Game Playing
Negotiating Rules and Identities

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DITTE WINTHER-LINDQVIST

Beginning with Lev Vygotsky's long-established assertion that the play of children always involves both imaginary play and rules of behavior, this article argues for a theoretical framework that connects such play with the construction of social identities in kindergarten peer groups. It begins with a discussion of Ivy Schousboe's model of the different spheres of reality in children's play to explain symbolic group play and applies the model to the play of a group of five-year-old kindergarten soccer players. The article finds that the soccer games of kindergartners and their negotiations of play rules intrinsically involve their social identities, both those that are real and those that are imaginary.

Introduction

THIS ARTICLE SUPPORTS A theoretical model that accounts for the simultaneous presence of children's pretend play and play with rules, both of them closely related to the social realities of kindergarten and to the social identities of the children who attend it. Lev Vygotsky (1993) argues that all play involves rules, and I argue, in turn, that the rules children construct refer to and reflect their social lives and identities.

Every day, children in kindergarten play in peer groups and form relatively stable relationships and alliances with their classmates (Dunn 1998). As they spend time together, they develop a shared history and assume mutually recognizable roles as particular players and persons in the social landscape of the peer group. This group reflects a local peer-group culture consisting of, as William Corsaro puts it, "a stable set of activities and routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (1992, 162). In Corsaro's analysis, the peer culture seeks to master play

spaces and props, protecting groups and controlling access to them (Corsaro and Eder 1990). Friendships and social alliances gain importance as children place themselves and others in the crucial positions likely to control ongoing play activities (Corsaro 1981, 1994; Kantor, Elgas, and Fernie 1993).

These groups help construct and reinforce children's social identities. When children obtain desired positions in such play groups through their friendships, social alliances, and roles in the play, they gain more social influence and obtain preferred positions within the peer group. Children recognize these peer relations, and they acknowledge these social identities in the games they play and the rules they play by.

Jean Piaget's play studies recognized symbolic playing and playing with rules as two different kinds of activities, which also occur at different stages of child development (Polgar 1976; Evaldsson and Corsaro 1998). Piaget sketched out the stages of children's development in which initial symbolic pretend play and its functions give way in middle childhood to play with rules, the only kind of playing that persists into adulthood (Piaget 1962, 166, 168). When engaged in games with rules, players compete by following explicit rules denoting which actions are legal and which constitute cheating. They perform the tasks of the game within the bounds of the rules that apply to all players, in all games, with the goal of finding a winner or a winning team (Jordan, Cowan, and Roberts 1995). Pretend play, on the other hand, has no winners or losers, and its goals are open ended. In pretend play, the players are free to enact and invent roles as they imagine a shared storyline (Singer and Singer 1990).

In contrast to this sequential view of play development, Vygotsky and his cultural-historical tradition emphasize that rules guide every play world. This view, however, still leaves room for imaginary play. Scholars operating within the Vygotskian tradition question not whether the activity is guided by rules but the extent to which the rules dominate. In pretend play, manifestly imaginary situations predominate, and the rules by which roles are enacted remain implicit. In game play, however, we find the opposite to be true. The rules are manifest, and they dominant the discussions, negotiations, and performances, while imaginary activity becomes subordinate (Duncan and Tarulli 2003, 276). Piaget and Vygotsky agree that symbolic pretend play is a precursor to the development of games with rules, but they very much disagree when it comes to viewing symbolic play and gaming as two different kinds of activities (Piaget) or as two versions of the same phenomenon (Vygotsky).

My own research supports a theoretical model in line with Vygotsky's, though one also sensitive to the peer culture and social realities of the children involved. This model accounts for children's rule-based play and pretense while emphasizing the important role that the players' social identities have in determining the nature and rules of that play.

A Model of Spheres of Reality in Play

Developmental psychologist Ivy Schousboe (1993) has presented a comprehensive framework for understanding and analyzing children's social pretend play, also known as symbolic group play. In her model, she draws on the cultural-historical school of thought and argues that there is no opposition between real and unreal in playing. She enters the debate about the role of real and not real in the study of children's play world, a debate which often leaves the impression that playing children zigzag between frames of reality and pretense, and thus in and out of reality and in and out of playing (Golomb and Kuersten 1996; Garvey 1977, 80; Goldman 1998, 3). Scholars following Vygotsky do not consider real and not real as mutually exclusive. Gunilla Lindqvist, for example, represents this position and states, "there is no opposition between aesthetics and rationality, imagination and reality" in play (2002, 440). In line with such thinking, Schousboe integrates the different aspects of children's play into three spheres of reality, each equally valid and equally important to the activity. To understand Schousboe's three spheres, we can imagine how they might be applied to a hypothetical example of children's play. Consider two girls, for example, pretending to celebrate a birthday.

