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Constructing public worlds: culture and socio-economic context in the development of children's representations of the public sphere

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Abstract

This paper explores how children in different cultures and socio-economic contexts develop representations about the public sphere. It addresses how contexts of representation shape the form and content of children's thinking while expressing the two-way transactions between child and social world. Drawings of children from two age groups (7 and 10 year-olds) and two socio-economic milieus (affluent and deprived), in four cultures (Germany, Mexico, Brazil and Romania), supported by observations and interviews, were used to investigate children's representations of their public world and their position within it. Findings show that public spheres characterised by collectivism, poverty and/or marginalisation: a) accelerate decentration bringing the public world and its complexity to the foreground of children's depictions and b) show a strong link between self and the public world. In affluent or individualistic public spheres we recognise the classical developmental pathway proposed by Piaget, with a clear increase in the separation between self and society as children grow. Children's representations are flexible semiotic systems whose form and content interact productively with the context in which they develop. These results reject conceptions of children's knowledge as a prototype of adult knowledge, suggesting that children's societal knowledge evolves through adaptive strategies to specific socio-cultural environments.

KEY WORDS: social representations, children's societal cognition, public sphere, social development, drawings, Germany, Mexico, Brazil, Romania.

Throughout the first year of life human infants co-construct the intersubjective scaffoldings that organise and make possible all subsequent psychological and social development (Duveen, 1997; Valsiner, 1997; also Vygotsky's, 1978, notion of zone of proximal

development). As babies grow, they engage in imitative learning that is not individual or idiosyncratic but ruled by cultural values and conventional forms of action. By the age of three they have at least some understanding of context-relative normativity (Rakoczy, Brosche, Warneken & Tomasello, 2009), by the age of five most are in full possession of a shared grammar and by the age of seven they are able to read and write a conventional and socially established set of signs that is language. As a force for development, socialisation goes hand in hand with individuation in enabling the formidable set of skills that makes children biological, cultural, psychological and social beings at once.

We know that children's development is a social process but how do the culture and socio-economic milieus of public spheres contribute to what children know about the social world in which they are born? Research on the developmental history of public spheres and on how young children engage with social life is scarce. We know little about children's social representations of public worlds and how specific public spheres shape the very nature of children's knowledge. This may be partially explained by the predominance of cultural representations that position children outside of the public arena, belonging only to the sheltered environment of family and school, from where they grow into fully competent members of society. Yet, while this description may apply to Western cultures, where industrialised and individualistic public spheres keep children inside (Valentine, 2004), it is less so in the case of collectivistic and developing public spheres in which children occupy key roles as workers and carers, inhabiting the streets and engaging with a wide range of social actors and institutions (Rogoff, 2003; Skovdal, Ogutu, Aoro & Campbell, 2009). Arguably such contexts are likely to impact on the knowledge children construct about public worlds and lead to differences in the ways they engage symbolic resources to make sense of the world 'outside'.

In this paper we address these issues by focusing on a problem that is central to the theoretical edifice of social representations and its connections to socio-cultural theories of development: how age and contextual variation within cultures shape the development of children's representations of the public sphere. Through a social representational approach to the study of knowledge in context (Duveen, 2000; Moscovici, 2008; Wagner & Hayes, 2005; Jovchelovitch, 2007a), we focus on the specificity of children's knowledge of the public world and the potential impact of socio-economic and cultural contexts on its content and development. Central to our effort here is the theoretical assumption that the development of knowledge about the public world is not only age-related but channelled by the cultural form and socio-economic configuration of the very public sphere in which children grow (Vygotsky, 1978, 1997; Moscovici, 1990). In other words, the public sphere and its internal socio-economic variety is a cultural context that influences the social representations children construct about this context itself.

We know for instance that collectivistic public spheres command styles of parenting, teaching and peer interaction that differ from individualistic public spheres (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994; Biggs, 1996; Chavajay & Rogoff, 2002; Gauvain, 2004; Morelli, Rogoff & Angelillo, 2003). And yet, societies rarely if ever conform perfectly to this binomial opposition (Omi, 2012) because each one of these constructs is itself a system of representation. Individualism, as Farr (1996) suggested, is in fact a collective representation, a system of signs that guides sense-making and practices in public spheres. As collective representations, both individualism and collectivism operate as semiotic mediations with power to shape mind, mentalities and behaviour. In this sense they constitute a context of representation, an already-there semiotic environment, within which children mature and come to know the world. Contexts of representation are cultural and inscribed in word

meanings (Toomela, 2003), artefacts (Cole, 1996) and the development of knowledge (Duveen and Lloyd, 1993; Jovchelovitch, 2007).

In addition, individualism and collectivism can co-exist and find expression in different, or even the same niches of one particular culture (Sinha and Tripathi, 1994). For instance, many post-communist public spheres, having made the transition to market economies, are moving towards individualism as a collective representation. Yet, they are still marked by patterns of interaction typical of totalitarian states and forced collectivism, where self and other are suspicious and afraid of one another and the rules of societal organisation are transmitted through rigid hierarchical relations (Marková, 2004). Unequal public spheres expose children to deprivation and poverty and make salient differences in economic positioning and the value attributed to different groups in social life (Ribeiro & Ciampone, 2001). All these features, which refer to the socio-cultural configuration of specific public spheres, frame styles of communication, patterns of intersubjectivity and behavioural codes that children experience. These kind of societal phenomena are resources for children's socio-cognitive development: they are not only apprehended cognitively by children but they also shape the transactions between the child and the social world. As a two-way process, they define sense-making and the construction of knowledge about public spheres. Indeed, these dimensions are dynamically related to the production of social representations in children and adults alike (Jovchelovitch, 1995).

