

A Call for an Ethnography of Childhood

Marjorie Harness Goodwin (2014)

Introduction

What I would like to consider today is the importance of ethnography for understanding children's lives. In particular, today my focus is on children interacting with other children in the peer group. As sociologist Leena Alanen (1988:924) has said:

The child ... remains for social theory negatively defined, because s/he is defined only by what the child is not, but is subsequently going to be, and not by what the child presently is. The child is depicted as pre-social, potentially social, in the process of becoming social – essentially undergoing socialization.

The peer group is an important institution for learning language and culture, as cultural anthropologist Browislaw Malinowski (1973:283) noted:

In many communities, we find that the child passes through a period of almost complete detachment from home, running around, playing about, and engaging in early activities with his playmaker and contemporaries. In such activities, strict teaching in tribal law is enforced more directly and poignantly than in the parental home.

Linguist William Labov (1970:34) has commented that "It is the local group of children's peers which determines this generation's speech pattern". The unit of analysis for studies of social cognition, as psychologist Marilyn Shantz (1983) has proposed, is activities, as within activities we see the child not simply as a knower about the social world, but as an actor in it. With the focus on activities we can directly study directly processes of social relations in the actual interactions of the child and others, rather than using experimental paradigms, which she views as "poor analogs of actual social interactions and meaningful social contexts" (Shantz 1983:497).

Piaget and hopscotch as a situated activity system

Early work on children's activities was shaped by Piaget's writings about children's games. He proposed that "the legal sense is far less developed in little girls than in boys" (Piaget 1965:77). He felt that none of the games that girls played were as complex with respect to the organisation and codification of rules. His example of a simple girls' game was the game of hopscotch.

I set out to see if this was in fact the case, doing fieldwork among a number of children's groups: African-American working-class children in urban Philadelphia, African-American migrant farmworkers' children in rural South Carolina, middle class White children in Columbia, South Carolina, an ESL class in Columbia, South Carolina, Latina and Korean children in downtown Los Angeles, and a group of children of mixed social classes and ethnicities at a progressive school in Los Angeles.

I considered games such as hopscotch a form of situated activity system, defined by Goffman (1961:96) as a "somewhat closed, self-compensating, self-terminating circuit of interdependent actions." As Sacks (1995:490) noted, "Games provide central environments of learning about 'interchangeability of personnel' as well as 'activity-relevant' positions. Janet Lever, a sociologist following Piaget's lead, argued that "girls' turn taking games progress in identical order from one situation to the next. Given the structure of these games disputes are not likely to occur" (Lever 1978:479). However, Lever neglected to consider the role of the judge, the person who is scrutinising every move of the jumper in the midst of play. As soon as a mistake is made, stepping on a line or jumping inappropriately through the grid, the judge in the Latina group in downtown LA calls "OUT!" and does so with high-pitch and distinctive intonation contours (see figure 1).

Latina girls make use of a low high-low pitch contour, jumping dramatically to nearly 700 hz (where girls' normal voice range is 250 hz) and with extended vowels. The judge makes a very deliberate point towards the girl whose move she challenges and then provides a demonstration of the inappropriate move, physically moving through the grid. As we know from work with reported speech (Goodwin 1990), the reported action demonstrating movement of the prior player through the grid, can be transformed.

Turning to a hopscotch game played by African American migrant workers' children, we find a dramatic pitch leap as the party who is argued to have hit the line denies it with "I AIN'T HIT NO LINE!" The pitch of the denial reaches nearly 800 hz. This move also is followed by a judge's demonstration, a re-enactment and a tapping on the line where the jumper

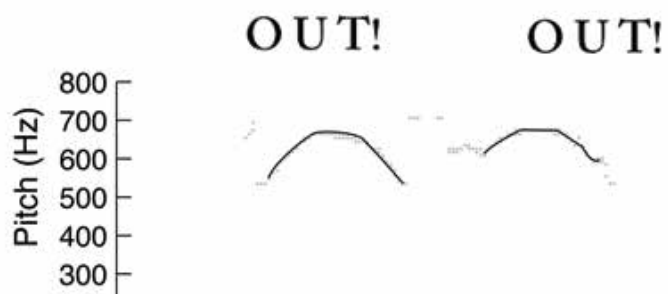


Figure 1: Calling “Out!” through heightened pitch and point.

reputedly hit. Next the jumper challenges the judges with a play hit towards them and an insult: “Shut up with your old-fashioned clothes!” (see figure 2).

