

Pretend Play  
and  
Emotion Regulation

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## Theories of Pretend Play

Piaget's Theory

Among modern accounts of pretend play, Piaget's theory has been highly influential. In his oft-cited volume, *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood*, Piaget (1952) presented his well-elaborated ideas, along with detailed observations of his three children. He sought to show how the phenomena named in his title fit into his theory as a whole. Insofar as they belonged substantially to his *pre-operational* period, he considered this work to "bridge the gap between sensory-motor activity prior to representation, and the operational forms of thought" (p. 1).

In Piaget's view, imitation and play are activities marked by significant disequilibrium, and are thus distinct from acts of intelligence *per se*. Specifically, imitation is characterized by a predominance of accommodation over assimilation, and play by a predominance of assimilation over accommodation. These activities originate early in the sensori-motor period, and follow parallel developmental lines until they more or less coalesce as complementary aspects of representational activity.

The primacy of accommodation occurs in imitative behavior because the child's actions merely replicate a model's, and lack the organizing influence of the child's own schemes. Within the sensori-motor period, the child imitates by reproducing others' immediately observable gestures, although towards the end of this period the child also reproduces gestures only previously observed. These gestural "copies" amount to a form of representation. As imitation becomes detached from its immediate context (i.e., *deferred*), it reflects the beginnings of a *semiotic function*; that is, an ability to represent one thing (which is *signified*) by another thing (a *signifier*) that is differentiated from it.

The primacy of assimilation, by contrast, occurs in playful behavior because the child's actions evoke the child's schemes "for their own sake" (p. 89), without an effort to adjust them to the circumstances of application. Within the sensori-motor period, the child plays by performing overt actions beyond the point at which they enhance comprehension or meet practical needs; for example, by repeating the movements that operate a mobile after their effects have been thoroughly explored. Towards the end of this period, the child also evokes familiar action schemes using objects that are "inadequate" to them, and to which the schemes cannot "realistically" be extended; for example, by handling an empty shell as if to drink from a filled cup. In the latter type of activity—a form of pretend play—an object in use denotes one that is absent. Like deferred imitation, then, pretend play reflects a nascent semiotic function.

In discussing semiotics, Piaget distinguished two types of signifiers, namely, *symbols* and *signs*. The former are related by resemblance to what they signify, and are thus *motivated*, whereas the latter are related arbitrarily. Piaget referred to pretense as *symbolic* play because its representations more or less resemble (imitate) the actions or objects they denote. Because the child can invent these representations, they afford a private means of self-expression (meaning evocation) before the child has mastered the public and conventional medium of verbal language.

Piaget's discussion of emerging representational ability shows that he viewed play as an important aspect of intellectual development, but he also pressed the point that play serves vital affective purposes. Noting that "feelings express the interest and the value given to actions of which intelligence provides the structure," he reasoned that we possess "affective schem[e]s or relatively stable modes of feeling or reacting" that mediate emotional adaptation at sensori-motor and pre-operational levels: "Interests, pleasures and difficulties, joy at success and disappointment at failure, all . . . intervene here, as regulations of the action constructed by intelligence" (p. 206). It follows that the predominance of assimilation in play favors the child's affective, as well as intellectual, needs and capacities.

Play is accordingly characterized and discerned partly by its affective qualities and objectives. A child's movement from exploration to play with a new mobile, for instance, is marked by an affective shift from interest to enjoyment. Symbolic play is particularly significant because it affords the child a powerful means of affective self-assertion: the child can reconstruct real-life experiences imaginatively, to repeat what is pleasurable and to revise or master what is discomforting (pp. 131-135).

To summarize, although play is not itself "intelligence in action," it serves important developmental and self-regulatory functions. As Piaget and Inhelder (1969) poignantly stated in their later synopsis:

Obliged to adapt himself constantly to a social world of elders whose interests and rules remain external to him, and to a physical world which he understands only slightly, the child does not succeed as we adults do in satisfying the affective and even intellectual needs of his personality through these adaptations. It is indispensable to his affective and intellectual equilibrium, therefore, that he have available to him an area of activity whose motivation is not adaptation to reality but, on the contrary, assimilation of reality to the self, without coercions or sanctions. (pp. 57-58)

A final aspect of Piaget's theory warrants discussion here, namely, the nature and extent of the child's own understanding of pretense. On the one hand, Piaget believed that preschool children show "consciousness" of their own symbolic activity in varying degrees; for example, a child may effectively announce that a shell denotes a cat, albeit fail to recognize an expression of sibling rivalry in a doll play scene (p. 171). On the other hand, he believed that they lack the cognitive structures for representing thought processes per se, as these belong properly to the formal operational period. He responds to this quandary by stating that the child "spontaneously" believes in a "subjective reality," without considering "whether his ludic symbols are real," but is nonetheless "aware in a sense that they are not so for others" (p. 168). The strained ambivalence of these assertions raises doubts that Piaget himself achieved a satisfactory "equilibrium" in explaining pretense.

### Vygotsky's Theory

Another influential account of pretend play was presented by Vygotsky (1967) in one of his lectures. Although his ideas were elaborated less extensively than Piaget's, they afford a rich and distinctive complement. He believed, as Piaget did, that childhood pretense marks a transition between more concrete and more abstract mental functioning, and that it serves important emotional purposes. In his view, however, play does less to express existing capacities than to extend them, so much so that he called it "the leading source of development in preschool years" (p. 6).

Vygotsky characterized play as "a novel form of behavior in which the child is liberated from situational constraints through his activity in an imaginary situation" (p. 11). More specifically, it is one in which the child evokes "meanings" apart from the particular objects and actions with which they are initially or ordinarily bound. As such, play constitutes an important stepping stone in the child's internalization process, leading towards "thought which is totally free of real situations" (p.13).

Vygotsky accorded central importance to the affective aspects of play, criticizing other theories for their restrictively intellectual scope. Indeed, he accorded central importance to affect in development overall, and undertook his analysis of emerging pretense from this vantage point. On his account (pp. 7-8), the "very young child" has markedly circumstantial and immediate wants, which when frustrated "have their own particular modes of substitution, rejection, etc." The preschooler, by contrast, acquires "large numbers of unrealizable tendencies and immediately unrealizable desires," while retaining a disposition towards immediate gratification. Play emerges along with the latter

child's conflict to afford "the imaginary, illusory realization of unrealizable desires."