Beyond the Epistemic Subject

Research on how children develop knowledge of society has made valuable contributions to the understanding and systematisation of the content of children's knowledge about a number of societal dimensions but none has explored children's ideas

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about the public sphere comparatively and as an object in its own right. Furth's (1980) important study of children's conceptions of society is, to the best of our knowledge, the only study that names society as a target-object. We know a fair amount about children's knowledge of the economy (Jahoda 1979, 1981; Webley, 2005), politics (Berti, 2005), the legal system (Ceci, Markle, & Chae, 2005), schools (Buchanan-Barrow, 2005), work (Emler & Dickinson, 2005), gender and social class (Durkin, 2005). Some of this body of work has contributed to challenge traditional Piagetian conceptions of how children engage with societal phenomena by paying less attention to universal stages of development and more to the concrete cultural practices and modes of transmission that shape children's knowledge construction (Emler & Ohana, 1993; Duveen, 1997). More recent research equally emphasises socially mediated transmission, socio-cultural contexts, the formulation of naïve theories and the emotionally laden nature of children's knowledge (Barret & Buchanan-Barrow, 2005). Yet, as Hatano and Takahashi (2005) pointed out, children's knowledge of society *per se* has never been the focus of intensive discussion and there are virtually no empirical studies of how it is affected by particular socio-cultural contexts. Existing research has focused on specific domains of social life and has been conducted in single cultural contexts, looking mainly at children growing up in Western middle-class milieus.

Furthermore, most studies have relied on frameworks introduced by researchers so that children's responses about society emerge through the categorical lenses of the adult world. This tendency is accentuated by seeing children's knowledge as an early prototype of adult knowledge with a focus on how well children can or cannot display cognitive representations that are typical of the adult world. This is evident in a review of work in this area, which shows that children's constructions are frequently portrayed as understanding

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little, displaying "pervasive failures of understanding" and "widespread ignorance and misconceptions" (Bennett, 2006, p. 340; for an example of research that focuses on the "correctness" of children's knowledge see Hannust & Kikas, 2010). Evaluations of this kind are based on the assumption that knowledge is a-historical and progresses linearly towards a stage of equilibrium that is expressed in adult rationality (Piaget, 1995). Juxtaposing children's knowledge as a less complex form of adult knowledge is analogous to comparisons between science and common sense and/or expert and lay knowledge, which denigrate one form of knowing at the expense of other. This form of excessive cognitivism fails to understand children's representations as situated systems of knowledge in their own right; this requires positioning children's representations not only developmentally but also socially and culturally. It requires an understanding of the child as a social psychological as well as an epistemic subject (Psaltis, Duveen and Perret-Clermont, 2009): children's knowledge develops embedded and shaped by the psychosocial dynamics of self-other relations, which in turn is always connected to larger societal relations, modes of communication and the cultural patterns of different public spheres (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990; Emler, Ohana & Dickinson, 1990; Corsaro, 1990; Semin & Papadopoulou, 1990).

The Study: Design and Methodological Tensions

Our study sought to address these conceptual issues by opening the field for children's own constructions and taking into account cultural and socio-economic variation. Our design is multi-method, ethnographic and psychosocial: it explored children's representations through drawings, observation of children's institutional positioning and supporting interviews. By comparing four different cultures, two socioeconomic milieus and two different age groups we sought to identify their impact –separate and combined– on

the development of representations. Our main focus here is on how these different contexts across and within cultures impact on the representational changes children experience as they mature and grow. Whereas it is expected that representations evolve and change with age and social interaction, there remains the theoretical question of how different socio-economic contexts and public spheres themselves frame these developmental pathways. We assume that the culture and socio-economic context within the specific public sphere in which children grow up is a major determinant of their constructions.

We used children's drawings and supporting observations and interviews from two socio-economic contexts in Germany, Mexico, Brazil and Romania[1]. We are cautious about equating nation and the culture of the public sphere but rely on the assumption that culture continues to be a central identifier of nation states (Steinmetz, 1999). There are, to be sure, multiple cultural differences not only between but also within nation states. For better grasping this kind of diversity we sampled children from two different socio-economic milieus in each country, each of them providing snapshots of heterogeneity within cultures.

Children in two age groups—1st and 4th graders, corresponding approximately to 7 and 10 year-olds across cultures—were asked to draw their public sphere, operationalised as the 'community', 'country', or 'world' of the child, depending on local language and cultural context. The object-target of our study remained firmly centred on the general idea of the public sphere, presented to children as an open semantic field framed by the words culturally used to talk about the external world in each society studied. This is in line with a conceptual framework that rejects adult knowledge as the benchmark against which children's representations are evaluated. Our focus is on the expressiveness of children's

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[1] We owe this point to an anonymous reviewer, to whom we are grateful.

symbolic constructions and we expected these to emerge in relation to the socio-cultural context in which they are produced.

