Doing Gender Through Patterns: A Sociocultural Perspective

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose the idea of psychological patterns to understand how children do gender in play. I build on feminist questionings of the notion of gender identity within the field of gender studies, to outline a sociocultural, psychological proposition. I propose to bridge the problem of sameness and fluidity in gender through the notion of psychological patterns, as semiotic and relational modes through which people express and develop their actions (Cabra, in press; Zittoun, 2020). The paper proceeds in three moves. First, I present the central tenets of a sociocultural psychology and develop an understanding of gender within this perspective. Second, I present and develop the idea of psychological patterns. Third, to substantiate my proposition, I present two examples of children doing gender and the patterns I argue they have so far developed.

Keywords: play; gender; children; patterns; semiosis

Introduction

Very early on, children speak about gender and sex differences. They identify some activities as being for girls or for boys, take part in them or not and act in different ways, depending of this classification (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Fagot, 1974; Liben & Bigler, 2002; Miller, 1987). Empirical studies on sex and gender differences have grown significantly since the 1970s and have continued to develop until today (Guionnet & Neveu, 2004; Kilvington & Wood, 2016). Within these, the studies conducted in psychology have mostly focused on describing choices and differences defining "classes" (e.g. related to boy or girl) or stable sets of characteristics that children construct or use in their everyday life (Bloch, 1987; Lachance & Mazzocco, 2006; Maccoby, 1988; Pomerleau et al., 1990). Somewhat contrarily to this classifying tendency, from a philosophical and sociological perspective, scholarship in gender studies argues for a fluidity in doing gender, and has shown a mismatch between what might be recognized as "for girls" or "for boys", and what people actually do in their everyday life. These approaches centre on a critique of the notion

of identity in favour of more enacted or performative understandings of gender (Butler, 1990; Irigaray, 1977; McNay, 1999; Mitchell, 2007). Yet, as a consequence, such scholarship has less stressed the stability that might characterise some aspects related to gender.

From a developmental perspective, authors claim that in order to identify change and transformation—in gender or any other domain—, one must assume a starting point from which to look such changes. This means that when considering change there must always be an invariant from which change can be evaluated (Fogel, 2006; Van Geert, 2012). If not accounted for, taking some aspects of the critiques to identity to extremes could lead to the dissolution of the subject altogether (Zittoun, 2006). In this paper, while following such critiques to the notion of identity, I propose to consider that which is invariant within transformation. When it comes to gender, it may be true that some feelings and choices change, but there might be others that do not, some forms of acting and feeling. Thus, in order to understand these changes, I explore a possible way to name that which remains the same through changes. If to speak of identities does not capture the fluidity of gendered positions, how can we account for some of its constancy?

Building on the feminist questionings of the notion of gender identity within the field of gender studies, I outline a sociocultural psychological proposition. I propose to bridge the problem of sameness and fluidity through the notion of psychological patterns, as semiotic and relational modes through which people express and develop their actions (Cabra, in press Zittoun, 2020). The paper proceeds in three moves. First, I present the central tenets of a sociocultural psychology and develop an understanding of gender within this perspective. Second, I present and develop the idea of patterns in sociocultural psychology (Valsiner, 2018; Zittoun, 2020). Third, to substantiate my proposition, I present two examples of children *doing gender* and the *psychological patterns* they have so far developed.

A sociocultural psychological perspective on gender

Although debates around gender have proliferated across different disciplines (Guionnet & Neveu, 2004), sociocultural psychology has been scarcely concerned in defining an approach to gender (Duveen & Lloyd, 2005; Lloyd & Duveen, 1992). I here develop some key assumptions of sociocultural psychology to argue they are in line with propositions done within the field of gender studies. This allows defining a sociocultural perspective on gender as a dynamic semiotic system (Cabra, in preparation; Duveen & Lloyd, 2005; Zadeh & Cabra, 2019).

