
Bakhtin's Carnival and Pretend Role Play

A Comparison of Social Contexts

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Twentieth-century Russian literary critic and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin developed an epistemology that linked carnival, authority, and laughter. Drawing on his work, the author investigates hidden parent-child interactions and children's discourse in early-childhood play. She argues that Bakhtin's ideas of carnival and its discourses apply to young children's pretend play. Early-childhood play, she holds, bridges the gap between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse, much as does the mockery of hierarchical order during the carnival festivals described by Bakhtin. The author uses examples from her study of culturally diverse three- and four-year-old preschoolers to illustrate the similarities between Bakhtin's carnival and pretend play. She discusses such play in the context of children exploring their identities and negotiating their relationships with the adult world. She suggests that early-childhood educators could benefit by viewing play from a child's perspective, as something not unlike carnival, rather than by forcing play always to fit more traditional developmental models. **Key words:** carnival; double-voiced discourse; dramatic play; grotesque realism; humor; Mikhail Bakhtin; pretend play; profanity; role reversal

SOME EARLY-CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS lament their field's reliance on developmental psychology (Cannella 1997; Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 1999; Grieshaber and McArdle 2010; MacNaughton 2005; Rogers 2011). These scholars call for theoretical perspectives outside the discipline, perspectives that reflect a diverse approach to research and teaching in early childhood. Brian Sutton-Smith claims that the "progress rhetoric, the view that children's play is about children's growth and progress, has not been strongly supported by scientific evidence" (2001, 123).

For the past two decades, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (DAP) (Bredekamp 1987; Bredekamp and Copple 1997; Bredekamp and Copple 2009), published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), has served what Michel Foucault (1980) might have called a "regime of truth" in early-childhood classrooms, a regime that perpetuates a narrow view

of play. NAEYC has used DAP to define what it considers normal and appropriate for all children (Cohen 2008). Kushner (2012) argues that the framers of the regime privilege mature, dramatic play as a category of play that supports children's development and learning, one sanctioned by teachers. At the same time, DAP states "virtually nothing about the type of play that falls into the category of illicit play" (Kushner 2012, 201), the kind of play that Sutton-Smith described as festive play, "play that often has a tendency to sneak into the school and disrupt our lessons" (1998, 32).

To get beyond this officially sanctioned developmental view of play, I want to take a look at preschool play and language using Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of carnival, specifically as he developed them in *Rabelais and His World* (1984b) and *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1984a). Several researchers frame children's discourse from a Bakhtinian perspective, a view that explores festive play in a preschool environment (Cohen 2009; Cohen and Uhry 2007, Dyson 1994, 1997; Edmiston 2008; Gillfn 2002; Matusov 2009; Sawyer 1997). Some scholars have related Bakhtin's concept of carnival and language play to English-language learners (DaSilva Iddings and McCafferty 2007), while others have related it to a writing workshop (Lensmire 1994; Swain 2002), and still others have tied it to video production (Grace and Tobin 1997). Not many, however, have written about Bakhtin's notions of carnival and discourse in pretend play, with the exception of Sutton-Smith in his brief discussion in *Ambiguity of Play* (2001).

Although Bakhtin never studied young children or play, Sutton-Smith's theories about the multiple layers of play can be compared to Bakhtin's carnival. In his multilayered definition of play, Sutton-Smith classifies Bakhtin's theories as a rhetoric of imagination. Sutton-Smith views play as imaginative, spontaneous, unpredictable, flexible, and powerful. These same features also define Bakhtin's notion of carnival and, indeed, make play from the Bakhtinian perspective inappropriate in the eyes of some adults precisely because play is not rational and it escapes adult control. The developmental view of play, according to Sutton-Smith, "is an ideology for the conquest of children's behavior through organizing their play" (2001, 205). In contrast, a Bakhtinian carnivalesque perspective of play and language examines *self* in the relation to the language and actions of *others*.

Bearing this in mind, I compare Bakhtin's ideas of carnival and carnivalesque discourses and actions to pretending in early childhood to provide an alternative to the notion of social pretend play and language. My approach draws on data from two preschool classrooms to investigate the similarities

between Bakhtin's festivals of the Middle Ages and the pretending in which young children engage and to compare carnivalesque discourse with children's talk in pretend play.

First, I offer a brief overview of Bakhtin's notion of carnival and its relationship to play. Then, I present the context for study described in this article followed by an analysis of the specific features of play that demonstrate the similarities between Bakhtin's carnival and children's pretend role play. One caveat: not all Bakhtin's characteristics relating to carnival are included in the data. For illustrations, I draw on previous play literature and on data from play episodes in two preschool classrooms.

Carnival and Preschool Play

Bakhtin wrote about the carnivals and popular festivals of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, tracing the history of class distinction as expressed in monologic versus dialogic modes of communicating. He viewed carnival as an act of rebellion, one of satire and playfulness. He suggested that an individual in the Middle Ages lived two lives—an official life subjected to the hierarchy of the social order and everyday existence and an unofficial carnival life freed of daily social norms and restrictions. In his prologue to *Rabelais and His World*, Michael Holquist urges the reader to approach Bakhtin's work as double voiced—as a scholarly account of a long tradition of folk culture reaching its fullest expression in the Middle Ages and as a subversively satirical attack on many specific aspects of official Stalinist repression in force in the 1930s Soviet Union at the time of Bakhtin's writing (1984b). Bakhtin suggests that the ambivalence of the carnival experience manifests itself in laughter, feasts, and images of the grotesque body.

For Bakhtin “the unofficial carnival is people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter” (1984b, 8). Carnival is a way of breaking down barriers, of overcoming power inequalities and hierarchies. Festive life is achieved through the playful mockery of hierarchical order by individuals oppressed by it. Through free and familiar interactions, carnival offers a temporary way of experiencing the fullness of life.