The preschooler's unrealizable "tendencies" and "desires" by their nature reflect a developmental shift. Drawing upon Lewin's field theory to explain the younger child's immediacy and impulsivity, Vygotsky asserted that "at this age perception is generally not an independent feature but an initial feature of a motor-affective reaction" and thus that "things have an inherent motivating force" (p. 11). As the preschooler separates the fields of perception and meaning, he develops "generalized, unpre-designated, affective tendencies," which are distinct from "individual affective reactions to separate phenomena" (p. 8).<sup>1</sup>

Play is fostered, then, by developmental advance. But in its own turn it becomes a developmental engine, or as Vygotsky put it, "creates the zone of proximal development." This occurs because pretend-play scenarios are highly structured by defining rules. While embracing these constraints to pursue imaginative pleasures, the child inhibits contrary perceptions and impulses, and even tolerates unpleasantness. (Indeed, a disagreeable task can actually be made enjoyable as a game.) This process helps the child to separate meanings and motive forces from immediate circumstances and affirm them independently; that is, to enhance his intellectual and volitional capabilities.

The separation is imperfect, of course, because the child relies upon objects and activities that resemble what is imagined, to serve as anchors for meaning. Vygotsky nearly characterized pretend play as "thinking out loud," maintaining that it "is converted to internal processes at school age, going over to internal speech, logical memory, and abstract thought" (p. 13). In recognizing an early form of semiotic function within pretense, his analysis concurred with Piaget's.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the child's understanding of pretense itself, Vygotsky attributed even less to the preschooler than Piaget did, asserting that "he plays without realizing the motives of the play activity" (p. 8) and that "[he] unconsciously and spontaneously makes use of the fact that he can separate meaning from an object without knowing he is doing it" (p. 13). A problem that arises with this position apparently escaped Vygotsky's attention. In his own discussion of a remarkable phenomenon, he noted that children vivify their

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<sup>1</sup> Vygotsky did not provide examples of these generalized affective tendencies, but his examples of pretend play imply that needs for adventure, affiliation, or mastery would qualify.

<sup>2</sup> Vygotsky denied that the child "symbolizes" in play, but he apparently meant by *symbol* what Piaget meant by *sign*.

ordinary experiences in "playing at reality" (e.g., when sisters pretend to be sisters), so that "what passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behavior in play" (p. 9). How *does* the child distinguish play from ostensibly equivalent activities? It is, perhaps, to Vygotsky's credit that a deeper analysis of meaning in play was to shed light on this matter.

### Bateson's Theory

An engaging essay by Bateson (1955) provided that analysis. It is curious that Bateson, by his own account, was not initially seeking to elucidate play activity. He wished rather to examine a phenomenon called *metacommunication*, which concerns messages that comment upon or alter the meaning of other messages, and which he considered relevant to understanding psychopathology and psychotherapy.

Bateson asserted that an important aspect of communication is the recognition of semiotic activity itself:

It is evident that a very important stage in [the evolution of communication] occurs when the organism gradually ceases to respond quite "automatically" to the mood-signs of another and becomes able to recognize the sign as a signal: that is, to recognize that the other individual's and its own signals are only signals, which can be trusted, distrusted, falsified, denied, amplified, corrected, and so forth. (p. 178)

He was, in fact, seeking behavioral evidence of such recognition among non-human animals at the zoo, when he observed the play-fighting of monkeys. He noted that "the unit actions or signals were similar to but not the same as those of combat," and inferred that this activity "could only occur if the participant organisms were capable of . . . exchanging signals which would carry the message 'this is play'" (p. 179).

Bateson asserted that the message "this is play" establishes a psychological *frame*, or context, within which the ostensible meaning of statements or gestures is denied. Thus, "the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (p. 180). He went on to discuss some intriguing complexities made possible by the imperfect qualification of meaning. For example, the peace-making ceremonies of certain cultures comprise "ritual blows [which are] always liable to be mistaken for the 'real' blows of combat"; the "realism" of a movie image may inspire "the full intensity of subjective terror"; and implicit symbolism in a purely fictional narrative may slyly depict a social truth (pp. 182-183). Bateson's analysis of

these complexities was intricate, but the essential idea seems to be that metacommunications foster paradox insofar as they cannot be separated definitively from the contexts they delimit, and are themselves susceptible to qualification.

There is, in Bateson's theory, a parallel to Vygotsky's distinction between overt appearances and implicit meanings, although it applies to *statements* rather than *objects*. It is noteworthy that Bateson, in likening psychological frames to picture frames, observed that the latter encourage the viewer to inhibit the perception of ground around a figure.

Although Bateson did not discuss children specifically, his analysis of play implies that children must, on some level of understanding, recognize play as a distinctive activity in its own right. It may well be that he *could* formulate his theory because he was not bound by beliefs such as Piaget's and Vygotsky's about the limits of children's intellectual capabilities. In any case, his work marked a crucial turning point in modern play theory.

### Leslie's Theory

Building on the work of Bateson and others, Leslie (1987) has offered a formal description of pretend play, as well as a detailed account of the cognitive capacities and processes that support it. He approaches these tasks from the perspective of cognitive science, viewing the mind's activity through an *information processing* or *computational* metaphor.

Leslie begins by seeking stringent criteria to distinguish pretense from apparently similar behavior. He notes that a child may simply evince a misunderstanding in acting as if something false were true, or merely demonstrate learned conventions in acting as if a toy were an object it resembles. He concludes that the "as if" quality of pretended actions must hold from the perspective of the actor as well as an observer.

Leslie furthermore cites three types of "as if" behavior that qualify as distinct forms of pretense, which respectively concern the identity, attributes, and existence of objects. Specifically, in pretense a child may assert that an object is one thing when in fact it is another; that something has properties that in fact it lacks; or that something exists that in fact does not. Characterized more formally, these assertions are descriptive statements, or *propositions*, about the status of things in the world.

