

Gendered toy play as mediated action

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This text presents some analyses of 4- and 5-year-old children's video-taped play with gendered dolls and figures in a Swedish preschool setting. Based on sociocultural and semiotic theory, the analyses try to identify in what ways boys and girls play differ and how the play can be understood as mediated by the gendered character of the dolls and figures used. It was found that social and cultural gender stereotypes, represented in the dolls and figures used, were reflected in most of the play episodes that were analyzed. The boys play with figures representing masculine men were mainly instrumental and the boys identified themselves with the aggressive thematic built into the toys. Girls play with dolls representing feminine women was mainly relational as the girls were involved in inter-subjective relations with the dolls. This was found to be enabled and supported by the character of the feminine dolls themselves and their accessories. Some examples of children's strategies to overcome constraining designs of dolls were also found.

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Since toy research is a relatively new and minor field at universities, most conceptions about toy play are based on experiences from everyday life. Ideas about the role of toys in children's play are often anecdotic and normative. Some people refer to their sons using whatever toys available as guns or to their daughters who they say use to put toy cars to sleep in their dolls prams. Such anecdotic references illustrate a common conception about toys, that toys are *raw* material, that are used to "play out" something that exist within the child itself, and naturally different for boys and for girls. They are part of a larger

paradigm in the Western world which states that humans, individually and independently, use objects in the world to express something that comes from inside (emotions, knowledge, objectives etc). In this paradigm, the cultural thematic built into the objects used in action is not treated as important. Opposite to this, there is another paradigm stating that there is a direct, almost mechanical, relation between the character and content of objects, and the actions people carry out when using them. This paradigm is represented, for example, in research about war toys in the 1970s and the 1980s. In experimental settings,

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researchers studied the effect of war toys and aggressive toys on children's anti-social behavior. Another area in which this paradigm is represented is the marketing of so-called educational toys, which according to the toy industry can have positive effects on fine-motor skills, creativity, literacy etc. These two paradigms could be understood as epistemological endpoints were the first one could be described as rationalism and the second as empiricism. They also illustrate the traditional demarcation between social science theories which gives primacy to the individual/actor on the one hand, and theories which gives primacy to society/ structure on the other.

The empirical study of children's play with dolls and figures that will be exemplified later in this text has been guided by a theoretical position trying to overcome the dualism between individual/society and actor/structure. The basic idea is that human action always has to be understood as a relation between individual and society. This also applies to children's play with toys. Play can be understood as "as if" (Knutsdotter, 1987) which relates play to fantasy. According to Vygotskij (1995) all human action includes creativity and fantasy. However, creativity and fantasy does not evolve in a cultural vacuum, from nothing. All human action (e.g. children's play) is based on creativity and fantasy but it is also related to the real world that children have direct or indirect experiences of. Children's toys form a substantial part of this real world, as material objects but also as representations of social and cultural practices.

Toys as artifacts and signs

The Swedish word for toy is "leksaker" (plaything). A common expression in Sweden is "Don't play with that, it's not a plaything". In the *Swedish Academy Dictionary* toys are described as (authors translation from Swedish): "small and insignificant things associated with wasting time". Toys are associated with children and their activities are generally not considered to be productive. To make this sharp distinction between children, their objects and activities on the one hand, and the adult (real and important) world on the other, is a mistake. In the following it will be argued that toys are not as insignificant as they are sometimes considered to be. Toys, as artifacts, are related to soci-

ety and therefore important for processes in which children get to know and grow into existing social and cultural activities and discourses.

Artifacts play a significant role in the development of societies. According to a sociocultural approach (Säljö, 2000), one of the most important aspects of being human is to use (and learn how to use) artifacts such as for example pen and paper, telephones, calculators, books and lawnmowers. People use artifacts to solve all kinds of problems that they face in living in and developing society. Knowledge produced by generations before us is available for us (built into) in artifacts. *Primary artifacts* (Wartofsky, 1979) are tools for production by which we transform the material world (e.g. hammer), while *Secondary artifacts* are representations of primary artifacts and of how they are used (e.g. instructions of how to use a hammer to make a construction). Secondary artifacts are tools by which we transform social and cultural ideas about being in the world. Secondary artifacts describe, explain and offer specific ways of understanding various phenomena in the world.