Sociocultural psychology is an approach that tries to understand how people become unique in a social and cultural world. One of its core assumptions is that people and societies, groups and institutions mutually constitute each other. It starts from the assumption of an interdependency between person and environment in development (Valsiner, 1997, 2014; Zittoun et al., 2013). In this relationship, what is considered to circulate between the social and the psychological is of semiotic nature. What this means is that we are born into a world where the existence of cultural elements, such as objects, words and gestures, mediate our thoughts and communication to others. Mind is enabled by semiotic mediation, that is, the mediation of such tools and signs (Valsiner, 2001; Vygotsky, 1987; Zittoun, 2018). Signs have a role in the organization of the on-going flow of experience as they give form to the immediate ways of being in the world, or to our future orientation (Valsiner, 2017).

Through our words and thoughts we make sense of what has happened, act in the present and imagine what may come. Signs in their relations allow us not only to think and communicate but also to organise and make sense of what we experience; in order to invest a future yet to come.

The fact that we can use and reconstruct such semiotic and cultural elements is the result of a long process of guidance by others, and first, mainly by adults, in early life and across the lifespan. Social guidance is considered the primary process through which semiotic mediation is possible (Valsiner, 1998). One important characteristic of this process is that it is normative. It does not only provide possible directions for action and thought, but it also defines what can or should be done in such directions. Normativity is then a common feature of all human phenomena as it somehow restricts the possibilities for action. What is further proposed from the sociocultural approach is that the normativity of the psyche, that is, the things that can be thought of, felt or considered, are a derivate of the social normativity, but not isomorphic to it (Valsiner, 2018). This means that what is socially defined as possible or impossible is not copied passively in the lives of people. The process of internalisation has been defined as that which allows an active engagement and reconstruction of the social (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). Distinguishing normativity at the level of the social field, and at the level of the psyche then gives room to the fact that there is always a certain margin of freedom and room for change in people's lives.

When considering gender, these two points taken together—the role of semiotic mediation and the importance of normativity—, have lead some authors to define gender as a semiotic system (Cabra, in preparation; Duveen & Lloyd, 2005; Zadeh & Cabra, 2019) that is crystallised (Zittoun et al., 2003) or materialised (Duveen & Lloyd, 2005) in everyday-life arrangements.

A semiotic system, according to Lotman (2012), is defined by a language and a field. Language, in turn, is defined as the sum of a lexicon, the elements that constitute it, and their rules for combination. Both in language and in field, there are abstract and material elements. Fields and languages can serve to different simultaneous semiotic systems. He further includes the notion of actor as a fundamental component of a semiotic system. Furthermore, a sentence is the result of the combination of elements with its rules, and an utterance is the materialization of a sentence in a specific substance. He exemplifies this proposition by considering the game of chess as a semiotic system. Chess has pieces—elements of the lexicon—, rules of movement, a board, which is the field and the game is materialised in the wooden or plastic pieces that we find in boxes.

We can equally consider gender as a semiotic system for three reasons. First, what people "do" gender with are elements composing something like what Lotman called the lexicon: these are the objects such as pirates or dresses, gestures, words, movements, which can be combined in different forms, according to different rules and norms materialized within classrooms and homes. Second, the system can manifest itself in different materialities such as buildings, beds, toys, gestures or words. Third, these combinations of elements then appear in certain arrangements producing holistic impressions: the flickering of someone's hair can accompany the twirling of their skirt, and this can be done through specific substances: voice, plastic, movement or paste.

This understanding of gender defines it also as normative, that is, as establishing the boundaries for what is possible. In institutions or people's homes, objects are disposed in

certain ways according to implicit assumptions regarding what is "male" or "female", and as such, reiterate cultural norms (McNay, 1999; Valsiner, 2008). This repetition of certain stable arrangements defines what is possible or what must be in relation to gender. In a home, there may be objects such as combs, necklaces and make-up recurrently found in the same places; whereas ties, coins and belts can usually sit on different furniture. People encounter such regularities and internalize them (Zittoun, 2020; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015) defining possible and acceptable pathways, as well as impossible or unthinkable ones.

