

PLAY AND FOLKLORE IN CHILDREN'S PEER CULTURES

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Abstract: This article examines children's creative production of and participation in a shared peer culture. Focusing on material on preschool children's use of counting-out rhymes, faecal humour, and word play gathered in two Slovenian kindergartens by means of participant observation and video ethnography, the article demonstrates the importance of social participation in peer groups from an early age and the alliances, conflicts, and power hierarchies involved. Focusing on how children create and participate in children's culture through interaction with other children in a peer group, ethnographic material is complemented by archival material on children's folklore in Slovenia. By bringing together folkloristics and anthropological and sociological studies of children and childhoods, this article aims to bridge the gap between these disciplines to gain a more nuanced understanding of children's worlds, and the role children's folklore plays in the creation of and participation in children's peer cultures.

Keywords: children's folklore, children's peer cultures, children's play, counting-out rhymes, faecal humour, word play

INTRODUCTION

Ever since Iona and Peter Opie (1959) took to the streets and playgrounds to observe and investigate children's day-to-day activities, routines, games, and other cultural forms that are reproduced without adult intervention, ethnography has gained pronounced influence in the sphere of understanding children's lives. Slovene folklorists have extensively documented children's folklore, typically

focusing on songs, games, riddles, jeers, and other short forms (e.g., Kuret 1979; Stanonik 1984; Terseglav 2006). A great deal of material was collected by means of interviews with adults and their childhood memories. Further material was obtained through the analysis of various secondary sources (e.g., archives, diaries, autobiographies, ethnographic reports) (Ramšak 2007: 33). In the 1980s, Marija Stanonik began to gather children's folklore with the help of school newsletters, after-school clubs, children's magazines (e.g. *Pionirski list*), and popular-scientific magazines for children (e.g. *Pionir*). She collected various types of oral folklore forms, local names, anecdotes, poems, counting-out rhymes, teasers, etc., and published them in edited and annotated form (Stanonik 1995). Furthermore, Saša Babič collected riddles during her field research at several schools (S. Babič, personal communication; see also Babič 2015; 2020).

Yet, rarely did researchers in Slovenia go beyond collecting and analysing the material, and little research has applied ethnographic methods to observing children's interactions in their natural environment. This has left Slovene folkloristics with raw material providing no or very little contextual background. Thus, children's creative production of, and participation in a shared peer culture in which documented folklore units have been used has remained at the margins of researchers' interests. With our background in folkloristics and anthropological and sociological studies of children and childhoods, this article aims to bridge the gap between these disciplines to gain a more nuanced understanding of children's worlds and the role children's folklore plays in the creation of and participation in children's peer cultures. We will focus on how preschool children create and participate in children's peer culture by interacting with other children in a peer group, and then examine the implications of this insight for the wider studies of children's folklore. The material gathered through the ethnographic observation of preschool children illustrates how children invent their own forms of play, which differ from children's folklore documented by Slovene folklorists. This might be due to age discrepancy as folklorists analysing children's folklore usually focus on slightly older children. However, by combining our data, we aim to point to social participation and intersubjective meaning-making as the foundations of children's peer cultures within which children's folklore also emerges. Furthermore, we are referring to other ethnographic studies conducted with older (i.e., primary school) children, which point to the interconnectedness of social participation, peer cultures, play, and folklore. The aforementioned Iona and Peter Opie have described and recorded the lives of children in a playground as it was actually happening (e.g., Opie 1993). Brian Sutton-Smith studied the evolving children's traditions in New Zealand (1959), just as John McDowell (1979) collected and analysed how

children learn about different levels of social, textual, structural, and factual order and disorder through riddles. Following this tradition, Anna Beresin (2010) observed children at recess, interviewed them, audio- and videotaped them, and documented their spontaneous storytelling, gametelling,¹ playground art, and play, as well as children's physical struggle for autonomy within adult control, children's stress and its adult misperceptions. Beresin analysed the consequences of an increase in adult control and commercially sponsored play, as well as a decrease in children's playtime and freedom of movement, and documented what children do with play as a culture of expression as they learn to function in their society (see also Beresin 2013). Julie Delalande (2001; 2003) also observed children in kindergarten and school playgrounds and went beyond collecting the games children play and stories they tell by analysing children's cultures as a micro-society that allows children to acquire what is socially and culturally important for participation in a group. The importance of ethnography and observing children interacting with other children in peer groups for understanding children's lives was also emphasised by Marjorie Harness Goodwin, who conducted a close ethnographic analysis of language practises used by schoolchildren to show how they construct their social worlds through everyday conversational interactions (2006; 2017).

