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The Study of Children's Folklore

In order to raise successful children, it is often necessary to study their culture and folklore so that one may create meaningful and personalized teaching experiences. However, the study of children's folklore is often overlooked when studying children and childhood, creating a system that is flawed from the start. In order to study children we must understand their culture, and to study children's culture we must learn about children's folklore. Additionally, folklore is a source of education to children, just like any other source, and it is an integral part of a child's development. If we wish to understand children, we must make the study of children's folklore a similarly integral part of our programs of study.

In order to examine precisely why it is valuable to study children's folklore, we first must define exactly what folklore is. Many folklorists struggle to find a precise definition for what exactly folklore is, but several definitions are common. In 2013, author and folklorist Lynne McNeill gave a definition of folklore in her book, Folklore Rules (2013):

> Folklore is informal, traditional culture. It's all the cultural stuff—customs, stories, jokes, art—that we learn from each other, by word of mouth or observation, rather than through formal institutions like school or the media. Just as literature majors study novels and poems or art historians study classic works of art, folklorists focus on the informal and traditional stuff, like urban legends and latrinalia. (2013:16)

This definition also allows us to see an important dichotomy of folklore, namely that folklore is both conservative and dynamic. Folklore is conservative because it is shared among many members of a society, and often preserves ideas across generational, financial, racial, or other social divisions. Folklore is likewise dynamic because there is no codified form or single source of knowledge, so each piece of folklore can be adapted or changed by the individual. By these definitions, we can see that in many ways the study of culture is the study of folklore, and vice-versa.

When speaking specifically of children's folklore, several observations must be made. First, children's folklore is primarily oral, consisting mostly of games or rhymes that children share with one another. Secondly, while children's folklore is frequently passed from child to child, children's culture can be learned from parents or adapted from mainstream culture as well. Lastly, children's folklore, like all folklore, is often trivialized (McNeill 2013:15). Those who study children must avoid this trivialization if they wish to fully understand childhood. With this definition of children's folklore, we are now prepared to examine how learning about children's folklore can help us understand the culture of children.

While some sets of children's folklore include jokes and rhymes, many diverse forms of children's folklore center around games and playtime. Play is an important part of a child's life, and is often used as a means for children to experiment with complex or dangerous ideas without facing the severe consequences those actions would normally entail. As such, play is seen as kind of a paradox, where actions taken during play don't mean what those actions would normally mean. (Bateson 2006) By learning about the folklore surrounding children's games, we can often

see what kinds of ideas children are trying to understand and how children's culture is helping them to become a member of adult society.

One complex idea that many children's folk games examine is the idea of power or control over one's environment. Children almost universally lack as much power in their lives as the adults around them, so it stands to reason that children would try to learn about this concept. Folk games such as tag or hide-and-seek often promote one child to the role of "it", giving that child significantly more power than all their peers, albeit temporarily. (Knapp, Knapp 1978:25) This desire to learn how power works is so strong in children that they often care more about the manipulation of power than the game itself, leading children to adapt some kind of folklore such as counting games or pregame ceremonies to their blatant advantage. Other children understand that this is happening, but generally don't consider this type of cheating to be morally wrong, leading one to believe that they too agree that the manipulation of power for the greater good is more valuable than the game itself. (Knapp, Knapp 1978:43) Without the study of children's folklore, many well-meaning parents and educators might try to stifle this kind of power negotiation among children, depriving the kids of the opportunity to learn first-hand about the concept.

In addition to being a means of exploring difficult concepts, folk games also help children prepare for adulthood. Two prominent childhood folklorists, Mr. and Mrs. Knapp, even argue that folk games do a better job of preparing children for adulthood than mainstream recreation such as organized sports. They argue that many folk games teach negotiation and conflict resolution skills that organized sports cannot teach due to the strict rules imposed by the organization for the sake of fairness. (Knapp, Knapp 1978:41) Folk games are also significantly

more inclusive, generally being played by whichever kids happen to be nearby. This means that

children often get to play with other children they normally wouldn't interact with, such as

children who are much older or younger, or children who may have different skill levels than

they do. (Knapp, Knapp 1978:20) By the Knapps' argument, if we overlook the study of

children's folklore while studying childhood, we're missing out on the more important part of a

child's education.

Folk games are not the only type of folklore children use to experiment with adult

concepts, however. Children often use folklore such as rhymes or rituals to learn about themes

such as violence, sexuality, and the occult. Some children's rhymes include themes such as the

violent murder of Barney or the child's teacher, while others include vague warnings about how

unwanted pregnancies occur or how sexually transmitted diseases are spread (Sherman 1999).

While it may be initially distressing to think of children learning and talking about such adult

matters, folklore's dynamic and trivialized nature allows children to understand these ideas at

their own pace. Children who aren't concerned with the complicated ideas behind the rhyme can

understand the rhyme as a simple diversion. This makes folklore one of the best vehicles for

teaching kids about these concepts.

Once we accept folklore's role as another source of education for children, it's purpose

and value becomes much more apparent. Significant amounts of time and effort are spent

studying and improving the formal education system of children because of it's huge impact on

childhood development, but neglecting to study the education acquired from children's folklore

with the same fervor is clearly an oversight. Again, according to the Knapps, it may be that

between mainstream education and education through folklore, it is education through folklore that has a stronger influence on children.

Another major benefit to studying children's folklore is that folklore can often be used to test and examine popular beliefs about mainstream education. In her paper titled "Accomplishing Social Organization in Girls' Play: Patterns of Competition and Cooperation in an African American Working-Class Girls' Group" (1993) Marjorie Harness Goodwin investigates the popular belief of her time that women were not suited for the workforce because young girls were never taught how to behave in a hierarchical command structure. She shows how studying the sayings and jeers of a group of young boys can teach us that they consider themselves to be a part of a hierarchical social structure, reinforcing the popular belief. However, she then also shows us how studying the folk game among girls of playing house also teaches the girls these same hierarchical social skills, which challenged the beliefs that young girls weren't suitable or accustomed to such situations. By using folklore as a second source of information, Goodwin could support and critically analyze finding from other fields.

Finally, one of the most important reasons we must study children's folklore is to understand the profound influence a negative culture can have on children. When a culture holds a hidden fear or worry, a related event can trigger what is called a rumor panic, where members of that society greatly overreact to the event and begin enacting extreme countermeasures until they feel the fear has been addressed. Tragic events such as the shooting at Columbine High in 1999 have been blamed on rumor panics that started because of a conflict between "heads" and "jocks" in children's cultures. The folklorist who made those divisions claims that rumor panics are "a means of telling a story in a structured format through real-life action rather than through

oral narration" (Ellis 2002). As such, these stories become toxic folklore that can have dire consequences on the whole community.

Some parents also argue that the rise of commercially-fueled folklore such as the stories told about Disney Princesses are harmful to children. They argue that by creating a culture that worships the characters of Disney's films outside the cinema setting young girls are learning that society expects them to be shallow and lacking in ambition (Bruce 2005-2006). Even critics who think that there may be some good to these modern fairy tales claim that the culture places too much emphasis on physical beauty and worldly possessions (Klapp-Intyre 2010). Whether or not this is true, the study of the effects of a Disney princesses culture is not a task we can undertake without learning about the folklore behind the culture.

Ultimately, the study of children's folklore is useful on many levels. It allows us to understand the importance and purpose behind children's games and playtime, it can be used as an effective method to teach children about how they fit in with society, and it can explain why children sometimes overreact to their fears and anxiety. If we don't include the study of children's folklore in a comprehensive study of childhood, there is no way we can gain a complete understanding of who children really are.

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