Contributions from the field of gender studies

Judith Butler (1993), although not a cultural psychologist, proposed similar ideas regarding norms and the materialisation of a gender system. In her analysis of sex, bodies and performativity, she argued that there is repetition and redundancy in everything we do. She calls this process iteration and poses that it is the process which creates things we can recognize as patterns or forms, that even though not exactly equal, bare some resemblance.

She relates materialization—how things come into being—to this iteration through the idea of norms. Norms are a result of the repetition of things that appeared at some point, and then acquired the weight of having to be as they are. The repetition of something is in a way, a condition of normativity. It is then by repeating something that is of normative character that is becomes the world as it is: it becomes materialised. Butler poses that we cannot understand the norms present in the production of bodies and ways of being male or female aside from the materialisation of such norms (Butler, 1993). It is by looking at how people dress or speak that we can understand how norms function and these norms materialize not only in bodies but also in all other human forms.

In line with this idea, what we know from developmental psychology is that children at some point in development identify what is, with what must be (Cabra, 2020 Piaget, 1976). They might consider blue as a colour for boys as a result from recurrent dispositions of the material world around them, because what usually is "must be". It is considered that the feminine/masculine opposition becomes naturalized through a ritualized system that displays oppositions—blue/pink; pirate/princess—, which hides the arbitrary nature of the classification. Through this semiotic operation the system lends a thickness to reality that hides its arbitrary character (McNay, 1999). Gender then functions through this iteration of norms and, in its reconstruction by people, produces what Butler calls a "fiction of interiority" (Butler, 1993, p. 134) for people—*to feel I am a woman, to feel masculine*. This is something that occurs at the level of the person. Thus, if these norms stem from patterns of movement, of ways in which things can or cannot come together, what is it that is developed, internalised or re-enacted by people in their actions? I will now present the idea of psychological patterns as semiotic and relational modes people reconstruct and enact in doing gender.

People are unique: the development of patterns

As mentioned, from the sociocultural approach, the social level of norms and possibilities appears materialised in objects, themes or phrasings. This social system "becomes psychological" (Zittoun, 2018) and people come to feel and think about their gender. This reconstruction is not only defined by the affordances of the objects and experiences as the gender system is internalized (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978; Zittoun, 2020), that is, actively reconstructed. Specifically, what is reconstructed is not signs or meanings in themselves,

but "a propensity for a certain movement, a simplified guidance pattern" (Zittoun, 2020, p. 144). And at the same time, while internalizing, people bring other interests and wishes, memories of the past, relations, possibilities and impossibilities. In order to consider this crossing of the social and the psychological, we need to look at ontogenesis. People's way of engaging with the world might be social and reproductive but also, somewhat unique, making us "us", different from "other". If we want to capture something of this psychology and regain some insight into people's possibilities within the social world, we need to be able to account for that uniqueness, of the space in which the common and shared make up for something other, unique or distinct.

There are many terms in the literature to refer to such uniqueness: some authors speak of "subjectivity" (Valsiner, 2019), "identity" (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010;) or "subject position" (Stenner, 1993; Lacan, 1956). All of these terms refer to something ontogenetic, constructed at the level of a person's life-course, and which has some form of prevalence and recurrence. Building on other propositions within sociocultural psychology, I propose to address this question of the uniqueness of humans in a shared world, through the notion of *psychological patterns.* Patterns are semiotic and relational modes of action and communication in people's lives that can be abstracted and inferred from how each person interacts with others[1]. In other words, there are recurrent ways in which the semiotic elements in the world may be combined. Patterns are forms that produce ways of organizing the world and which can be recognized in various situations and at different levels, such as how someone chooses to match their clothes, mix ingredients in a recipe, and reach an agreement at a work discussion.

The notion of psychological pattern can be considered as motifs in music, if we are to employ a guiding metaphor (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2020). A motif, in music, is a short musical phrase, it a salient recurring figure, a fragment or succession of notes that has a special importance or characterises a composers work or composition (White, 1976). Musical metaphors of motifs and melodies can be found in the works of different scholars such as Von Uexküll (1982/1940) or Vygotsky (1971/1960).

