
Children's Play Territories

Hideouts and Play Domains as Protective Spaces in Childcare Play Culture

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NILS FALK HANSEN

In this article, the author deploys Erving Goffman's concept of territories of the self as an analytical tool to understand the challenges and opportunities a childcare setting presents for children engaged in social fantasy play. He uses this concept to unpack the unique institutional play habitat of a childcare facility and shows how Goffman's territories form a constant concern for children in their engagements, orientations, and creative projects in social fantasy play. Through an in-depth analysis of emblematic play in an ethnographically inspired observational study, the author illustrates how the need for play domains and social alliances in childcare helps create both the demanding obstacles and inspirational possibilities of children's social fantasy play. **Key words:** early childhood education and care (ECEC); peer-group; play territories; social fantasy play; symbolic interaction

Introduction

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL FANTASY PLAY is often portrayed as an egalitarian art of co-creation and collaboration (Schousboe 2013). Children's co-creative construction of open-ended play dramas and play narratives involves shared make-believe scenarios and enactments of reciprocal roles (Winther-Lindqvist 2013; Connolly and Doyle 1984). To form a play group with peers, open the gate to the magical kingdom of imagination, and pursue the alluring "what if" question, children must be able to compromise, set their differences aside, and work together in an atmosphere of mutual inspiration and open responsiveness (Gillespie 2006; Connolly and Doyle 1984). This positive view of play appears consistent with a child's own experiences. The excitement of spending time with friends and playing together topped the list when Danish scholars recently asked children to name the key attractions of childcare life (Koch and Jørgensen 2018).

However, when we consider children's social fantasy play a consensual partnership of creative collaboration, we easily overlook the ongoing construction of social and geographical boundaries as an essential dynamic of children's play. For Schousboe (2013), social fantasy play is a shared project among a group of children simultaneously operating in three interdependent spheres of reality: imagination (the fictional fantasy play universe), staging (the negotiation of mutual roles and organizational planning), and reality (the physical locations, material resources, social surroundings, and real-life relationships of play participants). This view of social fantasy play calls for a heightened awareness of the social demands and environmental conditions of children's play habitats by foregrounding social fantasy play as a multilayered and multidimensional activity of meaning beyond the fictional realm of make believe. In fact, as many empirical studies have shown, children's practices of sharing, including, and forming cooperative play communities, especially so in a childcare setting, are inseparable from—and deeply intertwined with—their struggles to close off, control, and protect interactive spaces and play alliances against outsiders (Corsaro 2018; Cromdal 2001; Evaldsson and Karlsson 2020; Meire 2013; Sheldon 1996). The immaterial world of children's social aspirations and commitments to each other—as well as the material world of physical objects, spaces, and places—are constitutive parts of the dynamics of social fantasy play. An investigative look at the ongoing formation and transformation of social and spatial play domains in children's shared practices of fantasy play opens a gateway to the exploration of the complex demands of their institutional play habitats by shedding light on the principal challenges of organizing social fantasy play in a contemporary childcare setting.

Building on Schousboe's model of social fantasy play, I argue the theme of territoriality is inherent in social fantasy play in childcare spaces, and I introduce the term "play territories"—applying Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman's ([1971] 2010) "territories of the self"—to label and analyze the territorial implications of children's organization of social fantasy play in a childcare setting. Using empirical data from a qualitative field study of Danish children's play, I offer new perspectives on play in a contemporary childcare environment, specifically, children's construction, negotiation, and protection of social, material, and spatial boundaries and play domains during social fantasy play.

At its core, Goffman's idea of territories of the self holds that physical proximity to social others requires actors to be aware of mutual social bound-

aries, social roles, and social relationships. The dominant feature of social encounters in any public, semipublic, or even domestic context is the integrity of the self, which is based on the ability to sustain territorial claims. In Goffman's terminology, the "claim" represents the entitlement to possess, control, use, or dispose of a particular good, or desired object, or state in regard to which a claim is made: "At the center of social organization is the concept of claims, and around this center, properly, the student must consider the vicissitudes of maintaining them" (Goffman ([1971] 2010, 28). In this system, a "claimant" is the person who makes the claim or on whose behalf the claim is made.

All territorial claims lie vulnerable to violation. Agents are persons involved in claims: the claimant and counterclaimant, the person responsible for the impediment or the act, substance, means, or agency by which the claim is being challenged. Whether the act of entering into the intimate space of others represents a positive confirmation of a mutual social connection or a territorial indiscretion becomes a matter of ongoing interpretation by the coparticipants in any social encounter. Territorial claims thus serve as social, material, spatial, and embodied domains of the self. At the practical level of face-to-face interaction, sensibility to the territories of others enables the coherent and smooth operation of organized social activity. Yet, in a more profound sense, the question of territoriality is key to all aspects of human social interaction because it symbolizes the ritual recognition or disregard of social self and social position. For Goffman, territories of the self mean that physical proximity to social others requires actors to be aware of mutual social boundaries, social roles, and social relationships.

According to Goffman, the risk of territorial dispute and conflict increases in social terrains in which ambiguous social guidelines apply or the code of conduct places contradictory demands on the participants. Hence, the foundation of social life lies in the clear formal and informal rules that regulate social interaction. These rules are culturally varied and complex, but one of Goffman's more important points holds that basic similarities exist across different social environments. Using his categorization of these similarities, he constructs a kind of taxonomy of prototypical territories and territorial violations that provides a conceptual framework for the microstudy of the interaction order of adult social life, a framework which offers an analytical tool for analyzing children's play territories.

