

Preschool Protolore

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The folklore of preschool age children exists in a germinal form. Because preschoolers are generally non-literate and their thinking abilities are largely undeveloped, and because their social skills are just beginning to be acquired, their play and game lore is rudimentary.¹ It could be called "protolore" in the same way that riddles composed and performed by young children are called "reriddles."² Rather than follow specific actions or prescribed word formulae, the preschooler most often invents extemporaneously within a given, peer-understood structure. Thus, the group game I record in which the "family" –two or more children—is pursued by the "bear"—one child—demonstrates the structure, elements, and excitement of hide and seek and chase even though no specific rules or incantations accompany the game. Likewise, verbal play, in which a word or words are spoken by a child and picked up and played upon by the others who rhyme or repeat the original word(s) in a chant-like way, is structured and systematic, though no prescribed or learned rhyme or chant is spoken. I will describe and analyze three examples of preschool protolore. My material was gathered from observation of children enrolled in my preschool in Auburn, California.

Mary and Herbert Knapp point out that childlore emerges when adult supervision and organization of the child's time cease. In his article, "Children's Folklore," Jay Mechling notes the rise of day care facilities and the early age at which many children are confronted with a social situation. He states, "In these formal institutions, the children become increasingly adept at creating folk cultures separate from and resistant to the adults' definition of the organization's culture" (95). This corresponds to my observations. Amidst the organized preschool day and my agenda, lore arises during the less structured times: outdoor and indoor free play, mealtimes, transition times between activities. Childlore takes over as soon as there is no immediate adult direction. Adult intervention generally halts or inhibits the playing out of lore, but adult participation usually does not.

There is no overt teaching of protolore. The play is initiated by the children who know it; those unfamiliar with the lore learn by observing those who know and then by imitating them. It is remarkable how spontaneous the learning and performance of lore is. It is as though the children inherently understand their culture; those children exposed to a game for the first time become involved almost immediately. They may even begin playing before they have grasped the game intent and so learn by doing.

The preschool children involved in the creation and performance of the lore presented in this paper range in age from two and a half to five years old. The older ones generally, but not always, instigate the play. Once a game has been played, any child may, at a future time, urge the others to recreate it.

Fifteen children attend the preschool, but they come on different days, two or three times a week. On anyone day seven are present: usually four girls and three boys. The children know each other well; about one fourth have been acquainted through the preschool for two or more years. Due to the small number of children and the presence of only one adult, the group resembles a family, complete with close bonding and occasional squabbles.

The parents of the children are white with middle- to upper- middle-class incomes. All fathers work full time. Nine mothers are homemakers, and six mothers work part-time. Out of fifteen children, three have no siblings and two have more than one sibling. The majority have one brother or sister. Because the preschool is held four hours a day, as opposed to an all-day day care center, parents generally spend more time with their offspring than two full-time working parents would. These parents, particularly the mothers, are very interested in their children's education, and communication between parent and preschool teacher is strong.

The attempt to classify children's games and lore has met with frustration. Paul G. Brewster, editor of *Children's Games and Rhymes* asserts, "It is impossible to make the divisions mutually exclusive" (33). His own system of classification divides games into eighteen divisions, such as, ball games, hiding games, counting-out rhymes, and tongue-twisters. The Knapps group different childlore genres by chapter in their book, but do not introduce classification. Jean Piaget, the child psychologist, offers the division proposed by Stem of grouping games into two large classes: individual and social (108). Though there may be overlap even between these two, the three examples of childlore I have investigated fit predominantly into the social category. I recognize different lore genres and have chosen examples from fantasy: "Scary Bear;" imitation: "Sandbox Birthday;" and verbal lore: "Popcorn Word Play."

Scary Bear. This is a favorite and an exciting game. It is an outdoor activity requiring lots of space to run and places to hide and the permission to be very noisy. One child calls out, "Who will be the bear?" or "Jackie, will you be the bear?"³ The position of bear is a bit onerous, but two children lately have readily agreed to be 'it.' One, a three and a half year old boy, is popular with the others; the other child, a two and three quarters year old headstrong girl, is the class scapegoat and not as well liked. The children who constitute the "family," usually two to five of them, dash off and locate their home: the low branched climbing tree, the playhouse, or the play boat. They each claim

a position in the family: "I'm the mother," "I'll be the teenager." Occasionally, older and more assertive children assign roles to a younger or less assertive child: "You be the bunny."

The family sets up housekeeping, but they are on constant guard against attacks by the bear. Meanwhile, the bear lurks behind bushes or trees getting ready to rush in and frighten the family. The bear moves in growling and flailing its arms; the family members scream and make hasty plans to flee their dwelling for a safer one. They quickly gather their possessions—bowls, utensils, bedding—and race out of their home, the bear in hot pursuit. Screaming and squealing they run and dodge; excitement rises to a keen pitch. Somehow they elude the bear and reestablish their household in a new location. The bear, who has menaced them but never quite caught them, retreats to catch its breath. Sometimes this is the end of the game; the children may drift into another activity. Or, the family may settle into their new home and play house for a while. The bear, temporarily tamed or changed into something docile, may even reside with the family. After a few minutes of domestic quietude, the exciting threat and chase begins anew.

