

Cuidado, controle e contemporaneidade: Considerações sobre a relação adulto-criança

*Care, control and contemporaneity: Considerations **on** about the adult-child relationship*

Cuidado, control y contemporaneidad: consideraciones sobre la relación adulto-niño

Souci, contrôle et contemporanéité : réflexions sur la relation adulte-enfant

 10.5020/23590777.rs.v24i2.e13104

Anne Santos Stone  

Universidade Federal de Pelotas, Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil

Camila Peixoto Farias  

Universidade Federal de Pelotas, Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil

Abstract

This article proposes to investigate care and control in the relationship between adult and child, considering the crossings of the time and the alterity in the contemporary Western scenario. To make this investigation viable, the Laplanchean perspective is evoked in dialogue with other authors, using the psychoanalytic research method. In accordance with this perspective, the child is, from the beginning, confronted by an adult sexual world full of meanings and messages that exceed its capacities for apprehension and control. The destinations for the drive that the child builds are based on this encounter and on the care that the adult offers it. It is considered that the exercise of care and the exercise of control, which is related to it, presuppose a relationship model based on the otherness. In addition, the care demands a complex and indeterminate time from the adult to elaborate the affections produced by the encounter with the child. However, some aspects of the contemporaneity, such as the individualism and the suppression of the temporal dimension, seem to go against the grain of the time and the alteritarian bonds demanded by this practice. Faced with this apparent “disagreement” between the care that children need and certain characteristics of contemporaneity, it is proposed to discuss possible modalities of control in the adult-child relationship that can be disarticulated from the care and put at the service of the maintaining a contemporary “civilized” sexual morality.

Keywords: childhood, care, control, contemporaneity, psychoanalysis.

Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo investigar o cuidado e o controle na relação entre adulto e criança, considerando os atravessamentos do tempo e da alteridade no cenário contemporâneo ocidental. Para viabilizar essa investigação, recorre-se à perspectiva laplancheana em diálogo com outros autores, utilizando o método psicanalítico de pesquisa. Segundo essa perspectiva, a criança é, desde o início, confrontada por um mundo sexual adulto cheio de significados e mensagens que excedem suas capacidades de apreensão e controle. Os destinos para o pulsional que ela constrói estão alicerçados nesse encontro com o adulto e no cuidado que este lhe oferece. Considera-se que o exercício do cuidado e o exercício do controle, que lhe é correlato, pressupõem um modelo de relação pautado na alteridade. Além disso, o cuidado demanda do adulto um tempo complexo e indeterminado de elaboração dos afetos produzidos pelo encontro com a criança. Contudo, alguns aspectos da contemporaneidade, como o individualismo e a supressão da dimensão temporal, parecem caminhar na contramão do tempo e dos vínculos alteritários demandados por essa prática. Diante desse aparente “desacordo” entre o cuidado que as crianças necessitam e certas características da contemporaneidade, busca-se discutir possíveis modalidades de controle na relação adulto-criança que podem se desarticular do cuidado e se colocar a serviço da manutenção de uma moral sexual “cultural” contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: infância, cuidado, controle, contemporaneidade, psicanálise.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo investigar el cuidado y el control en la relación entre adulto y niño, considerando los atravesamientos del tiempo y de la alteridad en el escenario occidental contemporáneo. Para viabilizar esta investigación, se evoca la perspectiva laplancheana en diálogo con otros autores, utilizando el método de investigación psicoanalítico. Según esta perspectiva, el niño es, desde el principio, confrontado con un mundo sexual adulto lleno de significados y mensajes que exceden sus capacidades de aprehensión y control. Los destinos de la pulsión que construye el niño se basan en este encuentro y en el cuidado que le ofrece el adulto. Se considera que el ejercicio del cuidado y el ejercicio del control, que está relacionado con él, presuponen un modelo de relación basado en la alteridad. Además, el cuidado demanda un tiempo complejo e indeterminado por parte del adulto para elaborar los afectos producidos por el encuentro con el niño. Sin embargo, algunos aspectos de la contemporaneidad, como el individualismo y la supresión de la dimensión temporal, parecen ir a contrapelo del tiempo y de los lazos alteritarios que demanda esta práctica. Ante este aparente “desencuentro” entre el cuidado que los niños necesitan y ciertas características de la contemporaneidad, se propone discutir posibles modalidades de control en la relación adulto-niño que pueden ser desarticuladas del cuidado y puestas al servicio del mantenimiento de una moral sexual “cultural” contemporánea.

Palabras clave: infancia, cuidado, control, contemporaneidade, psicoanálisis.

Résumé

Cet article vise à enquêter sur le souci et le contrôle dans la relation entre adulte et enfant, en considérant les croisements du temps et de l'altérité dans le scénario occidental contemporain. Pour rendre cette enquête viable, la perspective laplancheenne est évoquée en dialogue avec d'autres auteurs, en utilisant la méthode de recherche psychanalytique. Selon cette perspective, l'enfant est, dès le début, confronté à un monde sexuel adulte chargé de significations et de messages qui dépassent ses capacités d'appréhension et de contrôle. Les destins de la pulsion que l'enfant construit reposent sur cette rencontre et sur le souci offert par l'adulte. On considère que l'exercice du souci et l'exercice du contrôle, qui s'y rapporte, présupposent un modèle relationnel fondé sur l'altérité. De plus, le souci demande à l'adulte un temps complexe et indéterminé pour élaborer les affections produites par la rencontre avec l'enfant. Cependant, certains aspects de la contemporanéité, comme l'individualisme et la suppression de la dimension temporelle, semblent aller à contre-courant du temps et des liens d'altérité qu'exige cette pratique. Face à cet apparent « désaccord » entre le souci dont les enfants ont besoin et certaines caractéristiques de la contemporanéité, il est proposé de discuter des modalités possibles de contrôle dans la relation adulte-enfant qui peuvent être désarticulées du souci et mises au service du maintien d'une morale sexuelle « culturelle » contemporaine.

