

## NASCENT FOLKLORE: COMMUNICATION AND AESTHETICS IN INFANCY

KATHARINE R. M. SCHRAMM

Whereas just as cultural relativity implies that each human group fashions its own forms of human adaptation and expression and that each has its wonder and beauty (as well as disasters), so with childhood there is an aesthetic for each age, which may be celebrated (or cursed) by adults, rather than simply glossed as an inevitably inferior step on the way to the 'wonders' of adults' civilization, reason, and morality (Sutton-Smith and McMahon 1999, 299),

Newborn infants, though weak and inexperienced, are sentient and intending agents (Trevvarthen, et al. 1999, 143).

The question of when folklore begins is one which is simultaneously philosophical, biological, and psychological. It hinges by implication on what, indeed, constitutes folklore. If we assume that folklore is artistic, communicative, culturally grounded, and socially actuated, something must come before the more recognizable forms of tradition, performance, and identity — a nascent folklore. Not only is there interesting material in the prelinguistic, pre-genre, pre-self arena of infant behavior that recommends itself to our attention as folklorists of children, but we as folklorists can recognize it and comment upon it, using the tools at our disposal. We can engage with proto-cultural agents through an interdisciplinary approach that does not relinquish our qualitative methods for quantitative ones.

In what follows, I will discuss the subfield of children's folklore as a gateway into discussing the broad issues inherent to folkloristics. Once having established a few basic criteria and their quantitative-field counterparts, I will press forward into an interdisciplinary exploration that takes on infant interaction in an ethnographic context, merging the developmental and folk psychological approaches.

In approaching the concept of nascent folklore, it may be useful to consider it as a subset of children's folklore. Children's folklore is our window through which we study expressive forms shared by children, among children, a protean world which often functions counter-intuitively to adult sensibilities (Sutton-Smith 1999, 6). Its study has come a long way from the thorough collection of text and variant and a preoccupation with "survivals" to incorporate theory that takes into account what William Wells Newell noted well over a century ago — that children's folklore is both innovative and dynamic, as well as traditional and conservative. Children's folkloristics is concerned not only with the contexts where childlore occurs, but also the negotiation of social roles and activity surrounding expressive forms (Goodwin 1985), and how children learn, adapt, and create within child-constructed frameworks of performative competence (Brady 1980, 163). Scholars are also cognizant of the fact that lore is not transmitted so much as it is activated, opening up the possibility of alteration and permutation (McDowell 1999, 61). Unlike folklorists who work with adults, folklorists of children are much more

likely to be aware of developmental considerations influencing what they observe, as those often are telling characteristics in setting childlore apart in both form and function (Fine 1980, 172).

An example of these developmental considerations is McGonnagill's 1993 study of preschoolers at play. The children she observed did not have a high degree of communicative or social sophistication, but she found that the game-playing behavior she observed still functioned as a way for them to process and cope with their social environment, despite relying entirely upon a fluid approach to their play, up to and including the actual goal of the game. McGonnagill called this behavior "protolore," because there were substantial differences when compared with approaches to folklore that stressed lore performed within the more clearly defined boundaries of aesthetic communication marked by particular conventions and style. She compared folklore and protolore to riddles and preriddles, enacted by young children whose grasp of the genre was not quite sophisticated or solidified enough to be considered mastered (McGonnagill 1993, 41).

However, children's folklore or protolore has rarely gone into areas that pre-linguistic children occupy, namely toddlers before 18 months of age. Talkers are more interesting: their experimentation with developing language skills gives researchers a ready verbal transcript, and the ease with which cognition and cultural competence can be evaluated via the increasing complexity and situational use of linguistic forms is undeniable. Infant behavior, on the other hand, has been dubiously regarded, save the responses and actions directed from adult caregivers to infants.<sup>1</sup> What occurs in infancy is complex and lays the groundwork for later development. I would not expect folklorists anywhere to deny this, just as they would not deny that childlore in its various age-appropriate incarnations contains its own complexity and significance whose mastery dovetails into the adult-recognized world of expressive competence. Yet the study of children's folklore ought not be concerned primarily with where child culture is going, through the ramifications of performative competence in the child contributing to adult social competencies, but with that which is in the moment, and how it has its own value which is insubordinate to adult norms. It short, it recognizes the inherent value and function of child expressive forms at each age.

Folklorists tend to gravitate to the expert performers, willing performers who have mastered their craft, and who are recognized by their community. These may include the most authoritative jump-rope ringleader on the playground, the snarkiest teenage dirty-joke teller, or the gaggle of kids who are unafraid to harass a fieldworker while the tape is running (Goodwin 1985, Bartlett 1971, and McDowell 1979, respectively). However, infants do not regularly exist in a community of peers, because they are incapable of being left to their own devices for long. The context one might imagine as hosting an "infant peer community" might be a day-care setting, or some arranged opportunity when infants are given the opportunity to interact with one another. Yet even here, our adult or even older-child conceptions of "peer group" seem inadequate. At times, infants do not even seem to be responding directly to one another when they're observed. Or are they?