Goffman ([1971] 2010) distinguishes between three primary types of territories. "Fixed territories" represent geographically delimited domains or prop-

erties to which a person can claim a legitimate ownership. For adults a car, a house, or a private office might serve as examples. The second type of territories Goffman categorizes as “situational territories.” These temporary properties can be occupied only for a limited period and are protected from intrusion by others only as long as a person or a group of persons physically occupies them. Examples might be seats on the subway or chairs in medical office waiting rooms. Finally, Goffman introduces what he calls “egocentric territories.” This category of territories consists of artifacts carried around by a person. Examples might be wallets, glasses, briefcases, and phones.

In addition to the three primary types of territories, Goffman presents a wide variety of subcategories of situational territories and territorial offenses, also called modalities of violation. Goffman also uses the term “markers” to refer to any form of visual sign announcing to potential intruders that a territory is already in the temporary possession of another claimant. In this article, I introduce the subtypes of territories, violations, and markers that have specific relevance to my own investigation.

Literature Review

There are compelling reasons to launch such an investigation in the current landscape of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for a curious researcher with an interest in children's play and the conditions of children's everyday institutional life in general. First, we live an era of increasing childhood institutionalization, and children in many western countries spend a growing number of hours each day in professional childcare from an ever younger age (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2017). Although the pedagogical traditions and goals of different systems of ECEC vary greatly, at least one solemn commitment to all children unites adult stakeholders in different countries from the level of national policy down to the level of pedagogical practice: namely, the acknowledgment and recognition of children's right to play (United Nations 1989).

Against this backdrop, the institutional play habitats that childcare facilities and preschools provide for children's spontaneous and self-organized play call for a closer look. To anchor the significance of boundaries and demarcations in children's play, I focus on three major themes from previous studies about children's enforcement of spatial and social boundaries in social fantasy play:

protection of material resources and interactive space; protection of privacy and autonomy; and protection of friendships and social alliances.

Protection of Material Resources and Interactive Space

In Denmark (and other countries), the play spaces, toys, and play arrangement features of many preschool and childcare environments carry the status of shared property. According to Corsaro (2018), “In preschools, . . . all the toys and educational materials are communally owned. Thus, use of the toys and materials depends on negotiations for their temporary possession” (132). Pedagogically, this egalitarian principle of distribution generally serves the higher purpose of inspiring children to acquire social competencies and an awareness of the needs of others (Winther-Lindqvist 2017). Studies confirm that conflict can be beneficial to children’s social and cognitive development (Church, Mashford-Scott, and Cohrssen 2018). In reality, however, sharing toys and space is challenging for children in a densely populated childcare play environment. In such a facility, popular toys represent valuable assets in short supply.

Thus, a substantial body of research has identified object-oriented conflicts concerning the distribution of resources as a predominant source of discord among preschool children (Chen et al. 2001; Corsaro and Rizzo 1990; Killen and Turiel 1991; Myrtil et al. 2020). In the study conducted by Chen and her associates in naturalistic classroom settings during free playtime, 322 out of 400 target child observations identified conflict events. This indicates that childcare facilities to some extent expose children to ambiguous and conflicting demands because the need to protect the limited resources of play spaces and play props co-exists with a moral obligation to adhere to the virtues of sharing and inclusion that are reflected in the core values of most childcare institutions. The substantial potential for conflict in children’s negotiations of temporary ownership rights over props and play spaces documented by such research suggests that protecting valuable material resources and play domains is indeed a very significant challenge for children’s institutional play habitats.

In terms of pedagogical support, regulating for and intervening in children’s play-related conflicts, the general approach—at least in the Danish childcare influenced by the child-centered, social traditions of Scandinavian ECEC—is to allow children to resolve their own differences through dialogue (Winther-Lindqvist 2017). In instances of disagreements or play space disputes between the children, the pedagogues view themselves as predominantly conflict mediators offering guidance to the children based on the basic principle that everyone

must share toys, props, and space in an inclusive and sociable manner. Although this approach serves as a general professional guideline for adult involvement in children's conflicts, research has shown that many children's disputes over toys and play space in institutional environments unfold under the pedagogical radar.

In a recent mixed-method study using head-mounted cameras worn by preschool children, American and Chinese scholars found that teachers intervened in less than half the 115 recorded peer conflicts between children (Myrtil et al. 2020). This finding suggests that negotiations regarding rights to use toys and administer control over play spaces involves what Corsaro (2018), inspired by Goffman (1961), labels an institutional underlife. Although the pedagogical code of conduct dictates that the refusal to share toys and the exclusion of other children from play are not acceptable behaviors, they in fact often occur, and the environmental conditions and spatial limitations of childcare facilities create an urgent need for the children to develop strategies to protect play domains, social alliances, and play props.

Protection of Privacy and Autonomy

As pointed out by Wolfe and Rivlin (1987), one of the defining features of modern institutions is that their inhabitants are to some extent deprived of the privilege of privacy. From a still younger age, children in many parts of the world, and especially in Denmark, spend a considerable part of their daily life in childcare (Kampmann 2004; Bergström 2013). From early morning to late afternoon, the children engage in play, consume meals, participate in educational activities, daydream, go to the toilet, form friendships, make enemies, share secrets, resolve differences, endure solitude, rebel against authority, and adjust to institutional order in the constant intimate presence of a large group of peers supervised by pedagogues.

