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# Interpretive Reproduction in Children's Play



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The author looks at children's play from the perspective of interpretive reproduction, emphasizing the way children create their own unique peer cultures, which he defines as a set of routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children engage in with their playmates. The article focuses on two types of routines in the peer culture of preschool children—approach-avoidance play and dramatic role play—and compares their importance. The author outlines the universal nature of these routines and how they can be embellished and extended. **Key words:** approach-avoidance play; children and social development; children's peer cultures; dramatic role play; interpretive reproduction; *la Strega*; plying the frame; socialization

## Introduction

I HAVE ARGUED, in other works, that the sociological theories of childhood must move away from the doctrine that children's social development involves primarily the internalization of adult skills and knowledge. Instead, I suggest, we must consider socialization not only a matter of individual adaptation and internalization, but also a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction. We must appreciate the importance of collective, communal activity in the way children negotiate, share, and create culture with adults and each other (Corsaro 1992, 2011; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998).

To argue that socialization is a collective and communal process, however, is not sufficient to construct a new sociology of childhood. The very term *socialization* remains a problem. It sounds forward looking, and whenever one hears it, the notion of training and preparing children for the future comes to mind (Thorne 1993, 3–6). Therefore, I have offered the term *interpretive reproduction* (Corsaro 1992, 2011). I mean *interpretive* to suggest the innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in society, and, in fact, children as young as two create and participate in their peer cultures by appropriating information from the adult world to address their unique peer concerns. I mean by *reproduction*

the idea that children do not simply internalize society and culture, but they actively contribute to cultural production and change. I think the two words of the term together also imply that children are—in their very participation in society—constrained by the existing social structure and by processes of social reproduction. That is, children and their childhoods are affected by the societies and cultures of which they are members (Corsaro 2011).

With interpretive reproduction, I wish to emphasize the importance of children creating their own unique peer cultures. Some theorists of childhood view peer culture as a category of children's lives and use it as proof of a "tribal" childhood where children create their own world independent of adult culture (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998). From the perspective of interpretive reproduction, however, children are always participating in and are part of two cultures—their own and adults'—and these cultures are intricately interwoven (Corsaro 2011). Further, children interpret—and contribute to—adult culture through their collective actions in the peer cultures they create throughout their childhoods.

I define children's peer cultures as the stable sets of routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share with each other (Corsaro 2011; Corsaro and Eder 1990). In this article, I focus on two routines in the peer culture of preschool children, approach-avoidance play and dramatic role play; and I compare the importance of these routines. I conclude with the possibility that these routines are universal in children's peer cultures.

### **Approach-Avoidance Play**

Approach-avoidance play consists primarily of nonverbal, pretend-play routines in which children first identify and approach then avoid and escape a monstrously threatening agent. Like many routines in peer culture, approach-avoidance is difficult to appreciate outside its natural context. The best way to get a feel for it might be to consider the way children collectively produce the routine, which I tried to capture on a video recording I called "The Walking Bucket" (Corsaro 2011, 180–83).

#### *The Walking Bucket*

Three children named Beth, Brian, and Mark, all of them about five years old and all from an American preschool, play on a rocking boat in a schoolyard. Suddenly, Beth notices another boy—Steven, six years old—walking some distance

from the boat, with a large trash can over his head.

“Hey, a walking bucket! See the walking bucket!” shouts Beth.

“What?” says Brian. Beth, pointing to where Steven walks, repeats herself, “A walking bucket. Look!” Brian and Martin turn, look, and see Steven.

“Yeah!” says Brian, “Let’s get off.”

The three kids stop the boat, jump to the ground, and—with Mark leading the way—walk toward Steven.

Steven cannot see the other kids approaching as he stops walking and stands near some large, stored, wooden blocks. When the three children from the boat reach Steven, Mark and Brian push the trash can around and start to raise it above Steven’s head.

“You,” shouts Steven, and he flips the trash can off his head.

“Whoa!” yells Brian; and he, Mark, and Beth run back toward the rocking boat.

Steven starts to place the trash can back on his head; but when he sees the other kids running, he drops it to the ground and runs toward the rocking boat, too, flailing his arms in a threatening manner.

Brian, Mark, and Beth pretend to be afraid. They screech and move to the far side of the boat. Steven stops at the vacant side of the boat and rocks it by pushing down on the boat with his hands. But he does not climb onto the boat, nor does he try to grab the other kids.