Similarly, “pretend play can be heavy and light, ritualistic and playful, earnest and frivolous” with an ever-changing heteroglossia of voices (Sutton-Smith 2001, 128). Bakhtin's (1986) ideas of heteroglossia—the presence of two or more

voices or discourses—expresses alternative or conflicting perspectives. Similar to those in Bakhtin's carnival, children also find themselves placed in an official hierarchy that subjects them to the demands, desires, and language of parents, teachers, and society. Children can resist unwanted structure and rules through pretending, which allows them to internalize the words and actions of parents and teachers through a persuasive discourse (Cohen 2010). Children act and speak words in play that are not necessarily their own, but—to echo Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia—they are the official words of parents and society retold in their own words, their unofficial discourse. For example, a child wearing high heels and a long dress addresses another in dramatic play. She screams, "No, you can't eat a cookie before dinner!" The child has transformed her appearance and speech, using the authoritative discourse—the official discourse—of her parents. By doing so, the child has internalized the official discourse of her parents; she has made the words her own internally persuasive words, her own unofficial discourse.

Bakhtin wrote "To be means to communicate" (1984a, 287), reminding us that the words we use have previously established meanings, and thus, we come to be through the *other*—we find our being in the language and actions of the other. Children assimilate both the authoritative and nonauthoritative voices of others through play. In pretend play, children take on roles as they play doctors, mothers, babies, and television characters and vary their voices or their ways of speaking to suit the roles. Bakhtin defines this interaction as "double-voiced speech," or discourse that is "directed toward someone else's speech" (1984a, 185). Through dramatization, children internalize the words of others and redefine those words to establish their own voice (Cohen 2009). The self or individual child is caught up in the other through mockeries and inversions that typify Bakhtin's carnival.

Background and Context

My inquiry into the subject involves a three-month study of two preschool classrooms and uses an approach informed by a few interpretive methods (Cor-saro 2003, 2005; Hughes 2001; Sutterby 2005). We try to "make sense" of circumstances "within a cultural framework of socially constructed and shared meanings," and we "create and re-create our social world as a dynamic meaning system, that is, a system that changes over time" (Hughes 2001, 35). This

approach involves trying to “understand socially constructed and shared meanings and re-present them as theories of human behavior” (Hughes 2001, 36).

Children’s social worlds change as they move beyond their families and interact with peers in organized play groups and preschools. Young children participate in role-play routines to transform the confusions and ambiguities they find in the adult world (Corsaro 1990). My study explores students’ use of double-voiced speech and the status quo to negotiate their place in the world. Specifically, in two early-childhood classrooms, I focus on childhood play and discourse using Bakhtin’s ideas of carnival.

Participants

The participants included students in a preschool program located in a culturally diverse suburb of Long Island, New York. My study investigated two classes: One class held fourteen three-year-old children (nine males and five females); The other class consisted of eighteen four-year-olds (five males and thirteen females). Two teachers supervised each class. The participants attended a half-day session five days per week. The three-year-olds had a 3.75-hour school day, whereas the four-year-old children had a 4.75-hour day. The majority of the children came from middle- to upper middle-income families. When the study began, the ages of the children ranged from thirty-seven months (three years, one month) to sixty-one months (five years, one month). The preschoolers represent a variety of cultures including Greek, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, German, African American, Iranian, and Russian.

Setting

The school used a play-based curriculum. Indoor and outdoor play occurred for fifty to sixty minutes per day. The classrooms included a library, writing area, art area, math area, science center for exploration, and interest centers for dramatic play and play with blocks. The children constructed their own play and explorations with a variety of materials in both planned activities and open play areas, and they had free access to playmates and all materials within the classroom. The teachers moved freely around the room, observed the children’s activities, and offered guidance or additional materials to them when necessary.

My research assistant and I observed and video recorded the children in each classroom’s family-center play area. The materials in the family corner consisted of a miniature refrigerator, microwave oven, stove, and a small table with chairs. Kitchen utensils, such as pots, pans, and dishes in a variety of sizes and

shapes, fueled the children's play. The children also used recycled telephones and computer keyboards. The dress-up corner contained a wide variety of materials, including jewelry, clothes, costumes, and bolts of fabric.

Data Sources and Approaches to Analysis

I spent the previous year at the school, where I also offered professional training for teachers. I had built relationships that I hoped would minimize the ethical problems of the child-adult research relationship (Lahman 2008). The teachers and children were comfortable with me, and they regarded my presence as another teacher in the classroom. I obtained parental permission to video record the preschoolers. The teachers offered helpful suggestions for equipment setup and for working around the routines and activities of their classrooms. A trained graduate assistant and I sat in the dramatic-play area and used a digital video camera to record conversations and role-play interactions. We sat in chairs during the taping to make our presence less intimidating to the children, as suggested in Fletcher, Price, and Branen (2010). The teachers continued to interact with children in the art, literacy, sensory, manipulative, and block centers, but they did not enter the dramatic play while I recorded the children's play. We collected twelve hours of video data from January to March in both preschool classes.

We examined video tapes for ways in which children's pretense related to Bakhtin's carnival. I used an established definition of a play episode as the unit of analysis for the video-tape data, specifically "an interactive, continuous play unit based on children's sustained involvement and duration during play" (Corsaro 2003; Löfdahl 2006; Van Hoorn et al. 2010). An episode began when children (or an individual child) engaged in a conversation in the dramatic-play area. It was terminated when a player (or players) left the setting, when a new player entered the drama center, when the theme or topic of play conversation changed, or when the time allocated for free play ended. I used a total of 108 episodes (54 from each age group) of pretend-play episodes for a microanalysis of play texts. I analyzed discrepant cases or short scripts focusing on children's language and play interactions, as suggested by Corsaro (2003) and Sutterby (2005). We viewed the videos, noting which interactions were carnivalesque. We analyzed internally persuasive discourse and actions in transcripts, as well as authoritative discourse and actions. Through study of children's dramatic play, we aimed to identify and describe the similarities between pretend role play and Bakhtin's carnival and to examine how children resisted authority and parodied adult styles and discourses in the carnivalesque world of social pretend role play.

