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Sharing and Control in Initial Peer Cultures

How do peer cultures come about? How are their elements shared and passed on to other groups? How do individual children come to produce and participate in a series of peer cultures? Although children's sense of belonging to a peer culture extends to a wide range of socioecological settings, the direct study of peer interaction and children's peer cultures is relatively recent. Most studies have been confined to a single setting over a limited period of time (usually a year or so at the most). Very few studies have followed children as they make transitions from the family to the peer group or from one peer culture to another. Therefore, it's difficult to answer all of these questions. Still, some patterns have emerged that allow us to begin to address these issues.

We can conceptualize peer cultures as general subcultures of a wider culture or society such as the United States, Italy, or Kenya. Most work on peer subcultures, however, focuses on particular micro or local cultures that are part of a wider network. The advantage of the notion of local culture is that it allows us to focus on culture as something that is directly produced and shared in face-to-face interaction. As Fine (1987) argued, we can study children's peer cultures as shared universes of discourse rather than as groups defined simply in terms of age or geographical boundaries.

Children are introduced to elements of a more general peer culture and to particular local cultures in the family—through interaction with older siblings, from television and other media, and even from parents. In Chapter 6, we discussed some of the priming activities in the family that prepare

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children for the transition to the peer group. However, children actively enter and become participants in and contributors to local peer cultures for the first time as they move outside the family into the surrounding community. This initial peer culture may take the form of loosely structured kin and neighborhood groups. In Western societies (and more and more in developing countries), however, children are moving into organized child care and educational settings at earlier ages. Given the amount of time that young children normally spend there, and the intensity of the interactions, these settings often serve as a hub in an interlocking network of peer settings or localities. It is through intensive, everyday interaction in this hub that the first local peer culture develops and flourishes (Corsaro, 2003).

Except for a few studies of children's play groups in neighborhood settings in Western societies (P. Christensen & O'Brien, 2003; Goodwin, 1990; Loyd, 2012; Matthews, Limb, & Taylor, 2000; McKendrick, 2009; Rasmussen, 2004) and of communal, multiage child care and play groups in non-Western countries (Gilmore, 2016; Harkness & Super, 1992; Martini, 1994; Nsamenang, 1992b, 2010; Punch, 2000), most research on children's peer cultures has occurred in settings such as preschools, playgrounds, and classrooms of elementary schools as well as baseball fields and other locales for organized sports and leisure activities. Although there is clearly a need for studies focusing on a wider range of cultures and settings within cultures, the available research serves as a highly valuable starting point for a better understanding of children's cultures. Recent research has identified specific peer processes, routines, concerns, and values. These studies suggest that peer cultures emerge, develop, and are maintained and refined across the various social settings that make up children's worlds.

Central Themes in Children's Initial Peer Cultures

Although a wide range of features of the peer cultures of young children has been identified, two central themes consistently appear: (a) Children make persistent attempts to gain control of their lives, and (b) they always attempt to share that control with each other. In the preschool years, the overriding concerns are social participation and challenging and gaining control over adult authority. These two themes are illustrated by the way young children's routines relate to their concerns with physical size. For young children, interactive settings are characterized by the children's looking up to those adults who have power and authority (see Corsaro, 1985; for a review and extended discussion of physical size and other aspects of the bodies of children and youth, see Fingerson, 2009; Prout, 2000). As a result of this recurrent need to look up to the adult world, young children are deeply concerned with physical

size. They come to value growing up and getting bigger. In fact, for young children the distinguishing characteristic between themselves and adults is that adults are bigger. This difference in size—the fact that I'm bigger than the young children I study—is something I have never completely overcome in many years of ethnographic work. As I noted in Chapter 3, it is the primary reason that many of the young children I have studied have labeled me "Big Bill"—someone who is not a typical adult but is too big to be a kid.

The best support for the claim that children value being bigger is their preference for and their routines of play in areas of nursery schools where they are, in a very real sense, bigger. When playing on climbing structures or in playhouses, children routinely climb to the top levels, where they can look down on others, especially adults. Another attraction of these climbing structures is that they are not easily entered by adults because they are scaled to the size of the children. A frequent play routine in the climbing bars in all the nursery schools I have observed is for children to race each other to the top, where they then look down and call out, "We are bigger than anybody else!" Such chanting is often aimed at adults. For example, in one instance I recorded, several children in an American preschool climbed to the highest level of a playhouse in the outside yard. One child, Dominic, yelled out to a teaching assistant, "Willy! Willy! Hi, Willy!" Willy looked up and waved to Dominic. Then Eva and Allen yelled out, "Willy! Willy! Willy!" Soon the three children were joined by two others, Beth and Brian, and all five children began to chant in unison: "Willy! Willy! Willy! We are bigger than you are!" This chanting continued for several minutes, and Willy seemed slightly uncomfortable with all the shouting. He laughed, shook his head, and moved inside the school. I had been standing near the climbing house during this episode, and I felt a great deal of sympathy for Willy. In fact, I began to worry that the children would begin taunting me next, so I moved slightly away from the climbing house to sit on the ground near the slide, where I greeted children as they descended.

The themes of control and communal sharing are evidenced in a wide range of routine activities in the peer cultures of young children. In this chapter we'll focus on children's sharing, on friendship play, and on routines related to children's communal attempts to gain control over adult authority. In Chapter 8 we'll consider routines that relate to conflict and differentiation in the peer culture of young children.

Friendship, Sharing, and Social Participation

We will begin our analysis of communal play routines by first examining young children's friendships, sharing, and social participation in peer culture.

We'll then consider play routines related to children's attempts to gain control over adult authority. Let's first look at friendship and sharing among peers, beginning with the earliest of peer relations among toddlers.

Play Routines Among Toddlers

Until recently, most studies of peer relations among toddlers have involved observing children in laboratory settings or in small play groups in homes. For example, Mueller (1972) documented how cooperative play with toys serves as a basis for the emergence of social interchanges during the 2nd year. With further language development, these interchanges are expanded to become shared routines among toddlers who have a history of interaction. They may serve as the beginnings of friendship and a peer culture (Budwig, Strage, & Bamberg, 1986; Engdahl, 2012; Løkken, 2000a; Sanderson, 2011; also see Göncü, Mistry, & Mosier, 2000, for a discussion of cultural variation in toddler play).

Studies of peer relations among toddlers in day care settings are rare and have been restricted primarily to recent work in Brazil and Europe (but see A. Honig & Thompson, 1993). In Brazil the research, guided by a cultural and ethological theoretical approach and fine-grained analysis of video data, has demonstrated that toddlers and even babies are capable of shared interactions and play routines (see Amorim, Anjos, & Rossetti-Ferreira, 2008; Carvalho, Império-Hamburger, & Pedrosa, 1998). Rossetti-Ferreira, Oliveira, Campos-de-Carvalho, and Amorim (2010) presented a review of research on infants and toddlers in Brazil that has been published in Portuguese. Many of the reviewed studies, through the detailed analysis of babies in the 1st year of life, revealed peer interaction at this early age in child care centers. The interactions were frequent (though often brief and easily interrupted) and clearly went far beyond simply doing things together or parallel play. The children demonstrated reciprocal if not necessarily intentional regulation of each other's behaviors. The analysis of episodes showed dialogue and meanings emerging among babies, although they were not structured by verbal means but rather by coordinated actions and gestures to achieve shared attention. The studies documented that by the end of the 1st year of life, infants demonstrated both empathy and shared pretend play behaviors.

Building on the theoretical views of Merleau-Ponty (1967), Gunvor Løkken (2000a) observed that "through intentional, bodily actions, the toddler immediately understands him/herself and the world he/she is in, without having to reflect or talk about it" (p. 531). Toddlers communicate and play based on expressive bodily actions, something Løkken (2000b) termed the "toddling style." Løkken provided examples of Norwegian toddlers making

music together (a "glee concert") and a "bathroom society" in the toddling style. In the bathroom society, several toddlers bang plastic cups, boats, and their hands simultaneously on a bench in the bathroom. Then, when the banging stops, one girl, Linda, says "no," and all the other children say "no" while simultaneously smiling and laughing.

> During the "no"-ing, the children rock on the bench, bowing forward as they say "no." Later, two girls, Sandra and Lisa, hide under the bench. Then they rise to sit on the bench next to each other, looking at each other. They simultaneously rest their chins in their hands, leaning forward on the bench. Sandra sings "yah-yah-yah yah yah." And then "Oh we are us" to the same tune. "We are us" Lisa sings, after a tiny pause, and to a different tune. Smiling at Sandra. (Løkken, 2000a, pp. 539–540)

Løkken noted that although "the 'We' was uttered by Sandra and confirmed by Lisa, the communal, playful actions, vocalizations, and smiles in general were part of this piece of 'music' performed by the four children, living through a 'We' in vivid present" (2000a, p. 540).

