ABSTRACT
In Brazil, children and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 15 years spent, in 2009, on average, 20 hours per week on domestic chores with boys spending a total of 10 hours and girls a total of 25 hours per week (IPEA, 2012). Additional data shows an increase in female insertion in the labour market (IBGE, 2012). However, this increase has not resulted in changes in the type of toys and children’s games. From earlier times, gender differentiation is part of a child’s play universe, and because of this differentiation, a child learns how to distinguish between toys and games designed for boys and girls. (MARCILIO, 2015). Therefore, our inquiry revolves around the type of messages children receive from their families, the media, and culture in general, that produce the gender differentiation in the way they play. Based on accounts from elderly people on old forms of play and observations of how children play nowadays, this article seeks to introduce questions relating to these differentiations and how they can reinforce stereotypes and gender roles in society and how they influence what children learn during childhood as they play. The methodology for this study was based on oral history and observation. We interviewed 13 elderly participants and observed 340 children in two districts in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. The study determined that the act of playing nowadays shows subtle differences in relation to the past and gender issues are reinforced in the discourses and messages found in children’s toys and games.

KEYWORDS
Childhood; play; culture; gender; memory.

Children’s games: Children’s rights and gender

This article is the result of a research conducted in the districts of Penha and Cangaiba both in the city of São Paulo, Brazil that identified children’s games from past and present. During the development of this research, we noted that from earlier times, gender differentiations are part of the child’s play universe, and it is under this condition that a child learns how to distinguish toys and games designed for boys and girls. The main purpose of this study is to present the information gathered from statements by elderly people about recreation in the past combined with observations of play time nowadays. This work will demonstrate these differences and how they can reinforce stereotypes and gender roles in society, which are influenced by what children learn during childhood as they play.

According to Ariès (2006), childhood became a specific age category in the XVII century. Before then, childhood did not exist as a specific human life period; children would develop socially in a group of adults that taught them what was necessary. Postman (1999) states that childhood is an invention and a social artefact on the verge of extinction due to several factors such as eroticism for girls, the similarity of children and adult’s clothes, and children who need to perform domestic chores, from cleaning to caring for younger siblings.

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With respect to domestic chores, a research developed by the Research Institute of Applied Economics – IPEA, (2012), which was based on gender and race disparity data from the National Research on Household – PNAD, (2009) showed that 24% of girls aged 5 to 9 dedicated 6 hours per week, on average, to domestic chores in their own homes, whereas 14.6% of boys committed 5 hours per week. Thus, the work gender difference starts in childhood. Notwithstanding the fact that average weekly time dedicated to domestic work increases with age, the gender difference persists throughout the lives of men and women. In the researched age range, children and adolescent between the ages of 10 and 15 years spent on average 20 hours per week on domestic chores with boys spending 10 hours and girls 25 hours per week. We point out that among boys of this age range, 49% stated that they performed housework compared to 88% of girls.

From a very early age, girls learn how to play within a domestic environment. For example, playhouse, mothers and babies, reproducing family roles (mothers, grandmothers, and aunts), using objects that imitate household items (pans, plates, glasses, kitchen, brooms, food, baby prams, among others). It is important to analyse the messages conveyed to girls by this form of play and toys and the relation to the findings of the research by IPEA and PNAD in Brazil. Additionally, it is necessary to understand how domestic work can interfere with the time that should be used for playing. The Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988 secures the child and adolescent’s the right to leisure, culture, respect and freedom, besides placing them above any form of discrimination.

As children and adolescents need to perform domestic chores during the time they are not at school, time that should be used for ludic and cultural activities necessary for their life experience, mental and physical health, they do not have their rights protected, specially girls, in the context presented by the IPEA and PNAD researches. To play is a right stipulated in Article 16 of the Children and Adolescent Act in Brazil: “The right to freedom incorporates the following aspects: the right to come and go, to be in public places and use communities areas; to have freedom of speech, to play, to practice sports activities, the right to entertainment; and to participate in the family and community life” (BRAZIL, 1990, p.11-32).