METHODOLOGY

In the analysis of selected data, this article combines the approaches of folkloristics and anthropology of childhood. The fieldwork data was derived from Barbara Turk Niskač's doctoral dissertation, which involved ethnographic research in two Slovene public kindergartens with children aged two to six, in the years 2010, 2011, and 2013. She employed the following methods: participant observation in kindergartens, video ethnography (a total of 660 minutes of daily occurrences in kindergartens were filmed), semi-structured interviews with educators, parents and grandparents, participatory photography, and photo elicitation interviews with parents, educators, and children aged three and over. Although her original study focused on the interconnectedness of play, work, and learning in early childhood (see Turk Niskač 2021), the current study necessitated that we re-read the materials gathered through participant observation and video ethnography in kindergartens. Such secondary analysis has become commonplace, serving to re-examine previously collected data "to explore new questions or use different analysis strategies that were not a part of the primary analysis" (Ruggiano & Perry 2019: 82). Data collected through semi-structured interviews and participatory photography focused specifically

on children's play and participation in work in family and kindergarten settings and are not presented in this article.

The material from kindergartens will be supplemented with the analysis of folklore materials, such as counting-out rhymes, faecal humour, play formulas, and word play, which Katarina Šrmpf Vendramin gathered in the archives of the Institute of Slovenian Ethnology at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU), in publications by different collectors, internet sources, and through personal observation and communication with the children of the two authors.

SITUATING PLAY AND FOLKLORE WITHIN CHILDREN'S PEER CULTURES

Although peer cultures are often associated with adolescents, children start to create and participate in peer cultures already in preschool. Here, peer culture is understood as “a stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers” (Corsaro & Eder 1990: 197). In his studies of two-to-five-year-olds, sociologist William Corsaro identified two main themes in children's peer cultures. The first was social participation, since children want to be involved, participate in, and be part of a group. The second is sharing, since “children want to gain control of their lives and they want to share that sense of control with each other” (Corsaro 2003: 37; see also Delalande 2003). Furthermore, ethnographic studies of children's language acquisition have shown that the processes of acquiring language and becoming a competent member of society, or acquiring culture, are deeply intertwined (see Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez 2002; Ochs & Schiefelin 1984). A peer group represents an important context in which children learn language and culture through playing and interacting with each other. Children's folklore is often part of their play and also serves an important function in the context of language and culture acquisition. Its significance in the context of language learning is particularly strongly reflected in multilingual areas, where we can find children's multilingual folklore forms (Pisk & Šrmpf Vendramin 2021).

We understand play as a fundamental way in which humans interact with the world, involving a fictional framework with values and possibilities different from empirical reality. It can also be described as a ritualised process in which not only children, but humans of all ages engage in different ways, for example in the context of religion, sports, and arts. Central to play is imitation, abstraction, and inference – i.e., operations through which humans develop

dispositions and attitudes required of particular modes of being (Schwartzman 1978; Sutton-Smith 1997; Henricks 2009). According to French anthropologist Roberte Hamayon, play consists of two fundamental components: one that lends structure and limitation, metaphors, and another that allows for flexibility, margins or leeway (possibility for unexpected turns, i.e., elements of surprise and diversion) (Hamayon 2016). Besides being inextricably linked to peer-cultures, children's play is also deeply rooted in intersubjective meaning-making (see Turk Niskač 2021).

Children's folklore mirrors adult culture; it includes fragments of various forms of beliefs, rituals, social structures, and technologies, as well as information about the way of life of certain social groups (Bascom 1954: 337). It contains games and texts that adults create *for* children and folklore forms echoing elements such as customs and rituals, which lost their ritual meaning in the lives of adults and made topological transitions to children's folklore (Stanonik 1984: 85; Klobčar 2009: 178). Children incorporate elements from the adult world in their play with creativity that goes beyond simply imitating adults; they incorporate adult activities, transform them, adapt them, mock them, and use them to make sense of the world by imbuing them with their own meanings and interpretations (Corsaro 2003; Montgomery 2009; Hirschfeld 2002). As was noted by American anthropologist Lawrence A. Hirschfeld, "children also create and inhabit their own making, cultures that in significant measure are independent of and distinct from those of the adults with whom they live" (Hirschfeld 2002: 612).

Under the influence of Lev Vigotski, cognitive development came to be understood as a primarily social process "whereby children acquire cognitive skills as a result of interaction with others in culturally defined situations" (Jahoda & Lewis 2015 [1989]: 12).

Children are not simply passive recipients who internalise adult skills and knowledge, and culture is not simply transmitted from one generation to another. Instead, children are actors in the social world and are involved as active and creative participants in the learning process of culture acquisition (Ingold 2007; Corsaro & Rizzo 2008). Here, other children, peers, and siblings are even more important than adults (Delalande 2003). According to William Corsaro, preschool children's production of peer culture marks a major shift in their social development when they recognise that they have the ability to produce their own shared world without direct dependence on adults (2003: 162).

Below, we will present selected ethnographic accounts to gain a better understanding of how children's peer cultures emerge, and what are their possible implications for the study of children's folklore with the focus on faecal humour, counting-out rhymes, and word play.

