

## THE ROLE OF SENSE-MAKING FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE I AND THE OBJECT THROUGH FAIRY TALES

**Maria Thereza C.C. de Souza**

University of Sao Paulo (Brazil)  
mtdesouza@usp.br

### **Abstract**

The main goal of this text is to present the role of sense-making in the process of constructing the notion of the I and of the object in light of interpretations of some folk tales. It is based on concepts taken from Jean Piaget's psychogenetic perspective concerning the notion of the object and the oneself, constructed at approximately 18 months of age and reconstructed at the representational level; the practical and symbolic sense-making of actions, and the relations between values as aspects of affectivity and the construction of knowledge. It also aims to illustrate the theoretical discussion presenting some data from investigation about children's interpretation of some folk tales, which research into the choice of characters and their admirable aspects. This might provide empirical indicators about I-related sense-making and value configurations in their relations with intellectual structuring in psychological development.

**Keywords:** Sense-making; Construction of the I; Folk tales; Piaget.

### **Resumo**

O objetivo principal deste texto é apresentar o papel da significação no processo de construção da noção de eu e de objeto à luz de interpretações de alguns contos populares. Ele está baseado em alguns conceitos retirados da perspectiva psicogenética de Jean Piaget referentes à noção de objeto e de si mesmo, construída aproximadamente aos 18 meses de idade e reconstruída no nível representacional; às significações práticas e simbólicas das ações e às relações entre valores como aspectos da afetividade e a construção do conhecimento. Pretende-se ilustrar a discussão teórica apresentando alguns dados de investigações sobre interpretações

de crianças sobre contos populares que pesquisaram as escolhas de personagens e seus aspectos admiráveis. Acredita-se que estes dados poderiam prover indicadores empíricos sobre as significações do eu e as configurações dos valores em suas relações com a estruturação intelectual no desenvolvimento psicológico.

**Palavras-chave:** Significação; Construção do eu; Contos populares; Piaget.

## Introduction

The main objective of this article is to present the role of sense-making for the construction of notions of the oneself and of the world in psychological development, based on the epistemological theory of Jean Piaget. Considering some concepts of this author the paper aims to illustrate the Piagetian view about values and affectivity (linked to the I related sense making) with examples taken from research over the last 30 years into children's interpretations of folk tales. Reflection on this matter rests on an approach to the field of Developmental Psychology as an area of knowledge suitable for investigating and explaining psychological processes involved in human development, from birth to adulthood, with its transformations and consolidations. We intend to demonstrate that Jean Piaget's genetic epistemology helps structure researches about the qualities of interpretations produced by children of different ages about certain folk tales (marvelous tales and fairy tales), in terms of sense-making and affective valuations attributed to the characters and passages from the plots of these tales. As known, marvelous tales don't have fairies and present enchanted stories with speaking animals, adventures, challenges and magical contexts. Fairy tales focuses on enchanted help provided by these women (the fairies) to the heroes or to the most fragile characters for facing the challenges. The theoretical core comprises theories of the first constructions of the real produced by children from birth to two years of age, especially all constructions concerning the notion of the object and the notion of oneself, which appear simultaneously and are revealed by the coordination of the actions of children of approximately 18 months of age. These constructions are the base for the sense-making process and also carried out at the representational level.

In the field of Developmental Psychology, chronological age traditionally indicates expected patterns of changes, above all for theories that take the biological factor as



the core of psychological development. Theories of development, including the piagetian one, classically organize progress into stages in order to indicate regularity in the overall paths which do not encompass all the particularities of individual stories, but which nonetheless express ideal sequences for psychological evolution.

This text is based on the Jean Piaget's interactionist perspective of development. In order to carry out the intended reflection, it shares with this approach the idea that knowledge does not reside either in the subject or the object, but is the result of a construction arising from a dialectical (or interdependent) interaction between them, and whose exterior element is the action applied to the objects (physically or mentally). Not just any action, however, but actions that are significant in a system of coordinated actions, and this arises from the baby's practical intelligence. Seeking to adapt to the world (a concept borrowed from biology), the system of the knowing subject (epistemic for Piaget) assimilates and produces an accommodation in order to know objects. This double transformation—of the object and of the subject—lends psychological development its characteristic of being dynamic and subject to imbalances of a range of magnitudes. One may say that the pursuit of better equilibrium is the goal of development and of the successive construction of states of knowledge. For Piaget, mediation par excellence is the significant action for the knowing subject in order to overcome the imbalance caused either by resistance of the object to assimilation or by a gap in the system itself leading to difficulty in assimilating the object. Piaget (1974) in his theory of equilibration, presents the several relations between assimilation and accommodation; between observables (what the subject finds or believes he or she finds) and coordinations (relations that are internal to the actions of the subject or to the properties of the objects). He also presents the different aspects of interactions between subject and objects for the construction of physical and logical-mathematical knowledge. Thus, Piaget's focus is not simply on any action whatsoever, but merely on those that acquire meanings in a system of actions that are coordinated to attain a goal (Piaget, 1936). Actions are interiorized, just as thought is socialized in the period from two to six years of age on average, providing new (symbolic) qualities for psychological development that will continue to all the life. One therefore can conclude that to understand how actions (physical or mental ones) became significant, it is necessary to follow the sense-making processes and to know the equilibration sequences in terms of intelligence and affect.