Carnival	Social pretend play
Public square	Drama center
Use of masks	Dress-up clothes and props
Carnival misalliances	Chaotic, disorderly
Official and unofficial discourse	Double-voice Discourse
Boundaries are overturned and re-created	Rules and character roles change
Laughter, grotesquerie, profanity	Humor, body postures, "bathroom language"

Figure 1. A comparison of carnival to social pretend play

Findings

This study, then, compares Bakhtin's ideas of carnival and carnivalesque discourses to social pretend role play. It investigates similarities between Bakhtin's festivals of the Middle Ages and young children's pretense and compares carnivalesque discourses with children's talk in pretend play. First, Bakhtin's analysis of *Rabelais* and Bakhtin's characteristics of carnival are compared to the preschool-classroom environment. An analysis of carnivalesque discourse in pretend-play episodes follows. I present and discuss the data with examples from transcribed videos and a comparison of carnival to social pretend play (see figure 1).

Similarities between Open Spaces

My first considerations involve the similarities between Bakhtin's festivals of the Middle Ages and young children's pretense in early-childhood preschool classrooms. Both have designated open spaces where all children can participate and assume the roles—and the consciousness—of characters. Carnival brought everyone together in a "true feast of time, feast of becoming, change, and renewal" (Bakhtin 1984b, 10). The carnivals provided a commentary on the domination of the masters whom the serfs despised. Serfs used the wild play of the carnival as a form of revolution. In contrast, pretense offers children opportunities to re-create events actually experienced, (e.g., seeing a parent care for a sibling), experiences emanating from fairy tales and popular culture (e.g., Hannah Montana and Cinderella), observations of other people's experiences (e.g., stories of peers), and identifying with the some other self.

Bakhtin argues that carnival belongs fully to all people and occurs on the public square. It is not a spectacle simply to view—like an opera or a baseball game. Carnival, Bakhtin tells us, is a life one lives. “Carnival knows neither stage nor footlights. But the central area could only be the square, for by its very idea carnival *belongs to the whole people*, it is *universal*, *everyone* must participate in its familiar contact” (1984b, 7). Similar to the public square, the dramatic-play area occupies a separate location in the early-childhood classroom where children take on and enact roles in pretend play. It typically contains a kitchen area, a table and chairs, a doll’s high chair, a doll bed, and dolls representing many cultures. The furniture usually separates the area from the larger classroom. All children in a preschool program can participate in dramatic play, which is self-motivated and self-directed, and the area becomes the space where players create a different—even comic—world within the official world of preschool.

A second important similarity of carnival and pretend role play resides in the dressing-up and masquerading common to both rituals. In the public square, people used masks and marionettes to assume new identities and to overcome fear—to free themselves from the pressures of those with power. According to Bakhtin, “These masks take on an extraordinary significance. They grant the right *not* to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right not to be taken literally, not to be oneself” (1981, 163).

Children use dramatic play in the same way. Preschool dramatic-play areas have an assortment of costumes, capes, shirts, scarves, and shoes for pretense. Children wear the hats, scarves, and jackets as they take on roles of mother, father, baby, and community workers. They use realistic props, such as telephones, toy food, dishes, and stuffed animals, as they pretend to eat dinner, celebrate a birthday, or work in a home office as adults do. When a child pretends to be, for example, a farmer, he dons a straw hat and directs other players; he is using his imagination to be another person. The straw hat symbolizes the child’s role as a farmer, and the child develops his subjectivity through shared meaning of the other in his present or past experiences. Consider an example of children dressing up in Halloween costumes and dance attire.

EXAMPLE 1. This episode demonstrates the children’s uses of costume to help them assume new roles.

Sara to Vanessa and Elena: “This is going to be for me.”

(Sara takes a ballerina tu-tu from the clothes rack. She puts it on and spins around three times.)

Vanessa to Sara, Elena, and Jessenia: "This is going to be for us."

(Each player dresses in different ballerina attire and parades around the dramatic-play area showing the classmates their attire.)

Sara in a high-pitched voice to all: "I'm going to wear these here!"

(Sara takes a bride veil, puts it on backwards, and uses it as a headband.)

Elena to all: "We need something for our baby, and this will be for our baby."

(Elena takes a tiger outfit from the dress-up box for the baby.)

Vanessa to all: "This is going to be for me."

(Vanessa takes a large blanket, wraps it around her waist, and struts her backside back and forth as she walks).

As Bakhtin's carnival goers do with their masks, the children transform themselves—in this case, into adults getting ready for a party. The children use their bodies and costumes in a carnivalesque manner to parody adults. No longer preschool children, they are elaborately dressed adult party goers, and their experience becomes embodied as they spin in place and parade around the drama center. The girls' discourses take on a high vocal pitch, reflecting social knowledge of adult females excited about their appearance. Through such pretense with clothes and props, children work out the tensions and paradoxes of the uncertainties of the official adult world that surrounds them (Corsaro 2003, 2005).

A third similarity between carnival and pretend role play resides in the planning or progression of playful events. In carnival, new relationships may transform in what Bakhtin calls "the living present" (1984a, 108). During the carnival period, official rules, norms, and values were temporarily suspended to create a more festive life. Carnival practices, such as underwear becoming outerwear, clothes worn inside out, nose picking, and displaying backsides were common during festivals. The children in our study did not show their backsides nor display their underwear, but on occasion they reversed gender roles.

The unpredictability of Bakhtin's carnival alliances is echoed in Fromberg's (2002) and Vander Ven's (2006) comparisons of play to chaos theory and in Sutton-Smith's (2001) and Hendrick's (2009) disorderly play frameworks. When children play, they sometimes engage in chaotic experiences that include a loss of control, surprise, and disequilibrium (Sutton-Smith 2001). This is a form of

“rebellion—the thwarting of more powerful others—as well as attempts at control of and letting go of restraints” (Hendricks 2009, 29). Vander Ven’s (2006) views are based on two principles: Play is a complex, adaptive system that generates other complex adaptive systems; Play is essential for young children to experience pervasive chaos and to identify themselves as complex adaptive beings.