In our study of peer interaction in an *asilo nido* (a child care institution for children from around 18 months to three years of age) in Bologna, Italy, Luisa Molinari and I found that the children produced several play routines during the first 2 months of observation that were elaborated over the course of the school year. One routine that we call the "little chairs" nicely captures the flavor of play among toddlers. The routine occurred in a large room that contained a number of small chairs (*seggiolini*) for the children to sit on for various activities and during meetings and group projects. The routine begins with one or more of the children pushing the little chairs to the center of the room. Once the play is under way, other children join by bringing other chairs or using those already put in line. The following case study is a summary of a short segment of the seggiolini routine that Luisa Molinari videotaped in the asilo nido (see Exhibits 7.1 and 7.2).

THE LITTLE CHAIRS ROUTINE

Arianna and Giorgio approach the chairs, and Arianna says, "I'll take the white chairs." The two children then begin pushing the chairs to the middle of the room and are joined in the activity by Stella and Franca. Meanwhile, two other children, Tommaso and Marco, who were watching while standing

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near the window, take two chairs and push them into the long line created by the other children.

Soon several other children join the play. At one point Stella says, "This is not well done!" and she moves some chairs closer together in the line. The children now begin walking on the line of chairs, which prompts Stella to tell one of the teachers that their construction is "well done."

Exhibit 7.1   Children Arrange *Seggiolini*

Now a number of children are walking on the chairs and moving onto a table, where they jump down and run to the other end of the line and start again. At one point Marco sways and says, "I'm falling, I'm falling," but then quickly rights himself and laughs at his pretend crisis. One child, Elvira, kicks at a chair and knocks it from the line. She is immediately reprimanded by Stella, who then returns the chair to its proper place. The children now begin walking in different directions on the structure, and as they cross paths Tommaso pushes Stella. Stella shouts, "Tommaso always pushes me" to Arianna, who is waiting for her at the end of the line. The play continues until one of the teachers announces that it is now time to begin a planned activity.

Exhibit 7.2   Children Walk on *Seggiolini*

Source: Adapted from Corsaro and Molinari (1990, p. 218).

In this case study, we see that all of the children participate in the routine to some degree. During the routine the teachers often warn the children to be careful, but they intervene only if they fear an injury may occur. In interviews the teachers told us that although they had some misgivings about the play, they did not want to restrict it, noting how much the children enjoyed their innovative creation. Along these lines, it is noteworthy that Marco incorporates the adult concerns into the routine by pretending to fall and then carefully righting himself. In fact, the children were well aware of the teachers' concerns and often reassured them. We can see, for example, how Stella tells a teacher that the design of the chairs is well constructed and therefore not dangerous. Moreover, the children often comfort each other when minor injuries occur and avoid asking the teachers for help even when there are disagreements. We can see that the routine gives the children a sense of control over their physical environment and the authority of the teachers.

The little chairs routine took a slightly different form every day, but some rules were always followed. The children were careful to space the seggiolini

to ensure that a child could easily step from one to another, and they avoided taking away chairs from the finished structure. Some of the younger children did not always respect these rules, however, and were frequently advised of violations by older children. Finally, we found that the older children began experimenting with the design somewhat near the end of the school term. These experiments involved modifications that made the structure more difficult and challenging to walk on.

An important feature of toddler play routines like the "little chairs" is their simple and primarily nonverbal participant structure, which consists of a series of orchestrated actions. This simple structure facilitates the involvement of a large number of children with a fairly wide range of communicative, cognitive, and motor skills. The structure incorporates the option of frequently recycling the main elements of the routines. Such recycling allows children to begin and end participation over a lengthy time frame and to embellish or extend certain features of the routines over time.

The simple participant structure of play routines corresponds to a central value of peer cultures: doing things together (Corsaro, 2003; Engdahl, 2012). As we noted earlier, adults tend to view children's activities from a "utility point of view," which focuses on learning and social and cognitive development (Strandell, 1994). Young children do not know the world from this point of view. "For them," noted Strandell, "the course of events of which they are part has an immediate impact on their existence as children here in space and now in time" (1994, p. 8). It is for this reason that we adults seldom truly appreciate the strong emotional satisfaction children get from producing and participating in what seems to us to be simple repetitive play.

The Protection of Interactive Space and Children's Early Friendships

The peer routines of preschool children (3- to 6-year-olds) go beyond the primary nonverbal coordinated actions of toddlers in that they normally involve highly sophisticated verbal productions. However, gaining access to play groups, maintaining interaction, and making friends are still demanding tasks for preschool children. Gaining access to play groups is particularly difficult in preschool settings because young children tend to protect shared space, objects, and ongoing play from the entry of others.

Protection of interactive space is the tendency on the part of preschool children to protect their ongoing play from the intrusion of others. In my work in preschools, I have found that this tendency is directly related to the fragility of peer interaction, the multiple possibilities of disruption in most preschool settings, and the children's desire to maintain control over shared

activities. Consider the following sequence, recorded on videotape in one of my studies in an American preschool:

> Richard and Barbara have been playing in the block area for several minutes. They are both building things and are sitting near each other. They have not spoken to each other, however, and they do not appear to be playing together. Another child, Nancy, who entered the area with Barbara, is sitting nearby watching.
>
> Richard says to Barbara, "We're playing here by ourselves."
>
> "Just—ah—we friends, right?" Barbara agrees.
>
> Richard replies, "Right."
>
> Barbara and Richard now begin to coordinate their activity and build a house together. Nancy stays on the fringes of the activity for a while but then moves closer, indicating her intent to join the play. Barbara and Richard resist her entry bid, telling Nancy she cannot play. Nancy returns to her onlooker role for a few minutes but then gives up and moves to another area.

Resistance of access attempts seems uncooperative or selfish to adults, including parents and most teachers (see Corsaro, 2003), but it is not that the children are refusing to cooperate or are resisting the idea of sharing. In fact, as we see in this example, the defenders of interactive space are often intensely involved in creating a sense of sharing during the actual course of playing together and often mark this discovery with references to affiliation ("We friends, right?"). In simple terms, the children want to keep sharing what they are already sharing and see others as a threat to the community they have established.

Children not involved in ongoing play desire entry and want to be a part of shared activities. Because their entry bids are continually resisted, they realize they must be persistent. Over time, most children meet the challenge of resistance and develop a complex set of access strategies. Consider the following case study involving three 4-year-old girls in an American preschool.

ACCESS RITUALS IN AN AMERICAN PRESCHOOL

Jenny and Betty are playing around a sandbox in the outside courtyard of the school. I am sitting on the ground near the sandbox watching. The girls are putting sand in pots, cupcake pans, and teapots. Occasionally the girls bring me a sand cake to pretend to eat. Debbie now comes up to the

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sandbox and stands near me, observing the other two girls. After watching for about 5 minutes, she circles the sandbox three times and stops again and stands next to me. After a few more minutes of watching, Debbie moves to the sandbox and reaches for a teapot. Jenny takes the pot away from Debbie and mumbles, "No." Debbie backs away and again stands near me, observing the activity of Jenny and Betty. Then she walks over next to Betty, who is filling the cupcake pan with sand.

Debbie watches Betty for just a few seconds, then says, "We're friends, right, Betty?"

Betty, not looking up at Debbie, continues to place sand in the pan and says, "Right."

Debbie now moves alongside Betty, takes a pot and spoon, begins putting sand in the pot, and says, "I'm making coffee."

"I'm making cupcakes," Betty replies.

Betty now turns to Jenny and says, "We're mothers, right, Jenny?"

"Right," says Jenny.

The three "mothers" continue to play together for about 20 more minutes, until the teachers announce cleanup time.

Source: Adapted from Corsaro (1979, pp. 320–321).

In this example, Debbie's efforts to enter the play illustrate a variety of *access strategies*. First, she merely places herself in the area of play, a strategy I call *nonverbal entry*. Receiving no response, Debbie keeps watching the play but now physically circles the sandbox (what I term *encirclement*). Some researchers refer to Debbie's actions as "onlooker behavior" and argue that it is an indicator of timidity or immature social skills. However, it is important to observe access attempts within their social contexts. Observing entire episodes of interaction, I find that access attempts often involve a series of strategies that build on one another.