FAECAL HUMOUR OR FARTLORE

Topics of flatulence, faeces, and other bodily fluids are a pervasive part of folklore (Blank 2010: 62). Thus, faeces and other “dirty” bodily substances are also among popular topics of children’s jokes, word play, and their humour more generally (Ackerley 2007; Nwokah & Burnette & Graves 2013: 90; Van der Geest 2016: 127). These topics make children laugh, they are funny because they contain taboo words, words which children are usually not allowed to say or which are associated with inappropriate behaviour (Hauser 2005: 189; Van der Geest 2016: 135). Faecal or toilet humour appears already among preschool children, and as Factor (1988) and Mawter (2005) have stressed, this type of humour is a component of “defiance humour”, which is an integral part of children’s peer culture. It can be found in the playground (Opie 1993), in sibling interactions (Nwokah & Graves 2009), and in other settings and contexts.

The next video transcript describes how four-year-old girls in a kindergarten,² after having finished their creative activity under the guidance of a teacher, started a playful conversation into which they spontaneously incorporated faeces-related and nonsense words:

Vesna was sitting at the table, finishing her creative activity, Simona was sitting next to her, and Inja was sitting on the floor.

Inja, who had already finished her creative activity, started a conversation: “And then she pooped and peed on her head.”

Straightaway, Simona continued the conversation: “Yes, and then the girl came, and she looked like this and said yucky, you old hen [laughing]! Then the hen took a bath and they removed it [poop and pee] and then [laughing]...”

Inja: “What happened then?”

Simona: “Then she lived happily ever after with *kukica* [made-up word] [laughter].”

Inja: “And with *bubika* [made-up word], and poop, and vee-vee.”

Simona: “Yes, whoops someone is calling. There’s always someone calling me.”

Inja: “Here you go [she hands a toy phone to Simona].”

Simona pretends that she is having a phone call: “Oh, it’s daddy. Hello, daddy. Oh, really? Ooooh [giggles].”

Simona returns the phone to Inja and says: “Daddy said that he gave birth to such a big baby and he pooped in his pants, and he also gave him vee-vee [covers her mouth with her hands and giggles].”

Inja now pretends to make a phone call: "Mummy, did vee-vee poop on her head? Did poop poop on a head [laughter]? Did vee-vee poop? Or was it poop?"

Simona: "Oh my, Oskar is calling me again [she takes the phone back]."

Inja: "Joškar, Joškar, who pooped?" [Here we can presume that Inja played with the name Oskar and changed it into Joškar. A name Joškar does not exist, although there is a name Joško (male) which resembles the noun 'joška' (female) meaning 'booby'].

Simona: "Oskar! Hello, Oskar [pretends that she is listening to Oskar for a couple of seconds, then laughs]."

Simona makes a wondering facial expression and laughs: "Right now? Really? Oooh. Right now? Ok. Bye [says 'bye' in a funny voice]."

Inja: "What did Oskar say?"

Simona returns the phone to Inja and replies: "That poop peed in his pants, and then vee-vee gave [incomprehensible, both girls giggle, Simona puts her hand over her mouth]."

Inja: "And then?"

Simona: "And then he pooped and peed [laughs]."

Inja: "And what happened next?"

Simona: "He just pooped on my dad's head [laughs]."

Inja: "And then?"

Simona: "And then nothing."

Inja: "Did he poop in vee-vee and in his ass and in...?"

Simona: "Let me see what it is now [she is trying to take the phone from Inja], what does Oskar say now?"

Inja: "No, I will [she does not want to give the phone to Simona, pretends that she is on a phone call]. What? What? Daddy wanted to say something [she hands the phone to Simona]."

The girls continue to play for a little while until Simona suddenly interrupts the play by saying to Inja: "This is a bad word!"

(Video transcript No. 22, 16 May 2013)

Children obviously understood the manners of polite conversation but found amusement in the use of "prohibited" words and subverted social norms in their play.³ Amusement derived from using prohibited or taboo words also appeared in an online survey on school folklore conducted among Slovenian children during the 2018/19 school year (see Babič 2020). In a question about jokes that children tell each other, the opportunity to rhyme the word "vic" (from German *Witz* meaning 'joke') with words related to excretion, proved so appealing that some answers combined the two:

Povej vic, prdnu je stric.
Say a joke, uncle farted.

Vic, ki ima na riti špic.
Joke that has a spike on the ass.
(Collection of school folklore 2019, ISN ZRC SAZU)

In contrast to linguistic and classical folklore research, which mainly focuses on text, texture, and context, humour research also uses psychological theories to analyse human unconscious and mental processes (needs and fears) manifested in folklore (see Apte 1985; Davies 1998; Oring 2010 [1992]). So a strong presence of scatological humour can be seen as part of the phases children go through while growing up. Faecal folklore or fartlore helps them express psychological shame about the pleasures they experience during excretion at certain developmental stages. By transforming socially undesirable behaviours into allowed or tolerated ones through folklore and play, children can unconsciously satisfy their infantile attraction to their own anal production, which also aids in their stable transition to adulthood (Blank 2010: 72). At a young age, children's scatological humour, whether in verbal or nonverbal forms, generally provides an avenue of satisfying their curiosity about the body and bodily functions, not unlike sexual humour later satisfies their curiosity about external relationships (Apte 1985: 96; Blank 2010: 65).

