

“We’re Friends, Right?": Inside Kids’ Culture

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Over 30 years ago in one of my first ethnographic studies of young children I was sitting on the floor in the block area of a preschool watching two four-year-old children, Richard and Barbara. They are sitting near each other and building things with small plastic blocks. They have not spoken and do not appear to be playing together. Up to this point their behavior would be seen as what many psychologists call parallel play.

Suddenly, Richard looks over at Barbara and says, “We’re playing by ourselves”

Just—ah—we’re friends, right?” Barbara asks.

“Right,” says Richard.

The two now coordinate their play and begin to build a house.

As this example shows, kids are social. They want to be involved, to participate, and to be part of the group. I saw little solitary play in my many years of observation in preschools. And when children did play alone or engaged in parallel play it seldom lasted for long. They were soon doing things together.

I marveled at how kids worked together to get things going, like Richard and Barbara did, and I shared in their joy when they marked their communal sharing with the oft-heard phrase, “We’re friends, right?” Social participation and sharing are the heart of kids’ peer culture.

But what exactly do I mean by kids’ peer culture? I am using the term *peers* specifically to refer to that group of kids who spend time together on an everyday basis. My focus is on local peer cultures that are produced and shared primarily through face-to-face interaction. (Of course, local cultures are part of more general groups of kids, which can be defined in terms of age or geographical boundaries—for example, all three- to six-year-olds in the United States). Kids produce a series of local peer cultures that become part of, and contribute to, the wider cultures of other kids and adults within which they are embedded.

Much of the traditional work on peer culture has focused on adolescents and the effects (positive and negative) of experiences with peers on individual development. Most of this work has a functionalist view of culture; that is, culture is viewed as consisting of internalized, shared values and norms that guide behavior.

In contrast, I take an interpretive view of culture as public, collective, and performative and define kids' peer culture as *a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that kids produce and share in interaction with each other*. There are two basic themes in peer cultures: Kids want to gain control of their lives and they want to share that sense of control with each other.

In this talk I want to focus on a common routine in young children's peer cultures, socio-dramatic role play. In socio-dramatic role play, kids collaboratively produce pretend activities that are related to experiences from their real lives (for example, family and occupational roles and routine activities) as distinct from fantasy play based on fictional narratives. Child researchers have long argued the importance of dramatic role play for children's social and emotional development (Garvey, 1977; Singer & Singer, 1990; Schwartzman, 1978). Like most adults, these researchers most often see role play as the imitation of adult models. However, kids do not simply imitate adult models in their role play; rather they continually elaborate and embellish adult models to address their own concerns.

Kids' appropriation and embellishment of adult models is primarily about status, power, and control. Kids are empowered when they take on adult roles. They use the dramatic license of imaginative play to project to the future—a time when they will be in charge and in control of themselves and others (Corsaro, 1985; Goldman, 1998; Sawyer, 1997).

Role play also allows kids to experiment with how different types of people in society act and how they relate to each other. Of great importance here for children are gender and expectations about how girls and boys should act and how roles in society are gender stereotyped. Young children do not accept but challenge and refine such stereotypes. Thus, gender role expectations are not simply inculcated into children by adults; rather, they are socially constructed by children in their interactions with adults and each other (see Aydt & Corsaro, 2003; Corsaro, 1985; Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998; Fernie et. al, 1995; Thorne, 1993).

“Get Down in the Backyard You two Cats”: Role Play and Social Power

Kids begin role play as young as age two and most role play among two- to five-year-olds is about the expression of power. In my dissertation research I was interested in language use in the play of a brother and sister, Krister and Mia, and a second boy, Buddy. In one play session, Mia (who was four and had been to preschool) and the two boys (both about two and a half years old and without preschool experience) began a role play sequence when Mia suggested that we play teacher. Krister wanted to be the teacher and pushed a chair to the front of a large blackboard in the room. Mia, Buddy, and I sat on the floor as students.

Krister took the chalk and said in a stern voice, “Now write this!” and drew several lines.

“Those aren’t letters, but just a bunch of lines!” I responded teasingly.

“He can’t write so good,” Mia told me, a bit annoyed. “Just pretend they’re letters.”

But Krister did not allow his authority to be tested. He shouted out at me, “Bill, you are bad! You must go sit in the corner right now!” Krister pointed to the corner of the room, and I took my paper and went over there to sit. Buddy and Mia began to laugh, but Krister gave some more orders about what to write and Mia, Buddy, and I did what we were told.