In this case, Debbie, when stationary and when on the move, carefully makes note of what the other children are doing. With this information, she is able to enter the area and produce a variant of the ongoing play. Although normally a successful access strategy, it is initially met with resistance in this instance. Not giving up, however, Debbie watches some more, again enters the area, and makes a verbal reference to affiliation ("We're friends, right?"). Betty responds positively but does not explicitly invite Debbie to play.

Debbie then repeats her earlier strategy, producing a variant of the play, this time verbally describing it ("I'm making coffee"). Betty now responds in a way that includes Debbie in the play, noting that she is also making something (cupcakes). She then goes on to further define the new situation by saying, "We're mothers," which is confirmed by Jenny. Debbie is now clearly part of the play.

Although Debbie is eventually successful, one might wonder why she simply did not go up and say "Hi," "What ya doing?" or "Can I play?" I have found that nursery school children rarely use such direct strategies. One reason is that such strategies call for a direct response, and this response is very often negative. Remember our earlier point about the protection of interactive space. Children fear that others may disrupt the cherished but fragile sharing they have developed. Direct entry bids such as "What ya doing?" "Can I play?" or the frequently heard "You have to share!" actually signal that one does not understand what kind of sharing is going on and therefore may cause trouble. Developmental psychologist Catherine Garvey (1984) characterized such requests for information as the three "Don't's" in her guidelines for successful play entry:

> Don't ask questions for information (if you can't tell what's going on, you shouldn't be bothering those who do); don't mention yourself or state your feelings about the group or its activity (they're not interested at the moment); don't disagree or criticize the proceedings (you have no right to do so, since you're an outsider). (p. 164)

The "do's" in Garvey's guidelines all revolve around demonstrating that you can play without messing things up: Watch what's going on, figure out the play theme, enter the area, and plug into the action by producing a variant of the play theme. As Garvey noted, it is also a good idea to "hold off on making suggestions or attempting to redirect until you are well into the group" (p. 187).

Again, we see why it is important for adults to take the children's perspective. What may seem like selfish behavior is really an attempt to keep sharing. Furthermore, by actively confronting resistance to their access attempts, children acquire complex strategies that allow them to enter and share in play. Later research confirmed this complexity. For example, a fascinating study of access rituals (Cromdal, 2001) captured the importance of friendship dynamics and code-switching in a bilingual school among immigrant and native Swedish children. Cobb-Moore, Damby, and Farrell (2009, 2010) in a study of Australian preschool children found that children create and manipulate rules and used pretend frames in their talk and play to manage and protect

interactive space. In a study of Swedish preschoolers Maria Simonsson (2015) documented how children use artifacts (such as toys, puzzles, bicycles and so on) to negotiate the transition from home to preschool, establish peer relations and to overcome resistance to their entry into the play activities of other children. Peg Elgas (2011) in a fascinating study of a preschool classroom with several English Language Learners focuses on two children, one a girl somewhat more advanced in English than her male peer. However, it is the boy who does better (often relying on highly effective non-verbal strategies similar to those we discussed above) at plugging into peer culture in preschool. Using the two children as key examples, Elgas discusses how knowledge of their contrasting success at entering peer culture was vital in developing curriculum for supporting English Language Learners.

There is one more point to our discussion of the protection of interactive space and access rituals. The access skills that children develop in this multiparty setting are clear precursors to adult skills that are used in similar settings. Picture yourself at a party. Let's say you have just arrived, gone off to get a drink, been to the bathroom, or some such thing. Now, like the children in the preschool, you do not want to remain alone. What do you do? Do you go up to a group and say "Hi," "What ya talking about?" or "Can I talk too?" Probably not. Instead, you probably stand near a group, listen, figure out what they are talking about, and make a relevant contribution to the conversation. In short, you do pretty much what Debbie did in the previous example. There is one difference, however. Adults are not likely to tell the guy who bursts in on a conversation that he "is not our friend" or to "beat it." We may want to, but we send more subtle signals—like ignoring what he has to say. As grown-ups, we have learned tact (although it does not always work as well as we might like).

Children's developing knowledge of friendship is closely tied to the social and contextual demands of their peer worlds. Children construct concepts of friendship while at the same time linking these concepts to specific organizational features of peer culture in preschools and other peer settings. Through their experience in preschool, children come to realize that interaction with peers is fragile, and acceptance into ongoing activities is often difficult. Therefore, rather than limiting their social contacts to one or two playmates, the children most often develop stable relations with several playmates as a way to maximize the probability of successful entry and satisfying peer interaction.

For preschool children, friendship primarily serves specific integrative functions (gaining access, building solidarity and mutual trust, and protecting interactive space). Friendships are seldom enduring and are rarely based on perceived personal characteristics of playmates (see Corsaro, 1985, pp. 168–169). (It is important, however, to remember the importance of

context in this interpretation of my findings; the nature of friendship processes will vary across social and cultural context. We will consider a comparative analysis of friendship processes in three cultural groups in Chapter 8.) It may be that enduring friendships are more common among preschool children in homes and neighborhoods (Gottman, 1983). Clearly there is a need for long-term ethnographic studies of children's friendships in such settings.

As we've seen, friendship concepts and skills do not arise solely or even primarily as a result of cognitive development or children's individual reflections. Friendships are collectively constructed through children's active involvement in their social worlds and peer cultures, an idea that clearly ties in to the notion of interpretive reproduction. Our earlier discussion of children's transitions from the family to the initial peer culture in preschool settings in Chapter 6 is also relevant here. There we pointed out that parents often make the association between friendship and sharing for their children by designating the playmates with whom their children share things as friends. In this sense, 2- and 3-year-olds are most apt to see friends as those children who are labeled as such by their parents. With experience in initial peer cultures, however, the concept of friendship is transformed from something denoted by a label that is applied to a specific child to something involving observable shared activity (Corsaro, 2003; Dunn, 2004). Friendship means producing shared activity together in a specific area and protecting that play from the intrusions of others. Thus, children creatively appropriate and extend social knowledge that was first presented to them in adult-child routines. Finally, in protecting their interactive space, children come to realize that they can manage their own activities. In negotiating who is in and who is out, who is one of them and who is not, children begin to grasp their developing social identities. (For a fascinating study of children's building of forts and dens on public playgrounds in Flanders, Belgium, and protecting these spaces from others both physically and symbolically, see Meire, 2013.) Such differentiation among peers becomes more important throughout the preschool years and is a central process in the peer culture of preadolescents (P. Barnes, 2003; Butler, Duncombe, Mason, & Sandford, 2016; Corsaro, Molinari, Hadley, & Sugioka, 2003; Dunn, 2004; Schneider, 2016). We will return to this issue of social differentiation in peer cultures in Chapters 8 and 9.

Language, Sharing Routines, and Rituals

Although children's cultures are composed of a wide range of language and behavioral routines, none are perhaps more symbolic of childhood ethos than **sharing rituals**. These collective activities involve patterned, repetitive, and cooperative expressions of the shared values and concerns of childhood.

They often involve stylized performances and "constitute ritualized moments which are distinctive to the childhood world in which they are embedded and which punctuate the flow of social exchanges in that world" (Katriel, 1987, p. 306). Sometimes, such stylized performances are embedded in more general peer activities, as seen in Goodwin's (1985, 2006) study of African girls' negotiations during a game of jump rope and Mishler's (1979) analysis of "trading and bargaining" among middle-class American 6-year-olds at lunchtime. (See Evaldsson, 2009, for a review of language play and rituals, and Cekaite, Blum-Kulka, Grøver, & Teubal, 2014, for important discussions of children's peer talk for literacy and cognitive development.) A fascinating example of the power of Taiwanese children's language play routines can be seen in the work of Kathryn Hadley (2003). Hadley found that through word play (such as manipulating teachers' and class names, Taiwanese kindergartners "both resisted and accommodated the Confucian values that the teachers aimed to instill in them" (p. 205).

Here, however, let us concentrate on ritual performances of Italian children whose overriding purpose of production is to mark communal sharing within peer culture. The art of verbal negotiation and debate is deeply valued in Italian society. Public discussion and debate (or what Italians refer to as *discussione*) are an integral part of everyday life and occur in bars, public squares, and shopping areas. Children also engage in discussione with adults and peers from an early age, and the activity is an important element of peer culture (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005; Corsaro & Rizzo, 1988, 1990; New, 1994). We will consider discussione among Italian children in the next chapter, when we discuss the importance of conflict in peer culture. For now, let's look at a particular verbal routine, the *cantilena,* which frequently arises in the course of children's discussions in the *scuola dell'infanzia* (a government-supported preschool program for 3- to 6-year-olds).