Methods

Participants: age and context

Children in the 1st and 4th grade of primary schools and one institution of care located in two different socio-economic contexts in four countries were purposively selected. Table 1 presents the mean age in years and months and number of participants per socio-economic context in each one of the countries. Considerations about context were central for our sampling strategy and for the overall design of the research. National units are not culturally homogenous and attention to local specificity guided the choice of different socio-economic milieus within the four cultures. These reflected conditions of affluence or deprivation and cultural patterns related to the specificity of the different public spheres where the studies took place.

Table 1. Number of participants and mean age in years and months across countries, socio-economic context and age groups

COUNTRIES	AFFLUENT		DEPRIVED		TOTAL
	7-year-old	10-year-old	7-year-old	10-year-old	N=359
GERMANY	28 (7)	24 (9;7)	15 (6;8)	21 (10)	88
MEXICO	32 (6;10)	30 (9;11)	24 (6;11)	25 (10)	111
BRAZIL	23 (6;9)	27 (9;10)	24 (7;10)	26 (10;10)	100
ROMANIA	18 (7;7)	18 (10;7)	12 (8;4)	12 (10;5)	60

Note: Cells include number of participants and mean age in parenthesis.

Germany reflects a Western European culture, recovering from a traumatic history that continues to make problematic the idea of nationhood (Brady, Crawford & Wiliarty, 1999). Its present-day economic prosperity attracts immigrants from different parts of the world, increasing the cultural diversity of Germany's urban spaces. In this context, children were selected from a suburban affluent community, and from an urban school in Cologne having students with different ethnic backgrounds and less affluent economic circumstances. Mexico illustrates a collectivistic society, where ties between individuals (especially extended family) are reinforced but also one in which there is a high degree of inequality in relation to power, gender and wealth (Lomnitz, 1977). In this case participants came from an urban and a rural setting in the state of Tabasco. Unlike Germany, Mexico's rural communities show relative deprivation in relation to urban centres. Brazil, similarly to Mexico, reflects a collectivistic culture marked by several and strong inequalities, especially a gap between the wealthy and the poor, evident not only across urban and rural spaces but within urban spaces as well (Reis & Barros, 1991). As such, participants were selected from schools located in an affluent and a deprived neighbourhood in the city of Porto Alegre, in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. Romania is an Eastern European culture whose public sphere re-emerged two decades ago after the anti-communist revolution. The communist past and its imposed 'collectivism' constitute a legacy confronted nowadays by the necessities of an individualistic market-based system (Ibrahim & Galt, 2002). A sensitive issue for past and present Romanian society relates to orphans and conditions of institutionalisation for children and the Romanian dataset included children from an institution of care and from a regular school in Bucharest.

Procedures and the Drawing Task

Initial contact with relevant institutions was established prior to data collection, when researchers provided the research protocol, including a time schedule and a full description of the activities proposed. Ethical clearance was obtained from the academic ethics committee of the University. Full consent was obtained from parents and/or guardians and, where pertinent, from relevant authorities in each country (schools and Departments of Education). Researchers spent at least two days with each group engaging in ethnographic observations, establishing a rapport with the children and keeping a diary of field notes to support the interpretation of drawings.

One of the greatest challenges in our study was formulating the drawing task and making the concept of the public sphere (see Habermas, 1989) operational for young children. Considering the complexity of this construct, the diverse cultural backgrounds and young age of the participants, the challenge was to find functionally and, importantly, semantically equivalent notions in different languages through words that children regularly use and can relate to. Language and multiple practices of representation challenge the understanding and appropriation of research tasks, which cannot be just transposed from one context to another. Whereas some cross-cultural psychologists opt for using similar instructions across contexts, we drew on ethnographic observation and discussions of language use in everyday life to find the word that would better open the semantic field about the public sphere (see also Toomela, 2002, on the relations between drawing and language). In Germany we opted for the term *Deutchland* (Germany), easily understood by children as their society and having the potential to uncover associated aspects related to nationhood and identity. In Mexico and Brazil the chosen terms were *comunidad* and *comunidade* (community) respectively, which are used colloquially and from a very early stage to refer to the world the child lives in. In Romania the public sphere was

operationalised as *lume* (world), a general notion equally inviting representations of the wider environment in which the child lives.