On the other hand, women have been entering the labour market over the years differently from what was the case during the 1930’s and 1960’s when mothers were at home taking care of their children in the districts of Penha and Cangaíba, São Paulo – Brazil. According to the Monthly Employment Research – PME, of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – IBGE (2012), with the exception of domestic and military work as well as civil servants, men represented the majority of the working population in several forms of work and this was the scenario both in 2003 and 2011. Even with male preponderance, we can see that the gap between men and women in the marketplace was reduced in 2011, with women increasing their participation in all kinds of occupation. In 2003, for example, the proportion of men with an employee’s work register in the private sector was 62.3%, whereas 37.7% belonged to women, making a difference of 24.7 percentage points. In 2011, these proportions were 59.6% and 40.4% respectively, decreasing the difference to 19.1 percentage points. The largest growth in female participation in the labour market happened in the private sector, but without the employee’s work register, showing a difference of 26.9 percentage points in 2003 (63.5% male and 36.5% female) and 19.1 percentage points in 2011 (59.5% male and 40.5% female).

Despite the noticeable growth of female entrance in the workforce, it is common to observe a division of roles between boys and girls, with girls performing tasks connected to the
home environment and caring of children. This behaviour directly relates to culture and discourses about “being a man” and “being a woman”. According to Foucault (1999a), the discourse would be an explanation of the world, a verbalization of a reality. He believes that the order of discourse is found in the order of laws. The production of discourses in every society is controlled, selected, organized and redistributed in such a way that its powers and dangers are diverted from its materiality. Foucault stated that a discourse becomes dangerous when it servers interests and when it can be used to marginalize and discriminate. On many occasions, individuals adopt a particular discourse to disguise and replace realities, guarantee positions and exert dominance. Knowing how to make use of a discourse means to control others. Do the discourses that are present in children’s games seek to strengthen the role of women as home carers and mothers?

Not least important, we identified speeches that diminish the act of playing as something unnecessary or a waste of time. At the same time that playing is simple it can also be seen as something “dangerous” since boys or girls can not perform certain games. Going against the concept that playing is simplistic and functional there are concepts and ideas related to this circumstance and cultural manifestation that are essential for the development of human beings. According to Huizinga (2005), playing represents a break from daily life; it has elements of make-believe; it completely absorbs who is playing; it has significance; it has its own rules and purpose; it manifests outside of immediate material interests and individual satisfaction of biological needs; it is serious; it is a cultural phenomenon, and when it reaches its end it is retained by memory. Caillois (1990) tells us that toys fall into the category of imitation: “thereof the success of accessory items and thumbnail toys that reproduce tools, utensils, guns and machines used by the elders” (p. 41). A child can then play by imitating adults. According to Bomtempo (2010), a symbolic game has been receiving influence from cinema, television, and cartoons which make it more “elaborated and sophisticated” (p. 68). It is understood that a symbolic game is present in several children’s activities, such as jigsaw, playing chess or playing with dolls.

Several authors consider the act of playing as a cultural expression and for Bomtempo (2012), for example, “it is through the act of playing that a child assimilates the ethical values of the society to which he belongs” (p. 22). Benjamin (2009) points out that playing always relates to culture whether a child is absorbing culture or producing it. For Winnicott (1975), a child creates his own world from fragments that he collects from culture. Similarly, as a child projects something in games that comes from inside and outside, the act of playing is an action over objects and a child has an active participation. Therefore, we could understand that it is through playing that a child learns about a culture and can transform it.

Carvalho and Pontes (2003) when analysing the relation between playing and culture affirm: “playing is a ritual that is transmitted, recreated or recurrent in different social and culture environments” (p. 16). In other words, there are similar forms of play in various social and culture environments. The passing on of games happens within a playing group from older children to younger ones, without adult interference. For Carvalho and Pontes, the playgroup is a “micro society” (p. 16), where we find a network of relationships with given roles throughout the interactions, where knowledge, rules and procedures are exchanged, revised, created and passed on continuously.