In both Latina and African-American groups, girls hold one another highly accountable for their actions in the game. I found that White girls used highly mitigated language in their noticing of an offense in response to someone stepping on a line of the grid. Girls would say, “I think that’s sort of on the line though.” With utterances, such as “Your foot’s in the wr(hh)ong(hh) sp(hh)ot.” they blamed a foot rather than the jumper for the mistake and further mitigated their calls by including laughter in their noticing of an offense. Girls excused the mistake with statements such as “You accidentally jumped on that. But that’s okay(hh).” The White girls neither pointed at the violator nor assertively re-enacted the prior move. Thus, across

girls' groups we find variation in how peers hold one another accountable for their actions.

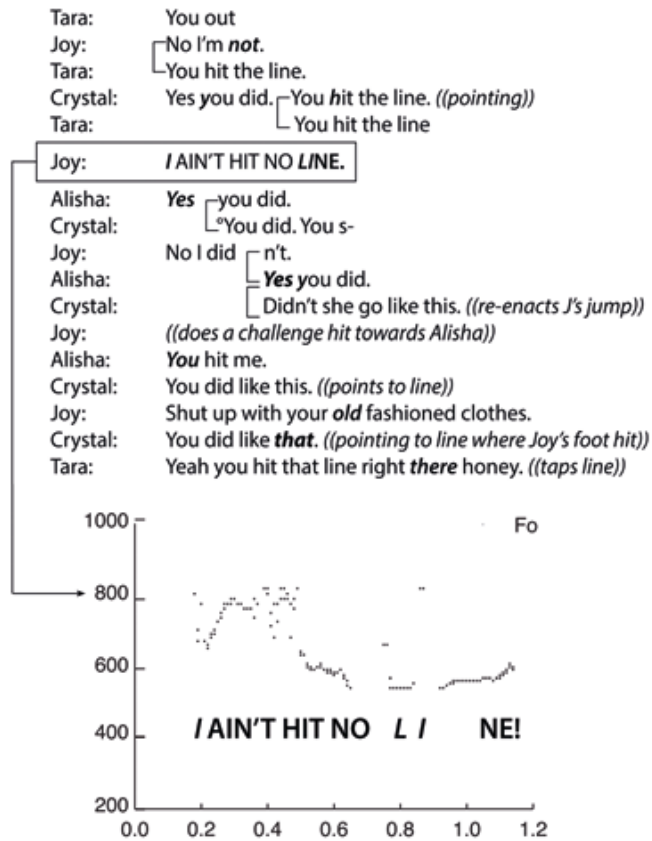


Figure 2: Dispute in hopscotch with re-enactments.

Children's notions of justice following violations of the social order

Piaget's notion of males' concern for justice permeates research until even now about divergences between males and females. Gilligan's influential book *In A Different Voice* (1982) chronicled two different moral imperatives, with males concerned with justice (equality, reciprocity and fairness) and females, an orientation towards care, the idea of attachment, loving and being loved, listening and being listened to, etc. These stereotypes get repeated in sociologists' views that boys are interested in aggressive achievement-oriented activities, while girls value social and nurturing roles (Adler and Adler 1998:55). Finally, psychologists such as Leaper and Smith (2004:993) argue that girls are more likely than boys to use language to form and maintain connections. These types of evaluative commentaries get replicated and repeated in the popular media, as we see in *As Good as it Gets*, where a young secretary asks the writer Melvin Udall (played by Jack Nicholson): "How do you write women so well?" He responds, "I think of a man. And I take away reason and accountability".

In work, I did studying African-American children in Philadelphia (ages 4–14), girls and boys were frequently in each other's presence and girls could hold their own in arguments with boys. There were striking differences in the types of accusations used by boys and girls. Boys were quite direct, as in the following:

Malcolm: **You** took the *hangers* that I took off your *bed*.

William: **Boy** you broke my *skateboard*!

Lee: Y'all just changed the whole *game* around!

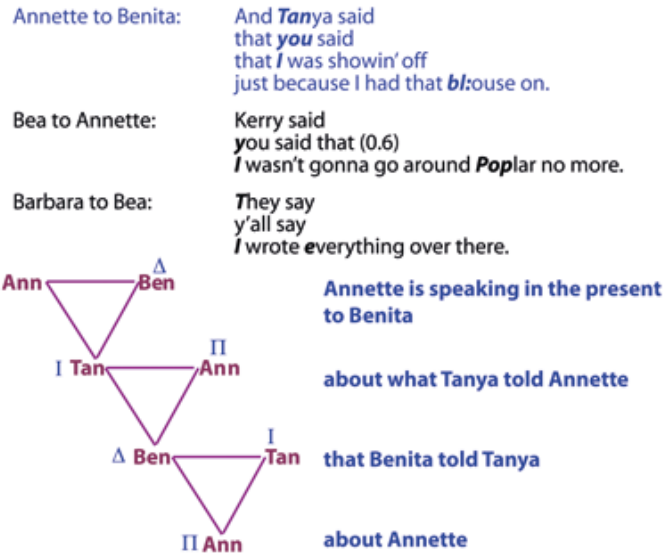
Vincent: You messin up my *paper*!



