SOCIAL PROCESSES OF NEGOTIATION IN CHILDHOOD-QUALITATIVE ACCESS USING THE GROUP DISCUSSION METHOD

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Abstract:
Group discussions in general can be viewed as a representation of everyday social interactions in which opinions, attitudes and values are communicated. Group discussions with children, who also constitute a real group in everyday life, thus provide us with insight not only into their opinions and values regarding certain subjects, but also into the way in which they assert, reverse, align and (further) develop these opinions and values—a process that I would like to refer to as "negotiation"-- within the peer group. These group discussions give us insight into an aspect of children's culture which for its part represents an essential context of individual development that is not only important aside from school and the parental home, but in fact eclipses both the institutional context of school as well as the context of family life. While in contemporary qualitative social research group discussions are principally carried out with adults and adolescents, children's philosophers have suggested discussing philosophical problems in groups, oriented towards the Socratic Method. The latter aims to stimulate participants in a discussion to reflect independently on a mutual subject solely by means of questions. Experience published to date with children's discussion groups analyzed within a philosophical context and the initial results of the implementation of this form of discussion as an instrument of qualitative investigation led us to also work with the group discussion method in various developmental psychological studies. In this paper, I first characterize group discussion with children as a method of investigation, and then present some examples that focus on the social processes of negotiation, which are an important area of peer socialization. With regard to the latter, it can be observed how children attempt to convince each other, how they achieve (or not) a consensus, and how they deal with opinions that do not correspond with those held by the group majority.

Keywords: Group discussion; Childhood; Socratic Method; Socialization; Negotiation

Processos Sociais de Negociação no acesso à Infância Qualitativa usando o método de Grupo de Discussão

Resumo:
Os grupos de discussão podem ser vistos como uma "representação" aproximada de interações sociais cotidianas em que as opiniões, atitudes e valores são comunicados. Os grupos de discussão com crianças, que também constituem um grupo real na vida cotidiana, nos fornecem uma visão não apenas de suas opiniões e valores a respeito de determinados assuntos, mas também da maneira como elas afirmam, retrocedem, tomam posição e (mais) desenvolvem tais assuntos – o que eu gostaria de chamar

"negociação" - dentro do grupo de colegas. Tais grupos de discussão nos dão *insights* sobre um aspecto da "cultura infantil" que, por sua vez, é um contexto essencial do desenvolvimento individual, importante não apenas "para além" da escola e da casa dos pais, mas que eclipsa tanto o contexto institucional da escola como também o contexto de vida familiar. Enquanto que as pesquisas sociais qualitativas contemporâneas sobre grupos de discussão são principalmente realizadas com adultos e adolescentes, os filósofos da infância têm sugerido discutir problemas filosóficos com grupos de crianças, orientados pelo método socrático. O método socrático tem por objetivo estimular, somente por meio de perguntas, os participantes de uma discussão a refletir de forma independente sobre um assunto. As experiências publicadas até o presente momento com grupos de discussão de crianças – analisadas no interior de um contexto filosófico e os resultados iniciais da implementação desse tipo de discussão como um instrumento de pesquisa qualitativa – nos convenceram a também trabalhar com o método de discussão em grupo em diferentes estudos de desenvolvimento psicológico. No texto que se segue, vou primeiro apresentar o grupo de discussão com crianças como um método de investigação e, em seguida, apresentarei alguns exemplos focalizando os processos sociais de negociação, os quais compreendem um âmbito importante de socialização entre colegas. No que diz respeito à socialização entre colegas, pode-se observar como as crianças tentam convencer umas às outras, se e como elas chegam a um consenso, ou como elas lidam com opiniões que não correspondem àquelas sustentadas pela maioria do grupo.

Palavras-chave: Grupo de discussão; Infância; Método socrático; Socialização; Negociação

Procesos sociales de negociación en el acceso a la infancia cualitativa por medio del método de grupo de discusión.

