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## Chapter 7

### **Reflecting on different views of social interaction: Explanatory and analytic perspectives<sup>1</sup>**

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The investigation of social interaction is a main object of inquiry in different theoretical and methodological approaches within the field of developmental, education and social psychology. In this chapter, we intend to reflect on two particular perspectives being combined in research studies presented and discussed in previous chapters. Within the first perspective, social interaction is studied for instrumental reasons. It is not an object of study *per se*, it is rather studied, for example, in order to explain something that is outside of interaction (e.g. cognitive ability, self related characteristics, etc.). Consequently, this perspective could be labeled as “exploratory perspective”. Within the second perspective, social interaction is the main object of research interest and it is analyzed in details in order to describe its diverse patterns and dynamics. Thus, this perspective could be named as “analytic” one. In his annual review of studies of

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classroom talks, Mercer (2010) organized his work using a similar distinction between two perspectives – the first one was labeled as “socio-cultural studies” and the second one as “linguistic ethnography studies”.

In this chapter, we first analyze in more details the explanatory and analytic perspectives, and then we point out how these two perspectives have been employed into the research studies presented in this book. In this way, we can better understand these two perspectives and how they might be combined enabling researchers not only to explore dynamics of social interaction and different forms and trajectories, but also to understand how human beings become different based on interactions with others.

### ***Two perspectives in studying social interaction***

The two aforementioned approaches, the explanatory and the analytic one, imply different levels of treatment of the notion of “social interaction” both at theoretical and methodological levels. For this reason, we intend to briefly present the main characteristics of these approaches, in order to be able to discuss some aspects that seem to us relevant in the current state of qualitative research in psychology and education.

#### *Explanatory perspective: investigating social interaction in order to explore its impact on learning and development*

As it is already noted above, the explanatory perspective in studying social interaction is an instrumental approach. It is based on the assumption that studies of social interaction can help to explain something else being outside of the interaction. This “something else” might be a personal characteristics (e.g. cognitive abilities, self-esteem, etc), but also an organizational

characteristics (e.g. roles and responsibilities, formal procedures, etc.). Assuming that these personal or organizational characteristics are involved and shape the interaction, as well as that they might be transformed throughout it, the study of the interaction can help to explain how these characteristics are (re)formed. In the developmental psychology, both Piagetian and Vygotskian approaches can be taken as examples of the explanatory perspective on social interaction. Although these theories are different with respect to the basic mechanisms of development (individual construction vs. co-construction), they are alike in their interest in social interaction.

Many researches within Piagetian and Vygotskian traditions have highlighted the relationships between social interaction and development of competencies (see, for example, Forman et al., 1998; Wood, 1999; Baucal, 2003; Staub, 2004). In this type of studies, the main goal has been to find out what kinds of social interaction can lead toward development of competencies, as well as how competencies are developed through the participation in interactions with others. These studies may vary in different factors such as the participants in interaction (peer interaction, parents – child, teacher – student interaction, etc.), the interaction site (school, home, etc.), or the object of interaction (items indicating deeper cognitive structures such as concrete-operational thinking, academic items such as understanding of the concept of floating in Physics, certain more open topics such as value based decision making situations, etc.). What is common to these studies is that they are rather selective in their analysis of social interaction. Following the instrumental interest in social interaction, these studies are focused mainly on those aspects that can contribute to the explanation of development of competencies.

In developmental and educational psychology, studies from this tradition tend to use the pre-post test experiment as a research design. Typically, based on the pre-test results two groups of participant are selected to be equal with respect to the

key object of interest (e.g. analogical reasoning ability, conservation, level of understanding of an educationally relevant concept such as floating, velocity, etc.). Then, the experimental group is involved in certain kinds of social interaction while participants from the control group have no such opportunities. Finally, in the post-test both groups are assessed again in order to evaluate the impact of social interaction on learning and development of the concept and the ability as the object of inquiry. Some researchers have been more interested in the quantitative effects of social interaction, while others have done additional qualitative analyses to find out how learning and development could emerge out of interactions with other(s).

In general, studies employing the explanatory perspective have provided a wide range of knowledge about what kind of interaction supports learning and development. Based on these studies, we understand that it is important for participants in social interaction to be actively involved in, that understanding of the goal and the object of interaction is shared, that socio-cognitive conflicts need to be managed in a constructive way, that argumentative thinking and discussion need to be involved. These studies have provided understanding how thinking develops as a means to reach certain goals and how the competence of learning to think is an inescapable part of children's and adults' growth.