The cantilena is a tonal device or singsong chant that children produce in a range of verbal activities. The chanting is often accompanied rhythmically with nonverbal gestures such as hitting one's fists or the sides of one's open hands together. Aside from these basic rhythmic features and except that verbalizations normally occur in alternating, nonoverlapping turns, there are no set rules to its production. However, the repetition of lexical items (words or sounds) within turns and key phrases over the course of several exchanges is common. Consider the following example: Several children between the ages of 4 and 6 are sitting around a table drawing pictures. One of the children, Nino, suddenly hits his hands together and chants, "*Chi mi da il nero, é per sempre mio amico. Chi mi da il nero, é per sempre mio amico*" (He who gives me black, is my friend forever. He who gives me black, is my friend forever). Two children sitting near Nino, Giovanna and Luigi,

rummage through a pile of marking pens on the table. Giovanna finds a black one first and hands it to Nino. This routine is repeated several times, with the three children alternating the role of enunciator of the cantilena.

It is difficult to capture the effect of the cantilena without actually hearing it. In this example, there is falling intonation in the first part of the phrase (*He who gives me black*) ending at the lowest point with the naming of the color, and then rising intonation in the second part ending at the highest point with the word *forever*. The fall and rise are rather easily produced in this example because a stock phrase about friendship is used. The children, however, often spontaneously produce the cantilena in the course of debates in which they often cannot anticipate the topics of discussion, let alone exact words or phrases. Consider the following case study of Italian children's production of the cantilena in a peer discussion.

ITALIAN CHILDREN'S PRODUCTION OF THE *CANTILENA* IN *DISCUSSIONE*

Several children (Franco, Paolo, Sara, Nino, Giovanna, and Luigi), who are all about 5 years old, are sitting around a table drawing. They are in the middle of a discussione about the existence of *lupi* (wolves or werewolves) and *fantasmi* (ghosts). After several claims and counterclaims, two of the children, Franco and Paolo, suggest that ghosts do exist and that they live in abandoned houses under the sea. At this point a girl, Sara, initiates a multi-turn cantilena.

Sara: *Nelle—le case buie. Stanno nelle buie.* (In the—the dark houses. They stay in the dark.) (See Exhibit 7.3.)

Paolo: *Eh, é vero.* (Yes, it's true.)

Franco: *E sotto mar—é buio!* (And under the sea—it's dark.)

Nino: *Eh, é vero.* (Yes, it's true.)

Sara: *E sotto—ci vanno loro.* (And under—they go there.)

Luigi: *No, ci vanno anche i granchi.* (No, also crabs go there.) (See Exhibit 7.4.)

           [Hitting his hand against marker]

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Franco: *Ci vanno I sommergibli.* (Submarines go there.)

Nino: *E anche I pescecani. E anche i pescecani.* (And also sharks. And also sharks.)

In her production of the cantilena, Sara strings together several elements from the earlier discussion (ghosts, dark houses, ghosts under water). Her turn is especially impressive because it involves three separate phrases all produced in the falling and rising pitch of the cantilena and all containing new elements related to the discussion with only minor repetition. Again, it is hard to appreciate the phonetic aspects of the cantilena without hearing it. To preserve the singsong pitch, it is necessary to produce a phrase with at least four syllables, and one quickly has to think of something to say of this length that fits the ongoing discussion. Long turns with new information are especially difficult to produce, and difficult productions like Sara's are appreciated by one's peers. On the other hand, minimal participation is also valued, and rather easily produced, as we see in Paolo's response to Sara (*Eh, é vero*). The trick here is to add the *Eh* (or *Si* or *No*) before the *é vero* to have enough syllables to work with. In all

Exhibit 7.3   A Child Initiates the *Cantilena*

Exhibit 7.4   Other Children Respond in *Cantilena*

my attempts to participate in the children's cantilena, I never got past this simple but appreciated contribution. After Paolo's response, Franco, Nino, and Luigi all contribute to the cantilena. They signal either agreement or disagreement, refine previously mentioned information (it's under the sea), or add new information (other underwater objects such as crabs, submarines, and sharks). In all of these turns, the children rely on the repetition of key phrases to ensure coherence and to maintain the basic singsong cadence and rhythm of the cantilena.

Source: Adapted from Corsaro and Rizzo (1990, pp. 58–62).

An important feature of the cantilena is that the routine is a consciously shared element of peer culture. That is, the children not only produce the routine but refer to it using the term *cantilena*. Additionally, the teachers and the children's parents are aware of the cantilena. In fact, the children's frequent chanting often irritates parents, who restrict usage of the cantilena in the home with the command "*Non far la cantilena!*" (Don't do the cantilena!). Interestingly, in family role-play in the *scuola materna,* children in superordinate roles (mother, father, and older siblings) often use this same command when disciplining peers in subordinate roles (babies and younger

children) when the latter produce the cantilena in pretend quarrels. In this way, the children take the adults' disapproving reactions to their peer routine and embed them into their shared peer culture in role-play. We again see how many peer play routines directly (or, in this case, more subtly and creatively) challenge adult authority.

We now turn to a more detailed look at the importance of play routines for autonomy and control in peer culture.

Autonomy and Control in Peer Culture

Earlier I noted that a major theme of peer culture revolves around children's desire to achieve autonomy from the rules and authority of adult caretakers and to gain control over their lives. This issue of control is apparent not only in children's active challenges to adult control but also in a range of play routines in which children collectively confront curiosities, confusions, and fears from the adult world.

Sociodramatic Role-Play

Child researchers have long argued for the importance of dramatic role-play for children's social and emotional development and language and literacy skills (Björk-Willén, 2012; Butler & Weatherall, 2009; Christie, 1990; Corsaro, 1985, 2003; Dyson, 1997; Galbraith, 2011; Garvey, 1990; Paley, 1984). We know from this research that kids do not simply imitate adult models in their role-play; rather, they continually elaborate and embellish adult models to address their own concerns.

Children's appropriation and embellishment of adult models is primarily about status, power, and control. Children are empowered when they take on adult roles. They use the dramatic license of imaginary play to project to the future—a time when they will be in charge and in control of themselves and others.

Role-play also allows children to experiment with how different types of people in society act and how they relate to each other. Of great importance here for children are gender and expectations about how girls and boys should act and how roles in society are gender stereotyped. Here again we will see that young children do not accept, but challenge and refine, such stereotypes. 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-Play and Social Power

Children begin role-play as young as age 2, and most role-play among 2- to 5-year-olds is about the expression of power. In my dissertation research, I was interested in language use in the play of a brother and sister, Krister and Mia, and a second boy, Buddy (yes, the same Buddy who was talking to his mother about blood and going to Sesame Street in Chapter 1). In one play session, Mia (who was 4 and had been to pre-school) and the two boys (both around 2 and a half years old and without preschool experience) began a role-play sequence when Mia suggested we play teacher. Krister wanted to be the teacher and pushed a chair to the front of a large blackboard in the room. 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 over 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 see a young child who had not attended preschool but had information that teachers are powerful and tell kids what to do. Also, bad kids are made to 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 there was no sitting in the corner in Mia's school. Perhaps it was from something on television such as a cartoon or an adult joking about kids having to sit in the corner if they are 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 in which young children seldom find themselves (see Cobb-Moore, 2012).

In sociodramatic play children relish taking on and expressing power. It's fun. As we can see in the following case study of a complex role-play episode from my work in Berkeley, California, a small group of children (all around 4 years old) clearly expressed power and control while in superordinate roles, misbehaved and obeyed in subordinate roles, cooperated in roles of equal status, but became confused about the alignment and gender expectations of other roles.

TWO HUSBANDS

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

"Hey, there are our kitties," said Bill.

"Yeah, they're down in the backyard," replied Rita.

Bill and Rita now went about arranging things in the house. They picked up blankets from the bed and placed the purses and suitcase on the floor in front of the bed. Bill then picked up a baby crib and placed it alongside of the front of the bed, blocking off the area around the bed from the rest of the room.

"This is our special room, right?" said Bill.

"Right," responded Rita.

"This is our little room we sleep in, right?" added Bill. "Our little room. Our—"

"We're the kitty family," said Denny, cutting off Bill; he and Charles have climbed up the stairs and into the playhouse. They began crawling around the room meowing.

"Here kitty-kitty, here kitty-kitty," said Rita, reaching out to pet them. "Yeah, here's our two kitties," she announced to Bill.

"Kitty, you can't come into this room!" Bill commanded sternly. But one of the kitties, Charles, immediately crawled into the room and climbed on the bed. Meanwhile the other kitty knocked a plate from the table to the floor.

"No! No!" yelled Bill. He then shooed the kitties back toward the stairs. "Go on! Get down in the backyard!"