Multiple forms of children's fartlore were collected in Slovenia, ranging from jokes to counting-out rhymes, jeers or teasers, and word play. One example of a joke from the archives goes:

There was a gentleman who always dreamed about a dwarf coming to him every night and saying to him: Well, now we will pee. And this gentleman went to the doctor and the doctor told him to tell the dwarf not to pee, and then the gentleman did so, but to no avail. Next time, the doctor suggested that he say it more decisively, but again to no avail. Next time, the doctor said to tell the dwarf: we won't pee, we won't pee, we won't pee, but the dwarf said: okay we won't pee, we'll poop. (Collection of school folklore 2019, ISN ZRC SAZU)

Fartlore is also represented in counting-out rhymes (which we will examine more thoroughly separately below). For example, a version of a popular counting-out-rhyme from the archives is adapted to fartlore:

Vija vaja pes prdi, starga deda srat tišči, kjer se kupček naredi, tam se šteje en, dva, tri.

Vija, vaja dog farts, old man has to shit, where the pile of shit is made, there it is counted one, two, three.

(Personal archive of Katarina Šrampf Vendramin)

In the archives, scatological humour is also featured heavily in jeers. However, these were not in the exclusive domain of children. Some jeers, especially those related to friendly teasing, were a part of children's folklore, but their authors and users also included adults (Terseglav 1990: XIV; Šrampf Vendramin 2019: 96). Examples of such jeers are:

Stara baba ropoti, kam'r počene vse smrdi.

The old woman is rumbling, wherever she squats everything stinks.

(Archive ISN ZRC SAZU, ŠZ 6/217, 43)

Bistriška sekula se je v hlače pokekala, Bistriška počakala, na dilco kakala.

Bistriška sekula [knife] peed in her pants, Bistriška waited, pooped on a board. (Gašperin 2018b: 80)

Apart from taking multiple aforementioned forms such as jokes, counting-out rhymes, and jeers, toilet humour in children's folklore also features in short humorous songs. For example, a well-known Slovenian children's song goes:

Gospod in gospa po cesti sta šla, gospod je zavriskau, se u hlače podriskau.

Gospa je jokala, ker hlače je prala, gospod pa je kleu, ker hlač ni imeu.

A lady and a gentlemen walked down the road, the gentleman screamed and pooped his pants. The lady cried because she washed his pants, and the gentleman cursed because he didn't have pants.

(Knific 2006: 42)

The next example is an adaptation of a singing song about a sailor who was eaten by a whale. The adaptation begins with the original initial verse and goes like this:

Po morju plava kit, ki ima zlo veliko rit, ko pride na sredjo morja, se userje do neba. Se krega ljubi bog, k si praska drek od nog, oj, ta presneti kit, ki 'ma tko veliko rit!

A whale swims in the sea, and has a very big ass, when it gets to the middle of the sea, it shits itself up to the sky. God grumbles while scraping shit off his feet, oh, that damn whale that has such a big ass!

(Izštevanke in nagajivke n.d.)

Returning to the material from the ethnographic study in kindergartens, it seems to show that preschool children include scatological themes in their play by chance. This can be seen in the following case. Four four-year-old children shared a table during lunch. Svit started a conversation by saying: “I have a pimple,” other children joined in, and the conversation soon revolved around the (im)possibilities of pimple sizes:

Mia: “Pimples it’s little dots and lines.”

Svit: “Yes, tiny, like this.”

Mia: “Yes, they’re so tiny.”

Svit: “Yes, they make such a big circle.”

Mia: “So big [shows a circle all over her face]!”

Svit: “Yes, you can have a back full of pimples.”

Mia: “Yes, the dot is as big as a house [shows with her hands, giggles].”

Svit: “A pimple as big as...”

Mia: “The door!”

Svit: “Like weenie or like poop [all the girls sitting at the table giggle and the conversation shifts away from pimples].”

(Video transcript No. 18, 23 April 2013)

Like Simona, Inja, and Vesna’s discussion of poop and pee above, we suggest that this interaction was not so much about the pimple itself, but rather about finding common ground in social participation. Without determining the rules of the game, children engage in intersubjective meaning-making; they synchronise their conversation around pimples, about the possibilities and impossibilities of their size. Such conversations have a concurrent bonding effect, enhancing the children’s belonging to and participation in peer groups. In this respect, humour in children’s folklore genres can also be seen as a device for bonding with peers, and laughter is always that of a group, which has social significance; it is always intended for others or to connect with others (Bergson 1977; Stanonik 1984: 87).

COUNTING-OUT RHYMES

As early as the twentieth century, folklorists recognised the meaning and significance of counting-out rhymes in children's social dynamics and play discourse (Tucker 2019: 175). Counting-out rhymes are short, mostly rhythmic texts whose function is to choose someone to play a leading role in the next game, such as playing catch or hide and seek. Some researchers, especially in the nineteenth century, have linked the origin of counting-out rhymes to sacrificial rites, which they believed to have served as devices for sacrifice selection (*ibid.*).