Social interactions contribute to the development of thinking not in a social vacuum, but as processes that are always situated in different settings of the everyday life. Ever since the first studies made by Piaget (1924, 1926) in order to assess children's cognitive development, social interaction has been an important element of analysis. Piaget was trying to assess the level of children's reasoning inviting them to engage in verbal interaction with adults and to react to different points of view (Piaget & Szeminska, 1941). The importance of peer interaction for the process of socialization, both moral and cognitive, from early childhood to late adolescence, has also been recognized. Even in the research lines of the post-Piagetian tradition this aspect has

been empirically explored in different manners, especially with respect to the impact of social interaction on cognitive development (Doise et al., 1975; Doise & Mugny, 1979; Perret-Clermont, 1980). Following this approach, many psychopedagogical studies (Slavin, 1986; Light & Littleton, 1994; Howe & Tolmie, 1999; Barron, 2003; Gillies, 2004; Mercer & Littleton, 2007) have investigated the conditions of success of peer interactions in classroom learning, highlighting various dimensions, such as: group composition, nature of the tasks and instructions, types of goals of the activity, etc.

A relevant contribution to the study of social interaction as a place for co-construction of learning and development has also been strongly supported by authors employing the theory of Vygotskij (1934/1962). Vygotskij has highlighted the relevance of language as semiotic means for cognition and for social processes whereby children learn and develop higher mental processes. This perspective has contributed to understand the role of the asymmetric relationships between adults and children, as a way to sustain the cognitive growth of the novices by introducing and participating in activities within their zone of proximal development. The post-Vygotskian tradition has strongly focused on the role of children's talk and on the educational resources that contribute to foster the collaborative work in educational settings and the children's thinking (Bruner, 1975, 1983; Forman, 1992; Mercer, 2000; Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

The study of social interaction from the explanatory perspectives, especially those engaged into more detailed qualitative analyses of interactions, brought understanding that social interaction is not just an "external" variable affecting development and learning, but an integrative part of the process of learning and development. Social interactions are situated events composed of many individual and relational processes connected with language, communication, thinking, identities, (un)shared goals and agendas, etc., implying that both social and individual aspects of the human life might not be disentangled. In

a way, this understanding emerging from the explanatory perspective provides a useful connection point with the analytical perspective.

*Analytical perspective: investigating social interaction in order to understand its dynamics and different forms*

The analytical perspective is based on the assumption that different personal characteristics (such as thinking, emotions, competencies, abilities, attitudes, etc.) are relational and situational/contextual. These traditions of research assume that the study of conversation and interaction between human beings is the main resource for the understanding of the way how different activities (cognitive, emotional, linguistic, social, etc.) are linked within social interaction and create certain kinds of dynamics and trajectories.

This analytical perspective had strong relevance to the investigation of social interactions as the main object of inquiry, and not instrumental as it is the case with the explanatory perspective (Rogoff, 1990; Schubauer-Leoni et al., 1992; Wertsch et al., 1995; Chaiklin, 2002; Perret-Clermont et al., 2004). Studies employing the analytical perspective pursue to take into account the dependence of all these aspects on the context in which they take place, such as the institutional, pedagogical or experimental settings. It is worth noting that the context is not considered as an external element because participants give their own interpretations of contextual elements, depending on their own stakes, cognitive levels, cultural schemes, values, motives. By doing it, participants construct the context during their talk (Light & Littleton, 2004). This meaning-making activity is simultaneously social, cognitive and situational and it is a fundamental aspect of the social interaction process.

In this respect, the analytical perspective takes rather different views on social interaction, learning and development compared to the mainstream psychology traditions that treats

personal characteristics as they exist within the person and they are relatively independent from relationships and contexts. From the analytical perspective, it is meaningful to study how “personal” and “social” aspects of social interactions are intermingled and how they create specific dynamic systems that might unfold into different ways. However, it is less meaningful to ask whether and how personal characteristics are (re)shaped by social interaction as if they have an existence outside of the interaction and the context.

