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“Jennifer and her Barbies”: A Contextual Analysis of a Child Playing Barbie Dolls¹

Delf Maria HOHMANN

Introduction

This paper will deal with the play performance of Jennifer. Jennifer is seven years old and attends grade two of an elementary school in St. John’s. After she returns home from school, she plays on her own until her younger sister Michelle returns home from kindergarten. Then they usually play a variety of games together, including puzzles and manufactured games the rules of which are provided by the manufacturers.

I became particularly interested in Jennifer’s performance playing “Barbies”. I had numerous opportunities to observe Jennifer playing Barbies when I was her babysitter in the afternoons and evenings. For fieldwork purposes, I expressed my strong interest in Barbies to Jennifer, a number of times, triggering an invitation to join her while playing Barbies at her home, where I took the role of a participant observer. This gave me not only the opportunity to observe Jennifer’s performance but also to ask a number of questions that provided more information about Jennifer’s perception of the Barbie doll.

Jennifer and I met outside her school on a rainy afternoon to play Barbies together at her home, since the bad weather would prevent her playing outdoors with her playmates. On the way home she talked to me about her Barbie dolls and her preference for playing Barbies. Upon arrival at her home Jennifer immediately began to set

1. I am grateful to Kathryn Kimiecik and Dr. Martin Lovelace for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of the paper. I thank Heather Wishart for reading the final manuscript. I also acknowledge Jennifer’s mother, Elsa Burt, for warmly welcoming me into her home.

up the Barbie house. Although Jennifer does not possess the actual Barbie House she arranged an imaginary house consisting of a kitchen, a living room and a room for the children. The walls between the rooms as well as the doors were imaginary. A piece of strong cardboard with two ends bent forward served as a closet for the Barbie clothes as well as the wall dividing the bedroom of the mother Barbie and the two children. The imaginary bathroom had only one piece of furniture, a bathtub. A large ashtray substituted for the bathtub:

Jennifer: I have this for a bath. See it's a nice. . . D.M.H.: Is it clean? Jennifer: Ya, it's all cleaned up, it's all clean. D.M.H.: Did you ever take a bath in an ash tray? Jennifer: Hmmm, well. . . D.M.H.: We just pretend, okay?²

Jennifer also has a variety of Barbie paraphernalia: a bed with a blanket, pillow and bedspread, coat hangers for the numerous Barbie clothes, chairs, and kitchen accessories like a stove, plates, cups and pots, a cutting board and a knife. Since the kitchen lacked a refrigerator and a sofa for the living room, they had to be constructed from a piece of cardboard. The Barbie house was set up on the living room carpet, which provided quite a cosy atmosphere.

Three Barbie dolls appeared as the main characters in the play. Jennifer named the two sisters Chrissi and Andrea. Andrea is one of Jennifer's playmates and Chrissi is a character known to Jennifer from the television show, "Three's Company". The third one was simply called "the mother", but later on, Jennifer named her after her mother, Elsa. The limitation of the family roles to these three indicates Jennifer's actual single parent family. As Jennifer explained, it is important to know how to play with Barbies:

Jennifer: Well, you gotta know, like, you gotta know how to speak them, and ya and you gotta know how to dress them. And you gotta know how to act them out, kind of. D.M.H.: Will you show me, though? Jennifer: Oh, like, 'magine she's going to a store, she'll say, Mom? - no, 'magine now she's going to a store, and you say, Mom? Can I go to the store? And she says, no you don't, and you says, yes, you'll go, right? It's just like a wife.³

Jennifer also describes typical features of the mother, especially when triggered by a question from the participant observer:

D.M.H.: Okay, so that's the mother, how do I know that that's the mother? Jennifer: Because, she's kinda older, and her hair is not so long, this. See these two are the children, so that's settled.⁴

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2. Transcript of tape recorded play session, March 21, 1986.
 3. Transcript of tape recorded play session, March 21, 1986.
 4. *Ibid.*

Despite the fact that Jennifer explained a number of things about playing Barbies, throughout the play session she suggested a few imaginative episodes to be acted out. The first episode relates the preparation of a supper with friends, the Haffertons and their daughter. It includes cleaning up the house and the preparation for the meal. The meal consisted of a piece of chocolate that Jennifer found under her mother's bed. Jennifer also recommended that Barbie should wear appropriate clothing for that occasion. The Haffertons arrived and were shown through the house, then everybody sat down and ate. Finally, after a rather short period of merriment, the visiting family stayed over for the night at the house. This episode dominated the playing session, although a variety of shorter episodes were also acted out. One of the daughters was to have a party the following night. A fight between the two daughters was settled by the mother. For her naughty behaviour the younger daughter, Andrea, had to go to her room and lie in bed. Later, after the guests had arrived, she was allowed to participate in the activities. This particular play session, in conjunction with the earlier Barbie sessions, will be the basis for an analysis of the child's play.