Figure 3: Boys' accusations.

Boys' accusations dealt explicitly with violations in the midst of their game activities and pastimes. Girls' accusations, by way of contrast, were more indirect. They concern an important offense in the girls' culture, talking about someone behind her back:

He-Said-She-Said Accusations



Considering the rotation of participants throughout the statement, we find that the party who was initially talked about becomes the plaintiff in a confrontation stage. Talking about someone in her absence is considered a grave offense by the girls. The plaintiff or accuser reports what was told her by an intermediary party or instigator, about what was (reputedly) said by the defendant about the plaintiff in her absence.

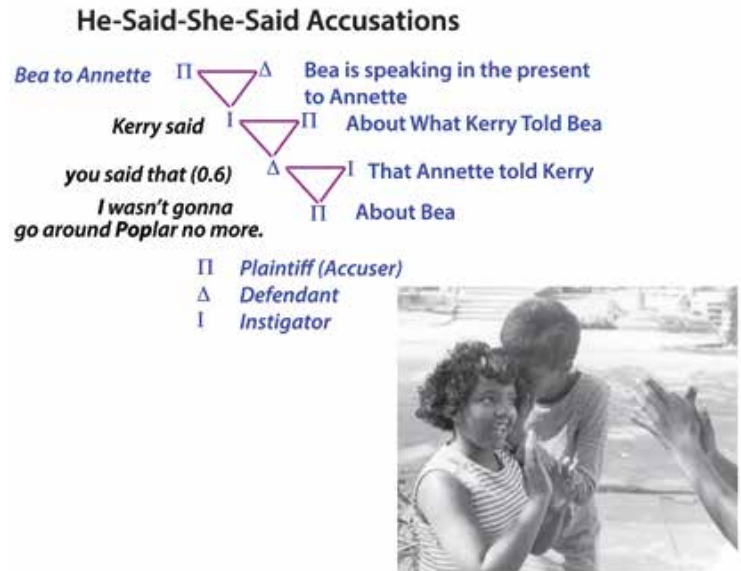


Figure 5: Biography of positions created in he-said-she-said accusations.

Through the way in which the girls report the offense, they have built into the action an alliance of “two against one.” As Ruby stated in the midst of a he-said-she said confrontation:

Two Against One

Ruby: Well *I'm* a get it straight with the **people**.
 What Kerry,
 It's between Kerry, and you, (1.0)
 See **two-** (0.5) **two** against one.
 Who wins? The one is **two**.=Right?
 And **that's** Joycie and **Kerry**.
They both say that you said it.
 And you say that you **didn't** say it.
 Who you got the **proof** that say
 That you **didn't** say it

Figure 6: Warrant for the accusation: 2 against 1.

Stories in the he-said-she-said event

To understand how stories are used to promote this event consider how Goffman's deconstruction of the speaker in his article on "footing" (1979) is relevant here to understanding how events can get reinterpreted through storytelling. On one occasion as Bea and I were sitting on the steps of her house, a boy skated by. She commented, "That boy have ugly sneaks. Don't he". When I responded "mm yeah" she next shouted out "HEY BOY. THAT GIRL SAY YOU HAVE UGLY SNEAKS!"

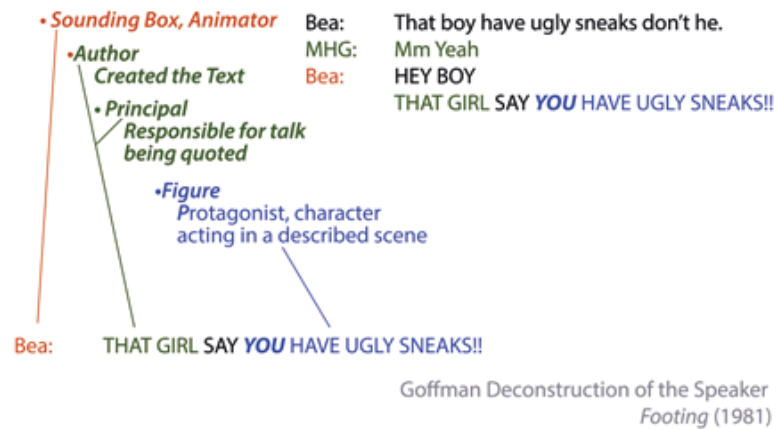


Figure 7: Reported speech and re-enactment in gossip.

