

1

Introduction

Three-year-old Nancy and her mother are in the basement playroom fixing decorations for a Halloween party. When Nancy begins to show signs of boredom, her mother suggests that she drive her car. Nancy retrieves a child-sized red plastic dashboard with steering wheel and seatbelt, and positions herself for driving. "Be sure to fasten your seat belt, right?" reminds her mother, "Buckle up-for safety!" Nancy fastens her seat belt, turns the steering wheel, and pushes the horn. To her mother's queries, "Where are you going? Are you taking a trip?" Nancy replies, "To Havana." "Again?" asks her mother, "Where did you learn about Havana?" Nancy continues to steer the car while demonstrating how to drive, "You drive a car like this. Like this. OK?" She explains that Havana is far away and discusses with her mother how many stops will be needed en route, and how old one has to be to get a driver's license.

Eventually Nancy's mother ceases to be a spectator to her daughter's play and actually enters the pretend world in the role of passenger. Nancy tells her to sit in the back seat and buckle her seat belt. Her mother then asks, "Are you the mom?" and Nancy says, "Yes." This exchange establishes Nancy's mother in the pretend role of child, while Nancy herself assumes the role of mother. That is, the role relationship that ordinarily applies has been reversed in play: mother has become child and child has become mother. The pretend child proceeds to badger the placidly driving pretend mother: she wants to open the car window and stick her feet out, complains that a bug flew in the window, whines about being hungry, and finally announces an urgent need to go to the bathroom. The pretend mother utters an exasperated, "Ohhhh!," stops the car, and shows the child to the bathroom (the area to the left of the sofa). Toileting accomplished, complete with sound effects and enacted flushing, the pair get back into the car and resume their journey. The pretend child is now tired and wants to go to sleep but continues to chatter, and the pretend mother, vigorously steering, scolds her in a stern voice, "And don't make any noise!" This admonition proves ineffective. The pretend child thinks she might tickle her mother, complains of being bored, and demands a snack. At last, nearly ten minutes after departing, the harassed mother and the fidgeting child arrive at their destination. The pretend mother declares, "We're here! . . . OK! And the results . . . And here (pointing to a pillow on the sofa) are the statues!" The two then proceed to explore Havana. When the pretend child attempts to step back into the real world in order to finish the

laundry, the distraught mother locks her in an imaginary bathroom. A series of pretend negotiations follow and, eventually washing the real clothes is incorporated into the pretend scenerio as the two tourists explore how the Cubans do their laundry.

* * *

This book traces the development of pretend play in nine children growing up within educated, middle-class European American families. As the opening scene illustrates, the development of pretend play is embedded within a distinctive sociocultural context. First, pretend play emerges within particular physical ecologies. Nancy is pretending in a room set aside for play, surrounded by objects—play dashboards, baby dolls, miniature cars—suggestive of pretend themes. Second, pretend play emerges within particular social ecologies. Nancy pretends primarily with other people and, through the age of three, her mother is her main play partner. Third, pretend play is governed by social and communicative conventions. Nancy and her mother conduct their play according to norms of mutuality, agreeing upon role assignments, informing one another about shifts in scene, and negotiating departures from the pretend frame. Finally, pretend play is informed by a broader system of beliefs. In casual conversations with the first author, Nancy's mother expressed the opinion that pretending is important to children's development, and that parents can facilitate their children's pretending.

The sociocultural perspective of pretending presented in this book addresses issues central to understanding both development and culture. We view pretend play as an early manifestation of the basic human capacity for mythmaking, upon which culture depends. "To be human and to live in a meaningful way within a culture requires living in and through a very sophisticated, abstract system that is largely imaginary" (Vandenberg, 1986, p. 7). In playing with particular myths—of family or Superheroes, for example—children not only become more deeply rooted in a system of meanings but alter, comment upon, and reinterpret meaning.

