Research on Language and Social Interaction
Vol. 24, 1990/1991: 141-157

Sodot: Secret-Sharing as a Social Form Among Israeli Children*

Tamar Katriel
University of Haifa

I. CHILDREN'S SECRETIVE EXCHANGES

In two earlier papers I dealt with ritualized exchange patterns among Israeli children. Both dwelt on the social and symbolic meanings attending the exchange of objects — 'consumables' in *hibudim* (Katriel, 1987) and 'durables' in *haxlafot* (Katriel, 1989). Another salient form of exchange in children's peer-group culture involves the ritualized exchange of privileged information, which takes the form of trafficking in secrets (natively referred to as *sodot*). The keeping and telling of secrets proved an emotionally charged topic for the children consulted in my studies. I was initially alerted to the centrality of secret-sharing as a social form in their lives as I listened to accounts of *brogez* incidents (Katriel, 1985) which were triggered by a breached promise ''not to tell,'' or overheard threats, ''If you tell, I'll be *brogez* with you.'' I was also intrigued to hear a number of children say matter-of-factly that they were careful about sharing their secrets with a friend in case they ''became *brogez*'' and the secret would ''come out.'' One boy even told me he had made an agreement with his friend

* Reprinted with the publisher's permission from the author's book, *Communial Web: Communication and Culture in Contemporary Israel*. Copywight SUNY Press, Albany, NY.

that they would not tell each other's secrets ''even if we became *brogez*.''

The centrality of secrets in children's lives is recognized by adults as well. This can be seen in treatments of the topic in poems and stories written for children and often read in school, and more directly, perhaps, it is indicated by the fact that topics like ''My Secret,'' ''I Have/Had a Secret,'' ''A Secret I Never Told,'' or ''I Kept a Secret,'' are standard fare as set-topic compositions in school. Children's written accounts are revealing, and I will use some of them to anchor my further analysis and discussion of children's secret-sharing, adapting the research strategy so fruitfully employed in Jules Henry's (1963) classical analyses of American children's world.[1] This written testimony will be supplemented by data derived from my non-participant observation of the social life of the middle-class, Jewish Israeli children among whom I have conducted my inquiry.

The children's written accounts impart some of the experiential flavor and dramatic appeal that the trafficking in secrets holds for the youngsters, and point to the central normative arrangements that regulate secret-sharing among them. The following illustrative examples were written under the heading of ''I Kept a Secret,'' a standard topic given by the teacher as part of an in-class sixth grade composition assignment. As is customary, it was one of three topics children could choose from in completing their writing task.

The first account nicely brings out the desire to share important personal information and the interpersonal dynamic such sharing can generate:

> One day when I came to school my best friend ran to me and said she had been trying to hold something in for some days, and now she must tell me something nobody must know: A secret. I promised her I would not tell even though I knew it would be a little hard not to reveal. ''My Mom is pregnant,'' she whispered in my ear. ''Really? What fun! And what month is it?'' I asked. ''She is in the third month,'' my friend said. Later, all through the school day we kept whispering secrets concerning her mother. When I got home I really felt like telling my big sister, because she surely would have been able to explain everything, as she is older than I am. But I know that I had promised not to tell, and really in all these days I never told anybody.

The second account brings out the sense of risk and temptation which children often associate with secretive exchanges, as well as the pride in one's ability to keep a secret, which was evident in the previous contribution as well:

> I kept a secret that T. told me. Oof, how many oaths she made me take before she told me. The next day I went to visit K. and was dying to tell her the secret because we simply talked and chatted and gossiped a little, so at the very last moment I didn't tell her the secret. The next day I went to T. again: ''Did you tell the secret?'' she asked. She shouted and threatened me that if I told the secret then... Even if I had revealed it I wouldn't have told her about it after all her talk. And so T. and I kept telling secrets to each other, and although I want to I never tell anybody.