1. The sphere of imagination (realm of performance in make-believe actions). The two girls pretend to celebrate a birthday by having guests, singing, giving and receiving presents, and eating (pretend) cake.
2. The sphere of staging (realm of organizing, planning, negotiating, agreeing, and discussing). The girls discuss their plans and decide that Emily is the birthday girl, and Amanda plays the mother. Then they decide Emily is going to bake the birthday cake.
3. The sphere of reality (the physical world of location, laws of nature, objects, props, and coplayers). The girls use the playhouse for their

party and use toys as presents. They take notice of each other's social identities and what impact that will have on their respective wishes and expectations. (Amanda expects to be the mother because she is older, and Emily allows this because she gets to be the birthday girl.)

Schousboe's concept of spheres of reality in play allows us to look at playing as a multilayered activity, one that is simultaneously about pretense and about the literally real. Children do not zigzag in and out of the real while playing because they can operate simultaneously—even when deeply engaged—within real and pretend. Staging—the part of the play that scholars such as Hans G. Furth and S. R. Kane might refer to as "out-of-frame" (1992, 154) or Jeffrey Trawick-Smith as "metaplaying" (1998)—appears to equate with the physical surroundings and to pretend play in this model because these spheres are permeable and transparent, and they are present throughout a given play episode.

Schousboe's aim is to explain how pretend play can become a self-forgetting activity, and she does so by investigating why and how the sphere of imagination becomes predominant during a play episode. The unique interplay of resources derived from all three spheres makes playing open and dynamic, so that what occurs in one sphere transforms another sphere, where it may facilitate or inhibit processes of expansion of that sphere within the play as a whole. For example, in the hypothetical scenario described above, if Amanda suggests to Emily that they are going to move houses (sphere of staging), this move affects the story and theme of a birthday celebration (sphere of imagination), which may involve a role shift (sphere of staging), and it probably involves a change of location (sphere of reality). In this way, the children are operating simultaneously in awareness of all spheres when they play.

Elsewhere, I have argued that in kindergarten, where children share a history of everyday play together, the children's social identities are present as resonant backgrounds in all spheres of playing, yet most prominently in the sphere of staging and in the physical reality sphere. This is so because group play is also a social gathering, one in which players interact as persons belonging to the peer group in different ways and enjoying different social statuses (Winther-Lindqvist 2006, forthcoming). The same argument holds for children playing team sports, as we shall see when we investigate their negotiation and employment of rules in their soccer games. But first, we must discuss the nature of rules in everyday children's games.

Rules as Prescriptive Regulations

In developmental psychology, Piaget's classic studies of children's play with rules (1932/1965) highlight the rational thought processes required to perform in a particular game such as marbles. Whether the rules of the game are followed correctly and how exactly they are articulated and practiced reflects the cognitive reasoning and level of understanding of the children playing the game. This developmental process trends towards greater and more independent understanding of abstract, consensual rules that function both proscriptively and prescriptively. This perspective allows the creation of a taxonomy of games in which children of different developmental ages are capable of playing games following more and more advanced, articulated, abstracted, and explicit rules. Brian Sutton-Smith's game taxonomy (1976) is a good example, as it differentiates levels of complexity within rules and behavior in games. Rules in this sense are nonnegotiable; they are dogma that are to be followed in the same way from game to game and applied consistently to all the players.

Rules as Sociocultural Practice

Another more sociological and anthropological approach to children's game play stresses that rules are negotiated and often ambiguous and that culture and social context shape their culture (Hughes 1991, 288). Scholars who take this perspective view all social life and human interactions as governed by implicit social rules (Goffman 1959, 1974; Garfinkel, 1967; Harré 1977). This view of rules as sociocultural practices is consistent with Vygotsky's descriptions of rules as they appear in children's play. For instance, sisters who are playing sisters act in sisterly ways—even more sisterly than normal—because they are performing play roles. This behavior is ordered and familiar because there are rules for how to behave as a sister, for how to behave as a mother, for how to behave as a princess, and so on.

Vygotskian rules denote behaviors that are rendered legitimate and meaningful because they are practiced within a particular frame of understanding, in accordance with a certain set of expectations. These could also be called social representations (Moscovici 2000). This view reflects a co-constructivist perspective on children as both creators of and participants in cultural processes

(Valsiner 1997). The rules Vygotsky explains are norms that serve as guides and markers for boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate actions as understood by children based on their everyday lives and the institutions they attend. Rules in this understanding are flexible and negotiable, and they are not suitable as direct markers of winners and losers. Instead, the negotiation of rules opens up a wide spectrum of argumentation, persuasion, and disagreement among the players trying to control and influence the game and, thereby, exploring and constructing social identities for themselves.

Rules for Rules

When researchers actually observe how children play games with rules, they find a curious misfit between what the children report as explicit rules for the game and how they actually play it. Linda Hughes summarizes this disconnect by asking, "If children don't play by articulated rules, recorded in books on children's games, what do they play by?" (1991, 285). In order to answer this question, Hughes develops a framework in which the play episode—not the abstract game itself—constitutes the unit of analysis. She finds it necessary to examine not only the explicit rules of the game but also the implicit rules of the social context and higher-order gaming rules, or, as she calls them, "rules for rules." Hughes argues that these rules for rules determine the rules to be followed in concrete situations. They establish how, when, and why other rules should be deployed, and they themselves need to be negotiated on the spot. In short, they mediate between the rules of the game and social rules.