Steven then returns to the trash can he left behind and pulls it back over his head. Brian, Mark, and Beth watch from the boat, giggling and laughing. Once Steven has the trash can back in place, Mark says, “Let’s kick him.”

Mark and Brian jump down from the boat and run toward Steven who still has the trash can over his head. However, it appears that Steven expects the other kids to return so he stays near the block area. Beth remains behind in the boat.

Mark reaches Steven first and kicks at his legs but misses and instead kicks the bottom of the trash can. Brian now runs up and also kicks at Steven but clearly misses. The two boys then run back to the boat as Steven raises the trash can off his head.

Steven flips the trash can to the ground just as Brian and Mark climb back on the boat with Beth. Steven takes on a threatening stance but remains silent and does not move toward the boat. Instead, he places the trash can back over his head again and walks around the playground, moving farther away from the three children to the end of the sand pile opposite the boat.

The three kids now begin to rock the boat very fast, “Whee! Faster! Faster!” shouts Beth.

Steven remains some distance from the boat but moves in the direction of the others. It is not clear how Steven knows where he is going, because he has only what he can see on the ground directly in front of his feet to guide him.

"Hey, he's coming!" yells Beth.

"Hey, you big poop butt!" taunts Brian.

All the kids laugh, and Beth yells, "Hey you big fat poop butt!"

Steven ignores these taunts and continues to walk around the playground.

Beth now jumps from the boat and, with Brian close behind, runs toward Steven. Mark also has left the boat but trails the other two. As Beth nears Steven, she veers off to the left, while Brian runs up to Steven and pushes the trash can. Mark arrives just as Steven flips off the can and shouts, "I'll get you!"

Steven chases Mark and Brian back toward the boat but takes a circuitous route, which allows the boys to make it to home base easily. Steven again pushes the vacant side of the boat and then returns to the trash can. Brian and Mark rock the boat, watching Steven place the trash can back over his head.

This video typifies the approach-avoidance play that occurred spontaneously in the American and Italian preschools I have studied. Composed of three phases, the routine includes identification, approach, and avoidance. In this example, the identification phase began when Beth identified Steven as a walking bucket. Steven had never placed a bucket on his head before, nor had he taken on the role of a monster or any type of threatening agent. In approach-avoidance play, children are often thrust into the role of threatening agent as Steven was here (Corsaro 1985, 2011 present more examples). Beth's playmates confirmed her identification when they turned to look at Steven, and Brian responded, "Yeah." The identification—although behaviorally quite simple (it involves a call for attention, shared attention, labeling, and confirmation)—provides an interpretive frame for Steven's behavior in line with the shared routine of approach-avoidance. Once the children offered and ratified the identification, the routine clicked into operation.

The approach phase started with Brian's suggestion, "Let's get off." The three children then left the rocking boat and headed cautiously toward Steven. Although Steven seemed aware of the approach, he did not react until Mark and Brian pushed the trash can and tried to lift it. Steven then removed it, so he could see—and chase—the other children. Beth, Mark, and Brian screeched loudly in mock fear when they ran back to the boat.

A number of things are important here. It seems clear that Beth, Mark, and Brian felt they were in this together. Their approach was communally orches-

trated, moving from Brian's proposal, to the careful advance toward Steven, to the pushing of the trash can, and finally to the feigned fear in reaction to Steven's removing the trash can from his head. An escalating tension occurred in the approach phase, which the children created and shared.

Steven's participation to this point had been limited. He was thrust into the role of threatening agent by the others. He did not seem aware of this assignment until they pushed the can and he took it off. Steven actually began to replace the bucket on his head, but then he saw the other children running away from him toward the boat.

The children's fleeing launched the avoidance phase. This phase can proceed only with the threatening agent's active participation. Steven flailed his arms in a threatening manner as he chased the other children back to the boat. Once he reached the boat, however, Steven did not actually get on it to capture the others. His behavior signaled the limits of his power as a threatening agent. The boat thus became a home base for the threatening agent that Steven ratifies by touching the vacant side while the Beth, Brian, and Mark stayed on the other side.

After ratifying the home base, Steven returned to the trash can and replaced it on his head. The threatening agent was now again disabled and the first cycle of the routine had been completed. The routine was recycled several times with the threatened children escalating the tension by taunting Steven and calling him names.

Before considering further aspects of the importance of the approach-avoidance routine in peer culture, let's look at a more formalized version of the routine Italian preschoolers call *la Strega* (Corsaro 2011, 183).