The next two accounts, by two different girls, tell tales of betrayal, indicating how breaches of trust are discovered, handled and incorporated into ongoing relationships:

> When I myself found out who I love (I won't mention names) I told K. and K. swore she would not tell anybody. After a while G. came to me. I wanted to tell G. I made her take an oath (and she swore in the name of her mother, her father, and all her family members) and finally I revealed the secret, and what do I hear from G.? That K. had told her. How angry I got! I could have killed her, and she begged me not to tell K. And then M. came and asked me to tell her. I wondered how she knew about it, and then the whole class knew who it is I love.

And,

> One day I told a secret to a girl from class. I told her not to tell anybody because this was something only between the two of us (and I didn't want her to reveal it). One day passed and the next day when I came to the class (after one lesson and another one). Suddenly during breaktime that girl came to me and told me she had revealed the secret to somebody in the class and told me who that girl was. And then I got terribly angry and asked her why she had revealed. Then she said she had to tell. And then the girl she told it to revealed it and it passed through the whole class. And in the end everybody knew about the secret I kept for myself, and then the girl I had told it to first came to me, and she was sorry she had told the whole class.

As both these accounts suggest, secret-sharing has both intrapersonal and interpersonal functions: It is an act of unburdening, but one that serves to affirm bonds of trust, and may also have a consultative value. The following locutions, which were used by children in discussing the issue of secrets, illustrate the way the unburdening and consultative functions figure in their discourse: ''It takes a stone off my heart,'' ''I feel better after I tell about it to my best friend,'' ''I feel I will burst if my friend is sick and I cannot tell it to her right away in the morning,'' ''I know what I can do with my problem after I tell it to my friend.''

Children's trafficking in secrets is, thus, a multifunctional affair. As I will argue later, in addition to the uses of secrets recognized by the youngsters themselves, secret-sharing as a ritualized social form serves important (though latent) group functions. Before I can substantiate this point, I must turn to an analysis of secrets as a social form as well as to a more careful consideration of the categories of secrets children share.

The exchange of secrets, like all other forms of human exchange (Gouldner, 1960; Homans, 1961), implies an interpersonal or social 'contract' which is predicated on a norm of reciprocity. In discussing the ritualized exchange of treats in *hibudim* and the swapping of collectibles in *hahlafot* I have pointed out that they articulate the patterns of generalized reciprocity and balanced reciprocity, respectively. The exchange of privileged information (identified as such by being defined as a 'secret') can either involve a pattern of generalized or a pattern of balanced reciprocity. Secrets which are self-oriented (about oneself or one's family) and directed to a specific other (usually a close friend) follow a pattern of balanced reciprocity grounding relations of trust. Secrets that are other-oriented (about a third party) and directed to an incidental other follow a pattern of generalized reciprocity. They can flow from anybody within the group who happens to know, to anyone who does not. I will refer to the first category of secrets as 'self-oriented' secrets and to the second as 'other-oriented' secrets, and will discuss them separately following some further conceptual clarifications.

Simmel's (1950) seminal analysis of secretive exchanges as social forms has indeed highlighted the general sociological and psychological significance of secret-sharing. In attempting to characterize the nature of secrets in adult life he made direct appeal to his observations of children's conduct. His comments address both the intrapersonal and the interpersonal functions of secrets and suggest that, for children, the ability to engage appropriately and meaningfully in secretive exchanges is socially acquired, or, as we would say today, it is part of the development of their communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). Thus, Simmel (1950, p. 330) notes:

> In comparison with the childish stage in which every conception is expressed at once, and every undertaking is accessible to the eyes of all, the secret produces an immense enlargement of life: numerous contents of life cannot even emerge in the presence of full publicity. The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former.

And later:

> Among children, pride and bragging are often based on being able to say to the other: 'I know something that you don't know' — and to such a degree that this sentence is uttered as a formal means of boasting and subordinating the others, even where it is made up and actually refers to no secret. This jealousy of the knowledge about facts hidden to others is shown in all contexts, from the smallest to the largest. (p. 332)