This tension between the myths imposed from without and the exertion of personal control in shaping one's interpretation and use of the

myths reflects the poles of a dialectic relationship between the individual and his culture. Through play, the child is socialized into a general cultural framework while developing a unique individuality with a distinctly personal matrix of life history and lived meanings. (p. 8)

This dialectic between individual and culture is articulated in more general terms by anthropologists Bauman and Sherzer (1989). They claim that "the dynamic interplay between the social, conventional, ready-made in social life and the individual, creative and emergent qualities of human existence" (p. xix) is a crucial problem in the social disciplines. These kindred perspectives suggest that our understanding of children and of culture ultimately will be enriched by the study of pretend play.

An integrated understanding of developmental and cultural dimensions of pretend play, however, has been slow in coming. As Schwartzman (1980) has pointed out, studies of play and studies of culture have tended to develop as separate enterprises, reflecting the intellectual histories of psychology and anthropology as distinct disciplines. Developmental psychologists have been interested in pretend play primarily as an index, and possible facilitator of, cognitive development, emotional well-being, creativity, and problem solving. Anthropologists have been interested in pretend play as a means by which children are socialized into culture. In this book we hope to contribute to a more integrated understanding of pretend play as both a developmental and a cultural phenomenon.

A second factor that has obscured the cultural nature of pretend play has been the overwhelming predominance of mainstream American children as the subject population in psychological studies of pretending. When researcher, reader, and subjects of a study share an implicit cultural framework, a "paradox of familiarity" operates against articulation of that framework (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984). Fortunately, there is a growing body of cross-cultural research that makes it possible to compare middle-class European American children with their counterparts in other cultural communities. By adopting a comparative perspective on the very group that has been studied most we hope to gain insight into the cultural nature of pretending.

A keystone of our empirical approach has been to describe the sociocultural context within which pretending occurs. Most of what is known about the emergence and early development of pretend play derives from studies that have examined pretending under quasi-experimental conditions in laboratory playrooms. Surprisingly little is known about pretending in everyday life—even for mainstream American children. We attempt to redress this imbalance by observing children as they go about their ordinary activities in and around the home. Our nine subjects are the offspring of well-educated, European American parents who live in spacious apartments or houses in affluent urban neighborhoods. Because each child was observed repeatedly from one to four years of age, we have gained an understanding not only of group patterns but of the individuality that gets expressed in pretend play. Although most of our young pretenders did some travelling, Nancy was the only one with a passion for Havana.

Our descriptions of these children are framed in terms of several important issues and theoretical questions. One basic issue concerns the amount of time that young children spend pretending. Claims that pretend play has a salutary effect on development rest on the implicit assumption that pretending is a major occupation of young children. Is this assumption warranted? We found that the children did, in fact, spend a significant amount of their daily time pretending.

A related issue concerns the nature of pretend episodes. When children are observed continuously for three to four hours at a stretch, it is possible to preserve the integrity of pretend episodes—how they get started, how they unfold, how they terminate, how long they last. Also preserved are the circumstances that occasion episodes of pretending, raising questions about the expressive, didactic, and recreational functions of everyday pretending. To our knowledge this is the first attempt to document how pretend activity emerges from the ongoing domestic scene.

Although we consider these issues to be fundamental, the primary objective of this book is to address questions that converge on the sociocultural nature of pretending. Leading theories of pretend play are most powerful in their formula-

tions of the cognitive and affective dimensions of pretending (Piaget 1962; Winnicott 1971) and least well developed with respect to the social and cultural. There is, however, an emerging literature relevant to these neglected dimensions, and detectable within it are several levels of sociocultural analysis. These levels of analysis have to do with the physical and social ecologies in which pretend play is embedded, the belief systems that frame and inform the practice of pretend play, and the cultural conventions by which pretending is conducted.