Without our easily usable default (admittedly problematized) terms like culture, group, and language, infant behavior seems to be a very amorphous

phase. In part, this impression is correct because the forms we enjoy studying do not yet exist — what is performative competence for something that is not yet performance? However, from another perspective, there is a basic insecurity in the way that we approach our informants — namely, that lacking the ability to refer to language use as a means to validate our conclusions, we doubt our assessments as too adult-centric, or as wishfully inserting the reading of intention instead of confirming it. These are perfectly agreeable and acceptable cautions, and well worth acknowledging: a teleological angle makes for circular arguments, and “just so” stories instead of theory. Another part of this insecurity comes from our hesitance to acknowledge infants as actors in their own right, as agents, even if they seem to possess an alien form of individuality against our developed sense of self. Yet we are creatures that can and do live as a part of a physical world wherein body language is read alongside *or without* spoken language (Cicourel 1973, 40-41).<sup>2</sup> Ascribing intentionality and agency to non-speaking individuals is part of all human interpretive communication, yet recognizing infant activity itself as part of the range of interpretable human experience clearly requires some sort of approach.

However, what do terms like competence, group, artistic, or communication mean in the context of infant interaction? To get at the undergirding elements of folklore requires some conception of what folklore itself is. As Oring notes, a definition of folklore *per se* is problematic, as it may be “partial, idiosyncratic, or inconsistent” (Oring 1986, 17). However, examining how various scholars have approached the problematic definition of folklore yields certain basic commonalities.

The first is that folklore occurs between and among people. It is discursive, interactive, and is a form of communication. This group may be large or small, down to a basic binary pair (Dundes 1965). The concept of “group” is fraught with ambiguity, and exists on multiple levels and imaginaries. However, it can be conceptualized due to shared experience and “bodily patterning” — existing in a physical, felt sense of community (Noyes 2003). This sense of community (alternatively, *communitas* as articulated by Victor Turner) hinges on the ability to empathize with fellow community members (Kapchan 2003). Empathy works to direct communication between members of the group, aiding mutual comprehension and sense of identity (Noyes 2003). In seeking out the nascent forms of these requirements for folkloric interaction, we will be identifying where and if the infant shares the ability to sense others’ motives, if the infant can recognize other humans through shared experience, and if the infant can communicate interactively with other humans.

Another basic aspect of folklore lies in its attention to the creative and the artistic. Folklore is at some level expressive, and aesthetic expression in turn draws in the notion of the repeated, re-creation, tradition, and again, the community (Ben-Amos 1971, Glassie 2003, Oring 1986). *Creative, artistic, expressive* — all of these terms are immensely problematic, and must be judged in terms of the culture from which they originate. Yet as Pocius points out, regardless of what art might be, its expressive potential hinges on the emotional and affective. “Art” comes to be considered as a kind of skillful behavior, accomplished between people to varying levels of emotionally-affective efficacy (Pocius 2003, 51). In short, the

connection between human communication, human skill, and human emotional response is inseparable: we will be looking for where infants show the capacity to respond and express with emotionally responsive and affective behavior.

The final basic block in artistic communicative actions is that its performance is intentional. The “interpretive frame” within which communication is produced and read must be at its heart a reading and evaluation of intention to make sense of others’ actions (Hufford 2003). The will to create makes the creation possible (Glassie 2003). To see if this aspect of folklore is present in a nascent form, we will be looking to see whether infants are capable of reading intention and demonstrating intentional behavior.

However, to seek out what makes the communal, the aesthetic, and the intentional feasible during this stage of human development benefits from an interdisciplinary stance, through developmental psychology, language socialization, and evolutionary biology. Developmental psychology takes as a starting point the idea of normative stages through which all humans pass on their way to adulthood. It is concerned not only with the development of infant cognition, but also what may be considered healthy development in terms of interaction and socialization through measurable tests of competence (Sameroff and Cavanaugh 1979, 386).<sup>3</sup>

Mediating between developmental psychology and more qualitative research is the study of language socialization, which asserts that all human behavior is learned interactionally, and that by gradual mastery of interactive forms, children become increasingly competent members of their social and cultural contexts (Ochs 1986, 2). Children socialize adults, just as adults socialize children, and once children are capable enough to work tacitly (if not reflexively) with interactional routines, they also socialize one another (Corsaro 1992).<sup>4</sup>

However, if infants are born with these socializing abilities, it may also imply a biological, evolutionary imperative inherent in infant interaction with adults. The evolutionary approach has become very trendy within the past decade. In its most fascinating moments, it makes a case for artistic activity as not merely part of what “matters” for our mental wellbeing, but that at a basic level it is a trait selected for over millennia for human survival (Dissanayake 2000, 2001).<sup>5</sup>

The three fields work well in tandem for the same reasons that ethnographers learn about a culture in order to interpret it. Developmental psychology points out what we can reasonably expect from our infant interlocutors, as well as gives us signs to look for during our ethnographic exploration. Language socialization provides us with a successful model to follow in terms of merging lab analysis with cultural manifestation. The evolutionary approach allows us the possibility that specific observations at the nascent level may indeed be generalizable across cultures.

