e. what is allowed and what is prohibited. These conventions are at the same time arbitrary, imperative, and dictatorial. Under no circumstances they can be violated, otherwise the play immediately stops and gets ruined by the very fact of that violation. The play is maintained in the first place, with the wish to play, i.e. the willingness to follow the rules. One should "play the play" [jouer le jeu] or not play at all." [8]

It is in this obligation to follow the rules, where L.S. Vygotsky saw the paradoxicality of play. The paradox resides in the fact that the child, in order to operate with an independent meaning needs another thing. Technically, this is the description of the mechanism of building an imaginary situation. A child finds some objects in one space that can be identified with other objects from another space.

Thus, a child has to orientate on two levels simultaneously to be able to act in an imaginary situation, on the level of real actions determined by the visible field, and on the level of play actions in an imaginary situation.

One can say that a normative situation forms part of the structure of preschool play, since it introduces the rules that children have to follow when taking up a certain role. But on the other hand, this normative situation has to be different from the others that a child encounters in his/her life. The distinction of a play and a real situation resides in that in the first case, they are already mastered by children, and in the second one, are only supposed to be eventually mastered.

Thus, there are two different types of actions performed by children in normative situations. The first one complies with cultural norms, and the other one is related not to the norms but to the meanings of adult activities. In this regard, play actions are in fact, subjective, and their operational aspect is symbolic, and is implemented by means of substitute objects. Herewith, a normative situation can be considered as an evaluation criterion for the developmental potential of a play depending on the extent of enrichment of symbolic aspect of play action by the child.

Now it is clear what kind of actions can be performed in a play. If we follow T. Parsons's perspective, play actions performed by preschoolers can be categorized as cultural actions because they are variants of social activities. He wrote: "A social action is an action that in accordance to its subjective meaning for the actor or the actors implicitly includes the attitudes and actions of others, and in its development, is oriented at them." [10]

In other words, in case of children it is valid to assume that a cultural (social) action is a form of child activity that always takes another subject into account. Here, the actions performed by the child both in a normative and

imaginary situation are cultural: objective normative actions follow a sample, while subjective play actions follow the role framework. Consequently, at preschool age as whole range of actions can be observed that is performed by children both in different normative situations, and in a play. Moreover, a normative situation can be used as an evaluation criterion for the developmental potential of play [24].

Preschoolers' actions

Talking about the actions of preschoolers, we mean both objective actions (per example) and subjective play actions. They are different from natural actions and can characterize the specifics of children's activity.

Natural actions imply inappropriate use of an object if compared to the corresponding norm. They can lead to the destruction of the object the child is handling (for example, he/she takes a toy car and bangs it against the table). A natural action is different from the action with a substitute object, because the latter follows the logic of the substituted object. Meanwhile, a natural action is beyond the object logic [21].

Cultural or objective actions (per example) are the actions mastered by the child under adult guidance or following the example of other children. These actions are social because they're acquired through social interaction and imply the possibility of someone else's participation. It is important to note that building a normative situation takes place in the point of social tension, i.e. where the subject can act egocentrically or prosocially. The latter occurs in accordance to the mandates existing for each and every normative situation.

Play actions are, as we mentioned before, implemented in compliance with the role taken by the child in a play. An imaginary situation becomes the space where

these play actions deploy. They allow children forming their relation to normative situations, and that is why they take place in subjective space. However, play actions should be also considered as social ones, since they imply the participation of other children and are aimed at the understanding of meaning of played situations typical for the social surrounding of the child.

Conclusions

We compared children's actions in normative and imaginary situations. Each of them is oriented on a certain type of actions of preschoolers. Culture mandates mastering of cultural samples or patterns. Normative situation is the space where objective cultural actions exist. It also characterizes such developmental tool as the zone of proximal development, and the learning process related to it.

Normative situations form part of preschool play structure as social patterns to be mastered by children. Play, as emphasized by L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontyev, and D.B. Elkonin emerges due to the complexity of the operational aspect of adult activities. Since the operational aspect of play actions is of symbolic nature, play becomes the space where children's subjective actions exist, and where their relation to culture is being formed. An imaginary situation, meanwhile, becomes the play tool.

All these actions can be considered social to a greater or lesser extent, and therefore, cultural. However, play and normative actions are different in their nature: the former deal with values, and the latter, with meanings; the former are objective, and the latter, subjective. Normative actions can also be used as the criteria for the development of children's socio-dramatic role actions.

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