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## **Love and affection among children – the social construction of feelings in peer interaction**

### **Abstract:**

The paper presented constitutes a preliminary analysis of an ongoing study constituting a sociological analysis on children's construction of affection and love, using the sociology of childhood frameworks of analysis. Child's agency is to be understood as structural when we analyse the constraints and possibilities of that agency, considering different consciousness levels. But we also consider human beings – and therefore, children - as agents, capable of reflexive capacity and consciousness, recognizing that agency has intentional and non-intentional consequences, in time-space context of action (Giddens, 1984). In children's agency, feelings and affections are to be considered as structurants of that agency, defining child's positions in their peer group. Children are therefore considered competent in their affections, being capable of defining them and reflecting about them and about the way they constitute children's relation with peers. Is the child capable of identifying different affections? How does the child define friendship, love and passion? What are the criteria for their constitution? Can we speak of a children's love? Using different qualitative and interpretative methodologies and techniques (observations, field notes, interviews, drawing analysis, written material produced by children) this study was developed with a group of children (aged between 6 and 10), in an after school institution, in Porto suburban area. Results of the work made with children will also be presented.

**Key-words:** childhood, childhood cultures, agency, affection, love, friendship, agent, peer cultures, social relationships

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## **Childhood as a social construction and as an autonomous sociological concept**

“Did children come into the world innocent, or with the stain of original sin upon them? Were children like a blank sheet at birth, or did they arrive with a number of innate characteristics already in place? (...) It is easy to waver between thinking of infants as little angels and little devils, or to feel obliged to protect a child and to fear being exhausted by it” (Heywood, 2001:32)

No present exists without a past or a future without both. The place occupied by the child, today, in history, in everyday lives, as not always been the same. Nor it is the same for every child, in every place at a given time.

In order to understand the way we see children, today, we need to look back and “read” the histories about them to realize how they became, nowadays, object of particular attentions, public policies and protection <sup>2</sup>. To do this, we need to take a brief tour to earlier societies and to the way they organized themselves to know that, depending on these issues, we can talk or not about childhood(s) as an object of particular attentions and care.

Sharing a consensual thought and according to available historic sources, historians believe that the fascination regarding childhood is recent. (Heywood, op.cit: 2; James, Jenks&Prout, 1998; Jenks, 2000; Hendrick, 2000). In fact, visions about childhood differed but it seems acceptable to agree that the child was been seen as an incomplete and imperfect adult and this conception changes recently with the feeling that the child was special and worth to study (James Schultz cit. in Heywood, 2001:2).

From Dante – in the XIII and XIV th centuries – and it's division of human life in terms of growing up, where we can't find, yet, the designation of childhood, but only adolescence (adolescenzia) to German philosophers of the XIX th century, who believed the child encapsulated the future (Richter, in Heywood, idem) and the romantics, for whom the child was a creature blessed by God and source of inspiration for the rest of times – visions produced about the child vary through radically different positions.

It will be the XIX th century to bring to educators and scientists the leads to a new path in studying children and childhood. Among other factors to this new path we can find the production of new frameworks in sciences such as psychology, anthropology, psychoanalysis and sociology. Before this the behaviourist influence grows in which childhood is little more than a preparatory stage to adulthood as well as sociology's and anthropology's conceptions about socialization<sup>3</sup> and development – who appealed, inevitably, to the idea of transforming the child

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<sup>2</sup> a good example of this is The United Nations Children's Rights Convention, 1989

<sup>3</sup> Today, the main perspective about children and childhood rejects, strongly, the notion of socialization as traditionally used by sociology. Regarding this, Corsaro proposes the notion of *interpretative reproduction*, stating that children do not receive, in a passive way, what's transmitted to them – they recreate, transform and adapt, finding their own ways of living and understanding that transmission (1997)

from an asocial, acultural, imperfect and incompetent being, into a competent, rational, social and autonomous adult (Heywood, 2001; James&Jenks&Prout, 1998; Corsaro, 1997).

Besides these influences, the idea of “naturalisation” of childhood<sup>4</sup>, seeing it as a natural phenomenon that would raise little interests to researchers, as been an obstacle to the rising of new perspectives (Heywood, op. cit: 3-5). Over the last years, several researchers have worked towards a rejection of these ideas, creating the basis for a new paradigm in the sociology of childhood. We will address this issue later.

In their analysis of the conceptions of childhood, James, Jenks and Prout (1998, 23:26) distinguish two major periods: the *presociological child* and the *sociological child*. In the first period, we can find visions of childhood produced from common knowledge, classic philosophy, development psychology and psychoanalysis.

The basic premise is that the child is exterior to the social context in which she is ignoring, therefore, the concept of social structure. In the sociological child, authors analyse the contributions of sociology and see it in 4 different categories that draw new attention in social theory towards the child and childhood. These theories are transactional, since they are prior to a new perspective in studying childhood.

In the “sociological child” theories, authors analyse social development theories and socialization theories. Although these theories represent an epistemological breakthrough with the first ones, by the relevance of social context, James, Jenks e Prout, believe that sociology was always, at least somehow, concerned with children’s development even though, at this time, it didn’t show great interest in the child as a social actor. (1998:22-24). Looking at theories on social order and social integration – in which they depend on a predictable and uniform action of the participant members – authors state that sociological theorization begins with a formal and established concept of society.

At this point, James, Jenks and Prout take an important conclusion: first, Parsons in his theory, made an almost exact, uniform and stable correspondence between individual actors (and their personality) and society itself; second, he believed in a universal practice and experience of childhood. So, in this perspective, the intentionality of child’s agency is constrained by a limited number of choices in social interaction. As we shall see, this is one of the most criticised and reviewed points of the sociology of childhood paradigm. Finally, children are seen, inevitably as incompetent and as a potential of abilities that will only be complete in adulthood.

The relevance of analysing socialization can be easily understood by the impact it had in constituting children as subjects in their own right in research.