If such counterfactual claims are taken at face value, Leslie argues, they should undermine the child's elementary knowledge and understanding of the world. Contemporary research findings have strongly implied that infants establish stable, internal representations of objects and their properties well

before the age estimated by Piaget. Should a child, say, construe one thing as another (e.g., a shell as a cup) without qualification, the child's conceptual categories and their relationships to sensory experience would become confused, a process Leslie calls *representational abuse*. To pretend without this abuse, we must discount face-value relationships between pretended assertions and actual circumstances.

Leslie continues by pointing out that the same three types of counterfactual assertion that figure within pretense can occur as the contents of mental states.<sup>3</sup> For example, someone may believe that a particular object is one thing when in fact it is another. To reason coherently about mental states, we must likewise discount the face-value meaning of *these* assertions. We cannot, for example, infer from the truth or falsity of a proposition whether or not someone believes it; we must know about the factors guiding that person's thinking, including perhaps other beliefs. This inferential barrier is called *opacity*.

Leslie asserts that the peculiar logic of opacity is common to pretense and mental state reasoning, and that a distinctive form of cognitive competence must undergird both activities. This competence differs from the capacity to understand "objects and events as such," for it concerns "the human mind's ability to characterize and manipulate its own attitudes to information"; that is, to "understand cognition itself" (p. 416). Leslie asserts that the former capacity requires a relatively basic psychological structure, which he calls a *primary representation*, whereas the latter capacity requires a more complex structure, which he calls a *metarepresentation*.<sup>4</sup>

A metarepresentation comprises and coordinates four types of information, namely, an *agent*, an *informational relation*, a *primary expression*, and a *decoupled expression*. The *agent* identifies an actor (oneself or another) engaging in pretense or experiencing a mental state. The *primary expression* is a proposition describing a perceived circumstance. The *decoupled expression* is a decontextualized proposition, analogous to a sentence placed in quotes. The *informational relation* (also called a *propositional attitude*) is a stance, such as pretense or belief, maintained by the agent towards the decoupled expression as a potentially counterfactual description of the perceived circumstance.

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<sup>3</sup> The notion that people have and act on the basis of mental states has often been called a *theory of mind* after Premack (1978), although the term is considered problematic by many scholars, including Leslie.

<sup>4</sup> He also asserts that a specific impairment in metarepresentation among children with autism accounts for joint deficits in pretend play and activities requiring mental state reasoning.

Leslie discusses several relevant issues in depth, including the coordination of what is perceived with what is imagined during pretense, and the ways in which both veridical assertions and ordinary rules of causal inference may be incorporated into pretended scenarios. What I have presented of his theory, however, is sufficient for my purposes, and provides a cogent account of pretend play.

Leslie's theory shares important points with Bateson's. Crucial principles for each are the suspension of ordinary meaning in particular assertions, and the associated need for a basic understanding of representation itself. Leslie justifiably notes that his analysis goes beyond Bateson's in relating pretense to mental state reasoning through the logic of opacity. Bateson (1955) discusses reasoning from "premises" within psychological frames (pp. 184-186), however, and this notion seems relevant to understanding opaque logic itself. Leslie (1987) implicitly acknowledges this relevance in "borrow[ing] a version of Bateson's frames notation" (p. 418) to discuss information processing for perceived and pretended situations.

A shortcoming of Leslie's theory is its virtual silence regarding the affective aspects of pretense. These involve more than the issue he notes of "what broader motivations or purposes might lie behind pretending" (p. 421). We might ask what emotions I experience when I *do* pretend something, and how they relate to *what* I pretend. I shall return to these questions, but next I shall review a theory of pretense in which affective issues have primary importance.

### Fein's Theory

Fein (1987) has recently examined childhood pretense as a medium of creativity and consciousness. It is marked, she observes, by a "unique confluence of emotional intensity and conceptual depth" (p. 282). It also blends imitation with surprising and curious transformation. Indeed, "the relation between pretend signifiers and that which is signified can best be described as representation in the service of exaggeration, embellishment, and ulterior signification" (p. 282). Drawing from naturalistic observation of preschool children's highly skilled free play, Fein seeks to describe and explain those features of pretense that support *divergent* (i.e., freely directed) thinking.

Central to her concern is the representation of affective experience. She notes "a considerable degree of affective force" (p. 291) in pretended scenarios, which can manifest in "the quality of the motions, sounds, tempo, and linguistic

utterance" (p. 298) of the play, as well as its narrative.<sup>5</sup> Children may express powerful and contrasting feelings in rapid succession while they dramatize emotionally salient issues, such as the conflicts and resolutions of family life. Often, their dramas do not portray authentic or even plausible scenarios, but rather evince "ludicrous distortion, exaggeration, and extravagance, at times bordering on the bizarre" (p. 291). They do, however, derive coherence from thematic unity.

Fein posits a distinctive system within the child for representing affectively significant information. Its *symbolic units* capture "affective relationships such as 'anger at,' 'fear of,' 'love for,' 'approval of,' or more subtle feelings about power and helplessness, safety and danger" (p. 292). These units can function as *templates*, allowing the child "to recreate emotional moments by adding the particulars of persons, things, or occasions" (p. 293). They are, in fact, sufficiently generic to facilitate spontaneous sociodrama, in which the players share a general understanding of the affects but instantiate them in personalized ways. Thus, "in pretense, affective symbolic units are manipulated, interpreted, coordinated, and elaborated in a way that makes affective sense to the players" (p. 292).

Several features of pretense support these symbolic activities. *Referential freedom* allows the treatment of "objects, persons, or places . . . as if they were other than they are" (p. 286). *Denotative license* casts narratives as "inventions rather than documentaries of real-world occurrences" (p. 286). *Sequential uncertainty* lifts normal constraints on the logic and temporal flow of events. *Self-mirroring* permits the self as pretending subject to behold the self as fictionalized object. These features "reflect in different ways the [affective representational] system's independence from the immediate environment, actual experience, or the need to cast one's experiencing of life or self into a tidy story" (p. 299). That is, they free the pretending child from canonical demands of *convergent* thinking, feeling, and acting.

Within and beyond this characterization, Fein seeks the larger significance of pretense. She asserts that

affective templates permit children to think about emotionally important things, about pleasant things and nasty things, satisfying things and confusing things. In pretend play, children are thinking out loud and sometimes together about experiences that have emotional meaning for them. (p. 293)

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<sup>5</sup> See Stern (1985, pp. 53-61) for an interesting discussion of modalities in affective perception and expression.