Here we see a young child who had not attended preschool but had information that teachers are powerful and tell kids what to do. Also, bad kids are made to sit in the corner. Did Krister learn this from Mia? Possibly, but not as a result of her own experiences in preschool. Their father assured me there was not sitting in the corner in Mia's school. Perhaps it was from something on television such as a cartoon or an adult joking about kids having to sit in the corner if they are bad at school. Where Krister picked up the information is less important than his desire to express the power one has in an adult role, a situation in which young children seldom find themselves.

In socio-dramatic play, children relish taking on and expressing power. It's fun. In one complex role play in my early work in a preschool in Berkeley, California the kids (all about four years old) clearly expressed power and control while in superordinate roles, misbehaved and obeyed in subordinate roles, cooperated in roles of equal status, but became confused about the alignment and gender expectations of other roles.

A boy, Bill, and a girl, Rita, entered the upstairs playhouse of the preschool carrying purses and a suitcase. Before coming upstairs they had agreed on the roles of husband and wife. As they dropped the purses and suitcases on the floor, they looked down at some children playing below. They saw two boys, Charles and Denny, crawling around and meowing like cats.

"Hey, there are our kitties," said Bill.

Rita replied, "Yeah, they're down in the backyard."

What is interesting about this simple exchange is how much it accomplishes. Before this talk, there had been no discussion of kitties, nor had Rita and Bill talked to the two boys.

However, Bill and Rita might have presumed that the boys would come upstairs and expecting

this, they *made* them their two kitties and made the downstairs the backyard merely by saying it was so.

Bill and Rita now went about arranging things in the house. They picked up blankets from the bed and placed the purses and suitcase on the floor in front of the bed. Bill then picked up a baby crib and placed it alongside the front of the bed, blocking off the area around the bed from the rest of the room.

[We can now watch the first sequence]

“This is our special room, right?” said Bill

“Right,” responded Rita.

“This is our little room we sleep in, right?” added Bill. “Our little room. Our—“

“We’re the kitty family,” said Denny cutting off Bill as he and Charles climbed up the stairs and into the playhouse. They began crawling around the room, meowing.

“Here kitty-kitty, here kitty-kitty,” said Rita, reaching out to pet them. “Yeah, here’s our two kitties,” she announced to Bill.

“Kitty, you can’t come into this room!” Bill commanded sternly. But one of the kitties, Charles, immediately disobeyed, went into the room and climbed on the bed. Meanwhile, the other kitty knocked a plate from the table to the floor.

“No! No!” yelled Bill. He then shooed the kitties back toward the stairs. “Go on! Get down in the backyard!”

Rita came to Bill’s aid and shouted, “Get down in the backyard, you two cats! Go down! Down! Down!”

The kitties headed toward the stairs and Charles started crawling down. But Denny

stopped at the head of the stairs and said, “No, I’m the kitty. I’m the kitty.” It seemed that he wanted to stay. But the husband and wife insisted that he go.

“Go back in the backyard!” commanded Bill.

“You get in the backyard. Ya! Ya!” yelled Rita, pushing at the remaining kitty with her hands.

Denny now gave up and also went down the stairs.

Bill looked down at the two cats and said, “Go in the backyard, we’re busy!”

“They were rough on us,” said Rita.

In this sequence we see that the husband and wife express clear authority over the kitties through their use of imperatives expressed with strong intonation and accompanying gestures of control. But we also see that the kitties brought on these strong displays by their misbehavior and resistance. In fact, in many role play episodes, subordinates (kids or pets) often misbehave by doing exactly what they were told not to do! (Corsaro, 1985; Ewaldsson and Corsaro, 1998). In the process, discipline scripts emerge with a language structure like we just saw, in which power is clearly displayed and enforced. It is as if the kids want this to happen. They want to create and share emotionally in the power and control adults have over them.

After the kitties left, the husband and wife decided that the house needed cleaning. In line with stereotyped gender roles, Bill moved the furniture while his wife, Rita, cleaned the floor.

Bill picked up the table and said, “Be careful. I’m gonna move our table.”

“You’re a handyman, handyman,” said Rita.

“Next,” said Bill as he pushed the stove near the door and then moved the table next to it.

“Bill? Bill?” called Rita.

“What?”

“You’re a strong man.” Rita praised him.

“I know it. I just moved this,” said Bill referring to the table.