EXAMPLE 2. Three girls are in the dramatic-play area. Naomi is pretending to be a horse. Vanessa is throwing food. And Anna is throwing money, calling the coins “sprinkles.”

Naomi: “Neigh, neigh.”

(Naomi gallops around the play area.)

Vanessa to Naomi: “I’m getting the food for you. Stop, Horsie!”

(Vanessa walks to the refrigerator.)

Naomi: “Neigh, neigh, neigh, neigh! Neigh, neigh, neigh, neigh! Neigh, neigh, neigh, neigh!”

(Naomi changes her body position and begins crawling to the refrigerator. In response, Vanessa laughs, removes the play food from the refrigerator, and begins to throw it at Naomi. She continues laughing and throwing food until the refrigerator is empty and a banana hits Anna.)

Anna to Vanessa: “Stop throwing food Vanessa! OK that’s enough food for the horsie! Vanessa! That’s *enough food!*”

Naomi to all: “Neigh, neigh, neigh, neigh!”

Anna to Vanessa: “We need to pay for the food for our horse. Help me with the money.”

(Anna begins throwing the play money in the air. Vanessa also throws the money. Both are laughing.)

Anna to Vanessa: “It’s sprinkles! Sprinkles! Sprinkles!”

This episode illustrates that children enjoy being silly and rambunctious when they pretend. The girls create a culture of laughter, generating chaos and disorder. Vanessa and Anna seek excitement through a lack of control and from the responses they muster by throwing food and money. Naomi transforms herself into a horse and neighs. Her carnivalesque movements alternate between galloping around the dramatic-play area and crawling on her hands and knees. With every movement, her head rocks from side to side. Both her near-grotesque laughter and her body movements contain something of Bakhtin’s carnival.

Taken together, the similarities suggest that preschool classrooms mirror Bakhtin's festivals of the Middle Ages with their open spaces, their use of masks, and their chaotic experiences. Next, I compare carnivalesque discourses and children's talk in pretend role play. This includes double-voiced discourse, role reversals, laughter, grotesque realism, and profanity.

Double-Voiced Discourse

For Bakhtin, carnival was a place "for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play acted form *a new mode of inter-relationships between individuals*, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical discourse of non-carnival life" (1984a, 123). During carnival, the masters and serfs temporarily loosened their constraining relations. In carnival squares, people worked out new relationships and overthrew existing patterns of hierarchies. For Bakhtin, a free and familiar attitude not specifically related to carnival activity appeared that temporarily suspended certain values, ideas, and norms. This suspension of social hierarchies and conventions also involved a different mode of communication among the people, a mode sometimes linked to eccentricity.

In carnival, according to Bakhtin, a kind of eccentricity "permits the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves." Carnival allowed for a discourse that was "freed from authority of all hierarchical positions," a discourse that let participants express their feelings and communicate who they were in a way that permitted discovery of their true identity (Bakhtin 1984a, 123). "During carnival time a special type of communication evolved that led to the creation of a special form of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other" (Bakhtin 1984b, 10). Similar to the open forms of communication expressed in carnival were Bakhtin's ideas of heteroglossia and use of a "double-voiced discourse" (Bakhtin 1984a, 185) that researchers applied to children's pretense (Cohen 2009; Duncan and Tarulli 2003). In carnival style, children use a double-voiced discourse in playful dialogic interactions to free themselves from the authority of adults and to develop a better understanding of their social significance.

In view of Bakhtin's ideas of ideological becoming (1981), I argue that children, as they engage in pretense, try to form their own individual ideology (and, hence, identity) by appropriating others' words, language, and forms of discourse. In Bakhtin's discussion of the process of ideological becoming, he distinguished between two different types of discourse: authoritative and internally persuasive.

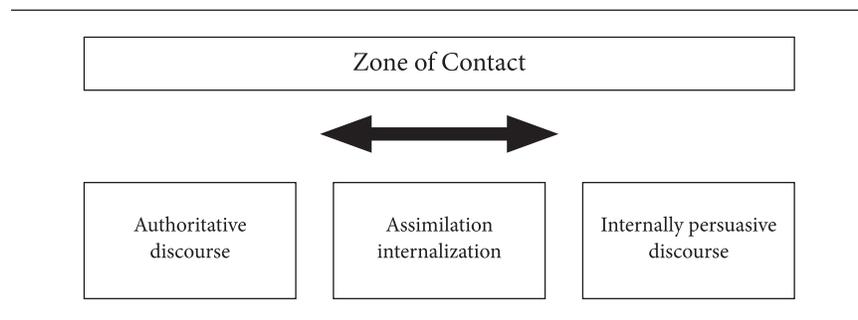


Figure 2. The zone of contact

Double-voiced discourse occurs when diverse voices interact and struggle to assimilate authoritative discourse (official discourse) and internally persuasive discourse (unofficial discourse). Authoritative discourse is fused with authority and power, and it is located in a distanced zone, one connected with a past higher in the hierarchy. “Its authority was already acknowledged in the past. It is a *prior* discourse.” (Bakhtin 1981, 342).

In contrast to authoritative discourse, unofficial or internally persuasive discourse is more flexible and dynamic. With internally persuasive discourse, we appropriate the words of others, redefine them, and establish our own voice. The “internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else’s and applied to new material, new conditions in an intense struggle with other internally persuasive discourses” (Bakhtin 1981, 345).

I suggest that these struggles—as with the discourses of adults and children—occur in what Bakhtin calls a “contact zone” (1981, 345). Here, the contact zone designates the social space in which adults and children meet when they engage in discourse that often conflicts. By appropriating an authoritative discourse in pretense, children develop a sense of identity that helps them contextualize the conflict. Ideological development, according to Bakhtin, is a “struggle within us for hegemony among various verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values” (Bakhtin 1981, 346). Below I provide an example of double-voiced discourse. A three-year-old girl role plays her mother attempting to feed her young child hot dogs.