A number of more recent studies have been devoted to explorations of the role of secrecy in human affairs, e.g., Bok's (1982) discussion of secrets from the standpoint of ethics, and Schwimmer's (1981) study of secrecy and power, which develops a semiotic framework for the study of secrets along the lines set out by Simmel. Although discussions of secrecy among adults tend to include passing references to children's world, to the best of my knowledge children's trafficking in secrets as a social activity has not been specifically addressed in its own right. An exception relating to children's play-world is Sacks' (1980) enlightening analysis of the ''button button'' game, which discusses children's social learning with regards to the

control, detection and manipulation of personal information. The present study of Israeli children's handling of secrets in both play and nonplay situations suggests, by analogy, that children's intense preoccupation with secretive exchanges serves as a practice ground for learning the subtleties of information control in social life. The development of the intricate notion of 'privileged information' is extremely important given young children's initial (egocentric) assumption of a non-differentiated discursive world similarly shared by all partners to an exchange.

In what follows I will draw on the aforementioned general discussions of secrets to analyze the social uses Israeli children make of secretive exchanges. As I will try to show, by focusing on the ways in which the themes of concealment and revelation are shaped and negotiated in a particular culture of childhood, we can gain some significant insights into fundamental aspects of social learning among children more generally. The main interest in secret-sharing as a communicative activity lies in the social functions served by the 'information game' involved, the structures of participation it engenders, and their implications for social inclusion and relationship building. In other words, secret-sharing will hold our attention as an interactional activity rather than as a linguistic performance per se, although some of the ways in which it is talked about will serve as important clues to children's own perceptions of the nature and the social roles of secretive exchanges.

Schwimmer's (1981) semiotic account of secrets can help to characterize the structure and functions of secretive exchanges in a more formal vein. He draws a distinction between 'code secrecy' (e.g., secret language) and 'fact secrecy' (e.g., concealment of information), focusing mainly on code secrecy. The concern of this paper is, by contrast, with 'fact secrecy.' Schwimmer's account of fact secrecy foregrounds two interrelated aspects of such exchanges, both of which are independent of their particular contents: (a) The structure of participation they imply; and (b) the nature of the information circulated. Their interrelationships provide a structural link between the secretive and the manifest worlds inhabited by the partners to the exchange.

As far as participation is concerned, secretive exchanges imply a three-person system: The two (categories of) persons between whom the secret is shared (say, person A as sender of the message and person B as receiver) and the (category of) persons from whom the secret is excluded (say, person C). Regardless of the specific content of the message exchanged, the nature of the information is presupposed to have some bearing on the excluded party (or on his or her relationship to the sender). This characterization of secretive exchanges as participatory activities has an important developmental implication: In secretive exchanges not only knowledge of facts but also knowledge about one's own and others' states of knowledge comes into play. Thus, children's participation in secretive exchanges is a spontaneous indication of their ability to make meta-cognitive assessments that are essential to communicative conduct in general.

Notably, quite a number of the very young children (around age 5) whom I probed on their understanding of secret-sharing characterized secrets as ''a surprise,'' ''a surprise you shouldn't know,'' ''something you shouldn't reveal'' and/or ''something you whisper in the ear.'' That is, they oriented themselves to one's knowledge or lack of knowledge of some fact (usually without any indication of what kind of fact it might be), or to the form the exchange takes. They did not indicate an understanding of the subtle configuration of relative states of knowledge implied by the full-fledged concept of a secret as characterized above, and as it figures in the social life of pre-adolescents.

For the latter, the type of information circulated is not immaterial: It depends on, and partially defines, the nature of the secretive exchange. In discussing secrets, many of the pre-adolescent informants drew an explicit distinction between two major, variously designated categories of secrets. The first category included secrets referred to as 'big' (*gadol*), 'serious' (*retsini*), 'personal' (*ishi*), or 'most confidential' (*sodi bejoter*). The second category included secrets referred to as 'small' (*katan*), 'simples' (*pashut*), or 'teasing' (*mitgare*). The two categories of secrets differ both in the types of information they convey and in their social functions within the children's peer-group. They are discursively distinguished not only through these polar