Here the children work together in line with stereotyped gender role expectations that are expressed in actions (that is, husbands are strong and help around the house to move furniture while wives do the cleaning) and reinforced in verbal evaluations (for example, Rita noting that Bills is a handy and strong man).

As Rita is pretending to mop the floor the kitties returned. Bill tried to block them off, but they scurried by, moving onto the just cleaned floor. Bill attempted to shoo the kitties back to the stairs.

[Now play second part of episode]

“Come on kitties, get out! Get out! Scat! Scat!”

Rita stopped cleaning to help her husband. “Come, scat. Scat!” she yelled.

Charles crawled back down the stairs, but Denny remained and stood up announcing, “I’m not—I’m not a kitty anymore.”

“You’re a husband?” Bill asked.

“Yeah,” agreed Denny.

“Good. We need two husband,” said Bill.

Now Bill called out to Rita who did not seem to hear the previous exchange. “Hey, two husbands.”

Rita was not pleased with this development and offered an alternative. “I can’t catch two husbands cause I have a grandma.”

“Well, I—then I’m the husband,” said Denny.

“Yeah, husbands! Husbands!” chanted Denny and Bill as they danced around the room.

“Hold it Bill,” said Rita. “I can’t have two husbands.”

Rita held up two fingers and shook her head. “Not two. Not two.” She then walked down the stairs. Meanwhile Bill and Denny continued dancing around upstairs and chanting, “Two husbands! Two husbands!”

Rita walked around in front of the downstairs playhouse shaking her head. She stopped near the stairs just as Bill and Denny came down, and said, “I can’t marry’em, two husbands. I can’t marry two husbands because I love them.”

Bill said to Rita, “Yeah we do.” He then turned to Denny and said, “We gonna marry ourselves, right?”

“Right,” responded Denny.

The boys then went bak upstairs and continued chanting, “Husbands!” They danced around and jumped on the bed, but there was no coordinated activity. It was not clear to them or to me what two husbands do, especially without a wife. Later Rita cam upstairs and said she was a kitty. The two husbands admonished her for scratching them and misbehaving and chased her down the stairs. Shortly after, the role play was brought to an end with a teacher’s announcement of ‘clean-up time.’

In this sequence the role-play hit a snag, at least for Rita, when Denny decided he didn’t want to be a kitty anymore. Perhaps he was getting tired of being shooed down the stairs. In any case, Bill suggested that Denny also be a husband and when Denny accepted, Bill even said,

“Good. We need two husbands.” It is not clear why Bill made this offer. Mostly likely, because Denny is a boy and males are husbands, Bill thought that Denny should be a husband like him.

Rita, however, thought otherwise and saw a problem that goes beyond gender stereotypes: one wife and two husbands. While the boys danced around and celebrated being two husbands, Rita argued to no avail that she cannot catch, have, marry, or love two husbands. She knew that something was wrong with this relationship (at least among the adults in her culture). What was wrong has to do with her emerging knowledge that the roles of husband and wife are not only gender specific, but are related to each other in particular ways. Wives and husbands love each other and get married. It is even assumed that is the case in her pretend relationship with Bill. But what was she to do with Denny?

She offers up the role of grandma for Denny, “I can’t catch two husbands cause I have a grandma.” But her phrasing is confusing and a grandma is the wrong gender, grandpa might have worked. The contrast of the boys’ glee at being two husbands—Bill even suggested that they marry themselves but no such ceremony occurred—and Rita’s discomfort with the proposed arrangement is interesting. In the end, she solved the problem by becoming a kitty and the play continued with a reversion back to misbehavior and discipline. However, Rita had a glimpse into the complexity of role relationships. In Piaget’s terms, she had a disequilibrium in her sense of her social world, which she will strive to compensate. So we see that role-play is fun, improvised, unpredictable, and ripe with opportunities for reflection and learning.

“Non C’È Zuppa Inglese”: Plying the Frame in Role-play

As I suggested above, role-play involves more than learning specific social knowledge; it also involves learning about the relationship between *context* and *behavior*. As the anthropologist

Gregory Bateson argues, when the child plays a role she or he not only learns something about that role's specific social position but "also learns that there is such a thing as a role." According to Bateson (1956), the child "acquires a new view, partly flexible and partly rigid" and learns "the fact of stylistic flexibility and the fact that choice of style or role is related to the frame or context of behavior."

Children's recognition of the "transformative power" of play is an important element of peer culture. It is their use of this transformative power in role-play that I will, in line with Bateson and the sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), refer to as "plying the frame." Let's consider some examples.