The use of drawings was particularly useful for investigating children's representations as they bypass the limitations of verbal reports and linguistic expression when working with young children and offer insight into the symbolic world of the child (Breakwell & Canter, 1993; Milgram, 1984; Pailhous, 1984; Galli & Nigro, 1987). The drawing task for 7-year old children was administered through a pretend scenario entitled "Marsi from Mars". We created Marsi the puppet as a mediating character between the researchers and the children. When children arrived in the classroom, Marsi was already there and it was introduced by the researcher as follows:

"Hi everyone! This is Marsi. He has come all the way to [country's name] *from Mars in his UFO. I met Marsi on my way to school this morning and decided to bring him with me to meet you. Marsi needs your help! Do you think you can help Marsi?"* (Wait until children reply) *"Can you draw a picture about your public sphere* [word used to operationalise public sphere]*, how your world is here in* [country's name]*, for Marsi to show this drawing to his relatives and friends when he goes back?"*

The task for 10-year old children was presented as follows:

"I would like you to draw a picture for me that shows how your [word used to operationalize public sphere] *is, your world here in* [country's name]*, as if it were for someone who has never visited or lived in your* [public sphere]*"*

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After these instructions, each child was provided with one sheet of paper and drawing materials. Extra guidance was kept to a minimum and time was managed so as to allow all children to complete the task. Participants engaged in an interview task after all drawings were completed. In this task, the researcher invited children to describe the elements in their compositions. Children's verbal accounts of their drawings were essential to accurately identify the elements in the pictures. These accounts were recorded and transcribed to support the analysis. Table 2 summarises the research design.

Table 2. Public Sphere, context, operationalisation and setting by national culture

Country	Public Sphere	Context	Operationalisation	Setting
GERMANY	Industrial, Western, individualist	Rural/urban	Deutchland (Germany)	School
MEXICO	Developing, unequal, collectivist	Rural/urban	Comunidad/mundo (community/world)	School
BRAZIL	Unequal, industrial, collectivist	Affluent/deprived	Comunidade/ mundo (community/world)	School
ROMANIA	Post-communist, collectivist legacy, individualist market-system	Non-institutionalised/ institutonalised	Lume (world)	School Placement Centre

Coding

A theoretically and data-driven coding frame was constructed for the analysis of the drawings. Following Jovchelovitch's (2007a) domains of social representations and engagement with public spheres, systematic examination of each one of the drawings produced a coding frame with tree main categories: subjective, intersubjective and objective (see Table 3). Drawings were coded as subjective when depicting self and immediate family, intersubjective when depicting self, others and artefacts beyond the immediate family such as institutions, spaces, buildings and symbols of public life and objective when only elements of public life were present, without presence of self and family. Each can be theoretically associated with more or less individualism and collectivism in the public sphere, if we consider relations between self and other as an analytical tool for identifying these modalities of community life. Further development of the coding frame was mainly data driven, looking for specific elements that followed a theme; each theme was encompassed in a labelled subcategory. Field notes were used to classify local components relevant to each country and to include equivalent elements in different contexts in the same category. Coding was performed on the basis of the descriptions obtained from the interview and the elements in the drawing that were self-explanatory. Six months after a first round of coding, the drawings were recoded, with discrepancies discussed and noted for refining and specifying the inclusion criteria. Three waves of coding were performed to grant reliability. First, drawings were coded independently by one author proficient in the language of each country. Secondly, codes in the data were verified by the original coder and another author. Thirdly, the codes and the coding of the drawings were revised and agreed by the whole team. Inter-coder disagreement was valued and considered as informative by itself (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). Discrepancies were discussed until inter-coder agreement was obtained.

Table 3. Outline of Coding Frame

A. Subjective (all drawings that include elements of the internal world of the child)

1. Presence of self and/or

2. Presence of family/family home

Elements: the self, family home, parents and siblings, pets, garden, etc)

B. Intersubjective (all drawing that include elements of the internal (subjective category) and external world of the child (objective category)

1. Presence of subjective elements (1 and 2 above) and

2. Presence of objective elements (1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 below) and/or

3. Presence of mediating other (Puppet from drawing task)

Elements: all subjective and objective elements identified in these categories

C. Objective (all drawings that include elements of the external world of the child)

1. Presence of other persons beyond family and/or

2. Presence of institutional world and/or

3. Presence of generic places of the public sphere and/or

4. Presence of symbols of nationhood and/or

5. Presence of local symbolism

Elements: schools, hospitals, churches, police, parliament, town hall, public transport, shops, streets, city, sports and leisure, urban connectors, flags, maps, natural landscapes and environments, monuments, national food, local cultural markers, etc.

D. Other (all drawings that do not fit the above)

Qualitative and quantitative techniques were used for data analysis. In addition to thematic analysis, chi square tests and correspondence analysis were used to analyse the main and combined impact of age, socio-economic context and public sphere on the drawings.

Results

Table 4 shows the distribution of subjective, intersubjective and objective drawings for each age group, socio-economic context and culture.

Table 4. Distribution of subjective, inter-subjective and objective drawings in each age group, socio-economic context and culture

Category	Germany				Mexico				Brazil				Romania			
	Suburban		City		City		Rural		Affluent		Deprived		Affluent		Institution	
	Age 7	Age 10	Age 7	Age 10	Age 7	Age 10	Age 7	Age 10	Age 7	Age 10	Age 7	Age 10	Age 7	Age 10	Age 7	Age 10
Subjective	50.0	0.0	13.3	0.0	15.6	3.3	20.8	0.0	30.4	3.7	37.5	30.8	16.6	0.0	41.7	16.7
Intersubjective	35.7	12.5	53.4	23.8	50.0	80.0	29.2	52.0	43.5	7.4	29.1	50.0	22.2	5.6	16.6	16.7
Objective	14.3	87.5	33.3	71.4	21.9	16.7	41.7	44.0	21.7	85.2	16.7	19.2	55.6	94.4	41.7	58.3
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.8	12.5	0.0	8.3	4.0	4.4	3.7	16.7	0.0	5.6	0.0	0.0	8.3

Note: Numbers indicate percentages.