### **Why “Nascent Folklore”?**

If developmental psychologists, language sociologists, and evolutionary biologists are doing so much good work on infant behavior already, why should folklorists take it as their interest? As cited in the introductory quote to this article, Felicia McMahon and Brian Sutton-Smith make clear that for folklorists of children, *each* age has potential. I read this as a challenge — shortly after the child exits

the womb, she is literally severed from the mother to become her own separate physical entity that must rely on communication to survive in a cultural context that will shape her and be shaped by her. I noted above that infant behavior does not always conform to our assumptions about how interaction is supposed to work. For cultural relativism to function for infant behavior, we have to simultaneously acknowledge infants as cultural agents, and as agents that may not yet have internalized cultural practice. This idea is particularly problematic when we consider the most loaded assumption of agency — that the agent be intentionally setting out to act upon her environment.

This is the heart of nascent folklore — the abilities, skills, and biologically adaptive mental machinery that infants possess as the smallest, most proto-cultural, and most underrepresented of human agents. The mastery of foundational communicative abilities is imperative for the development of later expressive forms, yet as an early form of communicative action embedded in shared human experience, these abilities can be shown to be themselves a form of folklore.

To explore what these foundational abilities mean in the context of ethnographic infant observation, I was fortunate to enjoy the cooperation of mothers and staff in visually recording infant interaction at several parent-baby playtimes during the spring of 2007. The playtime took place in a comfortable, living-room-like environment in the building of the hosting organization, which provides valuable natural-birth and breastfeeding resources, as well as pre- and post-natal counseling and other health-related activities particularly geared towards new and expecting mothers. During the same time period, I also took video footage of my then-baby daughter in our home. In the first situation, infants were able to interact with one another as well as with their mothers, though I stayed off to the side. While the mothers occasionally conversed with me, I spent no time deliberately interacting with the infants. In the second, staying out of direct interaction with my daughter was impossible, even with her father trying to engage her, due to her curiosity with the video camera.

In what follows, I will engage with the three major, interwoven areas common to approaches to folklore — the communal, the aesthetic, and the intentional — and argue that the infant abilities of interactive imitation, innovation, and intention are where these later orientations find their first expression.

### **Interactive Imitation**

The first area of nascent folklore is that of interactive imitation. Imitation in infancy takes place within an explicitly social framework in which develop forms of social cognition, group identity, and aesthetic capacity.

For present purposes, imitation is, most simply, the reproduction (or attempted reproduction) of some act. At its most easily detectable, imitation can resemble identical stimulus and response, but its complexity can encompass simultaneous movement, affect, sound, timing, and even intention (Trevvarthen et al. 1999, 140-142) Neonate imitation between adult and infant has received substantial experimental attention. Minutes after birth, a newborn can imitate simple movement, such as tongue protrusion, and by six weeks of age, infants can

repeat imitated actions over a day's delay, indicating some memory of the action (Meltzoff and Moore 2001, 176). Furthermore, they can actively influence the flow, type, and manner of communication with caregivers by their own positive and negative reactions (Dissanayake 2001, 85-86). By eight weeks of age, infants' sense of timing is good enough to know whether or not a play partner is responding contingently (Dissanayake 2001, 86). By three months of age, an infant can repeat behavior in order to elicit more of the same behavior from her partner, and by seven months, the infant repeats behavior to bring about a desirable result from an adult (Bretherton, et al. 1981, 334-5).

The ability to imitate and the awareness of being imitated give infants an identity by analogy which serves as a psychological basis for social cognition, not its eventual outcome:

Because human acts are seen in others and performed by the self, the infant can represent the other as 'like me': I can act like the other and reciprocally the other acts like me. Persons are special entities, the only entities in the world with whom I can share behavioral states. *The cross-modal knowledge of what it feels like to perform observed acts provides a privileged access to people not afforded by things.* This sets the child down the pathway of ascribing psychological properties to people. (Meltzoff and Brooks 2001, 174, emphasis in original)

In other words, imitation may not only be the sincerest form of flattery, but the most direct avenue into forming conceptual as well as lived community. Imitation goes hand in hand with what appears to be innate human empathy (Field 2007, 94; Eisenberg 1992, 8-10). Imitation provides a process by which motives are interactively engaged, being simultaneously read and responded to, and innate abilities develop into intentional ones (Trevvarthen et al 1999, 142). Beyond the establishing of community and social cognition, infants' intersubjective reading of motivation and early development of the intricacies of timing and signal may be responsible for the development of pretense, as they discover that the framework can be manipulated between the contingent response and the non-contingent response. With the skill in intersubjective comparison and contrast grows an increasing awareness of and competence in directing the metacommunicative signaling of play.<sup>6</sup>

### **Where to Find Interactive Imitation**

To draw out the shared, the aesthetic, and the communicative as one might hope to find in a folkloristic analysis, I am looking for consistencies, repetition and attempted repetition, what is collectively done, and how knowledge (if any) is transmitted, as well as looking out for metacommunicative markers of both play and social engagement (Meckley 1994, 5). This includes but is not limited to established signs of social interest from developmental literature, such as sustained gaze, smiling, outcry, eye contact, directed movement, as well as lack of interest denoted by averted gaze.