In Bologna a girl, Emilia, has made an ice cream shop with two of her friends. She comes to where I am playing with three boys, Alberto, Alessio, and Stefano. I have a microphone in my hand because we are videotaping the play.

"Bill, will you come to see our store?" she asks.

"I can't now because—ah—I'm here with this—" I struggle with my answer not sure how to say what I need to in Italian.

"*Microfono*," she finishes my reply.

"Yes. I can't ah—" I say motioning that the microphone wire is not long enough to go to her store. "Will you bring the ice cream to me?" I try to say, but my grammar is incorrect and she does not understand.

"What?"

"Take the ice—" I blurt out confusing the words for "bring" and "take." But then I recover quickly, "Bring me the ice cream, to me."

“Yes. But we still have to—“ she begins.

“Chocolate and—ah—chocolate and va—vanilla,” I say. I noticed earlier that Emilia and her friends were using dirt as pretend chocolate ice cream and sand for “*crema*” or vanilla.

“Yes,” she says, “but we must finish the store, we still have to make it—the vanilla.”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

“After I give it to you,” she continues, “there’s also strawberry. There is—I’ll tell you all the flavors.”

“Yes,” I say.

Emilia gestures, counting off each flavor first with her thumb and then with fingers of her hand, “Eh, strawberry, chocolate, vanilla—“

”Lemon?” asks Stefano.

“No, there is none,” Emilia tells him.

I say, “I like ah—vanilla and ah—strawberry.”

“Okay.”

“For Stefano,” I say, “for Stefano vanilla.”

But Stefano wants to make his own order. “For me strawberry and banana.”

Having just listed the flavors, Emilia is frustrated with this order. “There is no banana!” she insists. After all, this is a small ice cream store without many flavors because the girls are trying to use things like dirt and sand to make chocolate and vanilla, and perhaps leaves for pistachio. I am not sure what they are using for strawberry.

“Lemon,” says Stefano, knowing full well there is none.

“There is none!” replies Emilia.

“There is no lemon,” I remind Stefano.

“Chocolate,” Stefano finally agrees.

“Chocolate,” repeats Emilia as she heads toward her store to fetch the ice cream.

However, now Alberto places an order: “Hey, hey, for me, *zuppa inglese*—whipped cream and pistachio!”

Alberto’s request for “*zuppa inglese*,” a rare flavor derived from the English dessert, trifle, is so outlandish that Stefano, Emilia, Alessio, and I break into fits of laughter. After all Emilia just went through this business with Stefano and his request for lemon.

“*Zuppa inglese*,” Stefano and I say, laughing.

“They don’t have it,” I tell Alberto.

Emilia returns and bends over Alberto and says: “*Non c’è zuppa inglese, non c’è pistacchio!*” (“There is no *zuppa inglese*, there is no pistachio!”)

“Okay, then, I’ll take banana,” says Alberto.

Now there are howls of laughter.

“There is none!” Emilia says with a big grin.

“Okay, then, I’ll take whatever there is, chocolate,” Alberto finally agrees.

“There’s chocolate. There’s vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, maybe pistachio.”

“Orange soda?” asks Alberto.

“Well, I’ll go see,” says Emilia and she returns to her store.

In this example, Emilia at first wants to stay in the confined frame of pretending to have a small ice cream store with flavors that can be represented by features on the playground: dirt, sand, leaves, and so on. Although I have trouble making my order because of my fractured Italian,

I stay within the frame and accept, no, even volunteer “chocolate,” a flavor I know she has. But first Stefano and then Alberto more or less say, “What’s the fun of that!” They ply or stretch the frame by purposely ordering flavors that they know Emilia doesn’t have or doesn’t want to pretend to have. Then the whole role-play becomes about “playing with the play.”

This turn of events is most apparent when Alberto calls out after Emilia as she is leaving and orders *zuppa inglese*. Now even I get what is going on and join in the laughter of the other boys at Alberto’s request. Emilia, feigning disgust, clearly enjoys dealing with Alberto. She relishes the opportunity of denying the request, by responding “*Non c’è zuppa inglese!*” But Alberto’s response to this is to ask for banana! Later, however, Emilia gives in some and says there might be some pistachio and she will check into the orange soda.

The Ice Cream Store and Telephone Talk: Social Reproduction in Role-play

So far, in discussing kids’ role-play we have considered what it tells us about their developing knowledge of status, power, role-alignments, and gender expectations. We have also seen how kids ply or stretch the role-play frame to embellish or “play with the play.” In this way, kids are more in control of their play and use it to address concerns in peer culture and simply to have fun.

