

Symbolic Play

THE DEVELOPMENT
OF SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING

EDITED BY
INGE BRETHERTON

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OF SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING

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INGE BRETHERTON

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Colorado State University
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1984



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Preface

This book describes the development of symbolic play from infancy through the preschool years. Unlike much recent research in this area, it does not emphasize parallels between pretense and other representational capacities such as language. Instead, the focus is on make-believe as an activity within which young children spontaneously represent and practice their understanding of the social world. Clinicians have, of course, for many years thought of pretense as a window into the child's inner world, but they have studied it from the point of view of conflicts expressed and mastered, not from the point of view of a developing ability to represent complex role and action structures. We hope that the reader will be as amazed as we are at the tremendous skill with which young children manipulate their knowledge of the social world within the simulated reality of play.

The study of pretense from a social cognitive point of view has been facilitated by a new approach to representation, which emphasizes temporal-causal-spatial frameworks (event schemata, scripts, and stories), as opposed to disembedded symbols or taxonomic structures. The contributors to this volume have made use of these ideas in a number of ways. In addition we have drawn on Bateson's notion of metacommunication or the ability to mark off pretense from everyday reality by the message "This is play." Much symbolic play beyond the toddler years proceeds on two levels: planning outside the playframe and acting within the playframe. In play with small human and animal figures, children assume dual roles as narrators (who describe what the figures are doing) and vicarious actors (by activating and talking for the figures). In joint pretense, children play the dual roles of director (planning roles, themes, and settings) and actor. The research presented in this book shows that, in the context of familiar event schemata or scripts, social knowledge can be manipulated at several levels in complex and subtle ways.

The book has three parts. Part I is a general introduction, documenting what we know about the development of event schemata produced in symbolic play, about children's management of the playframe, and about the development of subjunctive, or "What if?" thought.

Part II (Chapters 2 through 6) concerns the development of joint pretending. Chapter 2 (by Nelson & Seidman) discusses the use of shared scripts in the organization of make-believe play, Chapter 3 (by Giffin) documents the subtleties of metacommunication, ranging from ulterior conversation seemingly within the playframe to out-of-frame messages ("Let's pretend that . . ."). In Chapters 4 through 6, early joint pretense between the child and others is considered in detail. Chapter 4 (Miller & Garvey) emphasizes the supporting role of the mother in early collaborative make-believe, comparing earlier mother-child with later child-peer play. Chapter 5 (Dunn & Dale) contrasts 2-year-olds' joint pretense with mother and with an older sibling. Chapter 6 (Forys & McCune-Nicolich) illustrates some of the strategies whereby unfamiliar 36-month-old dyads enter into make-believe, describing both solo pretense and joint role-play.

The focus of Part III is on social interaction through symbolic play with dolls, toy animals, object props, and language. Wolf, Rygh, and Altshuler's contribution (Chapter 7) examines the child's growing ability to represent the internal states of the inanimate figures whose doings he or she vicariously enacts. Volterra's study (Chapter 8) is an amazing documentary of a 2-year-old's verbal fantasies—collected serendipitously as part of a language study—during his mother's second pregnancy. Chapters 9 (Fenson) and 10 (Bretherton, O'Connell, Shore, & Bates) analyze the effect of contextual variation on toddler's symbolic play and play-related language. Both are short-term longitudinal studies. Kreye (Chapter 11) illustrates the use of the symbolic play format for facilitating various types of conceptual organization in preschoolers. Finally, O'Connell and Bretherton (Chapter 12) contrast a child's play alone and with the mother, documenting that maternal guidance can increase the diversity of play.

Overall, the two most striking findings are the remarkable complexity of social understanding and the importance of language in the conduct of pretend play, whether with replicas or with live partners. Chapters 9 and 10 independently noted a tremendous increase in the use of "pretend" language between the ages of 20 and 30 months. The complex forms of dual-level representation (narrator-vicarious actor, director-actor), which are so striking after the age of 3 years, rely heavily on communicative abilities. It is fascinating to speculate how joint pretending is managed by signing deaf children. No such studies have been conducted so far. In any event, the widespread tendency to consider language and symbolic acts as two separate and parallel aspects of symbolic play (Chapter 9 and discussion in 10) becomes detrimental in studies of symbolic play during the later preschool years. The fictive world of play is more fruitfully studied as a multimodal phenomenon with different symbol systems serving complementary, not necessarily parallel, functions.

We suggest that the approach taken in this book is useful not only to investigators who wish to learn more about the extent of a young child's understanding of the social world, but also to clinicians and educators. In the conduct of play

therapy it seems important to know the upper limits of what a child can represent in terms of roles, action sequences, and object substitutions. Such knowledge could aid in the interpretation of the child's played-out conflicts. Insight into individual differences (see Chapter 7) will also be useful. The information presented here can also be helpful to educators who wish to assess and facilitate young children's make-believe play. My hope—one that I share with my collaborators—is that this book will offer some ideas and tools for diverse applications and for more research into the development of the fascinating capacity to create "what ifs."

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PART I

Introduction

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CHAPTER 1

Representing the Social World in Symbolic Play: Reality and Fantasy

INGE BRETHERTON

INTRODUCTION: PIAGET AND EVENT REPRESENTATION

Research on symbolic play owes an enormous debt to Piaget. The delightful accounts of his own children's pretend activities, published in *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, (1962), have inspired a host of subsequent studies. Yet his own analyses leave many striking aspects of these rich observations almost completely unexplored.