A number of empirical studies have confirmed that maintaining and protecting personal space indeed offers a significant challenge for children in densely populated childcare and preschool environments (Corsaro 2018; Lowry 1993). In contrast to the back alleys and front yards, dirt roads, and woodlands that formed the play habitats for former generations of children (Gray 2011), the confined space of a contemporary childcare unit does not afford many opportunities to maintain physical distance and avoid unwanted intrusions of personal space. Thus, the immediate physical presence of other children and the constant exposure to the attentive eyes of professional grown-ups becomes a basic condition of the institutional environment that children must manage in inventive

ways to sustain any level of privacy, autonomy, and self-determination (Colwell et al. 2016; Lynch 2017).

In a study of children's hidden places, Skånfors, Löfdahl, and Häaglund (2009) demonstrate how the construction of "withdrawal spaces" becomes a strategy for children to make themselves inaccessible to other children and hide from pedagogues. Meire (2013) specifically identifies the construction of hideouts and dens as key elements in children's establishment of autonomous play domains in which they can find peace and exercise temporary control over autonomous space. The attraction of hideouts and dens is that they constitute easily detectable, geographically delimited, and clearly outlined play domains and, furthermore, that they are well suited to serve as scenarios for children's peer cultural practices of inclusion, exclusion, and rivalry (Meire 2013; Corsaro 2018; Hart 1979). For children, hideouts and dens not only provide temporary sanctuaries of privacy, their spatial and social borders also carry symbolic meaning in their peer culture as tokens of friendship and social commitments (Bateman 2012; Corson et al. 2014; Kylin 2003).

Protection of Friendships and Social Alliances

According to Winther-Lindqvist (2010), fantasy play establishes an arena for children to form social identities and negotiate their changing social positions in the peer group (e.g., Goodwin 2006). At the heart of children's search for friendship and play alliances, they look for answers to questions deeply rooted in their experiences of who they are and what they contribute to a social world of meaning shared with peers (Winther-Lindqvist 2013). Corsaro (2018) specifically points to the establishment of play spaces as one of the significant peer cultural rituals through which small children honor social commitments and confirm positive relationships in the peer group: "Friendship means producing shared activity together in a specific area and protecting that play from the intrusion of others" (169). Social and spatial boundaries thus represent both tools of division and symbols of unification in children's peer culture, defined by Corsaro (2018) as "a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (128). Negotiating the borders of play domains is a source of conflict among children in childcare settings (Cederborg 2020; Singer and Haanikainen 2002). The ongoing negotiations of spatial and social demarcation lines in play are of great symbolic and practical significance for the children because these lines separate insiders from outsiders and members from nonmembers of established play communities and

friend groups (Cobb-More, Danby, and Farrell 2009).

To gain access to ongoing play, children develop access strategies often based on indirect and nonverbal access attempts, rather than open requests to join ongoing play (Corsaro 1979; Cromdal 2001; Tellgren 2004). Children's protection of interactive spaces, use of access strategies, and engagements in territorial border negotiations thus reflect both the social dynamics of the peer group and the social aspirations of the individual child, expressed through the practice of social play. Extensive research about various childcare and preschool environments in different countries suggests that children's defense of their play domains against outsiders often has more to do with the protection of important relationships than with deliberate attempts to exclude other children (Corsaro 2018; Goodwin 2006; Skånfors, Löfdahl, and Häaglund 2009; Svahn and Evaldsson 2011).

Methods

The empirical material presented in this article stems from an ethnographically inspired field study (Spradley 1979) conducted between 2019 and 2020 in two public Danish childcare facilities, both located in suburban areas about twenty-five kilometers from Denmark's capital Copenhagen. The study focused on a target group of four-year-old children because classical developmental play theories broadly recognize this age as a particularly creative and dynamic period in a child's play life, a period in which all forms of imaginative role play and fantasy play flourishes (Singer and Singer 1990). Three separate units of the two childcare facilities were specifically selected to participate in the study because the majority of children assigned to these units were around four years of age at the time. On the outside playground where the children from the different units spent several hours each day, they intermingled. In all, approximately eighty-five children and fifteen pedagogues participated in the study.

One focal point of the study was to gain new understandings of the conditions and demands made by the institutional environment of the childcare facility as a social fantasy play habitat for children. Schousboe's (2013) model of social fantasy play and Winther-Lindqvist's (2013) research on children's social identities place questions such as "who is in" and "who is out" at the heart of children's self-organized fantasy play. The exploratory ethnographical approach implies that the researcher remains open, curious, and adaptive to the insights

from immersion in the living culture and lived experiences of people in real-life settings (Mukherji and Albon 2018). The study aimed to use the participant observation approach (Duveen and Lloyd 1993) to reach a deeper understanding of the entanglements between peer cultural norms, institutional order, and spatial and social environments that constitute the conditions of children's social fantasy play in childcare.

The empirical material of the study consists of approximately 250 hours of participant observations monitoring the day-by-day interactions of children and pedagogues mainly inside the childcare rooms and outside on the playground. As a curious outsider entering into a peer cultural child world of precious relationships and vulnerable social commitments, my primary ethical concern was loyalty to my informants. I visited the childcare facilities prior to the start of my observations to explain to the children who I was and why I would be observing their play. I documented my observations by hand on the spot in a field notebook, and I subsequently transcribed all handwritten field notes to a computer immediately after each visit. The children and I agreed that they could ask me to stop observing if they felt uncomfortable or disturbed by me. I also attained written and informed consent from all the children's parents as well as all pedagogues and assistants working in the units where I made my observations.