One consequence of this activity may well be a form of emotion regulation. Echoing Vygotsky's theory, Fein suggests that "the suppositional frame of pretense would be expected to contain and discipline the expression of emotion even as it permits emotional meaning to be explored" (p. 301). She doubts on empirical grounds, however, that "the repetition and elaboration of [affective] themes serves a cathartic function," suggesting instead that "play with affective symbols aides in reshaping the way vivid life experiences are represented to the self," and that the possible role of these representations in building "self-awareness and emotional maturity" merits longitudinal study (p. 302).

Fein draws explicit parallels between her own and her predecessors' theories: she likens her *affective symbols* to Piaget's *motivated symbols*,<sup>6</sup> and her *denotative license* to Bateson's meaning qualification. Parallels with Leslie's theory are also apparent. Fein's *referential freedom* corresponds roughly to his forms of object pretense, and the pretending subject of her *self-mirroring* equals his pretending *agent*. Moreover, Fein concludes from an argument, similar to but less rigorous than Leslie's, that pretense must be metarepresentational to avoid conflicts with conventional perception and understanding.

Fein's theory is perhaps the most encompassing among those reviewed here. More important than its mere inclusiveness, however, is its effort to integrate the cognitive and affective aspects of pretense in a cogent account. This effort will contribute substantially to the argument for my thesis.

### Implications for Emotion Regulation

The preceding theory synopses argue strongly, I believe, that affect has fundamental importance in childhood pretense. It remains, however, to show more clearly how the ideas discussed may generate testable hypotheses about the role of childhood pretend play in affect regulation. In what follows, I shall consider their implications for particular effects of play on children's emotional skills and behaviors.

#### Play as a Vehicle of Regulation

A relatively simple hypothesis concerns immediate and direct effects of pretend play on emotion: the play itself might enhance the quality, or moderate the intensity, of emotional experience. This notion follows naturally from

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<sup>6</sup> A more helpful correspondence, however, may be one between Fein's *affective templates* and Piaget's *affective schemes*.

Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories, as indeed it figured prominently in their formulation.

Recall that play on Piaget's view is marked by freedom from accommodative press, and thereby helps to satisfy those "affective and even intellectual needs" beyond the reach of immature intelligence. In permitting the child to "construct" experience more favorably than normal intelligence does, imaginative play should foster positive affect and mitigate negative affect.

Comparably, play on Vygotsky's view affords escape from external constraints to grant the "imaginary, illusory realization of unrealizable desires." In reducing frustration and satisfying need, it should likewise foster positive affect and mitigate negative affect.

A more complex hypothesis concerns enduring play effects. How might imaginative play assist the "mastery" of unpleasant facts or circumstances, if the child is merely (and temporarily) suspending accommodative effort? It seems in this regard that Vygotsky's theory offers more than Piaget's, for it emphasizes the child's strengthening intellectual and volitional abilities: while gaining "illusory" freedom from immediate circumstances, the child develops accommodative skills on his own terms.

Singer (1979) presents an alternative rationale for the supposition that play can ameliorate affect, based on a theory by Silvan Tomkins.<sup>7</sup> According to this theory, various levels and rate-changes of neural activation elicit particular emotions:

A sudden sharp increase . . . produces the *startle* response or the reaction of *fear* or *terror*. A more moderate gradient . . . provokes the more positive affects of *surprise* and *interest* . . . . Sharp reductions from high levels . . . yield the positive affects of *joy* and the *smile* or *laugh*. Persisting very high levels . . . produce the negative affect of *anger*, while somewhat lower but persisting high levels . . . generate *sadness* and *distress* or the *weeping* response. (p. 20)

Integrating these ideas with information-processing theory, Singer asserts that neural activation varies with our readiness to *assimilate* new experiences into established *expectancy schemata*.<sup>8</sup> This explains both an emotional challenge

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<sup>7</sup> Tomkins's theory, and Singer's elaboration, provide intriguing alternatives to the currently dominant *cognitive appraisal* theory of affect elicitation. Izard and Harris (1995) review several other theories about non-cognitive affect elicitors.

<sup>8</sup> Singer's use of *assimilation* recalls Piaget's, but he seems not to mean here the *unbalanced* (distorting) assimilation of play.

to the developing child, and the value of play in meeting it: the magnitude, novelty, and complexity of what is experienced may hinder its ready absorption, promoting anxiety and distress, but pretend play affords a stimulus reduction through the *miniaturization* and *manipulation* of phenomena. The resulting "moderate novelty holds the child's interest and with repetition is increasingly matched to newly forming and established schemata so that there follows an experience of joy" (p. 23).

Singer's hypothesis builds creatively upon Piaget's ideas, by suggesting that play helps to elaborate the child's schemes themselves. But it also draws implications for affect regulation from Bateson's, Leslie's, and Fein's theories. On each of these accounts, pretense frames or decontextualizes its subject matter. It thus effects a stimulus reduction through psychological distancing.

### Play as a Pathway to Understanding

Beyond the arguments just given, there are subtler and more intriguing reasons why pretend play might facilitate children's emotion regulation. Both miniaturization and framing invite the scrutiny of their subject matter. In Singer's analysis, the miniaturized world affords exploration, which builds familiarity and competence. Might emotion itself be a subject for framing? Can its exploration through pretense foster understanding and adaptation?

Our understanding of emotion—in ourselves and others—can hardly be taken for granted. The scientific study of emotion as a phenomenon has engaged at least a minority of biologists, ethologists, physicians, and psychologists from the time of Darwin and James (Izard & Harris, 1995). More commonly, in any given human culture, people hold common-sense or *folk-psychological* conceptions about what emotion is, and how it relates to the events, circumstances, and physical, psychological, and social aspects of our existence (Shweder, 1993). In recent years, the nature of common-sense emotional understanding has itself become a topic of intensive scientific and anthropological investigation (e.g., Izard & Harris, 1995; Shweder, 1993).

Harris (1989) reviews considerable theory and empirical research on children's emotion skills in modern, Western culture. These skills range from infants' recognition of and responsiveness to their caregivers' affect expressions, to adolescents' reflective alteration of their own affective experiences. To explain many of these skills and their developmental patterns, Harris argues, we must recognize that two distinct cognitive systems operate with regard to emotions.