Bea is the originator of the statement I agree with; she is both the sounding box and animator of a statement about the boy skating by. However, through her report of my agreement to her statement, she transforms me into the party who authored the insult, indeed as the principal party held responsible for the negative talk. In order to create drama and bring into being a future confrontation, the instigator tells a series of stories. In the following example, Bea animates an absent party (Kerry) disparaging the current hearer, Julia. She quotes Kerry as having said "If that *girl* wasn't there you wouldn't be *actin* all *stupid* like that."

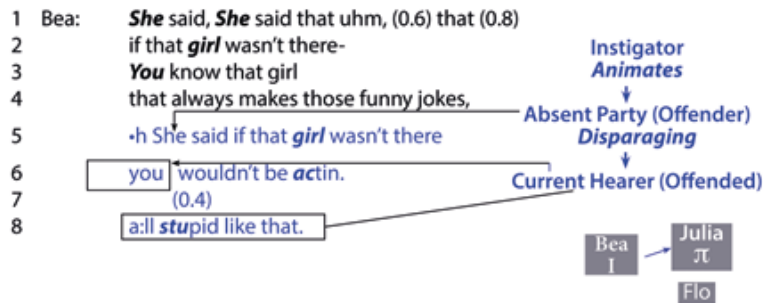


Figure 8: Animating absent party in gossip.

In response Julia challenges the depiction Kerry made of her: "But was I actin stupid with them?" (line 9). Bea continues the story, trying to elicit commentary from her interlocutors which will commit them to carrying out a confrontation. When Bea reports that Florence had said that Julia had said "Ah: go tuh-, somp'm like that." Julia responds "No, I didn't." (lines 11–12) in a soft voice. Next a hearer who was not a character in the drama provides her own commentary with a generic statement about the absent party: "Kerry *always* say somp'm. When you jump in her face, she gonna deny it."

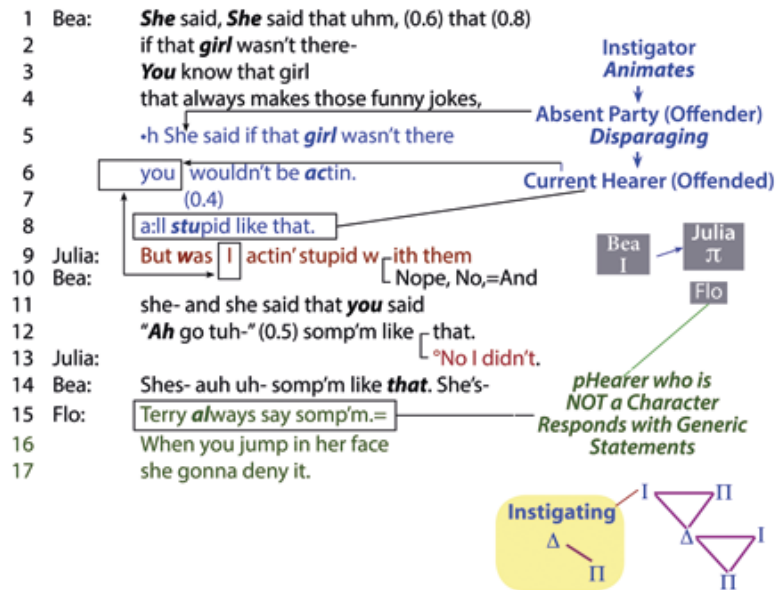
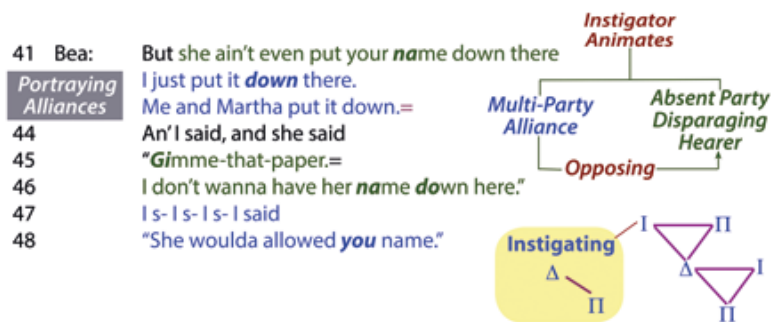


Figure 9: Hearers' talk in response to story in gossip event.