Toys are very seldom primary artifacts with functionality suited for transformation of the material world. This is partly due to the cultural understanding, in modern society, about childhood as distinctly separated from adulthood. There are of course toys with functionality that is similar to the functionality of the "real world" objects that they represent. A toy pot in red plastic could be used to store vegetables but placed on a hotplate its limitations in functionality is obvious when it melts. The red plastic toy pot, in combination with toys representing vegetables, a toy representing a hotplate and other toys representing household items, have features of both primary and secondary artifacts. They can to some extent be used as the objects they represent but their most important characteristic is that they give semiotic clues to how the real objects are used. van Leeuwen and Caldas-Coulthard (2001, p. 1) describes this idea like this:

Toys are produced as a resource for children with which they can explore the world in which they live, whether by "reading" them as "texts" or by using them in manipulation, but they can also be loaded with explicit and sometimes implicit agendas by the designers of the industry, and in

this sense they can form a repository of societies “value systems” and “ideologies”.

Not only primary artifacts like hammers and pots are represented in toys. Toys can represent everything with a material existence, like trees and bushes, heaven and the ocean – and perhaps most interesting, human beings.

Human beings in the world of toys

Toys that represent human beings are probably one of the oldest types of toys. In children’s graves from thousands of years B.C, small figures of clay and stones representing humanlike beings, have been found. A substantial amount of space in modern toys stores is used for the display of dolls and figures such as Barbie, Bratz, Rescue Heroes, baby Annabell, Cabbage Patch Kids, Playmobile figures, Star Wars, Batman and Power Rangers. Dolls and figures are not only objects for children’s play. They also have a representational dimension. Lönnqvist (1992) writes that:

If we look at the doll – the miniature man – historically and not only in a European context, the doll as a plaything for a child is only one of many dimensions. In those small figures we find a field of research into not only the mythology and cosmology of different cultures, but also about the relation man-object. Man creates an image of man and imagines that it has attributes that the creator himself either would like to have or that he disgust (Lönnqvist, 1992, p. 243)

In semiotic theory, a sign is something that represents something else. Different types of signs are related to what they represent in different ways. Icons are indicatory signs that resemble what they represent. Toys that represent human beings could indicate that some people are men and some people are women, some are children, some are teenagers, some are adults, some are thin, some are fat, some are tall, some are short, some are black, some are white etc. As icons, toys representing human beings can illustrate variation in human features. By viewing these toys as representations of *social actors* (van Leeuwen & Caldas-Coulthard, 2001) these features could be associated with different social roles and social identities. However, dolls and figures are not “true” representations of real human beings and not “true” representations of existing social roles and identities. Rather than representing “true” roles

and identities, they represent socially constructed ideas about roles and identities. Toys, including dolls and figures, are *semiotic resources* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) for making meaning about the world. According to Säljö (2005), secondary artifacts are instructive and reflexive. It means that they remind the user of different ways of classifying the world (e.g human beings) and they illustrate meaning- and action potentials. By analyzing dolls and figures that represent men and women differently, social and cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity could be found.

Stereotypical representations of gender in the toy world

In toy stores and toy catalogues there are separate areas for boys’ toys and for girls’ toys. In television commercials for toys, girls and boys are displayed playing with different types of toys. Boys are presented playing with tools, vehicles, weapons and male action figures, most often in brown, black and blue colors. Girls are most often presented as playing with baby- and female dolls (with accessories) and with household items, most often in pastel colors. These differences are then reflected in, for examples, letters to Santa before Christmas and in the toy collections found in boys and girls rooms. As secondary artifacts, toys represent stereotypical social values and norms system and as such, they are tools for meaning production about gender in children’s play. They direct boys and girls play in different directions; boys into highly intensive and aggressive activities in fantasy worlds, and girls into caring activities within the home.

Toys that represent men and women are highly stereotyped. In a Swedish study of children’s toy collections it was found that 75% of all toys that represent human beings represent men (Nelson & Nilsson, 2002). Dolls and figures most often also have a stereotyped design. Dolls and figures for boys, representing men, most often have hands designed with a possibility to hold/grip different kinds of tools and with large feet to help them stand steady on the ground. Dolls and figures for girls, representing women, most often lack the possibility to hold things in their hands (straggling fingers) and their feet are generally so small that they will fall if you try to make them stand by themselves. Another striking difference

is that toys representing men most often have very small or covered eyes (without color), while toys that represent women have very colorful eyes that are much bigger than “real” eyes (van Leeuwen, 1997). Most dolls and figures that represent women are designed to represent “real women” whilst those that represent men more often represent male heroes with super powers in fantasy worlds (Nelson & Nilsson, 2002). It is obvious that these differences represent social and cultural stereotypical ideas about what men and women are or should be (such as being active, instrumental, strong and independent – associated with masculinity, and being passive, relational, weak and independent – associated with femininity). Action- and meaning potentials based on these designs can be expected to influence the kind of play that will evolve when boys and girls get to play with them.