Mots-clés : enfance, souci, controle, contemporanéité, psychanalyse.

Contemporary times are marked by changes in the relationship between subjects and time and otherness. These changes inevitably require subjective reorganizations and remodeling, leading, according to Birman (2014), to transformations in various human relationships, including the relationship between adults and children. In view of this, we will reflect on the possible subjective consequences of contemporary dynamics, focusing on the fine line that separates care from control in the adult- child relationship.

For the investigation we propose, we use Jean Laplanche's theory as a basis, in dialogue with other psychoanalysts who seem to agree with his elaborations on care, such as Ferenczi and Winnicott. To address the issue of control in childhood, we turn to Foucault's thinking. Authors such as Birman and Debord, in turn, help us develop a critical view of contemporary times, considering two main points of analysis: time and otherness, both fundamental to the establishment of affective bonds.

We emphasize that a psychoanalytic investigation necessarily involves the researcher's subjectivity, which makes the production always unique (Figueiredo & Minerbo, 2006). The production is also marked by the historical and cultural moment in which the researcher is inserted. This methodological model allows the theory to be put to work based on the interpretative analysis of social elements and psychic phenomena, considering that these reverberate in the research subjects (Dockhorn & Macedo, 2015).

We have purposefully chosen to use the term adult in an attempt to avoid reproducing the dynamics of subordination that exclusively attributes responsibility for caring for children to women. We understand, and do not deny, that the exercise of care in the current cultural scenario is predominantly carried out by women, receiving not only gender biases, but also other biases, such as race and class. However, by predominantly using the word adult, we are trying to indicate that care is much more related to issues involving the psychic availability of the caregiver than to the supposedly innate characteristics of a given gender.

Our reflection begins with two main questions: how can we articulate childcare – and its primarily alteritarian model – with contemporary individualism? And how can we think about the relationship between adults and the time of care, in a context marked by immediacy? We propose to begin this reflection with some considerations about the initial moments of life, which can provide us with support for thinking about the adult-child relationship in contemporary times.

The initial moments: some aspects of the adult-child relationship

Thinking about the early stages of life from a psychoanalytic perspective implies considering the priority of others for the psyche to be formed (Laplanche, 1988). At this stage, newborns are completely dependent on another person to exist. Winnicott (2006) highlights the importance of adults offering children an environment that is personal and human. When it comes to an environment with these qualities, we consider that it transmits them to the newborn, including characteristics that underlie them, such as affections, conflicts and marks of the socio-historical and cultural context.

According to Laplanche (1988), the beginning of life is marked by a fundamental anthropological situation (FAS): the newborn finds himself inscribed in the plane of self-preservation, totally dependent on an adult who already has an unconscious sexuality that is sovereign over other psychic forces. From the beginning, the child is confronted by an adult sexual world full of meanings and messages that exceed his or her capacities for apprehension and control. By messages, we mean the idea, also proposed by Laplanche, according to which these emissions are not found only – or even mainly – in the plane of verbal communication; they are also transmitted by complex systems of semiotic communication, which include gestures, mimicry, postures, looks, etc., all of which are charged with a significant function.

This original scenario that we have tried to describe, according to Laplanche (1993), has as its core the seduction by the adult. This is because the child, being a passive object of care, is confronted by an adult world infiltrated by unconscious and sexual meanings, as we have mentioned. It is worth noting that the seduction described by Laplanche is not a pathological relationship, although it may constitute one; it is based on the relationship between adult and infant, which is invariably marked and parasitized by the sexual unconscious of the former and its infantile residues (Laplanche, 1988). Given this, Tarelho (2017) warns of the asymmetrical situation of this phase: asymmetry between adult and child, but also asymmetry of the adult about himself, since he himself is unaware of the unconscious that he conveys to the child. In the words of Laplanche (1993, p. 755), the message transmitted by the adult is often compromised and, for this very reason, constitutes an enigma: “opaque for the person receiving it, also opaque for the person sending it”.

From the articulation of the elements discussed, such as the asymmetry that marks FAS and the child’s inevitable dependence on the adult, it is possible to think of a state of helplessness in the early moments of life. The state of helplessness is related, according to Laplanche and Pontalis (2016), to the caregiver’s omnipotence over the infant in the initial relationship. The adult’s seductive phenomena exceed the child’s understanding, since the means that the child has to constitute codes for translating their messages are fundamentally inadequate (Laplanche, 1988). The processes by which the child begins to manifest their subjective activity are secondary in this time described as original, a time also of passivity, helplessness and seduction (Laplanche, 1996). However, the child’s subjective manifestation, evidenced at a later moment, also occurs thanks to the omnipotence of the adult, because, during the time of passivity, the adult transmits to the child the translation possibilities to connect his or her drive, which until then was disconnected, disorganized and anarchic. In other words, the adult who conveys the enigmatic message to the child also conveys the translation possibilities of this same message. Tarelho (2017) indicates that the first active attempts at translation occur precisely in the face of a need for translation: the enigma, according to him, can be thought of as the engine of the symbolization process.

