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Examining Children's Peer Play-in-Action: Micro Dramas and Collaborative Play Performances

Ann-Carita Evaldsson

Abstract: In this study, particular focus is on micro-ethnographic studies of children's peer play-in-action and how children create shared peer cultures through their collaborative performances in situated game activities. It will be shown how children create micro dramas in play that serve as cultural frameworks to i) dramatize and transform experiences from the outside world; ii) playfully subvert hierarchies and gendered orders; and iii) comment upon and unravel controversial issues in their social life. The data are drawn from three sets of video-recorded data of children's everyday play activities collected during fieldwork in separate school and after-school settings located in middle-class and low-income multiethnic suburban areas in Sweden.

Keywords: children's play, situated activities, peer cultures, micro dramas, micro-ethnography

Introduction

In this article, attention will be given to micro-ethnographic studies of children's play with a particular focus on children's collaborative play performances in situated game activities (Evaldsson, 2009; Corsaro, 2018 for overviews). The study of play and games as situated activities implies a shift in focus from *what* children play—the preoccupation of more traditional anthropological studies—to *how* players actively contribute to the organization of play and games (Evaldsson, 2009; Goodwin, 2006). There are several reasons for studying play as situated activities (Goffman, 1961). A focus on children's play as situated activities emphasizes the importance of investigating how children accomplish play activities in real life settings through jointly produced activities (Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998; Goodwin, 2006). It captures how play forms a crucial part of children's peer cultures and meaning-making, emotional sharing, and creativity in everyday lives with peers (Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011; Corsaro, 2018). A focus on games as situated activities also locates children's play in wider institutional frameworks. Of importance is that a situated activity has "transformation rules" or "frames" that define what experiences from the outside world are to be recognized in the boundaries of the activity (Goffman, 1961, pp. 26–34).

This study will foreground how a focus on children's play as situated activities provides rich sites for exploring the often spectacular and innovative character of children's collaborative play performances, in what will be referred to here as micro dramas. Micro dramas are characterized by the occurrence of something dramatic, recognizable and noteworthy. My interest in micro dramas relates to the ongoing improvisational and transformative character of children's play (Sawyer, 2002; Schwartzman, 1978), and how children through their participation in collaborative play produce and generate knowledge of the wider culture beyond the

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peer group (Corsaro, 2020, p. 18). Drawing upon perspectives from Goffmanian interactional analysis, linguistic anthropology and conversation analysis on children's peer play (Aronsson, 2011; Evaldsson, 2009; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011), I will show how micro dramas, involving dramatic and collectively performed actions, serve as cultural frameworks for children to address and transform controversial (moral, emotional, and social) issues in their everyday lives with peers.

The analysis draws on video recordings of children's everyday peer play activities that were collected at three separate fieldworks among elementary school children, in one middle-class setting (Evaldsson & Aarsand, forthcoming) and in two separate multiethnic low-income settings in Sweden (Evaldsson, 2003, 2004; Evaldsson & Melander, 2018). It will be demonstrated that ethnographic studies based on video recordings provide possibilities to study children's peer play (and the cultural and linguistic diversities it inhabits) in its' own right (Aronsson, 2011; Corsaro, 2018; Evaldsson, 2009; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011). Thus, rather than focusing on extended education from the perspective of the school or after-school program, or based on what adults/teachers consider important for children to learn, children's everyday life, their peer play practices and peer cultures form the focus of this study.

Studies of Children's Play and Games as Situated Activities

Micro-ethnographic studies of children's participation in situated play activities demonstrate the importance of exploring the often dramatic and transformative character of children's peer play interaction (Evaldsson, 2009; Goodwin, 2006). Investigating children's peer play interaction in situated game activities requires in turn methodologies based on fieldwork among children in real life settings (Corsaro 2018) together with video recordings of children's everyday activities (Goodwin, 2006). Such methods are now a common approach in research on children's peer interaction and peer cultures for capturing the embodied and highly dynamic character of their peer play (see Corsaro & Maynard, 1996; Cromdal, 2001; Danby & Baker, 1998; Evaldsson, 2003, 2004; Goodwin, 1990, 2006; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011; Griswold, 2007; Kyratzis, 2007; Theobald, 2013). The methodological approach taken foregrounds the role of language and social interaction as deeply embedded in the accomplishment of play activities, which both encodes culture and are a tool for children's participation in that culture (Corsaro, 2018; Goodwin & Kyrtazis, 2011). The linguistic anthropological approach taken to children's play is heavily influenced by the early work of William Corsaro (2018) on preschool children's participation in cultural routines (dramatic role-play, chasing, access rituals, and more) and constructions of peer cultures, as well as Marjorie Harness Goodwin's (1990; 2006) studies of preadolescent children's participation in a wide range of play and games (dramatic role-play, team sports, jump rope, hopscotch, and more) in their neighborhoods and at nearby playgrounds. Given the broad range of micro-ethnographic research on children's peer play interaction, my review in this section will focus only on a limited number of the existing studies. More specifically, I will show how ethnographic studies of children's play interaction can be used to challenge some of the tacit agreements that tend to reappear in more traditional research on play about the nature and benefits of children's play (see Schwartzman, 1978 for an overview). In most of this work, the focus is