The low-tech data collection method of the study gave me freedom of movement and the ability to follow the children around the unit or playground freely without having to worry about camera angles or zoom lenses. I furthermore avoided the risk of cameras or other technical equipment attracting attention from the children and creating unwanted distractions. To study the genesis of play over time, I generally followed particular play trajectories, even if some of the individual participants changed. I made this choice to explore in detail how the ongoing flow of thematic transformations and social reorganizations of the children's social fantasy play interweaved with their efforts to manage the spatial and social conditions of their institutional environment. Throughout the project, I tried to be sensitive and respectful of all the different engagements and personal stakes that my informants invested in their lives with each other.

As pointed out by Rasmussen (2011), loyalty in research expands beyond the privilege of anonymity, the duty of confidentiality, and the legal obligation to obtain written and informed consent. Inspired by Deleuze's ([1968] 1994) distinction between morals and ethics, I was particularly attentive to the risk of

letting my own moral judgments and sympathies guide my empirical observations and analytical interpretations. If the moralist evaluates the life of others, the ethical researcher ideally avoids evaluating the life of informants while seeking a deeper understanding of “what it is that is going on,” to use one of Goffman’s famous key phrases. Thus, throughout the scientific process of collecting, interpreting, and presenting my empirical material, I have been keenly aware that the play encounters I share with other scholars represent something already meaningful and important to all the children involved.

The theme of territoriality remains in all recorded play episodes. In some cases, territorial boundaries emerge as dominant conflicts in the children’s play—for instance, when three boys argue over the ownership of valuable building blocks essential for the construction of their LEGO skyscrapers or when a group of girls share the burdens of imaginary pregnancy in a hideout open exclusively for the selected few carrying giant pillow babies around under their shirts. Other times the territorial orientations of the play surface in ongoing verbal clarifications and agreements about mutual affiliations in social fantasy play without necessarily causing discord.

I carefully considered how to present the principal findings about multifarious functions and meanings of the children’s play territories in a way that captured both the wide general trends across the empirical material and the rich and nuanced interactive dynamics of social fantasy play as a multilayered activity with inherent territorial implications. A systematic presentation of the main thematic variations and play territorial subtypes identified in the material would provide the reader with an overview of the principal findings. However, such an analytical approach might fail to capture the dynamics of the social fantasy play in all its rich territorial complexity or to bring sufficient substance, depth, and context to the analysis. In fact, a single social fantasy play episode will often display a broad range of strategies to protect play territorial domains as well as gestures of openness and the acceptance of newcomers.

To meet this challenge, I have selected a single, in-depth, fantasy play episode to serve as a clear and specific illustration of the main findings in the material at large. This approach was inspired by a phenomenological methodology in which a single example embodies general empirical findings and reflects and deepens the theoretical concepts of the analysis (Van Manen and Van Manen 2021). The selected play trajectory is exemplary in its detailed depiction of the dynamic interplay between the spatial, social, and material conditions of the childcare setting, the children’s individual and collective projects in their play,

and the ongoing formation and negotiation of play territories across the three spheres of reality present in social fantasy play (Schousboe 2013). The carefully chosen play example illustrates the multifarious ways that the theme of play territorial boundaries interweave with children's organization and absorption in social fantasy play in imagination, reality, and staging.

Analysis: The Family Drama of Mum, Dad, and Little Sweetie

Four-year-olds Mary and Sally belonged to the group of oldest girls in the unit. While Mary was very popular among the other girls, Sally had to work hard to maintain a fragile position in the peer group. During the last weeks of the observation period, Sally initiated an intense rivalry with Mary, openly challenging her position as the social center figure and creative driving force in social fantasy play among the children in the unit. I recount some of the telling interactions with and among the children, then I follow with my analysis of their play.

Prologue

It is early afternoon. Some of the children participate in activities at the high tables with the two pedagogues, others are playing in small groups scattered around the floor of the unit.

For a while, I have watched Mary constantly relocating from place to place in her search for a peaceful spot to play with her Barbies. Sally persistently follows Mary around the floor insisting that she must hand over a glittering Barbie dress, which Sally claims that she had first.

Seeking temporary refuge from Sally, Mary takes cover behind a small room divider. She sits down with her Barbies, and after a while, she seems to be completely engrossed in her own imaginary fantasy play universe. Sally stays close by, attentively watching Mary in silence.

Mary proceeds to construct a hideout by closing off a quiet corner of the unit with a large mattress arranged on the side, so it forms a provisional security fence around her. She builds a roof of blankets and adjusts them carefully several times to make sure that it is not possible to peek in from the outside.

In a childcare setting, a Barbie dress cannot simply be regarded as “possessional territory” belonging to one identifiable and legitimate owner. Matters are far more complicated. Although both children and pedagogues broadly accepted the ground rule of “first to the mill” based on the prototype of territorial demarcation Goffman ([1971] 2010) called “the turn,” no exact timeframe was in place to determine the beginning or determination of a temporary ownership of a toy. This lack of clarity made persistent counterclaims to goods like toys and play arrangements a potentially effective strategy for Sally in her attempts to move in on Mary’s territorial domain.