The Physical Ecology

One important way in which culture affects pretend play is through the arrangement of the physical context. The families we describe contrast sharply with families from other cultural groups where manufactured toys are scarce, for example, rural Indian and rural Guatemalan groups (Goncu, Rogoff, and Mistry, 1989). The domestic environments we observed were arranged so as to accommodate the storage and use of large quantities of toys and other play props—dolls and doll houses; action figures and pirate sets; pony castles; Lego building sets with people, miniature trains, airplanes, and automobiles; stuffed animals; tents and playhouses; and bride, Superman, Ninja turtle, and kitty cat costumes. By providing their children with an abundance of objects specialized for use in play, caregivers both communicate that pretend play is a valued activity, and exert a powerful indirect influence on its development (Sutton-Smith 1986).

The Social Ecology

Another important way in which culture affects pretend play is through the assignment of categories of persons to settings and activities (Whiting and Edwards 1988; Goodnow 1990). Whether other persons are available as potential play partners, and what sorts of persons—mothers, fathers, siblings—are available, depend on routine arrangements of time and space, with their concomitant distributions of persons. By observing young children in the family context we discovered that pre-

tending was not only overwhelmingly social but that mothers served as the primary play partners from one to three years of age. Given the economic activities and childcare arrangements in these families, children had much greater opportunity to pretend with mothers than with fathers, siblings, or friends.

The Conduct of Social Pretend Play

Pretend play is cultural not only at the levels of physical and social ecology. It is also a conventionalized expressive system. This is perhaps most apparent with respect to content. Children enact the familiar roles and daily routines that reflect community norms and values. Vygotsky (1978) described pretend play as based on implicit rules of social behavior. By pretending, children come to better understand these cultural norms. In the opening example of role play between Nancy and her mother, Vygotsky would see an opportunity for Nancy to become aware of the rules and responsibilities of motherly behavior that she is not consciously aware of in real situations. As she pretends to be a mother and attempts to pacify a cranky and demanding child, she gains new insight into the mother-child relationship.

The creation of a pretend world requires a specialized set of communicative conventions for marking a nonliteral orientation and for negotiating and assigning roles, transforming objects and locations, and enacting scenarios (Bateson 1956; El'Konin 1966; Garvey 1982, 1990; Schwartzman 1978). Garvey and Kramer (1989) recently argued that the language of pretend play is not simply an outcome of ordinary language development but represents a specialized use of language that develops over the preschool period. The conventionalized form of these communications strongly suggests that they are learned through interaction with more experienced players.

This insight, along with our finding that mothers pretended extensively with their young children, led us to ask a number of specific questions about mothers' participation and how it affected the formation of pretend episodes. These analyses revealed that mothers systematically introduced the pretend mode and established, in interaction with the child,

conventions for the social conduct of pretense. Mothers did not impose the pretend mode on disinterested children; instead, like Nancy and her mother, they constructed norms of mutual engagement. Both mothers and children initiated episodes and together they expressed and manipulated topics of mutual concern—sibling rivalry, the child's fears, parent-child power relations, and rules and rule transgressions. Mothers attended to and pursued the topics introduced by the child, while at the same time extending the play by elaborating upon and prompting the child. Moreover, we found that the caregivers' participation had effects on the episode itself. Episodes with mothers were more sustained than solo episodes, and children incorporated what their mothers had said earlier in the episode into their own subsequent responses.

Belief Systems

The contexts and conduct of pretending are framed and informed by a system of beliefs about adult-child relationships in general, and play in particular. In some cultures, such as the Yucatec Mayan (Gaskins 1990), parental beliefs about childrearing and the nature of children preclude parental participation in children's play. By contrast, educated European American mothers and fathers typically believe that pretend play is important to children's development and that their participation is appropriate and facilitative (Haight 1991). Although the current study did not include an inquiry into parental beliefs and values, chapter 10 summarizes results from Haight's (1991) study of the beliefs of a similar sample of parents.

