

## Territoriality and Social Construction of Space in Children's Play

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In order to illustrate the social construction of space and the phenomenon of territoriality, free play episodes among 2-6 year-old children, selected from video-records taken at a day-care center, are presented. The selection was guided by the identification of interactional sequences in which either individual children or groups of children delimit, defend / fight over, or try to have access to particular spatial areas, in the course of several play modalities. The analysis highlights children's early capacities in terms of social use of space, construction and management of social relations. The use of "territoriality" and other terms to refer to temporary control over space is discussed and contrasted with the strictly biological and with the geopolitical uses of the concept. Functional distinctions between these several situations where the concept is used are suggested. It is proposed that, in the present case, territorial behaviors have communication functions, express interpersonal connections in the group and are part of the process of identity construction.

Index terms: Child-child interaction. Territoriality. Identity.

**Territorialidade e construção social do espaço na brincadeira de crianças.** A construção social do espaço e o fenômeno da territorialidade são ilustrados aqui com episódios de brincadeira entre crianças de 2-6 anos em atividade livre, selecionados a partir de registros videogravados em um centro de recreação. O critério de seleção privilegiou seqüências interacionais em que uma criança ou subgrupos de crianças delimitavam, disputavam/ defendiam áreas espaciais ou tentavam ter acesso a elas, em várias modalidades de brincadeiras. A análise desvenda as capacidades precoces da criança em termos de uso social do espaço e de construção e administração de suas relações sociais. Discute-se o uso de territorialidade e outros termos para designar o controle temporário de espaços, em contraste com o sentido biológico estrito e com o sentido geopolítico de território; sugerem-se distinções funcionais entre esses vários casos em que o conceito de território é utilizado, e propõe-se que, no caso em pauta, o comportamento territorial tem função comunicativa, concretiza relações de pertencimento a subgrupos e é parte do processo de construção da identidade.

Descritores: Interação criança-criança. Territorialidade. Identidade.

*O território não é apenas um fenômeno físico, geográfico ou político, é também um fenômeno psicossocial e de comunicação<sup>3</sup>*

(Carvalho e Pedrosa, 2003)

What is a territory? In ethological and comparative research, this concept refers to spacial areas which are more or less exclusively used by individuals or groups, and are defended

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through agonistic displays or interactions. The underlying functional hypothesis is that, in some species and under certain ecological conditions, territoriality favours the access to relevant resources such as food, reproduction sites or shelters or sexual partners. The circumstances under which it is useful to defend a territory

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<sup>3</sup> A territory is not only a physical, geographical or socio-political phenomenon; it is also a psycho-social and communicative phenomenon.

with a good cost-benefit relationship have been focused in a variety of studies. Territory is usually related to ecological factors such as scarce or relatively concentrated resources, since the defense of plentiful, and/or either too spacially and temporally scattered or too compacted resources would be a waste a time and energy.

For instance, in a study on weaver finches, Crook (1964, cit. Hinde, 1982) found relationships between feeding patterns, population structure (solitary vs gregarious and monogamous vs poligamous) and territorial behaviour in different species: insectivorous species were forest-dwelling, monogamous and defended large territories; seed-eating species inhabited savannah or grassland, and tended to be colonial and polygynous. These options make sense when the use of food resources and other characteristics of the habitat are considered. Insects are relatively scarce and scattered in the forest, and the nests of these birds tend to be located in areas subject to predation, as a consequence of nesting sites dispersion due to territoriality itself; males and females contribute to nest defense, a condition that favours monogamy. On the other hand, food is plentiful in savannah areas during certain times of the year, group foraging is favoured and reduces predation, and polygyny is possible because the female can raise the brood alone, due both to the reduction of predation and to periodic abundance of food. A combination of factors thus favours or unfavours territoriality.