almost entirely on *what* children play rather than *how* children organize their participation in play (see Evaldsson, 2009 for a critique).

Especially, Corsaro (2018, p. 18) has shown how preschool children in their peer play interaction "actively engage in the creation of unique peer cultures" while "appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns". For example he demonstrates how a group of Italian preschoolers used milk cartoons to create a unique "traveling bank"— an idea taken from the adult society but extended and given new meanings in children's fantasy play (see also Aronsson, 2011; Kyratzis, 2007). Such findings challenge, for example, common assumptions of children's play in traditional folklore studies (Opie & Opie, 1959/1977) whereby children are seen as possessing a culture that is separate from the adult world (see James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998, p. 85 for a critique).

Micro-ethnographic studies of children's peer play have also challenged easy gender dichotomies in children's games by exploring variation in styles of play activities across gender, ethnic, and cultural groupings (see Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2014 for an overview). Much research demonstrates increasing gender separation in schools, with older children preferring to play with children of the same sex (Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2014; Thorne, 1993). However, Evaldsson (2003, 2004) and Goodwin (1995, 2006), in ethnographic studies of girls' participation in foursquare games (Evaldsson) and in hopscotch (Goodwin), demonstrate how gender dichotomies of "girls as cooperative" versus "boys as competitive", along with essentialized notions of "boys' games as more complex than girls'", dissolve when children's interactions in situated games are analyzed in detail (see also Extracts 2a, b).

The romanticized view of play as a free activity—outside ordinary life, not serious but at the same time absorbing players (Huizinga, 1971; Opie & Opie, 1959/1977)—as well as the antithetical view of play as rebellious, hierarchical, and disorderly organized (Sutton-Smith, 1997), are also contrasted by the empirical subtleties in micro-ethnographic studies of *how* children organize their play *in situ* (Aronsson, 2011; Corsaro, 2018; Evaldsson, 2009; Schwartzman, 1978). Several studies have shown that children's play activities involve intense negotiations about how to play and with whom, in which relational positions, play hierarchies, and other aspects of the social order are at stake (Danby & Baker 1998; Evaldsson, 2004, 2005; Goodwin, 2006; Griswold, 2007). This means that ethnographic research on children's peer play provides a rich site for exploring how children in collaboration with other children actively construct their social world and their place within it.

Methodological Approach

This study uses a peer language socialization approach, integrating long-term ethnographic studies with a multimodal interactional analysis based on recordings of children's everyday activities, as a methodological approach (Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011). The data are drawn from three separate ethnographic sites where children's cultural routines and peer language practices were observed and video-recorded over time and across spaces, on playgrounds in school and after-school settings (see Evaldsson, 2003, 2004; Evaldsson & Melander Bowden, 2018; Evaldsson & Aarsand, forthcoming). The separate fieldwork occasions provided rich ethnographic knowledge of the social, emotional, and linguistic creativity in children's peer

play and peer cultures (for more ethnographic details see analytic section). Through long-term ethnographic fieldwork it became possible to identify, access, and document on video the children's peer interactions in everyday play activities within different peer group constellations. Ethnographic fieldwork with children involves spending a great deal of time with them in situations in which there are often no other adults present and the children are in control of the activities (see also Corsaro 2018). In this way, the researcher gradually gets to know the children and how they organize their everyday lives, which in turn offers a deeper understanding of the interpretative procedures children employ in situated meaning-making. Doing ethnographic fieldwork with children is sometimes highly challenging, and also requires rigorous ethical considerations and consent from the participants, both adults and children (Corsaro, 2020). In the selected ethnographies the children and their parents, as well as the staff, agreed to participate. The children were also continuously informed during the fieldwork that they could decline to be video-recorded at any time. Additionally, the use of long-term ethnographic fieldwork along with video recordings provides great possibilities to involve children in the research process while building trust and creating long-term relationships with them.