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Chi square tests revealed significant main effects for age (X^2(2, 341) = 43.19, $p<.001$) and public sphere (X^2 (6, 341) = 38.71, $p<.001$) but not socio-economic context (X^2 (2, 341) = 1.84, $p>.05$). These results indicate that, as expected, age has a significant effect on the pathway between subjective, objective and intersubjective. Importantly however is the size of the effect of culture on the drawings (ϕ= .337, $p=.000$), which is comparable to that of age ($\phi=.356$, $p=.000$). This points to the importance of the overall culture of the public sphere on children's representations.

The absence of a main effect for socio-economic context was surprising and to explore it further we tested associations between age and context and age and culture. We found significant effects for both. Table 5 shows that age has a stronger effect in affluent rather than deprived contexts and in Germany more than in Mexico, Brazil and Romania. Note the difference in the size of the effect (Phi) between Germany and the other public spheres. Whereas the culture of public spheres has an overall stronger effect on the way children draw their world, contexts of affluence and deprivation are also clearly relevant and interact with age to influence children's productions.

Table 5. Chi-square analysis of the relationship between age and socio-economic context and age and culture

	Age		Age			
	Affluent	Deprived	Germany	Mexico	Brazil	Romania
X^2	43.029**	7.446*	39.742**	10.522*	10.901*	6.455*
Phi	.472	.224	.684	.318	.341	.334

* $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.001$

We conducted a final chi square test to investigate the combined effect of age, culture and socio-economic context on the main categories of the drawings. Table 6 shows that both the culture of the public sphere and socio-economic context within public spheres mediate the way age impacts on the development of representations.

Table 6. Chi-square analysis of the relation between age, culture, and socio-economic context

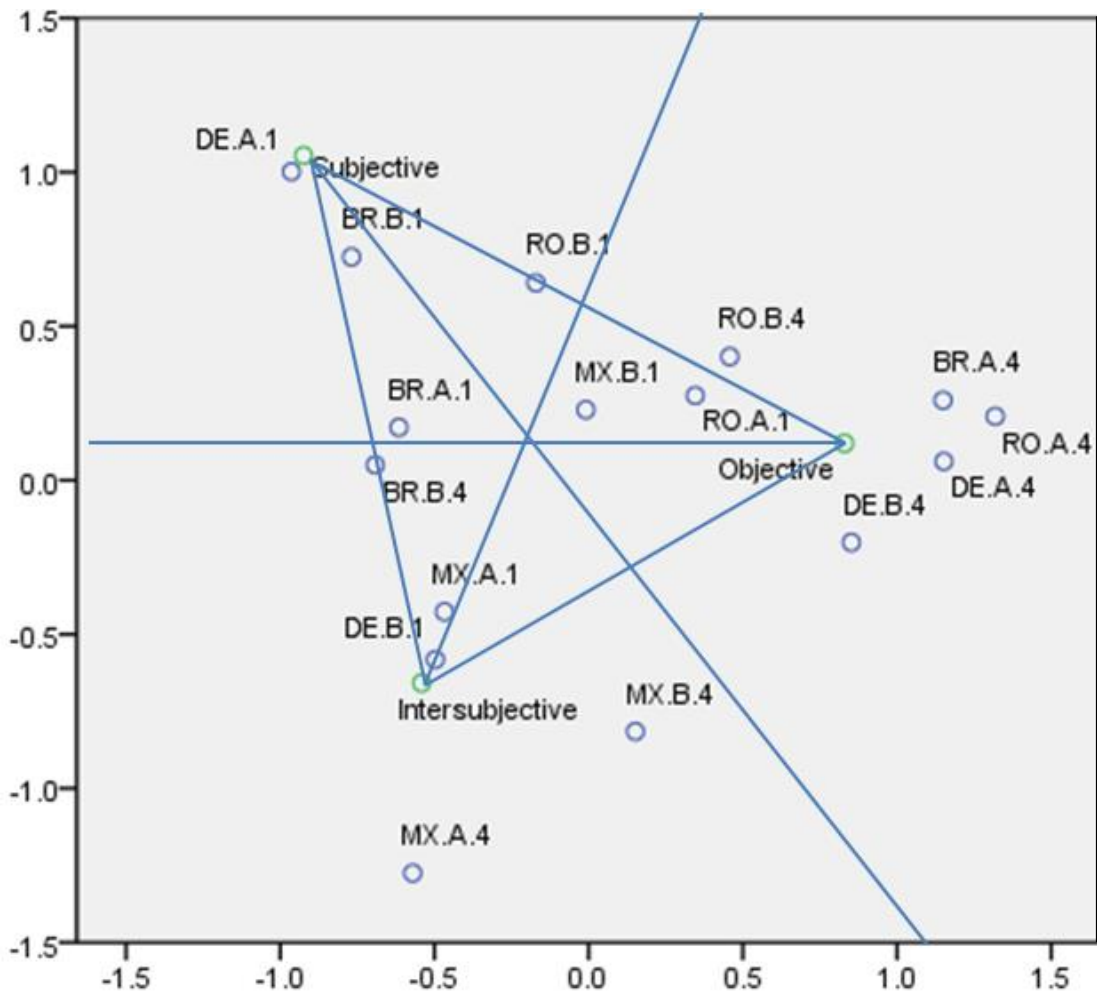|	Germany		Mexico		Brazil		Romania	
	Affluent	Deprived	Affluent	Deprived	Affluent	Deprived	Affluent	Deprived
X^2	29.426**	9.641*	4.536	6.773*	21.219**	1.208	6.592*	1.159
Phi	.752	.541	.280	.384	.665	.162	.434	.224