The social interaction as phenomenon and object of research is defined as dialogic and contextual processes in which people use language to combine their intellectual resources in the pursuit of a common task. As an interaction is always located within a cultural, social, institutional, and personal context, the bases of common knowledge upon which shared understanding depends are constantly developed by participants in the here-and-now of the interaction. The value of such approach in examining and assessing the social processes is the possibility to catch people in different situations of their everyday lives interacting and creating new meanings, trying to understand the other’s perspective and to pursue joint activities and goals. This perspective allows for a more specific attention to how language and thinking are used and transformed within social interactions in order to carry out the developmental and learning processes.

Within this framework, the conversational and discursive analyses can be fruitfully assumed as possible ways to inquiry and to account for the interaction among people in everyday social activities: language is not only an instrument of communication, but also one of the objects and aims of the socialization process. Consequently, the analytical perspective is characterized by the qualitative methodology(ies).

Contrary to the explanatory approach which aims at identifying only common characteristics of social interaction supporting learning and development of individual competencies, the scholars’ focus within the analytical approach is directed

toward exploring and understanding diverse ways in which interactions among people take place as well as different trajectories the interaction could unfold in.

***Integrating the two perspectives:  
Implications within the qualitative approach  
in psychology and education***

The analytical perspective puts emphasis on the collaboration with others as one of the very important competencies for the life in the modern society (Trier, 2001). Previous studies have demonstrated how the intersubjectivity in social interactions is progressively constructed by the participants via mutual negotiations, trying to understand each other's utterances and perspectives around the object of discourse and the relationship that is co-constructed (Schubauer-Leoni et al., 1992; Grossen et al., 1997). Within this approach, a common interesting feature is the fact that learning is not just a matter of understanding and developing individual competencies, but it is an activity that is constructed in a context, with partners that are in social interactions. The advantage of this approach is that it studies interaction focusing on its dynamics and situatedness, providing rich understanding of different ways and trajectories of real interactions, not only understanding of idealized and preferable forms that can produce positive impact on some other phenomena. However, because of the fine grain analysis encouraging case by case studies, it makes challenging to make generalizations about certain patterns of interaction that might be found across situations as well as typical conditions, when such patterns of interaction are more likely, and different social and individual effects they can have.

On the other side, studies taking the explanatory view on the social interaction have highlighted the idea that through their participation in social interactions, adults and children come to develop and appropriate competence in different socio-culturally

defined contexts. Contrary to the analytic perspective, it encourages generalization about productive patterns of social interactions as well as conditions that might increase likelihood that partners will manage to get into the productive interaction. However, it neglects the whole array of different forms that are not so productive, but that might be even more typical for interactions between children and adults in real life situations.

These two perspectives could be described metaphorically as “bird” and “frog” perspectives. While the explanatory perspective is more like a “bird perspective” providing insights into general patterns neglecting fine details and situatedness, the analytic perspective is more like a “frog perspective” enabling us to understand complex dynamics of interaction between partners and their relations to and dependencies on the context.

Although we appreciate difficulties emerging from different epistemologies and assumptions these perspective are founded on, we believe that it is not worthwhile to get in an endless debate on which one is better. We are strongly convinced that through practical, on site meaningful integration of these two perspectives it might be possible to advance our understanding of both complexity and diversity of social interaction as well as its fruits that could be extracted from concrete cases of social interaction to other situations and interactions. In other words, we assume that through the detailed examination of verbal interactions during social exchanges it is possible to account for the socio-cultural structures of the interactive context. A specific attention on the pragmatic functions of language can offer a way to also analyze the use of speech forms as evoking or establishing particular types of interactions, including the speakers’ stances or attitudes and their social relations, as well as specific attributes of individuals.

This book is focused on the analysis of social interaction from these two perspectives: some chapters are situated within the first one, exploring how children can develop new competencies or understandings through the interaction with others – peers or adults, or looking at the interaction as a space within which

something else is going on; other chapters take the second perspective, trying to describe the interaction itself and its complexity, focusing on different trajectories that it can take (how the convergence of meanings and ideas occurs within interaction), or looking at the development of communicative competencies.

The possibility to take into account both perspectives allows us to consider different possible questions on social interaction: should we focus on investigation of diversity of social interaction characteristics in order to understand what is going on spontaneously in everyday life contexts? How do participants manage to face all the challenges that appear when interacting with others, what do they rely on, which resources and tools do they use? Or should we try to understand how to foster effective interactions because it could be a fruitful element to develop different competencies?