The ethnographic analysis here is combined with a multimodal interactional approach to explore how children organize their play participation *in situ*ated game activities through the coordinated adjustments of assembling forms of actions (verbal and embodied) in a material environment (C. Goodwin 2000; Goodwin, 2006). In order to capture the dynamic and embodied ways in which children organize their peer group participation in the midst of play, the selected video recordings are transcribed following conventions within conversation analysis (Jefferson, 2004). The transcripts are combined with selected frame grabs from video recordings to capture some of the complexities of children's collaborative play participation in a socio-material environment. The applied transcription conventions are presented at the end of this article. The English translations are as close as possible to the Swedish verbatim records. To protect the participants' identities, all names are pseudonyms.

Micro Dramas and Collaborative Peer Play Performances

The analytic section will focus on children's peer play activities from a childhood perspective on children as creative producers of their own peer cultures; that is, in the actual doing of childhood. Micro-ethnographic studies based on video recordings provide a rich site for exploring the fast moving, innovative, and often, dramatic character of children's peer play interaction. The analyses will focus on how children within collaborative peer play performances create micro dramas that serve as cultural frameworks to, i) dramatize and transform experiences from the outside world; ii) playfully subvert play hierarchies and gendered orders; and iii) comment upon and unravel controversial issues in their social life.

Setting the Stage: Creating Play Hierarchies and Transforming Game Frames

In the first video-recorded episode three seven-year-old boys—Tom, Sam, and Per—participate in a game of table tennis on the playground (Evaldsson & Aarsand, forthcoming). The

three boys are classmates and two of them, Tom and Sam, are close friends who usually socialize with one another, while the third boy, Per, who has a disability status, usually spends his time alone on the playground. The selected episode draws from an ethnography based on video observations of Swedish middle-class children's everyday activities at school, at an after-school program, and in their homes.[1]

When we enter the first video extract the two boys, Tom and Sam, have been walking around the playground together acting out their imaginative play memberships as warriors in a pretend play of Astrid Lindgren's story *The Brothers Lionheart.* They now confidently approach the stage, walking side by side over to the table tennis table where the third boy, Per, is standing alone, holding a ball and two rackets in his hands (see Figure 1, Extract 1 lines 1–3). In the opening sequence the two boys set the stage for the game as a 'duel' (line 1) that then gradually is upgraded into a real "warrior duel" (line 9). Notable are the ways in the two boys (Sam and Tom) through their embodied actions, physical arrangements and their use of the available game artifacts (the rackets, the ball, and the table) transform the table tennis game into a competitive game framework of two against one.

EXTRACT 1: "Warrior duel"

1 This study was financed by the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, and the Swedish Research Council as part of the larger research project Learning, Interactive Technologies and Narrative Remembering (LINT).

```
1   Tom  #Ka ka[n vi utmanar dig till en ↑DUELL
         #Ca ca[n we challenge you to a ↑DUEL
         #(Figure 1)

2   Tom        [((puts his upper body on the table
3        tennis table while looking in Per's
4        direction))

5   Sam  ((walks up, places himself to the right of
6        Per, tries to take one of the rackets))

7   Per  >Nej men<
         >No don't<
8        ((pulls the racket back))

         (1.5)
9   Tom  Till en rikTIG ↑KRI[GA:R DUELL
         To a reAL ↑WA[RRIOR DUEL

10  Sam              [du vågar inte de:
11                   [you don't dare that
```

The playful framing of the game as a "duel" is displayed through Tom's opening announcement, "Ca- can we challenge you to a duel" (lines 1–4). In addressing Per, Tom uses a deep playful register, voicing the pretend framework, and with a powerful body position he literally tries to take over the table tennis game, leaning over the table and gazing directly at Per who is standing on the other side (lines 1–4). Naming the game a "duel" and presenting himself and Sam as part of a collective set the stage set for a competitive game framework of two against one. In close collaboration, Sam, physically approaches Per trying to grab one of his rackets (lines 5–6). However, Per does not accept the invitation but rather takes a step backward, firmly holding the two rackets (line 7). In what follows, Tom intensifies the competitive and playful framework of the activity into "a real warrior duel" (lines 9). Sam now launches a playful in-role threat, openly challenging Per for not daring to participate in the game (lines 10). Thereby, a hierarchical relationship is set in which the targeted boy, Per, is cast as a potential coward for not daring to participate in a game duel while the others position themselves as brave warriors.