Von Uexküll (1982/1940) in his theory of meaning spoke of a "growth-melody" of each living body: "A chime composed of living bells must possess the capacity to let its tune

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[1] Piaget (1975) paid special attention to what he calls the regularities in the coordination of the actions of the subject. Through the notion of scheme, he addressed the aspect of actions "that is general and can be transposed from one action to another" (Piaget, 1972, p. 67). He also claims these schemes change through different processes. They can be coordinated or integrated in different ways, through the appearance of what he calls perturbations in the system (Piaget, 1975). In this way, in his studies on mathematical, logical and physical objects, he identified schemes of action that coordinate and allow the subject to act in a certain way, that is, they provide a certain logic to the process of externalisation. This notion in the Piagetian tradition has remained linked to mathematical and physical objects due to the fact that they are more easily identifiable and delineated in the different aspects that constitute them. Gender, in constrast, is a fluid complex multi-faceted social and psychological object that does not allow identifying clear-cut distinction of actions involved in defining it. What I argue here is that there is some regularity in externalization, in how people act in relation to gender, what Piaget called "forms of organization of actions" (Piaget, 1975). But, instead of speaking of schemes, because of the nature of the object of study, I propose to address this regularity by defining regular modes of externalization I call psychological paterns.

resound, not only because it is driven by mechanical impulses, but because it is governed by a melody" (Von Uexküll, 1982/1940, p. 29). This is a constant meaningful shape, product by the subject and not reducible to influences on an object.

In his work, and especially the work of and in his analysis of Bunin's "Gentle breath", Vygotsky (1971/1960) looked at the novella composition through musical metaphors. From it stemmed the idea of identifying motifs as the dynamic ratio of the sounds making the bases of a melody. He stated that every story has a specific structure, which differed from the material upon which it was based. It makes the style unique because: "by studying the teleology of the technique, the function of each stylistic element, the purposeful direction, teleologic significance of each component, we shall understand the very essence of the story and witness how a lifeless construction is transformed into a living organism" (Vygotskiĭ, 1971/1960, p. 211).

More recently, Zittoun, Valsiner and others (2013) proposed there is a "melody for living" in reference to a "unique style with which each of us deals with the unexpected" (Zittoun, 2015, p. 20) evolving with time but recognizable: "rather than saying human specificities in terms of traits or inbuilt characteristics, our melodies of living are dynamic—the evolving outcome of our playing and imagining with what life offers" (Zittoun, 2015, p. 20).

Building on these propositions and within the framework abovementioned, I propose here to define psychological patterns as semiotic modes of action and communication emerging from relational patterns. Zittoun (2020) defined patterns as "a movement that follows a specific configuration of dynamically coordinated elements, and that has certain stability (…) in a given environment also generates dynamic patterns of feeling, perception, thinking or acting, and thus engages experience" (2020, p. 32). She has employed the term pattern to designate both the social and material recurrences as well as the personal reconstructions of unique "melodies". In order to distinguish these two levels, I will maintain the term *pattern* as a more general notion encompassing both individual and social forms of regularities for guidance; and propose to speak of *psychological patterns* at the level of the person.

These psychological patterns are then a form of organizer of experience, a mode by which people enter in relationship with people another and the world. As they refer to abstracted forms that appear at different levels, they can have many modes of concretion: they can be recognized in oral dialogue, written forms, drawings, clothes and house decorations. Their form becomes evident in the empirical material through its redundancy and repetition. I will now consider this proposition through two empirical examples from a study on children doing gender in play.

Mixing, negotiating and two possible patterns

The data presented here comes from a longitudinal ethnographic case study of children doing gender through play. The study was conducted with three children in Switzerland[2]

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[2] The study was a motivated ethnographic multiple case study conducted in a kindergarten, two primary schools, and children's homes during 10 months between March 2018 and January 2019. The data collected was centred in 3 children's daily lives, via participatory observations and

and I will refer only to two of the studied cases for illustrative purposes. First, I briefly present some methodological considerations, then I introduce the story of the two children and their families, to then propose the two psychological patterns that appear to emerge from their engagements. These patterns are defined through metaphors, that of integration and negotiation, which allows understanding the potentially multimodal character of patterns. Through this, I attempt to substantiate the hypothesis that psychological patterns can be observed through the development of the person as unique by looking at concrete examples.