We therefore consider that the adult’s control and omnipotence at this stage of life allow the child to exist, since the child’s state of helplessness is what “decisively influences the structuring of the psyche, destined to constitute itself entirely in the relationship with others” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2016, p. 112). Here, we emphasize the fundamental decentering that marks the subjects, an aspect pointed out by Laplanche (1988), when he states that every internal world is constituted from elements introjected by the other. We reiterate that this “internal world” is intimately engendered by the context in which the adult and the child are inserted: both the enigmas and the possibilities of translating them are necessarily based on the social scenario in which the old and the new meet.

The excess of messages directed at children characterizes a disorganization of the drive, which, in turn, goes against the process of “cultural” organization. This is the central idea proposed by Freud (1908/2015) in “Cultural” Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness. This idea resonates in Laplanche (1988): child sexuality is sexuality in its least civilized, least sociable, least organized aspect – it is sexuality detached, disinvested. It is necessary to have a kind of strategy for including children’s anarchic drive to organize it around specific cultural references.

We can think that this inclusion is possible through instinctual pathways that are considered and socially determined as more “civilized”, that is, more appropriate to the culture. Freud (1908/2015) emphasizes that part of the process of adaptation of subjects in the context in which they are inserted occurs through suppression and renunciation of the infantile

instinctual, polymorphically perverse¹, with the purpose of “civilizing”, that is, constructing culturally acceptable pathways for the anarchic instinctual.

To think about this strategy, we discuss an idea proposed by Foucault (2008), as an author who dedicated himself to thinking about the problem of control: for there to be a “civilizing” process, it would first be necessary to determine and establish minimum elements, to make them subject to modification. In this sense, we speak of the delimitation of elements considered “uncivilized” in children, to modify them according to specific objectives, more “civilized” objectives. From this, it would become possible to establish a complex control mechanism, a “training mechanism” for children, in Foucauldian terms.

Psychoanalytically speaking, one of the possible destinations for the polymorphically perverse drive, considered “uncivilized,” is repression. However, this occurs after the establishment of minimum standards (Foucault, 2008), which, it is worth emphasizing, depending on the context. This repression, according to Laplanche (1988), occurs in at least two stages: the first stage, passive, is the inscription of the original signifiers transmitted by the adult, not yet repressed; the second is marked by what Laplanche (1988) calls a reactivation of these signifiers, which is felt as an internal attack that the child tries to connect and/or repress. Repression is only possible through the acquisition of codes that allow the translation of these messages felt as intrusive (Laplanche, 1988). These possibilities of repression, transmitted to children by adults, gradually structure the Ego of each of them. According to Freud (1908/2015), it is in this movement that our processes considered civilizing are placed.

At the same time, Freud (1908/2015) highlights that the renunciation of drives – or, this direction of drives through repression –, in the name of “civilizing” activity, is not possible without a great psychic effort by the subjects in an attempt to “include” themselves in these models. What we can point out from this is that the control of drives through directions in civilizing processes has a structuring character, although it also seems to have a limiting character.

According to the theoretical aspects discussed so far, we can consider that this psychic effort to construct destinies for the drive following the norms is made by both the child and the adult. This is because the child, with the support of an adult, gives new directions to his polymorphically perverse drive, since it does not fit into the logic considered “civilizing”; and, in the same way, the adult is confronted by his repressed childhood unconscious, with his drive renunciations, a point that will be addressed more carefully in the next topic.

Between care and control

Without another adult, a child’s possibilities of existence are threatened. The threat certainly refers to the satisfaction of their basic needs, but not only to this: we also refer to the child’s body-psyche and its elementality (Padilha et al., 2012). As we have seen, the other is a fundamental mark for insertion into a symbolic universe; for Laplanche (1988), it is only in the face of this confrontation that a human being can come to be constituted. However, even if there is a time of passivity of the child about the adult, it is also necessary for the latter to be able to adapt to the infants and to their time. According to Ferenczi (1928/1992a), an author with whom Laplanche dialogues at various points in his work, it is important that the adults who dedicate themselves to care can adapt to the initial needs and welcome the manifestations of the child.

Figueiredo (2009) considers that the exercise of care is possible based on the understanding of the singularity of its object. Caring, therefore, implies recognizing the other as another subject: another who has his/her specificities and who constantly, in the game of encounters and exchanges, redefines his/her arrangement of singularities. Therefore, while there is an other who redefines himself/herself, it seems necessary that there is a permanent search for the recognition of this other to make the exercise of care possible. To this end, considering the adult-child relationship, it is necessary that the other adult allows him/herself to be affected by the child, both by his/her attitudes considered “civilized” – or even idealized from childhood –, and by his/her inclinations considered vengeful and aggressive (Freud, 1921/2011), as a result of his/her polymorphically perverse, “uncivilized” drive. On this issue, Ferenczi (1928/1992a) highlights the importance of allowing children to act, to a certain extent, according to their impulses, so that, in this moment of openness to the effects of the anarchic drive, the adult can welcome them and, gradually, help in the construction of possibilities for direction.