Rita came to Bill's aid and shouted, "Get down in the backyard, you two cats! Go down! Down! Down!"

The kitties headed toward the stairs, and Charles started crawling down. But Denny stopped at the head of the stairs and said, "No, I'm the kitty. I'm the kitty."

"Go back in the backyard!" commanded Bill.

"You get in the backyard. Ya! Ya!" yelled Rita, pushing at the remaining kitty with her hands.

Denny now gave up and also went down the stairs.

Bill looked down at the two cats and said, "Go in the backyard, we're busy!"

"They were rough on us," said Rita.

After the kitties left, the husband and wife decided that the house needed cleaning. In line with stereotyped gender roles, Bill moved the furniture while his wife, Rita, cleaned the floor.

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

"You're a handyman, a handyman," sang Rita.

"Next," said Bill as he pushed the stove near the door and then moved the table next to it.

"Bill? Bill?" called Rita.

"What?"

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

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

As Rita pretended to mop the floor, the kitties returned. Bill tried to block them off, but they scurried by, moving on the just cleaned floor. Bill attempted to shoo the kitties back to the stairs.

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

Rita stopped cleaning to help her husband, "Come scat. Scat!" she yelled.

Charles crawled back down the stairs, but Denny remained and stood up, announcing, "I'm not—I'm not a kitty anymore."

"You're a husband?" Bill asked.

"Yeah," agreed Denny.

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

Now Bill called out to Rita, "Hey, two husbands."

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

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

"Yeah, husbands! Husbands!" chanted Denny and Bill as they danced around the room.

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

Rita held up two fingers and shook her head, "Not two. Not two." She then walked down the stairs.

Meanwhile Bill and Denny continued dancing around upstairs and chanting "Two husbands! Two husbands!"

Rita walked around in front of the downstairs playhouse shaking her head. She stopped near the stairs just as Bill and Denny came down, and said, "I can't marry 'em, two husbands. I can't marry two husbands because I love them."

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

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"Right," responded Denny.

The boys then went back upstairs and continued chanting, "Husbands!" They danced around and jumped on the bed. Later Rita came upstairs and said she was a kitty. The two husbands admonished her for scratching them and misbehaving and chased her down the stairs. Shortly after, the role-play was brought to an end with the teacher's announcement of "cleanup time."

Source: Adapted from Corsaro (2003, pp. 113–117).

In this sequence the role-play hit a snag, at least for Rita, when Denny decided he didn't want to be a kitty anymore. Perhaps he was getting tired of being shooed down the stairs. In any case, Bill suggested Denny also be a husband; and when Denny accepted, Bill even said, "Good. We need two husbands." It is not clear why Bill made this offer. Most likely since Denny is a boy and since males are husbands, Bill thought that Denny should be a husband like him.

Rita, however, thought otherwise and saw a problem that goes beyond gender stereotypes: one wife and two husbands. While the boys danced around and celebrated being two husbands, Rita argued to no avail that she cannot catch, have, marry, or love two husbands. She knew that something was wrong with this relationship (at least among the adults in her culture). What was wrong has to do with her emerging knowledge that the roles of husband and wife not only are gender specific but are related to each other in particular ways. Wives and husbands love each other and get married. It is even assumed that is the case 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 is confusing, and a grandma is the wrong gender; grandpa might have worked. The contrast of the boys' glee with 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 solves the problem by becoming a kitty, and the play continues with a reversion to misbehavior and discipline. However, Rita had a glimpse into the complexity of role relationships. In Piaget's terms as we discussed in Chapter 1, she had a disequilibrium in her sense of her social world for which she will strive to compensate. So we see that role-play is fun, improvised, 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 the child plays a role, she or he not only learns something about that role's specific social position but "also learns that there is such a thing as a role" (p. 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" (p. 148). Children's recognition of the transformative power of play is an important element of peer culture. It is their use of this transformative power in role-play that I will, in line with Bateson and the sociologist Irving Goffman (1974), refer to as "plying the frame."

Let's consider another example also from my research in a preschool in Bologna, Italy. A girl, Emilia, made an ice cream shop with two of her friends. She came to where I was playing with three boys, Alberto, Alessio, and Stefano. I had a microphone in my hand because we were videotaping the play (Corsaro, 2003).

NON C'È *ZUPPA INGLESE*

"Bill, will you come to see our store?" she 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 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 and 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 had noticed earlier that Emilia and her friends were using dirt as pretend chocolate ice cream and sand for *crema* or vanilla.

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"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, "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."

"There is no banana!" Emilia 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, "There is no zuppa inglese, there is no pistachio!"

"Okay, then, I'll take banana," says Alberto.

"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.

Source: Adapted from Corsaro (2003, pp. 119–121).

In this example, Emilia at first wants to stay in the confined frame of pretending to have a small ice cream store with flavors that can be represented by features on the playground: dirt, sand, leaves, and so on. Although I have trouble making my order because of my not-so-good Italian, I stay within the frame and accept—no, even volunteer—chocolate, a flavor I know she has. But first Stefano and then Alberto more or less say, "What's the fun of that!" They ply or stretch the frame by purposely ordering flavors they know Emilia doesn't have or doesn't want to pretend to have. Then the whole role-play becomes about "playing with the play."

This turn of events is most apparent when Alberto calls out after Emilia as she is leaving and orders zuppa inglese (a rare ice cream flavor that is related to the English dessert trifle). Now even I get what is going on and join in the laughter of the other boys at Alberto's request. Emilia, feigning disgust, clearly enjoys dealing with Alberto. She relishes the opportunity of denying the request, by responding, "*Non* c'è *zuppa inglese!*" But Alberto's response to this is to ask for banana! Later, however, Emilia gives in some and says there may be some pistachio and she will check into the orange soda.

The Possible Universality of Role-Play

Given the ubiquity of role-play in children's play across historical times and across cultures, it can be argued that it is a universal aspect of children's play and peer cultures. In Chapter 4 we saw that 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.

We also saw in Chapter 4 that role-play was reported in interviews with former slaves by Lester Alston (1992) and David Wiggins (1985). They reported that slave children in the pre–Civil War South of the United States engaged in a variety of types of role-play that included religious ceremonies such as baptisms and most especially slave auctions, which clearly helped children deal with strong emotions about being separated from their families in the slave community.

More recently, in her ethnographic work on the play and work activities of rural Sudanese children in the 1980s, Cindi Katz (2004) documented elaborate role-play that was tied closely to adult activities. Boys reproduced various activities related to agricultural work and commerce from the profits of such work. Central to the play was a toy tractor one of the boys made from a variety of discarded objects with the help of an older brother. The

boys made a plow for the tractor and cooperatively and painstakingly repro-
duced all the various elements of agricultural work 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; they bought a range of
goods represented by objects such as bits of metal and glass and battery tops
(Katz, 2004, pp. 12–13).

Girls' role-play was also elaborate. Girls made dolls from straw; gave
names to the dolls, who represented 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, p. 17). The girls used
these props to enact a wide range of domestic activities such as cooking,
eating, going to the well to fetch water, and visiting. These activities,
although staying close to the adult model, were highly innovative in that the
children inventively made their toys from a variety of discarded and natural
materials as compared to the toys of children from Western societies.

Overall, there is good evidence to support the contention that sociodra-
matic role-play is a universal feature of children's peer cultures. However,
more studies of children's play from a wide range of cultural groups is neces-
sary to support this contention fully and to capture the diversity in the styles
and nature of these important play routines in children's everyday lives
(Corsaro, 2012).

Challenging Adult Authority

Another aspect of children's peer culture that may be universal is chil-
dren's tendency to challenge adult authority (Corsaro, 2003; Schwartzman,
1978). In Chapter 4 we saw that role-reversal games such as the boy bishops
ritual existed as long ago as medieval times and that the newsies and street
hustlers of turn-of-the-20th-century American cities clearly enjoyed outwit-
ting adults. Regarding cross-cultural studies, Brian Sutton-Smith (1976)
pointed to "order-disorder games" that can be found in Western and non-
Western societies. In these games—for example, the familiar ring-around-
the-rosy—everyone cooperates to create order, only to destroy it by
collapsing. Although some might accuse Sutton-Smith of reading too much
into such games, others argue that the subtle aspects of inversion, challenge,
and satire are what make these games so appealing to children.

Helen Schwartzman argued that children not only experiment with and
refine aspects of the adult world in play but also use play as an "arena for
comment and criticism" (1978, p. 126). As an example, she pointed to some

of the play of the children of the !Kung Bushmen of southwest Africa as described by the anthropologist Lorna Marshall (1976). One of the games of the !Kung children that Marshall described is called Frogs, a reverse form of Mother, May I? The game begins with one child's being chosen "mother for all" and 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 one to go and get her mortar and pestle so she can finish preparing the frogs. But each child refuses, so the angry mother goes to get the mortar and pestle herself. While she is away, the children steal the frogs and run off to hide with them. When the mother returns she pretends to be very angry and chases after the children.

