

Cultural Models at Play: What Miscommunication Reveals About Shared Social Norms

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In this article, I draw upon ethnographic fieldwork with children aged 7-13 years in Helsinki, Finland, to illustrate how points of tension observed during children's play were a fruitful entry point for anthropological inquiry. My fieldwork in Helsinki consisted of 6 months of participant observation with families, 2 months on summer camps, and 4 months at an after-school club, during which I aimed to identify the social norms and values that underpinned children's everyday lives. In other words, I was interested in how an "ordinary" or "culturally adequate" (Skjær Ulvik 2018) child behaved and interacted with others in this specific context and in the childrearing practices and norms that shaped these behaviours.

Such normative knowledge is the bread and butter of anthropological research but can be difficult to uncover because of its inherently invisible nature (Antweiler 2019). For example, the norms and assumptions that underlie childrearing practices tend to be implicit, unspoken, and shaped by deeply embedded cultural models (D'Andrade and Strauss 1992). They may seem so obvious as to be considered 'natural' and therefore taken for granted by those raised within them (Rogoff 2003; Tudge 2008), which can make such knowledge difficult for both interlocutors to articulate and for anthropologists to identify. During fieldwork, I found that moments of tension between children and miscommunications in the sense of "talking past each other" (Kinloch and Metge 2014) served to make the otherwise invisible cultural norms that underlie children's interactions more explicit. In this article, I illustrate this through an account and interpretation of children playing dodgeball, during which numerous moments of tension unfolded around one child, Leo.¹

Miscommunication During Play

It was the third day of camp, and three 8-year-old girls (Lili, Minttu and Isla) asked to play dodgeball. A camp leader took out balls and two 9-year-old boys, two 7-year-old girls, and I joined in.² They had played dodgeball the previous day and excitedly started a competitive but friendly game. There was a buzz of excited squeals and chatter as they reminded each other of the rules, "*It's ok, you're not out — it bounced before it hit you.*" The mood was relaxed.

Ten-year-old Leo soon joined in. Dodging around the court skilfully, his ball hit Lili's back hard, bringing tears to her eyes. The leader checked on her and asked Leo to play more carefully, saying with a pointed look, "*They are all younger than you.*" Minttu and Isla comforted Lili, loudly suggesting that it was an accident. They started to play again, and Leo soon threw the ball at one of the boys, hitting him on the nose. Leading him to get an ice pack, the leader said in a firmer tone, "*Play nicely [nätisti], the idea is to have fun, not to hurt each other!*" Soon after this, the two youngest girls left the game, shooting looks at Leo.

Leo's eventual win was greeted by silence from the other children, and he left immediately after, saying that the game was boring. The relaxed atmosphere soon returned as the players

cheered for each other, reminded others to get back into the game after a time out, and warned them of incoming balls. When Lili won, everyone clapped and cheered good-naturedly.

Points of Tension and Miscommunication

Rather than interpreting the (mis)communication events themselves (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2007), my interest primarily lies in what these tensions reveal about the underlying assumptions and models of behaviour of the majority group. Leo was a recent migrant to Finland and while his Finnish — the primary language used on camp — was at a basic communicative level, he spoke English well, as did the camp leaders and many children. In the above game, the camp leader spoke in both Finnish and English, and Leo appeared to understand her words; the miscommunication lay rather in how these words were interpreted. For example, the camp leader's disapproval was expressed when she *reminded* Leo of behavioural norms — playing more carefully with children who are younger than him — and attempted to *guide* his behaviour in the right direction by calling on him to “*play nicely.*” Likewise, the children consistently showed their dislike of Leo's play; their silence at his win implied disapproval and was especially clear when contrasted with the support following Lili's win. Leo, however, did not register the signals of disapproval communicated by leaders and his peers as such, and carried on with behaviour his peers later described to me as “*aggressive [aggressiivinen]*” and “*too rough [liian kovaa].*”

Tensions therefore arose when Leo acted in ways that were widely considered to be non-normative, and these moments served to make the (invisible) normative knowledge that was shared by the majority more explicit. In focusing on these tensions, culturally specific strategies for conflict management also became clearer; although no one directly punished him or retaliated, Leo quickly became unpopular with peers and leaders, regardless of factors such as their age or gender, and over the course of the week, many of the children began to avoid him.

Miscommunication as an Entry Point for Inquiry

While the social norms that children were drawing upon in everyday play and peer interactions were otherwise somewhat difficult to identify (Antweiler 2019), the tensions surrounding Leo served to make them more explicit. These moments of miscommunication thus became entry points through which I was able to identify the cultural norms that shaped the behaviour of the group of interest in this study: the “ordinary” Helsinki-based child. In doing so, I recognize that there is always diversity both within and across peer groups (Corsaro and Eder 1990), and the children in this study were no exception. Nevertheless, clear patterns emerged in terms of how the vast majority of children interacted with and reacted to Leo's non-normative behavior. These patterns directed my attention towards, for example, children's strategies of conflict resolution, conflict avoidance, and the preference to disengage from rather than punish disagreeable partners (Sequeira 2023). They also drew my attention to the sparsity of

physicality and aggression amongst children in Helsinki, including playful aggression and rough-and-tumble play, which are widely considered universal features of children's play (Fry 2005).

In summary, I have demonstrated how paying attention to tensions and miscommunications during play can be a fruitful technique in ethnographic research on/with children. In doing so, I suggest that through studying their encounters with and reactions to non-normativity it is possible to generate better understandings of the shared normative assumptions and practices that children are drawing upon in their everyday lives.

Notes

¹ All given names are pseudonyms. Composite persons are not used, but children's backgrounds are not given in detail to maintain anonymity.

² During summer camps I played, ate, and spent time alongside the children, aiming to take on the role of the "honorary child" (Atkinson 2019) whereby I acknowledged my undeniable adulthood while ensuring that children could grant or deny me access to their social worlds.

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Author Biography

Maija-Eliina Sequeira is a doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki. She has carried out ethnographic and experimental research in Finland and Colombia and her doctoral project takes a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach to understanding the socialisation of norms and values related to social hierarchies in these two contexts.

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