For example, imagine that a group of boys is planning a game of soccer (the sphere of staging). There is to be an equal number of players on each team (an explicit rule), but as they start playing (the sphere of imagination) another boy turns up and wants to join. He is allowed to play because this particular boy is a friend (a rule of the social context). The children actually operate in relation to a more fundamental rule in the children's peer culture: you don't exclude a friend from an ongoing play activity (rules for rules). There is thus a strong local and contextual feel to how children make use of and practice playing with rules.

Hughes argues that we need to take all these kinds of rules into consideration to gain a greater insight into the meaning and function of playing games among children in their relevant contexts and everyday lives. I argue further that

these different kinds of rules reflect and create social identities among children. Studying children as they play games and employ rules in kindergarten proves an excellent way to learn how social identities are constructed and sustained in peer groups. Thus it is toward the negotiation of rules and identities that we turn next.

Methods

The theoretical argument I pose here is based on empirical evidence from a motivated ethnographic study (Duveen and Lloyd 1993) in a kindergarten in a small Danish village. The population is lower-middle class and homogenous, almost entirely ethnic Danish. As a researcher, I followed a group of five-year-olds in their last four months of kindergarten and collected data using mainly participant observational techniques. I spent two to three full days each week in the kindergarten making handwritten field notes on the five-year-olds during all play activities, and I supplemented these notes with tape recordings and interviews.

Occasionally, I would accept an invitation from the children to play with them, and I placed my tape recorder in my back pocket or on the table. But generally, I just sat next to them or followed them and wrote down what I observed.

Sometimes, I stopped recording and taking notes for ethical reasons, for example, when children went to the bathroom or engaged in intimate love-play. For a long observational study like this one, participants should not be considered as offering blanket consent to be watched and recorded. Such consent should always be obtained for particular moments and specific activities only. It is solely the researcher's responsibility to make judgments on the appropriateness of observations and questions in any given situation. Making these evaluations requires constant awareness and reflection to respect the children's privacy and to avoid embarrassing them.

Background Information

I quickly learned that playing soccer was a core activity among most of the boys at this kindergarten. Although soccer was a group activity, it also gave each

boy an opportunity to develop his own personal orientations and to follow his individual passions. In playing soccer, the boys exercised their friendships and explored and changed their social status; and in doing so, they expressed their hopes and came to recognize certain social realities. The boys not only loved to play soccer; it was also their favorite topic of conversation. When they gossiped, they gossiped about who was good and who was bad at soccer. They talked about how different persons behaved when they played the game. Soccer was the kernel around which they formed their "we-ness," a construct that proved highly gendered.

As is often the case with day-care institutions in the countryside, the physical surroundings were spacious and rich; the playground was big and green. Its several areas suited different kinds of activities. For example, there were three playhouses arranged into a pretend village, a big wooden pirate ship, open spaces for bicycling and running, big swings, and sandpits. The children did not play on a recognizable soccer field, but they created a space for playing soccer in the corner of the playground next to the fence that bordered the local primary school. One goal was half the size of the other (marked by constructions in the fence), and the field was approximately ten meters long and five meters wide.

In Denmark, children three to six years old attend kindergarten from approximately eight in the morning until four in the afternoon. In recent years, pressure has grown on the day-care system to include more structured learning, and teachers have increasingly employed formal learning plans. The kindergartens, however, have not yet adopted all the formal routines such as scheduled lessons and breaks. As in most kindergartens, this one had no formal curriculum, so the teachers left the children to decide what games they wanted to play, where they wanted to play them, and with whom. Teachers planned activities for the children to join voluntarily—activities such as baking pancakes, reading stories, or making Easter decorations—but otherwise, the kids were free to play on their own (except for lunch, snacks, occasional excursions, and pedagogical projects). In all kinds of weather, the boys chose to play soccer almost everyday and, often, many times a day. Sometimes they asked a teacher to play along, and sometimes a big game was arranged with adults in attendance. For these special events, however, they took over the big school lawn for the game. But mostly, the boys played by themselves without adult supervision. Fifteen of these unsupervised soccer matches, each lasting more than fifteen minutes, constitute the basis of this analysis.

Subjects

There were ten boys in the kindergarten, each of them about five years old. Seven of them played soccer. Some were also best friends and played at each other's houses after school, but they all belonged to the group of boys who played soccer. In analyzing the nature of their play and peer relations, it was useful to categorize them according to their social status on the soccer field and to their relationships as playmates and friends.

The Star Players

Jamie, Ollie, Andy, and Fred were best friends who always wanted to play on the same team but who usually could not because the resulting teams would have been lopsided and unfair. Jamie and Andy led in choosing the teams. Jamie was king of the soccer ground, and the boys agreed that he was the best player, followed by Fred and Andy. Ollie was the least skilled among the better players, and he and Andy were the most likely to play on the team with the lesser-skilled players or to act in the unofficial role of judge of the rules of play.