According to Brougèere (2008), playing can only exist within a designated system, with meanings, embodied in a culture that gives sense to it. Thus, playing only exists from a pre-
existing culture that defines it, makes it possible and transforms it in a cultural activity. There are cultural codes or specific structures in the act of playing that children learn as time passes. For Brougère, “the ludic culture takes hold of elements of the child’s cultural environment to adjust it to the game” (p. 25). These last approaches demonstrate that ludic culture has a connection with culture in general, and in this case, with the culture shared by the child. This process involves not only a social family context but also themes from television, cinema and videogames. Only when playing can a child build her ludic culture. Kishimoto (2008) points out that when children expose their forms of playing they expand their culture, weaving a thread into a playing chain. This practice generates a memory record that by oral communication projects these forms of playing into the future.

The reference to culture takes us to the Cultural Studies field. According to Cevasco (2008), this subject was created to fill in intellectual needs of a new social and historical configuration and to revolutionize the criticism to culture, having as projects the study of the so-called popular culture, the events of daily life, including a new form of understanding high culture. According to Williams (1958)4 (verbal information), “Culture is ordinary, for all societies, and for all ways of thinking” (p. 2). The author believes that “Culture is formed by common meanings; it is a product of a whole population, the accessible individual meanings, the product of a personal and social experience of a human being” (p. 5). Playing, as well as culture, cannot be classified as of good or bad quality. The act of playing is present in all social classes and it is common to all. There is also a power relation in games and toys as well as in gender issues. All these factors can be analysed from the critical eyes of Cultural Studies.

From the information presented above referring to the child and adolescent’s right, the meaning of playing and its relation to culture, we note that young children, from a very early age, learn and create culture by playing. According to Carvalho and Pontes (2003), play is universal, it exists all over the world, and it includes playhouse and dolls. As we understand the real meaning of the act of playing and its relation to culture, it becomes more complicated to deal with questions of gender. It is in the act of playing that a child reproduces hegemonic speeches, but it is also through playing that a child can break a pattern and bring transformation.

Playing in the past and present: Gender issues

To understand forms of play in the past, we conducted 13 oral history interviews with elderly people who lived in the region of Penha and Cangaiba in the city of São Paulo between 1930 and 1960. We collected general information from their childhood, including forms of play, habits, beliefs, and ways of life. Additionally, to understand the forms of play in the present, 340 children were observed during school breaks of a public school and during their daily routine at a Non-Governmental Organization, both located in the region of Cangaiba, for 71 days between 2013 and 2015. The research also included visits to public parks in the designated areas to expand the range of observations especially at Parque Tiquatira, during weekends, public holidays and school holidays (in the months of January, February and July). The observations, talks and activities with the children were duly recorded in our ledgers for further analysis of the forms of play and toys, together with the issues related to gender.

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4 “Culture is ordinary”, 1958, translated by Maria Elisa Cevasco [200-?].
According to Alberti (2004), oral history reproduces a reality in a given historic and social context that often is not addressed by the official history. For Haguette (2013), the collection of data via oral statements is an interdisciplinary methodology used by several areas of studies. With respect to the participant observation method, according to André (2008), “observation is called participant because the researcher has a degree of interaction with the object of the study, affecting it and being affected by it.” (p. 28). The participant observation method allows an active interaction between the researcher and the research’s object in the form of interviews and talks with the group. We now present the main questions raised regarding gender throughout the observation phase, activities with children and reports by the elderly.

When talking to children about dolls at the NGO, one of the boys said that if the doll’s clothes were to be changed the doll would become a boy’s toy. It was not possible to identify in girls’ everyday talks and observations any mention to flying kites, playing with toy cars, fights or even football. Videogame, for example, was mentioned by both boys and girls, but more frequently by boys. Playing with dolls, playing house, reproducing mother and babies’ roles were games more common among girls and non-existent in the group of boys.

At the NGO, a boy refused to play drop the handkerchief because his father said it was “a girl’s games; another boy became a laughingstock because he said he liked Barbie’s movies. Girls did not allow boys to join them when they were playing house or mothers and babies roles arguing that they would spoil their play. When playing slingshot and drop the handkerchief, for example, even when playing in groups, boys and girls avoid mixing. Many boys complained that they were not chosen when playing drop the handkerchief and this reduced boys interest and participation in the game. A report by a boy referring to Barbie’s cartoon was particularly interesting: “I don’t like Barbie’s cartoon because there are no boys in it.” Boys do not recognise themselves in films that portrait only female characters. Nowadays, boys can make elastic bands for example, but there are still practices labelled by gender differentiation and children are taught to reproduce this segmentation.