The description that follows is excerpted from my video footage of the local parent-baby playtime described above, and lasts approximately fifty seconds. The excerpt features two infants of eight months and four months placed face-down, roughly two feet apart and facing one another on separate blankets. Both were at varying levels apparent strength and balance in maintaining a position in which they could push up with their arms on the floor to look around. Their mothers sat to their infants' sides within arm's reach, frequently speaking on the infants' behalf, interrupting their own casual conversation.

However, in looking solely at the movements of the infants and their non-verbal interaction, the two baby girls showed immediate interest in one another through sustained gaze and eye contact, breaking it only from time to time to look at a toy or a caregiver. These breaks in attention given to other things such as toys, blankets, or mothers lasted from one to three seconds. However, their shared attentive gazes lasted between fifteen and twenty-seven seconds, making the asides comparatively miniscule. Neither infant could creep or crawl effectively yet, so they stayed where they had been placed.

In the first ten seconds of the clip, the younger infant, who demonstrated generally a much less physically stable ability to push up and balance herself, arched her back and kicked her legs in the air. The older infant watching her immediately arched her own back and vigorously wiggled her arms and legs in the air. After the older infant repeated this movement several times, the younger observer noticed and followed suit. The timing of the wiggling was entirely dependent on whether or not they were visually engaged with their partner. When the older infant, more capable of turning her head and pushing herself up, looked away, she missed her play partner's break into wiggling, and did not wiggle in response until she turned and actually saw what the younger was doing. Of particular note was that the infants did not wiggle simultaneously while they were closely watching one another, only in alternation. When the younger infant averted her gaze, she stopped participating in the activity. It was only a matter of seconds after the clip ended before she began to cry and her mother removed her from the situation.

The interactive cues that marked the two infants' social interest in one another included sustained and averted gaze, outcry, isolated arm and leg movement, and the fully-engaged body wiggle. The communal co-wiggling activity was, like the preschool protolore observed by McGonnagill, spontaneous and structured in part by the context in which the mothers had placed the babies, but was not directed by the adults. Despite their occasional interference (such as stroking their infants' heads, smiling encouragingly, speaking to the infants or the other mother as if to explain their baby's action), the mothers were never as interesting to the infants as the infants were to one another. However, unlike protolore, the imitative wiggling cannot be read as including some intent, not even a flexible one. It exists on a genre-less level of action and reaction.

The mutually enjoyable patterning of wiggle play between the infants proved possible because of the highly developed sense of timing and signal that the infants already possessed. With extended observation, tracking cultural cues for timing could be achieved for even this young age. It is possible to suggest

that instead of disjointed flailing of arms and legs, the younger infant began to move in ways that lifted all four limbs up off the ground in closer imitative form to the other infant, closely attending to how it was done and then repeating the action. Beyond the idea of skill acquisition, the exploration of “turn-taking procedures” may be, as Shieffelin and Ochs suggest, a way into understanding larger communal social relationships (1986, 171). If we take nascent folklore in tandem with language socialization, we can argue that infants at this age not only communicate in terms of social cohesion and interaction, but that they actively teach one another by imitative skill acquisition within a peer group.

### **Innovation**

Innovation is the second major area of nascent folklore. It is closely linked with imitation, but beyond the establishment of community and social cognition, the intersubjective reading of motivation and infants’ early awareness of the intricacies of timing and signal rapidly transform into experimentation. From the early ability to compare and contrast grows an increasing awareness of the metacommunicative signaling of play. These markers can be found in “exaggeration and stereotypy, (e.g., prolongation, patterning, and repetition),” and the dynamic variation of their use serves to establish that intentions can vary dramatically from expectation and not be taken seriously, which is the point at which pretense can function (Dissanayake 2001, 94-95).

By nine months of age, an infant’s sense of timing is not only good enough to imitate when she wishes, but also to try different tactics in imitative interaction to see if the imitator is watching or not, which often becomes a game to see if the other is following (Meltzoff and Brooks 2001, 179). The infant also begins to attempt different means of accomplishing the same goal (Meltzoff and Brooks 2001, 182).

