

Examining Children’s Peer Play-in-Action: Micro Dramas and Collaborative Play Performances

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Abstract: In this study, particular focus is on micro-ethnographic studies of children’s peer play-in-action and how children create shared peer cultures through their collaborative performances in situated game activities. It will be shown how children create micro dramas in play that serve as cultural frameworks to i) dramatize and transform experiences from the outside world; ii) playfully subvert hierarchies and gendered orders; and iii) comment upon and unravel controversial issues in their social life. The data are drawn from three sets of video-recorded data of children’s everyday play activities collected during fieldwork in separate school and after-school settings located in middle-class and low-income multiethnic suburban areas in Sweden.

Keywords: children’s play, situated activities, peer cultures, micro dramas, micro-ethnography

Introduction

In this article, attention will be given to micro-ethnographic studies of children’s play with a particular focus on children’s collaborative play performances in situated game activities (Evaldsson, 2009; Corsaro, 2018 for overviews). The study of play and games as situated activities implies a shift in focus from *what* children play—the preoccupation of more traditional anthropological studies—to *how* players actively contribute to the organization of play and games (Evaldsson, 2009; Goodwin, 2006). There are several reasons for studying play as situated activities (Goffman, 1961). A focus on children’s play as situated activities emphasizes the importance of investigating how children accomplish play activities in real life settings through jointly produced activities (Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998; Goodwin, 2006). It captures how play forms a crucial part of children’s peer cultures and meaning-making, emotional sharing, and creativity in everyday lives with peers (Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011; Corsaro, 2018). A focus on games as situated activities also locates children’s play in wider institutional frameworks. Of importance is that a situated activity has “transformation rules” or “frames” that define what experiences from the outside world are to be recognized in the boundaries of the activity (Goffman, 1961, pp. 26–34).

This study will foreground how a focus on children’s play as situated activities provides rich sites for exploring the often spectacular and innovative character of children’s collaborative play performances, in what will be referred to here as micro dramas. Micro dramas are characterized by the occurrence of something dramatic, recognizable and noteworthy. My interest in micro dramas relates to the ongoing improvisational and transformative character of children’s play (Sawyer, 2002; Schwartzman, 1978), and how children through their participation in collaborative play produce and generate knowledge of the wider culture beyond the

peer group (Corsaro, 2020, p. 18). Drawing upon perspectives from Goffmanian interactional analysis, linguistic anthropology and conversation analysis on children's peer play (Aronsson, 2011; Evaldsson, 2009; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011), I will show how micro dramas, involving dramatic and collectively performed actions, serve as cultural frameworks for children to address and transform controversial (moral, emotional, and social) issues in their everyday lives with peers.

The analysis draws on video recordings of children's everyday peer play activities that were collected at three separate fieldworks among elementary school children, in one middle-class setting (Evaldsson & Aarsand, forthcoming) and in two separate multiethnic low-income settings in Sweden (Evaldsson, 2003, 2004; Evaldsson & Melander, 2018). It will be demonstrated that ethnographic studies based on video recordings provide possibilities to study children's peer play (and the cultural and linguistic diversities it inhabits) in its' own right (Aronsson, 2011; Corsaro, 2018; Evaldsson, 2009; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011). Thus, rather than focusing on extended education from the perspective of the school or after-school program, or based on what adults/teachers consider important for children to learn, children's everyday life, their peer play practices and peer cultures form the focus of this study.

Studies of Children's Play and Games as Situated Activities

Micro-ethnographic studies of children's participation in situated play activities demonstrate the importance of exploring the often dramatic and transformative character of children's peer play interaction (Evaldsson, 2009; Goodwin, 2006). Investigating children's peer play interaction in situated game activities requires in turn methodologies based on fieldwork among children in real life settings (Corsaro 2018) together with video recordings of children's everyday activities (Goodwin, 2006). Such methods are now a common approach in research on children's peer interaction and peer cultures for capturing the embodied and highly dynamic character of their peer play (see Corsaro & Maynard, 1996; Cromdal, 2001; Danby & Baker, 1998; Evaldsson, 2003, 2004; Goodwin, 1990, 2006; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011; Griswold, 2007; Kyratzis, 2007; Theobald, 2013). The methodological approach taken foregrounds the role of language and social interaction as deeply embedded in the accomplishment of play activities, which both encodes culture and are a tool for children's participation in that culture (Corsaro, 2018; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011). The linguistic anthropological approach taken to children's play is heavily influenced by the early work of William Corsaro (2018) on preschool children's participation in cultural routines (dramatic role-play, chasing, access rituals, and more) and constructions of peer cultures, as well as Marjorie Harness Goodwin's (1990; 2006) studies of preadolescent children's participation in a wide range of play and games (dramatic role-play, team sports, jump rope, hopscotch, and more) in their neighborhoods and at nearby playgrounds. Given the broad range of micro-ethnographic research on children's peer play interaction, my review in this section will focus only on a limited number of the existing studies. More specifically, I will show how ethnographic studies of children's play interaction can be used to challenge some of the tacit agreements that tend to reappear in more traditional research on play about the nature and benefits of children's play (see Schwartzman, 1978 for an overview). In most of this work, the focus is