PLAYING AND REALITY: VERBALIZATIONS OF CHILDREN IN SITUATION OF INSTITUTIONAL SHELTERING[1]

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 ABSTRACT. This study aimed to analyze the verbalizations of institutionalized children about their relation with the environment. A model and dolls were used to represent the institution and people, respectively. Six children between five and seven years old, who have remained in the institution for periods between three and seventeen months, participated in the research. The interviews were filmed, transcribed and systematized by means of content analysis based on Winnicott's theory, using two thematic categories: the relation of the children with the model, dolls and objects; and the perceptions of children while playing. The analysis leads us to conclude that the verbalizations of children during playtime reproduce their relations with the shelter environment and provide important data about children living in shelter conditions. Playing with the model enabled the children to project their feelings and internal conflicts in the toys, which allowed the analysis of the repetition of real situations, symbolizing the experiences and assigning sense and meaning to their lives.
Keywords: Sheltered children; playing (Winnicott) ; 'Winnicott, Donald Woods, 1896-1971'.

BRINCAR E REALIDADE: VERBALIZAÇÕES DE CRIANÇAS EM SITUAÇÃO DE ACOLHIMENTO INSTITUCIONAL

RESUMO. Este estudo objetivou analisar as verbalizações de crianças em situação de acolhimento institucional acerca de suas formas relacionais no ambiente. Foram utilizados uma maquete e bonecos para representar a instituição e as pessoas, respectivamente. Participaram da pesquisa seis crianças entre cinco e sete anos, com tempo de acolhimento institucional variando entre três e 17 meses. Os dados coletados foram filmados, transcritos e sistematizados com base na análise de conteúdo fundamentado na teoria de Winnicott, em duas categorias temáticas: relações das crianças com a maquete, os bonecos e os objetos; e percepções das crianças no brincar. As análises nos permitem concluir que as produções verbais das crianças durante as brincadeiras reproduzem suas relações com o ambiente de abrigo e fornecem dados importantes da vivência infantil do processo de acolhimento. O brincar na maquete possibilitou deslocar para o brinquedo sentimentos e conflitos internos que permitiram a repetição de situações reais, a simbolização das experiências e a atribuição de sentido e significado ao seu viver.
Palavras-chave: Crianças abrigadas; brincar (Winnicott); 'Winnicott Donald Woods, 1896-1971'.

JUEGO Y REALIDAD: VERBALIZACIONES DE NIÑOS EN SITUACIÓN DE CUIDADO INSTITUCIONAL

RESUMEN. El objetivo de este estudio consistió en analizar las verbalizaciones de niños en cuidado institucional y sus relaciones con el ambiente. Se utilizó para el estudio una maqueta y muñecos para representar a la institución y a las personas respectivamente. Participaron seis niños de entre cinco y siete años, con tiempos de internamiento de entre tres y diez y siete meses. Los datos fueron guardados, transcritos y sistematizados conforme al análisis de contenido y a la teoría psicoanalítica de Winnicott, en las categorías temáticas: relaciones de los niños con la maqueta, los muñecos y los objetos; y las percepciones de los niños durante el juego. Los análisis nos permiten concluir que las verbalizaciones

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de los niños durante el juego reproducen sus relaciones con el ambiente de protección y proveen informaciones sobre el proceso de acogida. Jugando en una maqueta movimiento al juguete sentimientos y los conflictos internos que dio lugar a la repetición de situaciones reales, que simboliza las experiencias y la asignación de sentido y significado a su vida.

Palabras-clave: Niños abrigados; saltar (Winnicott); 'Winnicott, Donald Woods, 1896-1971'.

Introduction

Social practices such as referring, reception and care of children in the institutional environment are increasingly common, especially in the so-called "Third World", where alternatives for childcare as placement in shelter institutions are sometimes in dissonance with the economic, political and cultural reality of some countries. Within this perspective, the shelter environment can be configured as a context of environmental failure, i.e., a place that can hinder the healthy development of children (Winnicott, 1987/2006). However, the potential that children's shelters have to promote a good development cannot be disregarded. Thus, the significant recurrence that the role of institutionalization assumed over the years reinforces the need for putting this subject constantly in debate, in order to build a reflective and critical thinking on the amplitude of their influence over children (Orionte & Souza, 2005; Lima, Pedroso, Cruz, & Aguiar, 2016).