A multi-party alliance is built by reporting how others in the past stood up to the party being disparaged. Bea reports on how Kerry had excluded Julia's name on a hall bathroom paper for a number of girls to go together: "But she ain't even put your *name* down there. Me and Martha put it down." When Kerry said, she didn't want to have Julia's name on the pass (line 46), Bea stood up to her saying that in a similar situation *she* would have included her name (line 48). In response to the report, the teller seeks to elicit from the hearer a promise to confront the party who disparaged her.

Julia's next move to the report was the statement, "I'm a tell her about herself today" (line 63). Once such a statement has been made it counts as a commitment to carry out the future confrontation. Failure to do so can result in girls saying that someone backs down or moles out or "swags."



63 Julia: I'm a tell her about herself toda y. Well,
 64 Bea: Huh? huh

Promise to Confront

Ethnographer could not elicit such narratives because she cannot occupy a position in the He-Said-She-Said activity

Figure 10: Building alliance and indirect solicit of promise to confront.

Notice that the ethnographer could not have elicited the types of narratives that occur here because she does not occupy a position in the he-said-she-said activity!

What we find a family of stories related through time and reflexively embedded within the he-said-she-said activity. Reports of promises to confront result in future hypothetical stories about what the party talked about, the offended party, might say: "Can't wait to see... action. I laugh if Kerry say I wrote it, so what you gonna do about it?" (line 1-7). In addition, the plaintiff speaks with other girls about complaints against the defendant and harvests a host of stories that can be used in next moves to the defendant's possible denials.

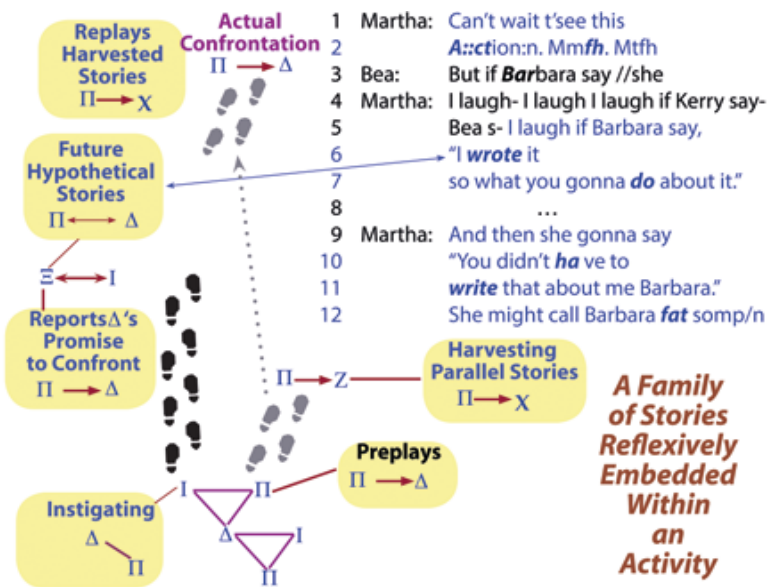


Figure 11: Family of stories in he-said-she-said.

He-said-she-said events are built not only to address the offense of talking about someone behind her back, but also to sanction those who position themselves above others in the group. The accusation statements and stories within the he-said-she-said provide a leveling mechanism, a vernacular legal system, designed for dealing with girls who violate group norms. Girls' actions within this activity, counter to Piaget, display keen attention to notions of appropriate moral rules of conduct. Girls' adjudications of offenses can take place over months and are much more extensive than the ways boys handle violations.

Constructing inequality through one-upmanship and forms of degradation

While Gilligan's notion of a "care orientation" has dominated much work on children's moral development, recently this view of the vulnerable girl has been replaced by the notion of "mean girl" (Gonick 2004:395) in public consciousness. Psychologists talk about how the aggression of girls is practiced by excluding girls and in a covert rather than overt way (Archer and Coyne 2005:215; Rigby 1997:20).