Other aspects under which territoriality has been studied refer to causal mechanisms which regulate territory defense and invasion. There is evidence, for instance, that in several species the previous ownership of a territory increases the probability of its successful defense (e.g. tamarins, *Leontopithecus rosalia*, Bales, Miller & Diez, 1999); that intruders may have mechanisms to evaluate the duration of previous ownership, which modulates their trend to challenge residents (e.g. red-backed salamanders, *Plethodon cinereus*, Barto & Wise, 1999); that cannibalism can be a component

of territorial defense (Mediterranean tarantula, *Lycosa tarantula*, Moya-Laraño & Wise, 2000); on the effects of the outcomes of previous agonistic encounters in territorial and less territorial species (California and white-footed mice, *P. californicus* and *P. leucopus*, Oyegbile & Marler, 2000) etc. 1999-2000. [www.animalbehavior.org/ABSPProgram/Past/Morehouse](http://www.animalbehavior.org/ABSPProgram/Past/Morehouse)

This short reference to the ethological and comparative research on animal territoriality is meant only to illustrate the diversity and the distribution of this phenomenon throughout the animal kingdom, and to introduce the question focused in the present paper: is territoriality a useful *psychoethological* (Ades, 1986) question for human beings? This question was raised by our observation and analysis of make-believe house-building and house-occupation by pre-school children (Carvalho e Pedrosa, 2003).

The biological concept of territory was borrowed by the social sciences in order to refer to geopolitical phenomena such as national territories, meaning physical areas (over land or over seas) under the control of authorities that represent a nation; or tribal/ clan territories in the case of relatively sedentary human groups endowed with cultural, ethnic-religious and/or political identity. This meaning is sometimes extended to physical areas controlled by urban gangs, either of adolescents (such as illustrated by the classic movie *West Side Story* ) or of organized crime.

Is there a common – and, particularly, a psychoethological – foundation for these various uses of the term? How do the foundations of these several “territorialities” differ and resemble each other?

While playing with peers, children often delimit, defend and/or seek access to spacial areas; these behaviours suggest a reflection on the notion of human territoriality and on its possible functions in the social construction of space in human groups interacting in the here and now (Spink, 1999). This reflection is the target of this paper.

*On the procedures*

As in previous studies (Carvalho & Pedrosa, 2002; Carvalho, Império-Hamburger & Pedrosa, 1998, 1999; Pedrosa & Carvalho, 1995), the episodes that illustrate this argument were selected from videorecordings of children aged 12-60 months, during free play activities in day-care centers. The present selection was obtained from a database covering two years, with 30-60 minutes weekly records, at a daycare in Carapicuíba, São Paulo, with 24-60 month-old children (see Carvalho, 1994, for details on group composition and its alterations along the two years). Each session included 2-5 scan samples aimed at the identification of the children present in the session, of their activities and social contacts; and *ad lib* records of play episodes for qualitative analysis. The selection criteria for the present analysis privileged those interactional sequences where individual children or small groups of children delimited, defended and fought over, and/or sought access to spacial areas, during several types of games.

*Delimiting and defending spacial areas*

Episode 1 illustrates and describes an interactional sequence in which two groups of children dispute over a spacial area and agree about its delimitation.

*Episode 1.* At the sand pond, three boys (3 y-o) play with toy trucks, loading them with sand and driving them around the pond. At one of the borders, two girls (3 y-o) play with toy buckets and shovels. One of the buckets falls down on the truck "route" and its "owner" protests: This is our road! One of the girl replies: We're playing here!. The boy uses a wood stick to trace a line on the sand, delimiting girls'and boys'territories.

Some aspects of this sequence can be taken as compatible with the biological concept of territory: boundaries are signaled through verbalizations (boy: this is our road!) and later through physical markers; spacial occupation is reclaimed and disputed (girl: we're playing here!); and negotiation delimits the areas to be occupied by the disputing groups (one of the boys uses a stick to draw a boundary between

the territory of the two groups). No primary biological function seems to be implied, rather the use of space according to the meanings constructed in the ongoing games – the road along which the trucks are driven. Not even objects are disputed: the girls don't make claims on the trucks, neither the boys on the tools the girls are using.

Episode 2 is a basically similar sequence, during which the signaling of property is particularly conspicuous and contagious.

*Episode 2.* Three boys (3 y-o), standing at the door of the hut, call out and make gestures addressed to the neighbouring children: This is our house! Get out, kids!

Fabio announces it, and is immediately followed by his two partners, addressing the nearby group of children: *This is our house! Get out, kids!* Once again, this signaling seems to be structured by the occupied area and by the meaning it has been endowed with in the game, rather than by physical resources or objects. A similar verbalization occurs during an episode in which wood boxes are used as houses by three 4-y-o girls playing "neighbours": a fourth girl, on her way, stops momentarily at Nina's "house"; Nina, who's "visiting one of the neighbours", protests: *That's my house!* The accidental visitor leaves immediately.