When she finds one, she strikes him/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 and pandemonium as the children try to dart away from mother's grasp. Soon everyone is chasing everyone else, shrieking and laughing and whacking each other on the head. (Schwartzman, 1978, p. 131)

Westerners might cringe at the references to drinking brains and the aggressiveness of the play. On the other hand, the !Kung would see our competitive games such as football and even hopscotch as similarly distasteful. In fact, Marshall pointed out that the !Kung do not play any competitive games (except tug-of-war) because the idea of winners and losers is not accepted in their culture, which values the group over the individual (Schwartzman, 1978, p. 130).

In a study in a Finnish preschool, Harriet Strandell (1997) showed how the children used language and playful mocking of the teachers to take control of the social arena and push the teachers' definition of the situation to the background. During lunch in the preschool, a group of 3-year-olds had just sat down to eat when older children were returning from an outing. A teacher suggested, "Let's show the big ones how nicely we can eat." The children began to eat but then called out names of the older children and a teacher they saw ("I saw Rita," "I saw Janne"). Then the verbal play was extended to fantasy as one child said, "I saw a lion," and another said, "I saw its tail." The teachers, sensing they were losing control of the situation, quieted the children. Later, after the children had finished eating, they ran into the hall, but a teacher called back to them, saying, "How about saying thank you!" One girl, Pia, stood by the dining room door and shouted, "Thank you so much, ladies!" All the other children started laughing and

shouting, "Thanks, ladies!" A teacher said, "That's enough now," but the laughter and the kids' chorus of "Thanks, ladies! Thanks, ladies!" continued for some while longer until a teacher repeated, "That's enough now," in a calm voice, only to have one of the children shout "Enough!" to more laughter (Strandell, 1997, pp. 459–460). The teachers were clearly put in a difficult situation here because of the children's clever use of language as they did what they were told (thanked the teachers) but in a way that clearly put them in control of the situation and created a great sense of fun and control among the children.

We explored children's secondary adjustments to adult rules in Chapter 2. Children's secondary adjustments in preschool settings contribute to a group identity and provide children with a tool for addressing personal interests and goals. Over the course of a year in a particular preschool, children's creation of and participation in a wide range of secondary adjustments leads to the development of what I have termed an "underlife" in preschools (Goffman, 1961). An underlife is a set of behaviors or activities that contradict, challenge, or violate the official norms or rules of a specific social organization or institution. The underlife exists alongside and in reaction to those organizational rules of preschools that impinge on the autonomy of the children. In this sense, the underlife is an essential part of the children's group identity.

The underlife is perhaps most apparent in secondary adjustments carried out through the active cooperation of several children. These secondary adjustments normally involve using legitimate resources in devious ways to get around rules and achieve personal or private needs or wants—what Goffman called "working the system" (1961, p. 210). Children frequently work the system to avoid helping at cleanup time. In preschools I have studied in the United States and Italy, cleanup usually occurs at transition points in the day (before snacks or meals, meeting times, and so on). There is a general rule that children stop play when cleanup time is announced and help teachers put things back in order. Children soon question the necessity and logic of cleanup time. I once overheard a child argue against putting toys away during cleanup time because "we'll just have to take 'em out all over again!"

Children often come up with strategies to evade cleanup time: relocation (immediately moving to another area of play upon hearing the announcement of cleanup); pretending not to hear the announcement (simply ignoring, for as long as possible, the command to obey the rule); and using personal-problem delay (claiming they cannot help clean up because of personal problems). This last strategy is particularly interesting. Children report a plethora of problems, such as feigned injury ("I hurt my foot"),

pressing business ("I have to go to the bathroom"), or role-play demands ("I have to finish feeding the baby").

Once in Italy, a child named Franca told one of the teachers that she could not help clean up because I was in the process of teaching her English. There was some truth to this because children often asked me how to say certain words in English, and Franca had made such a request earlier in the day, but we clearly were not involved in this activity when cleanup time ensued. Fortunately, I was not brought into the dispute because the teacher rejected Franca's excuse out of hand. Nevertheless, during the course of this debate, a good deal of the cleanup work was performed by other children. In fact, all of the strategies to avoid cleanup are at least partially successful for this reason. Due to organizational constraints—teachers' need to get the children to lunch, to begin a meeting, and so on—any delaying tactic is somewhat effective. (For an insightful study of Greek preschool children's perceptions and strategies regarding cleanup, see Penderi & Rekalidou, 2016.) It does not take long for children to learn this and to "work the system" accordingly (Corsaro, 1990, p. 20). For example, one of my colleagues, Kathryn Hadley, has volunteered in many preschools and tells the story of a boy who, upon the announcement of cleanup time, went around the school asking teachers and other kids for a "big hug." What a friendly fellow this little "hugger" was at cleanup times. This strategy worked for quite a while before the teachers caught on (Corsaro, 2003, p. 150).

Children's secondary adjustments are innovative and collective responses to the adult world. Furthermore, by sharing a communal spirit as members of peer cultures, children come to experience how being a member of a group affects both themselves as individuals and how they relate to others. Through secondary adjustments, children come to see themselves as part of a group (a peer group of students), which is in some instances aligned with other groups and in other instances opposed to other groups (teachers and adult culture, see Hatch, 1989; Lash, 2008). Markstrom and Halldén's (2009) study of a Swedish preschool identified strategies the children used that showed that they were active in playing at the border, acting as if the institution was the children's place. They also demonstrated how the children used different strategies as resources for managing the regulations, accounting for personal autonomy and negotiating the social order in the preschool. In this sense, the children both contributed to the reproduction of the social order of the school and brought about subtle changes, which gave them a sense of control and agency (also see Dotson, Vaquera & Cunningham, 2015).

At the same time, children begin to develop an awareness of how communal values can be used to address personal interests and goals

(Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006). Clear evidence of this can be seen in children's attempts to control the behavior of their peers by offering them the opportunity to share collectively in secondary adjustments. For example, on one occasion in an Italian preschool, I saw an older boy, Roberto, fail repeatedly to get a younger child, Fabrizio, to play a board game the "correct" way. Although exasperated with Fabrizio's refusal to follow directions, Roberto did not give up. He decided to abandon the game momentarily and took a small car from his pocket. He then rolled the car toward Fabrizio, who picked it up, looked it over, and rolled it back. After playing with the car for several minutes, Roberto put it back in his pocket and suggested that they play with the board game. This time the younger child played "correctly." After a few minutes, however, Fabrizio asked to see the car again, but this time Roberto said, "*Basta così!*" (Enough of this!) and left Fabrizio sitting alone at the table.

Confronting Confusions, Fears, and Conflicts in Fantasy Play

In Chapter 6 we explored how children's interactions with the adult world often generate disturbances or uncertainties for them. Children address some of these disturbances as they arise with parents and other adults, but they attempt to resolve many others in imaginary worlds that they create and share with peers. In these "as-if" worlds, "familiar activities may be carried out in different ways: inanimate objects may be treated as animate, one object (or gesture) may be substituted for another, and children may perform an activity usually carried out by adults" (Fein, 1981, p. 1096). This as-if quality does not mean, however, that there are no rules in imaginative play. Vygotsky argued that the very organization and coordination of pretend play demands attention to real-life rules and also the invention of new rules, which define and redefine the behavior of imaginary characters such as monsters, fairies, and ghosts (1978, p. 95).

Numerous studies document the complexity of young children's fantasy play throughout the world. Children's fantasy play is emotion laden and helps children deal with various concerns and fears such as being lost, facing a variety of dangers, and death—while contributing to literacy, cognitive development, and social skills (Alcock, 2016; Corsaro, 1985, 2003; Cekaite et al., 2014; Douglas & Stirling, 2016; Edwards, 2000; Fromberg & Bergen, 2006; Goldman, 2000; Göncü, 1993; Göncü & Gaskins, 2006; Löfdahl, 2005). R. Keith Sawyer (1997) impressively identified the poetic nature of American children's fantasy play. These poetic performances in children's fantasy play are part of a shared peer culture in that they are created in an improvised fashion that Sawyer called "collaborative emergence"

(Sawyer, 2002). By **collaborative emergence** Sawyer meant that children's improvised play is unpredictable and contingent on the ongoing turn-by-turn production of play narrative. Thus, one child "proposes a new development for the play, and other children respond by modifying or embellishing the proposal" (Sawyer, 2002, p. 340). Sawyer argued, however, that the researcher can interpret the particular episode of fantasy play by assuming that the play narrative ceases with the end of a particular play episode.