However, fieldwork I conducted with a multicultural multiethnic group in Los Angeles found that girls ages 10–12 were not always so covert. Forms of asymmetry and inequality were features of the girls' social organisation, as also has been reported initially by Norwegian social anthropologist Sigurd Berentzen (1984) and Swedish scholars (Evaldsson 2007; Evaldsson and Svahn 2012; Svahn 2012; Svahn and Evaldson 2011), and Americans looking at preschools (Kyratzis 2007). Girls in the group I studied constructed inequality through the way they made reference to signs (clothing, cars, houses) that indexed their social class. For example:

"You can play tennis every *day* in the Dominican." "My *mom's* side of the family they own *three* houses." "I've taken *ten* this year and it's *only* April."

While the girls made claims about their access to luxury items, they considered one of their classmates who followed them, Angela, who was African-American and working class, not even worthy enough to join in a jump rope game. Notice in the following frame grab that she is seated across the table, somewhat at a distance from other girls. When Lisa said "I'm gonna go get the jump ropes" Janis called out to Angela "You're last" When Angela protested with "I'm *first*" the girls said "No *NO*:: You're not here.

You're not even *here*!"

Positioning Angela

((Girls are sitting at lunch table))

Lisa: I'm gonna go get the jump ropes.
 Janis: °You're last. ((said to Angela))
 Angela: I'm **first**.
 Lisa: **No.=**
 Janis: **NO::**

Lisa: You're **not here**.
 Aretha: **YOU'RE NOT EVEN HE:RE!**

Angela: °Go:d.



Figure 12: Positioning Angela as an outsider.

The girls read the status claims that girls who put themselves above others and challenge them. They use laminating verbs such as “she thinks” and then state the valued status that a girl claims by virtue of a sign display that warrants attribution of the claim. Consider the following utterance: “Janis thinks she’s popular because she stays up to date. She likes the Spice Girls, She has Spice Girls everywhere. She wears the most popular clothes-”



Figure 13: Problematizing status claims.

By stating “She thinks” a speaker is problematising and undercutting the claim being made: being “up to date” because one wears Spice Girls clothes and has Spice Girls paraphernalia. Thus we find actors with quite complex mental lives being construed through the sign displays that they make.

When these girls position themselves in this way they are open to challenges by girls in the group who talk about them in their absence. On one occasion Janis excluded three girls, including Angela, from playing softball because Janis’s boyfriend, who was organising the game, told Janis she could only have three girls playing on the field. In response, the excluded girls, Sarah, Aretha and Angela, yelled insults from a distance towards Janis: “I *HATE THOSE PANTS! THEY’RE UGLY!*” (lines 12, 15). This resulted in Sarah and Aretha affiliating with each other in the midst of talking negatively about Janis:” Oooooo! *Girlfriend!* (line 16).

Alignment in Assessment Sequences

1	Angela:	Tell me naturally	
2		Do you really like Janis?	
3	Aretha:	Janis does everything that's trendy.	Janis positions herself above others
4		She thinks that she's so popular	
5		'Cause she stays up to date.	
6	Sarah:	Look at her pants.	
7		(2.0)	
8	Sarah:	I don't <i>like</i> being trendy.	
9	Angela:	She's not even matching.	
10		To tell you the truth.	
11	Sarah:	I got this three years ago. Trust //me.	
12	Aretha:	I HATE THOSE PANTS! ((yelling towards Janis	Yell insults at Janis from a distance
13		&Sean thrusting head))	
14	Sarah:	((looking towards Janis and Sean)) (0.8)	
15	Aretha:	THEY'RE UGLY!	
		(0.8)	
16	Sarah:	Oooooo! Girlfriend! ((looking at Aretha))	
17	Aretha:	They are. Look at 'em.	

Figure 14: Sanctioning putting oneself above others.

When Angela attempted to join, saying “They look like Shaka Zulu”, (line 21), she was ignored. Aretha and Sarah produced hand slaps or high fives (lines 27–31), affirming their converging assessment about Janis.

18 Aretha: They look like some **boys'** shorts.
 19 Angela: They look-
 20 Angela: Okay.
 21 They look like- (Shaka) Zulu.
 22 Aretha: You know how boys wear their shorts?
 23 They look like she's trying to be like-
 24 She wants to- *h **match Sean!** ((eyeball roll))
 (0.8)
 25 So she's wearing some **tren-dy-**
 26 Sarah: **Sean** has a shirt like that!
 27 ((raises arms to clap))
 28 Sean has a shirt like that!
 29 **Girl Girl Girl!** ((high fives Aretha))
 30 **Girl! Girl!** (0.3) Girl! eh heh heh!
 31 Gi(hh)r!//frien-!
 32 Angela: **eyeah!!! Yeah!!!** ((as Angela reaches over Sarah to slap
 33 Aretha's fists, Aretha's and Sarah's arms go down))
 34 Yeah::



Alliance against
Janis

Figure 15: Affirming a converging negative assessment.