Piaget's theory of representation as interiorized action revolutionized ideas about cognition. Representation began to be seen as a dynamic process instead of a static collection of symbols. However, Piaget did not apply this kind of thinking to the study of pretend play. In addition he emphasized the incoherence of pretending in spite of observations that illustrated its structure and coherence. Further, the ability to represent "what ifs," to engage in subjunctive thought, was simply taken for granted. This ability, as Hofstadter (1979) pointed out, is one of the most intriguing aspects of human cognition. Yet Piaget viewed young children's ability to disregard reality "as it is" as a prime example of egocentric,

nonsocialized thought, which serves purely affective needs and demands no explanation in cognitive terms. Make-believe, he claimed, permits young children to assimilate the world to the ego without being hampered by the need for accommodation (adaptation to present reality).

For the child assimilation of reality to the ego is a vital condition for continuity and development, precisely because of the lack of equilibrium in his thought, and symbolic play satisfies this condition both as regards signifier and signified. From the point of view of the signified, play enables the child to relive his past experiences and makes for the satisfaction of the ego rather than for its subordination to reality. From the point of view of the signifier, symbolism provides the child with the live, dynamic, individual language indispensable for the expression of his subjective feelings, for which collective language alone is inadequate [Piaget, 1962; pp. 166–167].

The figurative representation of social events, be they factual or counterfactual, was not what intrigued Piaget about interiorized action. His overriding preoccupation was with those interiorized actions that lead to logicomathematical thought. Because pretending is “assimilation of the world to the ego” and therefore not accommodated to present reality, it cannot, he claimed, play an essential part in the development of operations (seriation, classification, conservation) that alone make the coherent representation of reality possible. Hence, pretending only continues so long as the child cannot effectively accommodate to the real world.

Symbolic games decline after the age of four, for reasons which it is very important to discover, since they also explain why these games are so numerous earlier. In a general way it can be said that the more the child adapts himself to the natural and social world the less he indulges in symbolic distortions and transpositions, because instead of assimilating the external world to the ego he progressively subordinates the ego to reality [Piaget, 1962, p. 145].

This insistence on the importance of pretense for cognitive development only insofar as it faithfully reconstructs but not as it transforms reality has been critically reviewed by Sutton-Smith (1966).

It would, of course, be untrue to say that Piaget attributed no cognitive significance to symbolic play. Whereas he denied it a significant creative role in representational development, he did regard it as a useful yardstick for its progress (Piaget, 1962). In their early make-believe play, Piaget noted, children demonstrate a growing ability to dissociate the symbol from what it symbolizes. At the onset of pretending, when infants reenact their own activities (sleeping, eating, drinking) outside the normal, everyday context, the two are still closely linked, in the sense that a scheme, enacted out of context, serves as a symbol for the same scheme imagined in context. The symbol and what it symbolizes achieve somewhat greater separation when infants feed a doll, instead of themselves, or pretend at behavior they have observed in others (e.g., “read” a newspaper). Doll-directed behavior now stands for the infant’s self-directed everyday

action, whereas self-directed reproduction of another person's behavior stands for the model's imagined action. The dissociation of the symbol and the symbolized increases even further when the child begins to assume another person's role or uses one object as if it were another. In playing a role (identifying with the other person) the child becomes the symbol for the other person. In "eating" from a stick or "telephoning" with a spoon, the action performed with the substitute object symbolizes actual eating and telephoning with realistic objects. Piaget's description of the increasing distance of the symbol from the symbolized carries within it, I sense, the seeds of a theory of event representation, perhaps even of a theory of subjunctive thought. Because figurative representation held little interest for him, Piaget paid no heed of these seeds, however.

The approach to symbolic play taken in this chapter is deeply influenced by Piaget, but at the same time incompatible with some of his views. Although the emphasis on figurative as opposed to operative knowledge is un-Piagetian, the focus on representation as internal or mental action is deeply rooted in Piagetian thinking. It would be foolish to belittle the importance of operative representation. I suggest, however, that Piaget unjustly disregarded the implications of figurative representation for cognitive development. Work in the area of artificial intelligence (e.g., Schank & Abelson, 1977) and cognitive psychology (e.g., Aebli, 1980; Mandler, 1979; Nelson, 1981) supports this claim.

Persuasive evidence now exists that, at the most basic level, representation may not be organized in terms of taxonomic structures or classification hierarchies but in terms of event schemata or scripts that are skeletal frameworks of everyday events (Schank & Abelson, 1977). These frameworks are figurative in that they represent spatio-temporo-causal links among agents, recipients, and objects and are in this sense isomorphic with reality. They are constructed and revised in the course of repeated experiences with similar events, but they in turn guide understanding of such events. In Piagetian language, event schemata interpret reality (assimilation) and are adapted in response to it (accommodation). In the terminology of cognitive science, event schemata serve as top-down, conceptually driven processing mechanisms, which give meaning to incoming information (Mandler, 1979). Mandler suggested that taxonomic knowledge appears to be a secondary kind of organization, built onto a schematically organized memory system wherein linkage is based on spatial, temporal, or causal relations, not class membership. Along the same lines, Nelson (1981) proposed that scripts or event schemata may constitute a first-order organization from which other cognitive structures-processes (such as taxonomic hierarchies, roles, and problem-solving strategies) are then derived (see also Kreye, Chapter 11, this volume). Such a view attributes great significance to figurative representation as a basis for the construction of operative thought, turning Piagetian notions on the relationship of figurative to operative knowledge upside down.

The script model is intuitively appealing because, unlike the static, traditional