Every child is endowed with an innate potential to develop in physical, cognitive and psychological levels. However, to enable this process, the presence of specific factors in the surrounding environment is necessary. The considerations of Winnicott (1987/2006) indicate that one of the indispensable conditions is an environment consisting of good enough care, coming from a person fully identified with the children, both consciously and unconsciously. In this sense, the environment would be able to adapt to their needs, which would enable them to enjoy their existence, as they develop their bodily experiences imaginatively, discovering and relating with the external objects (Winnicott, 1987/2006). These processes enable the continuity of physical and cognitive child development, as well as of personal maturity (Winnicott, 1965/1993).

In the face of such considerations, the context of shelters can exercise the function of an enabling environment for child development (Siqueira, 2012), since, according to Martins and Szymanski (2004), the family is not the only structural reference for children, and being cared for outside their original family nucleus does not necessarily mean that their development will be jeopardized. Thus, we can understand that this context, substitute for family care, can, in many ways, come to realize and consider the needs of children and, consequently, to adapt to them, in order to provide them the indispensable care they require, as well as to keep them safe in affective terms during the sheltering period (Winnicott, 1965/1993; Rossetti-Ferreira, Serrano & Almeida, 2011).

Such sensitivity of the shelter environment rests on the existence of a person who represents a significant reference for the children, that is, who is spatially and temporally available to meet their needs and to facilitate the identificatory process between them, in order to mitigate possible traumas during the developmental process and give children the sense of continuity of existence (Winnicott, 1987/2006). In this way, due to these particularities, the institution may become a welcoming environment that identifies itself with the needs of children and provides them with continence, in order to offer conditions to affirm their potential and to enable their developmental process.

The care and its quality, providers of the sense of hospitality of the institution, is what will allow children to contact each other, their feelings and the enabling environment in terms of *holding and handling* (Winnicott, 1972/2001). Through this experience, children begin to feel interested in the other, not because of a sense of dependency, but due to the ability of the caregiver to identify with them, from the feeling "if I were in your place". This care does not mean the suppression of dependency, but rather the concept of giving children the opportunity to be autonomous, to satisfy their needs. In this way, caregivers demonstrate to be identified with and adapted to them, which leads us to reinforce the idea that the shelter environment can provide mechanisms that enable child development.

It is worth mentioning that shelters can provide opportunities for children to develop socially and emotionally. Thus, the moments of playing, in which social interactions often occur, provide exchanges

between them, so they can establish patterns of interaction that represent what has meaning for them in the world they live in. Therefore, playing is a process that produces subjectivities and means liberation, because children create for themselves, by playing, a little world of their own (Benjamim, 2009). When playing, children are capable of projecting their feelings, fantasies and internal conflicts in the toys, which allows the constant repetition of satisfactory situations, the symbolization of traumatic or pleasant experiences, and the attribution of sense and meaning to their lives. (Aberastury, 1992; Sperb & Conti, 1998; Dias 1992).

To Winnicott (1953/1975), playing is universal and particular to the individual, and allows children or adults to be creative and autonomous. It is important to stress that we consider *creativity* in Winnicott's understanding of the term. Thus, by playing, children can assimilate, elaborate and recreate the objects according to their experiences and through the course of their maturational development. Playing, at first a lonely experience, leads to the involvement in groups, and represents a form of communication. In addition, while playing, the individuals fill their potential spaces and conquer the opportunity to be creative to fully use their personality, since this creativity is what enables the discovery of the individual's self and the use of symbols that add up to the cultural life.

The referred author adds that besides the significations and senses, toys are also transitional objects, i.e., they are in the potential space: intermediate area of the so-called concrete reality and psychic reality of children (Winnicott, 1953/1975; Affonso, 2012). In this sense, the toy represents, for children, a way of insertion in the concrete reality, because it enables them to leave the position of mere spectators and to take on the role of transforming agents in their social context. Such change expresses the unique manner in which they are able to reflect, to order and disorder, to construct and deconstruct a world that is meaningful and that corresponds to their intrinsic needs, allowing them to work their relations with the real world.