EXAMPLE 3. The scene begins as Harry walks over to Sonia who is cooking at the stove.

Sonia to Harry: "You can't touch this!"

Harry to Sonia: "Why not?"

(Sonia cooks and does not answer Harry. Harry gets beaded necklaces from the table and puts them around his neck. He takes food from the basket. Sonia walks over to him.)

Harry to himself: "Hot dog, Hot dog!"

(Harry picks a hot dog out of the basket and asks to eat it.)

Sonia to Harry: "Excuse you!"

(She grabs food away from Harry.)

Sonia to Harry: "You can't touch anything."

(Sonia delivers her directive in a high-pitched voice and shakes her finger at him.)

Harry to Sonia: "What can I have?"

(Harry replies with a low, submissive tone.)

Sonia to Harry: "Not right now. This is for us!"

(Sonia continues to take food from the food basket and puts items on the plate.)

Harry mimics Sonia verbally repeating her and making face gestures. He continues to pick things out of the basket and attempts to fit them into a frankfurter roll.)

Sonia to Harry: "Here you go."

(Sonia puts a food item into a frankfurter roll for him.)

Harry to Sonia: "Hot Dog."

Sonia to Harry: "No, that's your fork! And this is your hot dog."

(Harry leaves the area, and Sonia continues to put food in a pot.)

Illustrating Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse, Sonia takes the adult authoritative role of Harry's mother. She assimilates the authoritative discourse of her parents and care givers and freely repeats and internalizes them as her own words. Harry asks for hot dogs, but Sonia uses an authoritative tone to tell him not to begin eating the food. Harry replies with a submissive discourse to ask his mother what he could eat. After Sonia abruptly tells Harry what he can eat, he mocks her words. Sonia uses dialogue to parody an official parental discourse, while Harry playfully parodies his pretend mother. Sonia employs a demanding, high-pitched tone as she reprimands Harry. Sonia and Harry reconstruct reality rather than mimic it. Sonia and Harry interact by pretending and by inverting real-life hierarchies. They comically exaggerate

situations reflecting relationships between authority figures and their subordinates (parents and children).

Like Bakhtin's carnival, pretend play thus appears to be the point at which children use ideas of official and unofficial discourse to develop a sense of identity. The development of self occurs in the context of play mediated by different words and forms of discourse by others. Children use their carnival bodies and voices in play to constitute a social understanding of the adult world. Ambiguity is linked to the chaos of pretend play. Carnival laughter and play are ambivalent because the official and unofficial spheres of discourse transform each other. In the interplay between the two poles, a new reality emerges in the zone of contact. A child cannot challenge adult words outwardly; instead, the child internalizes and parodies it in pretend play.

Rule and Role Reversal

Bakhtin also describes how carnival participants overturned boundaries by reversing roles. The mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king, he contends, is carnival's playful manipulation of the everyday world. The king's authority gets reversed by mock priests, bishops, and others with less authority: "Crowning/decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the *joyful relativity* of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position. Crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start. And he who is crowned is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester; this act, as it were, opens and sanctifies the inside-outside world of carnival" (1984a: 124).

Bakhtin argues that carnival and its ritual acts are reminders that structures are relative and transitory. "Carnival celebrates the shift itself, the process of replaceability, and not the precise item that is replaced" (1984a, 125). For similar reasons, children produce pretend roles that relate to experiences from their real lives (family roles or the occupations of family members) or directly imitate adult models. Just as carnival participants reverse rules and roles of social hierarchies for renewal and change, pretend play allows a reversal of both rules and roles. As we know, the contact zone forms the social space where authoritative and internally persuasive discourses meet. There, by appropriating an authoritative discourse, children develop a sense of identity, a sense of self: they develop their own subjectivity. "Bakhtin (1981) argues that becoming a self involves positioning oneself with respect to other speakers whose words (and relational

stances, characteristic acts, and viewpoints) one ventriloquates” (Wortman 2001, 147). Thus, by appropriating, speaking, and changing character roles, children learn about the points of view of other people and expand their own concepts.

According to Corsaro, “appropriation and embellishment of adult models is about status, power, and control” (2003, 112). Children use dramatic license during imaginative play to project a future where they will take charge and control of themselves. Subsequently, children frequently assume roles influenced by popular culture, which—not surprisingly—became evident in this study. Television and movie characters strongly influenced many play episodes. The unofficial interests of the children entered the dramatic-play area, shaping their experiences and subjectivities through discourse and play.

EXAMPLE 4. Four-year-old Vanessa took on the persona of Miley Cyrus, star of the popular *Hannah Montana* television series. The scene demonstrated how children played with and talked about the meanings and messages of pop culture.

Vanessa to Julie: “This is Hannah Montana.”

(Vanessa puts on a short little skirt over her jogging suit. She grabs a toy guitar and begins circling around the other players tossing her hair and wiggling her upper body.)

Elena to all: “Hannah Montana!”

(Elena uses a high pitch as she screams the star’s name.)

Mae to all: “Get the Poppins!” [another word for Munchkins or small doughnut balls]

(Mae finds a Munchkin container and fills it with plastic desserts. Carrying the container, she pretends to distribute poppins to Vanessa and other players.)

Ilene to all: “Poppins! We love Poppins! Poppins!”

(The girls sit at a table pretending to eat doughnuts. Ilene uses a high-pitched voice to tell the other players she loves the pretend sweets. To underscore the point, she rubs her stomach as she talks. Vanessa, standing over the other players, also pretends to eat doughnuts.)

Vanessa to Ilene: “How about Hannah Montana?”

(Vanessa reminds the girls of her role, Hannah Montana.)

Elena to Vanessa: “I love Hannah Montana!”

Ilene to Vanessa: “Me too.”

Elena to Vanessa: “Hannah Montana! Hannah Montana! Some-

one stole my money, Hannah Montana!”