Mary’s construction of a mattress fortress illustrated the immense difficulties of maintaining territorial integrity in an institutional play environment of situational territory. The common ownership of toys and space provided Sally with a multitude of opportunities to pose an unpredictable territorial threat without directly invading the “use space” that Mary occupied. In her position in the middle of the open floor of the unit, Mary was vulnerable to a variety of territorial violations and bereft of the proper tools to create an effective play territory defense line. In terms of territorial offenses, Sally’s physical presence in Mary’s intimate vicinity and watchful observations from the sideline prevented Mary from maintaining a desired physical distance from others and left her exposed to penetrative and intrusive looks (Goffman ([1971] 2010). Finally, Sally’s persistent verbal counterclaims challenging the legitimacy of Mary’s temporary claim to the Barbie doll dress constituted what Goffman defines as invasive sound interference and direct addressing by words in unpleasant and intrusive manners.

For Mary the marked territory of the hideout provided her with a temporary protection from the discomforts of these immediate territorial violations. The mattress walls and blanket roof of the hideout created a shield of protection from Sally’s curious eyes that enabled Mary to sustain an informational preserve in which she avoided involuntarily revealing details about her play and being the target of Sally’s scrutiny. The hideout enabled Mary to construct a fortified conversational reserve, which is Goffman’s term for the type of territory that allows individuals to administer control over who can approach them and join their activities.

The Sound of a Doorbell Sets Events in Motion

While she is outside her hideout to gather more clothes for her Barbies, Mary catches the sight of Casper (four years old), who has just

entered the unit. Mary rushes over to greet him and invites him to play with her inside her hideout.

Meanwhile, the arrival of Casper has also caught the interest of Sally, sitting close by still playing with her Barbies. Sally watches Casper attentively as he agrees to take on the role as the Dad in Mary's Barbie doll household and disappears into the hideout along with her. Sally moves closer to the hideout so she can overhear Mary giving Casper play instructions inside.

Mary: Look, this one was the sister, I was Elsa, and you were this one Casper.

Sally stands up in front of the entrance of the hideout and pretends to ring an imaginary doorbell.

Sally: DING DONG.

For a moment, everything is completely quiet inside the hideout. Then the sound of whispering voices breaks the silence.

Mary: Shhhhhhh, Casper, be quiet. We can't hear anything.

Sally tries to peek inside the hideout through a crack in the roof. Then she continues to ring the doorbell repeatedly.

Sally: DING DONG, DIIIIIIING DOOOOONG.

Mary appears at the entrance of the hideout.

Mary (hostile voice): You are disturbing us all the time.

She climbs outside and readjust the blankets to prevent Sally from peeking through the roof. Then she returns inside and instructs Casper to ignore the doorbell.

Following Casper's arrival, Sally embarked on a discrete reconnaissance operation using the access strategy Corsaro (2018) calls "encirclement" to gather information about what happened inside the hideout. She then applied a creative variant of the access strategy Corsaro (2018) identifies as "disruptive behavior." Thus, by inventing an imaginary doorbell and ringing it, she transforms herself from an unwelcome intruder to a polite houseguest honoring the rituals of social convention by announcing to the owners of the property that she would like to pop in for a visit.

This maneuver shows that the tricky part of selecting an effective access strategy is not merely to break down a territorial barrier to play but rather to present a self-definition that corresponds with the developing fantasy play scenario. This adaptability is of vital importance for an outsider attempting to gain

access to a hideout, because a hideout carries the temporary status of a fixed territory. The hideout combines a broad range of complementary types of territorial claims, potentially serving simultaneously as visual markers of a personal space, a use space, informational preserve, and a conversational preserve (Goffman ([1971] 2010), depending on the shifting strategic needs of the claimants.

So, rather than committing a direct territorial violation, Sally presented the inhabitants of the hideout with a form of open invitation to fantasy play by offering a surprising dramaturgical turning point (Who is at the door?). Mary turned down the invitation by ignoring the doorbell, indicating that at least one of the inhabitants of the hideout perceived Sally's creative access strategy as a disruptive intrusion based on the type of territorial violations Goffman ([1971] 2010) calls "sound interference" and "inappropriate addressing." As the owner and primary claimant of the hideout, Mary, in accordance with the peer cultural conventions, reserved the right to grant and deny entrance to aspiring members. On this ground, an uninvited guest hammering on an imaginary doorbell potentially constituted a territorial violation of an established play domain spatially outlined and clearly marked to function as a fixed territory reserved for her and Casper.

Calling in the Cavalry

Sally rings the doorbell again, this time stronger and more persistently. No one answers and she slams her fist into the mattress. Then she runs over to the big table where Helen, one of the pedagogues, is supervising an activity with a group of children.

Sally (tears running down her face): They don't want to play with me.

She hides her face in Helen's lap. Helen comforts her and asks her why she is so upset. Choked with tears, Sally explains that Mary will not allow her inside the hideout to play with her and Casper.

Helen calls Mary and Casper over to the table. Sally looks up from Helen's lap and follows Mary closely with her eyes, as Mary approaches the table. Casper stays inside the hideout.

Helen: Look Mary, Sally would really like to play with you and Casper.

Mary: But we want to play on our own.

Sally throws herself onto Helen's lap and burst into tears again. Helen tries to calm her down and encourages both of the girls to work out their differences and play together as friends.

As soon as Helen turns her attention back to the children at the table, Mary rushes back to the hideout and blocks the entrance behind her, so no one can enter or look inside.