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<sup>4</sup> In a similar way, today, perspectives about children and childhood also reject the idea of childhood as a “natural” phenomenon. Several researchers point out the idea of childhood as a *social construct*, as a result of the societies it’s in, historical times, etc... For further reading we suggest Corsaro, William, 1997, *The Sociology of Childhood*; James, Allison & Jenks, Chris & Prout, Alan, 1998, *Theorizing Childhood*; Jenks, 2000)

“(…) by not considering children as complete social beings we see them as something still to be, by the effect of adult action over the new generations. This concept (…) constitutes, more than an interpretative construct of childhood’s social condition, its exact occultation: if children are the ‘not yet’, the ‘to be’ they don’t achieve a complete epistemological status” (Sarmiento, 2000:149)

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Now we analyse children as autonomous agents and as sociological subjects independent and interdependent of the adult. We will analyse central concepts in sociology of childhood theories such as the child, childhood cultures and reproductive interpretation<sup>5</sup>. Sociology of childhood is a recent and ambitious task: “The task of making this emergent paradigm explicit is far from complete and remains the major priority for those involved in the study of childhood” (Prout&James, 1990:2-3). Naturally the rising of a new paradigm regarding children and childhood is related to a growing visibility of children in contemporary societies, namely, in the construction of a child’s idea as needed of protection and safety as well as subject of rights. That is why the XX th century is pointed out as the “century of the child” for in no other historical time the idea of a child centred society was so strong (James&Prout, 1990:1).

What reasons can we find, then, for the rise of a new paradigm<sup>6</sup> in children’s worlds studies? The change is not sudden and remains, today, a task to be performed.

Main concerns appear in social sciences throughout the 70’s with authors questioning themselves about the way they dealt with children and childhood. For them, available theories for studying children and childhood were not able to break the silence to which children were submitted for a long time. So, the central question began to appear: how do we recover children’s perspectives about themselves? How can we give voice to children? It was clear, then, that a new conceptualisation of childhood and children, in contemporary societies, was needed, alongside with theoretical and methodological frameworks which enabled a child’s perspective about him/herself.

However, sociology of childhood is not immune to the need of overcome sociology’s dichotomies when analysing children. As Giddens stated in his Theory of Structuration, the way

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<sup>5</sup> For further reading we suggest James&Prout, 1990; James, Jenks&Prout, 1998; Corsaro, 1997; Sarmiento, 2000; 2001; Jenks, 1992; 2001; Almeida, 2000; Prout, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> James, Jenks&Prout define paradigm from the Kuhnian notion: “A scientific paradigm stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a given community” (Kuhn, 1970:175 cit in James, Jenks&Prout, 1998:195-196). They also notice that a paradigm does not mean only, simple social rules of conduct applied to a given community: he produces ruptures and knowledge about a phenomenon and the best way to understand it. Thus, a greater knowledge about childhood – if a change of paradigm is to be operated – means, necessarily a rupture with taken for granted propositions and a change in conceiving and applying methodologies and techniques that can be appropriate to a better knowledge..

to overcome this dichotomies is, exactly, by trying to combine them and reach another way of seeing this. “His [Giddens] theory of structuration constitutes a proposal that seeks a non mechanic articulation between the located action of subjects and the production and reproduction also located in the structures, way from subjectivist or positivist orientations” (Pinto, 2000: 19)

As we shall see, even in theories of socialization, structure (society) is over rated towards the subject’s action. New proposals, namely Corsaro’s notion of interpretative reproduction are offered in order to suppress these ideas.

Prout analyses this questions in sociology of childhood and stresses out the need of observing four distinct dichotomies when studying children and childhood.

For Prout the sociology of childhood almost “transferred” these dichotomies making it necessary to include new perspectives. Prout’s proposal means that sociology of childhood needs to be more interdisciplinary, looking at different ways through which social reality presents itself, at mobility and intergenerational relations. So, Prout analyses the last 25 years – of enormous production of studies with and about children – to conclude that even though they were carried out with new perspectives they fail to suppress problems present in social theory for a long time. “In the decades of 1980 and 1990, Sociology tried to remain itself along with a joint complex of previously well delineated social changes and that had shaken the modern estimated ones that had served to it of base during almost all the previous century. The problem was that the modern social theory never had proportionate much space to childhood. The Sociology of childhood was seen, therefore, the arms with a double mission: to create space for childhood in the sociological speech and to collate the complexity and ambiguity of childhood while an unstable and contemporary phenomenon” (Prout, 2004: 5). Thus, the maximum point of contradiction when sociology meets childhood is that sociology of childhood struggled with propositions that were already being questioned by general sociology – for instance, the subjective character of subjects (children) and the definition of childhood as structural.

Therefore, some of the examples of theses dichotomies – from social theory to sociology of childhood – are the following: structure/agency (individual/society); nature/culture and being/to become. In the first dualism we can find two definitions: sociology of childhood – when it refers to childhood as an *element of social structure* – and sociology of children – when it refers to *children as social actors*.

Even though the recognition of childhood as a structural element had it’s positive consequences – as it is the case of determining a particular model of childhood in a given society that must be seen as shaped by spatial and temporal phenomenon’s – Prout states that it fails when it presumes that the large scale patterns explain individual and collective actors action’s (devaluating the way through which, for example, stability of the structure is accomplished by those same actions). On the other hand, if we focus the study of children as social actors we assume that childhoods are plural phenomenons built in diverse ways and throughout human actor’s interactions. In this sense, constraints to actors’ action, in this case,

are not sufficiently analysed for they do not try to understand how they act upon structure. Child action as a social actor is easily analysed in a superficial way. "(...) the real newness of the approach is that it considers that children do have a determined action [agency] and that the researcher's mission is to work and find out what she is" (2004:6-7)

In nature/culture dualism Prout considers that the interesting thing about the analysis is to call the attention upon the relational element of the production of different phenomenon. So, adulthood as childhood is seen as an effect of discourses – agency and structure would be, also, effects of discourse. But Prout criticises the way this has been made, since it gives the actors discourse "(...) the monopoly as a way through which, life, and therefore, childhood, are constructed. Reports about the socially constructed child always privilege discourse (...) (idem: 7-8). In the end we go from a discourse of biological reductionism – in which the child would belong to nature until integrated in social reality – to the extreme of a discourse of sociological reductionism – the idea of the socially constructed child.