attributions but also in other linguistically marked ways: The act of sharing a secret of the serious variety is typically spoken of as *legalot sod* (to reveal a secret) while the act of sharing a non-serious secret is typically spoken of as *ledaber/lehagid sodot al* (to speak/tell secrets about), a child-marked expression constructed in analogy to the expressions 'to gossip about' (*lerahel al*) or 'to tattle on' (*lehalshin al*), both of which imply that the person the information is 'about' would not like it to be circulated. Also, the telling of a 'serious' secret is usually spoken of in the singular (e.g., *lesaper sod*) — to tell a secret), while the use of the plural usually implies the exchange of secrets in gossiping activities (e.g., *lesaper sodot*) — to tell secrets). Clearly, the category of 'big secrets' in children's parlance refers to the analytic category of 'self-oriented' secrets posited earlier, whereas the category of 'small secrets' corresponds to the analytic category of other-oriented secrets. Let us consider each of these categories in turn

II. SELF-ORIENTED SECRETS

Instances of seriously disclosed secrets typically range over a number of experiential domains. Knowledge of such things, as one ten year old girl put it, ''makes the mouth locked.'' The following categories of information were repeatedly mentioned as privileged:

(a) Sensitive information concerning one's family (e.g., ''Mom is pregnant''); (b) discrediting or sanctionable information about the self (e.g., ''My baby brother fell to the ground when I was taking care of him''); (c) information related to bodily development (e.g., ''I started wearing a bra''); (d) romantic information (e.g., ''The name of the boy I love''); and (e) a piece of information circumstantially requiring unusual protection (e.g., ''I found a precious stone on the way home from school'').

Disclosing information of any of the above types is a serious matter, and the trafficking in secrets of this kind forms a lively undercurrent of activities in the children's social life. Such acts of disclosure serve important intrapersonal as well as interpersonal functions in children's social learning. In the intrapersonal domain, secrets

involve the demarcation and privileging of particular 'bits' of information about oneself and others. These may assume a formative role as they become a source and anchor for the child's self-knowledge and his or her self-reflective activity. In the interpersonal domain, secretive exchanges of this type serve crucial social functions in peer-group relations as they provide a social form through which intimate bonds can be objectified and reaffirmed.

Of the two actional elements involved in secretive exchanges which figured in Schwimmer's aforementioned semiotic analysis — 'telling to B' and 'keeping from C' — it is the 'telling to' element that is mainly brought out in children's discussions of self-oriented secrets. Children repeatedly evoked the category of 'close friend' in discussing the sharing of personal secrets; at the same time, in discussing close friendships, they repeatedly claimed that a good friend is someone you can trust not to reveal your secrets. Just as a secret is something you tell to a close friend, a close friend is someone you can tell your secret to. The ability and willingness to guard another's secret thus becomes the ultimate test of friendship bonds.

As the many conflicts and betrayals surrounding secret-sharing suggest, the norm of symmetrical reciprocity cannot be taken for granted. This is also suggested by the need children often feel to explicitly verbalize the condition: ''I'll tell you my secret if you tell me yours,'' as I have overheard a ten year old girl say to her friend. Furthermore, secretive exchanges are often subject to interactional reframing: The act of disclosure tends to take place in a spatially removed spot (e.g., ''I take her to the side,'' ''I take her to the corner''). It may be both preceded and followed by ritualized promises not to tell (e.g., ''During breaktime they called me out to the yard. They said: 'We have a very confidential secret to tell you. Promise not to tell anybody.' I said: 'I promise''').

When the secret is very important, or the person to whom it is disclosed is not felt to be fully trustworthy, an oath ensuring that one will not tell it, not just a promise, may be demanded. Examples of such oaths reported in the data include ''I swear to God,'' ''On my mother's life,'' or ''On the Bible.'' I have not found as elaborate and stylized expressions for secret-keeping as those reported by Opie and Opie for English children (1959, pp. 121-128). It appears that the more accen-

tuated the hedging is around secret-sharing activities, the more important the secret is held to be, and the more difficult it is to keep, according to some.

In sum, the sharing of self-oriented secrets provides a form and a context in which intrapersonal states of feeling and knowledge can be given palpable shape, and in which interpersonal bonds can be objectified. When a child says ''I wanted to have a secret'' or ''I thought and thought: 'what will my secret be?''' to cite two of my young informants, what is expressed, I believe, is both a quest for self-identifying, verbally objectified sense of self, and a recognition of secretive exchanges as a cultural resource for engaging in such a quest.