Role-play is fun for kids and while they are having fun they are also creating images of the adult world and reflecting on their place in that world in the present as well as projecting to their futures as adults. Therefore, in role-play, kids link or articulate local features of the ongoing play to their developing conceptions of the adult world. This articulation enables them to appropriate aspects of the adult culture, which they use, refine, and expand. It is through such appropriation that the children extend their peer cultures and contribute to reproduction of the adult world. This

is a process I have referred to as “interpretive reproduction” (children *actively* contributing to the reproduction of adult society through their activities in their own peer cultures, Corsaro, 1992, 1997). A comparison of the role-play of a group of upper-middle-class children with that of economically disadvantaged children helps us capture this idea of interpretive reproduction.

Let’s compare role-play in a private preschool for primarily upper class families, that I’ll call University Preschool, with role-play among children in a government supported Head Start program for economically disadvantaged children.

The kids at University Preschool frequently engaged in socio-dramatic play primarily adopting family and occupational roles. In the following example, several children are “making things” as they stand around a sand table in the outside yard of the school. At one point, a child makes a reference to ice cream and then the four children (Ann, Linda, Tom, and Ruth, all about five years old) decide that they are owners of the ice cream store. I am sitting nearby with a microphone, because we are videotaping the play. We begin as Ruth enters the play.

[Show first video sequence here]

“Hey, I heard you guys are making ice cream,” says Ruth

“We’re making rainbow ice cream,” Linda replies.

“Oh, rainbow ice cream,” says Ruth.

“That’s the best,” I add.

“I’m making silly unicorn rainbow ice cream,” says Ann

In this sequence we see that after the kids arrive at an understanding that they are making ice cream, they quickly link the activity to their peer culture. They do this by the creative reference to making a flavor of ice cream that is similar to a toy (a rainbow unicorn) that many of

the girls own.

“I know—I know what you can be,” Linda proposes. “Um, I know—I—you—Ann—Ann, you and me and Tom and Ruth, we could all be the owners of this store and he could be the customer”

“I’m the customer,” I agree.

“Bill’s the customer,” Linda confirms.

“Okay,” I say, “I got a big order for you guys.”

“What?” asks Linda.

“I want—three chocolate ice cream cones, one quart of rainbow ice cream, and two pints of vanilla.”

“Oh, that’s a lot of work,” says Linda. “You’ll need to wait a long time for that.”

“But I’m in a hurry,” I protest.

“Now we only have chocolate ice cream,” says Ann. “We don’t have no—“

Linda now hands me a container filled with sand, “Here’s the rainbow ice cream.”

“Ok,” I say and set it on the ledge of the sand table.

“With a cherry on top!” adds Linda.

Tom now says, “You have to be the ice cream—“ but he is cut off by Ruth.

“It’s gonna take us a long time.”

“Yeah,” Linda agrees, “‘cause we can’t make so much in one time.”

“Okay,” says Ann.

“Yeah,” adds Ruth, “even though we all have ice cream. How about I put it in there and you take it out, alright?”

“No,” says Ann, “let me get some chocolate ice cream. The, hmmm, let’s see—“

“They are not melted,” says Ruth referring to the ice cream orders.

“They’re not melted?” I ask.

“Yeah,” says Linda, “if you–this is a special kind of ice cream, that even if it stays in the sun for a long time it won’t melt.”

In this sequence, the children’s class backgrounds are surely important in their defining of themselves as owners of the ice cream store as opposed to the more common alignment I have seen in such play, that of being workers and bosses. Once the definition of owners is accepted, the kids work together to fill my order. However, as is often the case in role-play, there is shifting back and forth from adult to peer culture. For example, after acting like co-owners and coordinating their work, the kids surmount the real world problem of melting ice cream (it takes time to fill such a big order and it’s hot outside) through the magic of pretending. Their ice cream is a special kind that won’t melt “even if it stays in the sun a long time.” Later in the play I ask how much money my order will cost.

[Play second video sequence here]

“Um, three dollars,” says Tom .

“Yeah, three dollars,” agrees Ruth.

“Yeah, three dollars,” echoes Linda.

“Who gets the money?” I ask.

“Me,” says Linda.

I start to count out the money, “One–“

”Now remember this, remember this,” says Linda, “remember that this goes to the hospital.”

“It goes to the hospital?” I ask, a bit confused.