The significance of Barbies in Jennifer's play

A variety of cultural values are attached to the Barbie doll since it has become an icon, representing much of what our society most admires and fears about itself. The Barbie doll creates an image of correct personal appearance, hence a model for feminine behaviour.⁵

Jennifer's play with the Barbies is affected by these cultural values. To expand Motz' view, it seems necessary to note that cultural values are not only constructed by the Barbie image, but that cultural values as represented in the Barbie are fed back into society through the Barbie. Jennifer reflects both the childlike innocence and the material nature attributed to the ideal woman through the Barbie doll, as in the following scene:

D.M.H.: What's this, for jogging? Who's jogging, the mother? Jennifer: Well the mother don't really jog. D.M.H.: Why not? Jennifer: Oh, she could jog if she would. D.M.H.: Why do they jog? Jennifer: I don't know, oh,

5. Marilyn Ferris Motz, " 'I Want to Be a Barbie Doll When I Grow Up': The Cultural Significance of The Barbie Doll 1983," in Christopher D. Geist and Jack Nachbar, (eds.) *The Popular Culture Reader*, 3rd ed. Bowling Green, Ohio, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983 , p. 122.

you wouldn't want to use this, it takes up too much space. D.M.H.: What?
 Jennifer: Skiing. D.M.H.: Oh, no, no, no. I mean do they jog, the Barbies?
 Jennifer: Uhhh, to get some weight off them. They're all kinda slim.⁶

The image of the woman expressed through the Barbie doll reflects the cultural values of slimness and fashion consciousness. Thus, slimness represents a popular attitude which guarantees success in modern society.⁷ In Jennifer's opinion it is connected with jogging. Jogging in modern society is commonly accepted as a leisure activity practiced by both males and females. It functions as a means of getting or staying in shape or, as Jennifer notes, of losing weight. In conjunction with the image of slimness is the emphasis Jennifer places on the mother's apparel. For jogging the mother has to wear a jogging suit, while in the kitchen she wears an apron. Later Jennifer states:

Jennifer: 'Cause that's the style out now. D.M.H.: Do these Barbies always go with the fashion? Jennifer: Well, you can take your Barbie and do it.⁸

The contextual significance of this scene does not arise from the Barbie doll itself but from the clothes she wears.⁹ Here, Jennifer conforms to a commonly accepted attitude that clothing has a certain significance in a certain context. To be able to conform to the expected clothing standard on a special occasion reinforces the person's social status.

In the past, especially in medieval society, a costume was attached to a certain occupation or status within a community. It was an expression of the *societas humana* and it enabled others to know at a glance to which social level the person belonged. This rather traditional costuming practice is passed on to modern society and affects our interpretation of costume. Although clothing today does not necessarily provide an immediate indicator of the person's profession, it still indicates the status of that person within our society. Social standing is indicated by a person's dressing appropriately on specific occasions. Costume today does not function to express occupation but to reinforce, as in traditional cultures, status within a society.

One of the reasons for Jennifer's possessing a variety of Barbie clothes is to enable her to dress her dolls appropriately for the situa-

6. Transcript of tape recorded play session, March 21, 1986.

7. Motz, p. 123.

8. Transcript of tape recorded play session, March 21, 1986.

9. Motz refers to the "cultural significance" of the clothes and accessories of the Barbie doll, pp. 129-130.

tions in her imaginative play, thus validating modern societal attitudes toward clothing.

To assure herself of having a piece of clothing appropriate for the situation, Jennifer constantly sorted out and organized her Barbie clothes during her play performance. The Barbie doll in itself expresses, with her bodily appearance, all the desired features of a modern woman; the *sine quâ non* in playing Barbies is the possession of the clothes. Clothes are emphasized in two articles about the success of the Barbie doll on the toy market:

And her extensive wardrobe has pushed Mattel into first place as the biggest clothing manufacturer in number of outfits made.¹⁰

[. . .] the doll that requires a dozen or two complete changes of costume to make it, and its sub-teen owner happy.¹¹

To purchase clothes in such quantity is not possible in the middle-class family in which Jennifer lives, and so Jennifer compensates for this lack in her imaginative play, in her set-up miniature Barbie world.

In this miniature play world, Jennifer is able to create and control the action, as she cannot do in her real life situation.¹² Here, not only does Jennifer rehearse her skills for adult life as she engages in role playing activities, she also creates a fantasy world where all the situations follow her designs.

This is attested to at the beginning of the play, as Jennifer distributes the roles. The participant observer was only given one role, that of the mother, whereas Jennifer acted out the two sisters, Chrissi and Andrea. Later in the play, when the company arrives for supper, Jennifer also takes on the role of the additional characters. Jennifer does not let all her characters participate in the play on an equal basis, so that the roles of Mr. and Mrs. Hafferton and their daughter, Tara, appear to be rather marginal.