Sandbox Birthday. Several children migrate to the sandbox. The children almost always use the sandbox for baking and food preparation activities; rarely are homes built or roads constructed. Anywhere from one to seven children may be involved in making, baking, and celebrating a birthday. Sometimes it is a solitary effort; sometimes a cooperative venture. Usually two children "make the cake." They assemble equipment: a wooden bowl, spoons, leaves and grasses, flowers. First, the sand is spooned into a bowl. Then, numerous trips to the water fountain ensure a "batter" of the right consistency. One child may stir while another adds ingredients. Forays into the garden provide additions: a bit of dirt may become cinnamon, fallen olives are blueberries, and leaves and flowers serve as decorations.

The children are very busy and take turns stirring and seeking for ingredients. Some bake their cakes by placing the bowl under a bush or on a log which, for their purposes, are ovens; occasionally, they may transport the cake across the yard to the playhouse where there is a toy stove and oven. The next step is decorating the cake. This is elaborate: leaves, flowers, and candles (thin sticks) are arranged carefully. Secrecy and surprise are important elements in this play. Bakers hope the birthday child (just pretend) is unaware that the preparations are made in her/his honor. If the birthday person is aware of the pending celebration, s/he may be eager to eat the cake; the bakers must then admonish, "Not yet, we're not done!" and "Don't look!" Finally, the cake, candles lit, is ready to be presented. The bakers, holding the cake bowl with both hands, advance singing "Happy Birthday" to the honored child, who, depending on her/his degree of manner refinement, may stare at the

presenters and make no move to accept the cake, or, smiling graciously, accept the cake and take pretend bites. That done, the cake is unceremoniously dumped in the sandbox and another one begun or the play abandoned.

A variation on this game is the poison cake. Several children prepare their concoction surreptitiously, whispering, gesticulating with restraint, and glancing secretly at their target person. The cake is presented as a genuine love offering. After it is "tasted" by the recipient, the bakers gleefully call out, "You're dead!" or "You ate poison!" Poison cake making is considered a high joke and is not usually a reflection of interpersonal relations.

Popcorn Word Play. Preschool children love to play and experiment with sounds and words. Joy in sound production generates many verbal games. Preschoolers delight in nursery rhymes and nonsense syllables. One and two word rhymes and chants are particularly prized. So a child might say to another, "You're a silly billy," to be countered by the other with, "Well, you're a silly jilly." Back and forth they will go, each trying to best the other and making up new sound combinations as they go. The game I focus on has a very specific context: snack time when popcorn is on the menu. Each child has his/her own bowl of popcorn. Out of the general chatter, one will pick up a piece of popcorn and announce it: "a mouse" or "a snowflake," for instance. That signals the start of the game. Each child, in turn, holds up a kernel and announces it, "a jelly bean." The responses get sillier as the game progresses, "a bee," "a flea." Humor is important; laughter greets most responses.

The pronouncement is always the same: emphasis on the article "a"—it is drawn out—followed by a clipped and rapidly spoken noun. Nonsense syllables or new words may be introduced. Recently one five year old girl repeatedly interjected the word, "maniac." The game may end because the childrens' attention is distracted or occasionally by a child requesting that it stop, "That's enough!" or "It's too noisy!"

I have looked at the three examples of protolore in terms of contextual analysis in the first part of the paper. Now I will apply three other methods of analysis, functional, structural (the diachronic structure has been given; I will focus on binary oppositions of the synchronic structure), and psychoanalytic, to the lore. I will consider "Scary Bear" in terms of all three methods and "Sandbox Birthday" and "Popcorn Word Play" in functional terms.

"Scary Bear" functions as a release of physical energy—there is a lot of vigorous activity and running involved—and as a stimulus for excitement, a playing out of the fears and anxieties of childhood in a safe way. Fear of the "boogey man" and monsters is mediated in this game. It also allows for group dislike of a particular child to be expressed in a socially acceptable way (when an unpopular child is encouraged by the group to be the bear). It allows the children in the family to experience familial solidarity and play act traditional roles (mother, father, sister, brother).

"Scary Bear" reveals several binary oppositions: pursued and pursuer, family and outsider, humans and animal, inside (the family in the house) and outside (the bear is not confined), group and individual, defenders and offender, hidden and found. The reinforcement of these oppositions throughout the game creates a mighty tension between the two, family and bear. However, children are conscious that the game is just pretend; roles are assumed, and they may be changed. This fluidity allows the tension to be relieved. Children imitate and play out the oppositions and tensions they perceive in the adult world and those they experience in their own.