Considering the two perspectives and the above-mentioned questions, we think that it is possible to consider these aspects only assuming an integrative view, not keeping them separately but trying to think how complementary the two approaches are. In fact, different elements have been highlighted in all chapters presented in this book. The phenomena presented by the authors are relevant within a variety of dimensions that could be considered under the lens of both approaches. In our opinion, the focus on social interaction should be then re-analyzed having in mind this integrative perspective.

### *Relational and social dimensions of interactions*

Within studies presented in this book several relevant relational and social dimensions have been addressed. An interesting element concerning social interaction among people is related to the dimension of cooperation. The study on asymmetrical peer interaction, presented in chapter 2, has shown that cooperation is not a frequent phenomenon within

unsuccessful dyads. On the other hand, cooperation among partners was one of the most salient characteristics of successful dyads. As cooperative relation implies the social parity among partners, the focus of scholars should also be directed toward some other dimensions, such as domination or and/or social positioning of some partner(s) discussed within chapters 2, 3 and 4. If we focus on development of new competencies through peer interaction, we can say that the domination of one partner was frequent in the dialogues which did not lead to the new competence development. The obtained results revealed that the dominant attitude of a more competent student prevents the appearance of productive characteristics of the dialogue, such as cooperation, shared understanding or shared socio-cognitive conflict. In some situations it could produce a submissive and uncritical behaviour of partners who passively agreed, did not question partner's opinion and even withdrew from the interaction. In other situations, when students with lower competencies had shown an initiative and had proposed correct solutions, a dominant attitude of their partners discouraged that initiative and made them agree with a wrong answer.

A closely related dimension has been found and discussed in the analysis of interactive reading activities in chapter 3. It concerns the situations in which one partner takes a position of the one who knows better or the more competent one, in order to persuade a peer to accept his/her standpoint. In the same chapter it has also been found that in some cases one child tries to position the partner as the one who does not know and whose proposals should not be followed. Thus, although it has been hypothesized by many authors that peer interactions are characterized by the equality among partners in terms of social power, it has been observed that there are cases in which children frame the interaction as an asymmetric with respect to the social power.

Similarly, in the study of group interaction in a decision making task (presented in chapter 4) it has been obtained that, if

the so-called “risky child” (the child preferring a riskier option) is not sufficiently involved in the interaction, occupying in that way less space in the dialogue, losing the opportunity to advocate for his/her propositions, it leads to a situation in which his/her proposition is not taken as a possible group decision. On the other hand, it has been observed that aggressiveness and dominant role in conversation, manifested as intrusive talk about who from the group “has the right” to talk and when, as well as a strong affirmation of one's attitude, leads to the acceptance of that point of view, although it was riskier than the others' proposals.

Concluding this part, we would like to emphasize that all mentioned findings remind us that the social relation among participants in an interaction is a result of negotiation process that is taking place simultaneously with the negotiation around the task solution within the interaction. Thus, no matter if we are interested in the results of interacting process (in terms of the adequacy of the final solution or the new competence development), or if we are focused on the interaction process itself, we should be aware of this interweaving of partners' negotiations concerning their social relations and negotiation of meanings, ideas, and possible solutions. It is obvious that the result of one of these negotiation processes affects the way in which the other takes place. For that reason, it would be valuable for our understanding of interaction processes to rethink about it, keeping in mind the integrative approach we have proposed here.

### *Relational and cognitive dimensions of interaction*

Some of the data presented in this book suggest the joint presence of relational and cognitive dimensions of interaction that at the same time contribute to the pertinence of an integrative analysis of social processes.

In the course of several interactions, the use of argumentation, mostly as a tool in the process of negotiation

about a final solution, has been observed. As has been reported in chapter 2, a series of argumentative exchanges was present in the case of dialogues in some of the successful dyads. In the same way and also with the purpose to find the best joint task solution, children produced arguments when they were asked to discuss about written text. It was reported in chapter 3 in which these situations were analyzed with the aim to consider the use of argumentation as one of possible mechanisms that can lead to the convergence of children's initially divergent opinions. In other words, the child who has been using consistent argumentation, referring to the text or connecting information given in the text to previous knowledge, could persuade the partner to accept his/her point of view. In addition to this cognitive effect of argumentation use, it was emphasized within the same study that argumentation can have social effects as well. Namely, we could see that the use of argumentation by one partner could motivate the other child to change his/her way of positioning within joint work space. In continuation with what has already been discussed, this could be taken as one more finding supporting the idea of how important is to consider both social and cognitive aspects of the interaction process, but also of interaction effects.