A rather interesting situation develops from a quarrel between the two sisters, Chrissi and Andrea. In the first place Jennifer (Chrissi) expects the mother to punish her younger sister, but the mother, played by the author, does not react as Jennifer would have liked. Therefore, Jennifer immediately improvises a new situation, where the jewellery of the mother becomes the topic of discussion. Jennifer underlines the younger sister's behaviour by instantly creating another situation in which the younger sister displays an even worse behaviour

10. "The Most Popular Doll in Town", *Life*, August 23, 1963, p. 73.

11. "It's not the Doll, It's the Clothes", *Business Week*, December 16, 1961, p. 48.

12. Motz, p. 127.

towards her mother. The mother still does not react as Jennifer, in her role as Chrissi, deems appropriate. Jennifer (Chrissi) is seeking the mother's endorsement for her attack on her sister and suggests to the participant observer that the younger sister be sent to bed as punishment for her inadequate behaviour. This shows a fairly common type of sibling rivalry and allows Jennifer to release her frustrated jealousy of her sister. As the "saucy" daughter finally retreats to her bed, Jennifer has more space to act out her other Barbie dolls. As soon as the other daughter disappears from the stage, Chrissi talks to her mother and tries to gain recognition from her.

This scene describes Jennifer's status within her family in reality. Quite often, when Jennifer and her younger sister, Michelle, engage in playing together, similar situations occur with her younger sister quite frequently performing in a destructive way within the play of game. In reality, Michelle is punished by being put to bed early.

In the play situation discussed above, certain rules are re-confirmed. The re-enactment of this situation demonstrates the learning of an adequate behaviour within the social environment of the two sisters. In the course of a socializational process that both Jennifer and Michelle undergo, Jennifer has already learned to handle such situations. Jennifer's reaction in the play clearly expresses the idea that learning social roles in the daily context also involves the learning of rules, in this case rules of proper behaviour, which has yet not been achieved by the Barbie, Andrea, a substitute for Jennifer's sister, Michelle.

In the same context, it is interesting to note that Jennifer's imitation accurately reflects a scene of her daily life. Susanna Millar states that: "imitation depends (ideally) on reproducing or mirroring events in exactly the same way and in the same sequence as they occur."¹³ It is also important to mention that in the scene described above, neither Jennifer's mother nor her sister, Michelle, were present. Thus, it supports Millar's thesis that "Role playing does not require the presence of the 'model', the correct imitation of movements, or the communication of excitement."¹⁴ Millar states in her conclusion that imitation refers to different types of behaviour. In this case it is "role

13. Susanna Millar, *The Psychology of Play*, Middlesex, Eng., Penguin Books, 1977, p. 150.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

playing and the re-enacting of events where the repetition concerns patterns of actions witnessed or heard about."¹⁵

Jennifer's mother and her sister, Michelle, function as models for Jennifer's performance with the dolls. It is now necessary to attempt to classify Jennifer's play.

Roger Caillois defines play as an activity which is essentially free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules and make-believe.¹⁶ Jennifer's play performance with the Barbies is separate, being limited to a certain time of the day, after she returns from school until the arrival of her younger sister, Michelle. In terms of space, her Barbie doll play is limited to either the living room floor or her bedroom. The stage of the Barbie play usually does not exceed the imaginary Barbie house as it is set up on the floor. Therefore, time and space are defined and fixed. Jennifer's play is uncertain because the course of action is not determined, but one could argue from a structural approach that Jennifer usually develops and acts out a story. This story serves basically as a frame for little episodes that are triggered at certain points during her performance. As evidenced from a number of observations that preceded the actual play situation recorded and examined for this paper, Jennifer in fact performs in episodes that appear in frames. When the play performance comes to an end, Jennifer remembers the actual first frame of her play and guides the action of the play back to the outer frame. In this case, after the episode with the disobedient Barbie, Andrea, the story of the guests arriving for supper was resumed.

Jennifer's performance can be considered unproductive in terms that no goods are produced. Although Caillois focuses in the category on material goods, if his interpretation is broadened it may be said that play can be productive in terms of an experience that is invoked by a playmate. In this case, during the quarrel between Chrissi and Andrea, Jennifer expected the participant observer to react in a certain way, as described above. Since he did not react at once to Jennifer's complaint as expected, Jennifer, to achieve her goal, had to suggest certain phrases to be said by the mother. Thus, the play context invoked a situation in which Jennifer had to manipulate events in order to achieve the desired result, to have her sister punished for her behaviour. As the Opies note:

The 6-year-old child who plays "Mothers and Fathers" re-enacts the com-

15. *Ibid.*, p. 175

16. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, Games*, New York, Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1961, p. 9.

mon incidents of his everyday life with what seems tedious exactness, until one realizes that there is a thrilling difference: he has promoted himself, he is no longer the protesting offspring being scrubbed to bed, but is the father or mother; and the 6-month-old doll is the one being scolded for not getting into the bath.¹⁷

Similarly, Jennifer has placed herself in a position to practice the use of authority.