Resumen:
Los grupos de discusión pueden ser vistos como una "representación" aproximada de las interacciones sociales cotidianas en las que opiniones, actitudes y valores son comunicados. Los grupos de discusión con niños, que también constituyen un grupo real en la vida cotidiana, nos dan una visión no sólo de sus opiniones y valores respecto a ciertos asuntos, sino también sobre la manera como ellos afirman, retroceden, toman una posición y (además) desarrollan estos asuntos - lo que me gustaría llamar "negociación" – en el interior del grupo de colegas. Estos grupos de discusión nos proporcionan *insights* sobre un aspecto de la "cultura infantil", que, a su vez, es un contexto esencial del desarrollo individual, importante no sólo "más allá" de la escuela y de la casa de los padres, sino que los eclipsa tanto el contexto institucional de la escuela, sino también el contexto de la vida familiar. Mientras que las investigaciones sociales cualitativas contemporáneas sobre grupos de discusión se realizan mayormente con adultos y adolescentes, los filósofos de la infancia han sugerido discutir problemas filosóficos con grupos de niños, bajo la orientación del método socrático. El método socrático tiene por objetivo estimular, únicamente por medio de preguntas, los participantes de una discusión a reflexionar sobre un tema de forma independiente. Las

experiencias publicadas hasta el momento con grupos de discusión de niños – analizadas en el interior de un contexto filosófico y los primeros resultados de la aplicación de este tipo de discusión como herramienta para la investigación cualitativa – nos han convencido a trabajar también con el método de grupo de discusión en diferentes estudios de desarrollo psicológico. En el texto que sigue, en primer lugar voy a presentar el grupo de discusión con niños como un método de investigación y, a continuación presentaré algunos ejemplos centrados en los procesos sociales de negociación, que constituyen una parte importante de la socialización entre colegas. Con respecto a la socialización de los compañeros puede observarse cómo los niños tratan de convencer unos a los otros, si y cómo ellos llegan a un consenso, o cómo hacen frente a las opiniones que no coinciden con las que son apoyados por la mayoría del grupo.

Palabras clave: Grupo de Discusión; Infancia; Método socrático; Socialización; Negociación

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Introduction

While in contemporary qualitative social research group discussions are principally carried out with adults and adolescents, children's philosophers have suggested discussing philosophical problems in groups, orientated towards the Socratic method (cf. e.g. Lipman & Sharp 1978; Matthews 1980; Horster 1992). The Socratic method has the aim of stimulating the participants in a discussion to reflect independently on a mutual subject solely by means of questions. Experience published to date with children's discussion groups analyzed within a philosophical context (e.g. Matthews 1984) and the initial results of the implementation of this form of discussion as an instrument of qualitative investigation (e.g. Gebhard, Nevers & Billmann-Mahecha in press) persuaded us to also work with the group discussion method in different developmental psychological studies. In the following I will first present the group discussion with children as a method of investigation and then present some examples focusing on the social processes of negotiation, which are an important area of peer socialization.

The group discussion with children as a method of investigation

The group discussion is a method "in which communication processes, whose development and structure-at least in phases-come close to a 'normal' conversation, are initiated in a group by someone outside the group" (Loos & Schäffer 2001, p. 13). In recent years, the group discussion method in the area of qualitative sociological youth research has been developed further by the working group surrounding Ralf Bohnsack. However, although Richter's (1997) generally critical view of the method has been offset by concrete positive experience gained e.g. in the area of children's philosophy, through the analysis

of circle discussions in primary school (e.g. Heinzel 1996), or through our own developmental psychological work, it is hardly implemented in psychological, sociological or educational childhood research. Heinzel (2000) rightly complains that the potential of the group discussion method in research with children continues to be strongly underestimated.

Group discussions enable heightened insight into the microprocesses of social negotiations, in particular those described by Krappmann & Oswald (1995), because in this form of investigation children refer primarily to each other and less to the discussion leader. This requires a discussion stimulus that takes up the everyday experiences gained by children and a non-directive manner of discussion that in keeping with the principle of openness, enables them to place emphasis on their own topics. In the development of discussion content it can be observed, amongst other things, which experience and knowledge children contribute to a topic, which arguments they use to attempt to convince each other, whether and how they achieve a consensus, or how they deal with opinions that to not correspond with those held by the group majority.