In the first of these, called the *appraisal* system, cognition evaluates the implications of perceived events and circumstances for our needs and desires.

These appraisals elicit emotional reactions, which in turn serve generally adaptive purposes. For example, the apprehension of danger elicits fear and its concomitant avoidance tendencies.

In the second of these, called the *explanatory* system, cognition represents and processes information about emotion itself. It considers how events and circumstances, or appraisals of them, may elicit one's own or another person's emotional reactions. For example, it recognizes that one's apprehension of danger induces fear.

Harris's distinction between these systems roughly parallels Leslie's distinction between primary- and meta-representational cognition. Adapting Leslie's words, we might say that the second system concerns the human mind's ability to understand *emotion* itself. This ability often involves mental state reasoning, as beliefs and desires can influence feelings. I may, for example, feel happy in expecting a gift that I want.

These considerations imply at least an association between children's capacities for pretense and for understanding emotion. Harris in fact argues that children understand *other people's* emotions by actively *imagining* their mental states, although Leslie's ideas about a general metarepresentational capacity could likewise explain this understanding. In any case, as early as the second year of life, children exhibit both rudimentary pretend play skills (Fein, 1981; Leslie, 1987) and an elementary understanding of how events and circumstances affect emotions (Harris, 1989).

Whether or not pretense affords the means of understanding others' emotions, it does support the *modeling* of emotional experience. Doll play is a prime example. Harris (1989) notes that children between two and four years of age treat dolls increasingly as "representations of human beings," endowing them with capacities first to receive nurturance; then to "talk and act independently" and to experience "desires, sensations, and emotions"; and finally to manifest "explicit thought processes and intersecting plans" (p. 59). Kahana-Kalman and Walker-Andrews (in press) have furthermore demonstrated that three- and four-year old children can verbally indicate the influence of events and circumstances on dolls' emotion states, and perform appropriate actions to improve those states, within pretend-play scenarios.

Such modeling may serve to objectify emotional experience, to render explicit what (in Vygotsky's words) "passes unnoticed by the child in real life." It may even permit children to represent what they have difficulty verbalizing, perhaps because (as Piaget asserted) their mastery of private symbolism precedes that of public and conventional language, or because (in a process psychoanalysts call *displacement*) they can externalize anxiety-provoking subject-matters.

The objectification of emotional experience through play may in turn provide exploratory freedom. Harris (1989) cites evidence that "children find it easier to cope with hypothetical references to a fantasy character, than to their own parents" (p. 64), presumably because they need to manage fewer counterfactual ideas. Pretense that preserves veridical inferential rules about emotional experience may thus facilitate emotion regulation indirectly, by helping children to consider novel, potentially adaptive responses to stressful experiences and situations.

In discussing emotional understanding, Harris (1989) presses the point that we can imagine other people's feelings without experiencing them simultaneously. He also asserts, however, that we can experience affective arousal through a sufficiently vivid imaginative projection. We may, for example, feel sorrow in relating to another person's loss as if it were our own. In a phenomenon termed *fictional absorption* (Harris, 1998), we may likewise experience emotions appropriate to a story character whose perspectives we adopt. Harris attributes these emotional responses to engagement of the appraisal system.<sup>9,10</sup>

Fictional absorption provides one answer to the question I raised earlier, namely, how do emotions experienced during pretense relate to its contents? A child may feel the emotions of one or another story character. This creates intriguing possibilities, because the child (or someone else) can arrange the character's trials, tribulations, and triumphs. When the character represents the child in particular (as it does in Fein's self-mirroring), the vicarious feeling is experienced paradoxically in regard to the self. Play thus becomes a venue for reliving or recreating affective self-experience, in ways consistent with but more diverse than Vygotsky's "imaginary, illusory realization of unrealizable desires."

The fact remains, however, that emotions experienced in play may contrast with emotions represented. To cite Vygotsky's (1967) example, "the child weeps in play as a patient, but revels as a player" (p. 14). Such differentiation might occur, of course, because the play achieves the anxiety reductions that Singer posits, but it might also occur if the *representation* of affective experience *itself* has affective significance, as Fein's perspectives on childhood pretense imply. Have psychologists explored this possibility?

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<sup>9</sup> I shall discuss both evidence and implications of fictional absorption in a later section.

<sup>10</sup> An interesting collateral phenomenon is that *enactments* of pretended emotion might arouse sympathetic affective experience via physiological feedback from facial displays (Izard & Harris, 1995).

In a lucid introduction to the cultural psychology of emotion, Shweder (1993) discusses perspectives on *metaemotions* (i.e., emotional responses to portrayed emotions) distilled from an ancient Sanskrit text on drama (p. 418):

*Rasa* means "to taste," "to savor," or "to sample," but when the term is used to refer to the grand metaemotion of Hindu aesthetic experience it is usually translated as aesthetic "pleasure," "enjoyment," or "rapture." It is a pleasure that lasts only as long as the dramatic illusion that makes *rasa* a reality. Because it is possible for members of the audience who witness a drama (the *rasiki*) to experience enjoyment or pleasure (*rasa*) even from the apprehension of negative emotional states (disgust, fear, anger, sorrow), which in other circumstances one might want to avoid or repress, Abhinavagupta and others [medieval commentators] reasoned that *rasa* must be an autonomous metaemotion, a *sui generis* form of consciousness. (p. 419)

Shweder further explains that specific varieties of *rasa* correspond individually to various "basic emotions, which are thought to be possessed by all human beings at birth" (p. 420), but that each *rasa* differs from a mimetic or vicarious experience of the basic emotion to which it relates. Indeed, "something common to all the flavors of *rasa*" is "the pleasure, enjoyment, delight, or rapture that comes from being artfully transported out of time, place, and the immediacies of personal emotional experiences . . . into the hidden depths of the soul" (p. 420). More specifically, it is "delight that comes from the clear apprehension of the symbolic forms implicit in ordinary emotional experience"; that is, from "witnessing the generic symbolic structure that lends shape and meaning to a basic emotion" (p. 420).