The Ordinary Players

Jules, Phillip, and Nicky never led in choosing the teams. Although they actively participated in debating which rules counted and when and how those rules should be observed, their opinions never proved final. When they were placed on the team without any of the best players, the game usually broke down quickly because the teams were too uneven. So Andy or Ollie always found themselves among the ordinary players at some point during a game. Although these boys were not as skilled as the better players (except perhaps for Phillip, who was building a reputation as the best goalkeeper), they were nonetheless integrated and identified with the group as a whole.

The Other Players

Cecille and Camille, twin girls, were among the best ball players according to the adults, but the boys simply did not consider them true players. They were allowed in the game only when they possessed the ball first or when an adult joined the game. The girls on the soccer field represented the inappropriate others—they disturbed the boys' discursive narrative expectations about soccer players. In short, they demonstrated the norm by being different from it (Staunæs 2006).

An Example of a Game of Rules Related to the Social and Imaginary Realities

For this example from a game that took place in April, Schouesboe's model provides us an analytical framework for interpreting the game of soccer as a game of rules related to the social and imaginary realities of the boys in the group.

Field notes (1): The boys discuss who is to take a seat on the bench in order to make fair teams. "Jamie, you can change," Andy suggests. "No," he says, surprised. Jules can change, Jamie decides, and the others agree: "Jules, you are out." Jules accepts this and walks off the field to stand up against the fence. "I am on your team," Ollie declares. "No, you're on their team." Andy says that though Ollie wants to play among the star players, he can't because Jules is judge. So Ollie is needed among the ordinary players. Ollie sits down and grumps, "Then I am out!" "You always say that," Andy criticizes. "No I don't," Ollie replies angrily. "He always says, 'Then I am out,'" Andy explains to me. "He said it also before you came." Ollie denies this. "That is not true!" he says and looks at me with big innocent eyes. He then gives in and plays on the other team, though he constantly threatens to leave the game.

Comments and Analysis: The boys were setting the scene and discussing the teams (the sphere of staging). Evidently, Jamie and Andy always took the lead and defined where the other boys should be placed. Jamie decided that Jules was out, and Andy rejected Ollie's wish to play among the star players (a derogation of Ollie's social identity). Ollie tried to persuade the others to change this decision by threatening to leave the game. This led nowhere as Andy referred back to the game rule that there is supposed to be an equal amount of players on each team. Andy identified Ollie as stubborn and inflexible ("You always say that") which upset Ollie, who denied Andy's characterization of him.

Field notes (2): There is a fight over the ball, but otherwise the game flows well, and there are a few shots at each goal. Somehow, without my noticing, the teams are changed. Fred now plays on Phil, Nicky, and Jules's team. Fred is down, and he cries out in pain. "Free kick," he cries. "Free kick," he continues, and Jamie nods. Fred gets up, he points at the spot where the foul occurred, and he prepares to take his shot at the goal. He

hits it dead on and screams: "Goal!" "No, it was on the border," Jamie—now acting as goal keeper—declares from the goal. Fred looks disappointed, but he is already kicking the ball again, and this time he does indeed miss. The score is four to six, Ollie declares, and they continue to play. Fred is down again, tackled by Nicky. He sobs. "I am the judge," Ollie says, exhausted, and sits down next to me to watch the game.

Comments and Analysis: The game unfolded (in the sphere of imagination), and the boys played the ball, effortlessly changing roles and teams (in the sphere of staging). Fred demanded a free kick because he was charged, and he got it. He actually scored a goal, but the group pretended the ball was on the line. It was Jamie who nullified the goal, in essence changing the game rule that a score is a goal. The group complied because they all accepted the view that Jamie and his teammates, as the better players, would not fall behind in competition, which, of course, reinforces Jamie's social identity as the best player. Contrary to what one might expect, the designated judge had no authority at all in settling disputes and enforcing the rules. Being the game judge resembled taking a break or waiting to join the play—times when boys commented on the play in which they were temporarily uninvolved.

> *Field notes (3):* Fred and Jamie (now again on the same team) decide on a strategy, and they pass the ball back and forth to each other from opposite sides of the field. They play the ball the entire length of the field and score. "Yeah," they shout as they enjoy their beautiful goal, smile, and clap each other's shoulder. Then all the boys from both teams put their arms around each other and sing "We Are the Champions." Even Ollie joins them from the bench. Afterward, they split up again and continue playing. Fred is tackled again by Jules, and, with Fred out of the way, Jules has a clear shot at scoring. "Goal!" he screams. "NO!" Fred cries angrily. "No, he knocked me over." Andy now interferes, taking Jules's side. "I am out if it doesn't count," he declares. "It was not a goal," Jamie argues. "It was too direct and hard. We had no chance to block it." The matter seems settled, and the game continues.

Comments and Analysis: Jamie and Fred devised a game strategy (sphere of staging) in which they imitated moves of star players they had seen on television, thus making them star players too (anticipated and imaginary identities). They

all celebrated the goal and created a collective story of victory and championship (in the sphere of imagination), and they sang the song both to me and for themselves and looked excited and happy. Jules took a fine shot at the goal, but it was too good and was ruled out because the others had no chance to block it (sphere of staging). Even though Andy supported Jules, the two could not persuade Jamie and the others to accept the goal. So again, a rule of the game was overruled by rules related to social identities and the social reality of the players (sphere of reality).