The conscious and unconscious identification of children with a specific toy or playing contributes to the choice they will make when faced with a variety of options (Winnicott, 1953/1975). To Brougère (2001) the toy is, above all, one of the means to start playing; however, playing is only partially related to the toy. The activity of creating a toy implies in the proposal of an image to the child, a potential of seduction, which allows manipulations, in harmony with the suggested representations. In this sense, as children progress in their maturation process regarding the experience connected to the act of playing, the identifications with the chosen objects change, showing how some toys and games are inserted or removed from the daily lives of children at a given age.

This process of adding and replacing objects remains throughout the life of an individual. According to Winnicott's theory (1953/1975), the first identifying choice of the baby is the mother's breasts, where the mother is able to make concrete what the baby is ready to discover. The next is the playground phase, which creates the potential space, during the movement of rejection and acceptance of the initial object, where the act of playing starts to unify subject and object, personal reality and concrete reality. As a result, the child learns to be alone, i.e., to feel comfortable in his/her own company, as long as there is someone capable of providing security and availability when needed. And finally, as a result of emotional maturity, the individual exchanges identification with toys through cultural experiences and social coexistence. Therefore, the innate tendency of playing is to remain present in the life of the individual through several objects and experiences.

When children express what was fundamental to them as subjects of the experiment, their verbalizations while playing are ways of expressing the experience of a reality marked by ruptures and continuities. Thus, this study proposes an investigation of the perceptions of children in institutional care through their verbalizations during playtime with a model, regarding the environment in which they are inserted and the specificities of their relationships in it; its main characteristic consists in assessing fragments of a psychic reality marked by various experiences. It is considered that this information would be relevant to understand the process of institutionalization they experience and its possible implications, given the lack of studies that address the ideas and knowledge of children about the institution, its educators and reference partners.

It is important to emphasize that the psychoanalytic theory of Winnicott was applied to the analyses of verbalizations of children. In this sense, such data received the refinement of the transference process between researcher and object of research, i.e., the creative dimension of the mutual processes of

discovery and intervention was valued, in which the former is influenced by the latter, who, in turn, is constructed while the researcher advances in the elaborations and discoveries throughout the research (Freud, 1912/1996; Laplanche, 1987/1993).

Method

Participants

Six children were selected according to the criterion of convenience, five girls and one boy between 5 and 7 years old, linked to dorm VII of a child care institution. Fictitious names are used to preserve their identities. Table 1 illustrates the socio-demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Information of participants and characterization of the conditions of sheltering

Name	Age (years)	Cause	Time (months)	Siblings	Situation
Annie	6	SV	17	Yes	RMF
Fernanda	7	SV	7	No	REF
Joana	5	NE, AM	8	Yes	UN
Mariana	6	NE, MT	3	No	UN
Valquíria	6	NE, DM	4	No	REF
Vinícius	7	AB, DM	17	Yes	RMF

Captions: SV = sexual violence; NE = negligence; AM = alcoholic mother; DM = drug user mother; MT = maltreatment; AB = abandonment, REF = reintegration with extended family; UN = undefined; RMF = reintegration with maternal family.

Instruments

The spontaneous creation of playing while interacting with a model and with other objects (rag dolls and toys) was able to reproduce the activities in main areas of the institution used by the participants, such as dorms, a shack and external area, as well as the people present; given that these activities are able to stimulate the characteristic playfulness of children, they were instruments for the development of this research. The activities were performed in a child care institution located in the outskirts of a city in the State of Pará, in one of the rooms offered by the institution.

For the characterization of the children, we used an adapted instrument based on a previous study conducted by Cavalcante, Magalhães and Pontes (2007). The questionnaire contained open, closed and multiple choice questions concerning personal identification, family structure, history of institutionalization, current social and legal situation and children's health; they were filled using data from a survey of the socio-demographic information of the children.