* $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.001$

In summary, there are significant differences in the strength of the relationships for each one of the national cultures, suggesting that specific cultures shape the developmental pathway of representations and guide children's movement between the internal world of the self and the objective world of society. In Brazil the strength of the age effect for affluent contexts is four times larger than for deprived ones, whereas Mexico shows a significant age effect in the deprived context only, with the difference in the strength in affluent and deprived areas being relatively small. In Germany and Romania, the age effect is stronger in affluent socio-economic contexts and less so in deprived areas[2]. Except for

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[2] Please note that in Romania we had a smaller sample due to one of the contexts being an institution of care, with fewer children than in the classroom.

Mexico, age has a stronger effect in affluent environments and less so in deprived contexts, which supports the idea that age has a stronger impact on children's representations in more prosperous milieus.

Our second analytical step was to explore the nature of these effects. What were the specific directions and patterns of the relations between age, culture of the public sphere and socio-economic context in each one of the countries studied? In order to answer these questions, we performed a correspondence analysis (Figure 1) between the categories subjective, intersubjective and objective for the two age groups in each socio-economic context and public sphere. This analysis provides a useful spatial tool for mapping representational fields and situating different age groups, socio-economic contexts and national cultures in relation to the semiotic fields of our coded categories (Doise, Clemence & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993). We added lines so as to establish fields for the categories subjective, intersubjective and objective and looked at how each of the sixteen sub-groups (formed by two ages, two socio-economic contexts and four cultures) were located and 'moved' between these fields.

Figure 1. Correspondence analysis by main category[1/]

Results show different patterns between younger and older children in affluent and deprived contexts in Germany, Mexico, Brazil and Romania. These patterns were zoomed in and triangulated with the qualitative analysis of the semiotic content of the drawings and secondary research on the characteristics of the public spheres we studied. In the figures below affluent and deprived environments are depicted using a continuous and interrupted line respectively. Here we reach what is central to the theoretical insights that this empirical

study affords: relating the public context of representation to their content and process of development is needed if we are to fully understand how children construct public worlds.

Germany: An individualistic liberal public sphere

In Germany a clear trajectory towards objective representations was found: children from both socio-economic contexts, as they grow, converge towards an objective representation of public spaces. However, we can see that socio-economic context changes the starting point of the drawings in younger groups. Institutions and anonymous others are more salient in the urban than in the rural contexts of the German public sphere. The pattern found (see Figure 2) in the trajectory of children's representations was convergence. We suggest that this pattern is indicative of an individualistic liberal public sphere.
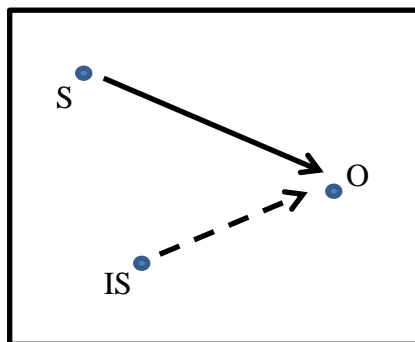
Figure 2. Germany: Convergence

The semantic content of the drawings shows that the experience of displacement/emigration and pockets of poverty is already present in the depictions of young city children, while in more affluent country environments young children's constructions remain focused on self, family, pets and home. Idyllic images of the subjective universe of family and home were typical in the rural suburbia context for younger children; see for example Image 1, left, in which a German 7-year-old girl presents the public sphere

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as her proximal world at home. As children in both contexts grow older objective elements of the external world take precedence in the depictions, which suggests the traditional Piagetian (1964) pathway of development. However, objectification starts earlier in the city (Image 1, right), indicating the effect of socio-economic context in accelerating children's engagement with the outside world. Here the features of an economically disadvantaged, multicultural context, in which children are in contact with a diversity of backgrounds plays a role in bringing the external world to the fore, which is not the case with children in the more affluent, rural suburbia.