Finally the *be/to be* dichotomy. As Prout argues we must consider the child as a being with its own rights and, at the same time, a being still under construction. In this sense, children have their own rights – as an actor belonging to a complex net of interdependent relations – and children as a "to be" being – where both adults and children will always be beings in formation. Thus, critics to sociology of childhood emerge, exactly because it has considered children as a completely formed being. "On the contrary, children and adults should be seen as a multiplicity of beings in formation, incomplete and dependent" (Prout, 2004:9)

Facing this, what's the solution presented to overcome these issues? Prout argues that the answer seems to be the fact that these dichotomies are mutually exclusive that is, they turn away our attention to its connexion points which are essential in order to have a careful and attentive analysis of children and their perspectives.

Another consequence – if we insist on these divisions – is that they will make it hard for new perspectives about the way contemporary childhoods are constructed to arise. The only way is to consider childhood as a complex social phenomenon that will not find the basis of this analysis but to see that they cannot be reduced as such.

The path for this new perspective will have to be made with the following features: *interdisciplinarity* (intensifying communication between different field studies of childhood); *hybridism* (considering what Latour called "heterogeneous nets of social reality"). Here there are no pure entities but, just, almost entities, pointing them out as a possibility as entities); *networks and mediations* (the theory of the net actor where childhood may be seen as a collection of different, competitive social orders); *mobility* (referring to society boundaries which are everyday more permeable and where we can find the "transnational childhoods" – children mobility in national and international spaces; pluralistic societies); *generation as relation* (a relation centred perspective through which childhood and adulthood are produced, generational process as a opened and plural one, life course perspective)

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## **Children as (re) producers of childhood culture(s): interpretative reproduction**

According to what has been said so far the idea that children receive in a passive way what the adult brings them is also, rejected. The child receives, transforms and recreates what he/she absorbs from the world, changing it and giving it new meanings.

We should talk about childhoods and not childhood as we assume childhood varies from culture, society and even within apparently uniform groups.

We have also seen that the concept of socialization (as traditionally defined by sociology) is not appropriate for this new vision of childhood and children<sup>7</sup>.

In this new perspective a strong conviction that children produce their own cultures – childhood cultures – is being developed. Corsaro states two central ideas in this theory (1993: 3 ss). First, children should be considered as active and creative social agents that produce their own cultures while contributing, at the same time, for the production of adult societies. Second, childhood is a socially constructed period in which children live their lives and that category is a part of society, such as social class or age groups. For children, themselves, childhood is a transitory period. On the other hand considering childhood as a structural form implies seeing it connected with other that affect its own nature. The nature of childhood in a given period or context is affected, in a direct or indirect way by social life changes or family life. Therefore, the idea of interpretative reproduction stresses out children's active contribution for the preservation of society and its reproduction, but also, its social change. The author reminds that adults, when asked about children usually refer to them as to what they will be and less to what they already are in their everyday lives. A classic example of this can be found in adult's questions like "What do you want to be when you grow up?" or "You are already a big boy/girl" (this questions appeal for adult's competences and maturity, all characteristics that are frequently denied when it comes to children)

Thus, children should be seen for what they already know and for those things they are already able to do.

As Sarmiento observed, childhood cannot be seen as the age of non-speaking: children's languages must be considered as multiple, since the child is born; nor as the age of non-reason, since children find their own ways of constituting reason in their everyday interactions, namely, *by incorporating affections and fantasies*; finally it should not be seen as the age of non work, if we look at the tasks children fulfil, daily, in different places (such as the house, school, after school activities, etc...) (Sarmiento, 2000:156-157)

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<sup>7</sup> When speaking about *children*, we mean social actors who become empirical object of sociological research – and when we speak about *childhood* we mean – a social category as the generational type, meaning, "the consideration of childhood as a social category is the most distinctive feature of sociological analysis" (Sarmiento, 2000:149-150)

In this sense, Corsaro argues that, from sociology's point of view, the notion of socialization should be seen as more than adaptation and internalisation<sup>8</sup>. Therefore we must set apart from individual perspectives regarding child development. As Corsaro observes, socialization is also "(...) a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction" (idem: 18 and following.). One of the most important features is the collective and children's common activity – the way they negotiate, share and create culture with adults and among themselves. Thus, in Corsaro's perspective two central elements emerge: language and cultural routines. Language as a double function regarding children's participation in their own cultures: first, as a symbolic system which incorporates local, social and cultural structures; second, as an instrument capable of establishing, maintain and create social and psychological realities (1994:19). Cultural routines are important for any given social actor – and, therefore, for children also - since they allow a feeling of safety and belonging to a given group. They are also important because they allow the production of a sociocultural knowledge that can be produced, interpreted and applied by social actors involved in them (ibidem).

"(...) I offer the notion of interpretive reproduction. The term *interpretive* captures the *innovative* and *creative* aspects of children's participation in society. In fact (...) children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns. The term *reproduction* captures the idea that children are not simply internalising society and culture, but are actively *contributing to cultural production and change*. The term also implies that children are, by their very participation in society, *constrained by the existing social structure and by societal reproduction*." (Corsaro, 1997:18)

It is clear in the definition offered by Corsaro the idea of overcoming of classical sociological dichotomies – the micro and macro levels of analysis. "In alternative to passive reproduction, Corsaro presents the thesis of 'interpretative reproduction', a concept that can be associated with A. Giddens notion of 'structuration' (1984)<sup>9</sup>. It expresses the idea that children, in their interaction with adults, receive constantly stimulus for social integration, by believes, values, knowledge, dispositions and norms of conduct which, instead of being passively incorporated in knowledge, behaviours and attitudes are transformed, generating judgements interpretations and children's conducts that contribute for shaping and transforming social forms" (Sarmiento, 2000:152).

The notion of childhood cultures is, we believe, a second break through in this new proposition for studying childhood and children. The existence of particular cultures, different

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<sup>8</sup> Author refers to Vigotsky's notion of internalisation, criticised in his work. When referring to adaptation he looks at functionalist views on socialization and social order. For a revision of Vigotsky theory and functionalist theories of children appropriation of culture, see Corsaro, 1997:14-18.