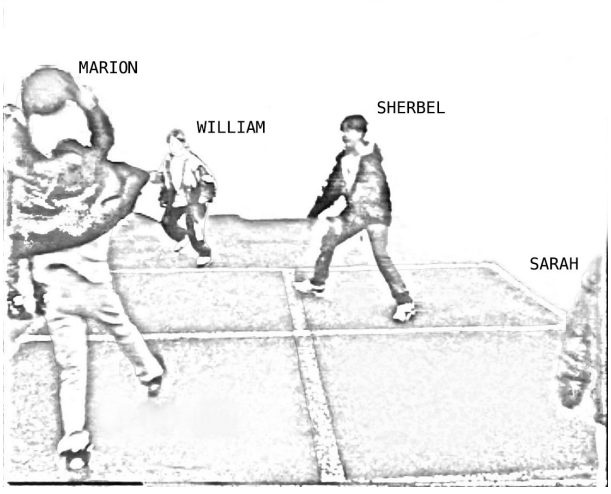
The collaborative and emergent performativity of the two boys' pretend play serves to transform an ordinary table tennis game into a micro drama. The two boys' collaborative performance is unpredictable, and contingent upon their ongoing turn-by-turn production (playful threats, subversion of fictive voices, recycling of powerful body positions, etc.) in ways that exaggerate and intensify the excitement of their collaborative peer play. Such collaborative performances are created in children's pretend play in an improvised manner, through what Sawyer (2002, p. 340) describes as "collaborative emergence". In staging the game as a "real warrior duel", the boys draw on authoritative figures from a well-known fictional story, *The Brothers Lionheart*, to create status and hierarchal positions while

strengthening within-group alliances. Outperforming another boy while having fun mobilizes what it means to be a "tough boy" in this peer group setting (Danby & Baker, 1998; Evaldsson, 2005). Thus showing how playful juxtapositions, subversions of genres and voices, and other performance elements are central in the co-production of a local (masculine) peer culture in which boys have fun at the expense of others. At the same time, it shows how particular children, like Per, who is excluded from the children's peer culture on a daily basis, is at risk of not managing to qualify for a membership (see also Goodwin, 2002; Svahn & Evaldsson, 2011).

Performing Gender and Challenging Relations of Power

The next series of extracts will demonstrate how a group of eleven-year-old girls stage a micro drama in which they play with, pull apart, and even juxtapose traditional gendered behaviors. The episode is from video recordings of a game of "boys against girls", which regularly took place on the playground in a multiethnic elementary school setting. The video recordings are drawn from one-year ethnographic study of intercultural friendship relations in a multiethnic school setting in Sweden (Evaldsson 2003, 2004). In this context I documented a peer group of girls and boys of Swedish-Syrian background, who engaged daily in same-sex and cross-sex foursquare games of "king out" on the playground. In the example, the children are participating in a game that was named by the children as "boys against girls". Two of the most physically skilled girls, Marion and Sarah, are on the girls' team, playing against two boys, Sherbel and William. The skilled girls dictate the game and take the lead with respect to the use of physical space and bodily moves such as slams. As will be demonstrated, the girls also set the limits for the boys' game performances, while transforming the boys' failing performance into a public event.

EXTRACT 2a: "Boys against Girls"

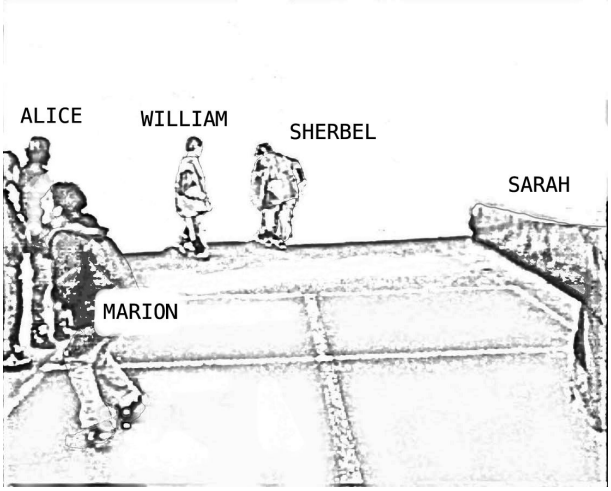


1	Sherbel	((studsar bollen,	((bounces the ball,
2		tar sats))	takes off))
3	Sarah	de e inga ↑låga (.)	you are not ↑allowed to
4		de e inga ↑såna	(.) throw like ↑that!
5		((pekar på Sherbel))	((points at Sherbel))
6	Sherbel	vad e de ↑DÅ ((tar	what can I do ↑THEN
7		sats)) Uh:: ((	((takes off)) Uh:
8		smashar bollen i	((slams the ball in
9		Marion's ruta))	Marion's square))
10	Marion	((fångar bollen, tar	((catches the ball,
11		sats, #kastar bollen	turns around, #slams the
12		i William's ruta))	ball in W's square))
13		#(Figure 2a)	#(Figure 2a)