Counting-out rhymes were supposed to be “magic forms” which, at the time when they still performed their primary function, were not allowed to be changed due to their ritual significance. Once they lost their original function, oral transmission allowed the text to be changed quite freely (Knific 2006: 38). Yet the counting-out rhymes maintained the relative stability of the text structure, as changing the text would result in a different person being chosen. Permanent structure also functions as a mnemonic device, as children, especially preschool children, rely on this permanence to help them with memorising the text (Rubin & Ciobanu & Langston 1997: 421).

Analysis of English counting-out rhymes has shown that literal recall of text cannot be obtained solely by memorisation (Rubin 1995), but memorisation is aided by genre rules / structures that have more limitations. This is called schema-driven recall, where the scheme also includes rhythmic and poetic structure and meaning. The poetics of counting is subtle and exhaustive, most words contain a repetitive sound pattern which is achieved by repeating words, rhyme, or alliteration, and all words that are not included in the meaning are included in one of these poetic processes (Rubin & Ciobanu & Langston 1997: 421). Linguist John Widdowson designated this the alternative of the “three Rs” of children's literary folklore – *rhyme, rhythm, and repetition* (Bishop 2016).

Changes and variations of texts most often occur in a way that preserves rhymes or does not violate restrictions (Rubin & Ciobanu & Langston 1997: 422). In most counting-out rhymes the sound image, i.e., rhythm and rhyme, is more important than meaning, which is why they can have many textual variants including those that contain foreign language expressions or nonsense words (Pisk & Šrmpf Vendramin 2021), for example:

Ekate pekate cukate me, abe fabe domine, ektum pektum tum tum tum, abele fabele dominum. (Gašperin 2018a: 6)

Aj baj kome staj, ije bje kompanije, cimu rakum tikum takum, aj baje ej bumf. (Sirk 2009: 182)

American folklorist Kenneth S. Goldstein's research showed that children, despite the relative permanence of the genre, adapt otherwise established texts by adding repetitions, new words, and slowing down the pronunciation, in order to choose the person they want (Goldstein 1971; Tucker 2008: 27); the latter was also observed during ethnographic fieldwork in two Slovenian kindergartens.

Here too, children often slowed down the pronunciation, in order to choose the person they wanted, an observation which we will situate in a context of children's social interactions at play – conflict nexus. When four-year-old Lija brought a toy computer to the kindergarten, other children started to quarrel about who would play with it. Lija said, "Whose turn is it? I will check whose turn it is." She then pretended to check data on her toy computer and finally announced whose turn it was to play with it. Another toy, Hana's plush dog, was particularly popular among the girls. A conflict arose when Hana wanted to play with Žana, and Lija wanted to play with Hana (all four years old). Hana resolved the issue by saying: "We can all play together. I decide, who has the dog first because it's mine." Lina soon joined them, and Hana now used a popular counting-out rhyme, "Am bam pet podgan [am bam five rats]", to decide whose turn it was to play with the dog. Children often used counting-out rhymes in such situations, but commonly counted in a way that tailored the result to their liking, which in turn led to new conflicts. Hana's counting-out rhyme should have landed on Žana, but she slowed down her counting in order to point to Lija. Žana did not ignore this and told Hana: "You're rude, you know!" Hana announced that it would be Žana's turn next, after Lija. However, it was Lija's turn to do the counting-out rhyme, and her count landed on Lina. The girls looked at each other in silence for a moment, but then Lija gave the dog to Žana anyway. Lina complained: "Lija, you counted me in." Žana played with the dog for a short time and then started counting-out: "Am bam five rats, four mice, blow in my ear, vija vaja [she pauses for a second] out, Lina." She gave the dog to Lina, who in turn already announced that she would end the count on Inja, which indeed happened. Then Lija tried to persuade Hana that it should be her turn again; this time Hana started negotiating and said she would only end the count on her if she lent her nail polish in exchange. Žana said: "We're in charge, Hana and me. You can also be in charge, Lija. The three of us can be in charge." The girls stood by the wall, waiting for their turn to play with the dog. The girl who got the dog, led it around on a leash for a while, but not for long, and she was already counting who got the dog next. It seemed that the focus of this interaction was not actually on the dog and playing with it, but

on arranging and deciding who would be the next in line and on playing out power hierarchies (determining who is in charge and who decides). The girls continued to play for a while and then started quarrelling again. Hana got mad, she took the dog to her locker in the dressing room, saying, "No, I will never give the dog to anyone again."

Hana was one of the more popular girls, and so of course was her dog. It was not entirely clear whether Hana was popular because she had the dog, or whether the dog was popular because it was Hana's. When children were asked about who they were friends with, two girls named Hana and added that she was their friend because she had a dog. For the purpose of research, children also took pictures at home. One of the girls, Mila, took a picture of her plush dog and told me that its name was Hana. Similarly, Žana took a picture of her plush bear which was also named Hana.