<sup>9</sup> The proximity of Corsaro's concept to Giddens approach is clear, as said above. Observing Pinto " (...) socialization is not a kind of 'cultural programming' in which the child 'passively absorbs the influences of the realities their in (...) the child é, since she/him is born an active member' of this process" (Giddens, in Pinto, 2000: 67)

ways of being in the world, feeling and thinking that are specific of childhood, which are, necessarily different from adult's – even though interdependent of them – is a crucial aspect regarding the study of children's social and cultural worlds. As Sarmiento argues, "Childhood is, simultaneously, a social category, as a generational type and a social group of active subjects that interpret and act upon the world. In that action they structure and establish cultural patterns. Children's cultures constitute, in deed, the most important feature in childhood differentiation" (Sarmiento, op.cit:157). The author continues arguing that the central question in analysing childhood cultures is it's autonomy regarding adult world. Sustaining the idea that the child creates meaning processes – we would add, (re) meaning processes – Sarmiento believes that the question is still under some controversy. The question is to perceive until which extent these ways of creating and recreating significance are enough standardized to be assigned as cultures. We can assume according to this that, in spite childhood cultures express the social culture in which they ate in they do it in a distinctive way from adults.

As Pinto and others point out new analysis regarding children and childhood must give particular attention to their social worlds making it necessary to hear their own perspectives about those worlds (Pinto, op.cit: 83). For researchers, of course, a big challenge is made (we will address to this point in the next section of this paper). Still, as O'Kane states:"working within a historical and cultural context in which children's voices have been marginalized, researchers face great challenges in finding ways to break down the power imbalance between adults and children, and in creating space which enables children to speak up and be heard" (2000:136-137)

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### **"Friendship is a wonderful thing, in spite of love"<sup>10</sup> – children's construction of emotion in peer group relations**

#### **Sociology and Emotions**

"In fact we know little about emotions in everyday lives"  
(Montandon, 1996: 267)

Sociology's relation with love is not an obvious one. Sociology has devoted most of its work regarding human agency, mainly, understanding it as a rational competence. Therefore, human agency is mostly motivated by rational possibilities and constraints and less by other

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<sup>10</sup> Sentence written by a 8 year old girl when filling a paper heart in Valentine's Day celebration at the after school institution, February 14<sup>th</sup> 2005

elements such as emotions <sup>11</sup> (traditionally studied in other academic fields, such as psychology). On the other hand, emotions are seen as an individual feature or as an individual matter more than a social and cultural one. More, it is less seen as an important component when studying social relationships and human agency. Therefore little attention has been given to the affective component of emotion in constituting and rationalising human agency. Torres, as others, argues that the sociological analyses of affective relationships is a pertinent one if we consider that affection constitutes, itself, as a dimension of analysis of those relations.

It is curious but not by random that studies about love and emotions proliferate more since the beginnings of the 80's (we will look at some reasons that can help understanding why). Yet, and more curiously, this effort goes alongside with the rise of a new paradigm in sociology of childhood. Still, it is hard to find work about this issues made with children. Love and affective relationships remain, still, an adult issue.

But, with this "strangeness" of sociology towards love and its place in (re) structuring social relations and, therefore, interpersonal relations – comes the recent reencounter of sociology with children and childhood. We have, then, three levels of complexity on trying to analyse the importance of love in the sociology of childhood: sociology and love; sociology and children and, last, sociology and children's love and affections. In fact, even in general sociology love comes frequently analysed in terms of marriage and divorce, emotional capitals, the couple, the ideal of romantic love, etc... In this sense it is common that children are seen as a result of adult's love.

When we analyse affections and emotions among children they often appear in terms of measuring social and interpersonal abilities of children in their peer groups and emotions go to classic ones such as pride, shame, guilt, etc...When we look for studies that seek a children's vision on their own emotions and the way they are built less material is found. With this limitations we will try – based on authors who worked some of our questions and on the work made with two groups of children – we will try an insight of the place of affections such as friendship and love, among children in the context of peer interaction and of childhood cultures (we will address to the results of this work later in this paper)

Let's turn back to the relation of social sciences – and, particularly, sociology – and affections. To Montandon, as to Torres, social sciences have made little work in studying emotions. Except for some psychoanalysts and anthropologists for a long time researchers have considered emotional manifestations as a phenomenon of little interest (Montandon, 1996: 263:264)

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<sup>11</sup> We do not mean by this that there is no work made by sociology regarding love. We can find, for instance, the pioneer work of Simmel "The Philosophy of Love"; Goode, "The theoretical importance of love" (1959); and more recently works such as the one of Brown "Analysing love", Harré "The social construction of emotions"; Barbalet "Emotion, social theory and social structure" or Denzin "on understanding emotion". We just state that this "fascination" of sociological work on emotions and its understanding is a recent one

Torres believes that we can find some factors that could help understand this new interest in sociology: the lost of influence of theoretical approaches that defend the “(...) ‘exteriority’ of social facts or, in different ways, stress out the importance of structures and social systems diminishing, in this way, the role of social action and it’s subjective meanings” (Torres, 2000: 3). Besides this the rising of new perspectives – that we can also find in the sociology of childhood, as noted above – proposing a suppression of the dichotomies objective/subjective, agency/structure. Many years ago, Weber had already defined social action as constituted by subjective meanings in which we find the component of emotion as essential to that very action. A second factor, according to Torres, is related to the growth of attention to feelings, associated to the change of ways of experiencing them, its practices and values, namely, in marriage (Torres, 2000).

“The study of emotions, in a general view could constitute a new branch of sociology. It’s been 20 years now since anglo saxonic sociologists have been working in this area and made it their speciality” (Montandon, 1996). The field of emotions according to Montandon could bring new paradigms that, although existing, are little developed within sociology. One of the challenges in this study – as in studying childhood and children – is to integrate micro and macro analysis. Studying emotional socialization becomes a pertinent matter since contemporary societies appeal to the idea of “sensitive men” (Vanandruel, 1991) and stress out the “emotional fulfilment what the self” (ibidem). But Montandon remains careful about this kind of effort: “(...) there is still much to do in this area for sociologists. Without doubt this requires imagination in both theoretical and methodological planes, but not in the specificity of studying emotions. This work is a passionate and hard one: the conceptual clue is still fresh” (Montandon, 1996).