Despite undoubted differences between the ancient Indian theater and modern child's play, Shweder's comments on the former might have bearing on the latter. The dramas of pretend play may offer children a unique form of aesthetic pleasure, a sense of delight at the rudimentary illumination of "basic" emotional experience (including what Fein calls their affective templates). If this is true, it helps to explain children's fascination and enjoyment during pretense, even when the themes entail (as Shweder put it) "negative emotional states" or (as Fein put it) "nasty things." It also means that emotions

experienced in pretense comprise more than affective repetitions or escapes, for they sometimes evince a nascent, liberating insight into emotion itself.<sup>11</sup>

### Empirical Findings

Despite noteworthy differences among theories of pretend play, there are some general implications for its effects on emotion. Pretense is hypothesized to contribute to emotion regulation either directly, by altering immediate affective experience, or indirectly, by fostering emotional insight and concomitant adaptive behavior. In what follows, I shall review some empirical evidence relating to these claims, including observational and experimental studies and child-clinical case reports.

#### Studies of Affect in Play

One line of evidence comprises links between affective expression and play behavior in children. Singer (1979, pp. 28-31) discussed preliminary results from a study in progress, directed by himself and his wife, that employed naturalistic observations of preschool children's affect and spontaneous play during 10-minute periods in day-care settings. Analyses revealed strongly positive associations between ratings of positive affect (joy, interest, and surprise) and several measures of imaginativeness (including the child's engaging in pretense and using future-state verbs during play, having imaginary friends by parental report, and providing human movement responses to inkblot figures during prior assessments). These findings are consistent with the thesis that pretense (or a disposition towards it) fosters positive affect, but the nonexperimental design supports the converse and other plausible interpretations as well.

An earlier study (Singer & Singer, 1976) tested interventions designed to foster imaginative play in preschool children at a day-care center. Subjects were observed during spontaneous play 2 weeks before, and 2 weeks after, their participation in one of several groups administered for 30 minutes daily over 2 weeks. In one group, an adult conducted imaginative-play training exercises; in a second and third group, children watched a television show (Mister Rogers) featuring make-believe discussion and activities, respectively with or without an

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<sup>11</sup> Shweder also notes that one may view empathy as a metaemotion of "middle scale" (i.e., between *rasa* and *basic emotion*) because "as a witness to someone else's emotional experience, one is transported out of oneself" (p. 420). An implication for self-mirroring in play is the possible, indirect development of empathic self-awareness.

adult who facilitated program interpretation; and in a fourth group, children followed normal activity schedules featuring neither play training nor television viewing. Children in the treatment groups showed moderate increases in pretend play and positive affect (interest and joy), whereas those in the control group showed a moderate decrease. Linear trends from the first to the fourth of these groups were furthermore evident in both variables. These findings offer stronger evidence for effects of pretense on affect, although the treatments *might* have increased pretense by enhancing affect. A treatment that enhanced affect without increasing pretense would have reduced this ambiguity.

Phillips (1994) reviewed a series of three observational studies, conducted by himself and a colleague, on affect expressions during solitary play in nonclinical children aged 6 months to 5 years. The children played freely for 25 minutes in a toy-filled room with their caretakers sitting nearby. The investigators coded videotapes for several categories each of the child's play behavior (collapsed for analysis into non-play and manipulative, functional, and pretend play) and facial emotion expression ("joy, fear, sadness, surprise, contempt, interest, disgust, shyness, shame" [p. 4]), and then examined temporal correspondences between play and emotion.

They found, over the three studies, that children expressed interest roughly 80%, and joy roughly 10%, of the time during play overall. Anger and sadness occurred less than 2% of the time, and other emotions but rarely. Finer breakdowns of the second and third studies' data revealed little difference between pretend and non-pretend play in the distribution of emotion, except that joy occurred slightly more often during pretend play. The third study's data also revealed a unique predominance of sadness over interest during non-play activity.

Although Phillips expressed surprise at the predominance of interest over joy in play, given his reading of play theory, the associations of interest and joy with all play activity and that of sadness with non-play activity are at least consistent with the thesis that pretense fosters positive affect. The emotion distributions within pretend and non-pretend play, however, confer little distinction on pretense. Phillips aptly notes that affects displayed during pretense have ambiguous meaning in any case, as they may reflect either pretended expressions or subjective experiences. To resolve this ambiguity, one must relate observed affects to the thematic content and the child's perceptions during play activity.

### Evidence of Fictional Absorption

Research bearing on fictional absorption has begun to address this requirement. Harris (1998) proposes a model of this common but intriguing phenomenon. On his account, we can project ourselves imaginatively into the world of a fictional narrative, in a way that "suspends any epistemic reflection" (p. 343) on its fictional status. We tend in so doing to appraise the narrative's events and circumstances for emotional significance, as if they earnestly applied to us in the role of one or another story character. These appraisals elicit emotional responses proportionate to the depth of our projection.<sup>12</sup>

Harris cites findings from various research domains to authenticate this account. For instance, some studies have shown that story readers answer content questions more quickly if the questions are phrased to reflect a viewpoint implicit in the narrative, which implies that the readers adopt this viewpoint in processing story information. Also, studies of adults have shown that viewing disturbing images evokes higher skin conductances than viewing non-disturbing images, and that recalling frightening scenes primes stronger startle responses than recalling pleasant scenes, which implies that imagined experiences elicit emotional reactions.

Of particular interest is an experiment by Meerum Terwogt, Schene, and Harris (as cited in Harris, 1998) that measured self-reported mood in 6-year-old children before and after they heard a sad story. Children in one group "were asked to try to involve themselves in the story and to feel sad like the main character," (p. 347) whereas those in a second group were encouraged to detach themselves, and those in a third group were merely encouraged to listen well. Children in the *involved* group declined more in reported mood, and retold the story using more emotion words, than those in the *detached* and *control* groups. Children who could report their strategies for involvement or detachment described efforts respectively to identify with the protagonist or focus on the unreality of the story.