However, deciding when and where infant inventiveness occurs may hinge on uncovering the point at which habitual action and delayed imitation can be distinguished from “innovation,” as well as coming to terms with what innovation may mean for infancy. The field observation in the previous section dealt with infant interaction in a face-to-face context, but it must also be noted that much of infant and toddler play is done in apparent solitude, with little or no direct interaction at all. However, this co-presence still functions as a basis for imitation and learning. Tullia Musatti explains that among infants and toddlers, it has been experimentally verified that even during apparently non-related play, children’s activities are related consistently to what other children have done previously during the same time, with varying degrees of relationship between them. In studies where the range of age went from twelve to eighteen months and eight to twenty-seven months, imitation occurred that did not necessitate direct communication; infants and toddlers aligned themselves to what occurred around them. “Having a child’s own activity and that of the partner simultaneously displayed makes it easier for the child to assess the activities’ similarities and differences” (Musatti 1993, 245). In other words, they are able to distinguish



between their own activities and those of others, and to incorporate and imitate that which is new.

The question then is whether any innovation is truly new, or if infants simply learn by watching others and trying out new activities the first time for themselves. While I do not want to dismiss the infant at solo play, the autotelic, self-sustaining enjoyment of his experimentation feeds upon itself. Much like studying dialogue with oneself, solo play bears the hallmarks of communicative activity while not explicitly being so. Innovation rises out of interaction with others, even when it is in parallel and indirect.

In summary, dynamic variation existing between the infant and the other, whether another infant or an adult, gives rise to the co-interpretative, intersubjective existence of imaginative play, all by the age of nine months. The ability to engage and recognize engagement by the other is fundamental to recognize what is play and what is not, in order to establish the subtle framing of experience and interaction.

### **Where to Find Innovation**

For the purposes of identifying nascent folklore, we turn our focus to what is communicatively effected during the flow of an interactive scene, setting aside for the time being the more difficult-to-identify innovation at work within individual experimentation.

Signs to look for in identifying innovation are similar to imitation. Sustained gaze can denote interest, and shared actions and patterns mark the interactive element. However, to discover innovation, we seek those actions which break the pattern, and in a play context, are used for the purpose of contributing to a sustained and mutual enjoyment of an activity. To know whether an action is truly innovative, a fresh invention of game play that the child has never witnessed before, is simply not in the scope of these field observations. However, introduction of a fresh movement, a different cry, or a different use of a toy that is done for the purpose of prolonging the enjoyment of play demonstrates the innovative ability of the infant to string together prior witnessed behaviors into a fluid whole, not unlike verbal formulas and innovative variations within a riddle sequence that require skill, intelligence, and creativity to fashion together.<sup>7</sup>

By way of illustration, let me sketch a play scene based on my own observation of infants at play. Two infants are playing with toys which rattle. One lifts his toy into the air and shakes it vigorously, eliciting the sound. The enjoyment of doing the action appears to be reason enough to continue shaking the rattle periodically. Meanwhile, the second infant begins to pay attention and lifts her rattling toy, imitating her play partner's movement. Now there are two infants rattling toys in similar ways. At this point, the second infant, whose toy is not of the rattle-specific variety, but has a number of other bells and whistles attached, begins to bang it on the carpet, and it makes a most pleasing cacophony of noise. Infant one continues shaking his rattle midair for a moment more, then begins enthusiastically pounding it on the floor, smiling, eyes wide.

We do not know whether the second infant had experienced floor-pounding with the toy prior to this situation. However, the break in the rattle pattern was directed by the infants' choices, and, most importantly, contributed to the continuation of the play activity. Perhaps after a time, rattling midair would have ceased to be enjoyable. Perhaps changing the activity to pounding allowed the infants' enjoyment of the activity to endure ten or even twenty seconds longer than the rattle game might have lasted on its own—a significant space of time for their attention spans. The possibility for this early creative process hinged on the intersubjective space between the two infants where variation could be incorporated and improved upon.

This example suggests an approach much like trial and error in the ways that human beings mutually construct culture. Behavior is imitated, and when improvements are attempted, the response of the community (or party) for whom the communicative behavior is initiated determines whether those changes in turn are repeated. This early pattern in infant rattle play becomes writ large, with all of the same messy and subjective misfires of communication building upon and responding to one another, smoothing into established patterns over time.

The attempting of new or previously demonstrated behavior for one's own ends (often in the same process of trial and error) is also foundational in regard to creativity. Creativity and innovation as terminology possess culturally-laden value; and the idea of innovation as "newness" and therefore "good" certainly creates problems. However, if we recognize the interactive quality of innovation — namely, that it is dependent upon others to validate it, repeat it, or encourage further repetition — we can see that together, imitation and innovation in interactive symbiosis provide rudimentary guidelines for judging activities that evoke pleasure, such as play (Miller 1973, 91). In other words, they form the foundational properties of aesthetics.

As noted earlier, distinguishing the difference between previously imitated behavior, a failed imitation, and a completely original innovation is beyond the scope of my observation. However, I would question to what extent such distinction truly matters. The communicative function of the innovation is located in the context where it occurs, and its effect is of greater interest than its originality. However, as noted above, imitated behavior and innovative behavior do differ somewhat in the matter of intention, for it is in the exploration of intention that we can create a picture of the infant as agent.