After several attempts to renegotiate the rules for throwing (outside Extract 2a and on lines 1–5), Sherbel finally takes off and slams the ball with great force in Marion's square (lines 6–9). Although Sherbel tries to change the rules of the game to his own advantage, the targeted girl, Marion, does not miss the opportunity to respond and counter-challenge the boys (lines 10–12). After successfully catching the ball, Marion immediately takes off and slams the ball with force in William's square (Figure 2a, lines 11–13).

In response, William runs after the ball but misses catching it (Extract 2b, lines 16–18, Figure 2b). Now the two girls, Marion and Sarah, join in a shared outburst of laughter, while they happily turn their bodies towards the audience (Figure 2b lines 19–25,).

EXTRACT 2b: "Boys against Girls"



14	Sherbel	DU- DU- TA DE:::N!	YOU- YOU- TAKE I:::T!
15		((springer efter bollen))	((runs after the ball))
16	William	((springer efter	((runs after the ball
17		bollen, missar att	and fails to catch
18		fånga den))	it))
19	Sarah	Ha ha ha ha	Ha ha ha ha
20		((tittar på Marion,	((looks at Marion,
21		skrattar))	laughs))
22	Marion	[ha ha [ha ha=	[ha ha [ha ha=
23	Alice	[ha ha [ha ha=	[ha ha [ha ha=
24		((står på sidan,	((joins the girls
25		stämmer in))	from the line))
26	Sherbel	[ha ha [ha ha=	[ha ha [ha ha=
27		((deltar i	((joins the girls in
28		flickornas skratt))	their laughter))
29	Marion	=ha:n gick U::T!	=he: is OU::T!
30		((pekar på	((points at William))
31		William)))	
32	William	((lämnar spelet,	((leaves the square,
33		ställer sig i kön))	lines up))
34	Alice	HÄ::RLIGT MARIO:N!!	GREA::T MARIO:N!!
35		((klappar händerna))	((claps her hands))

The fact that the more skilled boy, Sherbel, runs after the ball but does not manage to help his playmate, William, intensifies the fun of the game, including the boys' failures and their difficulties in outperforming the girls (Figure 2 b, lines 14–15). The transformation into a

playful and humorous event is keyed through the girls' shared laugher and verbal outbursts that all are oriented towards making the boys' failures into a public event for the wider audience of children (lines 19–31, 34–35). In this way, an ordinary game of foursquare is intensified and transformed into a collectively performed micro drama. The playful framing maximizes the fun of the game, and transforms the boys' failing game performance into a public concern that engages all the children in the audience. Within this micro drama the winning girl (Marion) and the failing boy (William) are the central figures while the other children are transformed into an active audience. In this process, the boundaries between play and seriousness become blurred. By laughing at William's failure, the two girls mock-challenge and make fun of the boys while simultaneously performing and juxtaposing gendered relations of power in games.

The children's playful reactions to Marion's successful attempts to defeat the boys make gendered notions of boys as physical athletes highly ambiguous. The different reactions on behalf of the two boys, Sherbel and William, demonstrate in turn that not all boys fit into a traditional form of masculinity that assumes all boys to be tough, physical, and assertive (Thorne, 1993: 98). In this micro drama, the players (both girls and boys) use a range of collaboratively performed and improvised ludic techniques, including collusive negotiations of game rules along with laughing uptakes, verbal outbursts, mutual smiles, facial expressions, and exaggerated bodily movements to intensify the excitement of the game. By outperforming the boys and playfully juxtaposing power structures on the playground, the girls manage to play with and pull apart gendered stereotypes of girls as physically subordinate to boys in ways that subvert an existing social order and entertain others. In this activity, the girls' orientation towards competition, including advanced physical competencies and entertainment skills, is fashioned by a democratic ethos of gender equality in this school setting, where sports and physical education are accessible for both girls and boys. (see Evaldsson 2003; 2004)