Four 30-minute long sessions were held individually, and recorded, with each child. At the beginning of the first session, the objective was to assess the knowledge of the participants about what the model represented; then, the toys were presented, and were freely and spontaneously chosen. The sessions were planned so as not to interfere in the daily activities of the shelter. A video camera was used to capture the images of children in playful activities and for the transcription of their respective verbalizations. These transcripts are presented in italics to differentiate them from the lines of the researchers, which remained in normal font.

Procedure

Data collection. Data collection was carried out through an experiment with a model, which aimed to encourage the children, by means of playfulness, to repeat and symbolize their experiences, to enable the verbalization of their perceptions regarding the shelter and their lives. The sessions were later transcribed by the researchers responsible for the activities.

Data analysis. Data were systematized through Bardin content analysis (1977/2010). Thus, two thematic categories of analysis were created: the relationship of the children with the model, the dolls and objects, and the perception of children while playing. The construction of categories was undertaken by means of consultation of the films, their respective transcriptions and through a combination with the literature on the subject, which is mainly based on psychoanalysis. The latter, in turn, was based on authors who discuss the playful universe of childhood, the changes that the context of shelters might exert in children and the role of playing in these places. There was no concern, in this study, in finding evidence to prove established hypothesis, but rather in allowing participants to express their speeches, in order to analyze their emotional aspects and the implications inherent in the process of sheltering. The words have been transcribed exactly as expressed by the children, so that the specificities of their vocabularies were preserved and respected. To facilitate the understanding of dialogues by readers, corrections and/or comments were inserted between brackets.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Human Research (CEP-ICS/UFPA), under registration No. 146/11, CAEE 0135.0.073.000-11. It is important to emphasize that this survey is part of a larger project on the theme "Perceptions of children in shelters: the environments and relational forms". All the recommendations of the Ethics Committee have been met in the development of the study, as well as the precautions for the publication, including the confidentiality of the identities of participants.

Results and discussion

Children's relations with the model, dolls and objects

In this first category, we propose the investigation of the perception of children, i.e., the form of psychic elaboration regarding the model, which, in turn, symbolizes the shelter; the dolls, which might represent their families, the caregivers and the other children who live there; and the main identifying objects selected during playtime.

The way the children related with the model revealed a similarity in all of them: from something familiar present in their life experiences, the model was perceived as "home", that is, a place where they were able to freely express they creativity. Such aspect in common points out that, despite the routines that should be followed in the shelter, it emerged at some moments of playing as a place of freedom, in which they could impress a part of their subjectivities, and thus shape the environment, each in his/her own way and possibilities. This elaboration is consistent with the model of shelter engaged with the emotional and social development advocated by Siqueira (2012), whose environment with rules and limits is dedicated to care, so that children can trust it and see in it a good place to live.

This space of freedom can be noticed when Mariana (6 years old) recognizes in the model the space "shack" as a place to play: *"... The shack*. Oh, is this place the shack? *It is*" (Session 1). "What, what do you do in the shack? *I play. This shack is too small for me to play in it ... There is the ladder of the shack, the other ladder of the shack .... Only this here doesn't look like… only this here isn't*". (Session 2). Such perception is also consistent with the enabling environment proposed by Winnicott (1987/2006; 1965/1983), composed of people identified at some level with the children, who are willing to assume a careful stance before them, providing the favorable context for creative expression, imaginative

elaboration of experiences, both painful and pleasant, and enabling the continuity of physical and emotional development. In this sense, we conclude that only the existence of an enabling environment could reverberate in the child's perception of it as a place that provides freedom.

Most children, that is, four of them, freely associated the model with the shelter and, consequently, with their homes, which enables us to observe a frequent recognition of the place where they live and its qualification as their current home. This association occurred by the empathy they felt, during playtime, with the place "shelter" (Winnicott, 1953/1975). On the other hand, the state of identification occurs because the shelter plays, for the children, this nurturing role for their needs, enabling their development (Winnicott, 1987/2006). It enables the development of children's autonomy and the creation of a world with a reality that is no longer omnipotent or transitional, but shared (Winnicott, 1953/1975).