In order to participate Angela had to reach over the shoulders of Sarah in order to join in with the celebratory hand clap.



Figure 16: Angela's distal participation.

Often she was excluded from them their games or lunch conversations as is visible from her seating positions, further from the main group.

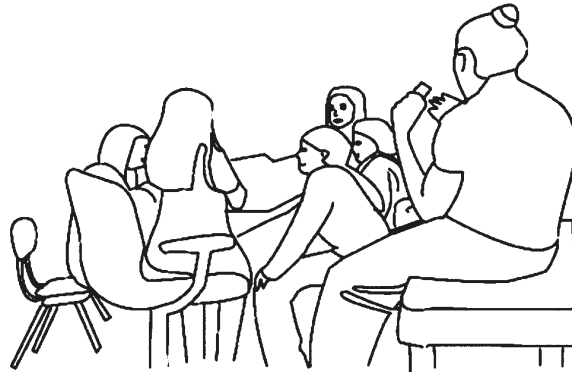


Figure 17: Angela's position at the periphery.

While in the past example insults were hurled from some distance to someone who put herself above others, in the next example we find that Angela is degraded in the presence of others. When she begins to eat pudding with her tongue she is told that her actions are disgusting. The girls produce loud response cries and remove their bodies from the table, positioning themselves away from her.

Girls' Insult

- 1 Angela: **When you grow up, you gonna to be working**
- 2 **at Pick and Save.**
- 3 Girls: ah hah hah [hah HAH HAH HAH HAH HAH!
- 4 Sarah: **So? Are you going to be working?**
- 5 Emi: You're not even **going** to be working!
- 6 (Linda): [(At Sears.)
- 7 Sarah: **I know!**
- 8 Angela **So? You gonna be-**
- 9 Linda: You can't find a job **anywhere.**
- 10 Melissa: [Angela you'll- you'll have to be-
- 11 **You'll(hhh) be-** Degrade current participant
- 12 **You'll be cleaning out the gutters.**
- 13 Emi: [Everyone will- eh heh heh!
- 14 Girls: eh heh hih hih hih!
- 15 Angela: **Well that's better than** [working at **Pick N Save.**
- 16 Emi: [Everyone will **reject** you.
- 17 Kathy: **Chimney Woman.**
- 18 Melissa: *h As **if** the gu(hh)tters are going to accept her ((*smile voice*)).
- 19 Angela: **At least I don't eat jello.**
- 20 Girls: Ah ha hah hah!

Figure 18: Degrading Angela through insult.

And while ritual insult is frequently about aspects of the other that are not true (Evaldsson 2005; Labov, 1972), in interactions with Angela, the girls select features that are real rather than fictional to depict Angela, arguing that she is not going to be working (or if so, at a low-class store), not being able to find a job, possibly cleaning out the gutters. Indeed, the negative person descriptors that are selected tell us much about valued features of culture. In Sweden among boys of working class immigrant background negative person descriptors include being poor, having limited Swedish language proficiency, dressing like a girl, or being like a “Gypsy” (Evaldsson, 2005).

Conclusion

Bullying, a worldwide problem (Sanders 2004), is usually not investigated ethnographically. Psychologists such as Pellegrini (1998:166) argue that:

The time has come in our study of bully-victim relations to complement self-report and laboratory methods with direct and indirect observational methods of youngsters functioning in the natural habitats in which these problems occur.

As psychologists (Shweder et al. 1987:16) have said:

Despite the fact that morality deals with decision making concerning what is appropriate, fair, and right to do in a particular situation, for the past thirty-five years, the psychological study of morality has focused attention on reasoning about moral situations rather than on moral action itself.

Close ethnographic analysis of the language practices used by children problematises many of the stereotypical notions textbooks proliferate regarding girls' and boys' lives. Ethnography allows access to the lived experiences of children interacting with their peers. We discover that girls exhibit a heightened concern with rules in games, with notions of justice and a concern for equality, reciprocity and fairness. They put into place elaborate vernacular processes for sanctioning those who violate their local community norms. In dealing with peers, they can also practice elaborated processes of exclusion and bullying, exhibiting anything but a tendency towards the “care orientation” hypothesised by Gilligan. The value of ethnographic study is that we can hear the voices of the children themselves as they articulate their social organization for each other. This permits a more nuanced view of children's social worlds on streets and in playgrounds.