What do these "mine" and "ours" mean in a situation where no resources are being claimed – rather, apparently, what is claimed is a certain temporary spacial organization? Before reflecting on this question, it seems adequate to report a few more episodes in which the communicative efficiency of territorial signalization, as well as the sharing of the notion of territory by play partners, can be highlighted.

*Communicative function: what access rituals point out*

The analysis of access rituals highlights the communicative efficiency of defense and signalization behaviours and of the spacial configuration itself, to which these behaviours refer. Access rituals are strategies used by children in order to access or to take part in spacial areas or in games undertaken by other

children (Carvalho & Carvalho, 1990; Corsaro, 1979, 1985, 1997). The use of these strategies implies that children understand the meaning of spacial configurations and the social relationships that they signalize.

Non-systematic observations suggest that, upon arriving each morning at the play group, the child often “inspects” the environment, as if to recognize its physic and social configuration. This inspection seems to orient his/her options in terms of where to go or what to do: for instance, supposing that his/her usual partners are playing at the sand pond, he/she will often choose to join them and their activities there; supposing he/she has brought a ball and the football field is not occupied, he/she may look for partners for a football game; and so on. The physical and social configuration of the environment contains information and orients displacements and choice of activities (cf. Campos de Carvalho, in this issue) – just as it occurs with adults entering a more or less familiar social environment.

The use of access strategies also shows that the child recognizes certain rules about spacial occupation and organization. For instance, the child (or children) who initiate(s) an occupation is usually endowed with precedence and with the right to allow (or not allow) the entrance of new participants. Thus, Kika (girl, 4-y-o) approaches the hut where Fabio, Jonas and Nicolau (boys, 3 ½ y-o) are playing and invites Tati (girl, 4 y-o) to join her: *Do you wanna play here?* Tati approaches the hut together with Gigi (girl, 5 y-o), but Fabio declares: *Only Tati can play here.* Tati gets in the hut with Kika, and Gigi leaves without protest (Carvalho & Pedrosa, 2003). A similar recognition occurs in the “owner of the game rule”: the child who initiates the game is entitled to create rules, attribute roles and give or deny access to new participantes (Morais & Carvalho, 1994).

Even for very young children, the group has a recognizable social configuration: frequent partnerships and group camaraderie are perceived. Spacial delimitations might function as an element that confirms and concretizes these perceived social configurations. Carvalho & Carvalho (1990) found out that access strategies are preferably used when the child is

approaching a “closed” group – i.e., spacially disposed in a circle, as opposed to “open groups”, disposed as a line or as a semi-circle. In the latter cases, the child tends to approach and place him/herself with no previous mediations. Furthermore, certain spacial areas may become associated to certain subgroups, either because they use them more frequently, or because these areas propitiate particular types of activities, characteristic of these subgroups; as a result, a perception of priority of access by these subgroups can be constructed, as well as an expectation that they will defend these areas against other individuals or other subgroups. Carvalho (1992, p. 82) describes one such example: “João (3 ½ a) and Nicolas (3 ½ a), were playing together at the woodwork table; after a while they stop and walk along the yard, approaching the football field, where the bigger boys (4-5 y-o) are playing football. João suggests: ‘Let’s play football?’. Nicolas: ‘They won’t let us...’. Nicolas is right: as they approach the lawn, Pedro (one of the big boys) runs toward them and frightens them away with menacing gestures”

Access strategies or rituals can assume several different forms: gradual approach and extended observation of ongoing activities; engaging in a similar or complementary activity; offering a pertinent object (Carvalho & Carvalho, 1990). In the age range focused here, most approaches are mediated by actions, rather than by verbalizations. But short ritualized verbalizations may signalize a perceived or pretended belonging to the group: *We’re friends, right?* (Corsaro, 1979); or the recognition of the partner’s precedence regarding space and activity may be expressed by begging his/her authorization: *May I play here? May I play with you?* In some cases, such as the interactional sequence of Episode 3, the mediation may be performed by one of the approached partners, functioning as an accomplice of the approaching child.

*Episode 3.* Two boys (3 y-o) are playing with toy trucks and shovels at the sand pond. Another 3 y-o boy approaches them and stands nearby, watching the game. One of the partners looks at him and says to the other one:

He is my friend. The partner nods his head in agreement. The newcoming boy squats and joins the game.

The delimitation and defense of spacial areas, as well as the use of access rituals, can thus contribute to concretize subgroup relationships and to signalize them to the larger group. The territory is, in this sense, a communication resource.