The Controversial Side of Online Game Play

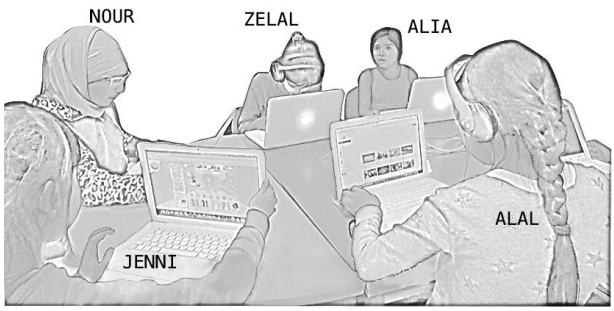
The last video-recorded episodes focus on how a group of school aged girls comment upon and unravel a controversial moral issue of hacking and stealing in online game play within their peer culture (see Evaldsson & Melander Bowden, 2018). They do this in a peer play context where their friendship, play, and self-expressions are reconfigured through their engagement with new media (Ito et al. 2010). Digital media and online communication are now a pervasive part of school-aged children's everyday lives and peer cultures at school, after-school and within the family (boyd, 2010).

Controversial online behaviors and actions related to what has been referred to as "the dark side of game play", such as cheating, stealing, and scamming, are common not only in the gaming world (Mortensen, Linderoth & Brown, 2015) but also on social networking sites among younger children (Ito et al., 2010). Such immoral practices are often condemned by adults, but are sometimes considered an aspect of expertise in children's social media (Kafai & Fields, 2013). The selected episode focuses on how a peer group of five girls stage a micro drama to unravel controversial online behavior involving character loss and stealing in gaming and social networking. The video recording is from a fieldwork in 2016 when, as part of a

larger project involving children's digital media practices[2], we video-recorded everyday peer play activities among children (8–9-year-old third graders) in a multiethnic after-school setting in Sweden. In this setting, both girls and boys engaged daily in a social network environment for kids called Momio, to play and chat with peers, establish social relations, and problem-solve (see Evaldsson & Melander Bowden, 2018).

In the first extract 3a, five of the girls are seated around the same table, each with a computer, busy playing Momio and chatting with one another online. At this point one of them, Alia, a newcomer to the game, makes an unpleasant online discovery, that someone has stolen all the belongings she has bought for her avatar (Extract 3a lines 1–10, Figure 3a):

EXTRACT 3a: "Online stealing"



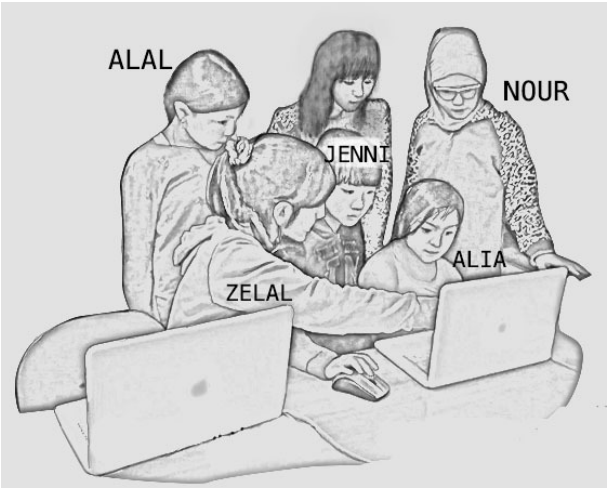
2 This study was financed by the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation as part of a larger project on children's digital media practices in peer groups.

1	Alia	#↑HÖR↓ru. ↑Je:nnie.	#↑HEY. ↑Je:nnie. (.)
2		(.) fa:sen. ja har	da:mn. I've bought more
3		köpt mer än så här	than this (.)this is not
4		(.) de här är inte	even (.h)(.) something
5		en(.h)s (.) nåt som e	that is (.) F↑U::n. (.)
6		(.) K↑U::l.(.) nån	someone has taken xxx
7		har tat xxx för mej	from me ((shakes her
8		((skakar på huvudet	head, looks at the
9		tittar på skärmen,	screen, then at the
10		sen på de andra))	others))
		#Figure 3a	
11	Alal	(xx) kanske du har	Maybe you have lost them
12		tappat bort dom	thrown them in-n (.) the
13		kastat dom p-på (.)	bi::n (xx xx) bet
14		papperskorgen (xxx)	money:: and throw them
15		satsa pengar. och	away and you'll get-
16		kasta dom och du	
17		kommer å få-	
18	Alia	↑HÖR↓ru. nån har	↑HEY↓. someone has taken
19		tagit <al↑la> tiaror	<al↑l> the tiaras I've
20		ja har kö:pt.	bou:ght.
21	Nour	VA::?	WHA::T?
22	Alia	A:lla. alla-	A:ll of them- all-
23	Alal	men du köpte-	but you bought-
24	Zelal	((vänder sig, tittar	((turns around and looks
25		på Alias skärm)	at Alia's screen))
27	Alia	Ja har köpt nästan	I have bought almost a
28		hundra stycken	hundred pieces ((points
29		((visar på skärmen))	at the screen)) and it's
30		å de e bara de hä::r	just he::re "Saba is no
31		"Saba är inte längre	longer a part (.) of
32		med (.) i din	your group chat" ((reads
33		gruppchat" ((läser på	from the screen)) no:.
34		skärmen)) ne:j.	