Thus, as important as being affected is, in the face of affectation, being able to provide an environment that is capable of welcoming the anarchic drive, in this interim of actively participating in the processes of structuring the child’s psyche, with all the unconscious implications of this process, and limiting it, that is, participating in the processes of constructing “civilizing” directions. The limit proposed by the adult seems to vacillate between organizing – and providing the possibility of existence – and controlling, to the extent that it inevitably frames the child’s drive within norms considered “cultural”. The question that seems to arise here is: to what extent does the adult’s control move towards psychic structuring, enhancing

¹ The idea of a polymorphically perverse, anarchic infantile drive was addressed by Freud in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905/2016). In this sense, the satisfaction of infantile sexuality and its direction through the paths considered “civilizing” are still in the process of construction, therefore encountering little resistance.

the child's modes of existence, and to what extent does it do so in a way that de-potentiates them, rigidly (de)limiting the possibilities of "being" of this subject?

Part of this immense challenge in the exercise of care also seems to lie in this confrontation: caring refers to the moments in which the adult was a passive object of care and also to how his or her anarchic drive was welcomed and directed during this period. Freud (1914/2004) points to a revival on the part of the adult; Laplanche (1988), along the same line of reasoning, states that the adult is confronted by affects that refer to his or her own FAS. In referring to this, we are not seeking to support a determinism, on the contrary: the way in which the adult was invested as a child will not necessarily dictate how he or she will invest in his or her objects of care; the investments received are internalized and translated in unique ways, and new modes of care can be constructed. When this adult, faced with such affections during the care relationship, can make room for singularity and exercise recognition, he finds possibilities to create new ways of caring and, at the same time, for the child to be able to develop his caring capacities. It is through this gradual egoic development, which is constituted in the face of the care and control of another adult, that the child can come to assume his vital functions and begin to exercise care – and some level of control – over himself.

We conclude that the possibilities of caring for a child inevitably involve the exercise of control, especially when we return to the idea of the omnipotence of adults over the infant in the early stages of life. Control for "care purposes", however, seems to be based on the idea of recognizing the other, welcoming them and providing support for the construction of directions for their instinctual manifestations. It is often necessary for the adult caregiver to intervene, limit and directly control certain actions of the child, to care for and protect them.

Laplanche (1988), when talking about children's adaptation, points out that, at first, adaptive assemblies in the face of real dangers are non-existent. Therefore, it is up to an adult to take control, directly preventing the child from being exposed to the dangers that may arise. When we speak, for example, of a control that can recognize a child who is in a dangerous situation, we are talking about this relationship between care and control: a care in control – the control that recognizes the other as other, the other-child-subject in danger.

We therefore consider important an implication and direct intervention of the caregiver. However, according to Figueiredo (2009), the adult's ability to be absent is important, characterizing what he calls a reserved presence. During reserved presence, the caregiver needs to exercise the renunciation of his/her omnipotence over the child, opening ways so that the care relationship is not solely overlapped by the logic of domination and control. This flexibility also seems to make it possible for the relationship not to be marked by a control that disregards otherness and that tends to psychologically imprison the child.

For control to be based on acceptance and support for the construction of directions for the drive, it is necessary, as Ferenczi (1933/1992b) points out, for adults to recognize the child's submission, so that they can gradually abandon the so-called "tyrannical transference". But first, as stated, the adult must recognize the tyranny of this relationship. This movement allows the child to assume control, constructing their drive directions. This point is related again to how the control relationship with the other adult occurred: control for the sake of control, imprisoning, rigid, or control articulated with care, flexible, based on the recognition of the other? These aspects transmitted in the control relationship can mark how the child will relate to morals and ideals (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2016).

It is possible to think that control that is disarticulated from care is related to a weakening of the processes of recognizing the other and their singularity. We can consider that a relationship between an adult and a child based on the disarticulated control of care is closer to a "fixed" dynamic of domination of the former over the latter. Such a relationship seems to be based on a less flexible dynamic: a dynamic of pre-establishment of specific standards (Foucault, 2008) of what it means to "be a child", these intertwined with the adult's unconscious memories and fantasies, which cannot be thought of separately from the social context.

Even though adult dominance and omnipotence are fundamental aspects of the initial moments, they need to be gradually made more flexible. However, the flexibility of dominance seems to be possible only when the adult critically recognizes these models and fantasies – when he recognizes the singular subjective arrangement of the child with whom he relates –, trying to renounce to a minimum extent these specific patterns imposed by the historical-social context, even though, inevitably, these aspects are mobilized during the adult-child relationship, a point that will be addressed below. In this sense, we bring the idea that the flexibility of the dynamics of dominance and control is, in itself, also an act of care. We will continue this discussion by attempting to approximate elements that seem to mark the contemporary Western context.

Care and control in the contemporary scenario

To continue our discussion, we return to the idea of a "cultural" sexual morality: Freud (1908/2015) indicates that our cultural processes are based on a series of instinctual suppressions. In light of the issues that marked his time and context, he developed criticisms that, to a large extent, are directed at the norms imposed by religion, marriage and other institutions and at instinctual suppressions related to the demands of subjects to fit into them. Still thinking in this direction

but trying to “update” this idea of Freud to our time and context, it seems relevant to reflect on the paths our contemporary “cultural” sexual morality takes.

Contemporary Western society has some peculiarities that seem to make us think about the processes of subjectivation of the subjects that are part of it. We can point to changes in the relationship with work and production, with time, with space, with consumption, etc. This modernization of society, as Birman (2016) indicates, seems to impose new demands on subjectivity and, nevertheless, on the relationship between adults and children. This is because, according to Birman (2014), the signs that previously guided the world, directing modes of existence, have been displaced from their symbolic positions and places. It seems important, in this regard, to reflect on some characteristics that seem to permeate the relationship between adults and children in contemporary times and the possible subjective effects produced by them. Among the endless aspects that can be analyzed, we propose a reflection more specifically on time and otherness in the contemporary world and how these two elements seem to be linked to each other.