In the past, there was a greater play segregation between boys and girls. They did not share the same games, but some activities, such as play tag, dodgeball, or playing Simon says, allowed contact between boys and girls. In the past, it was not common for girls to play freely in the streets. They were subject to parental control, and playing in the streets was not well-regarded. Besides, they often had to help with house chores, including caring for younger siblings. Even though in the past some girls managed to play football with boys in the streets games were well divided with girls playing within a domestic household enviroment (dolls, playing house, preparing meals) or playing less energetic games (who’s got the button, to throw bean bags or playing marbles), with the exception of skipping rope. Whereas boys were interested in flying kites and leapfrog. Play tag was a typical game played by boys and girls as well as dodgeball and barra manteiga, Simon says. At present, the division between the forms of play for girls and boys are still very strong. Playing with dolls and playing house, playing football and cards are forms of play that contribute to this gender separation.

Currently, girls play with dolls, ropes, play on swings, tents, slides, flowers and household objects; boys play ball games and male dolls. We note that male dolls were not common in the past but boys use them nowadays, and this phenomenon deserves to be analysed.

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5 The rules for mãe da rua can also be found in another game called Traffic Lights, similar to Simon says.
6 The complete game name is: button, button, who’s got the button
7 The rules for barra manteiga are similar to play tag; it could be a similar version of the game.
pared to the past, a doll is still a popular toy for girls from Penha and Gangaíba but they are different now. Out goes the rag dolls, the porcelain and papier-mâché dolls and in comes the Barbie doll, Baby Alive, and Monster High. Additionally, we note that there are still differences between toys for girls and boys that were recognized by the children themselves.

Apparently, boys and girls have the same difficulties playing in a public place. However, a statement from a father at Parque Tiquatira was an exception. He informed that girls are more homely and some children from the NGO miss having more girls in the streets. Thus, even today we note that some girls are deprived of playing in the streets because there is a common sense that they naturally prefer staying at home reinforcing the social and cultural pressure that fall on them from an early age.

Foucault (1999b), sought to make a description of the mechanisms of social control not through discourse but discipline and body control. Docile bodies are formed from working rules, behaviour and moralism with individuals repeating behaviour patterns without questioning them. “A docile body is subjected, used, transformed and improved” (p. 118). He affirms that in any society, the body is subject to power, enforcing limitations, prohibitions and obligations that discipline would be the most important method of a detailed control of body movements. This way, discourse and distinct forms of play, accompanied by body control end up exerting influence on practices by boys and girls.

Final considerations

Nowadays play presents little difference in relation to past times. Gender issues are reinforced in discourses and messages conveyed in toys and games. Due to moral standards established in the past, boys cannot play with dolls, playhouse or even drop the handkerchief. On the other hand, girls receive presents such as domestic utensils and dolls that carry many messages, enhancing their role as carers and house leaders.

It is when a child is playing that he reproduces hegemonic discourses, but it is also through this discourse that a child can break this practice and give rise to transformation. It is necessary to propose activities that make children think about the future so that they can change gender hegemonic discourses. It is essential to question what families and the media are imposing, and this can be achieved through the act of playing. As seen in the theories by Brougère (2008), Carvalho and Pontes (2003) and Kishimoto (2008) a culture defines a form of play in the same way that play allows a cultural transformation.

Children need to be motivated to think about the future, about the pre-established toy and play conceptions. They deserve the right to deal with situations where girls can become leaders and boys can be good parents and excellent housekeepers. Every children activity, at schools or ludic areas involving the media and dissemination of culture should represent a form of inclusion and a guarantee of rights, debates, discussions and criticism to promote and enrich public politics on gender issues. The organization of society has changed in many aspects, and one of them is the female insertion in the labour market. On the other hand, it would appear that this increase has not yet contributed to alterations in patterns of toys for boys and girls that are advertised on the media and the market. These toys and forms of play, according to this research, maintain the traditional male and female roles. They overload women who have to juggle professional obligations and house care. Most women seem to carry, alone, all domestic responsibilities.
Bibliography