Findings

The Local Soccer Rules
According to educational psychologist Mariane Hedegaard, children of kindergarten age need to experiment with rules in play as a natural part of their development. (2007, 254). Obviously, these boys were doing just that—experimenting with the rules. And through experimentation, they were also creating their own rules, inspired by conventional soccer rules and terminology but also spiced up with their own ideas about good behavior, friendship, and justice. These sometimes contradicted the conventional rules of soccer, and sometimes they did not. They were constantly negotiated, however, among the players.

Common Rules
On the basis of all fifteen games lasting longer than fifteen minutes, I have identified the following common rules by which the group played. If I have not already illustrated one of these rules in my examples above, I have added a vignette from a different game.

1) The person who finds the ball is always allowed to play and take the lead in deciding who is to be on which team. For example, Camille runs out after lunch and finds the ball. Jamie arrives only minutes afterwards. "Give the ball to me," he says, trying to take it from her. But she says, "I have the ball, and I decide who is playing." "You decide one team, I decide the other," Jamie replies, and she nods. Camille points at different players, but only Phillip gives in and joins her team. The others refuse. Cecille now comes out and joins Phillip and Camille so they can form a team.

Comments and Analysis: This rule followed the typical peer-culture norm that allowed players to claim access to play areas and props by holding objects and physically occupying spaces (Corsaro 1981). If Nicky or Jules got the ball, they usually offered the right to pick teams to Fred or Jamie as a friendly gesture and also as a way of indicating their sensitivity to the social hierarchy. The hierarchy was well defined and accepted as a kind of rules for rules, to use Hughes's terminology, and Camille offered Jamie the right to pick the one of the teams. The willingness and ability to function and perform within this well-defined hierarchy was crucial for individuals who wanted to be included and accepted as participators in boys' play groups (Kampmann 1993, 83).

2) There are equal numbers of players on each team (usually).

Comments and Analysis: As I mentioned earlier, when the number of players was uneven, one player was selected as the judge or sat on the bench—though Jamie or Fred never had to sit out the play. Sometimes the star players created a dream team and enjoyed the challenge of being one man short.

3) When someone is hurt, the player is (mostly) compensated. In one game, for instance, Jamie falls down and screams. He hurts his leg, and the boys gather around him. Ollie gets the ball and gives it to Jamie, who takes a shot at the goal. He misses and runs to take another go at it. He kicks it right in Phillip's gut, and Phillip cries out in pain. "GOAL!" Jamie shouts. Phillip actually blocks the ball as goalkeeper but has to accept that the others consider this a goal anyway.

Comments and Analysis: When the game turned tough and someone got hurt, the injured player was sometimes allowed a chance alone with the ball or was given a free kick in front of the goal. Sometimes the victim was rewarded by the placing of a yellow card on the player responsible for the foul. But this all depended on the social positions and identities of the fouler and fouled. Phillip was not compensated or even recognized for blocking the point because he ranked lower on the social scale.

4) Red cards are given when an adult (say, me) hits a player in the head with the ball. When a child hits another child in the head with the ball, the sanction (whether a red or a yellow card is awarded) depends entirely on who is the kicker and who is the victim.

5) A score is a goal, sometimes. A score earns one point unless someone has a good argument against it (which happens quite often), or the ball is kicked so directly or so hard—in other words, so perfectly— that the goalkeeper has no chance of blocking it.

Comments and Analysis: When Jamie made a perfect score, the goal counted. If other players made a perfect score, it counted only when they were on Jamie's team or when their team was so far behind they needed a goal to motivate their playing.

6) The most important rule is flexibility within stability. This means that the same rules do not hold for everyone in every situation. There are patterns of order in which influence, privileges, and sanctions are associated with specific persons in relatively predictable ways.

These rules were not all explained to me as prescriptive rules formed at the beginning, rather they evolved and developed over time. For example, the boys invented the rule of giving a red card after I kicked the ball right into Jamie's face. The consensus that recognized new rules sometimes resulted from play on the field rather than through verbal articulation. It was striking that matters of fairness and scoring were subjects of dispute and negotiation in which the situation at hand was taken into account. For example, if the two teams were unevenly matched and one was much more likely to win, a goal could be awarded to the weaker team because a player started crying. A lot of the time on the soccer field was spent disputing calls and discussing outcomes, giving the boys practice in persuasion, reaching agreements, and quarrelling. While scholars like Laurence Goodwin have noted in other contexts that each player is held personally accountable for actions like committing a foul (2004, 8), I found that when two parties did not agree, the player with the stronger alliances and higher social status won, not the person with the best argument or the fairest case.