In order to empirically identify the patterns, I based myself on the ideas of repetition and recurrence for identifying patterns (Butler, 1993; Valsiner, 2008; Zittoun, 2020). I looked across the material for the repetition of forms of acting and speaking, and tried to identify the differences between the parental modes of acting and speaking; and the children's. This distinction was based on the idea that the child internalizes or actively reconstructs the social modes of doing gender.

The children that I followed grew up in the same cultural-historical context, in Switzerland, lived in the same town all their lives, within the same 20-block radius and went to the same kindergarten. The children were 4 years old at the time of the beginning of the study and their parents had been to university as well as politically engaged in some way, specifically in relation to gender and feminism.

Integration and creative mix: Nadine's psychological and family pattern
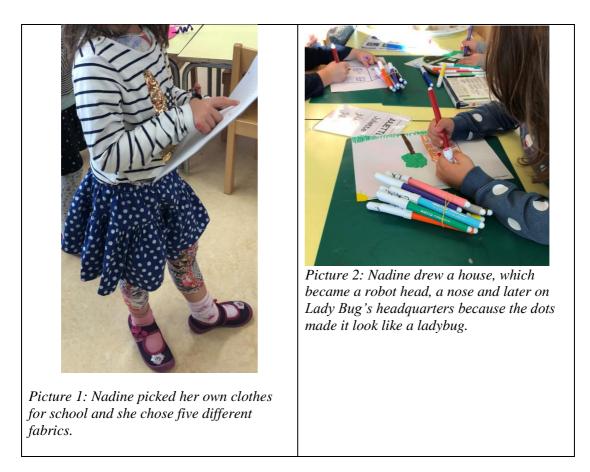
Nadine was 4 years old and the daughter of Cadi and Uziel, sister of Olindo and Vaïla. Her best friend was Elena. Her mother Cadi, is a graphic designer, who has a small art shop where she shows and sells prints with a friend. She had been working for a jewellery company until recently when she quit because "with the kids, it was too much". Uziel is a self-defined "tech-guy" working as a graphic designer. "She turned me," he says in relation to his wife and career change. In the family, there is a strong promotion of creativity and engagement in different sorts of crafts in the house. The parents openly reject the respect of "useless norms", other than "brushing your teeth or eating your broccoli", as they say.

I called *integration,* the family pattern I identified. *Integration* as a principle can be found in the family sphere at two levels: 1) It is present in the materiality of the house's arrangements: the parents have set the children's room in a way that all toys are mixed and they share them all. There is a large rack at the entrance, which is the first thing we see when we enter the house. On its shelves there are all kinds of materials—bits of fabric of all colors and patterns, glues, stickers, branches, leaves, beads, dry fruits, toys (a little car, farm animals, a crown, a unicorn), books, boxes. The toys in the room and the material in the rack are set so that they are mixed. 2) We also find it in the mother's discourse: she insists that "Here [at home] we mix everything". She also says that "we are allowed to do everything in play" and spends a lot of time doing crafts, putting together and mixing materials for collages.

When looking at Nadine, we see some traces of the mixing pattern that the family enacts, but we further see that this "mix" or "integration" is an occasion for her to "create": I have

interviews, from which I defined a corpus for each child's observations to analyse separately and in comparison. All names references here are pseudonyms.

thus called her patterns the *creative mix*. In what she does, the combination of single elements, through their relations gives rise to qualitatively different compositions. We can find this creative mix at different levels:

Picture 1: Nadine picked her own clothes for school and she chose five different fabrics.

Picture 2: Nadine drew a house, which became a robot head, a nose and later on Lady Bug's headquarters because the dots made it look like a ladybug.