### **Final considerations**

In our observation situation, no cases of exclusive and permanent use of "territories" occurred. For instance, the lawn is not a prerogative of the older male subgroup – though their precedence regarding this space may be accepted, perhaps due to the high frequency of football games among their activities; or maybe because their distinctive cohesion and/or defense abilities are perceived. But this doesn't mean that other individuals or groups will never or only very rarely occupy this spacial area.

The "territories" observed in a group of children are typically temporary prerogatives. They are compatible, in this sense, with the concept of "jurisdiction" proposed by Roos (1968), implying control of space for delimited periods of time and/ or for delimited purposes, and warranted by some sort of authority: e.g. your office, or your table in your office; both territorial and jurisdictional behaviours would be functional in the ordering of group relations. A further distinction is suggested by Goffman (cf. Groos, 1968, p. 77) between temporary territory and jurisdiction: the former is defended on two grounds: 'keep out'; and 'it's mine', while the latter is controlled solely on the first ground, and involves no ownership claims, however transitory – e.g., a bus seat while you're sitting on it. Groos argues that this distinction is often shady, as when a person has repeated jurisdiction; he also states that the use of ethological analogies in human behaviour can be misleading, since "human behaviour invariably has symbolic or cultural content" (p. 82).

Leaving aside, for the moment, this somewhat controversial last statement, Roos' analysis does contribute to a distinction between the geopolitical or macrosocial meaning of territory and its microsocial meaning, pertinent to interpersonal relationships. On the one hand, geopolitical territories are clearly based on some sort of authority statement and recognition – one of the characteristics of "jurisdictions"; on the other hand, and differently from jurisdictions, they usually involve property and permanence claims. As applied to our play episodes, the concept of territory would involve a further different combination of characteristics: property claims are typically present; the delimited space and its defense are typically variable and transitory, and some notion of authority would perhaps apply as far as implicit companionship rules and behaviour expectations can be recognized – and rules, by the way, can be considered as cultural or at least proto-cultural phenomena (and thus not necessarily symbolic in the traditional sense? This provocative question goes beyond the scope of this paper, and is currently being addressed in our ongoing work) that are easily observable in play groups, even with very young non-verbal children. (Carvalho & Pedrosa, 2002; Mo-rais & Carvalho, 1994).

Moving a step further, some other distinctions can be suggested. Curiously enough, when the functional aspect is considered, the geopolitical territory seems to be closer to the strictly biological (or ecological, according to Roos) than to the microsocial territory. In the first two cases, it has to do with securing or maximizing access to survival resources (though of course there are enormous differences regarding the nature of these resources and the mechanisms of access in either case). In the microsocial context, as employed by Roos and as suggested by our examples, functional relevance seems to be displaced from securing resources to the management of interpersonal relationships – a functional analogy that, again, does not imply identity of causal mechanisms, which is not usually found even in the comparative analysis of different animal species.

Another functional dimension can be highlighted from our examples: the construction of individual and group identity,

which is intimately tied to the management of interpersonal relationships. When defending “our house” or “our road”, or when authorizing the access of certain partners, but not of other partners, to his/ her space, the child signals that certain individuals belong, or do not belong, to a certain group – even if the group is very shortlasting. Carvalho & Pedrosa (2003) suggest that territoriality expresses, among other things, the relationship network that constitutes the group: “Differently from what is usually assumed on a common sense basis, territoriality should not be lumped together with individualism: a territory is typically communitary, it differentiates subgroups rather than individual property” (p. 37). In this sense, the status of territory as a group and relational phenomenon goes beyond its communicative role. “Just like other communication phenomena, (it) involves at a time sharing and seclusion, nearness and separation: me and the other, we and the others – differentiation and fusion, the dialectics of sociability” (Carvalho & Pedrosa, 2003, p. 38). It could be added: the dialectics of identity construction, intrinsic to human sociability. Individual or group identity are built, among other processes, through social structuration and management of space and through the consequent information about interpersonal relationships in the group.

The role of space and of spacial structuration in the organization of behaviour is already recognized by current theoretical interpretations (cf. Campos de Carvalho, in this issue). On our view, the main contribution of the analytical perspective suggested here is to complement these interpretations with an emphasis on the child’s active role in the social construction of space – provided he/ she are allowed a minimum degree of autonomy and of resources for this construction, which can potentialize his/ her knowledge about the world, about others and, through them, about him/ herself.

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*Territoriality and social construction of space in children's play*

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