III. OTHER-ORIENTED SECRETS

Unlike self-oriented secrets, which tend to be a dyadic affair, other-oriented secrets are more of a group affair. They are less a matter of 'telling to,' with a particular addressee in view and the implication of interpersonal choice, and more a matter of 'keeping from' and 'using against,' as an expression of social rivalry and peer-group tactics.

A child who declares, or more or less subtly lets out that he or she ''has a secret,'' automatically invites persistent and insistent pestering and exhortations not to be 'a pig' and to tell his or her secret. This is an ideal means of drawing social attention to oneself — a precious commodity within the peer-group. A nine year old girl spoke to this issue when she said: ''If you go and you say 'I have a secret,' then it can't be a real secret because everyone will nag you 'tell me, tell me,' and you will end up telling. A real secret — it's a secret that it's a secret.''

Indeed, the idea of discretion was not easy for me to convey to many of my young informants — they usually felt that any secret whispered around them was very much their business. This did not seem to be only a matter of sheer curiosity, or non-acceptance of

others' rights to privileged information. It was also a matter of wariness: Children, especially girls, seemed to be very sensitive to the possibility of finding themselves the topic of other-oriented secretive exchanges (of having secrets ''told against/about'' them). Secrets of this type function very much like gossip (Havilland, 1977; Heilman, 1982). They involve social commentary about others' conduct, appearance, or character and thus provide a channel through which social standards and expectations are articulated and reaffirmed.

Unlike self-oriented secrets, other-oriented secrets are not kept from some 'generalized other' but specifically from the person the secret is 'about' as well as his or her associates. Thus, you do not tell a secret about C to C's friends: ''I made a blunder,'' an eleven year old girl told me, ''I told a secret to G against M and didn't know she was her friend. Now they're both angry with me.'' Aside from blunders of this type, secretive information is routinely circulated by individuals labeled as 'gossips.' These individuals are denigrated for their inability to protect others' secrets and at the same time they are recognized as convenient indirect channels for passing on information for which one does not wish to be held accountable. More likely than not, a secret will make its unofficial, though highly predictable passage from child to child until it eventually reaches the ears of the child it is 'about.' That child may either choose to ignore it or not. A piece of social information, usually criticism of some sort, has been thus conveyed to a specific child in such a way as to involve minimal commitment on the part of senders and receiver alike: Just as anyone can deny having said it, the target child can pretend not to have heard it, exempting him/herself from the need to respond to the affront. In their social uses, then, as well as in their playlike quality, other-oriented secrets differ markedly from the self-oriented secrets described in the previous section.

Other-oriented secretive exchanges, moreover, are also used as deliberate teasing devices. Complaints like the following one reported by a nine year old girl, who explicitly used ''gossiping against'' and ''telling secrets about'' as synonymous locutions, are common occurrences: ''I went to the teacher and told her that they were telling secrets about me, that they were gossiping against me.'' Actual or imputed

secretive exchanges of the teasing variety may trigger a conflict resulting in *brogez*, the ritualized suspension of communication and the institution of a ratified state of nontalk.

As partners to these exchanges children are aware of their teasing potential, and some were able to be quite explicit about the nonverbal cues that they use in order to mask them: Not wanting a child to know that a secret is being told 'against' him or her, one will take care not to draw his or her attention — to refrain from looking in his or her direction, and so on. Awareness of the irritation induced by the whispering of secrets has produced the generally recognized and often verbalized moral, formulaic injunction: "*Lo omrim sodot behevra*" (one should not tell secrets when in company). Asking children to comment on this saying proved a fruitful opener for my probings.

In conclusion of this section, we might say that through their preoccupation with other-oriented secrets children chart and rechart their group relations, enhance or undermine their own and each other's social standing, and reaffirm or shift social alliances. In all of this activity, the content of the secrets exchanged becomes secondary, often even to the child the secret is 'about' or 'against.' It is in the very activity of telling secrets 'against' one another, with the particular structuring of information involved, that children utilize the social form of secret-sharing as a strategic tool in their manipulation of social relationships. Secret-sharing is used to accomplish this social task much in the way that states of *brogez* are generated in a teasing and competitive spirit to test loyalties and affiliations within the group.