By making explicit how equilibration allows one to go from a level of less equilibrium to one of better equilibrium, Piaget distinguished between equilibrium and

equilibration, describing the former as a state, while the latter is responsible for the dialectical relation between subject and object and between structure and genesis. On another occasion we have applied this vision of interdependence or dialectic to the relations between affect and intelligence. (Souza, 2011).

The goal of this article is to present how the process of sense-making of the I, of the oneself, and of actions takes place, especially when thought becomes representational and logical providing conditions to interpret fantastic stories. Thus, we intend to illustrate the way in which sense-making is organized into interpretations that children of different ages bring to bear on certain folk tales.

### **Construction of the I and of the Oneself: The Base for the Sense-Making Process**

Piaget (1937) associates the construction of the oneself with the notion of the object, and both are part of what he called the construction of the real. In his view, the real could be defined as being made up of four categories: object, space, time and causality, which are constructed by the baby in the first two years of life, from a practical point of view—in other words, directly linked to the logic of its physical actions in the world. The constructive movement goes from non-differentiation between action and the object to which it is applied (action as a prolongation of the subject) to differentiation between subject and object, and simultaneously between subject and oneself, as an object among other objects. Piaget states that by constructing the notion of object permanence (which means knowing that the object remains integral in time and space, and relates to others in terms of physical causality, despite not being accessible to direct perception), the baby becomes capable also of conceiving itself as object and subject. He then states that this is the moment of development where the first awareness of oneself takes root in the child's mind. What is most innovative in the Piagetian concept of the construction of the real is that it begins before representation is evident as a form of organization of the baby's actions, which will only be systematically observed as of two years of age on average. However, since in his approach no construction occurs abruptly, we may think that entry into the representational world begins as early as the construction of the notion of object permanence, around 18 months of age.

In his work on the birth of intelligence in children (Piaget, 1936), the author had already developed the idea—amply illustrated with observation of his own three children—that rather than being symbolic, intelligence was practical and sensorimotor,



as a type of overall organization of activity (motor schemes). In the same work, writing about the sixth stage of the sensorimotor period (“discovery of new means”), Piaget comments that a new form seems to be already in activity, foreshadowing the overall structure of the following period, the semiotic function, defined as the ability to differentiate between signified and signifier; objects and their representatives. The semiotic function, therefore, indicates the new capacity built from the logic of sensorimotor actions: that of representing the world and the self through symbols and signs. The former are predominantly individual and not shared, while the latter present a collective character. Piaget’s ontogenetic perspective emphasized the interactionist and constructivist character of relations between the subject and the objects, revealed in the period between two and six years of age, by interiorized and symbolic actions as well as by the socialized thought known as preoperational. All the notions constructed from birth to two years of age are reconstructed in the new period, now with representational characteristics, including the I and the oneself. Thus, just as the baby in the sensorimotor period, from the construction of the notion of object permanence, can locate and relocate objects and the I in different systems of practical relations, so the child in the preoperational period can do the same thing with its mental and symbolic representatives, which substantially extends its cognitive capacities.

The construction of signifies thus goes from a sensory level to another level—which is representational and intuitive—and after logical, which we can observe, according to Piaget, in children’s beliefs about the world, about subjective processes such as thinking and dreams, and, according to studies by Souza (2000, 2005 and 2008) about the characters in fairy tales.

It is important to mention that according to this approach, symbols are expressions of the semiotic function, and are less interesting in terms of their content than in the way in which they organize the activity of the small child, such as symbolic play (playing “make-believe”), imitation and language. Although Piaget recognizes the relationship between symbols and subjective processes, as he presented in his text on the secondary symbolism of play and of dreams (Piaget, 1978/1945), this was not the author’s focus, choosing rather to analyze symbolic thought in its structure and not in its content, as he believed Freud’s psychoanalysis had done.