Torres also acknowledges this new study subject: “these new subject of analysis considered by many (...) a great reveller of contemporary societies functioning in its paradoxes and contradictions” (Torres, 2004: 16).

It is not our purpose, obviously, to create new paradigms or to constitute a new sociological subject of study – that, we believe is being done in a smooth way. It’s purpose is to an exploratory approach to a subject that has been given little attention – specially when it’s analysis is done with children.

In his book, “Emotions and sociology”, Barbalet states a different position.

He claims that even before the constitution of a specific field – that of the sociology of emotions – sociologists have written about the central role of emotions in the analysis of social processes and sociological explanation (20002:6).

## **Studying emotions and love**

Barbalet believes that emotion is necessary in sociological analyses. In stating this need Barbalet observes “there is a tradition in sociology that claims that the power of individual social actors derive from their self – control in defining purposes and executing them, under the aegis

and direction of values, and against distracting impulses and emotions” (2002: 1). Analysing the classical distinction between reason and emotion Barbalet believes that every action and reason itself, need the appropriate emotions in order to produce successful actions. Thus social actors – and so children – operate rationally but this rationality is also based on emotional behaviours that sustain that action. Therefore “Without the appropriate emotions underpinning and supporting reason, reason turns to its opposite” (idem:2). In this sense, emotions link agency and structure providing social actors knowledge about feelings and experiences that they can display in order to recognize and act upon situations.

On the other hand, emotions have been seen as irrational elements of human behaviour, that is, as the opposite of reason. Emotions have never, until now, been considered as an element of action and, therefore, as a component of human and social behaviour – they are socially constructed and social actors learn these emotions and the ways to respond to them. So, they learn how to act also based on emotional knowledge.

Another question to be considered is the relationship between power and status and emotions and also between social order and the role played by emotions. Kemper considered three different dimensions in order to analyse emotions: power and status (required in a relationship and in different degrees – enough, excessive, adequate, insufficient, etc...). Power as a crucial role in human agency; the second dimension refers to the relation between physiological processes and experiences of power and status (a specific situation could lead to specific physiologic reactions); last, the evidence that shows that some emotions can be related to physiologic transformations felt by actors involved in them (e.g. in love <sup>12</sup>, those reactions are associated, for instance, with a growth of adrenaline facing the loved one, blushing, shaking in voice and leg’s, fast heart beats, etc...). Barbalet, when analysing Kemper’s theory on emotions argues this “We are then left with the very compelling idea that the particular emotions that people experience arise out of the structure of the relations of power and status in which they are implicated” (Barbalet, 2002:3:4). As we shall see in this paper in children’s world power (whether a material or symbolic one) as well as the child’s status within peer groups plays a major role in defining different relationship levels (or the possibilities of such relationships) for children – whether a friendship, a love relationship or even the exclusion of a child turning him/her into social isolates<sup>13</sup>.

In order to feel emotion, Barbalet continues, we need to be in relation with the other – that is to say “(...) emotion experienced in my body as subjective feeling is part of a transaction

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<sup>12</sup> When asked by us to define that time when a children knows (in this case, it was a 8 year old girl) that a friend will become her boyfriend she explain it to us like this – “Well... you know... you know that you love him... because... because you can feel love coming up, you know?”.

<sup>13</sup> The term *social isolates* is used by Patricia Adler and Peter Adler in “Peer power”. The social isolates refer to “those individuals had no real friends. As loners, drifters, dweebs, and nerds, they occupied the bottom stratum of the grade and stuck out to everyone” (1998:88). These are some examples of children’s strategies in order to display an hierarchy organization into they peer groups pointed by authors.

between myself and another. The emotion is *in* the social relationship (...) (Barbalet, 2002:4). We would add that this other could be seen as a real or imaginary person. Therefore, the link between social structure and emotions is clear: "Emotion is directly implicated in the actors' transformation of their circumstances, as well as the circumstances' transformation of the actor's disposition to act" (idem)

### **Children and emotion – friendship and love relationships construction in peer interaction**

Kemper states that relations between individual generate emotion and that they can be different when analysed according to two different dimension: power and status. Power is characterised by elements such as control, domination constraint and threat while status is associated with maintaining, gift, friendship, affection and sympathy (Montandon, op.cit. 265).

Hochschild considers that emotions must be analysed through values, norms and rules. In this sense the individual's experience of emotion depends on the way he evaluates and appreciates a given situation – determined by structural factors (for instance, sexual, ethnic or social belonging of people involved in the situation) and on the cultural factors that will indicate to an individual if their feelings are adequate, and conform to his social position - cultural factors such as norms and values. Therefore the expression of emotions depends on an "emotional work" that depends on values, ideologies and social, ethnic or sexual belonging (idem)

A range of theoretical positions has its equivalent in field work developed in order to study the place that emotions occupy. According to Montandon for some emotions are analysed as something we can analyse and measure from the outside (since they depend on social contexts and conditions). For others, in an opposite view emotions should be approached from personal experiences that should be analysed from a subjective or intersubjective point of view.

In order to overcome these indecisions Montandon analyses emotions considering the place they have in individual's socialization, introducing the concept of "emotions socialization"<sup>14</sup> (Montandon, op.cit: 267).

Montandon follows Denzin when he argues that emotions have a central role in socialization – they allow people to discover themselves and to connect with others. The child discovers herself in this sense: by becoming a moral person and contributing for it's own socialization process. Gordon created a theoretical framework of social and variables that influence what children learn from emotions and how they learn it. He assumes that emotions are socially constructed and that the experience and expression of those emotions depend upon the meanings attributed to them by subjects, through social processes of interpretation (Montandon, op.cit: 287).

Thus, Montandon believes that the socialization of emotions – as any socialization process – happens in a double process: the action of socializers and the elements displayed in

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<sup>14</sup> In the original, "la socialisation des émotions »

social groups for young people integration and the action of the socialized ones and their one experience in emotional socialization processes.