### *La Strega*

Cristina, Luisa, and Rosa—all about four years old—play in the yard of an Italian preschool. Rosa points to Cristina and says, "She is the witch." Luisa then asks Cristina, "Will you be the witch?" Cristina agrees. Cristina now closes her eyes and Luisa and Rosa move closer and closer to her, almost touching her. As they approach, Cristina repeats: "*Colore! Colore! Colore!*" Luisa and Rosa move closer with each repetition, and then Cristina shouts: "*Viola!*" Luisa and Rosa run off screeching, and Cristina, with her arms and hands outstretched in a threatening manner, chases after them. Luisa and Rosa run in different directions, and Cristina chases after Rosa. Just as *la Strega* is about to catch her, Rosa touches an object of the color *viola*—a toy on the ground that serves as home base. Cristina turns to look for Luisa and sees that she also has found something *viola* (the

dress of another child). Cristina now again closes her eyes and repeats: "Colore! Colore! Colore!" The other girls begin a second approach and repeat the routine, this time saying "Azzurro!" to name a new color. Rosa and Luisa again find the correctly colored objects before Cristina can capture them. At this point, Cristina suggests that Rosa be *la Strega*, and she agrees. They repeat the routine three more times with the colors *verde*, *rosa*, and *giallo*. Each time *la Strega* chases but does not capture the fleeing children.

I had observed many enactments of *la Strega* in my first study of a preschool in Bologna in 1984. When I returned in 1985, I asked some children to play the game so I could video tape it. They asked which *la Strega* I wanted to see: *la Strega colore cammando* or *la Strega bibita*. Knowing what *colore cammando* was, I asked about *la Strega bibita* and received a long explanation and demonstration of the new version of the game where the witch walks behind children kneeling on the ground.

Each child has selected a flavor of soft drink (*bibita*). The witch taps one child on the back and the child asks the witch what she wants. "Un *bibita*," replies the witch. Then the witch backs up and the children approach her in a straight line. They get very close. The witch then shouts out the flavor of a soft drink and the child who has selected that flavor runs from the group. The witch chases and tries to catch the child before she or he returns to the group.

I was impressed to see the children had invented a new version of the game during my short absence from the preschool. Both *la Strega* routines highlighted some additional implications for children's peer culture of approach-avoidance play. First, it allowed the children to personify the feared (but fascinating) *la Strega* in a fellow playmate. The fact that a living person embodied *la Strega* was tempered by the animator being, after all, just another child. The feared figure became part of immediate reality, but its personification was both created and controlled by the children in their collective production of the routine.

Secondly, the routine led to an exciting buildup and an important release of tension. In the approach phase, the witch relinquished power by closing her eyes as the children drew near. The tension built, however, as the children got closer and closer, and only the witch could decide when to make the announcement of a particular color or flavor of soft drink. The announcement signaled the beginning of the witch's attempt to capture the children and the avoidance phase of the routine. Although the fleeing children may have seemed to be afraid in the avoidance phase, they clearly feigned the fear because in *la Strega colore cammando*, they easily found and touched objects of any color. In *la Strega bibita*,

the fleeing child had a head start on the witch and felt encouraged by cheers from the group to return to them before being captured by the witch. Thus, in both versions of the routine, the witch seldom actually captured a fleeing child. In fact, threatened children often prolong the avoidance phase to increase the excitement of the routine.

We see in the American and Italian examples that the threatened children have a great deal of control. They initiate and recycle the routine through their approach, and they have a reliable means of escape (home base) in the avoidance phase. These cross-cultural data nicely demonstrate how children cope with real fears by incorporating them into peer routines that they produce and control. In fact, approach-avoidance play may be a universal feature of children's peer culture (Barlow 1985; Corsaro 2003, 2011; Schwartzman 1978). Engaging in play routines to confront fears and anxieties also appears in the playful, leisure activities of older children and adults when they attend horror films, ride roller coasters, and so on (Gaut 1993; Tudor 1997).

### **Dramatic Role Play**

Child researchers have long argued for the importance of dramatic role play for children's social and emotional development. Like most adults, these researchers often see role play as a direct imitation of adult behavior. Kids do not, however, simply imitate adults in their role playing; rather, they continually elaborate and embellish adult conduct to address their own concerns.

Children's appropriation and embellishment of adult behavior primarily concerns status, power, and control. Kids feel empowered when they take on adult roles. They use the dramatic license of imaginary play to project into the future—when they believe they will be in charge and in control of themselves and others.