Although the main patterns emerged quite strongly, we were also struck by the extent of individual variation within this homogeneous sample of middle-class families. Children differed among themselves, and mothers differed among themselves, not just quantitatively but qualitatively. It was obvious, as we looked on, that some mothers and children not only pretended more prolifically than others but with more originality and inventiveness. It was obvious that some mothers and children found pretend play less appealing than book reading or coloring, whereas for others it was a favored and

highly satisfying mode of relating. Existing theories cannot account for this kind of individual variation. Nor can they account for cultural variation. Although our study is not comparative in design, it is informed by a cross-cultural literature. Clearly, the case that we describe is extreme in the extent to which early pretending is encouraged. Not only is maternal time, attention, and imagination devoted to pretending, but large sets of toys specialized for pretending are lavished on young children.

In summary, the purpose of this book is to describe the emergence and early development of pretend play in its sociocultural context. In the next chapter we begin by describing the children and their families, and elaborate upon the advantages of using a naturalistic approach to address the questions at hand. The issue of how frequently children pretend is taken up in chapter 3 and procedures for defining and quantifying episodes of pretend play are set forth. The findings reported in chapter 3 are important not only in their own right but because the episodes that are extracted provide the basis for the analyses reported in succeeding chapters. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 establish the social nature of pretend play by describing its interpersonal context, the social conduct of mother-child pretending, and the effects of the partner's participation on pretend episodes. Chapter 7 complements these chapters by examining the social functions of pretending, providing qualitative descriptions of the interpersonal circumstances out of which pretending arises. Chapter 8 describes play objects and other aspects of the physical ecology of pretend play, revealing still other social and cultural dimensions of pretend play. In an effort to provide a more integrated view of our findings and to illustrate individual variation in pretending, we present in chapter 9 portraits of pretending in two of the children. Conclusions and directions for future research are presented in chapter 10.



Copyrighted Material

2

Studying Everyday Pretending

It is late morning. Three-year-old Molly and her five-year-old sister Rachael are lying side by side on their bedroom floor (ostensibly “picking up”). Molly asks repeatedly to play with Rachael’s Tropical Skipper doll, but Rachael refuses. Eventually, the distraught Molly bites Rachael, who authoritatively reminds her of the prohibition on biting and then threatens to “tell.” Molly explains, “I’m a doggie who bites.” Rachael begins to scold the doggie and then realizes, “Baby doggies don’t like Tropical Skipper!” Apparently satisfied that the issue is resolved, she turns away and begins to sing, “The sound of music!”

Molly, however, is still angry and scratches her on the back. Rachael grabs the front of Molly’s dress, “You are a cheese cracker that I bite.” Molly laughs. Rachael: “You are a cheese cracker that I bite if you bite me again!” Molly laughs again. Rachael refers to Molly as “doggie” and scrapes her with the toy comb. Molly complains, “I don’t want to do it else I’ll bite you again!” Rachael: “And then you’ll be my cheese cracker who I bite. And I really will bite you!” Molly and Rachael move very close together, faces almost touching, and make biting gestures and noises. Rachael: “I’m gonna bite you if you bite me again. And you will be a cheese cracker that I will really bite.”

Then, smiling and gazing at Rachael, Molly bites Tropical Skipper’s feet, gently. Rachael grabs Tropical Skipper from Molly, “Noo!” Rachael smiles, then continues in a sing-song, authoritative tone, “Don’t ever bite on Barbie’s feet. How would you like it if somebody came up and bit on your feet? Tropical Skipper doesn’t like it. How would you like it if she came up and ate, bit on your foot. And now here she comes to.” Rachael holds Molly’s leg up at the ankle. Molly points her toe towards Tropical Skipper’s mouth. Rachael makes eating noises as she holds Tropical Skipper to Molly’s toe. Molly: “She didn’t eat up my foot.” Rachael: “Well she bit it. Well she did bite it.” Molly laughs then picks up her blanket and walks away.