Although friendship and playing out power hierarchy through counting-out rhymes was common among girls, it also occurred among boys in the same kindergarten group of four-year-olds. Birthdays were usually celebrated in kindergarten, children sang a song and made a drawing for the birthday boy or girl, and they in turn brought candy or snacks for the whole group. For Dejan's birthday, the teacher made a cake with fruit and candy and decorated it with three colour palm tree decoration images, which Dejan had brought. Dejan commented that the kids who behaved well would get to take the palm trees home. Several children wanted the palm trees and Dejan finally used the counting-out rhyme "Am bam pet podgan..." to determine who would get them. Yet on this occasion, Dejan too slowed down the counting in order to land on the children he wanted to and gave the palm trees to Vesna, Jernej, and Lija. Živa was offended that she did not get one and went away sulking, while other children tried to convince the chosen children, albeit unsuccessfully, to exchange their palm trees. One of the girls, for example, tried to convince Lija, "Can I have it just for a little bit, I will give it back right away." Finally, a teacher cut these negotiations short, telling the children to put the palm trees away because "they have pointed tips" and she thought them unsafe to play with.

William Corsaro noted that preschool children form friendships based on common play or other common activity and sharing (2003: 69). Five-to-six-year-old children already formed smaller groups of friends, often gender-divided. This was notable also during participant observation in Slovene kindergartens: children formed relationships based on things they had in common, friendships in this context were situational, fluid, and negotiable. Having something in common could mean having similar hair styles, clothes, and accessories such as glasses, as well as participating in joint activities, which included play as well as chores.

When Lija wanted to join Lina and Mia at play, Lina turned her down: “No, you can’t [play with us] because you don’t have pigtails!” Thus, Lina and Mia had something in common – their hairstyle – while Lija’s different hairstyle was the basis for her exclusion from play. Girls in particular defined friendship based on their appearance. When asked why they were friends with certain children, they replied: “Because I find her pretty,” “Because she has pigtails,” or “Because she has such a nice T-shirt.”

Friendships also formed through possession and redistribution or sharing of toys or candy. But objects were not the only currency of social exchange; so were also invitations for playdates at home or birthday parties. Showing, sharing, and retrieving were frequent bases of interaction among children (see also Garvey 1990). Particularly the toys that the children brought from home played an important role in their interactions at play – conflict nexus. These toys were particular objects of desire, which many children wanted to play with; this lent a special authority to the owner who emphasised their dominant position by deciding whose turn it was to play with the toy in question. Thus, children’s play also reflects ideas about authority, “status and power between children and their struggle to impose their will on their peers” (Montgomery 2009: 148). This was noted already by Iona and Peter Opie (1969), as well as by Lawrence A. Hirschfeld in his study on using cooties to establish and maintain unequal social relations between children (2002).

WORD PLAY

Human language is one of the most pervasive aspects of social organisation. Every culture has developed a linguistic system that is shared by all of its members and pervades the ways those members interact with one another. By acquiring language, children are simultaneously becoming functioning members of their society (Goldin-Meadow 2006: 353). Word play is an important tool for mastering language. Catherine Garvey distinguished three types of social play with language: “spontaneous rhyming and word play; play with fantasy and nonsense; and play with speech acts and discourse conventions” (1990: 67). She noted that spontaneous rhyming and word play arise from states of mutual attending and desultory conversation when one child starts the word play and other children repeat the leader’s words and rhythm.

In the word play observed in kindergartens, it was common for a child to start with a sentence, and for the other children to continue in the same style, repeating the sentence and changing it slightly. For example, at snack time one child said: “I will eat mud”, and others followed: “I will eat the flute [pretending

that the hot-dog was a flute]", "I will eat the dinosaur", "I will eat the poison from the snake". All of these activities initiated and maintained social interactions among children. Children liked to repeat the same ritualised actions over time. In this case the repetitive mode of the word play was also accompanied by playing with possibilities and impossibilities. Again, the unspoken rule of the above game was to include in the statement an object which could not be eaten: mud, a flute, a dinosaur, poison from the snake. But children were also very selective and often did not want to respond to their peers' calls for this type of playful interactions and used silencing, ignoring, and direct refusal to decline these calls (see also Schwartzman 1978: 238).

On one occasion during lunch, Nejc and Simon (both 4 years old) sat at the same table. Nejc was persistently trying to initiate conversation with Simon, who simply ignored him. On another occasion Jakob (6 years old) said to Ivan (5 years old): "I will eat a snake", to which Ivan replied: "Stop playing with food, this isn't a snake, this is bread!" As was noted by Garvey (1990: 72):

Manipulation of senses is often, except in intent, closely related to outright prevarication and we must presume that, when a child misnames or asserts an obvious untruth and marks it as playful, he has some awareness of the distinction between truth and falsehood.