References

- Adler, Patricia A., and Peter Adler (1998). *Peer Power: Preadolescent Culture and Identity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Alanen, Leena (1988). Growing Up in the Modern Family: Rethinking Socialization, the Family, and Childhood. *In Growing Into a Modern World: An International Interdisciplinary Conference on the Life and Development of Children in Modern Society*. Karin Ekberg, and Per Egil Mjaavatn, eds. Pp. 919–45. Trondheim, Norway: The Norwegian Centre for Child Research.
- Archer, John, and Sarah M. Coyne (2005). An Integrated Review of Indirect, Relational, and Social Aggression. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 9(3): 212–30.
- Berentzen, Sigurd (1984). *Children Constructing Their Social World: An Analysis of Gender Contrast in Children's Interaction in a Nursery School*. Bergen: Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen.
- Evaldsson, Ann-Carita (2005). Staging Insults and Mobilizing Categorizations in a Multiethnic Peer Group. *Discourse and Society* 16(6): 763–86.
- Evaldsson, Ann-Carita (2007). Accounting for Friendship: Moral Ordering and Category Membership in Preadolescent Girls' Relational Talk. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 40(4): 377–404.
- Evaldsson, Ann-Carita, and Johanna Svahn (2012). School Bullying and the Micro-Politics of Girls' Gossip Disputes. *In Disputes in Everyday Life: Social and Moral Orders of Children and Young People*. Susan Danby, and Maryanne Theobald, eds. Pp. 297–323. Bingley, UK: American Sociological Association's Studies of Children and Youth. Emerald Group Publishing.
- Gilligan, Carol (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goffman, Erving (1961). *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Goffman, Erving (1979). Footing. *Semiotica* 25: 1–29 (reprinted in Erving Goffman's *Forms of Talk*, 1981, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Pp. 124.
- Gonick, Marnina (2004). The 'Mean Girl' Crisis: Problematizing Representations of Girls' Friendships. *Feminism and Psychology* 14(3): 395–400.
- Goodwin, Marjorie Harness (1990). *He-said-she-said: Talk as Social Organization Among Black Children*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kyratzis, Amy (2007). Using the Social Organizational Affordances of Pretend Play in American Preschool Girls' Interactions. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 40(4): 321–52.
- Labov, William (1970). *The Study of Nonstandard English*. Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers.
- Labov, William (1972). Rules for Ritual Insults. *In Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Pp. 297–353. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Leaper, Campbell and Tara A. Smith (2004). A Meta-Analytic Review of Gender Variation in Children's Language Use: Talkativeness, Affiliative Speech, and Assertive Speech. *Developmental Psychology* 40(6): 993–1027.
- Lever, Janet Rae (1978). Sex Differences in the Complexity of Children's Play and Games. *American Sociological Review* 43: 471–83.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw (1973). The Group and Individual in Functional Analysis. *In High Points in Anthropology*. Paul Bohanan, and Mark Glazer, eds. Pp. 275–93. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. [Reprinted from *American Journal of Sociology* 44, 1939].
- Pelligrini, A. D. (1998). Physical Activity Play: The Nature and Function of a Neglect Aspect of Play. *Child Development* 69(3): 577–98.
- Piaget, Jean (1965). *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1932). New York: Free Press.
- Rigby, Ken (1997). *Bullying in Schools – and What to Do About it*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Sacks, Harvey (1995). *Lectures on Conversation I*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Sanders, Cheryl E. (2004). What is Bullying? *In Bullying: Implications for the Classroom*. Cheryl E. Sanders, and Gary D. Phye, eds. Pp. 2–19. Sanders: Academic Press.
- Shantz, Carolyn Uhlinger (1983). Social Cognition. *In Handbook of Child Psychology (Fourth Edition), Volume Iii: Cognitive Development*. John H. Flavell, and Ellen M. Markman, eds. Pp.495–555. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Shweder, Richard A., Manamohan Mahapatra, and Joan G. Miller (1987). Culture and Moral Development. *In The Emergence of Morality in Young Children*. Jerome Kagan, and Sharon Lamb, eds. Pp. 1–98. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Svahn, Johanna (2012). *The Everyday Practice of School Bullying: Children's Participation in Peer Group Activities and School-Based Anti-Bullying Initiatives*: Uppsala Studies in Education No. 129. Uppsala: Uppsala University.
- Svahn, Johanna, and Ann-Carita Evaldson (2011). You Could Just Ignore Me: Situating Peer Exclusion Within the Contingencies of Girls' Everyday Interactional Practices. *Childhood* 18 (4): 155–71.