Through an exaggerated theatrical stance, Alia announces that someone has stolen her online belongings (lines 1–10). The micro drama is staged through dramatic shifts in footing from the pretend/online world to the real/offline one. In the process, Alia intensifies the immoral character of the online game event of stealing by presenting herself as a victim of online theft as if it were a real event. However, at this point she does not manage to get the other girls' support. Only one of the girls, Alal, who is seated opposite Alia, responds (lines 11–17), while the others continue to communicate with one another online. It is only after Alia has repeated her reference to the incident twice (lines 18–20, 22) that another girl, Zelal, who is seated next to her, pays attention to what has happened (lines 24–25). The two girls now join in an attempt to find some observable clues to solve the mystery of Alia's missing online belongings by intensively scrutinizing her communication on the screen (lines 29–34).

In the discussions that follow, all the girls in the peer group become involved and operate as detectives to search for an actor who is responsible for the act of online stealing (Extract 3b). Compared to the first example, when Alia was alone with her problem, all the girls engage in unraveling the problem. At this point, they are gathered around Alia's computer to report the theft to the "police" on the network site (outside Extract 3b) when a friend invitation pops up on Alia's screen (Extract 3b, lines 08–10):

EXCTRACT 3b: "Online stealing"



08	Alia	#Kan ja skriva till	#Can I write to her "why
09		henne "varför tog du	did you take my (.) eh
10		mina (.)eh klä:der."	clo:thes."
		#Figure 3b	
11	Alal	Hon vill va din vä::n	She wants to be your friend
12	Nour	De e Zelal, de e	It's Zelal, it's Zelal,
13		Zelal, Zelal ((tittar	Zelal ((looks at Zelal's
14		mot Zelals skärm))	screen))
15	Alal	Zelal vill va din vän	Zelal wants to be your
16			friend
17	Jenni	↑Nä:: .hh de e Baris.	↑No:: .hh it's Baris.
18			
19	Alal	Du vill va hans vä:n.	You want to be his
20			friend.
21	Zelal	((tittar på Alias	((looks at Alia's
		skärm))	screen))
22	Alia	>Ja,< (.) Dess me:r	>Yeah,< (.) the mo:re
23		vänner dess ro:ligare	friends the more fu:n
24	Jenni	Vill du va eh hennes	Do you want to be uh her
25		e:- De här e:	e:- this is uh: ((looks
26		((tittar mot Zelals	at Zela's screen)) uh-
27		skärm)) e-	
28	Zelal	↑NÄ:: BLI INTE HANS	↑NO:: DON'T BE HiS
29		VÄN, (.) bli inte	FRIEND, (.)dont be his ↑
30		hans ↑VÄ::n.((vänder	↑FRIend. ((turns around
31		sig snabbt, pekar på	quickly, points at the
32		skärmen))	screen))
33	Jenni	Hennes.	Hers.
34	Zelal	↑Ne::j, de e Ba:ris.	↑No::, it's Ba:ris.
35		((pekar på Alias	((points at Alia's
36		skärm))	screen))
37	Jenni	Va:¿ ((tittar på	What:¿ ((looks at
38		Zelal))	Zelal))

When a person online, a female avatar, asks Alia to become her friend, Alia happily chants "the mo:re friends the more fu:n" (lines 22–23). The other girls initially support her attempts to confirm the invitation (lines 11–16). However, at this point Zelal, who is seated next to Alia, urgently interferes and repeatedly warns Alia against accepting the invitation: "NO DON'T BE HIS FRIEND" (lines 28–32). At the same time she points at Alia's screen, telling her that a

boy in their class named Baris is hiding behind the female avatar "No::its' Baris" (lines 34–36). In that way, Zelal manages to stop Alia from becoming a friend with the boy, who has taken on a disguised online identity as a female avatar and is engaging in taking over other children's avatars.