* * *

This episode illustrates the emotional intensity that often characterizes everyday pretending. It also illustrates how pretending evolves out of ongoing activities: in this case pretending

was occasioned by sibling conflict over the prized Tropical Skipper doll, conflict that gets carried over into the pretense. A precarious balance is maintained between really biting and pretending to bite, between hostile and amused feelings. Admission into this intimate, imaginary world requires time and discretion. The observer recorded this episode on videotape while she was positioned across the bedroom in the doorway of an open closet. She had been recording for two consecutive hours and had spent approximately twenty hours videotaping in the home prior to this observation session. The children were comfortable enough in her presence to engage in activities that are generally disapproved of by adults (e.g., arguing and biting), and they seemed to respect her role as observer, approaching her only occasionally for help with dressing a doll. In this chapter we briefly describe the children and their families, and the methods that were used to obtain a record of everyday pretending.

The Children and Their Families

We recruited nine children and their mothers through newspaper ads. The four girls and five boys were similar in many respects to other children typically studied in research on pretend play: they were from families who had the time and space for pretending and the financial resources to provide an abundance of toys and play props. Six of the families lived in an academic community in Chicago, and three lived in a nearby suburb. All of the parents were college educated and ranged in age from their early twenties to their early forties. The fathers were social workers, lawyers, a physician, a graduate student, a businessman, and a college professor. With one exception, the mothers had pursued professions before their children were born. They were social workers, teachers, a businesswoman, a photojournalist, and a computer programmer. At the time of the study, the mothers were the primary caregivers. Three children had older siblings, three had younger siblings, two had a younger and an older sibling, and one was an only child.

The Research Strategy

The study was longitudinal in design and naturalistic in approach, involving a succession of extended observations of the children in the contexts of everyday family life. Our methods combined several features designed to maximize the ecological and cultural validity of the findings.

Naturalistic observational approach. Previous developmental studies of pretend play typically have examined play under quasi-experimental conditions in laboratory playrooms. By contrast, in the present study we observed pretending under the conditions in which it ordinarily occurs—at home, on the playground, on the way to the grocery store—with family members and friends near at hand. A naturalistic approach was best suited to our goal of documenting the social ecology and routine conduct of everyday pretending. Also, our approach is compatible with that advocated by Dunn (1988) and Tizard and Hughes (1984). They have argued for the need to study development within the emotional context of the family and to assess children's competencies in environments which are meaningful to them.

Observation sessions were scheduled for weekday mornings or afternoons. Mothers were present throughout the observation sessions but did not constantly interact with the target child because of other demands on their time. Other family members were present inconsistently (see chapter 4). The observer used a portable videorecorder to make a continuous recording of the target child's activities. She did not attempt to elicit particular behaviors or to structure the situation in any way.

The advantage of naturalistic observations is that they are more likely than assessments conducted in unfamiliar contexts to capture children's newly emerging abilities, and hence are less likely to underestimate children's competence. For example, in the context of her own bedroom, and in the company of her sister, three-year-old Molly's pretending is surprisingly complex in structure, function, and theme. Molly and Rachael not only communicate a series of specific symbolic transformations (e.g., "I'm a doggie," "I'm a baby doggie," "You are a cheese cracker that I

bite"), but this pretend talk apparently functions to justify aggression arising from a seemingly unresolvable conflict occurring outside of the pretend frame.

Longitudinal design. The study entailed seven successive longitudinal samples of behavior during the period from one to four years of age (with data points at twelve, sixteen, twenty, twenty-four, thirty, thirty-six, and forty-eight months of age). This period spans the emergence of the first fleeting pretend gestures through the development of elaborate pretend scenarios. The findings reported in this book are based on observations at twelve, twenty-four, thirty-six, and forty-eight months of age for a total of 116.5 hours of observation.

While many fine studies document children's early play through cross-sectional (e.g., Dunn and Wooding 1977; Kavanaugh, Whittington and Cerbone 1983) or short range longitudinal designs (e.g., Sachs 1980), there are few longitudinal studies encompassing three full years of development for the same children (but see Wolfe, Rygh and Altshuler 1984). Our design allows us to juxtapose stable individual differences with normative patterns of developmental change. For example, from the age of twenty-four months, Molly engaged in highly verbal, imaginative role play involving dolls. Moreover, her keen interest in Rachael's Tropical Skipper doll at thirty-six months was evident one year later at forty-eight months.