A similar word play involved children asking questions. This, too, often occurred among children who were sitting together during mealtime. Four-year-old Aleš, for example, started with a question, "Who wants to go to the swimming pool with me?" and other children at the table all raised their hands and screamed: "Me!" Children do not necessarily take turns in asking questions, as demonstrated in the example where Aleš initiated the game with the first question and maintained his leading role in asking subsequent questions:

Aleš: "Who wants to go to the seaside with me?"

Other boys reply and raise their hands: "Me!"

Oto: "Who wants to go with me... [pauses as he can't remember what to say]"

Other boys: "Me!"

Aleš: "[finishes Oto's question] ... to karate!"

Other boys: "Me!"

Oto: "No, who wants to go to the cinema with me?"

Other boys: "Me!"

Aleš: "Who wants to go to karate to fight with me?"

Other boys: "Me!"

Simon: “Who wants to go to see the dragon with me?”

Other boys: “Me!”

Although here the basic resource in play is language, the form and timing could also mark this example as a ritualised interaction. Through this repetitive ritualised word play, the participants establish and maintain the patterns of exchange, alternating turns, the sequencing of rounds, and precise timing. Such “synchronisation of utterance and pause durations indicates a far greater ability to attend and adapt to a partner’s behaviour than has generally been attributed to preschool children” (Garvey 1990: 120). Indeed, play and ritual can be seen as related human processes. They both reflect and sustain social reality and enhance human meaning-making (Hamayon 2016; Clark 2003). Both play and ritual include a capacity for make-believe, symbols, imagination, and ambiguity of meaning that allows room for contradictions, subversions, absurdities, inconsistencies, and illogicalities (Clark 2003: 125).

Repetition and repetition with variation have long been recognized as characteristics of early play. They constitute a formative principle in magical incantations and spells, religious chants, cheers for football teams, political rallies, riots, in fact in many events where members of a group must be synchronized to express solidarity. (Garvey 1990: 120)

From the folkloristic perspective, children enjoy repeating words in rhyme patterns and appealing rhythm that encourages them to start reciting rhymes with their parents and later, when ready, narrate them themselves (Tucker 2019: 176; Freeman Davidson 2006: 35–36). Rhymes are therefore a common linguistic element of children’s folklore, which appear in various forms and functions ranging from jokes, counting-out rhymes, jeers and teasers to word games whose sole purpose is entertainment. One such game of rhymes consists of a child asking another to repeat a word they said, and when the word is repeated, the child responds with a rhyme, as for example:

Reci miš. Miš. Ti loviš.

Say mouse. Mouse. You are chasing.

Reci kaj. Kaj? Mačka ima rep nazaj.

Say what. What? The cat’s tail is backwards.

Because these rhymes are more complex, smaller children often learn them by imitating their older peers, but they design the rhymes to contain humorous themes such as scatological humour used by 10-year-old children as in the below examples.

Reci sliva. Sliva. Tvoja rit je lepljiva.
Say plum. Plum. Your ass is sticky.

Reci solata. Solata. Tvoja rit je kosmata.
Say salad. Salad. Your ass is hairy.

When we observed children in kindergartens, we noticed that when they were not allowed to talk during meals, they resorted to subtler forms of communication that involved their whole bodies and were often based on imitation. For example, when a six-year-old and a five-year-old sitting at table opposite each other were told to stop talking during the meal, they started to communicate by blinking at each other. Here, imitation is not understood as a passive form of interaction. Instead, it is an active and creative form of establishing and maintaining a relationship (Ingold 2001). Relationships among children were established through play and other joint activities, including chores (for example, clearing tables after meals). In addition, they were often established spontaneously as synchronised activities. For example, while sitting at table waiting for lunch, Matevž (five years old), Nejc (four years old), Andrej (four years old) and Eli (three years old) simultaneously raised their arms and yelled "Hooraaah!" Then one of the children said "Čičke čačke", and they all started to tap with their hands on the table.

Psychologist Catherine Garvey has said:

A ritual is unmistakably play. It exhibits all the descriptive characteristics by which instances of play are recognized. It is apparently enjoyable, performed for its own sake rather than for a goal such as information exchange or the resolution of a disagreement. It is quite spontaneous and engages both partners in precision performances. Rituals are generally based on some other behaviour that could be performed as non-play, like peeking out of the door, exchanging greetings, asking and answering questions and so on. Finally, rituals are very clearly marked as non-literal by their repetition and by their highly controlled rhythmic execution. The message, 'this is play' is emblazoned on the ritual. (Garvey 1990: 120)

Doing something together, looking for something that connects and establishes a common identity and enhances belonging was at the heart of children's peer cultures. Children also often used strategies of persuasion and bribery when they were trying to persuade other children to let them play with their toys or gain access to some other desirable object: "If you give me [a toy], I will give you a sweet", or "I won't let you use my trampoline". Yet it would be superficial to conclude that children used these strategies only to gain access to the object of desire. The following example demonstrates that it was in fact social relationships that were at the root of their exchange:

Jernej, Aleš, Oto, and Sven (all four years old) were playing in a corner of the playground, leafing through a book. At first, all the boys browsed the book together, but then Jernej, Aleš, and Sven hid under the table, and there was no more room for Oto. Oto, visibly angry, walked away, sat for a moment, then came back and said, "I won't invite any of you to my birthday party and you won't even get an invitation!" The boys indeed came out from under the table, and Oto immediately invited them to another play corner: "Let's go, there's more space here." But instead, the boys left the book with Oto and went to play with Legos. It was noticeable that Oto did not achieve his desired goal. Looking unhappy, he tried unsuccessfully to at least persuade Jernej to continue browsing the book together: "Jernej, you can look too." The boys ignored him, but he did not give up. A little later, Sven and Jernej started playing with a tennis ball, Oto looked at them and told them: "This isn't a marble. Hey, do you want me not to give you an invitation to my birthday? So you won't come then." Jernej replied: "Yes, we want to come," but Sven said: "I'm not going to invite you to my birthday party either." Immediately after this, the boys began a word play by asking questions:

Jernej: "Who would like to go to the tractor with me?"

Other boys: "Me!"

Sven: "Who would like to go to the swimming pool with me?"

Other boys: "Me!"

Oto: "Who would like to go to the movies with me?"

Other boys: "Me!"

Sven: "Who would like to go to my birthday party with me?"

Other boys: "Me!"

Oto: "Who would like to go to the playground with me?"

Other boys: "Me!"

Jernej: "Who would like to go fishing with me?"

Other boys: "Me!"

Oto: "Who would like to go play hide-and-seek with me?"

Other boys: "Me!"

Sven: "Who would like to go to the pool with me?"

Other boys: "Me!"

Through this word play, Oto managed to re-connect with other boys and when Sven interrupted the word play by saying "Let's go play hide and seek!" Oto joined them as well.

Thus, word play entailed negotiating inclusion and exclusion from the community (peer group), and ultimately had a bonding effect.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Many of the described interactions from ethnographic accounts happened in in-between places, while waiting for lunch, or in transitions between activities, but also when children were together sitting at table engaged in creative activities, during meals, etc. We hope we have shown the complexity of children's social lives and the amount of labour involved in the maintenance of social participation. Helen Schwartzman noted that in order to be able to participate in shared play, children constantly communicate their intentions to each other and recognise each other's intentions (Schwartzman 1978: 238). For social interactions to be successfully maintained, children have to recognise each other's intentions and coordinate with each other in a shared activity (Tomasello & Carpenter 2007).

We have placed the observed children's interactions at the nexus of play, folklore, and children's peer cultures. According to Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) and Johan Huizinga (2009), play is as much a quest for excitement, uncertainty, and disorder as it is a search for order, control, and cognitive harmony. The vignettes of children's interactions through word play showed how children play with order and disorder, chaos and the cosmos, and explore the limits of what is allowed and actually possible (Sutton-Smith 1997; Huizinga 2009; Henricks 2009).

Play as such inevitably involves subversive acts through which children explore ideas, concepts and actions beyond the norms of society, regardless of whether or not society allows such exploration. In these playful actions rules are undermined, boundaries are explored, and yet the action remains within the rules of play. This was particularly evident in their use of faecal humour.

On the other hand, through these joint activities children also initiate, maintain, and decline social interactions and negotiate their membership in the community of a peer group. This inevitably leads to managing relationships and conflicts, which we observed in the way the children used counting-out rhymes to negotiate power hierarchies and determine who was in charge and in a position to decide for others.

Like folklore reflects the ways of life of the community (Tucker 2008: 7–9), so do children’s play and folklore reflect the world of adults, their wider social structures and values. Children apply observations from their daily lives to their play, but they also modify individual elements and lend them their own meanings and interpretations. Ethnographic observation of children’s interactions and their use of children’s folklore in peer groups thus enables us to gain new insights into the production and participation in children’s cultures.

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NOTES

- ¹ Anna Beresin refers to gametelling as the process by which games emerge as an alternative form of spontaneous storytelling, and analyses the popularity and frequency of games as markers of cultural significance (Beresin 2010: 6).
- ² Pseudonyms are used for all research participants.
- ³ Subversion was commonly used in various forms of children’s play creating an uncivilised or even primal world that defies the niceties of adult society. For example, teachers in kindergartens did not allow children to play games which included aggression or any kind of weapons. Three boys made Lego guns, but because teachers did not approve of play which included weapons, they found ways to bypass the rules imposed by adults. They used the Lego guns to play that they were firemen and were putting out a fire. They merged the play of putting out the fire with shooting, as their

movements resembled shooting with machine guns. At some point, one of the boys forgot the unspoken rule of the game and said to the other: "Put the gun down!"

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

ISN ZRC SAZU – Institute of Slovenian Ethnology, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts
Video transcripts – personal archive of Barbara Turk Niskač
Personal archive of Katarina Šrmpf Vendramin

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