During some activities, the shelter sometimes appears as a place that can be "attacked and destroyed". According to Dias (2000), when children outsource aggressions while playing, i.e., direct their feeling of hatred for an object that is also the target of their love, it means they feel free to express themselves freely, that is, to exercise their creative potential without fearing the same aggression, formerly outsourced, will return to them, because a good enough environment has the characteristic of surviving childhood aggressions (Oliveira & Fulgencio, 2010). Such discussion can be demonstrated in the report of Vinícius (7 years old), as follows: "Where, where are you? *I'm behind the shelter*. Behind the shelter? Can we go out there with you? *No, there's a lot of snakes here*. ... And why are you there? *Because I am brave*" (Session 2). This dynamic offers children the necessary aid to signify different feelings and to feel as an important part of the world they live in. This, in turn, enables the ability to control their fears and develop autonomy, that is, the gradual progression of a state of relative dependency to the state of independency (Winnicott, 1965/1983).

In the dialogues of Annie (6 years old) and Joana (5 years old), it is possible to observe the psychic work of elaboration of fear: *"Then she ran because she saw a ghost*. Where mother? Where a ghost? *Inside here*. Who said there was a ghost? *In there*. But does the ghost really exist? *Let's take out the baby*" (Annie- Session 2). *"I am going to kill your entire family*. What? *I am going to kill your entire family*. Why are you going to kill my entire family? *Because I'm evil* (in this speech, she gives life to a car). Why are you going to kill us, why? If I give you this mirror, are you still going to kill me? *A magic mirror?* A magic mirror ... *No*. And now, what are we going to do? *Now we take the magic mirror*. Done, done ... The car is over. *The car is dead*" (Joana- Session 2). Such elaborations carried out by both children tend to enable the emergence of a stance that is creative in the face of their anxieties, and autonomous, able to assist them in the way it dealt with these feelings.

The expression of aggression, and consequently of creativity, while playing, enable experiences of protection and domain of fears, after a moment of imminent danger. In this way, the autonomy of children is intensely worked through a fantasistic elaboration of the necessary acts that must be employed to escape the threats and regain safety. In the dialogues above, this process consists of Annie's need for protecting the babies and in the potential that Joana's magic mirror presents to cause the death of the car, i.e., of danger (Dias, 2000; Oliveira & Fulgencio, 2010). It is important to stress that both entered the shelter due to sexual violence and negligence, respectively, information that is not dissociated from the frequency of their demonstrations of fear while playing. Faced with such realities, the institution acts as a facilitator for the process of development and subversion of the experiences they lived, which can be noticed during their expressions of confidence in the trustworthiness of the relationships of care they received, at the shelter and by the caregivers.

On the other hand, for some children, the dormitory included in the model is identified as a lost place in which they do not include themselves, and not necessarily their homes. We observed this situation in the speech of Mariana: "The house?! Hum... And what would these little doors here be, of this house? Huh? *The man's house*" (Session 1). Vinícius also refers to the model as house: "... Where are we going? *We are going to the house, to rest*. Are we going to rest? Where is our house? *We'll have to go by car*. We are going by car? Alright. ... Who is waiting for us there? *Nobody*" (Session 4). These statements suggest that, though the institutional context of shelter presents full opportunities to perform the function of a good enough environment, and so facilitate the children's development, it can also represent various meanings for each child, depending on how they symbolize their experiences in it (Fulgencio, 2011). Vinícius, when stating that nobody waits for him, and Mariana, who does not feel included in the shelter,

corroborate the analysis of Magalhães, Costa and Cavalcante (2011) about the eventual absence of individualized attention and privacy in the institution.

The feelings of loneliness and helplessness, expressed by Mariana and Vinícius while playing, point to the lack of a solid and satisfactory bond, which would make them feel unique and special. This absence, in turn, configures a possible environmental flaw in the attempt of transforming the shelter into a nurturing place (Winnicott, 1965/1983). This is related to the numerous demands that the caregivers must meet daily that, sometimes, tend to complicate the offer of individualized attention to the singularities of each child, as well as the large number of children there, which might hinder their binding process and prevent that their emotional requirements are met in a way that would enable them to feel appreciated in the institution. In this sense, we can realize that, despite the attempt of the caregivers to exercise the functions of *holding* and *handling*, due to situations inherent in the institutional routine this gesture is not always genuinely enabling in order to contemplate, with sufficient qualities, the care given to all children (Winnicott, 1965/1983).