(Elena leaves the table and begins playing with a toy cash register. She tells Vanessa that her money was stolen. It seems that Elena thinks Hannah Montana has power and control over other players.)

Ilene to Mae: “I changed my name.”

Elena to Mae: “You have to change our names only in the family center, okay?”

Vanessa to Ilene: “You like my friend’s broom. I’m not a witch.”

(Vanessa puts a replica of a broomstick between her legs and pretends to fly.)

Vanessa to all: “I’m not a witch even though I have a broom. I’m Hannah Montana. I’m Hannah Montana with a flying broom.”

(For Vanessa, perhaps, the broom and act of flying symbolizes the freedom and the power movie stars enjoy in our culture.)

As popular culture enters the drama center, the authoritative discourse of the media and internal discourse of the children cross lines. Children appropriate the actions and language of super heroes and Disney characters. Thus, they temporarily overturn rank and privilege. In playing a popular culture icon, Vanessa clearly adopts the role of Miley Cyrus. She mimics a voice with a soft pitch and an occasional giggle, and she tosses her hair and struts around the play area. Moreover, she speaks more formally, carefully announcing her role (Hannah Montana) to the other players and reminding them that that they need to love and adore her. Elena, Mae, and Ilene circle Vanessa, verbalizing their love and devotion by giving her doughnuts. Elena reinforces Vanessa’s status by requesting help when her money gets stolen. As with Bakhtin’s notion of the process of replaceability, rules can be broken, and Elena tells Mae that names have to be changed in the family center. The broom and act of flying signify the freedom and status of movie stars.

This dramatic-play scenario resembles the symbolic inversion of the usual hierarchies and the reimagining of rules and roles in Bakhtin’s depiction of carnival. Bakhtin considers the ritual crowning and decrowning of carnival kings as a strategy of covert conceptualizing by medieval serfs longing to garner new power, a longing controlled and suppressed by church, state, and feudal society. For Vanessa, new power emerges in her role as Miley Cyrus. Her friends circle around her, glorifying her presence. The carnivalesque voices that emerge are voices of the other. Children acquire the power of the represented through pretending.

Carnival players not only suspended all rules and roles, they spoke the language of the carnival, one that was a free and unofficial discourse; subsequently certain activities emerged. Bakhtin says, “they act and speak in a zone of familiar contact with an open-ended present to *consciously* rely on experience and on *free invention*” (Bakhtin 1984a, 108). This brings us to the last function of Bakhtin’s carnival, strong unofficial discourse, including laughter, grotesque acts, and obscenities.

Laughter

During carnival, participants established a type of expression in which they were able to communicate openly and in ways that exercised freedom from societal constraints through (among other things) laughter, grotesque acts, and profanities. Carnival abuses and the term *grotesque* were not negative for Bakhtin, rather they connected to real life as a way to mock fear and generate renewal and rebirth. “Laughter embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with *crisis* itself. Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter). This is profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world” (Bakhtin 1984a, 164).

Unfortunately, there is little research about laughter in play contexts (Bergen 2006). Play, of course, relates to humor, but few studies of play include investigations about humor (Bergen 2006). Lee describes carnival as serving a ritualized response to authoritative structures “in which humor serves to undermine authoritative dominant discourses” (2004, 133). Nursery-school humor produces actions and language that involves clowning around, playing the fool, making faces, and eliciting paralinguistic imitations (Bariaud 1989). Sometimes children take the role of animals and bark like puppies. Laughing, giggling, and feelings of gaiety prevail. Assuming the roles of animals expresses the power through which children exercise authority over the pretend dog or cat (Corsaro 2003) as well as one in which they find great joy, even those playing the cat or the dog. We observed children laughing and joking in the dramatic-play area, including a play episode involving two girls transforming themselves into animals.

EXAMPLE 5. Animal role play in this episode involves three children. Mae takes the role of a human, and Elena and Julie play animal roles. The episode concludes with a drive in Mae’s car.

Elena to Mae and Julie: "Oh, I'm the kitty too. Meow, meow."
(Elena moves her tongue to her hand, pretending to lick her paw.)
Julie to Elena: "I'm not a kitty. I'm going to be a dog. Woof, woof."
(Julie uses a harsh, rough voice to portray her dog character.)
Mae to Julie: "I made this leash for you. Do you like it?"
(With a grin, Mae shows Julie, her pretend dog, a beaded necklace.)
Elena to Mae: "There's no more."
(Elena notes that there are no more necklaces. She abandons her kitty character to let Mae know she doesn't have a leash.)
Julie to Mae: "Excuse me. I need to look for more. Here."
(Julie, momentarily stepping outside her dog character, securing another necklace from the plastic bin. She giggles as she ties her pretend leash to Elena's new leash.)
(Mae ties the leashes of the pretend dog and kitten together, and both girls begin crawling around the floor.)
Elena to all: "Meow, meow!"
(Elena moves her tongue to her hand, pretending to clean her paw.)
Mae to Julie: "Guys, . . . Let's go!"
(Mae takes the two pretend leashes and begins walking her crawling dog and kitty.)
Elena: "I got two pieces for you."
(Elena begins rolling around the floor, laughing and tugging on the pretend leash.)
Elena to Mae: "Meow, meow!"
Julie to Elena: "You be a good kitty. Woof, woof!"
Mae to Julie and Elena: "Come on! We're driving a car."
(Mae pulls the two girls over to a chair that signifies her car. She unhooks the leashes and her dog and kitty. They squat and pretend to drive off with their owner, howling and laughing.)

The humorous antics of the three girls illustrate small acts of Bakhtinian grotesquerie. For the children, animal roles offer freedom from ascribed social roles and statuses (Myers 2002). Myers found that children playing animal roles usually step out of their animal role to negotiate the play frame. Here, Elena and Julie negotiate the role of kitty and dog, while Mae takes on a human role. Mae places beaded necklaces around Elena and Julie's bodies to leash them and assert power and control. Mae holds her body in a tall, upright position as she walks

her dog and kitty to the pretend car. Elena and Julie scamper on hands and knees and roll around the room as they transform themselves into submissive pets.