In terms of material goods Caillois' categorization does not necessarily apply to children's games. Jennifer's Barbie play, a variety of objects belonging to a proper household are not at hand. So Jennifer is forced to improvise and, for example, creates a table for the kitchen from a container that is turned upside down, or a refrigerator from a piece of cardboard. In general one can argue that children will most likely create objects that from their point of view are for the play.

Caillois's category of the unproductive aspect of the play context does not distinguish precisely between play and game, but it can be shown in his next category that play/game is governed by rules. Jennifer's performance of play is governed by rules. In her performance, Jennifer sticks closely to the rules that are imposed by the society upon her. This can be seen in the way she lets her characters, mother, Chrissi and Andrea, communicate with each other. Jennifer applies patterns of speech from her daily life to the characters in her performance. The presence of the Barbie doll on its own triggers a behaviour that is governed by cultural attitudes that are attached to the Barbie doll.

Another point to support Caillois' theory is Jennifer's use of onomastics. Jennifer performs a traditional way of naming in that she only applies to her characters (names) of people with whom she socializes in reality. The younger Barbie sister is named after one of her playmates - Andrea. The daughter of the guests invited for dinner bears the name Tara. In reality, Tara is one of Jennifer's favorite friends at school. Jennifer recalls good experiences with her schoolmate in the past; otherwise she would not have her as part of her imaginative play. B.H. Granger states that a name is felt to be an integral part of an individual.¹⁸ This can also be considered a rule, since Jennifer uses a traditional pattern to name the Barbies.

17. Iona and Peter Opie, *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 331.

18. B.H. Granger, "Naming: in Customs, Beliefs, and Folktales", in *Western Folklore* 20 (1961), pp. 27-37.

Caillois' last category is that of make-believe. Jennifer is in fact aware of her imitations of real life:

Jennifer: [. . .] you gotta learn they're only Barbies, they're nothing really, [. . .] Oh Delf, they're only dolls.¹⁹

This is also expressed quite frequently as Jennifer changes from episode to episode. Every new episode is accompanied by the statement, "Can we pretend" or "we just pretend". This seems also to function as an opening formula to announce the shift from one scene to another.

The make-believe category leads us to a secondary categorization by Caillois that can be applied to Jennifer's performance. Caillois classifies games into fundamental categories: *Agon*, *Alea*, *Mimicry Ilinx*.²⁰ Jennifer's performance fits into the category of *Mimicry* which defines children's acting games as play. Caillois states:

For children, the aim is to imitate adults. This explains the success of the toy weapons and miniatures which copy the tools, engines, arms and machines used by adults. The little girl plays her mother's role as cook, laundress, and ironer.²¹

Jennifer does imitate perfectly the actual world around her. This is revealed in the set-up of her Barbie's house, which has the same number of rooms and a similar arrangement to the apartment in which Jennifer lives. It is also reflected in certain speech patterns that are performed, going so far as to use the same vocabulary that is applied in specific situations by her mother and her sister. Jennifer's play in the context of the recorded play performance can also be grouped under *Alea* (chance). In this particular performance, the participant observer did not always react as planned by Jennifer, whereas in the observed play situations, Jennifer's younger sister, Michelle, adhered much more closely to a repetitive behavioural pattern and response to Jennifer's actions.

Since the participant observer is less spontaneous in his reactions to certain speech and behavioural patterns and does not react as experience in other play situations has led her to expect, Jennifer finds herself in a gambling situation, in which she takes chances on different responses by the actual play mate. Although Caillois applies his theory to lottery and other winning games, where the player has no control over the outcome, the features of chance are also present

19. Transcript of tape recorded play session, March 21, 1986.

20. Caillois, pp. 14-23.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

in Jennifer's Barbie doll play context, as her adult playmate reacts differently than her prospective playmates of similar age.

Conclusion

In Jennifer's play with the Barbie, the Barbie doll functions to trigger a variety of behavioural patterns linked to the cultural values which are attached to the Barbie doll. It gives Jennifer the opportunity to express a variety of problems which occur within her family. In the context of the play she is able to rehearse her skills to reinforce her status within her family, which is particularly expressed in her perception of her younger sister and of her mother as she re-enacts these characters in the play situation. Through the medium Barbie, Jennifer performs a very close imitation of her real life.

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