## **Intention**

The final area in which to see the nascent stage of folklore is intention. Imitation and innovation in the context of interaction are intimately tied to the simultaneous and mutual reading of intention and motivation by infants. Intention, motivation, belief, and desire are all terms considered to fall into the realm of "folk psychology," namely, the interpretive system(s) that humans utilize to make sense of others' actions through the attribution of mental states (Malle and Knobe 2001, 45-46).<sup>8</sup> Despite its relative lack of empirical provability, intention has been the focus of much attention in recent years, and considerable effort has been made to

analyze the various aspects of intention as well as to do empirical study of how the concept is put to use (see Malle and Knobe 2001, Ames et al. 2001). What is particularly relevant for this analysis is that intention and the reading thereof is a social, survival-oriented trait, culturally nuanced and intimately connected with communication.

Infants appear to learn intentionality within the same interactive and imitative framework that Dissanayake credits with laying the foundation for later aesthetic imagination. Meltzoff notes that infants are taught the idea of actions being linked with intention by virtue of their own experience in trying to fulfill their own goals and watching others do the same:

Infants have goals and act intentionally. They have experienced their own failed plans and unfulfilled intentions ... When an infant sees another act in this same way, the infant's self-experience could suggest that there is a goal, plan, or intention beyond the surface behavior. Thus infants would come to read the adult's failed attempts [at doing a task], and the behavioral envelope in which they occur, as a pattern of 'strivings' rather than ends in themselves. (Meltzoff 2007, 131)

However, this broad analysis gives us little assurance. By three months of age, it has been shown, infants repeat behavior in order to bring about a repeated response in a caregiver, and infants from seven months repeat behavior in order to make an adult laugh (Bretherton et al. 1985, 334-5). Elsewhere, it has been argued that infants begin to infer absent goals from between nine to thirteen months of age (Meltzoff and Brooks 2001, 181).

However, to what extent can such activities be considered intentional? Knowing that infants are intentional agents and recognizing infant intention may be separate matters. Ascribing intentionality may itself be a component in whether an action achieves its goal, since reading a situation as goal-oriented implies the existence of intention. Relevant as well is the idea of self, and to what extent the infant agent conceives of the self, as we approach intention's sister concept, agency. The awareness of how one acts upon the world, in tandem with how much one may exert one's own action upon it, vary substantially within the first year of life.

In order to interpret underlying intentions, there must be a shared "framework of meaning," as well as some medium through which communication can be achieved (Bretherton et al. 1981, 340). As discussed in the previous sections, this framework of meaning is constructed through the minutiae of action and reaction, imitation and innovation, and infants can direct and influence its flow. I read this as arguing that infants do not need to possess a "theory of mind," that is, the ability to recognize intentionality in others, in order to express desire in a goal-directed way.

Desire is another folk psychological concept. As Malle and Knobe point out among adults discerning between desire and intention, desire is often defined as an internal state, while intention is the action that springs from desire. In determining intention, social perceivers suppose strength of a person's desire to

do something. If that desire is acted upon, then it is read as intention, but only if there is an equally perceived presence of commitment (Malle and Knoke 2001, 60).

This raises a teleological spectre. Do varying assumptions of present desire and committed action risk adults reading too much intention into infant behavior than actually is present? I think that we as ethnographers must be willing to spend the time necessary to interpret infant behavior in long-term ethnographic context, to recognize individuated cries and gestures, as well as culturally-relevant recognizing of infant intention — what is recognized will be responded to.

In studies of vocal imitative behavior between infants and parents, developmental psychologists Kokkinaki and Kugiumutzakis found that with infants between two and six months of age, imitation with parents gave rise to “two specific kinds of emotion: interest and pleasure.” They go on to write that, “Given that emotions are regarded as motives in human intentional communication, this later finding provides evidence that infants and parents also share the ability to read each others’ motives and intentions” (Kokkinaki and Kugiumutzakis 2000, 185).

While this developmental work does not prove anything about perfect strangers being able to read the intentions of infants whom they do not know, it does suggest that drawing in expert observers, namely parents, could provide an angle for making more accurate conclusions about infants’ intentions during a given interaction. Like any human interaction, reading motivation is an interpretive process.

When looking to establish and interpret infant intention, many of the same criteria that are useful in recognizing imitation and innovation also apply. However, this time the approach must also incorporate more obvious emotional signs of response — pleasure, excitement, and interest — that work to direct action.

Beyond merely signaling and recognizing intent with sustained gaze, or looking for consistencies and repetitions and breaks in that repetition for new permutations on an old theme, the indication that the collective play activity has a clearly defined emotional component is key in attributing intention, as well as are metacommunicative markers of play, such as exaggeration and stereotypy.

### **Where to Find Intention**

I hope to illustrate this concept of intention by comparing the following two scenes, where I have entered as an “expert observer” of my own child. Both scenes demonstrate attempts at a game variant of peek-a-boo played with my daughter of thirteen months at our home. The first scene is directed by me, stationed to one side of a video recorder. The second is the same game played with her father while I filled the role of observer and camera person. Both video clips do not last more than thirty seconds each in recorded form.