Looking at this game psychoanalytically reveals several possible interpretations. The bear could symbolize the beastly untamed nature of humankind which is out to frighten and devour the civilized nature. Or, the game could represent the vulnerability of children at the mercy of the adult world. Huddling for safety inside the house can be likened to the security of the womb. Also, the group represents security and conformity; the bear, the loneliness of the individual.

The excitement engendered by the bear's pursuit of the family seems to be the main reason for the game. As soon as the children have secured a person to play the bear, they become big-eyed and keyed up. This mounts as the play progresses. Squeals become screams; running from the bear escalates into wild flight. The excitement reaches a frenzied peak as the bear either nearly succeeds in capturing a family member or fails as the family eludes it. Thus, I see the overall function of this lore as an exciting and nonthreatening way of mediating children's fears of the "boogey man," the adult world, the unknown.

"Sandbox Birthday" is a hands on, direct imitation of making a cake and celebrating a birthday. The play allows the children to be physically creative and to get dirty. The cake making and decorating culminate in the presentation of the cake to the honored person. Often, who this will be is unknown until the singing of "Happy Birthday" discloses the name. Thus, there is an element of surprise: the bakers must keep a secret and the recipient kept in anticipation. Mechling identifies secrecy as an "antithetical device" employed by children in their play as a way to assert power over another (102).

This game reveals children's readiness to accept and imitate social customs. It allows them to play "grownup" and still get messy. It gives them an opportunity to honor a particular child. The poison cake variation enables them to turn the tables and play a trick. Secrecy and surprise give the baker children the feeling of being in control and having the upper hand. In the real world, of course, adults wield the power; "Sandbox Birthday" is a way through play that the child can be in charge. In addition, the poison cake play may mediate real anxieties of poisoned food. Children are at risk when they

ingest candy gathered trick or treating at Halloween. Parents convey these anxieties to their children, and children release them through play such as this.

Humor and word experimentation appear to be the function of "Popcorn Word Play." Each succeeding response is sillier, and the children laugh harder. It is a social and cooperative game. Throughout, children take turns giving their responses (until the chaotic end when several speak at once), and they build on the previous response, "a goat," "a sheep," or "a comb," "a gnome." Children listen and are challenged by the nature of the game to display skill in matching or rhyming the antecedent response. The play encourages children to try out new words—maniac, for example—and taboo words—"poop" and "pee" occasionally pop up as a response rhyme. Preschoolers are struggling with sound, word, and sentence formation. This game gives them a fun way to tryout new or forbidden sounds and words. It provides children an opportunity to be creative with language, practice social skills, and have a good laugh.

Although there is no dearth of collections and analyses of folklore of children age five years and up, material pertaining to the preschool child is more likely to be found, and with a different emphasis, in child development or child psychology literature. Child developmentalist Frances Markey concludes in her 1935 study (reprinted 1976) *Imaginative Behavior of Preschool Children* that "many aspects of the development of learning and understanding may be observed in connection with the imaginative behavior [of] some expressions of a child's social adjustments and his techniques for dealing with others" (130-31). These are broad though valid statements when applied to possible interpretations of protolore.

The Knapps cite lore that enables a child to feel a sense of power and to cope with the unknown. Though many lore items the Knapps describe are not applicable to preschoolers—the Knapps deal primarily with lore of children ranging in age from five years and up—some genres overlap, for example, what they call, "coping with the unknown." The Knapps state, "being scared—but not really—is a feeling children love.... Children want to explore their deep-seated fears of ... the worst things they can imagine" (242-44). For older children this may be accomplished by telling spooky stories; for the preschool age, it may be by playing a game such as "Scary Bear."

As I suspected, direct questioning of the preschool children did not disclose revelations as to their motivations for playing out the lore. Typical responses to my question of "Why do you play this game?" were, "Just because," or, "cause it's fun." When I asked several children who were baking in the sandbox why they made birthday cakes one snorted and replied, "You don't have a brain!" thus admonishing me for asking such a silly question.

In studying preschool lore, it has become clear to me that children satisfy many of their needs through their own inventive play: the need for release of physical energy, the need for excitement, for feeling safe; the need to imitate and tryout what grownups do; the need to mediate anxiety; the need to express sounds and play with language; the need to laugh, have a good time and bond with other children. Childlore effectively mediates these requirements. It provides children an oblique, playful, and imaginative approach for dealing with their physical, psychological, and social needs and issues-an approach which may surprise, delight, and humble adults working in preschool education.

NOTES

1. I will use the terms "lore," "game," and "play" interchangeably with these distinctions. Lore refers to the overall system of child-initiated imaginative play activity. Game connotes a specific child-initiated imaginative play activity. Play refers to the process or performance of the play activity.

2. Jay Mechling suggested the term "protolore" to me.

3. The "bear" has been in vogue for several months. Variants are the "shark," "ghost," "monster," and so on. The antagonist is either an animal or a supernatural being.

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