The episode shows the girls' collective moral agency, and how they help newcomers to network sites through collaborative communicative methods for unraveling controversial online issues such as scamming, cheating, stealing, hacking, etc. In the process, we see how Alia's online discovery of stealing is transformed to a micro drama where the other girls help her solve the mystery of the online acts of stealing and her missing belongings. In this process, the girls engage with and anticipate the knowledge networks at play to gain insight into the unpredictable and ambiguous features of online communication (Evaldsson & Melander Bowden, 2018).

Concluding Discussion

"But, when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is we fall into silliness. There is little agreement among us and much ambiguity. Some of the most outstanding scholars of children's play have been concerned by this ambiguity" (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 296).

As demonstrated in this article, micro dramas serve as important frameworks for children to collectively address, play with, and pull apart some of the ambiguities and tensions they are exposed to in their everyday lives with peers and adults in educational settings. The children's staging of micro dramas has also more general implications of children's appropriation of aspects of the adult culture and how they make new contributions to it (Corsaro, 2020). The ambiguities related to hierarchical gendered relations and peer group hierarchies that invariably develop in school and after-school settings are reproduced in the children's framing of their play as both a playful and a serious activity in which they are in control. For example, the micro analyses of a routinely performed foursquare game of "girls against boys" showed how the girls used assembling embodied actions, along with a play object (a ball), to playfully comment upon and juxtapose hierarchical gendered relations of mainly boys as physical athletes (Extracts 2a, b). By outperforming the boys, the girls maximized the fun of the game and transformed the boys' failing performances into a public concern of entertainment that engaged all the children, including the audience.

The performative and embodied character or style of the children's peer play relates to Goffman's (1961, 1974) theoretical understanding of the dramaturgical and interactional framework of social life (see Aronsson, 20011; Goodwin, 2006). The dramatic and exaggerated manner in which the children instantiate micro dramas or stage-play, whereby intricacies of social interaction are commented upon, made fun of or challenged, offers possibilities for reinterpreting and even changing relationships. The framing of an ordinary table tennis game as a "warrior duel" presented the boys with several opportunities to stage a micro drama to outperform a subordinate and rejected peer, and to take control over the game (Extracts 1a, b). In the process, the boys' used assembled embodied actions to strengthen alignments of power while downgrading the third boy through playful threats and derogatory person depictions of him as a coward. Altogether, the micro dramas performed by the children

show theoretical convergence with Bateson's (1956) notion of play as keyed through a meta-message of "this is play", which signals to participants that playing is a paradoxical form of communication that includes contradictory and ambiguous meanings (see also Sutton Smith, 1997). As Bateson notes (1956, p. 70): "The paradox is doubly significant within the signals that are exchanged with the context of play, fantasy and threat". If we accept that contradictions and ambiguities are key components in children's play, we can recognize that ambiguities, in the sense proposed by Bateson, are important features of children's social life. In the process of playing, children learn that there is a difference between play and non-play, and what is pleasurable and fearful, risky and exiting, and that these relationships can be commented upon, challenged and even controlled by children.

The children's staging of micro dramas tells us a great deal about children's agency and how they collectively address and respond to ambiguities and tensions in their social life in the form of playful threats, teasing, bluffing, and cheating. For example, the girls' collaboratively performed responses to online stealing, cheating, and disguised identities in social networking artfully connected their serious concerns about challenging and controversial online issues to their ongoing concerns about friendship (Extracts 3a, b) (compare with boyd, 2010). As children experience various forms of ambiguities and tensions in social relations at school, after school, and in the family, it is not surprising to find that various aspects of social life, including asymmetries, ranking, and foolishness—but also trustworthiness, intimacy, and friendship—are commented upon and reinterpreted in children's peer play interaction, including children's experiences of their own relationships with one another.

Transcription Conventions

Adapted from conversation analysis (Jefferson 2004)

A::	prolonged syllable
[ ]	overlapping utterances
(.)	micropause, i.e. shorter than (0.5)
(2)	numbers in single parentheses represent pauses in seconds
AMP	relatively high amplitude
x	inaudible word
° °	speech in low volume
(( ))	further comments of the transcriber
((xx))	inaudible speech
↑	shifts into high pitch
↓	shifts into low pitch
?	rising terminal intonation
.	falling terminal intonation
=	latching between utterances
<u>out</u>	sounds marked by emphatic stress are underlined
haha	laughter
kom	talk in Swedish
schw	children's linguistic innovations
come	translation to English

The *English translations* in italics are as close as possible to the Swedish verbatim records. All names of the children in the selected examples have been substituted with fictional names linked to their diverse ethnic backgrounds.

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