Discussion

My study illustrates that even though playing soccer involves kicking a ball, tackling, playing together, playing solo, and following rules, kindergartners do not follow the rules in any conventional way (Lancy 1984). Rather than accepting explicit, general, and abstract rules, they seem more concerned to

create rules that fit their worldview and the local understandings of themselves and others. Their disputes over rules both reflect and produce social identities. This is most evident when they choose teams. Choosing up sides often involves long, complicated, and delicate debates, negotiations that often lead to conflicts and quarrels. After watching many games and seeing that no particular team constellation ever lasted more than five or ten minutes before being changed for any of a variety of reasons (the goalkeeper seemed to be the only player on any team who stayed put for any length of time), this great worry over particular team constellations struck me as a bit odd. Yet, from the boys' perspective, a lot is at stake, each and every time.

Negotiating and Creating Social Identities through Playing Soccer

At every game, negotiation begins anew. As the boys bargain over which team to join, they solidify, change, or remake their social identities among this group of friends. In every match, they exercise and explore their social status among the boys of the game and scope out their influence on their peers. Each shows how he perceives the others—whom he admires most and whom he likes most. The match becomes a social event, constituting the "soccer boys" as an entity, a group. At the same time, each boy establishes his identity as a particular player and a person holding a specific position in the broader social hierarchy, the one outside and beyond one match or even the game of soccer itself.

This is part and parcel of the ongoing social identity work that children engage in every day among their peers in kindergarten. They demonstrate the degree of their influence by their ability to define their place in the social order and make the rules governing their shared play. We recognize the degree of their influence as a question of status and of social identity. Jamie appears to be in charge: he exercises the authority, often having the final say in disputes. He is the one who decides whether a goal counts, whether a foul calls for a free kick or a yellow card, and whether Jules or Nicky sits on the bench. Andy often challenges him, disputing his decisions, but the outcome of these fights consistently reflects the influence of the boys' well defined and acknowledged social identities more than the strength of any particular arguments. Andy loses the fight; Jamie's decision holds.

The Generic Social Hierarchy as Open System

The social landscape of a peer group in which Jamie never sits on the bench and Jules very often does may be stable, but it is not necessarily static. In the early months I observed the group, Phillip was lucky to make it onto the field instead of merely watching the game from behind the fence and acting as game judge. A score almost always counted when a ball was kicked at his goal (even when he blocked the point with his gut). But over the course of four months, he grew in standing and acceptance in the eyes of the others. By the end, Phillip was recognized as a very good goalkeeper. The change resulted perhaps from his obvious commitment to the role of goalkeeper, the way he so seriously trained for the position. Or maybe it happened because his mother became the official coach of the village junior team. Whatever the reason, the role of goalkeeper became more admired by and attractive to all the players.

All the boys tried to influence the game by energetically defining the rules for themselves and others, which would have been pointless in a nondevelopmental system. But a peer group of the soccer boys like this one is a dynamic, open system, one in which a boy like Phillip can build a reputation as the best goalkeeper, one in which a boy like Jules can win recognition at last for being good at something other than simply making everybody laugh with his dirty language. The individual identity of each boy shifts even as he remains oriented towards shared goals and daydreams of being a superstar soccer player. They can have fun and enjoy the recognition of being well-liked, integrated members of this group of friends. It is in peer groups like this, in just such open and local systems, that children's rules are communicated and rendered legitimate.

Specialists often describe children's peer groups, including their hierarchically ranked social organizations, as fluid. They contrast this fluidity to a fixed system (Goodwin 2004; Corsaro 1994), which leads them to suggest a constantly chaotic, ever-changing condition, one which is not ordered in any predictable ways. I do not find this kind of terminology useful for understanding children's peer groups. I prefer language that emphasizes flexibility within stability because I see that children's social groups and hierarchical patterns may be dynamic even though, day-to-day, they are characterized by relative stability and order, as well as predictability (Tudge, Putnam, and Valsiner 1996).

Rules as Social Structures and Logics

The rules of the game among these players are so fluid and negotiable that they hardly manifest themselves as different from—or in a different category from—social rules or the rules for rules that Hughes writes about. It seems that the soccer boys' rules are not differentiated according to objective, rational criteria, by what we could call the cognitive logic of consistency and abstractness. But when we look at the rules as part of the social context of everyday life, they are indeed quite differentiated and complexly organized. There is a social logic to the patterns of influence, privilege, and sanction in the rules as they relate to individuals, and they are relatively predictable.

When Jules gets hit in the nose by a ball, the foul may result in a free kick if he is lucky—and if his team generally needs some encouragement to stay in the game. When the same thing happens to Jamie, he will be compensated without hesitation. He will himself get a free shot at the goal, or the kicker who fouled him will be sanctioned with a yellow card. Similarly, all goals scored by Jamie count, but the scores of every other player are contested for any number of reasons. "My shoe fell off," a goalkeeper might say, or he could claim the ball was kicked too hard, and so on. So there is logic to how the rules work and for whom, logic that points back to the social life and social identity of the participants, and the rules are different depending on the boy's position in the peer group.