With reference to the classic studies conducted by Sherif (1935) and Asch (1940), within the field of psychology an argument against the implementation of group discussions for investigating opinions, attitudes and values is that the "public" opinions articulated in groups do not necessarily correspond with "actual", "private" opinions. According to the argument, the group dynamic processes associated with the way opinion leaders exercise social influence on more passive participants prevents each of the participants in a group discussion from expressing his or her personal opinion, doubts about what has already been said, or an opposing opinion.

These group effects, which have been proven in experimental settings, and the everyday experience that people express different opinions about identical topics in different social situations are undisputed. One aspect of our social competence is that we adapt our stories and our opinions to the respective

situation and to our partners in conversation. However, if we take into account that a person is bound from birth to a social network with rules, values and world views that have been (sub)culturally molded, which in the course of one's life becomes more differentiated and in which one becomes more and more actively involved (cf. e.g. Bruner 1990), then the differentiation between private and public opinion appears highly artificial. Opinions and values do not emerge purely individually in a social vacuum, nor are they forced on us. Rather they are brought about and developed within a social context of common experience. In 1955, Pollock, who initiated the development of the group discussion method in Germany with his investigations of political consciousness, wrote that "[o]pinions and attitudes do not *emerge* and *work* in isolation, but rather in constant interaction between the individual and the society directly influencing the individual" (cited in Nießen 1977, pp. 55 f.) [italics mine]. Neither are opinions, attitudes and values irrevocably fixed at a certain point in an individual's development, but rather-with the exception of a few items of "basic stock" (such as e.g. certain moral principles)-they change, sometimes gradually and sometimes abruptly, in a communicative exchange with others in common social contexts and as an individual gains life experience. Thus they have more the character of a process than of a product.

Taking all of this into account, group discussions can approximately be viewed as a "representation" of everyday social interactions in which opinions, attitudes and values are communicated. This is particularly the case for the investigation of so-called "real groups", groups that have, at least in part, a common background of experience such as e.g. friends, people who spend their leisure time together, or classmates, which I will refer to as peer groups. When investigating real groups, the ecological validity can only be defended if the participants in a group discussion accept the topical stimulus as relevant for themselves and become involved accordingly, which must finally be substantiated through text interpretation. The social influence observed in such a

case is then not a product of the specifically arranged investigative situation such as that in the social psychological experiments conducted by Sherif and Asch, nor is it an accidentally achieved, virtually random result. Rather it is the expression of those microprocesses of the social formation of opinions that are also in effect in the everyday lives of the group participants investigated.

Group discussions with children, who also constitute a real group in everyday life, thus provide us with insight not only into their opinions and values regarding certain subjects, but also into the way in which they assert, reverse, align and (further) develop these-which I would like to refer to as "negotiate"-within the peer group. Group discussions give us insight into an aspect of "children's culture", which for its part is an essential context of individual development that is not only important "aside from" school and the parental home, but rather eclipses both the institutional context of school as well as the context of family life.

Examples of social processes of negotiation

In the following I will draw on examples from different developmental psychological studies to demonstrate how children negotiate opinions, attitudes and values with each other in group discussions. The examples represent different types of negotiation processes that can be found in nearly every group discussion amongst children:

The-successful or unsuccessful-direct social influence of individuals. One or more children attempt to change another child's mind by insisting on their own opinion, therefore without argumentation.

The (partial) reversal of attitudes and opinions on the basis of arguments, i.e. arguments and experience are exchanged that finally compel a child to reverse, modify or specify his or her previous opinion.

Co-constituting discussion development. In this type of negotiation process, a mutual reinforcement using additional examples and arguments

results on the basis of individual statements; if this interaction is concluded, a common development of idea contents or views can be observed.

2.1 Direct social influence

The *first example* demonstrates the successful direct social influence. It is taken from our qualitative research on the mathematical self-concept of girls and boys of elementary school age (cf. Billmann-Mahecha & Hausen 2000). Data was collected based on group discussions with second-grade girls and boys on the subject of mathematics. The qualitative analysis confirmed the central results of the available quantitative investigations. Over and above this, however, it resulted in heightened insight into the highly ambivalent self-assessment of the girls in regards to their capabilities, performance and effort in the area of mathematics as compared with boys. In addition, insight was gained on the significance of the peer group for the development of a mathematical self-concept, which has received little attention in existing quantitative research.