In light of the rejection of her initial access strategy, the hopeful counter-claimant changed her approach. To substantiate her territorial impediment and increase her chances of attaining the desired membership to the hideout, she relied on the unpredictable resource of adult assistance and turned to the pedagogue Helen for active support. By arguing that the other two kids did not want to play with her, Sally increased her chances of mobilizing pedagogical support. Thus, the institutional norm that it is not acceptable behavior to exclude others from play provided her with an opportunity to recruit Helen as an “agent,” which is the Goffmanian ([1971] 2010) term for a potential ally respectively representing the claimant or counterclaimant in such matters. Sally’s recruitment of Helen failed and once again, she had to turn to a new access strategy.

*Adversaries Joining Forces: The Art of Building
a Family while Fighting for Territory*

Casper steps outside the hideout. He sits down and starts fiddling with a pink Barbie convertible. Sally, now observing the hideout attentively from her discrete position over at the table, grabs her Barbie doll, jumps to the floor and moves closer. She sits down a few steps away from Casper and starts dressing the Barbie pretending to ignore him.

Casper does not seem to notice her. He makes engine sounds and drives the convertible around in small circles.

Sally: Casper, you frustrate me. I do not bother to talk to you at all.

Casper does not respond. He is examining the chassis of the convertible. Sally waves her Barbie doll in front of Casper’s face.

Sally: Casper, who wants to play with my Barbie?

Mary (reappears at the entrance of the hideout): No one, we don’t, right Casper!

Sally (takes a step towards Mary): My dad will be so mad at you!

Casper stops playing with the convertible and looks up at the two girls.

Casper (to Sally): My dad can throw you in the trash. My dad can throw you all the way up to the moon.

Sally: My dad can throw you all the way up to North Pole-land.

Casper: Well, my dad can fart in your face.

Sally and Casper simultaneously burst into laughter. Mary watches them attentively from the entrance of the hideout in silence. Then she starts laughing too.

Mary: Sally, which Barbie would you like to be?

She widens the entrance so Sally can see all the Barbie dolls inside the hideout.

Mary instructs Sally and Casper that Mom and Dad are going to have a new baby. Sally immediately insists on playing the role of Little Sweetie, Mom and Dad's adorable newborn baby. Mary reluctantly accepts the suggestion, and the two girls start to expand the hideout together so it can house a whole family.

Surrounded on all sides by the situational territory of shared space, a hideout is notoriously vulnerable to territorial encroachments even if it is to some extent respected as fixed territory in the children's peer culture. Sally took advantage of these environmental conditions and tested the strength of the exclusive conversational preserve symbolically shared between Mary and Casper by their membership in the hideout. She approached Casper as soon as he stepped outside and engaged him in a playfully hostile dialogue. This turn of events showed that the integrity of the protected use space and conversational preserve provided by the hideout was not sustainable for Mary unless she was prepared for a direct confrontation with Sally.

Faced by a persistent, resourceful, and creative counterclaimant scouting relentlessly for a window of opportunity to advance into her play territory, Mary changed her territorial strategy and allowed Sally inside the hideout. Casper's loyalty and territorial orientation remained unclear. By inviting Sally to join the hideout and enter the play group, Mary changed the rules of engagement and triggered a transformation of the order and social dynamics of the territorial power struggle between the two girls. Thus, her suggestion that Mom and Dad are about to have a baby and her acceptance of Sally's adaption of the role of Little Sweetie paved the way for a relocation of the territorial dispute into the realm of a fantasy play universe.

The two girls co-created a family play narrative molded over the cultural norms, functions, and social roles of modern family life, and the pretend world of symbolic play was about to become a new frontline in Sally and Mary's inten-

sifying territorial battle. The following description and analysis illustrate the expansion of the territorial dispute from its origin in the world of physical objects and spaces to the fictional household of Mom, Dad, and Little Sweetie.

*Devoted Husband and Loving Dad:
The Divided Attention of a Modern Family Man*

Mary (reaches for Sally's hand): Come on Little Sweetie, did you forget that we were going to the Big Water today?

Little Sweetie responds with excitement and the two girls set out hand in hand on a joint trip to the "Big Water" (a small space in the middle of the floor of the unit). Little Sweetie is moving forward on her knees and has difficulties keeping up with her mom's rapid pace.

As they reach the Big Water, Little Sweetie throws herself into the waves and starts splashing and singing while she swims around and calls for her dad.

Mary (Mom): Listen, Little Sweetie. Mom and Dad needed to watch TV by themselves. They were very tired from work. Would you like to swim by yourself?

Sally (in a high-pitched baby voice): I want my dad. I want my dad.

Mary shushes Little Sweetie and waves goodbye to her as she returns to join Casper (Dad) now sitting in front of a TV made from toy magnets. Sally starts moaning as if she is in pain.

Mary: What is wrong Little Sweetie, are you ill?

Mom starts to comfort Little Sweetie as her moans of pain intensifies. Casper detaches himself from the TV and starts to assist Mary in her efforts to find the source of Little Sweetie's pain. They start to examine Little Sweetie thoroughly while her moaning continues. Casper suggests that they feed Little Sweetie some pizza, because she might be hungry.

Little Sweetie struggles to get up and then she suddenly falls dramatically to the floor where she lies completely still with her eyes closed as if she has fainted. Casper tries to bring Little Sweetie back to life by feeding her a slice of plastic-pizza. It does not have the desired effect.