According to sociocultural theory, all human action is related to social, cultural and institutional contexts (Wertsch, 1998). It is by using historically developed artifacts that individuals grow into and become part of socioculturally developed knowledge, practices and activities. Gendered themes and ideologies in children’s toys mediate children’s play. When people use artifacts, they use them with intentions located within their own subjectivity, but at the same time they build on and explore intentions, values, knowledge’s and discourses that other individuals, situated in socio-cultural practices, has built into them. Based on the design, some actions and meanings are enabled and others are constrained. Artifacts, such as toys, are not *raw-material*. They are related to power and authority and they define actions in ways that are not totally controlled or foreseen by the user. One way to put this is to say that it is not only the child that plays with the toy; the toy (with its social and cultural values) also plays with the child. It can therefore be expected that the gendered features of dolls and figures will be expressed in children’s play with them.

Actions performed by the boys and girls (video-taped play sessions with male and female dolls)

Two four-year-old boys and three five-year-old girls were video-taped, in a preschool setting, while playing with dolls and figures representing

men and women with gender-stereotyped features. The masculine men, e.g. Action Man, can hold tools (weapons), stand on their feet and have small (covered) eyes. The feminine women, e.g. Bratz, have big colorful eyes, hands with no possibility to grip anything, and small instable feet. Accessories to the male dolls were mainly weapons and to the female dolls they were clothes, jewelry, brushes and small pets. The children also had access to dolls representing males with feminine features (e.g. a doll called Generation Blaine) and figures representing females with masculine features (e.g. a figure called Jungle Venom Poison Ivy). In the following some patterns identified in the two hours (two times one hour) of video-taped play will be described. These illustrations have previously been published in the article (in Swedish) *Identity and gender in play with dolls and figures in preschool* (Berg & Nelson, 2006).

In the children’s play we observed differences between boys and girl play styles which we interpreted as related to the differences in male and female dolls’ meaning- and action potentials. The boys in the study played almost exclusively with dolls representing masculine men. One of the most significant characteristics of this play was that the boys played **through** the dolls/figures. They held the dolls/figures in front of themselves with the dolls faces turned away from the boys themselves, outwards. By this, the dolls became an extension of the boys’ bodies and intentions. The boys identified themselves with the dolls and their masculine features. They acted as if they were the dolls. The dolls were described as “I”.

Example: Billy is holding Action Man in front of himself, he then put him in a shoe and says: I have shoes as protection. He then put him in a box (helicopter) and walks (flies) away. He is using “I-form”: Now I’m here, now I’m here in this...Now I’m flying away with my helicopter...Look at me, look at me.

The girls played almost exclusively with the dolls representing feminine women. Differently from the boys, they played **with** the dolls. The dolls were mainly turned towards the girls. Consequently, there were two subjects involved; the girl herself and the doll. These subjects were involved in various kinds of inter-subjectivity, managed by the girls. In the boys’ play, accesso-

ries (exclusively weapons) were put in the hands of the dolls and thereby became tools for the actions that the dolls performed. In the girls' play the accessories (clothes, brushes, and jewelry) were handled by the girls in actions carried out with the dolls. It is quite obvious that these differences relate to the differences in the design of dolls representing masculine men and feminine women. The masculine men are mainly designed to be active with tools. The feminine women are mainly designed to be played with interactively by their possibility to have "eye contact", hair that can be brushed, clothes that can be put on and off etc. These play patterns are not mainly (or not at all) defined by natural differences in boys and girls play styles. There were examples of the same play pattern when boys played with feminine women.

Example: Billy is combing the feminine women Bratz. I'm combing her hair. After a short while he turns the dolls face towards him and look at her face in a way we haven't seen him look at the other dolls. He treats her more gently than he has treated the other dolls. During this one minute long play episode he holds her turned towards him and do things with her hair and clothes.

In some play episodes the girls also played **with** the dolls. Sometimes, as in the boys play, the dolls were denominated as "I", which could be understood as the same kind of identification as was described in boys' play previously. But there was an important difference. First we have a look at the transcript and then it will be commented upon.

Example: Amanda and her doll (the daughter) has just persuaded Beate's doll (the mother) that she should take a walk to school. She (Amanda) takes her doll and walk away to Cecilia (who has a doll with some small dogs)

Cecilia: I am the vet! Amanda: Al right! Cecilia: These are my dogs! Amanda: Well, do you know where I can find the school? Cecilia: Eeeeh, first you go to the

right and then you go to the left and then you will find it. Amanda: Okey! Amanda walks away with her doll, she takes a little break and says to Cecilia's doll: Do you sell dogs? Cecilia: Nooo! Amanda: Well, that was what I was thinking.