Subjective, affluent, younger   Intersubjective, deprived, younger

Image 1. Germany: Foregrounding the self in younger children's social representations

Mexico: A collectivistic public sphere

Intersubjective drawings predominate in Mexico across age groups and contexts. Self and society meet in children's depictions demonstrating the force of a collectivistic culture marked by the presence of the other in the life of the self. Already at 7 years of age children are close to the intersubjective space and move further into this space as they grow older, absorbing the communalism of their public sphere. The pattern found in the development

of children's representations was parallelism: the two socio-economic contexts considered are parallel and have the same direction (see Figure 3). We suggest that this pattern is indicative of a collectivistic public sphere.
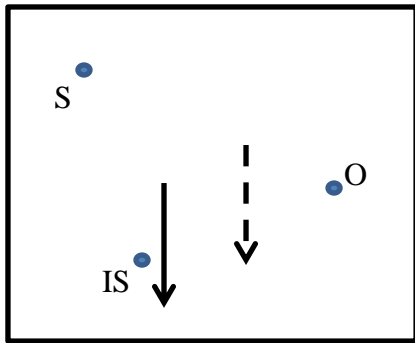
Figure 3. Mexico: Parallelism

Interestingly, in Mexico children who inhabit the underprivileged setting presented high percentages of intersubjective drawings but also a considerable proportion of objective drawings. The closeness and intensity of the highly participatory rural context of Mexican society forges not only a highly predominant intersubjective depiction of the public sphere but also brings objectivity to the fore. This predominance is reflected in colourful and 'crowded' intersubjective depictions (Image 2), where children's representations include the Mexican flag, institutions such as the church and school, services (the milkman) and a vibrant natural landscape that mingles with elements of streets and transport. The self is situated between home and town, between the inside and the outside.

Intersubjective, deprived, younger   Intersubjective, affluent, older

Image 2. Mexico: Self and society in children's representations of the public sphere

Brazil: An unequal public sphere

In Brazil we found divergent pathways of representational change with younger children of different socio-economic backgrounds in closer positions in the subjective representational space and older children in orthogonally different places. Children living in the poor areas of the city display mainly subjective and intersubjective drawings, while those in affluent neighbourhoods show a pattern that moves from subjective to mainly objective depictions. In this public sphere we identified an orthogonal pattern (see Figure 4) in the directions of the two age groups and socio-economic contexts. This is in line with the Brazilian public sphere, which is characterised as unequal containing both pockets of individualism and wealth and strong forms of collectivism that are historically part of Brazilian culture and linked to the life of the 'vilas' or 'favelas'.
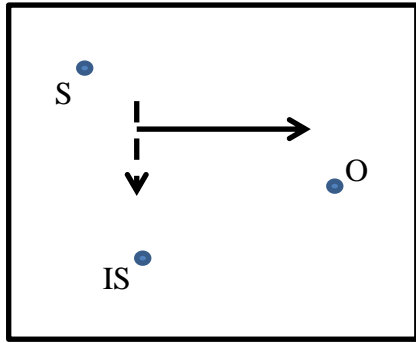
Figure 4. Brazil: Orthogonal

Brazilian drawings about the public world show a strong presence of self, family and home in young children of both socio-economic groups. As children grow we observe that affluent contexts display the more traditional Piagetian pathway towards objectivity while deprived areas remain in the intersubjective space, which corresponds to the collectivistic culture of the public sphere of these areas in Brazil. Image 3, left, for instance, integrates the family home (third from the left) within the wider public sphere, in which geographic connectors such as 'e*scadarias*' (steep stairs linking deprived areas to the urban environment) and main roads populated by different local shops are prevalent. Here the force of a relatively restricted social universe grounds the self to its community, whereas children in affluent areas open up to the wider public sphere, which extends to the whole country (see Image 3, right).

Intersubjective, deprived, older   Objective, affluent, older

Image 3. Brazil: Divergent pathways in representing the public sphere

Romania: An impersonal, post-communist public sphere

In Romania, children's drawings convey an impersonal public sphere where the relation between self and the public world is predominantly absent. The drawings reveal an anonymous social world in which there are very few instances of subjective or intersubjective elements. The pattern found in the development of children's representations was concatenation: in both contexts children move towards more objective depictions with lower age affluent children seemingly 'starting' at the point where the trajectory of institutionalised children 'ends' (see Figure 5). This pattern is shaped by the impersonality of the Romanian post-communist public sphere, which tends to exclude self from the public world.
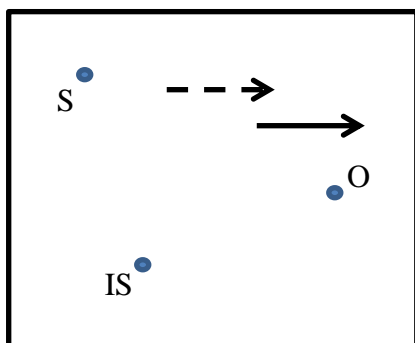

Figure 5. Romania: Concatenation

Romanian children mainly represented the public sphere through elements of the external world such as parks, buildings, banks and streets, frequently empty or occupied by anonymous others (see Image 4, left). Children growing up in institutions of care show their experiences in detail. In Image 4 (right), the child drew the town hall, the police and the civil servants in charge of housing him and his mother. This young child depicts a personal life experience, and yet does not depict himself in it. It is however worth of note that the few subjective Romanian drawings were mostly found amongst young institutionalised children, representing mainly the institution of care and or aspired family home. As with the majority of Romanian drawings, however, the self itself was rarely present.