As in all other aspects of social interaction, the settlement of play territory

demarcations between the children relied on their ability to perform roles in adaptive and socially meaningful ways, no matter if these role performances entailed acts of hostility and deception or of solidarity and affection. In fact, such differences are primarily a matter of perception in the eyes of a Goffmanian interpreter. Likewise, what constitutes a personal space, a use space, a stall, or a conversational preserve in a spatially confined childcare facility is a matter of constant reinterpretation and negotiation expressed through children's collective practices of social fantasy play. Thus, while attempting to outmaneuver each other in an intensifying territorial feud, the two girls were mutually obligated partners in the development of a shared family role play universe.

Mary (shakes Sally gently): Look Little Sweetie, would you like to swim in the Big Water again to make you better?

Little Sweetie does not respond.

Mary: (shakes her harder): Look, the Big Water, you can swim all by yourself!

Sally (crying): Want my dad.

She reaches out for Casper and repeats that she wants her dad.

Mary: There is no dad. Now there was a big crocodile out in the Big Water.

Little Sweetie stays on the floor moaning and crying for her dad.

Mary tries to pull Little Sweetie up on her feet.

Mary (irritated): Come on, now Little Sweetie went for a swim, and then the crocodile came.

At the word crocodile, Casper jumps to his feet, ready to take action.

Casper: I can beat him. I can beat the crocodile.

Little Sweetie jumps into the water and starts screaming for help. Without hesitation, Casper throws himself into the Big Water and launches a brave attack on the (imaginary) crocodile with a series of wild punches, karate kicks and grunts.

In the middle of Casper's epic fight with the vicious reptile, his mom arrives to pick him up. A little while later, Helen (pedagogue) asks the two girls to collect all the blankets and pillows and clean up after themselves.

Neither the girl's exchanges of claims and counterclaims nor their encroach-

ments on each other's territorial domains were arbitrary. They were completely consistent with the developing storyline, loyal to the characters the girls were impersonating, and kept in line with the culturally established norms dictating the roles and responsibilities of the different members of a contemporary family. Even if the underlying aim of their co-creation of an imaginary family of Dads, Moms, Little Sweeties, Big Waters, and ferocious crocodiles was to outmaneuver each other in a fierce competition for the good of Casper's attention and devotion, the two girls nevertheless demonstrated a high level of mutual adaptiveness, responsiveness, and collaboration throughout the play episode. They remained true to the family play frame and invented characters, play themes, and turns of events that corresponded with this specific role and fantasy play universe. They used their intimate knowledge of the cultural norms that guide the level of physical intimacy between family members in real life to disguise territorial intrusions as natural signs of affection.

It is not correct to interpret the dynamics of the interaction between the two girls simply in terms of conflict, disagreement, and antagonism. Nor is it correct to interpret the presented play trajectory as a celebration of imaginative co-creation and cooperation. The personal stakes for both girls were high, and regardless of whether the actual good for which they fought was a committed relationship with the absentminded Casper, a dominant position in the social hierarchy of their peer group, or something else entirely, one thing was certain: The two girls could not escape each other's immediate physical company and had to work out their differences in the confined space of an institutional environment in which territorial boundaries were blurry, fragile, and negotiable. As suggested by Winther-Lindqvist (2010), the most popular girl was likely to uphold the director's position in a social fantasy play and to enact the role of Mom (Mary). The two girls, in their opposing roles as Mom and Little Sweetie, illustrated that no social hierarchies are static and that it is essential to master the delicate art of breaking down, negotiating, and enforcing territorial boundaries for children engaging in social fantasy play and forming friendships in a childcare setting.

Discussion

Sally and Mary's inventive use of role transformations and dramaturgical turning points to pursue their opposing territorial agendas while taking on reciprocal

roles in a shared fantasy play scenario indicates a high level of adaptability to the play's environmental conditions in childcare. The two girls relied on a broad range of sophisticated access strategies and complementary role performances to drive the play narrative in a direction that served their respective territorial agendas and needs. The obvious question is whether all children have equal opportunities to become skillful masters of the complex territorial landscape of a self-organized childcare play environment.

One of the cornerstones of the current national curriculum for Danish ECEC is the imperative that "children's spontaneous and self-organized play should be acknowledged and respected and should be allowed plenty of space in everyday activities" (Ministry of Children and Education 2020, 18). On the surface, Danish childcare indeed provides a rich and fertile environment for children's spontaneous and self-organized play because it allows them a high degree of self-determination and unscheduled playtime with peers of the same age in institutional settings offering accessible play arrangements and toys (Winther-Lindqvist 2017).

However, through the territorial lens of Goffman's microsociology, the ambiguous and sometimes decidedly conflicting demands of children's institutional play habitats become visible in surprising ways. Thus, as Goffman ([1971] 2010) demonstrates in his microstudies on social interaction and public order, the integrity of a social self relates intimately to an individual's ability to maintain a minimum of control over fixed, egocentric, and situational territory. In this regard, the social terrain of a childcare unit confronts its inhabitants with some of the same distinctive challenges that make grown-up co-mingling tricky in public parking lots and cramped subway cars during rush hour. Large crowds of people gathered in confined spaces, where valuable goods are in short supply and claims to situational territory rely on personal initiative, potentially heightens the risk of social tension.