The boys have a self-confident and firm view, namely that girls are worse at math than they are. In the following passage the discussion leader asks the boys if the girls are also better than boys in some subjects:

DL: Are girls better than boys in some subjects?

Alex: Not in arithmetic! [...]

Markus: Religious education [...]

Marvin: But I'm good in that subject too! (indignantly)

Timo: They're good in religious education.

Markus: They're better than us in religious education.

Alex: Yeah.

Marvin: No, I'm very good in religious education!

Markus: But the girls are better in religious education!

Timo: Yeah, because the ...

Marvin: But I'm almost as good as the girls! (outraged)

After Timo, Markus and Alex insist that girls are better in religious

education, although he is still indignant Marvin intervenes: "But I'm almost as good as the girls!" In his male peer group, Marvin had to experience that religious education is considered more of a girl's subject. In this way, group opinions are created which contribute to the development of gender stereotypes certainly as much as the expectations of parents and teachers, as discussed in specialized literature (cf. Tiedemann 2000). There are several passages in our discussion transcripts that suggest the hypothesis that in addition to differential parent and teacher expectations, differential peer expectations are also responsible for the development of different mathematical self-concepts amongst girls and boys.

The *second example* demonstrates an unsuccessful social influence. Within the framework of a research project we looked into the question of how the historical consciousness of children can be investigated and we found out that the group discussion is a very fruitful empirical approach (cf. Billmann-Mahecha & Hausen in press). In a group discussion with second grade boys and girls the children thematisized by themselves the evolution:

Noah: It goes like this: Insects, then reptiles, then dinosaurs, then the ape, then the Stone Age people and then □ knights and then human beings.

Till: Oh, the knights came before Stone Age people did!

Noah: No they didn't!

Anna: Yes they did!

Till: They did! The Middle Ages came before the Stone Age!

Anna: Yeah. [...]

Noah: Imagine a Stone Age man with armor and a sword. What would that look like?! [...]

Noah: I think I'm right.

Till: I think I'm right!

In this passage Noah began with a demonstration of his knowledge. Till contradicted and was supported by Anna. Finally Noah tried to convince the others with an aesthetic "argument", but without success. Both boys emphasized

to remain on their own opinions.

2.2 Partial reversal of attitudes

The example for the partial reversal of attitudes is again taken from our studies on the mathematical self-concept of girls and boys. It shows how exaggerated gender stereotypes are corrected at a social level. It concerns the claim that boys are better at math:

Mirco: Boys. Much better! First, there are more of us, and second, there are much, much more smarter ones than girls, and third, we have much, much, uh ...

Max: ... more sense.

Mirco: Oh yeah!

Ron: Everybody has the same amount of sense!

Mirco: Yeah, but just, there are more of us.

Mirco initially received support from Max but retreated back to his quantitative "argument" following Ron's objection. By the way, statements of this kind with regard to content were not made at all by the girls; we do, of course, also find passages containing reciprocal correction in their discussions

2.3 Common development of idea contents

The third type of social negotiation process, which allows observing microprocesses of development within the peer group, is certainly the most interesting. An example from a project for the development of moral motivation (cf. Billmann-Mahecha & Horster in press) is well suited for illustrating this process. In this project we led group discussions with children between the ages of 8 and 12 about a story from the (potential) everyday experience of children. The discussion focused on a moral conflict: whether to ignore having seen a best friend shoplifting or to tell on her. In the following, I present and comment on the course of a discussion amongst four eight- to nine-year-old girls from a church-led girls' group. The girls are all friends and are in the same class at

school.

At the beginning of the discussion three of the girls make statements about what they would do in the case of a girlfriend who had observed the shoplifting incident:

Julia: Well, if it had been my best girlfriend, well, then I wouldn't have told on her, but I also don't think it's right that she, well, that she didn't pay. [...]

