



Through race-colored glasses: Preschoolers' pretend play and teachers' ratings of preschooler adjustment[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated relations between preschoolers' pretend play, examiner-rated adjustment, and teachers' reports of educational and social adjustment in a large and racially diverse sample. Preschoolers ($N = 171$; $M_{\text{age}} = 49.25$ months, $SD = 2.76$; 89.5% non-White; 50.9% female) completed a standardized assessment of pretend play during a laboratory visit and teachers rated their academic and relational adjustment 3 months later. Interactive effects by child race were evaluated in light of prior suggestions that relations between children's creative expression and teacher-rated adjustment may vary by child race. There were no significant race differences in observers' ratings of preschoolers' pretend play, examiners' ratings of child adjustment, or teachers' ratings of child adjustment. Imaginative and expressive play features were positively related to examiners' ratings of child ego-resilience for all children in the laboratory setting. However, child race moderated relations between these same play features and teachers' ratings of preschooler adjustment in the classroom, even after child age, child IQ, family socioeconomic status, teacher-child racial congruence, teacher familiarity with the child, and child gender were held constant. Among Black preschoolers, imaginative and expressive pretend play features were associated with teachers' ratings of less school preparedness, less peer acceptance, and more teacher-child conflict, whereas comparable levels of imagination and affect in pretend play were related to positive ratings on these same measures for non-Black children. These results suggest that teachers may ascribe differential meaning to child behaviors as a function of child race. Implications for child development, teacher training, and early education are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Between the sensorimotor play behaviors of infancy and the rule-governed exchanges of childhood lie the fantastical machinations of preschoolers' pretend play (Piaget, 1962). In pretend play, children treat one thing "as if" it were another (Fein, 1981; Lillard, 2001). In doing so, they can metabolize overwhelming affects, negotiate problems and challenges "as if" they were happening, and generate novel narratives to support a host of positive cognitive and affective developmental outcomes (Göncü & Gaskins, 2007;

Pellegrini, 2011; Russ, 1993, 2004; Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsch-Pasek, 2006).

Although theory and research suggest that culture influences the expression of pretend play as a context for development, the majority of extant research has focused on White European American children (Gaskins, Haight, & Lancy, 2007; Rogoff, 2003; Roopnarine, Johnson, & Hooper, 1994). Thus, little is known about if or how pretend play features vary across racial groups within the United States, and even less is known about if or how the developmental correlates and consequences of pretend play vary across racial groups. This investigation sought to fill this gap by evaluating the form and meaning of pretend play across groups of Hispanic, Black, White, and bi/multiracial preschoolers.

This study employed multiple methods and informants to examine preschoolers' pretend play and its adaptive correlates in a large and racially diverse sample. The first goal of this investigation was to explore whether or not central features of preschoolers' pretend play with respect to expressed imagination and affect during a standardized play task varied across Hispanic, Black, White, and bi/multiracial preschoolers. The second goal of this study was to determine whether preschoolers' imagination and affect expression in pretend play were associated with children's adaptive

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functioning as rated by school teachers and laboratory examiners. Finally, given evidence that the meaning ascribed to children's behavior and creative expressions by others can vary across racial groups (Chang & Demyan, 2007; Chang & Sue, 2003; Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Scott, 1999; Sonuga-Barke, Minocha, Taylor, & Sandberg, 1993), the third goal of this study was to explore these relations across racial groups.

1.1. Pretend play, pretense, and positive development

Heralded as the "leading activity" of the preschool period (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003), classical and contemporary theories emphasize the role of pretend play as a powerful mechanism of and context for child development (Freud, 1961; Göncü & Gaskins, 2007; Piaget, 1962; Russ, 1993, 2004; Singer et al., 2006; Vygotsky, 1967; Winnicott, 1971). Studies employing varied designs and methods converge to suggest that pretend play facilitates cognitive and socio-affective development by creating a safe space for children to express their interest in and achieve comfort with novel ideas, divergent perspectives, and a range of emotional experiences and expressions. Both correlative and training studies support the salience of pretend play for emerging literacy skills, divergent thinking, problem solving, and coping (Christiano & Russ, 1996; Roskos & Neuman, 1998; Russ, Robins, & Christiano, 1999; Wywer & Spence, 1999; Zigler, Singer, & Bishop-Josef, 2004). Similarly, pretend play may support children's socioemotional development, including their comfort with emotion expression, capacity to access and apply emotion to solve problems, perspective taking skills, and behavioral adjustment (Bretherton, 1989; Connolly & Doyle, 1984; Galyer & Evans, 2001; Lindsey and Colwell, 2003; Seja & Russ, 1999; Youngblade & Dunn, 1995).