One shortcoming of this study is that children may have responded to experimenter demand in their mood reports. A more rigorous approach might be to have participants adopt the *strategies* children reported, without reference to goals, and to measure facially expressed as well as self-reported affect. Nevertheless, the collective evidence regarding fictional absorption offers at

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<sup>12</sup> Harris's account contrasts notably with Bateson's account of a similar phenomenon (recall that a movie image may inspire "the full intensity of subjective terror"). Harris emphasizes a knowing suspension of disbelief, whereas Bateson emphasizes an inherent ambiguity and instability in psychological framing.

least moderate support for the notion that imaginative activity can regulate emotion, not least because manipulations of the former have apparently influenced the latter.<sup>13</sup>

### Play Interventions with Hospitalized Children

So far I have presented evidence that pretense can alter emotion, and in particular that it can foster positive affects, under comparatively ordinary circumstances. The question remains whether pretense can mitigate negative affects in stressful situations that would normally elicit them. For children, hospital admission is a situation fraught with unfamiliarity, uncertainty, complexity, and the potential for much discomfort, and therefore one liable to foster anxiety and distress or even emotional disturbance. Health care providers have accordingly sought to mitigate these difficulties through preventive interventions.

Cassell (1965) studied the use of puppet play in helping children aged 3 to 11 years to undergo cardiac catheterization. Children in the treatment group underwent a preparatory therapy session, in which the therapist and child enacted the surgical procedure using puppets, and then the child played freely with the puppets and asked questions. Those in the control group received no intervention. Children in the treatment group received substantially more positive mood ratings during surgery, and expressed substantially more willingness to return to the hospital after discharge, than those in the control group.

Russ (1995) criticized Cassell's design for confounding pretend-play, instruction, and friendly adult contact. Her point is well taken, although on Singer's account it is familiarization *through* play that reduces anxiety, and indeed Cassell's method description is notable for its explicit references to miniaturized hospital personnel and equipment, and its detailed evocation of the surgical procedure. Similarly, on Vygotsky's account it is the *mixture* of pleasure and challenge in play that promotes mastery, and Cassell (1965) did

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<sup>13</sup> Emotional responsiveness to imagined events and circumstances may also have evolutionary significance, because it can motivate adaptive anticipatory behavior.

emphasize children's disposition to "use puppets to work through emotional problems which are too threatening to deal with first hand" (p. 2).<sup>14</sup>

Rae, Worchel, Upchurch, Sanner, and Daniel (1989) sought to differentiate effects of play and verbal support on hospitalized children's psychological adjustment. Children aged 5 to 10 years were assigned to one of four conditions administered by a single research assistant. In the *therapeutic play* condition, the child engaged in "nondirective, child-centered play therapy that included reflection and interpretation of feelings," and that provided toys appropriate to various "medical and nonmedical" pretend play themes (p. 622). In the *diversionary play* condition, the child engaged in non-pretend play (e.g., puzzles or competitive games) without receiving verbal support or hospitalization-relevant information. In the *verbally oriented support* condition, the child engaged in conversation that addressed "concerns, anxieties, and fears within a supportive, nurturant, interpersonal relationship" (p. 622), but did not engage in play. (These treatments were administered twice for 30 minutes.) In the *control* condition, the child "had no contract [sic] with the research assistant other than the pre- and postassessment sessions" (p. 622).

The authors found that children's self-reported "hospital-related fears" (p. 623) decreased more during hospitalization for the therapeutic play condition than the other conditions, but did not decrease differentially among the other conditions. They also found however that parent-rated child anxiety decreased comparably for all of the conditions, whereas nurse-rated child anxiety decreased for none of them. Notwithstanding these interrater discrepancies, the self-report findings offer at least moderate support for the assertion that thematically relevant pretend play helps mitigate stress-induced anxiety.

### Play Interventions with Children Starting School

Another situation that can elicit children's negative affect is their first experience attending school. Their introduction to a novel environment may prompt anxiety and distress, which are then heightened (if not independently provoked) by separation from an attachment figure (i.e., a caregiver who customarily provides protection and reassurance). This occurrence provides a

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<sup>14</sup> Of particular interest in this regard are the therapist's reverse role-play modeling of the child's natural emotional responses "during any possibly frightening experiences" (p. 3), and a game in which the therapist and child each guessed what emotion the other expressed while wearing a surgical mask. These interventions, intended to foster the child's perception of empathy in the hospital staff, may also have fostered the child's empathic self-awareness and comfort with emotional expression.

"naturalistic" circumstance in which to study pretend play as a regulator of stress-related affects.

Barnett (1984) studied effects of play and peer-presence on anxiety in children, aged approximately 3 years, during their first day of preschool. Children were assigned to high- and low-anxiety conditions based on behavioral ratings and a Palmer Sweat Index (PSI) measurement at the time their caregivers left the school. (Pre-separation PSI measurements showed that the higher scores in the former condition reflected situational anxiety.) Each of these conditions was subdivided into conditions that respectively featured 15 minutes of either free play with various toys and games, or a story reading about "various types of trees and shrubs that could be found in a forest" (p. 478). Each of these conditions in turn was subdivided into conditions that respectively featured the presence or absence of moderate-anxiety peers during the activity.

Post-intervention PSI scores showed greater reductions for the free-play than the story condition, among high- but not low-anxiety children. Average PSI scores were also lower for the peer-absent than the peer-present free-play condition, among high- but not low-anxiety children. Observations in the free-play condition revealed that high-anxiety children spent more time in pretend play than did low-anxiety children, and that high-anxiety children spent more time in pretend play with peers absent than with peers present. Barnett reasonably concluded that play fosters reductions in separation-induced anxiety, and that they are more likely attributable to its "imaginative qualities" (p. 482) than to peer contact opportunities.

Milos and Reiss (1982) studied effects of play structuring and thematic relevance on separation anxiety in children, aged 2.5 to 5.5 years, beginning nursery school. Children high on teacher-rated separation anxiety were assigned to one of four play conditions administered by a research assistant for three 10-minute sessions. Three *thematic-play* conditions featured identical, separation-relevant pretend-play props: in the *free-play* condition, the child played freely with dolls; in the *directed-play* condition, the child viewed a school-separation doll scene, and then played freely with dolls; and in the *modeling* condition, the child viewed doll scenes featuring adaptive responses to separation-related distress. A *nonthematic-play* condition featured non-pretend play materials.