“Yeah,” says Linda.

“The money does?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Linda agrees.

“For charity?” I ask. I am still not sure what she is proposing.

“It’s to help kids,” says Linda.

“Help kids in the hospital?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Linda responds.

Although Linda implies that the decision about giving the money to the hospital had been made earlier (“Now remember this—“), there has been no such discussion or reference to this proposal earlier in the play. In fact, Linda is improvising this line of action in the play through her skillful use of language. She asks us all to think back and remember an imaginary time when the owners agreed that money paid for the ice cream would go to the hospital to help sick kids.

There are several things to note here. First, as was the case in defining themselves as owners of the store, the decision to donate money for sick kids is surely also related to the kids’ experiences in their families. Given that they are from upper-middle-class families, they have most likely attended or been exposed to the idea of charity events. Second, although Linda introduces the idea and talks with me about it, as we will see, both Ruth and Ann pick up on the proposal and expand on it later. Finally, we see differences in the kids’ developing concepts of the world and their language as compared to an adult’s. I use the word “charity” while the kids talk about “helping kids.” Let’s consider a final segment from the role-play.

“Here’s your—another ice cream cone,” Linda says as she hands me a plastic scoop filled

with sand. She then informs me: “You can stay here for day and night, without stopping eating, ‘cause we can work day and night.”

“You guys work 24 hours a day?”

“Yep. No, we work 24 hours the day and night!” says Linda.

“We work all the time,” says Ann.

“Yeah,” adds Ruth, “we never stop working.”

“You never have a break?” I ask.

“No. We don’t want to,” says Linda.

“We have to work all the time,” Ann adds.

“All night and all day, ‘cause we have to pay money for the hospital a lot, to help the kids,” says Ruth.

“That’s right,” I say, “I forgot about that.”

“Yeah, I said that this money goes to the hospital,” Linda reminds me.

“Yeah, to help the kids,” adds Ruth.

“Sick kids?” I ask.

“Yeah,” replies Linda.

“Yeah,” says Ruth, “but all—and all goes to the sick kids, ‘cause if you look at the sick kids don’t have very much money because the hospitals take it all away!”

“I’m making some drinks,” says Ann.

“They have to use their money to pay the hospital bills?” I ask Ruth.

“Yeah,” she answers. “So we send the money to the hospital to give to the sick kids. And sometimes we even send balloons for the kids that are being good.”

The sequence begins with the kids talking about having to work a lot, “24 hours the day and night!” This discussion of long hours and hard work prompts Ruth to return to the idea of money for sick kids. She expands the idea further with the gist of her argument being that hard work and investment of time yields money which is needed to help kids who are both sick and, therefore, also economically disadvantaged because of hospital bills. However, even in developing this highly sophisticated analysis, Ruth also retains important elements of the peer culture in that she notes that the sick kids will get not only money, but, if they are good, also balloons.

Overall, we can see that in the security of their role play the kids connect aspects of the adult world and their peer culture. In the process, they create windows through which the future is foreseen. In this way, the production of the routine itself contributes to the eventual production of aspects of the wider adult culture. We will return to this point after we consider an example of role-play among the Head Start kids.

As was the case in University Preschool, the kids in the Indianapolis Head Start center frequently produced socio-dramatic play that recreated family and occupational roles. Let’s consider an example in which two girls (Zena and Debra) pretend to be mothers talking on the telephone in the family living area of the classroom. As we will see, the telephone talk involves general themes about the difficulties of parenting. The talk is impressive because the girls are producing their own interpretation of their mothers’ telephone conversations about their (the mothers’) parenting demands.

Telephone narratives of this type often involve not only the reconstruction of past events, but also evaluations and interpretations of these events by both the tellers and the audience. In this way they both reflect and constitute shared culture. As Peggy Miller and Barbara Moore (1989)

argue, when “caregivers habitually tell and retell personal stories, they are constantly reminding themselves of the experiences that are meaningful to them and relevant to their child-rearing beliefs and practices.”

We can now turn to Zena and Debra’s role-play. They have toy telephones and first pretend to be the women bus drivers conversing about the kids who ride on their buses—which ones are good and which cause trouble. They then say goodbye and hang up. Debra redials her phone and Zena answers.

[Play first video sequence here]

“What you been doin’?” asks Debra.

“Hah. Cookin’. Now I need to go to the grocery store.”

“I got to take my kids to the party store, they told me, I said—“

”My kids,” interrupts Zena, “my kids want me to take them to the park!”