Therefore, when the environment does not act in an enabling manner, children might not identify it as a place where their needs are met, as observed in the speech of Valquíria (6 years old): "Do you see this place here? What does it remind you? What do you think it is? *This one?* Oh yes, but what does this place remind you? Take a look at it like this. *Well... there... I don't know*". (Session 1); also in the speech of Fernanda (7 years): "Good afternoon, Fernanda. "*Good afternoon.* Do you know what this is? *No.* No? Does it remind you of something? *No.* No? Sit here with me, let's see. Do you know what this is? Doesn't it remind you of some place, something? *I don't know*" (Session 1). Besides the difficulties presented by the children to associate the context of the shelter with the model, there is also a possible impairment of the construction of their true self and of their world in the shared reality (Winnicott, 1965/1983; 1953/1975). It is important to highlight that the reasons for their presence in the shelter were family neglect and sexual violence, and in a situation where the ego tends to defend itself, a differentiated environmental movement, which allows the expression of their feelings and creative potential, would be fundamental for the change, for the process of defense (Winnicott, 1965/1983).

The child Mariana, during sessions 1 and 4, gives one of the dolls the name of her older sister, who is not in the shelter: "What about these ones? The girls and the women? What would be their names? [*The child says her sister's name*]. (Session 1). I don't remember your name today. I woke up forgetful today. [*Mariana says the older sister's name*]" (Session 4). It is worth mentioning that the child comes from a family consisting predominantly of women and the current location of the father is unknown, what indicates that, in addition to being a choice based on female identification, it is also an attempt to relive, in playing, the old family coexistence, as well as the elaboration of the current frustrations arising from the absence of the father (Winnicott, 1953/1975).

In another moment, Mariana says she will play as herself: "Alright, who are you? [*The child gives her own name*] ... And here [playing]? Who are you going to be? *You are going to be...?* [*The child says her own name*]" (Session 1). "Who do you want to play with, from here? *This one.* This one? Who is this? What is her name? [*The child says her own name*]" (Session 2). This gesture indicates that the shelter environment is also able to provide the child the opportunity to elaborate an image of herself and to develop her creative potential. Such consequences help the child to feel like a being endowed with continuity in time and space, fully capable of conducting her life independently and with the belief that everything can be accomplished satisfactorily (Winnicott, 1987/2006).

Mariana resorts to fairy tales and attributes the fact that her family have received assistance to the "snow girl": "But who is this snow girl who helped us? *She is the girl here in the mirror.* Is she? What is the story of the girl in the mirror? *She is good, she is good, very good*" (Session 2). When they enter the shelter, children do not know why they are there, and tend to assign the cause to an arbitrary decision of someone. The recurrence of the "snow girl" is the means by which she projects her fantasies while playing, enabling the elaboration of traumatic situations, in addition to being a means to conceive the opportunity to re-elaborate the anguish of previous experiences in the shelter, representing the significance of this process for the child (Aberastury, 1992; Winnicott, 1953/1975).

The children demonstrated ability to properly identify the objects according to the purpose of each one. In the speech of Vinícius, what draws attention is his relation with his bed and the act of sleeping: "*... This bed here is for me to sleep up here* [on the roof]. Oh, son, you're going to sleep on the roof today?

No. I am". (Session 2). "*Then the thief sneaked and stole the beds. The oven...* And where did he take those things? *To his home.* Did he? *No, he went to build a house. ... Then you went to check the room and there were no beds*" (Session 4). It is noteworthy that in these verbalizations the boy reveals aspects consistent with the events that occurred in his life. By externalizing the robbery of the house, he refers to his mother, who sold all their belongings as a result of her involvement with drugs.