At the same time, the territorial conditions and demands of childcare also place children in position to discover the benefits of compromising by making room for others and avoiding open conflict. These challenges are pivotal to most forms of social interaction in adult life, not to mention a driving force in the co-creative activity of social fantasy play. In fact, the intimate presence of social others, even if they potentially cause disruptions and provoke territorial power struggles, provides children in childcare with unique chances to engage in a rich social life with each other. Thus, the process of negotiating territorial demarcations in play proves extremely valuable for children because it forces

them to seek compromises, expand their social horizons, and engage together in creative play projects that open doorways to the realm of social fantasy play. Nevertheless, situational territory in a play habitat that provides some children with opportunities for engagements in social fantasy play for others may be difficult to decode and navigate.

From a traditional pedagogical standpoint in Danish and Scandinavian ECEC, entrusting children with a responsibility to engage in self-organized play, share space and props, and learn to resolve conflicts peacefully is part of a larger project of democratic formation and recognition of children's active social agency (Winther-Lindqvist 2017). On one hand, research shows that children's immersion in play with peers in childcare is a valuable training ground for the acquisition of social norms and competencies (Winther-Lindqvist and Svinth 2019). On the other hand, this does not necessarily indicate that children's self-organized play in childcare naturally evolves in the direction of inclusion, harmony, and equal opportunities if we delegate the responsibility to organize play, resolve differences, and share resources in a peaceful manner to the children themselves. In fact, existing research suggests that children's self-organized play produces community and friendship as well as marginalization and social exclusion (Scrafton and Whittington 2015; Schousboe 2013; Winther-Lindqvist and Svinth 2019). Reumano and his associates (Reumano et al. 2014) find that free and self-organized childcare play environments tend to foster self-reinforcing fantasy play communities among some children, while other children fall outside these synergistic creative circles and have fewer opportunities to gain entrance and become positively involved in play.

My study underlines that a dichotomous distinction between prosocial and antisocial behavior fails to capture the complex dynamics of children's social fantasy play. The empirical data generally reflects that children must navigate a territorial landscape of high complexity in their play. The ability to interpret unwritten peer cultural rules and avoid committing open transgressions against them are vital skills to navigate this complexity. For instance, a ratified coplayer, a trusted friend, or a leader of the peer group is often allowed to enter what Goffman ([1971] 2010) called personal space—that is, the immediate space surrounding a child—while, instead, a child without such friendly affiliations or of lower status in a peer group likely gets received with hostility. Thus, successful entrance into and influential participation in play in a childcare setting, social fantasy play in particular, requires of the children resourcefulness, dexterity, cultural knowledge, and refined communication skills.

The children enforce, negotiate, challenge, and mark out territorial lines and territorial claims for play with a multitude of different agendas and purposes. In general, the empirical research significantly finds that although the establishment of territorial domains in children's play frequently causes conflict (particularly when physical space is limited), play territories also unite the children in shared fantasy play projects and mark important social and organizational connections. These create new relationships and allow fantasy play communities to be born. A remarkable social flexibility, adaptability, and willingness to work out solutions and find common ground exists among children.

Conclusion

Although it is a paramount pedagogical project to inspire children to embrace the virtues of inclusion and sharing, the children themselves must address other urgent problems and concerns. Their primary objectives are to form functional play groups, immerse themselves in stimulating fantasy play, protect valuable material resources, invest in personal relationships, and gain control over their own lives in the midst of crowded childcare facilities. From their point of view, sharing toys, sharing space, and embracing a social etiquette based on the principle that everyone should play together as friends can sometimes directly contradict their immediate needs and aspirations in social fantasy play. Thus, navigating the challenging habitat of a childcare play environment not only requires openness, collaboration, and willingness to share from children, it can also demand efficient strategies to outmaneuver opponents and barricade the entrance to a hideout. These findings highlight that sustaining play territorial integrity and reaching influential positions in social fantasy play is an endeavor of high complexity for children in childcare. Beyond other decisive factors such as age, gender, and status in the peer group, my study reveals that a rich and diverse reservoir of creative skills, resources, and negotiation tactics enables children to manage the territorial implications of organizing and gaining entrance to social fantasy play in a childcare setting.

Pedagogical involvement in these vital matters is often limited to encouraging children to resolve territorial discords in their play with diplomacy and a willingness to share and include each other. Pedagogues intervene in physical confrontations between the children and mediate to the best of their ability

if children call for their assistance. A growing body of international research addresses the value of pedagogues taking on an actively supporting role in children's play (Devi, Fleer, and Li 2018; Fleer 2015; Hakkarainen and Bredikyte 2018). Winther-Lindqvist and Svinth (2019), in their review of children's childcare play, find that play supported by adults has a strong potential to decrease children's conflict level and promote increased participation and social inclusion in play.

However, my observations indicate that children mainly manage the formation of territorial borderlines in play according to the premises of their own peer cultural rules and social hierarchies. This is a potential source of social marginalization. Some children need guidance, inspiration, and creative solutions from capable and engaged pedagogical sparring partners to find a way into social fantasy play. The multifarious meanings and functions of play territories in children's social fantasy play testify to the need for an expansion of our knowledge about how to support children's self-organized play in ways that opens gateways to positive participation for children of all ages, genders, cultural backgrounds, status in the peer group, and levels of play experience and skill.

While the territorial indiscretions of an inconsiderate fellow traveler on the subway is forgotten once he or she disappears into the crowd, children in childcare must work out their differences and handle their territorial disputes in play on the premise of an intimately shared institutional everyday life. By understanding the territorial conditions and implications of a childcare play habitat, I argue, we can better support children's social fantasy play and provide them with fertile, rich, and inspiring institutional play environments in the future.

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