In terms of theorizing about the construction of the real, it is important to highlight the Piagetian idea of awareness of oneself or notion of oneself that enables one to infer a process of reflection and the notion of being, at the same time, subject and



object, which could not occur without a foreshadowing of representation. We can therefore state that awareness of oneself, when it becomes symbolic, reveals new capacities for sense-making about the I, beyond that which is described in relation to the interiorization of actions and is revealed in the interpretations of stories. This is the assumption on which the discussion we undertake here is based—in other words, that the I and the object, also made symbolic, assume different focuses in the small child's sense-making system, and progressively with psychological (cognitive and affective) development come under multiple influences, from experiences, social interactions, maturation, and above all, the process of equilibration. This discussion is thus part and parcel of the field of relations between form and content, based on a psychological theory of the development of intelligence and relations between intelligence and affectivity, coming from Piagetian genetic epistemology. It also includes theorizing carried out by the author and by Barbel Inhelder, his most frequent collaborator, and from concepts—above all, after his death—concerning the microgenetic aspect of interactions between subject and object (Inhelder & Céliier, 1996/1992). By differentiating procedures from structures, the authors emphasize the particular features of the former in their relations with the tasks and the role of the contexts in which they are carried out.

Procedures link up together and are temporal, thus depending on the characteristics of the context of tasks and situations to which they apply and as a result of which they change. Structures, in turn, are atemporal and relate through integration, higher structures having as substructures those that had globally organized the activity in a previous period. This taking into consideration of the peculiarities of the tasks and contexts enables the Piagetian psychogenetic perspective to understand in detail which aspects of the objects are emphasized and assimilated step-by-step by the knowing subject, and which are the interactional difficulties in evidence. In the 1992 text, Inhelder and Céliier comment that microgenetic analysis is not opposed to Piaget's macrogenesis, but rather complements it, by facing the epistemic subject as a psychological subject also. As early as in their text of 1979, Piaget and Inhelder indicated the possibility of placing the psychological subject within the framework of Piagetian research into development. Among specific factors of interest to Piagetian microgenetic analysis, familiarity with the task and the context within which the task is performed, stand out.

### **Folk Tales and the Piagetian Perspective**



For a view based on the Piagetian perspective, folk tales may be conceived of as objects for thought, and interpretation of them may reveal the qualities of notions, beliefs and theories constructed by children of different ages and levels of development. These tales are therefore a pretext for accessing children's minds in their affective and cognitive aspects. They are also a source of identifications for children, who see in their characters models to be imitated and the carriers of admirable and virtuous roles (Souza, 2005; Souza et al, 2008).

The best-known emphases for psychological analyses related to folk tales (fairy tales or marvelous tales) are Freudian psychoanalytical theory and Jungian theory. The former acknowledges that tales are instruments that could relieve children of their developmental angst, since they present characters' good and bad aspects as completely separate, which may help children deal with them. Tales thus represent symbolic contexts with which children identify, and in doing so can symbolically elaborate elements that in real life would not be feasible because of the suffering associated with them (Bettelheim, 1980). Jung's analytical psychology, on the other hand, focuses on universal myths and symbolism present in the tales, which when relived by children in particular stories provide them with encouragement for aspects of their subjective trajectories. Unlike authors supported by Freudian psychoanalysis, Jungians discourage interpretation of the tales in a therapeutic context, stating that their symbols should be taken in their original characteristics, which in itself would configure the therapeutic use of them. There are several uses for the tales in therapeutic contexts for children and adults based on the above statements. However, the use of tales as instruments of research into psychological development in line with Piaget's approach is recent.

Souza's early studies focused on the cognitive aspects involved in the elaboration of interpretations of certain folk tales by the Brothers Grimm (Little Red Riding Hood; Rapunzel: Three Feathers; The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids; The act and the Wolf). Analyzing the answers to questions on the stories as well as retellings by nine and eleven-old children, Souza (2000) observed three levels of reconstruction: the fantastical, the concrete, and the interpretative. The first has to do with a retelling in which children—above all younger children—insert new elements into the original story, changing it freely, sometimes to the point of hindering recognition of the initial plot. In the case of concrete reconstitution, the child is excessively tied to the details of the original tale when retelling it, insisting on the insertion of words and phrases verbatim, giving the impression that if they did not do it this way they would not be