Playing roles also allows kids to consider how different people act in social situations and how they relate to each other. Children find role playing of great help in understanding gender—for example, it helps them deal with social conventions about how girls and boys should act and with social stereotyping based on gender. Here, again, we see that young children do not accept such conventions and stereotypes but challenge and refine them. 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.

*Role Playing and Social Power*

Children begin playing roles as young as age two. Most role playing among two- to five-year-olds concerns the expression of power. In research early in my career, I was interested in the use of language 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 around two-and-a-half years old and without preschool experience) began a role-playing sequence after Mia suggested we all play teacher. Krister wanted to be the teacher and pushed a chair in front of a large blackboard.

Mia, Buddy, and I sat on the floor as students. Krister took the chalk and said, "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 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 saw a young child who had not attended preschool but who knew that teachers are powerful and that they tell kids what to do. They also, Krister understood, made bad children 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 no one ever had to sit in the corner at Mia's school. Perhaps the idea came from something on television such as a cartoon or from an adult joking about kids having to sit in the corner when they were bad in school. Where Krister picked up the information is less important than his desire to express the power one has in an adult or superordinate role (that is a role with the most power or authority), a situation which young children seldom experience.

In socio-dramatic play, children relish taking on and expressing power. It is fun. In one complex role-playing episode during my research in Berkeley, California, the kids (all were about four years old) clearly expressed power and control while in superordinate roles, misbehaved and obeyed in subordinate roles, and cooperated in roles of equal status. But they became confused about the alignment and gender expectations in other roles (Corsaro 2011, 168–71).

*Two Husbands*

A boy, Bill, and a girl, Rita, enter the upstairs playhouse carrying purses and a suitcase. Before coming upstairs they have agreed on the roles of husband and wife. As they drop the purses and suitcases to the floor, they look down at children playing below. They see two boys, Charles and Denny, crawling around and meowing like cats.

“Hey, there are our kitties,” says Bill.

Rita replies, “Yeah they’re down in the backyard.”

Bill and Rita now arrange things in the house. They pick up blankets from the bed and place the purses and suitcase on the floor in front of the bed. Bill then picks up a baby crib and places it at the front of the bed, blocking the area around the bed off from the rest of the room.

“This is our special room, right?” says Bill.

“Right,” responds Rita.

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

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

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

“Kitty, you can’t come into this room!” Bill commands sternly. But one of the kitties, Charles, immediately disobeys, comes into the room, and climbs up on the bed. Meanwhile the other kitty has knocked a plate from the table to the floor.

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

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

The kitties head toward the stairs and Charles starts crawling down. But Denny stops at the head of the stairs and says, “No, I’m the kitty. I’m the kitty.” It seems he wants to stay. But the husband and wife insist that he go.

“Go back in the backyard!” commands Bill.

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

Denny now gives up and also goes down the stairs.

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

"They were rough on us," says Rita.

After the kitties leave, the husband and wife decide the house needs cleaning. Bill moves the furniture as his wife cleans the floor.

Bill picks up the table and says, "Be careful, I'm gonna move our table."

"You're a handy man. Handy man," sings Rita.

"Next," says Bill as he pushes the stove near the door and then moves the table next to it.

"Bill? Bill?" calls Rita.

"What?"

"You're a strong man," Rita praises him.

"I know it. I just moved this," says Bill referring to the table.

Here the children work together (and their work is in line with stereotyped, gender-role expectations, which are expressed in actions and reinforced in verbal evaluations). As Rita pretends to mop the floor, the kittens return. Bill tries to block them off, but they scurry by moving onto the just cleaned floor. Bill attempts to shoo them back to the stairs.

"Come on kitties, get out! Get out! Scat! Scat!"

Rita stops cleaning to help her husband, "Come scat. Scat!" she yells.

Charles now crawls back down the stairs, but Denny remains and stands up announcing, "I'm not—I'm not a kitty anymore."

"You're a husband?" Bill asks.

"Yeah," agrees Denny.

"Good. We need two husbands," says Bill.

Now Bill calls out to Rita, who does not seem to hear the previous exchange, "Hey, two husbands."

Rita is not pleased with this development and offers an alternative. "I can't catch two husbands cause I have a grandma."

"Well, I—then I'm the husband," says Denny.

"Yeah, husbands! Husbands!" chant Denny and Bill as they dance around the room.

"Hold it Bill," says Rita. "I can't have two husbands."