Given the centrality of secret-sharing as an instrument of children's social life, it is not surprising to find that games revolving around the themes of concealment and revelation are central to their social play as well, especially among pre-adolescents. As I will try to show in the next section, these games both condense and reverse the secret-sharing patterns described earlier. At the same time, the world of play and the world of everyday life interpenetrate each other, as personal confession is transformed into play, and playful gesture becomes the stuff of gossip.

IV. SECRET-SHARING GAMES

The secret-sharing practices I have described as part of the flow of pre-adolescents' social life have their more formalized counterparts in the children's party-game repertoire. For this age group in Israel, parties held in private homes typically involve the whole school class (typically, about forty youngsters), whether it is considered a school-class night (*erev kita*) or a birthday party (with birthday parties having a role in the ritual construction of the school class as a social unit for Israeli children). In what follows, I will briefly discuss two games which are generally felt to be the high point of these parties and which manifest a concern with the control of personal information. One is a combination of two 'kissing games' described by Sutton-Smith (1974): The 'spin the bottle' game and the 'truth or consequence' game; it combines the chance element of bottle spinning with the choice element of choosing between disclosure (the name of the boy or girl one is in love with) or the performance of a ludicrous or embarrassing act (often, but not necessarily, involving kissing or other heterosexual touching). This game is call '*emet o hova*,' literally 'truth or duty.' The other game, less common than the first, is called *vidui* (confession) and involves naming three opposite-sex classmates: A loved one, a liked one, and an admired one (labels considered to be in decreasing order of weightiness).

Both games provide a ludic context in which the concealment/revelation issue is thematized, but while in everyday life attention is mainly directed to the element of concealment in secretive exchanges, in the party context attention is directed to the moments of revelation as the pinnacle of the playful activity.

Since the game proceeds through individual selection, it does not create a completely insulated game-world, but rather serves as an arena where attachments and fancies not acknowledged in everyday life are channeled and given expression. Although nobody is officially excluded from playing, a child who is marginal within the group may find that he or she is never actually 'paired up' and may subsequently choose to drop out, complaining that the game is boring. Given the

participation structure of these games, as well as children's tendency to play them at the end of the party, not all children actually participate in them. Indeed, those who regularly participate in these games are sometimes felt to form a distinctive subgroup within the class, and have been referred to on several occasions as ''the kids who stay up late and play *emet o hova* and games like this.'' Notably, *emet o hova* is lighter in tone that *vidui*. *Vidui* provides no slots for tension release in the form of funny performances and requires a higher verbal differentiation of feelings (the children's own version of sociometric nominations, in a sense).

The most interesting point about these games from the standpoint of this study is that they mark a play context in which self-oriented and other-oriented secrets become inextricably fused. The excitement attending revelations in the game context has, of course, to do with the topic of love. From a social, not a romantic point of view, the act of naming the person one loves permits the playing child to have his or her preferences publicly ratified, and thus to exert control over the web of his or her public image and social relations. That this is indeed the case is indicated by the ways in which such disclosures are later incorporated into the stream of gossip about ''who loves whom.''

Observations of these party games suggest that the individual's social right to control his or her projected image and the disclosure of personal information is not unlimited. The group does not automatically ratify any statement made by playing members.

The voice of the group steps in first of all when a child asserts that he or she does not love anybody, or loves somebody ''who isn't here'' and therefore is not in a position to disclose. Such a claim can always be interpreted as an evasion, and a player who consistently makes such claims can be branded as a spoilsport. On some occasions, I observed instances in which a player's statement was not only considered evasive, but was rejected outright by his or her peers as insincere: ''We know who you really love,'' they chimed in one time, brushing aside the child's own choice. Surprised by such incidents I probed my informants about them, and found them singularly unperturbed and casual about the group's pressure on individual children: ''Yes, they want him to say what they gossip.''