retelling the story. Finally, the third model of reconstitution was called interpretative, since it described the organization of elements of the tale so as to enable recognition of the original plot, without the repetition of words and sentences, instead presenting syntheses of one or more parts. Correspondence was found between these three types of reconstitution and some general features of children's thinking according to Piaget's theory of the stages of intelligence, associating fantastical reconstruction (answers like *The Red Hiding Hood's grand mother didn't die in the wolf's stomach because he didn't bit her*) with a tendency toward preoperational thinking; concrete reconstitution with aspects of concrete operational thinking (answers as *The Wolf didn't bit The Red Hiding Hood in the woods because there were some hunters there and that would be dangerous for him*) ; and interpretative reconstitution with elements of formal operational thinking.(answers as *The Wolf didn't bit The Red Hiding Hood in the woods because his plan was to bit her grand motherat the first place*).

In later studies, the author's focus shifted to indicators of affective aspects of development (Souza, 2005; Souza et al, 2008), in line with Piaget's theorizations (1954/2005) of affectivity, such as values and interests. Although Piaget did not directly research affectivity because he believed it was difficult to achieve objective interpretations of it, on several occasions he presented concepts of possible indicators of affective aspects that were indispensable for him in the understanding of any behavior and responsible for the rhythm of psychological development, capable of hastening it or delaying it. Affectivity, defined as the energetics of action, is not thought to be able to create new intellectual structures, but participates in conduct with a regulating and motivational effect. What are the indicators of the participation of affectivity? In Piaget's view these indicators are the values and interests essentially responsible for the choice of goals and the actions that allow one to attain them (Piaget, 1954/2005). Some of the definitions of value proposed by Piaget should be highlighted in this text: 'value', as the expansion of the activity of the I in mastering the universe; as an affective interchange with the exterior (object or person); as the qualitative aspect of interest; and, above all, as the starting-point of the sentiments (in the case of values ascribed to people). It is thus possible, on the basis of research into values, to have access to affective aspects and the I in its relations with the world and with the oneself. With this goal in view, interview protocols were created for a number of tales by the Brothers Grimm, containing questions on choices of interesting and admirable characters and aspects, which enabled relations between the I and the tale as an object of knowledge to be characterized.





## Examining Relations between Sense-Making and Values through a Folk Tale: An Example

In this section two interview protocols for a classic tale (*The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids*) will be presented as examples that how sense-making process and affective configurations are related. They were created in order to investigate intellectual structuring and affective valuations carried out by children from 7 to eleven years old. In general the data-collection method followed a three-step process: the first was reading the tale to the children; the second was the child retelling the tale that it had heard; and the third was the interview itself. This tale presents a story of a mother-goat and her seven young kids. She must go to the village to take food and ask them not to open the door. After she went away, a wolf arrived and asked the kids to open the door pretending that he was the mother. The first time, the wolf showed his paw that he covered with a white paste but the kids didn't open the door. The second time, he pretended that he was the mother imitating her voice and, again, the kids didn't open the door. The third time, finally, the wolf entered in the house and ate six of the kids. The youngest escaped because he hid in the clock. When the mother came back he told her what had happened and they saw the wolf sleeping on the grass. They cut his stomach and let the all six kids free. After the mother and the seventh kid stitched the wolf's stomach. When he woke up he falled down in a well and died. The Mother-goat and the kids were very happy and cried out: The wolf is dead. The wolf is dead.

It should be stressed that the questions in the protocols fall into three categories: one, for checking comprehension of the tale; two, for asking judgments about the actions and attitudes of the characters; and three, for accessing values and choices of interesting and admirable characters and aspects, which is the main point of interest in this article because of the link with sense-making. Certain data will also be presented along with the protocols, revealing the qualities of the affective valuations and sense-making.

The first protocol created for *The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids*, is:

1. Why did the mother goat go into the forest?
2. Why do you think the wolf called the kids 'darling children'?
3. Why do you think the baker and miller helped the wolf?
4. Why do you think the kids thought that the Wolf was the Mother Goat?

5. Why did the wolf eat the kids?
6. What do you think the youngest kid felt when he realized he was the only one that the wolf had not eaten?
7. Why do you think the kids did not die in the belly of the wolf?
8. Which character did you like most in this story?
9. What do you think is interesting (= nice) about this character? Why?
10. What qualities does the character have that you admire (= would like to have yourself)? Why?
11. Is there anything you don't admire in the character? What? Why?
12. Who do you think has this (the quality just mentioned): boys or girls? Why?
13. Who do you think is the hero of this story? Why?
14. Would you like to change anything about the ending of the story? What?