Contrary to the boys, the girls always used specific play voices to talk on behalf of the dolls. All dolls were given different voices. This could be interpreted as creating a distance between the girls themselves and the roles action they helped their dolls to perform. The boys always used their own voices.

Actions performed by the dolls and figures

The character of the actions performed by the dolls and figures were found to be highly influenced by the accessories. As a result of this, actions performed by dolls/figures representing men were different from those performed by dolls/figures representing women. Actions by male dolls were short, fragmentary and mainly related to aggression. The boys made the male dolls/figures (most often Action Man) *jump, fall, hit, fight, fly, take cover, shoot* (most often shooting). These play actions were clearly inspired by the extremely masculine features of Action Man (muscular body) with weapons and armor. The meaning and action potential of Action Man is not to be used as a "A nice middle aged man coming home from work to play with and make dinner for his children". It would of course be possible to put Action Man to sleep in a dolls pram but this is not what the design inspirers the children to do. Action Man is not *raw-material* for playing any theme.

Very different from the boys play, in the girls' play the dolls carried out socially complex and multidimensional actions within narrative frameworks. In the example given before, Amanda's doll (mother) has a long conversation with Beate's doll (daughter) about whether she can go to school or not. She then walks away and meet another person (doll), played with by Cecilia. She is told where the school is and she walks there.

¹Lars-Eric Berg Anders Nelson (2006). "Identitet och genus i lek med dockor och figurer i förskolan". [Identity and Gender in Play with Dolls and Figures in Preschool]. Nordisk Pedagogik 2. Göteborg: NPPF (Nordic Educational Research Association). 124–138.

After she visited the school, she walks back to the same person (doll) again. It turns out that this person is a vet. They also start talking about where the school is and they discuss the possibility for the daughter to have a dog. Finally they decide that she can have a dog but only if she helps out to give the dogs some medicine. The daughter then take one of the dogs, walks home and proudly shows the dog to her mother.

When the girls played with the female dolls, the dolls very seldom used any tools. Those few occasions when they did it was the girls that provided the hands to hold them. The absence of tools might be one of the explanations to the creative and multidimensional character of the girls play. Most accessories for the female dolls were used to identify WHO the doll is (daughter – short skirt, mother – long skirt, vet – dogs) and HOW they are (e.g. beautiful). Accessories defined WHAT the girls did with the dolls but not what the dolls did. The themes and plot in the play had to be invented by the girls.

Dealing with constraints

The main objective of this text has been to describe how the meaning- and action potentials in toys enable and constrain different ways of playing. However, even when some meanings are constrained, children find ways to overcome the constraints. They don't passively assimilate everything that is designed into the toys. We observed some play episodes where children actively challenged the limitations of "their" dolls.

One such episode is when the two boys only had access to one doll representing a masculine man (Action Man). The other available doll was Generation Blaine, a feminine man with colorful clothes, a guitar, and hands not designed

to grip. They boys talked about that they (the dolls) were going to fight against each other. From the boys dialogue it was clear they were preparing for the fight by making their dolls ready for action. In this preparing dialogue they talked about the strengths and powers of their dolls. It was an asymmetric dialogue since the boy with Generation Blaine had a hard time to try to convince his opponent (and himself) that the feminine Generation Blaine could fight at all. The other boy was teasing him and said things like: *You can not fight, you are a loser, you can't do anything, and you can only fart!* It was obvious that this was a discussion about the lack of masculinity, built into the doll itself. The boy with Generation Blaine found some ways to overcome these limitations. He found a helmet with a black visor which covered the dolls face completely. Some of the femininity, the feature of his face, was hidden. He then took a pair of big black boots and put them on the dolls feet so that he could stand up by himself – in a moment one of the previously described features of feminine dolls what gone. These changes made Generation Blaine more masculine, ready for fighting. But there was still one big problem. He could not hold a weapon in his hand. The other boy continues to talk about the lack of power: *Ha, ha, he has no gun!* The boy with Generation Blaine desperately tries to put a gun in the dolls hand, but he fails. Even if this last aspect of the "masculinization" of Generation Blaine failed, this example shows that children actively work with the constraints of the toys in order to play according to their "own" ideas.

All play episodes that we observed contained interplay between the children's intentions and the social and cultural representations of gender.

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