To think about the relationship of the contemporary Western subject with time, we turn to Debord (2003), when he points to an attempt at social domination of time. Time, according to him, seems to have taken on new nuances: it not only serves the production of goods – material and immaterial – but becomes, itself, a commodity. Since time itself is a commodity, it would be gradually expropriated from adults, contemporary producers and consumers. However, Debord mentions not only an expropriation of the quantitative dimension of time, but also, and especially, a suppression of the qualitative dimension. We understand that time, in its qualitative dimension, is a mediated, complex time, which allows the historicization of the subject, that is, the psychic movement between past, present and future.

Birman (2014) points out that this temporal expansion is an important dimension for the psychic experience of subjects and that the recording of time – its movement and dynamism – enables the processes of psychic elaboration. When we think of a qualitatively suppressed time, we are thinking of a less dynamic time, with less mobility, much closer to an immediate logic, therefore imprisoned in the present. When we talk about the elaboration of experiences, we are talking about the need for an indeterminate, non-quantifiable and expansive time, which seems to be close to what Debord (2003) calls qualitative time.

Freud (1920/2006) emphasizes the timelessness of unconscious processes, which operate in a dynamic whose linear and quantifiable notion of time cannot even be applied. We infer that qualitative time, marked by a complex relativity, has a great influence on the elaboration of affects, and vice versa. When we consider the qualitative suppression of time, we are considering, first, a possible compromise of the time for the elaboration of affects, but, beyond that, we ask: could suppressed time not also exert an influence on the promotion of sociability, on the time available for exchange with others?

Perhaps comparing Debord (2003) with Birman (2014) will help us think about individualism and the consequent unavailability to others in Contemporary times. Without qualitative time for dialogue with others, Birman (2014, p. 23) warns of a consequent “loss of the potential for symbolization of contemporary subjectivity”. How can we think, then, about issues such as a qualitative suppression of time and individualism, now seeking a more direct relationship with the exercise of caring for children?

When previously thinking about the exercise of care – and, therefore, the exercise of control, which is articulated with it –, we made some considerations that are worth revisiting: care moves through the processes of recognizing the other; and the encounter between adult and child produces complex affects that confront the adult with the moments in which he or she was the passive object of care (Laplanche, 1988). We also considered that the initial moments of the adult-child relationship are marked by a profound asymmetry between the child enrolled in the plane of self-preservation, dependent on a caregiver, and the adult, who, in turn, transmits messages loaded with sexual signifiers, unconscious to him or her (Laplanche, 1988). We revisited some of these aspects to try to indicate, first, that the time dedicated to the exercise of care, and all the complexity that it encompasses, seems to be much closer to a mediated time, which allows the intertwining of the present, past and future, as opposed to the time of immediacy, imprisoned in the present. Secondly, if we consider Debord’s (2003) hypothesis of a precisely qualitative suppression of time – a suppression of an elaborative, mediating time –, this seems to be in contradiction with the time of care.

Considering the issue of individualism, it seems that we are faced with another possible contradiction. Now, a context based on an individualistic logic seems to be at odds with care, since caring for a child presupposes a model that is primarily other-oriented. Care, as we have sought to demonstrate, is much more linked to relationships marked by recognition and dialogue with others than to individualism.

Given these contradictions, we assume that temporal suppression may require adults to work hard to organize, control, and synthesize the time available for the most diverse demands. This limited available time, regulated and inhabited by immediacy, thus seems to be deeply compromised by a level of organization that leaves little room for unpredictable, uncontrollable, and random events. In this way, the “events of childhood” seem to challenge contemporary attempts at control and domination, because they demand a qualitative, undetermined, and uncontrollable time for care and elaboration of the complex affects produced by the encounter between adult and child. Furthermore, these “events” produce affects that call upon otherness and end up disturbing the order of individualism – especially one of its main assumptions, which is control over oneself, an illusion of absolute autonomy.

Given these aspects, we see that one of the possibilities of the adult-child relationship, engendered in the contemporary scenario that we seek to describe, is to use strategies that aim not only to control the anarchy of children's drives, but also to control the reactivation of the polymorphically perverse drives that the encounter with the child provokes in the adult (Laplanche, 1988). These strategies seem to target the qualitative and complex time demanded by childhood, in an attempt to impose the functioning of a restricted, controlled and immediate adult time, since the anarchic drive disturbs adults' attempts at organization and the illusion of autonomy and control that they have over themselves.

We return to the idea that strategies for controlling children seem to initially occur through a minimal pre-establishment of childhood events considered to be disorganizing, through the creation of specific models of existence and through the attempt to organize and control subjects. Here, in this discussion, we refer more directly to discourses that aim to circumscribe specific models of "being a child," which are certainly biased by the creation of specific models of "being an adult." In other words, we are not referring to merely controlling adults, but to adults who are profoundly controlled by a contemporary "cultural" sexual morality that tends to determine the destinies constructed for the instinctual, mainly through the demand for specific forms of relating to time and otherness, which directly impacts the mode of relating constructed with children.