This example of playful laughter and mockery of social status fits well with Lee's (2004) description of Bakhtin's carnival rituals as a way to undermine authoritative and dominant discourses. Elena and Julie become animals (role reversal) and smile, laugh, and giggle while using unofficial carnival voices. Mae (the pet owner) assimilates and internalizes the words of authority in the contact zone when she says, "Guys, . . . Let's go!" and when she walks her pets to the car and says, "Come on! We're driving a car." Calling to mind Bakhtin's depiction of laughter as a form of renewal, an air of amusement engulfs this scene as the three players enter a different and shared being. They use a kind of humor and play that much resembles unofficial carnival voices and body postures and movements.

Grotesque Realism

According to Bakhtin, laughter has the "power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, and peer at it from above" (1981, 23). And if we follow Bakhtin's logic, it was precisely grotesque realism that fosters carnivalesque ambivalence. Laughter and grotesque realism related to the cycle of degrading (in the grave) and renewal (in the womb) for the purpose of transformation. For Bakhtin, "to degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and womb. It is always conceiving" (1984a, 21). During carnival festivities, it was appropriate to degrade the king and clergy—this was the people's carnival, a way to turn the official spectacle inside-out and upside-down for purposes of transformation and renewal.

An ambivalence also appears as children appropriate words and actions that belong to different worlds, the inner world and the outer world, the official world and the unofficial world. Pretense often involves assuming the voice of mothering and the role of caring for babies. Children will produce a stream of talk to another child or to a doll who plays the role of baby. This talk can be nurturing, controlling, humorous, or instructive. The following is a conversation preparing for the birth and the delivery of a baby.

EXAMPLE 6. Elena, Sara, and Juliana are playing in the drama center. Elena announces she is going to have a baby.

Elena into the toy telephone: "Hello. Yeah, uh huh. We're supposed to be having a baby tonight."

Sara to Elena: "Can I be the baby?"

Elena to Sara: "Okay."

Elena into the telephone: "And we have a baby right now."

Sara to Elena: "Pretend I'm still in your tummy."

(Sara squats to the floor in an upright fetal position. The small body posture represents the baby. She places herself in close proximity to Elena.)

Elena into the telephone: "Anna, she's still in my tummy. Oh! Oh! She's not coming out today, but soon she's coming out."

(In a high-pitched voice, Elena cries and rubs her belly.)

Sara to Elena: "I'm still in your tummy, right?"

(Sara remains in a low fetal position on the floor. Juliana enters the play scene.)

Sara to Juliana: "I'm going to be the baby, and I'm going to come out of Emma's tummy."

Elena to Juliana: "I'm going to call the doctor! "Oh! Oh! Oh!"

(Elena bends over pretending to go into labor.)

Juliana to Sara: "Come on baby! Come on out!"

(With a high-pitched voice, Juliana tells Sara she needs to be born.)

Elena to Juliana: "No, she's still in my stomach!"

(Elena rubs her belly and pushes her upper body forward to indicate that a baby is in her stomach. Juliana puts a tablecloth on a table.)

Sara to Juliana: "I'm still in Emma until she pushes. Whaaaa! Whaaa!"

(Sara voices a crying baby.)

Juliana to all: "I can't wait to see this baby. That is the fun part. Oh, she will get presents."

(Elena stands next to the table. She moves her body back and forth.)

Elena to Juliana: "My baby's out of my tummy tonight! This is my baby."

(Elena laughs as she strokes Sara's hair.)

This example demonstrates young children reenacting the birth of a baby. They use vocal effects to represent pain and a baby's cry. Throughout the episode, the girls use body postures and movements such as squatting in a fetal position, rubbing, and swaying the upper torso. Spreading a tablecloth suggests a bed for the newborn baby. Although the children do not display their backsides or the act of defecating, their movements and voices evoke grotesque humor.

Profanity

In addition to laughter and grotesque realism, open communication at the medieval carnival included profanities and abusive language. Bakhtin (1984b) viewed profanities and abusive language in the carnival square as a new form of communication. There, profanities related to laughter and became ambivalent in relation to status and power. Profanities were "excluded from the sphere of official speech because they broke its norms; they were therefore transferred to the familiar sphere of the marketplace" (Bakhtin 1984b, 17).

Profanity and cursing occur throughout society, and worry about the effects of exposing children to taboo language limits research about children's cursing (Jay, King, and Duncan 2006). Even fewer studies consider cursing in play. Jay (1992) found that children acquire curse words as soon as they speak, and cursing persists throughout life into old age. In a study of children's cursing, age twelve months to twelve years, Jay (1992, 2000) found in a 660-word sample, infants as young as one year repeated curse words they heard (e.g., fuck). "Children's production grew from three or four curse words at age 2 for both girls and boys, to 23 curse words for girls and 17 for boys ages three and four. By the age of 5 years, boys produce more dirty words in public than girls and this trend continues through adulthood" (Jay 1992, 37). Sutton-Smith and Abrams (1978) examined five- to eleven-year-old children for the presence of overt psychosexual elements in children's spontaneously reported narrative fictions. They found that boys selected psychosexual and obscene stories in greater numbers than did girls, who told only romance stories. Thus, cursing appeared to be related to gender as boys produced more profanities than girls in preschool and primary grades.

Typically, educators of young children prohibit the use of profanity because such language disturbs adults. In play, young children's use of abusive words is often associated with bathroom language such as "pee-pee" or "poopy-head." Sutton-Smith and Abrams (1978) found a younger child finds humor in using words directly for sexual organs or bodily functions ("pee-

pee,” “poo-poo,”), but children at about age eight and after, spoke taboo words (“tits,” “cunts,” “eating shit”) freely. Katch’s (2001) and Wright and her colleagues’ (2007) analysis of young children’s stories during play document profanity and bathroom talk. Katch concluded that the widespread use of cursing in popular entertainment appears to partly explain for the appearance of curse words in preschool play. “Children repeat the words they hear from the media, with explicit language of sex and violence, even when they don’t understand what the words mean” (37).

