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Emotional and playful stance taking in joint play between adults and very young children

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this single case study was to investigate emotional and playful stance taking in adults and very young children as they engage in joint make-believe play activity in a natural Finnish group-care setting. Drawing on the sequential approach of conversation analysis (CA), the study represents an effort to understand play in an early childhood education (ECE) setting from both children's and adults' perspectives at the same time. The results suggest that the interplay of emotional and playful stance taking in make-believe play produces emotional transitions in interaction. These transitions can be understood as interactional accomplishments that offer children and adults the possibility to align and affiliate themselves with their own and each other's emotional experiences and to explore personal reflections of the emotionally heightened real-life trajectories in a shared make-believe play frame. Based on these findings, it is argued that creating and maintaining emotionally heightened joint play with very young children requires adults' emotional involvement and delicately calibrated participation through leading, following and leading by following. Further empirical study is needed to investigate sequences in which playful and emotional stance taking stand in a non-aligning and non-affiliating relationship. Such research could reveal problem-remedy sequences more evidently and provide important further development of ECE theory and practice for children under the age of three.

1. Introduction

Joint play activity is an interesting phenomenon in terms of both analysis of social interaction and study of emotion. Play and emotion seem to be closely intertwined and many scholars have stated that a deeper understanding of play must consider the elaboration of its emotional underpinnings (Burghardt, 2005; Howard & McInness, 2013; Kuczaj & Horback, 2013). Empirical interaction research has shown that displays of positive emotion and play are highly correlated and there has been a continuing tradition of integrating emotional characterizations into the definition of play. For instance, pleasure, enjoyment, joy and amusement displayed through smiling, laughter and other non-verbal and verbal resources have been commonly mentioned emotional characteristics of play and play signaling (Burghardt, 2011; Darwin, 1872/1965). On the other hand, studies have also pointed out that play can be serious and produce a sort of mirror or interactional space for a wide range of emotional tones and nuances that emerge from real-life trajectories and relationships (Bateman, Danby, & Howard, 2013; Björk-Willén, 2012; Cobb-Moore, 2012).

Especially make-believe play – a form of activity that involves transformation of ordinary objects and persons into characters in a fictional world (Garvey, 1976) – is often described as an activity in which emotions are in continuous flux and also negative emotions can be displayed in *as if* form through *play signals* (Bateson, 1976). A wide corpus of empirical interaction studies support these claims

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regarding the emotional complexity of make-believe play. Studies on children's play in peer groups have reported 'playful' displays of anger and aggression in activities such as play fighting (Smith, 1997), exploration of different kinds of negative tones (e.g., playful disputes) embedded in family role-play (Aronsson & Thorell, 1999; Björk-Willén, 2012; Cobb-Moore, 2012) and forms of 'playful' unkindness within activities such as mocking and teasing (Lerner & Zimmerman, 2003).

It is evident that emotions are pervasive elements of play, however we still know relatively little about the actual structures and processes of emotions in play interaction. More detailed and systematic research is needed especially in the field of early childhood education, where play is considered to be the *basic feature* of everyday interactions (Singer, 2013). Existing literature has mainly explored the connection between play and emotions from a psychological or educational perspective and focused on demonstrating the functional significance of play for the individual child and his/her socio-emotional development and learning (for an overview see Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels, 2017). Considerably less attention has been paid to relational and interactional perspectives, such as exploring how emotions emerge and unfold in joint play activities and how different kinds of emotions inform, affect, direct and coordinate children's and adults' actions during play activities (cf. Madrid, Fernie, & Kantor, 2015; White, 2013).

In this *single case analysis* (Sacks, 1984; Schegloff, 1987) we investigate emotional and playful stance taking in adults and very young children as they engage in joint make-believe play activity in a natural Finnish group-care setting. More specifically, we are interested in how adults' playful and emotional stance taking contribute to taking turns and to the larger play activity context. In our approach emotions and play are understood as stance displays (Goodwin, Cekaite, & Goodwin, 2012) and more dynamically as *stance shifts*, for example from more serious and real to playful or from more neutral to emotional (Kaukomaa, Peräkylä, & Ruusuvauro, 2015; Pursi and Lipponen, in press). The central methodological assumption underlying our study is that by positioning play and display of emotion in the same analytical frame and analyzing them as "different facets of a single unified stance act" (Du Bois, 2007, 145), we might be able to learn something new about both, and about the relationship between them.

While stance, like make-believe play and emotion, has been treated as an attitudinal matter and psychological feature of an individual person ("pretense can occur in the absence of pretense actions, but not in the absence of mental representations" Lillard, 1993, 373), in this paper we align with a different appreciation of these phenomena. We view stance taking as a publicly available system and as a form of social interaction. Like recent interactional studies, we conceptualize stance taking as both a subjective and an intersubjective act through which individuals align themselves in relation to themselves, each other and the ongoing courses of action (Du Bois, 2007; Goodwin, 2007). In other words, a stance as congruent or incongruent alignment "refers to the distance from or closeness to the experience" (Stern, 2004, 39), including both subjective and shared experiences.

Previous studies have illustrated how joint make-believe play emerges between adults and very young children in natural group-care settings and how adults organize their actions to actively participate in shared make-believe activity (Bateman, 2015; Jung, 2013; Lobman, 2006; Pursi and Lipponen, in press). However, so far, no empirical studies have systematically focused on investigating co-ordination and interactional calibration of emotion in joint play between adults and very young children. One way to study and describe these phenomena is to detect emotionally heightened moments from naturally occurring joint play interaction and systematically investigate how emotions arise in the first place, how emotional and playful stance taking unfold towards shared emotionally heightened moments and finally how heightened emotions and play 'disappear' from the interaction. In interactional studies this kind of analysis is called a *sequential approach*. In this paper, we draw mainly on the sequential perspective of conversation analysis (CA) and its treatment of joint activity, make-believe play, stance and emotion (Du Bois & Kärkkäinen, 2012; Goodwin, 2007; Sidnell, 2011).

Our analytical interest focuses exclusively on those aspects of play and emotion that the interactants make publicly available (through verbal and non-verbal means). We assume that play actions are lodged to the sequential organization of unfolding interaction and therefore cannot be examined in isolation from their interactional context. We demonstrate how playful and emotional stance taking is organized between adults and very young children during one, emotionally heightened joint play sequence taken from a larger corpus of videotaped data (150 h). More specifically, we answer the following research questions:

1. How do the adults and very young children construct and organize their emotional and playful stance taking during one sequence of emotionally heightened joint make-believe play?
2. How does the adults' playful and emotional stance taking contribute to taking turns and to the larger play activity context during one sequence of emotionally heightened joint make-believe play?
3. How do the adults and children open, sustain and close the emotionally heightened joint play sequence?

2. Methodological considerations

2.1. Context of the study

This article offers a *single case analysis* (Sacks, 1984; Schegloff, 1987) of one emotionally heightened play sequence in which an adult and a group of children are mutually engaged in joint make-believe play activity. The video-recorded sequence is part of a larger ethnographic study examining play culture and especially adults' and children's joint play activity in one Finnish toddler classroom. The classroom was a municipal group-care setting for 13 children under the age of three with one qualified kindergarten teacher, two qualified nursery nurses and one personal assistant to a child with special needs (adult-child ratio 1:4). The day care center was located in an outer suburb of Helsinki, Finland. This particular toddler group was chosen because initial short-term observations revealed that adults frequently co-participated in children's play activities and also actively initiated joint play during adult-led activities. Overall, the adults' interaction was *responsive* and *improvisational* (cf. Lobman, 2006), offering a rich context to

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