Abstracted notions of fairness and justice are indistinguishable from the social identities of the individuals in the group. What seems right and wrong, fair and unfair, is completely interwoven with the social identities and relationships the boys have fashioned. These connections create a local consensus that guides the actions among the players. What is striking is the strength of the locally defined and practiced culture among the boys, who may occasionally refer to more-established, consensual rules and norms but often only to modify them and change them to fit their purposes. This contradicts Piaget's findings that not until children reach ten years of age do they begin to view rules as flexible and as facilitators of play rather than as authoritative dogma (1965; Polgar 1975).

Imagining Soccer

Schousboe's model becomes relevant to our soccer players for several reasons. We need a layered model, rather than a hierarchical one, that accounts for the

kind of rules and pretense articulated among the soccer players. In my sample, we cannot easily separate what the players considered game rules, social rules, and rules for rules. Rather, the rules and their negotiation—as well as how they are practiced—depended to some degree on the social context and the relational history among the boys in soccer play. It is mainly in the staging sphere that the rules of the game are constituted and created in accord with the reality sphere—the constant awareness of the different ways each of the players participates, and the boys' interpretations of their attributes, their identities, their desires and their performances. So, in the last section of this article, I turn to the imaginary situation (the sphere of imagination) in my case study of kindergartners playing soccer. My analysis here engages the debate about whether games with rules should be regarded as a different kind of activity from that of pretend play by concluding that they are rather different versions of the same phenomenon.

Subjunctive Thinking in Play

We commonly recognize that there are two types of fiction involved in pretend play—*as-if* and *what-if* narratives—both of which help a child relate to his or her surroundings (Bretherton 1984; Engel 2005). We call activities as-if when a child, for example, pretends to drink from a plastic cup as if it were a real cup of tea. Thus simulations and imitations figure prominently in make-believe or symbolic thinking. As-if performance relies on symbolic functioning, but make-believe—the simple practice of performing and anticipating alternative realities—relies on subjunctive thinking as in what-if.

This creative cognition is not only relevant when discussing playful acts: "Human beings constantly manufacture mental variants on the situations they face. . . . We select from our fantasy a world which is close, in some internal mental sense, to the real world. We compare what is real with what we perceive as *almost* real" (Douglas R. Hofstadter cited in Bretherton 1984, 33). Subjunctive thinking characterizes all kinds of pretend situations where we entertain slightly different versions of the reality or even just anticipate a reality yet to come. In playful acts, possibilities—likely, unlikely, thrilling, exciting, scary—fuel the imagination with a range of ideas for how a game can be organized and played. In social pretend play, or symbolic group play, as-if as well as what-if acts are overt, tangible, and easily identified, as when children pretend to be tigers, for example.

When children play soccer and try to score goals, what-if and as-if acts are not immediately apparent. But if we look closer at the boys in soccer play, imaginary situations prove surprisingly common and evident, as we have seen when the whole group pretended that there was no goal when the ball had obviously been perfectly kicked to score a point! I am arguing that soccer among my sample of five-year-old players was frequently guided by imaginary and pretend scenarios.

> *Vignette*: "It is fun playing soccer," Andy says and smiles as Cecille runs right past him and scores a goal. "No, that was not a goal!" Andy shouts, and Fred and Jamie support him. "It was a goal," Cecille argues, and she gets support from me. "No, because Nicky [the goalkeeper] was standing out here. Then the goal doesn't count," Fred argues. "How can it be our problem that your goalkeeper is not guarding the goal?" I ask. "It is cheating," Cecille complains. "Those are the rules," Jamie says.

Comments and Analysis: Cecille's score was clearly a goal, but somehow it got treated by some players as "only almost" a goal. And because the nullifiers argued most persistently and from the most dominating positions, the goal was finally annulled. This vignette serves as a nice example of subjunctive reasoning. Often this "only almost" claim leads to extensive arguments, negotiations, and attempts at persuasion (in the sphere of staging) to reach agreement about which version of reality to follow.

Social Identification Process and Subjunctive Thinking in Play

I agree with Vygotsky that subjunctive thinking, which is always involved when people anticipate something, is also involved in all play—both in symbolic play and in games. To understand how this happens, we can turn to Schousboe's model, which allows space for experiencing all kinds of realities within a moment, although the imaginary situation may dominate the overall experience. The presence of subjunctive thinking as a factor involved in all play is also, I argue, relevant to imaginary identification.

> *Vignette*: "It says Graversen on my t-shirt," Phillip says happily and jumps up and down, as he guards the goal as goalkeeper. "Is Graversen

your favorite player?" I ask him. "No. Schmeichel is my favorite. He is
a goalkeeper like me," Phillip says with satisfaction.

Comments and Analysis: In his soccer play, Phillip identified himself with his
idol and hero Peter Schmeichel. This wishful thinking underscores his dream:
"What if I were like Schmeichel, the best goalkeeper in the world?"

This kind of dreaming occurs in a game like soccer when the players perform
their roles on the field. Experiences like these are reinforced collectively when
the boys ritualize their game by singing, by congratulating each other, and by
paying respect to each other, as they have seen professional players do. When
the boys perform their roles as players, when they talk (and shout) in deeper
voices, when they use relevant terminology from the world of professional soc-
cer, they create a thickened story of themselves as soccer players. Such stories
sometimes even involve their invention of their own local soccer terminology,
such as "chance kick," which the boys in my study used. The boys thus rework
the game so that it fits the desires of imaginary as well as factual identities.