Looking at children's peer groups we could consider them both as emotional socializers and emotionally socialised. On the other hand, by taking in this concept we can also learn about the way adults interact with children regarding their emotions. Therefore, we believe that children could be considered as collective emotional socializers <sup>15</sup> considering their childhood cultures and peer group interaction and also the communications with adult worlds. As we shall see children both learn with each other about emotions and control emotions within the context of peer group interaction. This is obvious, for instance, when we observe children from 1<sup>st</sup> grade (6 years old) and 4<sup>th</sup> graders (9-10 years old) in the same room of the after school institution. In reality, older children become expert socializers to smaller children – teaching them the rules (and also strategies to breaking them), introducing them to the reality of schoolwork, friendship relations, etc...

When questioned about emotions Montandon asked children to associate ideas to words within emotions universe. She wanted to understand if they could find nuances in those words. She verified that children are conscious about a double meaning of emotions, about relevant aspects of conversations with friends as well as several themes regarding others. They have implicit notions about the origin of emotions and the interactional character of the experienced emotions.

On the other hand she could see a feminisation of the affective arena. Children seem to transfer to their own domains gender constructions that are present in society, namely, in adult world, and they adapt those visions to their own emotional universes. We could also verify this in our study. We asked 4 girls, aged 8 years old, to explain us how did someone get to be your boyfriend. Let's look at the conversation that followed this question:

Girl 1: Well, first you have to know him already. I mean, you have to be friends first. I mean... you don't really become his girlfriend if you're not his friend first, see?

Me: Ok, so you are already a friend of this boy, and then what happens?

Girl 2: well it's not really only that... I mean, he also has to be a nice boy, like... he must be gentle.

Girl 1: that's true, he does have to be gentle.

Me: So, let's imagine that he is a gentle boy and he is already your friend. How do you become his girlfriend, now? Who asks? Is it the boy or the girl?

Girls (together): The boy!

Girl 1: the boy, of course. He's the one who has to ask you!

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<sup>15</sup> The author does not distinguish in her analysis collective or individual socializers. Considering our perspective – namely the one of children's peer cultures and interpretative reproduction – we feel the need to consider that children (and not adults) assume themselves as emotional socializers and at the same time as socialised. That's not to say that when analysing children's emotions and their construction we do not consider children or adults' perspectives.

Me: Ok, and is there any time in which the girl asks a boy to be her boyfriend?

Girl 2: Not really...

Girl 3... Well, she could, but...

Girl 1: It's almost every time the boy, you know?

Me: Ok, so what does the boy have to do to become your boyfriend?

Girl 1: well he has to ask you out for dinner! Not just dinner, but in a romantic dinner.

Then, he must buy you a ring...

Girl 2: yeah, diamonds ring an expensive one!

Girl 1: ...and then you go out to dinner and he gives you the ring.

Me: and that's it? Then you become his girlfriend?

Girl 1: well if you like him... like loving...yeah. If you don't you don't become his girlfriend!

Me: So, is it always the boy.

Girl 1: Most of the times, yes

It is clear from this conversation that children absorb not only gender roles from adult's worlds but they also observe norm and appropriate behaviours that boys should have. On the other hand, they refer to impossible situations since they are children – they don't really have enough autonomy – financially, personally, etc... - to take a girl out to dinner. What they do have is the ability of creating this kind of situations, particularly at school – in free play time children can create a pretence romantic dinner or even a marriage, as we shall see. In peer cultures every event is possible, with the help of friends (especially with the help of best friends who always know who you love or who's in love with you). That is within childhood cultures children are able to absorb and transform adult rituals and social roles and reappropriate them to their own worlds.

Also in Montandon's study children stated that emotional manifestation is more feminine than masculine and that experiencing emotion is a more feminine than masculine thing. This fact, according to Montandon seems to explain why girls have a larger emotional repertoire than boys, when defining emotions.

The idea that children's feelings are not taken seriously is very common (in certain cases even for children themselves). If adults tend to look at friendship in a serious way the same does not happen, often, if children talk about a love relationship in which they are involved. We do not aim at a definition of love in our work – others have already tried it and have often failed in doing so. What we want is to understand at what extent can we speak of a children's love relationship – that is, of a kind of. In order to do so we used an ethnographic approach as the appropriate to this kind of study: we used participant observation (field notes analyses) within two different groups of children<sup>16</sup> aged from 6 to 10 years old; conducted

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<sup>16</sup> We did not make this division since it depends on children's distribution within the after school institution. This year, children go to different rooms: one with 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders; another with 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders. The

interviews in small and large group; analysed materials produced by children (drawings and texts they produced, for instance, on Valentine's Day).

Here we tried a double analysis on two different kinds of relationship in which children invest a great deal of time and energy: friendship and love. However, as we shall see, there's a very thin line when it comes to distinguish these feelings since, depending on the children we've observed, we can find distinctive ways of defining them and experiencing it. Regardless these difficulties, there are some very interesting aspects that we can analyse from fieldwork made with these children: first, friendship as great importance to children – a symbolic and practical one. Children spent lots of time with their friends and learn from them all sorts of competences – they can learn negotiation, interpersonal communication skills, learning abilities, drawing abilities, games and rules, etc... However, and as Adler and Adler have noticed we can talk about and observe different kinds of friendships among the same group of children. That is to say that we can find similarities in children's experience of friendship but we can also learn about their diversity (Christensen and James, 2000; Qvortrup, 2000).

### Friendship relationships



Picture 2 – detail of the hearts produced by children on Valentine's Day (2005). First, drawn by a 8 years old ("I like my friend S very much"; "I like to play with my friends X, S, Z and N"); Second, detail of the heart drawn by a 8 years old girl on Valentine's Day (2005) – "X, I like you very much; Y, I like you very much as a friend; M I like as I like L; L I like you very much because you're my friend and I can count on you for everything"

One of the common features of friendship is the importance it assumes to children – regardless if they have a large number of friends or not. However, for those experiencing difficulties in making friends – as it was the case of a 8 years old boy in one of the groups of children – the need and willing to "have friends" becomes more important (one 8 years old child

purpose is that the same caretaker – beginning next year – can follow children since they are in 1<sup>st</sup> grade until the end of elementary school. Therefore, the first room has children aged from 7 to 9; the second room has children with 6 and 9/10 years old. It is interesting, however to observe the dynamics among 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders – peer culture's assume, here, it's very potential.

writing about friendship stated that “friends are very important for those that haven’t got any”). So, we can find at the same time a symbolic value to friendship – which applies to every child – but also a different experience of it. Friendship, as an important symbolic value is not always an easy thing to accomplish.