Ongoing controversies regarding the importance and impact of pretend play on development highlight the need for clarity regarding the specific play constructs under investigation in empirical studies (Lillard et al., 2013). This investigation focused on preschoolers' pretend play, specifically cognitive expressions of imagination and emotional expressions of affect in play. Moreover, we examined solitary pretend play using a standardized laboratory task to assess preschoolers' capacities for imaginative and expressive pretend play as distinct from the socially embedded manifestations of these same features in peer play.

Importantly, our focus on solitary pretend play also differentiates this study from the broader literature on pretense. Theorists and researchers often refer to pretense and pretend play interchangeably because both represent symbolic activities that subserve shared developmental functions (Bretherton, 1989; Fein, 1989). However, pretense embodies a broader construct than pretend play. Although pretense shares the "as-if" character of pretend play, it does not necessarily share the same motivational and behavioral features that characterize pretend play (Bergen, 2013; Friedman & Leslie, 2007). In pretend play, pretense is self-directed and behaviorally expressed. However, beyond the context of play, pretense may be other-directed (e.g., a child may be instructed to make believe that her/his finger is a toothbrush, which would be pretense, but not play) and "although action generally accompanies pretense, action is optional" (Lillard, 2001, p. 497; see also Friedman & Leslie, 2007; Lillard et al., 2013). Thus, while pretend play is an expression of pretense, not all pretense constitutes pretend play.

In sum, as an intrinsically motivated behavioral expression of pretense, pretend play has long been recognized as important for child development by developmental theorists (Freud, 1961; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1967; Winnicott, 1971). Moreover, a growing body of research points to its positive developmental correlates and consequences, at least in the predominantly White samples studied thus far (Göncü & Gaskins, 2007; Pearson, Russ, & Spannagel, 2008; Pellegrini, 2011; Russ, 1993, 2004; Singer et al.,

2006). Because pretend play is a central context for the practice of pretense with enduring developmental effects, research should explore if and how pretend play features and/or their adaptive correlates vary across racial groups.

1.2. Racial differences in pretend play and its correlates

Play is a culturally embedded phenomenon; thus, everyday tools and traditions influence the form and meaning of children's pretend play (Gaskins et al., 2007; Rogoff, 2003; Roopnarine et al., 1994). Cross-cultural studies reveal significant differences in the quality of children's pretend play with respect to imagination, affect expression, and complexity across countries and cultures (Bornstein, Haynes, Pascual, Painter, & Galperin, 1999; Chessa et al., 2012; Farver & Howes, 1993; Gaskins & Miller, 2009). Similar variability may exist within countries. For example, Brazilian children from communities characterized by less formal schooling and earlier transitions to work engage in lower levels of pretend play relative to their higher income Brazilian peers in urban communities (Gosso, Morais, & Otta, 2007). Yet there is a notable dearth of research evaluating the form and meaning of solitary pretend play across racial groups in the United States.

Albeit an imperfect and socially constructed proxy, race is a marker of culture, ethnicity, and related constructs; one that is correlated with cultural values and practices, and one that is undeniably tied to our views of one another and our children (Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Steele, 1997). Thus, in this study, we examined patterns and correlates of pretend play among Hispanic, Black, White, and bi/multiracial preschoolers. While cultural norms may influence how children express pretend play, sociocultural constructions of race and racial stereotypes may influence the meaning ascribed to children's playful expressions of pretend by significant others, including teachers.

A large body of research has evaluated the operation and developmental implications of racial bias in educational settings. These studies suggest that teachers may perceive and interpret child characteristics and behaviors differently as a function of the child's race (Chang & Demyan, 2007; Chang & Sue, 2003; Downey & Pribesh, 2004; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013; Scott, 1999; Sonuga-Barke et al., 1993). These differential perceptions or biases exact a painful toll on children's development in both devalued and overly valued groups (Major et al., 1998; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Steele, 1997). The present study contributes to this literature by exploring relations between imaginative and expressive pretend play features and child adjustment in a racially diverse preschool sample as rated by early childhood teachers in educational settings and by examiners in the laboratory setting.

Most play studies have employed small, racially homogenous samples that preclude the evaluation of questions regarding the form or meaning of preschoolers' play across racial groups. Even in sufficiently diverse samples, these questions have rarely been addressed. In contrast to studies of pretend play in different countries (Bornstein et al., 1999; Chessa et al., 2012; Farver & Howes, 1993; Gaskins & Miller, 2009), there is little evidence that either imagination or affect expression in play varies across racial groups within the United States (Cote & Bornstein, 2009; Farver, Kim, & Lee-Shin, 2000; Gaskins & Miller, 2009). However, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have tested whether the correlates of these play features are consistent across racial groups and/or developmental settings.

The current study explored racial differences in preschoolers' pretend play and its correlates in both school and laboratory settings. Given the scholastic emphasis on comparative evaluation, as well as the presence and likely influence of intergroup dynamics in the classroom, racial bias may be especially salient in school

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