Excerpt 1: Nadine negotiates what to play with her friends and me. She makes up a new name, Sinfa, from the animal play, the discussion on boy and girl names and the fact that she knows Simba from the Lion king. She mixes references and combines them to create a new name.

Observation sequence

Tina: And what's your name?
Nadine: Rose… Hum… Rainbow. Rose or Rainbow.
Researcher: Rose Rainbow?
Nadine: No, Rose or Rainbow.
Tina: I want to choose my name… Lily.
Nadine [to researcher]: And you?
Researcher: (pause, I think).
Nadine: But a girl's name.
Researcher: Why?
Nadine: Well, because you're a girl.
Researcher: But we're allowed to be animals.

Tina: No, you have to.
Nadine: You can have a boy animal name.
Researcher: Simba?
Tina: Oh, I know Simba…
Nadine: *Sinfa…*
Researcher: Ok, Sinfa.

These examples show how she uses elements that are present in the world around her, building on something that is socially possible, leading her to new forms through combinations, to creations of sorts, in line with the promoted "creativity" that the parents have an important discourse. In this, Nadine managed to construct a way to do with the world by mixing, making room for norms and wishes, for some of the necessary and some of the chosen. This particular way of combining is developmentally, a creative result of what she has done with the iterative operationalization of social norms.

Although this pattern defines possibilities for action in different domains that don't necessarily refer to gender, they are put at work around the gender system. In the case of the invention of "Sinfa" as a name, she made use of the creative mix to maintain the social norm defining that, as the researcher was a woman, she had to have a girl name, even though they were playing animals. It is a mode of acting that can be abstracted from the materiality of the world, yet, it can only be put to work with those elements, which, in the case of gender, are organized through a dichotomist system. Nadine creatively mixes that which is also already organized around her.

Negotiating: Paul's psychological and family pattern

Paul is also 4 years old and the son of Oliver and Alice, brother of Octave. Oliver is a psychiatrist and Alice a historian. They work at the university and have been politically engaged in their youth. Alice insists that she has always "wanted to give him [Paul] the choice between cars or dolls". Alice stopped working at the university "because it was too much with the boys". She works for the state now. There is a strong promotion of independence and rules in the house. The children are promoted to play board games and "respect the rules", even intervening when their 2-years-old son wants to make up rules while playing. When confronted with drawing and painting, the mother quickly moves on to colouring books where the shapes are already in print. Oliver, the father, has a small workshop in the basement where he teaches the children how to build and fix things. Here, it is very important that everyone respect the safety guidelines.

There is a pattern of acting in this family that I have termed *negotiating*. As a principle, it can be found at different levels: 1) It is present in how the objects in the house can be used. For example, in the living room there are Lego's. You can only use the small Lego's if you don't mix their heads with the Ninja Go's—if we turn this statement around; they propose that if you don't mix the heads, then you can use the Lego's. 2) It also emerges from how activities are negotiated in the family. For example, in the following sequence, the mother negotiates an exchange in activities:

Excerpt 2: The mother negotiates how many pages she will read in exchange for the work the child needs to do.

Observation sequence

Mom: I will read you four pages and then you tell me what you want to take on holidays.
Paul: 6 pages.
Mom: 5 pages and then we pack, ok?
Octave: I also want pages.
Mom: So, if I do two pages for Octave and 5 pages for Paul, then we pack.
Paul: Ok

When we consider Paul's actions and speech, we can see traces of this negotiation pattern; although used in what I called *deceiving negotiation,* as he employs it to get others to do what he wants. We can find this psychological pattern in his play with other children:

Excerpt 4: He negotiates how to get the machine done as he wants.

Observation sequence

Paul: If you say you want to build a machine, you can but if you say you want to build a machine bigger than mine then you cannot play anymore.
Nino: I do as I want.
Paul: Then I don't play with you anymore. I don't care I play with someone else.

Excerpt 5: Paul tries to maintain a certain distinction by negotiating with the researcher.