Talking further about the use of argumentation, we would like to remind on the way the argumentation has been used by children in the study which addressed the important points concerning risky decision making (chapter 4). A kind of argument with great persuasive power was the one referring to the opinion of an important adult. As it has already been discussed in chapter 4, parents' opinions have a fundamental role in children's learning and development. For that reason we have to include in our analysis the broader context in which the interaction takes place. By saying this, we do not refer exclusively to family, as one of the primary groups within which the socialization process takes place, but also to all other relevant settings of participants' lives, which influence the opportunities to create a space for a joint work, affecting at the same time the content of participants' talks.

Apart from argumentation that can be used as a tool for opening a space for participants' exchange of ideas, other data presented in this book address some other tools with a similar aim. In particular, in chapter 5 we could see how raising questions can be an efficient tool in creating a space for the other to check his/her own understanding or to build a new understanding. Analyzing the practices of a teacher labeled as modern, it has been described how questions were used by this type of teacher in order to initiate students' personal meanings and literary works interpretation development. Apart from creating a space for students to express their own interpretations of literary works, one more aspect of teachers' questions has been discussed: their function in developing students' argumentation concerning expressed opinions. On the other hand, some other verbal tools have been found in the exchanges among students and so-called "traditional" teachers. Questions were not raised with the aim to seek for students' opinions, but on contrary they were used to check pupils' knowledge. By doing so, the teacher assumes the role of "primary knower" which prevents students in building their own interpretations and developing argumentative thinking.

From the point of view of the role of social interaction in the development of individuals' competencies, some dimensions influencing later performances have been highlighted in the analyses presented in chapters 2 and 3. In particular, in chapter 2 it has been presented how the experience with a more competent peer who was confused or even regressed in comparison to previously measured competence level, can be a cause of regression in the partner's performance as well. In addition to this, in chapter 3 we could see that the interaction with a peer can lead the child to build and to apply a new strategy in dealing with written texts, which leads the child to the proper task solution. This is very important as it clearly shows the role of social interaction, not only in coming to the proper solution in a particular situation, but also in developing and practicing new strategies in order to deal with written texts.

### *Relational and communicative dimensions of interaction*

The investigation of the child's early turn-taking skills, presented in chapter 6, addressed an important topic of the role of social interaction in the communication development. The pattern of the mother-child communication seems to be similar to the adults' conversation, which means that the child's actions serve as a trigger for the mother's responses, regardless on the child's initial communicative intention or its absence. Through this pattern the child gets the possibility to learn how the conversation among participants looks like and how he/she can participate in communicative exchanges in a proper and efficient way.

The topic of communication development through social interaction has an important role in our discussion about the place of an integrative approach in considering the social interaction research field. It reminds us once again of the fact that social interaction, as inevitable part of our everyday lives, takes part in the development of different competencies (communicative, cognitive, social) and knowledge, but it is also a means through which we express our ideas, emotions and intentions, organize our activities, and get feedbacks from other people.

### ***Conclusion and further development***

We believe that the results of different researches proposed in this book might be considered of scientific interest, as well as of considerable practical value. The goal of this enterprise has been to contribute to the understanding of the numerous processes that are involved in social interaction. The attention to the question of context in order to better understand the conditions in which

social interactions can occur is crucial: the analyses of such a complex system are not easy. For this reason, this book aims at opening new views on the qualitative modalities that can be implied in the investigation of interactive phenomena among people. Our view is also in the direction of sustaining interdisciplinary studies able to better analyze contexts and psycho-social conditions in which natural and experimental situations are done. In our opinion, it is important to improve an articulation of different methodologies in the study of interactions as situated activities: we think that it is necessary to observe in detail participants' discursive practices and to link them to the contextual aspects of the setting. In particular, the analysis of educational settings in institutional frames can contribute to take into account the adults' and children's representations of joint activities and goal-directed tasks. Implications at theoretical and methodological levels could be useful for educational psychologists, teacher trainers and other practitioners in the field of education.

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