These games, then, are double-edged affairs: They provide occasions for individual self-disclosure as well as occasions for the exercise of social control by peer-group members who may interfere with the individual's attempt to define his or her interpersonal preferences. In the context of these games, the precarious balance of revelation and concealment is openly negotiated between the individual and the group: Self-disclosive playful acts feed into the system of gossip and gossip may become the measure of their validity. These games can, therefore, be considered as a way of charting and rechart-ing the group's relational web through a relatively 'safe' process of social negotiation. Thus, as playful counterparts of secretive exchanges in everyday life, these party games serve, inter alia, as meta-comments on secrets and their uses in children's social experience.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter has sought to trace the social uses of secret-sharing among Israeli children. Following the children's lead in distinguishing between self-oriented, 'serious' secrets and other-oriented 'small' secrets, I have identified the major uses children make of secretive exchanges in their social life, and some of their latent, group-related functions. Self-oriented secrets contribute both to a heightened sense of self and to the establishment of intimate relations through the dramatization of interpersonal choice. The exchange of other-oriented secrets is a strategic move in the establishment or shifting of social hierarchies and social groupings.

Secret-sharing can be compared to the ritualized sharing of treats in *hibudim* and swapping collectible items in *hahlafot*. These patterns of exchange define culturally shared contexts in which relations of reciprocity are regulated in such a way as to give concrete form to various interpersonal and group bonds. They work in different ways, however: For example, while the sharing of treats serves to demarcate the outer boundaries of Israeli children's social worlds, operating

within acquaintanceship relations in a generalized exchange mode, the sharing of privileged, personal information serves to delimit the intimate domain in a balanced exchange mode. Thus, children whose relationship is such that they exchange self-oriented secrets will not ordinarily treat each other with the token gift characteristic of ritualized sharing, but rather will divide their 'goods' equally. Other-oriented secrets follow a generalized exchange mode in such a way as to signal inclusion and exclusion vis-a-vis group participation. The swapping in collectibles, like secret-sharing, involves a balanced exchange mode but defines impersonal, contractual (marketplace) relations rather than intimate, wholistic ones. Taken together, these exchange patterns serve to give form and stability to Israeli children's social world. Notably, it is the very expectation of reciprocity that attends all these exchange patterns which induces a measure of continuity and coherence into children's interpersonal and group life.

NOTES

1 Several of my students, who were teaching in grade schools at the time of the study, made a large number of such compositions available to me. I have chosen a few illustrative ones out of the close to three hundred (usually paragraph length) compositions I have read. I also benefitted from students' fieldwork, doublechecking any additional insights they provided with my own informants. All this help is gratefully acknowledged.

REFERENCES

Bok, S. (1982). *Secrets: On the ethics of concealment and revelation*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Gouldner, A.W. (1960). The norm of reciprocity: A preliminary statement. *American Sociological Review, 25*, 161-178.

Havilland, J. (1977). *Gossip, reputation and knowledge in Zinacantan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Heilman, S. (1982). *Synagogue life*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In J.B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics* (pp. 269-293). Middlesex: Penguin Books.

Henry, J. (1963). *Culture against man*. New York: Vintage Books.

Homans, G. (1961). *Social behavior*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Katriel, T. (1985). *Brogez*: Ritual and strategy in Israeli children's conflicts. *Language in Society, 14*, 467-490.

_____(1987). "*Bexibudim!*": Ritualized sharing among Israeli children. *Language in Society, 16*, 305-320.

_____(1988/9). *Haxlafot*: Rules and strategies in children's swapping exchanges. *Research on Language and Social Interaction, 22*, 157-178.

Opie, I. & Opie, P. (1959). *The lore and language of school children*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sacks, H. (1980). Button button who's got the button. *Sociological Inquiry, 50*, 318-327.

Schwimmer, E. (1981). Power and secrecy: Semiotics of manipulation and deception. *Semiotic Inquiry, 1*, 214-241.

Simmel, G. (1950). *The sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: The Free Press.

Sutton-Smith, B. (1974). The kissing games of adolescents in Ohio. In E. Avedon & B. Sutton-Smith (Eds.) *The study of games. New York: John Wiley & Sons.*