Foucault (2014) states that, in all societies, discourses offer organization, but also, at the same time, control, selection, classification and attempts to dominate random events. Childhood, due to the anarchy of children's drives, is precisely marked by random and ambivalent characteristics. It seems that these characteristics of children's drives can confront adults' attempts to control, who strive to excessively organize and dominate that which escapes control – the child's sexuality and the child's repressed sexuality, mobilized by the encounter with the child (Laplanche, 1988). To try to exemplify this issue, we can think of a child whose curiosities, observations and concerns about what is considered pre-established in "being an adult" tend to confront, denounce and threaten a disorganization not only of the social structures of control, but also of the intrapsychic control structures of adults. It is this potential for disorganization in childhood, both social organization and intrapsychic organization, both closely linked, that seems to be the target of adult control.

In this sense, we believe that a possible "civilized" form of excessive adult control over children involves controlling the anarchic and potentially disorganizing characteristics of childhood and that, by controlling, the adult rejects this child sexuality that disrupts contemporary "cultural" sexual morality (Freud, 1908/2015). At this point in the discussion, we consider that this "civilized" strategy of control by adults would occur through a partial rejection of the affections² provoked by the child. This partial rejection seems to appear when the adult deals with, accepts and allows himself to be affected by the "idealized" and "civilized" characteristics, circumscribed by the discourses of childhood, and, unconsciously, tries to reject, control and remove the anarchic characteristics that also abundantly inhabit the world of childhood. Freud (1914/2004), when discussing narcissism, speaks of the tendency to deny what concerns child sexuality, by the adult, which would be close to what we are trying to point out. All this indicates that a partial refusal of affection works at the same time as an egoic defense mechanism for the adult and a control mechanism for the child. In this sense, it seems that, in some situations, the relationship with the child would be more focused on a defensive resource, in which what is in focus is the threat of disorganization felt by the adult, rather than on the recognition of the child as another.

This, in turn, points to a possible compromise in the processes of recognizing the other.

In the name of this partial refusal of affection, the adult may attempt to exert excessive control over the anarchic characteristics of the child's drive, by resorting to the most diverse strategies, for example, through inattention, ridicule, excessive infantilization, excessive submission to the child's demands to avoid their anarchic manifestations, impatience with the child's attitudes considered "disorganizing", the need to overload the child's time with the most varied tasks, the need to quickly contain the child's discomfort with the most diverse means of distraction, etc. Therefore, the adult caregiver-controller becomes invasive, insofar as he or she attempts to excessively control and impose on the infant a qualitatively suppressed time, which compromises the construction of an alteritarian relationship, giving little room for management of the polymorphically perverse drive.

The manifestations of partial refusal of affection do not necessarily, then, seem to occur through explicit attempts at control by adults – perhaps that is where our difficulty in understanding lies. We also refer to an excessive control, often implicit, meticulous, largely unconsciously based, which strives to fit "being a child" into discourses that pre-establish synthesized models of "being a child". We therefore consider that the discourses that involve "being a child" and "being an adult" certainly do not are limited to explicitly stated verbal formulations, but that they "are said, remain said and are yet to be said" (Foucault, 2014, p. 21), which seems to refer to an idea of broad discursive diffusion. This proposal

² The idea of a partial refusal of affection was inspired by a discussion proposed by Kupermann (2009), when dealing with the radical nature of the refusal of the possibility of being affected by the other, imposed during Nazism. We tried to expand this idea a little further, by thinking about the refusal of affection on the part of the adult in the relationship with the child. Perhaps we can think of a partial refusal (which is what we try to suggest) and a radical refusal of affection. As a radical refusal of affection, it can also refer to extreme cases of mistreatment and neglect of the child, adult towards the child, in which there is a radicality of non-recognition of the other, making it considerably difficult or even impossible to exercise care, which, as we have pointed out, depends precisely on the processes of recognition.

by Foucault (2014) seems to dialogue with that of Laplanche (1988), when dealing with the transmission of enigmatic messages from complex, non-verbal semiotic systems. It is worth remembering that, just like the messages proposed by Laplanche, discourses are necessarily organized around historical contingencies and are, therefore, modifiable, being in perpetual displacement: they are disseminated in the most diverse and complex ways and are not static.

Drawing attention to the complexity and dynamism of discourses, we suggest a moment of reflection on what a “civilized” child might be like, framed within the current discourse on contemporary childhood: an idealized and controlled child, to the point of not disturbing attempts to dominate contemporary adult routine and the supposed control over the polymorphically perverse adult drive. What kind of child would be “rejected” by the current discourse on childhood? We can think, for example, of the vengeful child, the aggressive child, the distressed child, the agitated child, the child who questions, the child who does not perform the established gender norms, the child who does not respect (lack of) time in contemporary times, the child who cries incessantly, the child who removes the adult, even if only for a few moments, from individualistic logic, etc. Given this, one of the problems of this system of excessive control, in addition to those already pointed out, is that these aspects of childhood, “civilized” and “uncivilized,” can coexist. We insist that the anarchic, polymorphically perverse drive bears the mark of ambivalence.

When we talk about control strategies that partially reject the child’s instinctual drive, closer to the logic of non-recognition, we can perhaps think of a type of control that is partially disconnected from care. Because it is closer to the logic of non-recognition, it leaves little room for the child to elaborate on his or her feelings that were rejected by the adult, favoring the maintenance of the dynamic of domination of one over the other. We can consider that, by rejecting the child’s “uncivilized” instinctual drive, the adult can hinder the processes of acceptance and elaboration of the anarchic instinctual drive by the child itself, if we consider again that the investments received from the other adult will influence how the child will invest in himself or herself and others. Perhaps the child himself or herself will end up rejecting, repressing the feelings that were initially rejected by the adult, leaving no room to build other destinies. Therefore, the child’s instinctual drive, rejected by the child itself, would become circumscribed, just like the adult’s rejected instinctual drive, in excessively organized forms by “cultural” sexual morality, excessively synthesized by current discourses. What would be the possible subjective implications of this, both thinking about the child and the adult?