On the other hand its definition by children varies according to the child’s age and the amount of experiences they have already gathered in peer groups. We can see for 1<sup>st</sup> graders, for instance, that they refer more often to the will of having friends and many (that is to its number) rather than appreciating qualitative or even symbolic features of friendship. Some of the things written by them are:

“I want lots of friends”

“I like having lots of friends”

“friendship is important”

“having friends is funny”

On the other hand, when asked to define what’s a friend like, smaller children tend to identify a particular friend and not abstract characteristics of the feeling friendship. We also asked children to make a drawing about friendship. As we talked to them while they were doing the drawings children often referred to friends as “someone who plays with you”, “someone with whom you can do funny things” and “someone you like”.

For older children we can find more elaborated definitions of friendship. We believe that there are some reasons for this to happen: first, older children (particularly 4<sup>th</sup> graders) have accumulated experience in school and in the after school institutions. Their experience in friendship is, we believe, larger than 1<sup>st</sup> graders; second, they have a larger language and vocabulary in order to express their feelings. 1<sup>st</sup> graders have just started learning how to write and read; third, as children grow up their relations intensify and become more elaborated. As Harris stated in his theory of emotion, children, in order to recognize and define an emotion need to look at their own experiences in order to be able to rescue their own memories (Harris, 1989)

Older children define friendship in a more complex way. As we shall see they already introduce moral questions; symbolic qualities and recognize the complexity of this feeling. Rather than defining quantity or the need of having lots of friends they tend to see it as a more abstract concept recognising, as 1<sup>st</sup> graders do, the need of naming friends:

“Friendship is the glow in our eyes” “What’s above everything? Friendship!!!”

“We should be friends of everybody” “With friendship you can make special friends”

“Friendship is the best thing in the world and makes you have a big heart”

“Friendship is a very beautiful thing for peoples and for children”

“Friendship is a symbol of freedom”

“Friendship is an internal thing and even if you get mad at someone we should be friends because friendship never ends”

“Friendship is happiness when friends get together making ideas”

“Friendship is a special thing with friend. Friendship is a friend you like very much. Friendship is a friend that you like and he likes you”

“Friendship is very important because when you get sad it can help you getting happy”

Here we can find some interesting elements: moral attributions are made when children state that we should be friends with everyone and respect everyone; the importance and vitality of friendship in children’s relationships; friendship as something that never ends and that needs preservation (even if you get mad at someone); friendship as an internal feeling and as something that could bring you happiness; and, finally, the need of reciprocity in friendship relations as referred by one children. That is that you can only be considered as a friend if the other also recognises you in the same way.

On the other hand, children distinguish different levels of being friends with someone: they can like you, like you very much, like you as a sister/brother. This, we believe represents that children are aware that they establish different kinds of friendships in their peer groups and are able to distinguish those degrees in friendship. Adler and Adler have already found this as to be true in children’s peer groups. The best friends, the acquaintances, the colleagues all represent different kinds of friendships. What seems to be a big factor in distinguish these is the intimacy children reveal in them: the stronger the friendship the more intimate children become (1998).

On observing children it is clear to see that they don’t all relate in the same way and that gender plays its role in defining children’s friendship. As we observed children in their daily routines in the after school institution, we could see popular children and their group of friends; girls and boys tend to developed gender alike relations, even though we can find cross-gender relations (Adler&Adler, 1998) and that popularity and the status it brings into peer relations has a major role in creating friendships. Even so, popularity is not only made by children who have a special ability in a determined area, as stated by Adler&Adler. It can be obtained, as we observed in one of the rooms, by a child (in our case, an 8 years old girl) that defies social order in the after school institution: as we saw this girl is looked up by peers since she challenges and contests adult’s decisions; convinces others to take her position and has a group of friends in which every children wants to be in. On an opposite side, a popular boy in a smaller group of this room, an 8 years old boy, also by the same reasons, gathers different opinions by the peers – they often get mad at him for not allowing them some experiences and because he shows, sometimes, aggressive behaviour towards both adults and children.

As children wrote, they are friends with someone because they are: nice, cute, and popular.

Finally children often state that they like someone “as a friend”, particularly when referring to an opposite sex friend. This we believe can be explained since children are aware of

another kind of relation – a love relation – and they make it clear when they like someone “as a friend” or if they “like someone” (meaning they can like him “in love”). When it comes to preserving friendship children are aware of the risk of becoming romantically involved with someone that his/her friend also loves. When this happens, as we shall see, children also chose to break up with the boyfriend/girlfriend in order to keep their friends. Or they can present another strategy to resolve the tension: they can, as one couple did, propose that both friends become girlfriends with the same boy.

### Love relationships and Valentine’s Day



Picture 1 – after school institution cafeteria, on Valentine’s Day (2004)

If we listen to music and read poetry we can find a common theme – love. But how can we define love? That’s not, of course the intention of this work – as so many have tried it and failed in doing so. Are children aware of this feeling? Do they set it apart from friendship? How do children define love and how do they built love/romantic relationships?

We need, first to acknowledge that this reality is not the same for every child. More, not every child is willing to talk about love or about love relationships. Finally they have not all experienced having a love relationship in their peer groups – this makes it harder for them to talk about it.