Anne: I would've paid for it for her and then told her the next day that I'd paid for it and that she should really give me the money. [...]

Sandra: Well, if I were Sarah [the girl in the story] I would go to my girlfriend and say that she should take it back. Yes, that's what I would've done.

The girls agree that the girlfriend should not be told on. However, their knowledge about the shoplifting incident also represents a burden to them that they feel they need to confide in someone about:

Sandra: It's always better to talk to someone about it than not to say anything at all.

Anne: Otherwise the problem never goes away.

However, in the girls' view the matter still has not been completely dealt with. They would also speak to the girlfriend personally, but not telling on her still has priority:

Sandra: Well, I'd personally go to Nicole [the girl in the story who shoplifted] and say: "Why did you do that?" or "Why can't you take it back now?". Something like that.

Julia: Yeah, or: "Can I pay for it for you?" [...] You don't want to, hmm, you don't want to tell on her.

Sandra: Well, I wouldn't 've told on her. I would've talked to her or something.

Julia: Yeah, yeah, talked.

Sandra: Well, that's what I would've done. Because telling, that's, if it's your best friend, then it would feel funny to tell on her.

Sonja: I would've said, hmm: "Didn't you have enough money? Then you could let me know and maybe I could lend you some."

Not until the girls agree that the girlfriend should not be told on and that they have to talk to her does it occurs to them that because of the incident, their trust in her might now be spoiled:

Anne: Maybe she couldn't trust her anymore.

For this reason, something must be done (e.g. by the mother) about the girl's behavior:

Sandra: [...] Well, someone has to tell her that you can't do that, because she might do it again and again, that's why, and so she has to be really punished so that she doesn't forget and so she doesn't do it again.

Julia: Yeah, and maybe she'd do it to, to Sarah and her other friends. And then they won't want to be friends with her anymore.

Anne: Exactly. Then they can't trust her anymore

Julia: Yeah.

At the conclusion of their discussion the girls developed a fictitious scenario in which the saleswoman knows the girl and her family; she might even be the girl's aunt or godmother. As we were able to observe in our girls' groups in general, they again focused on the relationship aspect:

Sonja: Yeah, if it was her aunt, hmm, and the girl, Nicole, took it home with her and the aunt saw it, hmm, then she'd probably think: "Why did she steal that when she could always be trusted otherwise?"

Sandra: Yeah, and if you know the girl then it's probably even worse. Why didn't she ask "Can you keep this for me" or something "and I'll come back later?" or something. [...]

Julia: That's embarrassing, too.

Anne: Yeah.

Sonja: Yeah. [...]

Julia: Yeah, and if it's her godmother, and if its her godmother or her aunt then that's even more embarrassing for her parents.

Sandra: Then her aunt'll probably get a bad impression of her and her parents maybe won't want that, and that's why it's even more embarrassing.

Overall, the girls worked out the problem in reciprocal, co-constructive

reference: Starting from the premise that they could not tell on the friend, even if she had stolen something, they first have to relieve their own conscience by confiding in someone. After that, however, there remains the problem of having lost trust in the friend. For this reason, the appropriate steps have to be taken as a reaction to the shoplifting incident. Finally, the girls reflect on how embarrassing it is for parents when it becomes known that their child has stolen something. For the girls, persons of authority can be confided in, but they can also exercise punishment. As is generally the case with our young participants, the possible reasons or motivations for the theft are not reflected on.

Closing remark

I hope that by presenting these few examples I have been able to suggest the potential contained in the group discussion method with children. On a *content level* it could be observed, amongst other things, which experience and which knowledge children contribute to a subject and which arguments they use to support their explanations. This provides important insight into the pattern of orientation with which they categorize and interpret their everyday experiences.

With regard to *peer socialization* it can be observed how children attempt to convince each other, whether and how they achieve a consensus, or how they deal with opinions that do not correspond with those held by the group majority. Above and beyond this, in group discussions one can discover how children work together to form ideas about the world they live in or-as the last example shows-how they work out possible solutions to problems and communicate their values.

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