“What?”

“My kids told me to take them to the park,” continues Zena, “and then, and then the bus had to come and get ’em. That’s gonna be a long walk for to here! And then the bus would have to come and get us!”

“Well,” answers Debra, “we have to wait for transfers, then I have to buy groceries, we have to buy some groceries. And um—“

”Guess where my kids told me to take them?” asks Zena excitedly. “To the store. When the bus come by my kids waitin’ for it. I don’t got time to do that.”

In this sequence, the girls skillfully build coherent discourse through what the anthropologist Marjorie Goodwin (1990) terms “format tying” (the repetition of certain words or

phrases of prior turns and semantic links across turns) regarding their pretend kids' requests, to construct the shared topic of problems of parenting in poverty. For example, in her answer to Debra's question of what she is doing, Zena notes she has to go to the "grocery store." Debra builds on this syntactic element by noting that she has to take her kids to the "party store." Zena then picks up on the talk about kids and says that her kids want her to take them to the park (what Goodwin means by semantic linking). In later turns the girls discuss the difficulties of doing these things and develop the theme of parenting in poverty.

The content of the talk as well as the structured order of turn-taking is also important. It is not just that the mothers (animated by the children) have to do everyday chores like shopping, their children also expect them to provide additional services. For example, the kids want to go to the party store. The party store is a type of small business that carries fewer items at higher cost than large grocery stores. In poor neighborhoods in inner cities, there are few grocery stores and residents try to keep their reliance on party stores to a minimum, that is, for basic necessities. However, this problem is a difficult one for young children to understand and Debra captures this difficulty in noting her kids *told* (rather than *asked*) her to take them there. Further, the girls' discourse captures their mothers' frustrations in trying to meet their children's demands to take them to the park and other places when they don't have a car and must deal with a limited and time-consuming bus service.

Later in the episode, the children continue to talk about the difficulty of parenting, noting numerous occasions of misbehavior of their pretend children. This misbehavior leads to reprimands and physical punishment, but the kids still misbehave. In fact, the girls pretend that their children are making so much noise at the moment of their telephone conversation that they

have trouble hearing each other. At one point, Debra even covers the phone receiver to shout out to her pretend children to be quiet.

After the talk about discipline, Zena, who is standing some distance from a table where Debra and I are sitting, asks to talk to me. Debra hands me the phone.

“What are you talkin’ about?” I ask Zena.

“Oh, we’re talkin’ about the kids, our kids are—“

”You got bad kids?” I ask.

“Very bad,” says Zena. “I was gonna give ’em some ice cream but I can’t. And I told them that I would.”

“Told ’em what?”

“I told ’em, I told ’em, ‘be quiet, be quiet.’ But they wouldn’t listen to me.”

“And then they got some ice cream?” I ask.

“No!” shouts Zena.

Debra now speaks up without using the phone. “You shouldn’t do that,” she says. Here she means give ice cream to kids when they will not behave. Then she asks me, “Guess what my kids did? My kids said cuss words right in front of my momma!”

“Oh,” I respond. “Who taught them those cuss words?”

“Probably cousins,” says Zena.

“My sister’s boy friend,” says Debra.

“That’s where they heard the cuss words?” I ask.

Debra, frowning, nods her head, Yes.

Having overheard the earlier discussion about misbehavior, I ask Zena if she has bad kids.

Zena says the kids were very bad and she could not give them promised ice cream because they would not obey and be quiet. Both she and Debra are emphatic about not giving in and letting the kids have ice cream as I suggest. Debra then relates an instance when her pretend kids were not only bad, but put her in a very embarrassing position by cussing in front of her mother. In response to my question of who taught her kids the cuss words, Debra exhibits intricate knowledge of her complex family structure and how it influences family interactions and parenting.

A final segment from the role-play reinforces the complex nature of these girls' family lives and their keen awareness of the stark realities of growing up and parenting in poverty.

[Play second video sequence here]

Zena is again talking on the phone to Debra and is now seated at the table with her. She says, "You know what girl? My daughter asked me for pop. Every hour and all day. I say, 'No pop, you're gonna eat ice cream and cake, and water—drink water and brush your teeth. Eat gum—"

"Guess what?" says Debra. "I'm getting ready to drive over to your house."

"I won't let you in," Zena responds.

Surprised by Zena's refusal, I ask, "Why not?"

"Cause," says Zena. But she changes her mind and tells Debra, "I'll let you in."