In the first recording, our daughter turns from standing at a door and walks roughly fifteen feet away from the camera, through a living area scattered with toys, and down a hallway. I ask her where she is going (in high-pitched play tones) even as she disappears out of sight around a doorway. Then come the

cue words of our game, which we have played numerous times before: "Where's [Name]?" The sing-song chant is repeated at a higher pitch. As the repetition of the cue comes to a close, the child runs out from the doorway with a huge smile on her face, looking for my face. I exclaim with exaggerated excitement, round eyes, and large smile, "Ohh, there she is!" My daughter responds by squealing in delight and prancing on her tiptoes. She drops eye contact with me, and continues to create the squealing noise for her own apparent pleasure. She averts her gaze to inspect the basket momentarily before she looks up and turns back for the doorway.

In the second clip, the toddler is standing behind her father, seated in the middle of the living room floor. He begins the game cue. "Where's [name]? Where did [name] go?" He turns around quickly with a wide, open-mouthed smile and exaggeratedly wide eyes. "There she is!"

However, our daughter has instead turned to a nearby toy behind her father, and does not respond to his cue. As her father turns to make eye contact with her, she looks up from the toy, and then to where I am seated with the video camera (about ten feet away) and then back to her father (about a foot away), before she returns her gaze to the camera, with a slight smile. The father tries again, turning away from her and repeating the game cue again. However, the direction of my daughter's gaze does not stay more than a moment on her father, and with an increasingly large smile, the indirect steps that had taken her to the toy become more direct, and she makes an unsteady beeline in the direction of the camera. As she passes her father by, he laughs, "Ohh, [Name]'s not paying any attention to Daddy; [Name] wants the video camera!" The clip ends as the child, grinning into the lens, gets her wish, grabbing for the camera and wrenching it to one side.

The desire of our daughter to play the game with us was just as important as our willingness to play it with her. Through metacommunicative exaggeration, we parents in both clips demonstrated our intent to play, and our daughter picked up on it. In variation one, she used the doorframe to hide behind. In the second variation, her father expected her to hide behind his back and appear to one side (based on their previous game play). However, whether due to the distraction of the camera, or the lack of ability to see his face as he signaled the game to her through exaggerated expression and repeated, patterned behavior, her direct engagement with him and with the game were fleeting, despite his numerous attempts at re-establishing the flow of interaction between them.

In the first clip, pleasure could be interpreted and shared by both participants, and recognized in the form of squealing, exaggerated expressions, and body language, such as excitable prancing. The appearance of the toddler was marked by the child's pleasure. Perhaps this came from filling the hanging, uncertain expectation of the situation and gratifying it, but it engendered a return of clear, affective signals that reinforced and heightened the her own emotional response. Pleasure was also demonstrated for pleasure's sake, such as the continued squealing that was disengaged from seeking a response. When we re-engaged through eye contact, she immediately turned back and walked directly for the doorway, a clear gestural sign that she wanted to repeat the action and have the game continue.

In the second clip, the child's own gauging of the likelihood of chasing the camera seemed to grow steadily, first in the uncertainty of her glances between camera, father, and toy, and then in the widening smile she manifested in advancing in the direction she wished to go. It might also be noted, however, that she was never dissuaded from heading toward the video camera. Both parents reinforced their own amusement to the child through smiles and laughter as the incongruencies between the situation they were trying to effect and the child's actions became more and more pronounced, first through her utterly ignoring her father in favor of the nearby toy, and then as she toddled purposefully for the camera.

Both of these clips make apparent the ability of the parents and the toddler to establish a pattern and a play frame for the game. The parents achieved this through a repeated call with a specific vocal tone and exaggerated facial expressions. The child accomplished this through the repetition of actions that will trigger the calling cue, and enabled her to share in the expression of delight and surprise. The delight and surprise that generated the fun of the game hinged on the toddler's ability to distinguish between that which was expected, and that which was not expected. By failing to appear immediately in the first game, the toddler experimented with the concept of expectation, of the absent being present, and her own control in eliciting a reaction. She was in control of the flow of the response (though if she had disappeared into the bathroom for too long, I would have assumed that she was no longer participating, and would have broken the play frame to deny her agency in exploring that particular location). In the second situation, parental attempts at creating a recognizable play frame can be seen to exist somewhat shakily, and then fall apart. In the uncertain glances between father and mother and camera, it was apparent that not only did the parents recognize what their daughter wanted, but that the toddler was not entirely at ease with pursuing her goal until the signals were clear — the parents had been attempting to make eye contact and repeat a cue call, but once their laughter and smiling at her replaced their (feeble) attempts to maintain the play situation, her steps became faster and more direct, and her smile widened and grew to a cry of pleasure upon reaching her destination.

### **The Promise of Nascent Folklore**

The areas of interactive imitation, innovation, and intention have much to offer folklorists who wish to understand this stage of human aesthetic potential.