Rita holds up two fingers and shakes her head, "Not two. Not two." She then walks down the stairs. Meanwhile, Bill and Denny continue dancing around upstairs and chanting "Two husbands! Two Husbands!"

Rita walks around in front of the downstairs playhouse shaking her head. She stops near the stairs just as Bill and Denny come down, and says, "I can't marry them, two husbands. I can't marry two husbands because I love them."

Bill says to Rita, "Yeah, we do." He then turns to Denny and says, "We gonna marry ourselves, right?"

"Right," responds Denny.

The boys then go back upstairs and continue chanting "Husbands!" They dance around and jump on the bed, but there is no coordinated activity. It is not clear to them or to me what two husbands do, especially without a wife. Later, Rita comes upstairs and says she is a kitty. The two husbands admonish her for scratching them and misbehaving and chase her down the stairs. Shortly after this occurs, the role playing comes to end when the teachers announce "clean-up time."

In this sequence, we see the husband and wife express clear authority over the kittens through their use of imperatives with strong intonation and gestures of control. But we also see that the kittens caused these strong displays by their misbehavior and resistance. In fact, in much role playing, subordinates—kids and pets—often misbehave by doing exactly what they are told not to do. In the process, disciplinary scripts emerge with a language structure that allows the clear display and enforcement of power. It is as if the children want this to happen. They want to create and share emotionally in the power and control adults exercise over them.

After the kittens left, the husband and wife decided the house needed cleaning. Bill moved the furniture as his wife cleaned the floor. Here the children worked together in line with stereotypical, gender-role expectations that are expressed in actions (for example, husbands are strong, and they help around the house to move furniture while wives do the cleaning) and reinforced in verbal evaluations (such as Rita's noting that Bill is a handy and strong man).

Rita pretended to mop the floor as the kittens returned; Bill tried to block them, shooing them downstairs as the kittens scurried past onto the just-cleaned floor. In this sequence, the role playing hit a snag, at least for Rita, when Denny decided he did not want to be a kitty anymore. Perhaps he had gotten tired of being shooed down the stairs. In any case, Bill suggested Denny also be a husband; and when Denny accepted, Bill even added, "Good. We need two husbands." It is not clear to me why Bill made this offer. It was perhaps because Denny is a boy and males are husbands; Bill thought Denny should be a husband like him.

Rita, however, clearly thought otherwise and saw a problem that went beyond gender stereotypes—one wife and two husbands. While the boys danced and celebrated being husbands, Rita argued to no avail that she could not catch, have, marry, or love two husbands.

She knew something was wrong with such a relationship (at least for the adults in her culture), which had something to do with her emerging knowledge that the roles of husband and wife are not just gender specific. She knew wives and husbands love each other and marry. She even assumed that one wife—one husband applied in her pretend relationship with Bill. But what was she to do with Denny?

She seemed to offer up the role of grandma for Denny, “I can’t catch two husbands ’cause I have a grandma.” But her phrasing was confusing, and a grandma was the wrong gender—grandpa might have worked. The contrast between the boys’ glee at being two husbands—Bill even suggested 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 to misbehavior and discipline. Rita had a glimpse, however, into the complexity of role relationships. In Jean Piaget’s terms, she experienced disequilibrium in her social world that she will strive to equalize. So we see that role playing is fun, improvisational, unpredictable, and ripe with opportunities for reflection and learning.

### **Plying the Frame in Role Play**

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 (1956) argued, when a child plays a role, she or he not only learns something about the role’s specific social position but “also learns that there is such a thing as a role” (148). According to Bateson, 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” (148).

Children’s recognition of the “transformative power” of play is an important element of peer culture. In line with Bateson and the sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), I will refer to their use of this transformative power in role playing as “plying the frame.” Let us consider an example from my research in Bologna, Italy (Corsaro 2003, 119–21).

#### *Non C’è Zuppa Inglese*

In Bologna, Emilia imagines running 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 video taping the play. A summary of the video-taped episode might read:

“Bill, will you come to see our store?” Emilia 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 say 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; 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 have noticed earlier that Emilia and her friends are 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.

“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!"

"*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 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 wanted to stay in the confined frame of pretending to have a small ice cream store with flavors that could be represented by features on the playground: dirt, sand, leaves, and so on. Although I had trouble giving her my order because of my fractured Italian, I kept within the frame and accepted—no, even volunteered—"chocolate," a flavor I knew she had. But first Stefano and then Alberto said, more or less, "What's the fun of that!" They stretched the frame by purposely ordering flavors they knew Emilia did not have or did not want to pretend to have. Then the whole role playing became about "playing with the play."