In contrast to this partial rejection of the child’s instinctual drive, Winnicott (1975) speaks of the importance of the child expressing his or her “uncivilized” instinctual drive to the adult by destroying his or her objects and, later, experiencing the survival of the objects and his or her destructiveness. When speaking about this survival, Winnicott refers to the adult’s ability, as an object, to “not retaliate”, not to change the quality of his or her attitude when faced with the manifestation of the child’s destructiveness. Winnicott suggests that it is by being able to destroy his or her objects and experience their survival that the child also begins to experience the creation of externality, of otherness, placing the object outside the Self. By placing the object outside the Self, the child can experience the gradual unraveling of the dynamics of domination, of control, of the adult. But for this to happen, there needs to be a favorable condition on the part of the adult: that he does not base his relationship with the child on strategies that precisely reject this “uncivilized”, destructive drive, and that he does not change the quality of his attitude towards the anarchic drive.

We continue our attempt to indicate the importance of an adult welcoming the anarchic child’s drive. At this point in our discussion, we resort to the concept of psychic plasticity, based on the proposal by Rodrigues and Gondar (2018, p. 247), not concerning the subject’s ability to submit to a power struggle or, then, about a capacity for adaptation, but rather to the idea of psychic plasticity as “‘resistance to’, that is, by enabling confrontation with what is established, what is assumed – which implies considering, then, the subject’s (dis)connections about order (including symbolic)”. This is because aspects such as chaos and disorder, characteristic of the anarchic child’s drive, potentially impute cracks in the subjects’ drive circuit (Rodrigues & Gondar, 2018), allowing space for difference, for the new. In other words, it is not only important to open a welcoming space for the child’s “uncivilized” instincts, but it also seems to be important for the adult, in terms of psychic plasticity, that there be this openness to the chaotic, to difference.

We agree with the importance of the processes of organizing the drive circuit as a structuring factor of the Self, but at the same time, when the psyche seems organized in an excessively fixed way, we can consider difficulties in accessing the multiplicity of experiences, often called upon by childhood. Thinking more specifically about the exercise of care, we can imagine that a psyche with little plasticity is a psyche that exercises excessive control over the child, by refusing the disruptive, the difference, being much more tied to discursive syntheses, to morality, to repetition, with little space for affections, for the unexpected, for creativity.

Such excessively defensive, impractical strategies, which refuse affection and launch themselves into the illusion of invulnerability, unfold into a mortified, rigid psyche that is, ironically, susceptible to abrupt narcissistic breakdowns (Rodrigues & Gondar, 2018). In other words, the excessive use of this defensive strategy of control through refusal seems to point to a narcissistic vulnerability in adults. However, we try to make it clear that there is an entire socially established scenario that not only favors the dynamics of excessive adult control over the child, but also reinforces it: we talk about a

suppressed and controlled time of adults, about a consequent compromise of the logic of otherness through individualism, and how these aspects seem to establish a contradiction with the care time demanded by children.

Final considerations

In this article, we reflect about the dynamics of care and control in the adult-child relationship, considering some aspects of the contemporary scenario. When reflecting more specifically on time and otherness, as fundamental elements for the exercise of care, we indicate the idea that they can establish a possible contradiction when we consider a qualitatively suppressed time (Debord, 2003) and individualism in contemporary times. Given the contradiction that we indicate, we consider that excessive and disjointed control of care, on the part of the adult, seems to be an important feature that marks the adult-child relationship in the current context.

Considering these reflections on excessive control, we suggest the idea of a partial refusal of affection, and some possible subjective implications of this refusal, both for the adult and for the child. The adult refuses, excessively controls the child's polymorphous perverse drive that does not fit into a contemporary "cultural" sexual morality. However, it is important to emphasize that these are not simple issues to discuss or resolve, or that their subjective effects on the child and the adult can be minimized. Precisely because they involve such complexity, we cannot resort to simplistic answers and indiscriminately hold adults responsible for exercising excessive control that is disjointed from care, since they also see themselves subjectively engendered in contemporary "civilized" sexual morality.

Perhaps one of the contributions of this article was to point to an apparent place of disagreement occupied by children in contemporary Western times, at least when we think about the compromise of the dimension of contemporary time and individualism, which are, as we have seen, closely linked. It was from this hypothesis of disagreement that we were able to develop some of our reflections and problematizations, to think about the insertion of the adult-child relationship in this scenario, and to indicate possible "consequences" at a subjective level. But we believe that many other reflections could have been and may be developed from such a hypothesis.

When adults retaliate by refusing, even partially, the manifestations of the child's anarchic instincts, they may be compromising the construction of a potential space with the child, a space for the transit and elaboration of affections, whether "civilized" or "uncivilized." In this context, as we have tried to indicate throughout this article, psychic plasticity, access to a multiplicity of experiences, and the encounter with difference and alterity would be compromised for both parties.