Therefore, when he projected to the toy his feelings concerning his family experiences, he reveals the presence of a mixture of previous experiences and what he thinks and creates internally, which allows him the ressignification of them (Aberastury, 1992; Benjamim, 2009; Dias 1992).

Children's perception of their playing

This category covers the types of playing that emerged with greater frequency during the sessions with the children, in addition to others that, although less frequent, brought more significant content regarding what is proposed to be analyzed in this study.

The playing with cooking and/or eating was often chosen by the children. The following excerpts show that Joana demonstrates great concern about satisfying primary needs (food and hygiene), especially with the babies, pointing to a possible desire to take care of others or to elaborate the lack of a more fraternal and differential care (Winnicott, 1987/2006; Bomtempo, 2012): "Am I going to cook? ... What do you want me to cook for us? ... *Make something tasty*" (Session 1). "*The baby will eat alone. ... Take a spoon for you... Then give... Pass it to them. The babies are having gagau* [porridge]" (Session 2). During this activity, we can see parts of the institutional dynamic of the shelter and its routine, as this is the time in which the older children have contact with the younger ones, and they end up helping the caregivers to feed and assist them. This repetition characterizes the affective aspect of playing, which lies in the possibility of offering to children the opportunity to know themselves better, as well as finding, in others, the attitudes and abilities they admire (Siqueira, 2012).

From this interaction, we can observe the evolution of playing while solitary activity to playing as shared activity, from which will emerge the first bonds of friendship (Winnicott, 1953/1975). In this way, children tend to represent a good enough and enabling environment to each other, since, in a way, they end up performing the tasks of holding and handling among themselves. Thus, the activity of eating becomes a kind of creative act, maintainer of affective links (Winnicott, 1987/2006; 1972/2001).

Playing with housework and with objects was very common among the children's preferences: "And what do you want to do? *Only set the table.* ... And now, what are we going to do? *Put our little house in order*" (Joana, Session 1). In the speeches of Joana, the concern about tiding up the house and caring for the objects is constant. The contents related to utensils and household chores stood up in her speech, unlike Vinícius, who demonstrated greater concern in taking care of the little car: "Do you want to play with us? *I must take care of my car*" (Session 2). These aspects allow us to reflect about the presence of gender stereotypes, socially constructed in the everyday life of children, by means of these representations in playing. In this sense, playing enables children to assimilate such social constructions, parallel to the reflection, ordering and disordering of such content (Fulgencio, 2011). In that way, they build a world that is meaningful to them, and that corresponds to their intrinsic needs (Aberastury, 1982; Winnicott, 1953/1975).

While playing of caring for children and babies, there is a concern to meet their basic needs and to provide them protection: "*Where do I put these two little children? ... There are no more beds. ... We can take the babies... To the doctor.* Are they going to the doctor now? *Yes*" (Annie- Session 1). These aspects, observed in Annie's speech, corroborate the explanation of Aberastury (1992) about playing as a means of repetition of pleasant situations and elaboration of children's anguish. In this same sense, Vinícius shows himself always concerned about the importance of their rest: "*I will put the baby in the dorm.* Why are you putting the baby there? ... Why is the baby going to the dorm? Have you already left him there? *I have.* Did he cry? *No. ... I'll put him to sleep*" (Session 1). By playing *make-believe* (Dias, 1992), the children can work the situations of their everyday lives in order to better understand them, in the same way Vinícius expressed his desire to protect the baby and elaborate a situation of making-believe that will shield him from the adversities of life, situation that is consistent with the reason of his presence in the shelter: maternal abandonment due to her drug addiction.

We emphasize here the aspects pointed out by Bomtempo (1999) and Dias (1992) as how the social reality of children is revealed while playing *make-believe*, which reflect their social and family relationships, and their concerns in meeting the basic needs of babies. Both children have younger siblings and demonstrate a cultural experience common to low-income families, where the older siblings must take care of the younger ones to help their parents. In the same way that, by projecting fragments of their social reality into playing (Aberastury, 1992), they are able to fill their potential space by being creative, and make full use of their personalities (Winnicott, 1953/1975).