Extended observation sessions. While most studies of pretending involve brief (a few minutes to one hour) samples of play from a relatively large number of children, we chose instead to obtain lengthy (three to four hours) samples of play from a relatively small number of children. Table 2.1 shows the length of each observation session. One important advantage of this strategy is that it provides exceptionally in-depth coverage of each child's pretending. A second advantage is that we were able to capture even prolonged pretend episodes in their entirety as well as sequences of related episodes, thereby permitting analysis of the mundane contexts from which pretending emerges, who initiated the episodes, and how they were

Table 2.1.
Total time observed in hours for each child

	<u>12 mos</u>	<u>24 mos</u>	<u>36 mos</u>	<u>48 mos</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
	(N=8)	(N=9)	(N=9)	(N=9)	(N=9)
Charlie ^a	1.6	3.6	4.2	3.4	12.8
Elizabeth	3.2	4.0	3.2	2.9	13.3
Justin	3.6	3.8	3.8	3.7	14.9
John	3.8	3.9	3.1	3.1	13.9
Joe	1.8	3.6	3.7	3.3	12.4
Kathy	2.0	2.3	3.2	3.4	10.9
Molly	2.5	3.9	4.2	3.6	14.2
Michael	— ^b	3.5	3.5	3.3	10.3
Nancy	3.1	3.2	3.9	3.6	13.8
Total	21.6	31.8	32.8	30.3	116.5

^a Pseudonyms are used throughout this report.

^b The first observation of Michael occurred at sixteen months.

sustained. Furthermore, our findings suggest that extended observations provide a more accurate picture of pretending than can be achieved through brief observations (see chapter 6). At thirty-six and forty-eight months of age, the most extended and complex episodes of pretending occurred subsequent to the first hour of observation. For example, the pretend episode excerpted at the beginning of this chapter was one of seven related episodes, totalling more than twelve minutes, that Molly and Rachael engaged in during the third hour of observation. All revolved around conflict over the possession of Tropical Skipper.

Fortuitously double blind. In addition to these features of our research strategy, there are other features that speak to a methodological issue of perennial concern in observational studies: how to minimize the effects of the observation procedures on the findings? Especially relevant to this issue is the

fact that our study was fortuitously “double blind”: the data were originally collected for a study of vocabulary development, and hence neither the observer nor the parent was aware that pretending would be the focus of inquiry. (Mothers subsequently granted their permission for the study of pretend play.) This makes it unlikely that the mothers consciously or unconsciously altered their pretend behaviors per se in response to being observed. Similarly, it is unlikely that the observer inadvertently encouraged pretending. In addition, since the children and their mothers were not recruited with the intention of studying pretend play, it is unlikely that their pretend play was different from that of other members of their community. And, indeed, the children reached the major milestones of pretending at the usual ages, i.e., pretending was barely established at twelve months, children’s first explicit role transformations appeared at approximately thirty-six months, and children began to sustain pretend play with other children during the fourth year of life.

Rapport building. Although mothers and children did not know that pretend play was to be a focus of study, they obviously knew that they were being observed. It was therefore extremely important that the families felt comfortable with the observer. Prior to each observation session the observer visited informally with the mothers and children in an attempt to establish and maintain rapport. The mothers and observer talked about their families, professional and other common interests, current events, etc. The children were mostly interested in examining and operating the video camera. During the actual observation, the observer attempted to remain as unobtrusive as possible. Mothers were instructed to go about their usual routines and to ignore the observer as much as possible. Further discussion of the impact of the observation procedures is provided in chapter 4.

In sum, nine young children from affluent, highly educated families were studied repeatedly during the period in which pretend play emerges and rapidly develops. They were observed in their homes as they went about their ordinary activities, with mothers and other family members near at hand.

Observation sessions were lengthy enough to permit analysis of entire episodes of pretending as they emerged and unfolded. This research strategy, while atypical in developmental studies of pretending, is appropriate to our goal of investigating everyday pretending in an ecologically valid manner.