Children live with love and love relationships in their everyday lives. They can see it in their families, in school, in television – they have, we believe, cultural and social patterns of what it means to “be in love” “to love” someone. In Portugal, at this time, for about a year now children have been very attentive viewers of a juvenile series <sup>17</sup> that explores this issue (mostly

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<sup>17</sup> The series “morangos com açúcar” (in a rough translation “Strawberries with sugar”) is considered to be a juvenile series and runs at the end of the day and on weekends (with a compact review of the week). The series is mostly about an high school and adolescents and elementary school children. Love relationships and other issues are seen in the series and parents are often worried because they believe that, most of the times, the series is not appropriate for small children like these ones. More, children listen to the series soundtrack everyday (in the after school institution also, since they are allowed to bring Cd’s

among adolescents) but also with children. They are big fans of this series and they play – a pretence play – at being the characters of the series.

Once every year children celebrate in the after school institution Valentine's Day. This day is also announced on television with suggestions of gifts to be offered to the love one, etc... Children know what this day is about – they can make gifts to offer their girlfriends and boyfriends and they decorate the after school institution. It is the institution's policy to celebrate this day by providing children a different day – last year, children have a Ball where they could ask other children to dance; this year, the institution offered children a special lunch and caretakers decorated the tables on the cafeteria. Children were given the possibility of choosing with whom they wanted to have lunch with. Concerned about children who didn't have any boyfriend or girlfriend, this year the institution decided that this year, Valentine's Day would be called the "Friendship Day" or the day of special friends. By doing this they assure that both children having love relationships and those who don't could appreciate the day. Children are encouraged in this Day to write something to a special friend and then give it to them.

For children in love Valentine's Day is "a wonderful day because we can spend lots of time with our girlfriends." For those not engaged in a love relationships this day can also be an opportunity to tell someone that you're in love with them as some children did (last year at the Ball, three girls told the same boy they loved him. This is the most popular boy in the 4<sup>th</sup> graders group. Since he was not in love with any of them, he decided to accept the cards they had made for him and he danced with the three girls).

Also in this day, a couple of 6 years traded cards and gifts. Here's a part of the fieldwork note of that day:

*R came to us, on his way out and asked if he could go to F and offer her something. We told him he could do it and he showed us a pink bear along with a card to offer his girlfriend. He went across the room, with red face and quickly gave her the gift. She smiled – embarrassed – and said thank you. The other children started to clap their hands and cheering up with this. He turned away and she kissed him (February, 13<sup>th</sup>) on the chick. On the same day, at school playground they "got married". Friends got to be the witnesses and another one was the priest.*

Later we found out this marriage ended in divorce: the girl started to like another boy in her class and so they broke up. Now, she claims she's not sure if this was the right thing to do because she can't be sure about the love she feels about the other boy.

Still, if a friend loves the same person, at least for older children, the loved one must choose. Fidelity is one of the features of love to 4<sup>th</sup> graders. However, we could not find this as an homogeneous feature of love relationships among children. Especially in smaller children it is possible to have several girlfriends/boyfriends at the same time. Even so, there's always one

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to listen in free play time) and buy youth magazines with posters of the series actor's (they place this posters in their bedrooms)

that comes as the most liked. “Well, you can have more than a girlfriend but you really love one more” (boy, aged 7). So, becomes possible for children to maintain more than one girlfriend/boyfriend but the degree of importance of those relationships and the status it brings varies. Another couple we’ve followed (she was 8 and she was 9) had a different problem to face. They were dating since the beginning of classes, but somewhere in the middle, her best friend fell in love with him. So, in order to maintain the friendship, she decided to leave the decision to him – he could choose between not dating her or date both of them at the same time. His decision however was clear. As he explained to me: “She doesn’t understand. She is the one I love. I even told it loud in school. I said that I loved her. But I don’t love C (the girlfriend’s friend). So, I will break up with her” (boy, aged 9). At the end of the school year he went to another school, and she was very sad. She still doesn’t talk about him, with me.

When it comes to analyse love relationships in peer groups, we can find that it comes to a matter of status and power – children, particularly the popular ones – are the most wanted within peer groups and can be loved by several boys or girls at the same time. However, they choose one (since they believe that if you dated more than one person you would be betraying the commitment) and it gives them another status in the group. For example, it can limit their plays with friends and they shouldn’t be asked to date by anyone else. When recreating marriages, for instance, children bring up to their world adult’s lives – still, they change and recreate them in their own terms. One of the most interesting aspects of this is that they assume roles that they know to be impossible for them – to be a priest or to be a bride or groom. They also know that children are not “allowed” to marry and they do know that this is not a regular thing to do. However by sharing these moments with their peers their commitment becomes symbolically significant and gives the relationship strength. Finally, reciprocity is not necessary for every child – some will “only love someone that loves me too” and others “like someone even if he likes someone else”. For children, the first step is usually taken by the boy – she is left with the power to say yes or no. Gifts are often offered which means that parents, most of the times, know about their children’s love relationships. As one of the girls explained when I asked her how long could a love relationship last for them she said: “Well, if it was serious, you know.... It could last many years. But since it is like this, it can last only one day, one week!!! “

## **Conclusion**

We can observe different reasons for children to break up a love relationship – changing schools or after school institutions; geographic distance; inappropriate behaviour (in the child’s point of view); the passion of a friend; summer breaks at school; falling in love with someone else. We can also observe different constraints to children’s construction of a romantic relationship – the child’s reduced mobility (to meet the girl or boy outside school, for instance); limited financial resources (to buy a gift, to call the girlfriend or boyfriend); time (that’s mainly

regulated by adult's and not by children themselves); peer group influence (popularity, liking or disliking the child's choice).

Children's construction of emotion is highly variable among children, in different ages and between boys and girls. Girls seem to "fantassise" more than boys that seem to be more direct and more practical in engaging in a love relationship. Reciprocity is not an universal condition for every children: "Some are able to love without the love their love being reciprocated while others can only love those who love them" (Hunter, 1983:70 in Brown, 1987:1). Breaking and remaking a relation is an easy thing for children to do – perceptions of time seem to influence children's capacity of constructing and breaking up a relationship. Finally, children often hide love relationships from parents and recreate adult's rituals such as marriage and divorces recreating them and giving them new meanings (in peer culture). On the other hand, children seem to appropriate adult elements into their own worlds by transforming them to their own cultures. So, it is possible for them to get married, to go out for dinner and offer an expensive ring or even to divorce – in different time measures and with different consequences.

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