The seeds of identity and community sprout in shared communicative and intentional behavior, the mutual recognition and empathy inherent in imitation, and the developing theory of mind that comes out of the developing child recognizing others as "like me," perhaps the most early experience of Turnerian *communitas*. The most basic experience of imitation and innovation is relived in tradition, paralleling the conception of folklore's ability to be both conservative and dynamic (Toelken 1979, 39-40). This "communal creation and recreation" (Ben-Amos 1971, 7) is negotiated through a social community and its inherent system of response and evaluation, and the building fluency of triggering response in others and in

turn reading their intention provides for the existence of framing and the reading of contextual clues (Hufford 1995, 532). The ability to read the differences in performance and intention can be argued as the foundation of genre.

There are some unsettling implications that we can draw out of the areas of infant ability that I have discussed above. One harks back to outdated assumptions about “primitive” man and cultural group-think. Another could be perceived as a flattening of cultural variation and change under biological reductionism. However, despite the implied conclusion that all infants everywhere share these foundational abilities as part of their biologically evolved equipment for survival, there is no cause to diminish the role of human agency.

By recognizing foundational abilities which incorporate the desires and the intentions of the individual actor, there exists room for the growth of the master performer as well as creative expression. Between cultural and social frameworks, I would expect to find imitation, innovation, and intention appearing in varying forms, with peer and adult responses to proxemics, timing, and variations of intentional action being read and responded to very differently. The forms that these infant desires and intentions grow into will be diverse — what creativity looks like, and indeed what constitutes mastery or performance, will vary by culture and folk group.

The folklorists of infancy are few and far between, which suggests challenges in negotiating developmental literature, dealing with the lack of a clearly defined group identity, and transcribing multimodal, nonverbal communication. However, perhaps we set aside ethnographic methodology and interdisciplinary experimentation too soon. As adult humans we possess years of practice past that early developmental milestone of nine months to begin grasping that others have goals and that other humans are “like me,” while simultaneously acknowledging that expectations can and do differ from what actually occurs. Already highly experienced readers of intention and action, as ethnographers we hone this skill to make our interpretations as accurate and culturally sensitive as possible; as folklorists, we engage the expressive, emotionally moving, communicative aspects of human behavior — regardless of the phase of human development at which it occurs.

Infants experience emotionally meaningful shared communication—between one another and others. They possess their own means for evaluating contingency and demonstrating their engagement and preference; they interact creatively and imitatively. With expressive communication which is wordless yet vocal, active and intentional, infants can be recognized as significant bearers of protoculture — their own nascent folklore.

## NOTES

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## NOTES

1. A notable anthropological exception to this that I have found is Alma Gottlieb's "Do Infants Have Religion?: The Spiritual Lives of Beng Babies," in *American Anthropologist* 100 (1998: 122-135). She spent over 700 hours with infants in order to counterbalance a potentially "adulto-centric" perspective.

2. See Noyes' discussion of physical experience (and academic discomfort in addressing it) *Fire in the Plaça: Catalan Festival Politics after Franco* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). See also Sklar 1994.

3. It would be incorrect to assert that all developmental psychology is clinically "cold" or unconcerned with cultural nuance, though critically speaking, quite a lot of literature suggests Western-centric universals in forming normative bases for comparison with other cultures that has in turn been picked up by the social sciences (see Burman 2008, Hirschfeld 2002 for extended discussions).

4. While this assertion would not be hotly disputed in many psychological circles, these two fields of developmental psychology and language socialization differ in many ways. Language socialization is positioned between the quantitative lab analysis common to most psychological studies and qualitative ethnographic research, incorporating both statistical and interpretive elements, with an end focus on what can be learned about cultural values encoded in the medium of language forms and how they are taught and internalized by children (Shieffelin and Ochs 1986, 168).

5. In its most extreme forms, the evolutionary approach risks falling into biological reductionism, taking for granted that there are a set of universals that exist a priori to culture manifesting in its various forms. However, for early infant behavior, where cultural forms are in fact in a nascent and largely unformed state, biology may offer insights — especially when we take as a possibility that certain human behaviors may be evolved just as physical characteristics are, rejecting the idea that evolution is the equivalent of biological determinism (see Bandura 2001 for an extended discussion).

For an excellent critique of this evolutionary position, which in many studies contains at its core the reverse-engineering of culture, see Robert C. Richardson's *Evolutionary Psychology as Maladapted Psychology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

6. By exploring this area, I do not mean to conflate protolore and nascent folklore with play, despite some of their obvious similarities. For example, Piagetian sensorimotor-period "practice play," is certainly marked by an intrinsic enjoyment of the act of doing itself, its agents not yet having reached the developmental capacity for symbols or rule-based games, yet it is often done in solitude (Miller 1973, 90). While I do not believe that the ability to derive pleasure from solitary play is unimportant or unrelated to an intersubjective social framework, it does not receive focus here.

7. See McDowell 1979 for an extended discussion of the creativity and variation within riddling sessions.

8. A term generally considered pejorative by the psychological literature, I wonder if we cannot bring some respectability to the idea of "folk psychology" by recognizing it as the way in which humans perceive others, a cultural system which is taught and believed.



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