Post-intervention anxiety was assessed by measuring speech disturbance in subjects' answers to separation-relevant interview questions, and through teachers' behavioral ratings. Speech disturbance scores were lower for the thematic-play conditions than the nonthematic one, but did not differ among the thematic-play conditions. Teacher-rated separation anxiety did not differ

among any play conditions. Among all children in the free- and directed-play conditions, speech disturbance showed a moderate negative correlation with ratings of "emotional involvement and mastery effort" (p. 391) regarding separation themes in play. The authors reasonably concluded that pretend play fosters reductions in separation-induced anxiety, to an extent that reflects its affective and conative qualities.<sup>15</sup>

#### A Case Series on Posttraumatic Play

The hospital and school studies I have reviewed suggest that pretend play can mitigate negative affect under moderately stressful conditions. We might ask, however, whether limits exist on the natural affective regulatory potential of childhood pretend play. These limits might appear when children try to cope with intensely disturbing affects, especially those elicited by subjection to overwhelming (i.e., *traumatizing*) stressors. Affective *disregulation* is in fact a prominent feature of *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*, a psychiatric disturbance frequently diagnosable among individuals who have felt overwhelmed by witnessing or enduring situations that threatened or inflicted serious personal harm (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Among children, this disregulation often entails persistent and proliferating fears related to the stressors (Izard & Harris, 1995; Terr, 1991).

Terr (1981) discussed unusual play behavior she had noted in traumatized children, including several she had seen in private practice and some she had interviewed after they had been kidnapped while riding a schoolbus in Chowchilla, California. She termed this behavior *posttraumatic play* in view of its evident links to traumatic experience. It was distinguished by its relatively literal evocation of traumatizing events or circumstances in the child's history (e.g., "playful" reenactments of a vicious dog bite), and by its compulsive repetition without elaboration or alteration. Although the activity might be labeled as "fun," it commonly elicited anxiety, and often flirted with genuine danger. The affect it aroused could also be strong enough to engage non-traumatized children's practical and emotional participation.

Terr noted that traumatized children lacked awareness of the links between this play and their traumatic experiences, and that the play would terminate after these links were discussed therapeutically. She reasoned that traumatized children naturally engage in play to cope with their affective disregulation, because they intuitively recognize its value in reducing anxiety;

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<sup>15</sup> Rae et al. (1989), Barnett (1984), and Milos and Reiss (1982) have also been reviewed favorably by Russ (1995).

indeed, even traumatized adolescents and adults sometimes adopt regressive play forms for this reason. This move fails to relieve anxiety, however, because the genuineness and intensity of traumatic horror overshadow and constrain the fictional enterprise. Insofar as the children cannot achieve distance or control in the narrative, the play tends to amplify the very anxiety it seeks to allay.

### A Case Study Involving Polarized Emotions

Children who have not been severely traumatized may nonetheless experience clinically significant levels of affective dysregulation. Indeed, many psychiatric disturbances in children (as in adults) are characterized substantially by their affective symptomatology, whether or not they are termed "affective disorders" (Izard & Harris, 1995). It is moreover a commonplace among child mental health practitioners that children referred for treatment of one or another problem typically struggle with particular emotions, while demonstrating underdeveloped abilities to understand and verbalize emotions in general. Insofar as these abilities are considered instrumental to the child's affective equilibrium and social adjustment, their cultivation becomes a therapeutic objective.

A case study by Harter (1977) nicely illustrates the therapeutic use of pretend play to pursue this objective. Harter was treating a learning-disabled 6-year-old girl, whom she called *K*, whose polarized, ambivalent, and unarticulated feelings were a prominent concern. *K* exhibited low self-esteem in regard to the poor school performance for which she had been referred, as well as fear, sadness, and anger in regard to a family life marked by an unpredictable household composition, important relationship losses, inconsistent and sometimes harsh discipline, poor communication, and little exploration of affective experience.

*K*'s initial treatment course was distinguished by her penchant for role plays that cast herself and her therapist, respectively, as demanding teacher and incompetent pupil. Harter considered that these repetitive enactments allowed *K* to identify with a powerful figure and to project her sense of helplessness and inadequacy outside herself, but that they also created a therapeutic impasse, as *K* exploited her fictitious authority to quash Harter's prompting of emotional exploration.

Harter surmised that this impasse was rooted substantially in *K*'s tendency to globalize her feelings and perceptions, so that she could, for example, see herself only as completely *smart* or (more characteristically) completely *dumb*. Harter likened *K*'s thinking about affect and identity to that

of a child in Piaget's preoperational period (Piaget, 1969). When confronted with a conservation or class-multiplication task, such a child attends to one or another perceptually salient dimension of the physical stimulus, instead of coordinating its multiple dimensions within a logical structure. K would likewise attend selectively to attributes or experiences that fostered a single self-image or emotion, so that she could not see herself as being capable in certain respects while being disadvantaged in others, or being happy about some things while being sad about others.

Harter reasoned that K needed to extend existing concrete operational abilities from the physical domain to the less tangible emotional one. Playing the pupil, she presented a line drawing (a circle divided into hemispheres labeled *S* and *D*) that ostensibly depicted her *own* identity as a person who could feel both partly *smart* and partly *dumb*, because she performed various tasks with various proficiencies. K appropriated and elaborated this drawing as a "graphic metaphor" (p. 428) of differentiated affect and identity, using it to communicate indirectly about various feelings and to depict the effects of gradual scholastic improvements on her self-esteem.

Certain principles concerning pretend play and emotion regulation, as discussed in this paper, are vividly exemplified in Harter's case study. K's caricature of "an extremely strict and punitive teacher" (p. 426) recall both the "exaggeration, embellishment, and ulterior signification" (perhaps?) and the "considerable degree of affective force" (certainly) that Fein observed in her "master players". K's passion for these enactments presumably reflected some fictional absorption as she experienced the teacher's empowerment, and ventilated some anger unlikely to be welcomed in other quarters. Yet the frequent repetitions failed to relieve her painful affect, and indeed their compulsiveness hints at posttraumatic play.

Harter's comments on her own role enactments suggest that she grasped her client's depth of feeling through some complementary fictional absorption: when K harshly rebuffed her initial presentation of the line drawing, she wryly considered that "as a therapist, I have only one part, and it's all dumb!" (p. 427). Notwithstanding that moment of pessimism, Harter's intervention proved doubly smart. Her drawing established a concrete symbol (Piaget's *motivated sign*) for mirroring and elaborating K's self-understanding; whereas her presentation as pupil exploited the subtle ambiguities of Bateson's psychological frame, telling a story about herself that K could safely hear, when it was all about K after all.

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