The children often perform the rescue of their family members while playing. In the following dialogue, we observe how Joana gathers the family to pray and ask for protection, a feeling of union that comes from environmental survival in face of aggressive and creative expression (Winnicott, 1953/1975), manifested by her at the moment she claims a car will kill her family: "they [family] are talking about what they are going to do to get rid of the car. *Only pray*. What? *Only pray*. Only pray? *We must pray, pray, but loudly!*" (Session 3). Playing values the imaginary at the expense of realism. The world represented by Joana, while playing, appears as a means of trying to escape from her current reality, and then projecting herself into a new universe, in order to discover other worlds, where there are people who are highly significant to her (Brougère, 2001).

To Vinícius, an important character in his speech is his mother: "... My son, where are you? My dear son, thank goodness I found you. Look, the mother of [says the children's name] is hugging him. *Why are you hugging me*? Because I was worried. The snake was going to catch you. *Why*? Huh? *Here I go again*. Are you going again, son? Why? *Help! Help!"* (Session 2). We can see the impact of her presence when, while playing, she embraces him and he questions her about the reason of the gesture.

The way Vinícius reacts to his mother's embrace while playing reflects his relationships of family care. According to Winnicott (1953/1975), the quality of the care received is what will enable the child to contact others, their feelings, the world and life itself. In this sense, we can observe that Vinícius' reaction demonstrates the lack of affective contact within his family. Therefore, if the shelter becomes a nurturing environment, which identifies itself with the needs of the child and provides him continence, it can provide conditions for the re-elaboration of bonds of care and enable his developmental process (Siqueira, 2012).

Final considerations

The study of children's perceptions in institutional sheltering through the analysis of their verbalizations while playing with a structured toy answers some questions and provides evidence that point it as an important source for understanding the symbolic constructions performed by children about their process of sheltering.

The experience of "playing" of children in a context of shelter has the function of enabling them to project in the toy their feelings and internal conflicts, which allows the constant repetition of satisfactory experiences and the attribution of meaning and significance to their lives. Likewise, it represents, for children, a way of entering the concrete reality since, through it, they are no longer mere spectators and assume the role of transforming agent in their environment.

Thus, the study points out that the context of shelter can perfectly play the role of enabling environment for the social and emotional development of the children who live there. This happens by means of the existence of people identified with the needs of children, who are willing to assume the position of caring for them. Thus, their attitudes will tend to provide an affective and significant *holding*, which will enable the expression of creativity, imaginative elaboration of experiences, creation of a shared reality and the interaction and participation in a cultural world filled with ideas, senses, values and meaning.

The present study also allows us to emphasize that, given the presence of a significant environmental flaw, the context of shelter might exercise the role of substitute to this flawed environment, i.e., it might come to be sufficiently good and enable the spontaneity intrinsic to childhood, the emotional and maturative development and the creativity inherent in the condition of being alive. A means by which it

allows such facilitation for the expression of potentialities is by providing the necessary context for the free exercise of playing and the constant elaboration of these painful experiences by the children.

The playful activities with greater significance and importance to the children, regardless their frequency during the study, were: cooking and/or eating; house work and care for objects; care for other children and babies; and the evocation of the presence of the family. They allow us to observe, especially: the exercise of caring for others; the displacement of fragments of their fantasies and social reality, for a possible elaboration of them; the repetition of pleasant situations; the socialization with other people, in order to find in them the attitudes they are able to identify themselves with; the ability of assimilation of social constructions; and the gradual transition from playing alone to playing with others, which allows the creation and maintenance of affective bonds.

It is concluded that the shelter can exercise a nurturing and enabling function for the development of children, which, through the identification with their needs, provides them the conditions to re-elaborate old experiences and to explore their potential. Likewise, if the essential features for *holding* are absent, such as the availability and the significant care of caregivers, the shelter might fail to fulfill the aforementioned function. However, it is still possible to provide conditions for the ressignification of painful experiences. This information is relevant to understand the process of institutionalization these children experience, given the lack of studies that highlight children's perceptions about the institution, the educators and reference partners through the analysis of their speeches.

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