My observations concur with previous research (Katch 2001; Sutton-Smith and Abrams 1978; Wright et al. 2007). The children in my study did not curse, but in a few episodes the children in the four-year-old class used bathroom language. There was no evidence of bathroom language with the three-year-old children.

EXAMPLE 7. In a short exchange, Conrad and Naomi speak bathroom language.

Conrad to Naomi: “Poopy.”
(*He hands her pretend food.*)
Naomi to Conrad: “Ewe!”
(*Naomi tightens her face and closes her eyes.*)
Conrad to Naomi: “Eat it.”
Naomi to Conrad: “I don’t like it.”
(*Conrad walks away*)

Parents use words like “pee-pee” and “poo-poo.” Conrad internalizes the words of parental authority and uses this bathroom language in a humorous, playful way. When Naomi does not respond to Conrad’s humor, he walks away.

Speech styles and gestures were frank and free in the carnival square, “permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times” (Bakhtin 1984b,10). This pervasive sense of satire and two styles of speaking interacted in the zone of contact (Bakhtin 1981). In comparison, the discourse in our example of pretend play may have reflected the social norms of the children’s classroom and adult norms. To the point here, pretend play is carnival-like in the sense that the preschool children search for truth as they take on the character and voice the words of adults and authority figures.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to describe, analyze, and evaluate children's play using examples of play episodes and play literature within the context of Bakhtin's ideas of carnival. Extending Bakhtin's carnival to pretend play illustrates several similarities between the festivals of the Middle Ages and pretend role play. From an analysis of play episodes, children's cultural narratives were compared to carnival.

First, I identified the public square and early-childhood classroom as open spaces for all to participate in a special type of communication. Participants used the masks and dress-up clothes in both social contexts to present multiple personae and take on different perspectives. Pretense provided arenas for preschool children to escape official channels, resist authority, and generate disorder to gain control of their lives (Corsaro 2005). Next, I demonstrated that children maintain a carnival discourse mixing authoritative and internally persuasive discourse in their contact zones. They laugh, talk loudly, turn things upside down, and have fun. They are able to create a childlike culture of reality through social representations of adult roles and the assimilation of adult dialogue. Finally, I compared Bakhtin's grotesque realism with children's pretense. The children had no boundaries as they moved from one area of the drama center as pretend animals to another as mothers delivering newborn babies. Time was unimportant to them: they overturned roles and rules within two minutes. Indeed, play appears for them to be a "landscape dominated by collective scenes, chaos, actions, cacophonous sounds, and dynamic movement of bodies, identities, and ideologies" (Oksnes 2008, 162).

In relation to the study presented in this article, although the focus was social pretense and double-voiced discourse—not the Middle Ages—the roles and voices of overthrowing authority were manifested in my data. I used an interpretive approach to view development as a process of children's appropriation of their culture, rather than a linear developmental view. In a linear view, childhood passes through developmental stages in which children's cognitive and language abilities are acquired in preparation for adult life. Young children's interpretations of the culture that surrounds them are shaped by their ability to represent the perspective of others and to use objects, body movements, gestures, and language to represent meaning (Corsaro 2005). I demonstrated how children produce their own peer worlds and cultures in the zone of contact by assimilating and appropriating the actions and words of others. I used the

children's play scripts to analyze and interpret through a Bakhtinian lens their making of meaning.

Bakhtin's concepts of carnival as a stance from which to interpret pretend social play has implications for educational researchers, and it suggests further research is needed. Most theories have been based on development in contemporary psychology and education, and early-childhood research and practice continue to accept the power of the guidelines of NAEYC's *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, guidelines that essentially discourage disorderly and carnivalistic play (Kushner 2012). Developmental theories dominate the research: most studies rely on Piaget's cognitive developmental theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural approach (Christie and Roskos 2009; Roskos, et al. 2010). These theories have focused primarily on "developmental outcomes and failed to seriously consider the complexity of social structure and children's collective activities" (Corsaro 2005, 27).

Early-childhood educators and researchers need to expand and deepen play theory (Cohen and Johnson 2011; Johnson 2010) to challenge, destabilize, and harness the potential of multiple perspectives of contemporary thinking about play. Postfoundational perspectives offer knowledge that challenge certainty, order, and age-based stages of play (Grieshaber and McArdle 2010).

I used Bakhtin's carnival theory in a quest for an alternative understanding of the possibilities for examining social pretense and for a possible framework to explore children's social knowledge. Broadly speaking, subjectivity refers to an individual's sense of self. It involves a continual process during which the self develops through interactions and experiences with others (O'Loughlin and Johnson 2010). When we apply Bakhtin's concepts to play analysis, a deeper, more useful view emerges. Children mentally represent, consciously and unconsciously, multiple identities and characters (selves and others) that form their subjectivity.

As children experience what it means to be persons, they must engage in dialogic relations. By participating in dialogue with other players, children develop an understanding of their social worlds and an understanding of self, much like the serfs of medieval Christendom attempting to overturn the social order by irreverence toward the voices of authority. Duncan and Tarulli suggest that children can develop Bakhtin's notion of "ideological becoming of a human being" (2003, 341) in the context of pretend play, and there is evidence for just that in this study. Duncan and Tarulli also argue that "play affords children the necessary distance or *otherness* from which to objectify

and comment on the adult spheres of life” (283), and play can be structured so it challenges adult forms of discourse. The play episodes highlighted in this article resemble Bakhtin’s depictions and analysis of carnival. Educators who approach children’s play from the perspective of Bakhtin’s notions of carnival develop another layer of understanding and come to appreciate the importance that pretend play has on children’s developing of self and understanding of their world, as well as the roles they play in it.

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