Johannesen (2004; also see Corsaro & Johannesen, 2007), in her study of children's fantasy play with LEGOs, extended Sawyer's work by entering the practice of family play in terms of the practice itself. She did this by considering the play frame reality as voiced by the LEGO play characters as a real world and the voices as expressing real experiences. Given that her work is longitudinal, with the study of play with LEGOs by the same children over a long period of time, Johannesen demonstrated that the LEGO characters remain intact even when they, as embodied in play artifacts, are stacked away from one day or week to the next. Over time, the children's play reality persists and becomes increasingly complex as the characters, as orchestrated by the children, plan and experience recurring episodes of danger-rescue and other themes. These recurrent experiences materialize in the enduring relational identities, artifacts, and participants in the play. Thus, we see many of the aspects of peer culture as we defined it in Chapter 1 (play routines, values and concerns, and artifacts) in the shared production of fantasy play over time (Corsaro & Johannesen, 2007).

In her work on "doing reality with play" based on observations of Finnish preschool children, Strandell (1997) made a similar point, maintaining that play in the peer culture should not be seen only as a means of reaching adult competence. Rather, she argued that play is a resource children use in their everyday life activities in the peer culture. Interestingly, these and other studies of fantasy play demonstrate language and improvisational skills among the young children that can be seen as surpassing those of the majority of older children and adults (Corsaro, 2003).

This phenomenon is strikingly illustrated in a recently published study by Perry Gilmore (2016). Gilmore documents how during field research in Kenya in 1975, two five-year-old boys—her son Colin and his Samburu (a tribal group in Kenya) friend Sadiki—invented their own new pidgin language they named *Kisisi*. Through highly crafted ethnographic and sociolinguistic analyses of the boys' evolving friendship and language practices, Gilmore convincingly demonstrates "the creative linguistic competencies of very young children and often overlooked potential as language innovators and pidgin creolizers" (2016, p, 34). By this, Gilmore maintains that the boys went beyond creating a pidgin or mixture of two languages to a more

advanced creole that goes beyond mixtures to have unique elements. Capturing the importance of improvisational skills and learning, Gilmore argues that the boys' new language demonstrated "their stunning creativity, verbal virtuosity, performative spontaneity, and artistic improvisation" (2016, p. 131).

Some fantasy play routines are taken directly from, while others are only loosely connected to, models from the adult world. In a fascinating study of children's fantasy play in an Israeli preschool, Vardi-Rath, Teubal, Aillenberg, and Lewin (2014) analyzed children's spontaneous free play after reading popular children's books with teachers such as *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Hansel and Gretel*. They found that the children in their fantasy play showed awareness of the plot, characters, and narrative structure of the books, but at the same time made changes based on both their worlds and the immediate reality surrounding their play. The children taught each other new words, used a higher linguistic register (for example quoting the written register and embedding it in their fantasy play or discursive register), "and interpretively reproduced the text, while simultaneously maintaining the story structure" (2014, p.78.) In line with the notion of interpretive reproduction that we talked about in detail in Chapters 1 and 2, the children appropriated elements of the stories in their play; but they also transformed them and added new aspects, characters, and events. In the process, at times, they even created new words. For example when two children tried to impose the role of scoundrel from the story, "The Emperor's New Clothes" by the brothers Grimm, on a third child, the third child rejected the role "on the grounds that he had never *scoundreled* . . . by which he meant he had never behaved like a scoundrel. He turned a noun (not necessarily familiar to him, *a scoundrel*), into a verb *scoundrel*, conjugating it as he would other regular verbs (for example, *cheat—cheated, bike—biked*, and therefore *scoundrel— scoundreled* (2014, p. 80, emphasis in original).

In my work, I have found that many fantasy routines loosely connected to the adult world seem to be acquired spontaneously in local peer cultures, while others seem to be passed along from older to younger children. Let's look at one such routine, which I refer to as **approach-avoidance play**. Approach-avoidance play is a primarily nonverbal pretend play routine in the peer culture of preschool children in which children identify, approach, and then avoid a threatening agent or monster. The best way to get a feel for approach-avoidance play is to examine an enactment of the routine. Like many routines in peer culture, approach-avoidance is hard to appreciate outside its natural context. Furthermore, the routine is primarily nonverbal, making it even harder to capture on paper. I try to bring to life a videotaped enactment of the routine in the following case study.

THE WALKING BUCKET

Three children from an American preschool (Beth, Brian, and Mark), who are all about 5 years old, are playing on a rocking boat in the outside yard of the school. Suddenly, Beth notices another boy (Steven, 6 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 is walking, repeats, "A walking bucket. Look!" Brian and Mark turn, look, and see Steven. "Yeah!" says Brian, "Let's get off."

Brian, Mark, and Beth jump off the boat and slowly approach Steven. When they reach him, Mark and Brian push the bucket and start to lift it up.

Steven responds by lifting the bucket off his head. Brian yells, "Whoa!" and the three children pretend to be afraid of Steven and race back to the rocking boat. Steven pursues them, flailing his arms in a threatening manner. Brian, Mark, and Beth all hop onto the far side of the boat. Steven stops at the vacant side and rocks the boat by pushing down on the edge of it with his hands. Steven does not climb onto the boat, nor does he directly try to get at the other children.

Steven then returns to the dropped bucket and places it back over his head. Brian, Mark, and Beth watch from the boat, giggling and laughing.
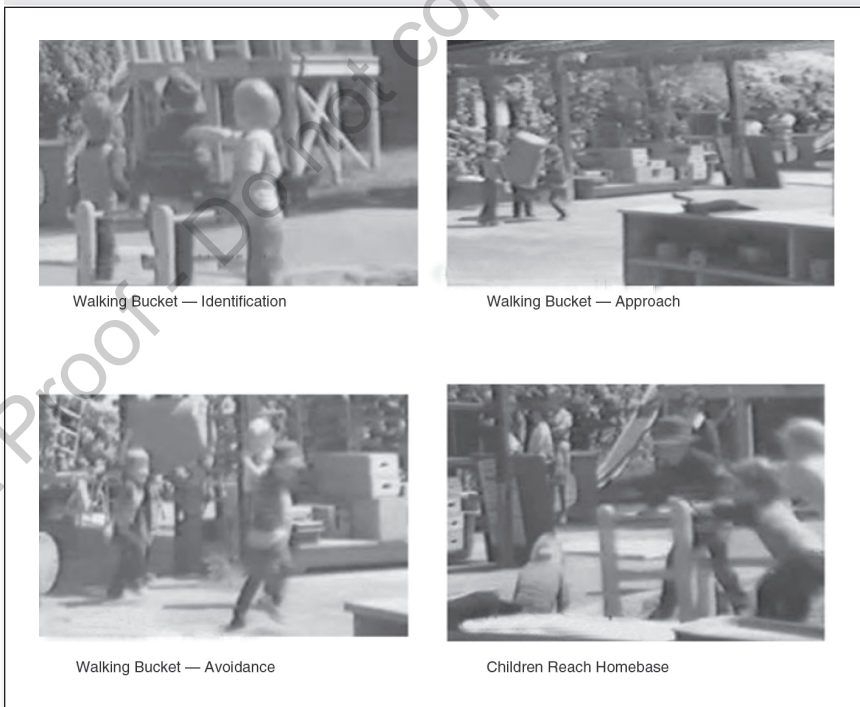
This routine continues with Brian, Mark, Beth, and later another child, Frank, approaching Steven every time he replaces the bucket on his head. Each time he removes the bucket, the children flee back to home base with Steven in pursuit. With each approach, the group of children becomes more confident and aggressive. They taunt Steven (calling him a "big fat poop butt") and kick at his legs under the bucket without actually making contact. During a fourth approach, Steven flips off the bucket a bit prematurely and finds himself face-to-face with Mark. The two begin to push one another, and a teacher standing nearby intervenes, ending the play.

This example is typical of the approach-avoidance play that occurred spontaneously in the American and Italian preschools I studied. The routine is composed of three phases: identification, approach, and avoidance (see Exhibit 7.5). In this case study, the identification phase begins when Beth sees and refers to Steven as a walking bucket. Steven had never placed a bucket on his head before. Beth just happens to see Steven and spontaneously identifies him as a walking bucket. In approach-avoidance play, children often are thrust into the role of a threatening agent in this way. Beth's playmates confirm her identification when they turn to look at Steven and

Brian responds, "Yeah." Although behaviorally very simple (it involves a call for attention, shared attention, labeling, and confirmation), identification provides an interpretive frame for Steven's behavior that is in line with the shared routine of approach-avoidance. Once the identification is offered and ratified, the routine literally clicks into operation.