Objective, affluent, younger   Objective, deprived, younger

Image 4. Romania: The absence of the self in the public sphere

Discussion

The findings of our study show that cultural contexts of social representation are systems of semiotic mediation that constitute children's knowledge about public worlds. As expected, age is a main factor in the transition from subjective to objective depictions but so are national cultures and socio-economic contexts. In fact, the impact of culture is very strong

and comparable to that of age. Socio-economic milieus within national cultures are equally significant, altering the direction of the developmental trajectories and the content of children's societal knowledge.

These findings lend support to conceptions of development as a situated process thatvaries as a function of age, socio-economic context and the culture of the public sphere in which children grow up. Traditionally, developmental theories have relied on a vision of linear progression in children's knowledge and engagement with the world, from egocentrism to decentration, from less to more complex representations (Piaget, 1928, 1964). Drawing on social representations theory, we demonstrated that children's knowledge of society is irreducible to an under-developed version of adult knowledge. On the contrary, it is a situated and expressive system that allows children to grasp and make sense of their social world. This has important theoretical implications for sociocultural and historical understandings of children's development (Vygotsky, 1997, Rogoff, 2003) and for the theory of social representations itself (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990; Emler & Ohana, 1993) as it brings cultural conceptions of the public sphere to bear on children's role and position as emerging social actors (Shaw, 1996; Valentine, 2004).

The present research challenges the typical Piagetian pathway of moving from subjective to objective depictions of the public world, arguing that this specific pathway is not universal, but characteristic mainly of Western public spheres defined by affluence and individualism. This is evident in the case of German and Brazilian children from an affluent socio-economic context. In contrast, public spheres characterised by poverty, collectivism and/or marginalisation bring the public world and its complexity to the foreground of children's depictions and seem to accelerate decentration. Mexican children produce predominantly intersubjective drawings from the start, containing self, family and other

people, all together within squares, institutions and meeting places. They show the strong community links and closeness between self and other that characterises this collectivistic public sphere. This is equally clear for Brazilian children living in poorer neighbourhoods with strong local networks and social bonds. The tendency towards objectification is further accentuated in deprived Mexican children and in almost all groups of Romanian children, who primarily represent the social world through objective elements. It is worth noting that both underprivileged Brazilian children and institutionalised Romanian children of lower age, living in conditions of accentuated deprivation, alternate between a constrained subjectivity and opening up to an outside world that remains to some extent unknown to them, beyond the boundaries of their home neighbourhood or the placement centre.

Combined, these patterns offer evidence of the diverse ways in which cultures and socio-economic contexts shape both the content and the processes of children's societal knowledge as well as the developmental trajectory of public spheres. Children exist in the social world and engage with it at multiple levels and in differentiated ways. From the protected environment of home depicted by young German children, to the interconnected nature of community life present in Mexican and Brazilian drawings, and up to the neutral and at times impersonal depictions of the public space in Romania, the world of the child differs and so do representations build to comprehend and appropriate this world. The development of cognition and the development of socio-cultural frames are deeply inter-connected (see Vygotsky, 1997; Winnicott, 1971).

Our findings corroborate and expand the view that children's ability to represent and understand their social world is a competence rooted in their social interactions and wider social environment (Doise & Palmonari, 1984; Duveen & Lloyd, 1990; Jovchelovitch, 2007a; Valsiner, 1997). Children are competent knowers and active participants of their public

spheres, something that is evidenced by their drawings and accounts. Rather than giving us a mistaken or inaccurate portrayal of the social world, our research shows that children's constructions offer insights and reveal complex characteristics of the environments they inhabit. Children's knowledge is experiential and situated without being a copy of what they perceive in the world. It carries imaginations, desires, identity and hopes: its value and functionality does not lie on its cognitive accuracy but on its symbolic power. As soon as we abandon the adult-centric lenses through which researchers tend to assess what children know, we can start to appreciate the specificity, expressiveness and functionality of children's knowledge. Paying attention to children's own conceptions and interpretations can teach us a great deal not only about the content of their social representations but also the conditions under which they acquired them.

Finally, children societal knowledge has consequences for the reproduction and perpetuation of public spheres themselves. The thinking frameworks children construct and use for making sense of the public world are key building blocks for how they eventually position themselves in that world, become citizens and understand their relation to the larger society. In this sense, our research adds to a growing body of literature which is critical of adultist public spaces (Valentine, 2004) and the exclusion of children from public worlds. At the core of this exclusion stands a deficit model of childhood (Shaw, 1996) and an ambivalent attitude of adults towards children (Sommerville, 1982). The Western binary view that sees children as vulnerable and menacing, both in need of protection and dangerous, originates in the idea of the unfinished child (D'Alessio, 1990), whose knowledge is inferior and place is restricted to the private realm of the family home.

This study contributes to the recognition of the validity of children's societal knowledge and their position in social arenas; as stated by Duveen (1997, p. 87): "what

children know and believe serves a symbolic function, since it provides a primary means through which children are able to locate themselves in the social world". Studied here using a cross-sectional design, this can be further documented using longitudinal investigations aiming to highlight the ways in which children's knowledge is both adaptive and responsive to socio-cultural environments and a constant producer of these environments. Future analyses of children's representations of the public sphere offer thus the possibility of understanding the child as a social actor and her role in the construction of a 'thinking' society.

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