Observation sequence

Paul: Here, this is yours; I'm the white one. They are brothers. You are the bad guy, it's Noed de Garmadon, I saw the movie you know...
Researcher: So I'm the bad guy.
Paul: You want to be a girl or a boy?
Researcher: Boy
Paul: Ok, give me; I'll put the head on (takes my headless Ninja Go to put a head on).
Researcher: What's this head?
Paul: A girl head (laughs).
Researcher: I'm still the bad guy? What was it?
Paul: A boy…
Researcher: But then…
Paul: Well you're first a little bit the bad guy, but then you are a girl.
Researcher: Ok.
Paul: This head is stupid (throws it away).

In these examples, Paul uses the conditional to regulate interactions and to further get what he wants. The family emphasis on rules is found again and again in the conditional

negotiations of their everyday life. In this, Paul constructed a negotiating style which has roots in the family way but which allows him to alternate between what has to be and what he wants. As with Nadine, the pattern can be used to deal with different domains of life. Yet, in excerpt 5, we see it at work in relation to gender: the fact that distinctions and differences need to be maintained and can, at best, be alternated in a negotiation, leads to the impossibility of me having a male head on my Ninja Go. The gender dichotomy is maintained and reproduced by the enactment of the pattern.

What we can see in both Nadine and Paul's cases is that by analyzing the family patterns and children's psychological pattern we can understand how children construct their *being gendered*, partly related to the way in which the social world is organized, but also partly defined by the active work of internalization the child engages in; that is, the development of psychological patterns.

Discussion

The proposition developed in this paper has been a way to address the critiques to the notion of identity and subjectivty for understanding gender (Butler, 1990; Irigaray, 1977). As, I have argued, taking some aspects of these critiques to extremes can lead to the dissolution of the subject altogether. This tendency is also present quite frequently in certain psychologies (Zittoun, 2006). I thus attempted here to explore the consequences of conceptualizing gender in the field of sociocultural psychology without dissolving the person. I argued for a definition of gender a semiotic system (Cabra, in preparation; Duveen & Lloyd, 2005; Zadeh & Cabra, 2019), to then propose that the way in which such system is internalised is through the development of psychological patterns. I attempted to show that it is necessary to rethink how people come to be able to do certain things and not others; and identifying patterns at the ontogenetic level, of people's life-courses, is an attempt to theorize, in a person's life, the reproduction and recreation of the social as well as people's margins of freedom.

Furthermore, I briefly exemplified two family and psychological patterns in the daily-lives of children. I presented them as relational as well as semiotic. I defined them as forms that define how things can be combined and that become evident through redundancy. In the notion of psychological pattern, it is at the level of the person that such recurrences become evident. They are behind the way in which intersubjectivity takes place, while being personal: they define the unique way in which each child constructed her relation to the world.

Particularly, the way in which family patterns are internalized defining children's psychological patterns show how in different cases children may be more or less flexible in their dealing with gender norms. Although in some cases it may be almost impossible to transgress the dichotomy system of "girl" and "boy"—even in play, such as in the case of Paul; in others, children have a creative engagement that can allow for a more flexible and transformative way of engaging with such norms—such as in the case of Nadine. Playing is not sufficient for the norms to be transgressed or changed: it is in the person's way of dealing with the social world that we find a key element to understand these possible transgressions and transformations of norms.

These propositions require to be explored further and particularly in relation to adult patterns. Their definition may also have consequences for how we understand the emergence of the possible. What options do children but also adults have in this subtle

construction of modes of inhabiting the world? Does the construction of impossible forms of being and acting decant from the establishment of these patterns? Patterns may thus be reproductive of the social order and testifying to the potential lack of possibilities for change, but they may also point to some forms, which produce qualitative jumps of unforeseen combinations thus moving unexpectedly the borders of the impossible. To put it simply, small things such as what is bought and said to children may make all the difference. In all interactions, we are creating the very fabric of our life. With what we say, we produce and reproduce our possibilities for freedom and change. Change does not happen ex-nihilo: the construction of possibilities has another side, that of the impossible and its definition may be related to the different ways that we have to engage with it.

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