"My man start in on me," says Debra. "He's been hittin' on me, he's been hittin' on me for 10 minutes."

Jumping up from her chair, Zena responds, "You got one and I don't have one. My kids been askin' for 'my daddy.' I say—they say, 'I want my daddy. I want my daddy,' all day."

In the first part of this sequence we again see the complexity in the narrative skills of the two children, especially Zena. Zena begins with the use of a rhetorical question (“You know what girl?”) a device she has used throughout her narrative. Rhetorical questions of this type draw attention to statements that follow them and can also serve as topic shifts or extensions. Here, Zena extends the topic of parenting difficulties, noting in effect that her children never seem satisfied. She has given them ice cream and cake, most likely in celebration of a birthday, but they ask for pop (soda), which would add more sugar. Using an internal quote, Zena notes that after her daughter asked for pop “every hour and all day,” she told her “No more pop, you’re gonna eat ice cream and cake, and water—drink water and brush your teeth.” After Zena’s turn, Debra introduces the idea of a visit to Zena’s house, which we see later is a device to set up the discussion of her need for escape from her man “hittin’ on” her. Zena immediately responds to Debra’s plight but with little comfort, noting that at least Debra has a man, whereas Zena’s kids keep asking for their daddy all day long.

While I have no information on domestic abuse in Debra's or Zena's families, several other children in the Head Start center volunteered descriptions of such abuse to the teachers and me over the course of the school year. Although domestic abuse occurs in all social-class groups, what is most important here is how poverty worked against these children’s parents’ relationships and their family life. Zena’s response, that Debra at least has a "man" while her kids constantly ask for their father, is striking. In interviews with Zena’s mother we learned that Zena and her younger siblings have been separated from their father for long periods. They stayed in homeless shelters with their mother both before and after this particular role play episode occurred. Zena's response to Debra clearly shows her understanding of the extent of her mother's (and other single

parents') problems in such demanding situations. Facing such challenging family circumstances alone can, at times, be so intolerable that even a mate who is physically abusive might be seen as better than none at all (see Corsaro, Molinari, & Rosier, 2002; Rosier, 2000).

The stark difference in the content of these two instances of socio-dramatic play involving upper-middle-class and economically disadvantaged children is readily apparent. For example, the middle-class kids' play addresses the real-life challenges of having to work long hours to run a successful business and the need for charity to help those in need (here, sick kids in the hospital). On the other hand, their role-play also has a number of fantasy elements like rainbow ice cream and ice cream that doesn't melt.

In contrast, Debra and Zena stay very close to the harsh reality of their real lives in the telephone narratives. They talk about and reflect on the difficulties of parenting in poverty. They have no safe parks or reasonably priced grocery stores nearby, and they have to rely on limited and time-consuming public transportation. Most depressing of all is the girls' talk of the absence of their fathers and even domestic abuse. In short, the middle-class children display the joy of fantasy play and optimism about their future as adults, while the Head Start children are much affected by the harsh realities of their family lives and display a sober recognition of what will be challenging futures.

Despite these differences in the quality of life portrayed in the middle-class and economically disadvantaged kids' role play, their play routines share a number of common features. First, in both examples the kids actively take information from the adult world to create stable and coherent interactive routines in the peer culture. Second, the kids, through their highly sophisticated use of language, embellish the adult models to address both collective and personal

concerns in the peer culture. Third, the children's improvised socio-dramatic play contributes to their acquisition of a set of expectations or predispositions through which they confront the circumstances of their daily lives.

While the developing expectations of the upper-middle-class kids are characterized by security and control over their lives, the emerging orientation of the economically disadvantaged kids seems to be one of sober recognition of the difficulty of their circumstances. Yet in both cases, these predispositions are not determined in advance, nor are they simply inculcated by adults (Bourdieu, 1977). They are, rather, innovative and creative productions in the kids' peer cultures, which, in turn, contribute to the reproduction of the dominant culture with all its strengths and imperfections.

Conclusion

From these examples of children's role play, it is clear that such play is not simply an imitation of the adult world. Children are, of course, affected by the adult world, but they collectively appropriate features of that adult world to create innovative play routines in their peer cultures. Role play is especially interesting because it involves children's collective construction and sharing of narratives about their lives in the present and their projections of their lives as adults in the future. Children's construction of these narratives are creative and fun and are valued aspects of their shared peer culture. In the process of creating and engaging in role play children come to develop predispositions to their futures, and in this way they actively contribute to reproduction and change of the adult world.

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