Resemblances between Symbolic Group Play and Playing Soccer

Different soccer games resemble different storylines with the same theme, like
the theme of birthday celebration we recognize from symbolic group play.
Some games invoke high spirits underscored by social support and encourage-
ment and create a strong sense of togetherness ("we-ness"). Other games prove
frustrating, full of unresolved conflicts and accusations. Some games play more
neutral. But no game is ever the same as any other in its emotional density
and the quality of its experience.

The point here is that these games follow a well-known narrative pattern
with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Most games elicit plots, or turning
points, as when the boys gathered together arm-in-arm and boisterously sang
"We Are the Champions" or when someone finally left the field too "injured"
to carry on. These performances and stories all involved pretense and subjunc-
tive thinking. None of the boys was literally hurt in ways that justified rolling
around in the dirt, screaming, and hysterically writhing in pain; rather, the
boys brought their symbolic resources and knowledge to bear by pretending
(Zittoun 2005). They enacted these scenes as they found them appropriate and

exciting. They were playing their roles as soccer players while, at the same time, they were identifying with and exploring alternative identities in ways similar to those children use to create and perform symbolic group play.

Recognizing and Being Recognized as Part of Playing Together

When the boys celebrated victory or defeat together, when they disputed the fairness of a call, when they complimented each other on clever moves or scores, there was another layer of imaginary identity at play during the game peculiar to Andy. Andy, best friend of Fred and Jamie and often at odds with Ollie, performed the role of a particular kind—the field general or the sportsman who recognizes the great performances of others. When the boys played against each other, tackled each other, shared strategies, took a shot at the goal, blocked the ball just in time, or praised or criticized each other, they were both themselves and more than themselves. This resembles the way children enact roles in symbolic group play. Jamie may have been just Jamie, but he was also Jamie, the star player and goal-scoring champion during the game. The way a boy played became who he was perceived to be by others.

> *Vignette:* "You tripped, Andy. You did it on purpose! You always just trip people," Fred yells at Andy, who shrugs his shoulders and looks down in shame. "I never trip people," Phillip comments to me, jumping up and down. "No, that is true, you are a real gentleman," I agree. His face lights up in a broad and proud smile.

There was a constant underlying identification with and recognition of different kinds of players (of possible identities) and persons throughout the game. These realities were not considered real instead of pretend in an either-or way. They were real, as well as pretend, as well as negotiated. They were represented, in other words, in each of the three spheres of reality. And they all informed the actual performances and experiences of the players. In this sense, the model Schousboe proposes to account for children's symbolic group play as represented in the three spheres of reality also explains the game of soccer among boys in kindergarten. In such play, different forms of experience coexist, even if imaginary situations and rules are represented in different scales

of relative strength in different kinds of playing. This conclusion supports Vygotsky's belief that children's games and play are different versions of the same basic phenomenon, and it finds Schousboe's model useful in considering the children's play of a soccer game.

Conclusion

I have explored and extended Vygotsky's claim that every play situation entails both an imaginary component and rules for appropriate behaviors. My discussion was based on a sample of fifteen soccer matches played by a group of five-year-old kindergartners. To explain both the imaginary events as well as rules of the game that controlled the play—and how both came about—I employed Schousboe's comprehensive model for how children relate to various spheres of reality when they play.

I argued that the relevant rules created on the field resemble and often refer to the social situation among the boys in their daily life. The soccer rules were characterized by flexibility within stability. There were different rules for different persons and situations, but there were also patterns in which influence, privileges, and sanctions were particular to individuals in relatively predictable ways. In line with Vygotsky's interpretation of children's rules in games and playing, these patterns were culturally produced and locally practiced in ways that reflect the institutional and social milieu of the children.

We can substantiate the content and practice of the rules further by recognizing their relation to the social identities of the players who explored those very identities through soccer play. They did so not only through their formulation of and use of the rules of the game but also through their imaginary versions of the game and their own roles in them. It is noteworthy how prominently the sphere of imagination looms in the soccer play of these boys. The presence of an imaginary situation in the game resembles the imaginary situations we see in symbolic group play. In fact, the similarities are more striking than the differences. In both symbolic group play and soccer, children assume roles that they negotiate and come to agreement about through the sphere of staging. They treat soccer and symbolic group play as both real and imaginary, as in the sphere of reality and of imagination. As a team, the children create a shared story of victory and championship, of defeat and disbelief. The players perform according to certain group-assigned tasks—goalkeeping, scoring, refereeing. In

short, kindergarten children create and explore imaginary situations, local and consensual cultural rules, and real and imaginary identities when they play.

Not only do these similarities between pretend play and play with rules support Vygotsky's view of children's play, they also suggest that we should be cautious when we talk about different kinds of play as more or less developmentally progressive, occurring only at particular stages during a child's development.

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