The approach phase begins with Brian's suggestion, "Let's get off." The three children then jump to the ground and move slowly toward Steven. Although Steven seems aware of the approach, he does not react until Mark and Brian push the bucket and attempt to lift it. Steven then lifts the bucket from his head, enabling himself to see and chase the other children. The three children screech loudly in mock fear and race back to the boat. Several things are important here. It is clear that the three children are in this together. The approach is communally orchestrated, moving from Brian's proposal, to the slow advance toward Steven, to the pushing of the bucket, and finally to the feigned fear in reaction to Steven's taking the bucket from his head. A building tension occurs in the approach phase, which the children create and share.

Exhibit 7.5   Phases in Approach-Avoidance Play

Walking Bucket — Identification

Walking Bucket — Approach

Walking Bucket — Avoidance

Children Reach Homebase

Steven's participation to this point has been minimal. He is thrust into the role of threatening agent by the others. He is not even aware of this assignment until they push the bucket and he removes it. Steven actually begins to replace the bucket on his head but then notices the other children running away from him toward the boat.

The children's fleeing initiates the avoidance phase. This phase can proceed only with the threatening agent's active participation. Steven flails his arms in a threatening manner as he pursues the other children back to the boat. He does not, however, move onto the boat, signaling the limits to his power as a threatening agent. The boat thus becomes a home base for the threatened children. Steven returns to the bucket and replaces it on his head. The threatening agent is now again disabled, and the first cycle of the routine is complete.

Before pursuing further discussion of the importance of approach-avoidance in peer culture, let's look at a more formalized version of the routine Italian preschoolers refer to as *la Strega* (the Witch).

LA STREGA

Cristina, Luisa, and Rosa (all about 4 years old) are playing in the outside yard of the preschool. Rosa points to Cristina and says, "She is the witch." Luisa then asks Cristina, "Will you be the witch?" and Cristina agrees. Cristina now closes her eyes, and Luisa and Rosa move closer and closer toward her, almost touching her. As they approach, Cristina repeats, "*Colore! Colore! Colore!*" (Color! Color! Color!). Luisa and Rosa move closer with each repetition, and then Cristina shouts, "*Viola!*" (Violet!). Luisa and Rosa run off screeching, and Cristina, with her arms and hands outstretched in a threatening manner, chases after them. Luisa and Rosa now run in different directions, and Cristina chases after Rosa. Just as la Strega is about to catch her, Rosa touches a violet object (a toy on the ground that serves as home base). Cristina now turns to look for Luisa and sees that she also has found a violet object (the dress of another child). Cristina now again closes her eyes and repeats, "Colore! Colore! Colore!" The other two girls begin a second approach, and the routine is repeated, this time with gray as the announced color. Rosa and Luisa again find the correctly colored objects before Cristina can capture them. At this point, Cristina suggests that Rosa be the witch, and she agrees. The routine is repeated three more times with the colors yellow, green, and blue. Each time the witch chases but does not capture the fleeing children.

The La Strega routine highlights some additional implications of approach-avoidance play for children's peer culture. First, it allows for the personification of the feared (but fascinating) figure La Strega in the person of a fellow playmate. The fact that La Strega is now embodied in the actions of a living person is tempered by the fact that the animator is, after all, just Cristina (another child). The feared figure is now part of immediate reality, but this personification is both created and controlled by the children in their joint production of the routine.

A second thing to note is that the structure of the routine leads to both a buildup and a release of tension and excitement. In the approach phase, the witch relinquishes power by closing her eyes as the children draw near to her. The tension builds, however, as the witch repeats the word *colore* because she decides what the color will be and when it will be announced. This announcement signals the beginning of the witch's attempt to capture the children and the avoidance phase of the routine. Although the fleeing children may seem to be afraid in the avoidance phase, the fear is clearly feigned because objects of any color can easily be found and touched. Thus, the witch seldom actually captures a fleeing child. In fact, threatened children often prolong the avoidance phase by overlooking many potential objects of the appropriate color before selecting one.

We see in these 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 (Corsaro, 1988).

Variants of approach-avoidance play have been reported in many cross-cultural studies of children's play (see Schwartzman, 1978; Sutton-Smith, 1976, for reviews). In Chapter 6 we talked about Gaingeen, a bogey described by Barlow (1985) in her study of the Murik of Papua New Guinea. In her analysis, Barlow described and analyzed a strikingly similar type of approach-avoidance play among children of the Murik in response to Gaingeen. Barlow noted that although Gaingeen is "initially terrifying and strange, early in children's experience the secret of the masked figure is revealed" and the children discover he is an adolescent boy wearing a costume (1985, p. 1). Barlow pointed out, however, that Gaingeen loses none of his fascination after this demystification. Rather, children incorporate Gaingeen into the routines of peer culture. For preadolescents, there is a pattern in which Gaingeen himself is approached and avoided when he appears. For the younger children, Gaingeen is created by one or several children who make costumes (see Exhibit 7.6) and take on the role of Gaingeen while the other children approach and avoid.

Exhibit 7.6   Young Children Make Gaingeen Costumes

Source: Photo by David Lipset.

A final important point is that engaging in play routines like approach-avoidance to confront fears and anxieties is not confined to children. It also appears in the playful, leisure activities of youth and adults when they attend horror films, ride roller coasters and other similar activities (Corsaro, 2012; Gaut, 1993; Tudor, 1997).

Summary

The concepts of sharing and gaining control are important to children's production of and participation in initial peer cultures. In the preschool and early elementary school years, children immensely enjoy simply doing things together. However, generating shared meaning and coordinating play are challenging tasks for young children. Thus, children spend a good deal of time creating, protecting, and gaining access to basic activities and routines in their peer culture. We saw, for example, that once preschool children initiate a play activity, they tend to protect their interactive space from the intrusions of other children. Although the protection of interactive space seems uncooperative to adults, it is seen as just the opposite for the children. Given their developing cognitive and communicative skills, children have to work hard to establish shared play. Once shared play is initiated, children want to keep sharing what they are already sharing, and they see others as a threat to the community they have established. What about the children seen as intruders? They wish to enter and to become part of shared play. Thus, over time, by confronting resistance to their access attempts, children acquire complex access strategies that allow them to enter and share in play. These access strategies are clear precursors to adult skills for becoming part of interaction in similar multiparty settings.

Once children establish shared play, they produce a wide range of behavioral routines. None is perhaps more symbolic of childhood cultures than sharing rituals: collective activities that involve patterned, repetitive, and cooperative expressions of the shared values and concerns of peer culture. In this chapter, we discussed one such activity, Italian children's production of the cantilena, a tonal device or singsong chant that the children regularly produce in peer discussions and debates. Children's production of sharing routines like the cantilena reflects a range of concerns in the peer culture. Most important, it provides young children with a sense of excitement and emotional security.

Children attempt to gain control over their lives in a number of ways. One way children gain a sense of agency or control is in their sociodramatic role-play. As we saw, children are empowered when they take on adult roles. They use the dramatic license of imaginary play to project to the future—a time when they will be in charge and in control of themselves and others. Another way of gaining a sense of control in peer culture is by directly resisting and challenging adult rules and authority. Children challenge adult rules in the family from the 1st year of life. Such activity becomes more widespread and sophisticated when children discover common interests in preschool settings. In these settings, children produce a wide set of practices in

which they both mock and evade adult authority. In fact, many of these secondary adjustments to adult rules are more complex (structurally and interactively) than the rules themselves.

Children attempt to deal with confusions, concerns, fears, and conflicts in their daily lives by creating and participating in various routines of their peer cultures. Young children are frequently warned of dangers by parents and other adult caretakers and, more indirectly, through their exposure to movies and fairy tales. Children, in turn, frequently incorporate a wide range of fears and dangers (from threatening agents such as monsters and witches to dangerous events such as fires, floods, and becoming lost) into their peer cultures. We saw examples of such incorporation in preschool children's pretend fantasy play and their production of the approach-avoidance routine. Approach-avoidance play—a pretend play routine in which children identify, approach, and avoid a threatening agent or monster—is especially interesting because its production has been documented in several cultures, which indicates its possible universality. Overall, by engaging in shared fantasy play and by producing games, routines, and rituals, children more firmly grasp and deal with social representations of evil and the unknown in the security of their peer cultures.

We turn now to Chapter 8, wherein we consider conflict and differentiation in children's peer cultures.