Considering that children will become adults in the future and will occupy the places called upon to exercise care for others, in which recognition of others becomes fundamental, we hope that our discussion will exercise a critical stance concerning how we currently welcome and care for our children. To conclude this article, we return to the provocation made to us by Freud (1908/2015, p. 389): "(...) it is fair that we ask whether our 'civilized' sexual morality is worth the sacrifice it imposes on us".

References

- Birman, J. (2014). *O sujeito na contemporaneidade: Espaço, dor e desalento na atualidade* (2a ed.). Civilização Brasileira.
- Birman, J. (2016). *Mal-estar na atualidade: A psicanálise e as novas formas de subjetivação*. Civilização Brasileira.
- Debord, G. (2003). *A sociedade do espetáculo*. Contraponto. Originalmente publicado em 1967.
- Dockhorn, C. N. B. F., & Macedo, M. M. K. (2016). Estratégia clínico-interpretativa: Um recurso à pesquisa psicanalítica. *Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa*, 31(4), 529–535. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0102-37722015042473529535>
- Ferenczi, S. (1992a). A adaptação da família à criança. In S. Ferenczi, *Psicanálise* (Vol. 4, pp. 1-14). Martins Fontes. Originalmente publicado em 1928
- Ferenczi, S. (1992b). Confusão de línguas entre os adultos e a criança. In S. Ferenczi, *Psicanálise* (Vol. 4, pp. 347-356). Martins Fontes. Originalmente publicado em 1933
- Figueiredo, L. C. (2009). As diversas faces do cuidar: Considerações sobre a clínica e a cultura. In M. S. Maia (Ed.), *Por uma ética do cuidado* (pp. 121–141). Garamond.
- Figueiredo, L. C., & Minerbo, M. (2006). Pesquisa em psicanálise: Algumas ideias e um exemplo. *Jornal de Psicanálise*, 39(70), 257–278. https://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?pid=S0103-58352006000100017&script=sci_arttext

- Foucault, M. (2008). *Segurança, território, população (Curso dado no Collège de France 1977–1978)*. Martins Fontes.
- Foucault, M. (2014). *A ordem do discurso (Aula inaugural no Collège de France, pronunciada em 2 de dezembro de 1970)*. (24a ed.). Edições Loyola.
- Freud, S. (2004). À guisa de introdução ao narcisismo. In S. Freud, *Escritos sobre a psicologia do inconsciente* (Vol. 1, pp. 95–132). Imago. Originalmente publicado em 1914
- Freud, S. (2006). *Além do princípio de prazer*. Imago. Originalmente publicado em 1920
- Freud, S. (2011). Psicologia das massas e análise do Eu e outros textos. In P. C. Souza (Trad.), *Obras completas de Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 15, pp. 13–113). Companhia das Letras. Originalmente publicado em 1921
- Freud, S. (2015). A moral sexual “cultural” e o nervosismo moderno. In P. C. Souza (Trad.), *Obras completas de Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 6, pp. 359–389). Companhia das Letras. Originalmente publicado em 1908
- Freud, S. (2016). Três ensaios sobre a teoria da sexualidade. In P. C. Souza (Trad.), *Obras completas de Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 6, pp. 13–172). Companhia das Letras. Originalmente publicado em 1905
- Kupermann, D. (2009). Figuras do cuidado na contemporaneidade: Testemunho, hospitalidade e empatia. In M. S. Maia (Ed.), *Por uma ética do cuidado* (pp. 185–204). Garamond.
- Laplanche, J. (1988). *Teoria da sedução generalizada e outros ensaios*. Artes Médicas.
- Laplanche, J. (1993). Elaboraões temáticas: Sedução, perseguição e revelação. *Revista Brasileira de Psicanálise*, 27(4), 751–782.
- Laplanche, J. (1996). *La prioridad del otro en psicoanálisis*. Amorrortu.
- Laplanche, J. (2014). *Sexual: A sexualidade ampliada no sentido freudiano 2000–2006*. Dublinense.
- Laplanche, J., & Pontalis, J.-B. (2016). *Vocabulário de psicanálise* (4a ed.). Martins Fontes.
- Padilha Netto, N. K., & Cardoso, M. R. (2012). Sexualidade e pulsão: Conceitos indissociáveis em psicanálise? *Psicologia em Estudo*, 17(3), 529–537. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1413-73722012000300018>
- Rodrigues, A. A., & Gondar, J. (2018). Elementos para repensar a sublimação: pulsão de morte e plasticidade psíquica. *Tempo Psicanalítico*, 50(1), 236–257. https://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?pid=S0101-48382018000100012&script=sci_arttext
- Tarelho, L. C. (2017). O descentramento do ser humano e o realismo do inconsciente na teoria laplancheana. In D. Kupermann, P. C. Ribeiro, M. T. M. Carvalho & M. R. Cardoso, *Por que Laplanche?* (pp. 15–50). Zagodoni.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1975). *O brincar e a realidade*. Imago. Originalmente publicado em 1971
- Winnicott, D. W. (2006). *Os bebês e suas mães*. WMT Martins Fontes. Originalmente publicado em 1987

How to cite:

Stone, A. & Farias, C. P. (2024). Care, control and contemporaneity: Considerations on the adult-child relationship. *Revista Subjetividades*, 24(2), e13104. <https://doi.org/10.5020/23590777.rs.v24i2.e13104>

Mailing address

Anne Santos Stone
E-mail: stoneanne@live.com

Camila Peixoto Farias
E-mail: pfcamila@hotmail.com



Received: 09/19/2023

Revised: 06/12/2024

Accepted: 06/25/2024

Published: 08/16/2024