This turn of events was most apparent when Alberto called out after Emilia and ordered *zuppa inglese* (which is a fancy Italian restaurant dessert related to the English dessert trifle). By then, even I understood what was going on and joined in the boys' laughter at Alberto's request. Emilia, feigning disgust, clearly enjoyed dealing with Alberto. She relished the opportunity to deny the request, by responding "*Non c'è zuppa inglese!*" But Alberto's response to this was to ask for banana! Later, however, Emilia relented and allowed that there might be some pistachio and that she would check into the orange soda.

### **Conclusion: Play and Peer Culture in the Moment and over Time and Place**

Are approach-avoidance play and role playing universal aspects of children's peer culture? Do these activities occur throughout history and exist in all countries

and cultures of the world? Approach-avoidance play, as we view it here, is a type of play documented in different time periods and in different cultures. It clearly relates to a number of run-and-chase games that include one child taking on a threatening role. In my work in Italy, I documented a game called *la Strega* or The Witch, which has several variants but basically involves approach-avoidance play.

This type of play has also been documented among !Kung children in Namibia in South West Africa by anthropologist Lorna Marshall during the 1950 and 1960s. There, the children played a game called “frogs,” a reverse version of “Mother May I?” The game begins with one child taking the role of “mother for all” as the remaining children sitting in a circle. When the mother taps a child with a stick, the child pretends to sleep. While all the children are sleeping, the mother pulls hairs from her head and places them in an imaginary fire to cook. The hairs are “frogs” that have been gathered for food. When the frogs are cooked, the mother wakes her children one by one and asks each to fetch her mortar and pestle so she can finish preparing the frogs. But each child refuses, so the angry mother fetches the mortar and pestle herself. While she is away the children steal the frogs and run off to hide. When the mother returns, she pretends to be very angry and chases after the children.

When she finds one, she strikes him or her on the head with her forefinger. This action “breaks the head” so that the child’s “brains run out” and she then pretends to drink the “brains.” The final part of the game frequently ends in chaos as the children try to dart away from the mother’s grasp. Soon everyone is chasing everyone else, laughing and whacking each other on the head (Marshall 1976 in Schwartzman 1978, 126). The game’s correspondence with our approach–avoidance sequence seems obvious, even though the game itself is more elaborate and complex.

Regarding role play, historian Barbara Hanawalt, in her book, *Growing Up in Medieval London* (1993), reported that children of medieval London engaged in types of dramatic role play such as reproducing the celebration of religious ceremonies and marriages.

Using interviews of former slaves, Lester Alston (1992) and David Wiggins (1985) offered another example. They reported that slave children in the pre–Civil War South of the United States engaged in a variety of role playing—again including religious ceremonies like baptisms but most especially “slave auctions”—that clearly helped children deal with separation from their families.

More recently, Cindi Katz—in her ethnographic work in the 1980s on play

and work among rural Sudanese children—documented elaborate role play tied closely to adult activities. Boys mimicked agricultural work and the profitable commerce that grew from such work. Central to the play was a toy tractor one of the boys made with the help of an older brother from a variety of discarded objects. The boys made a plow for the tractor and cooperatively and painstakingly reproduced all the stages of farming from plowing the fields, to planting and watering the crops, to irrigating and weeding, and finally to harvesting the crops and taking them to a pretend storehouse. They also reproduced the process of selling their harvest using artificial currency. Finally, they used their pretend profits to play store, bringing a range of goods represented by objects like bits of metal, glass, and battery tops. (Katz 2004, 12–13).

In the same culture, girls also played elaborate pretend roles. They made dolls from straw, gave names to the dolls representing males and females of all ages, and played with the dolls in houses “they established with dividers made of shoes, mortars, bricks, and pieces of tins” (Katz 2004, 17). The girls used these props to enact a wide range of domestic activities like cooking, eating, fetching water, and visiting. These activities, although staying close to the adult behavior, were highly innovative in the children’s use of discarded and natural materials compared to the way children play with toys in Western societies.

Overall, good evidence supports my contention that approach-avoidance play and dramatic role play are universal elements of children’s peer cultures. However, we need more studies of children’s play in a wider range of cultural groups to prove this contention fully and to capture the diversity of these important play routines in the children’s everyday lives.

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