Studies (Souza et al, 2008) have shown that younger children (6-8 years of age) tend to choose more concrete aspects of the characters, and admire them, such as youngest kid's size (being small), which enables it to hide inside the clock where the wolf could not find it. Older children (9-11 years of age) tend to choose more abstract aspects such as the courage of the youngest kid, hiding and then helping his mother kill the wolf by filling its belly with stones, after releasing the other kids who had been devoured but had not died in the wolf's belly. The younger children seem to be more related to their gender, stating that someone of the same sex is cleverer, braver and so on, even though in this tale the 'mother goat' character does not play a striking role. Nonetheless, younger girls tend to say that even though the kid was the hero, it was the mother goat whose idea it was to kill the wolf and this shows that girls have the best ideas. The results also seem to show that sense-making of aspects of the character seems also to have to do with aspects of the I (in this case, the gender). Representation of the I seems thus to come into play when children interpret the fantastical plots of classic tales. The data seem to indicate the need for further studies in which concepts such as constancy of gender and identity of gender are placed in perspective for analysis.

The second protocol was created for a cooperation research with the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, in which an interview was held according to the theorizations of sociologist André Petitat. In this case the specific object of investigation was to study



what the tale *The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids* meant to nine-year-old children in São Paulo and Lausanne. The protocol included the following items:

1. Interpretation

What does this tale mean to you?

I would like to retrace with you the steps you took in stating what the tale means to you. What in the tale led to this interpretation? What element of the text are you referring to? Which character do you mean?

2. Identification; preferences

Which character did you like best?

What do you think is interesting about this character? Why?

What do you admire in him or her? Why?

Is there anything you don't admire in the character? What? Why?

3. Construction of the relation to real life

Do you think the story of the wolf and the young kids really took place?

Does the story make you think about the real, everyday world? Did it make you think that you or other children might be alone at home? Thinking about children on their own at home, what do you think might happen?

4. Interference of the questionnaire in the interpretation

What answer would you give me now if I asked you again what the tale means to you? Why have you changed your answer? (if there has been a change)

It can be seen that in this case the intention was to follow children's reflective paths in their construction of meanings for the tale, from the first triggering question (*What does this tale mean?*) to the interview's last question (*What answer would you give me now if I asked you again what the tale means?*). Additionally, the goal was to gather information on relations between the tale (the fictional world) and the real world (item 3). Some differences were observed between the answers of the Brazilian and Swiss children, particularly in regard to the range of possibilities of meaning for the tale, in accordance with the categories created for the analysis (Petitat, de Souza & Raccimolo, 2010). Swiss children presented only an answer for the question about *what do you think that the tale means*. They said that it means that *we must never*

*open the door for strangers*. Brazilian children said that the story means that *when we are alone at home we have to be careful with strangers that can knock at the door; we have to let the neighbors know that we are alone, we have to call someone before the stranger entered into the house*, etc... Thus, in this study, since the children were the same age and theoretically at the same level of development (the logical one), they gave different answers. These differences were interpreted as related to the children's different family contexts, particularly the advice given to them by their parents about what to do if a stranger comes knocking (the issue in the story in question). In Lausanne the children showed one single possible attitude for a stranger, which was not to open the door, whereas in São Paulo children displayed mentioned this response as well as others such as letting neighbors know there was a threat concerning the stranger at the door. This decrease of possibilities of interpretation by Swiss children led the Brazilian researcher ask to the Swiss researcher informally how old Swiss children might be when they were left alone at home and what advice parents gave their children on leaving them home alone; the answer was that only older children (over 11-12 years of age) can stay home alone, and that parents emphasize strongly that their children cannot talk to strangers. The word *étranger* (strange) in french has two main meanings: someone that come from another country and someone that we don't know, that is not familiar. The families do not allow their children talk with strangers in trains or squares. Brazilian parents also prohibit this but also give them suggestions about what they can do if they have to deal with strangers. There is a possibility of reflection about the data that makes one think that further studies could be carried out in a range of family contexts and educational practices to investigate how value configurations of actions and behaviors in these situations might affect children's sense-making of narratives presented as classic tales.

In conclusion, we can state that the interpretation of classic tales seems to reveal aspects of psychological processes of the construction of meanings of the world and the I, as well as values that regulate actions and interpretations of stories. Jean Piaget's epistemological theory can contribute to reflection upon and analysis of these constructive processes, pointing up elements of dialectical relations between the subject and the object as well as of psychological development in its affective and cognitive dimensions. Further studies using folk tales in a piagetian view may help establish better empirical indicators of the sense-making process, the evaluative settings and also the different social contexts.



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