

The Community Practice Of Teasing Among Latino Children

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In recent years, much research and media attention has focused on negative aspects of teasing, involving primarily teasers bullying teasees (e.g., Irvin, Walker, Noell, Singer, Irvine, Marquez, & Britz, 1992; Walker, Irvin, Noell, & Singer, 1992; Ma, 2001). Consequently, much effort has been directed towards eradicating teasing in local schools and communities through, for example, the development of intervention programs that aim to reduce the incidents of teasing among youth. However, these negative perspectives on teasing may reflect dominant mainstream cultural interpretations and functions of teasing – without necessarily recognizing cultural variations in teasing practices. They may also relate to theoretical and empirical work that conceptualizes teasing and other metaphorical activity as text-based in nature. From such approaches, words and sentences are regarded as encapsulating definitive “meanings” that are understood by all and are transferable across contexts (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Gibbs, 1994).

Contrasting traditional text-based perspectives on metaphorical activity, sociocultural research considers participants’ constructions of meanings – such as teasing – to be an emergent interpretive process culturally defined by community values, beliefs, and goals of development through participants’ transforming involvement with others in cultural activity (Heath, 1983; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1998, 2003). Building on sociocultural research on teasing (Eisenberg, 1986; Miller, 1986; Schieffelin, 1986), the present study examined the social organization of teasing among Latino children participating in a summer youth program. Teasing is defined as figurative activity involving actions (verbal and nonverbal) that are playful and ambiguous with multiple literal and nonliteral meanings/interpretations, which may include criticisms, insults, anger, affection, wit, humor, and annoyance, such as name calling, joking, taunting, mocking, playful aggressive acts, and sarcasm/irony, and making faces, gestures, and noises.

Method

The present analyses focused on the videotaped naturalistic observations of eight Latino children, ranging from 3 to 12 years of age. These children, along with 17 additional Latino (2- to 15-year-old) children participated in a neighborhood summer youth program, under the guidance of two Latino male staff members in Santa Cruz, California. The program ran weekdays from 11:00am to 3:30pm from the middle of June 2000 until the end of August 2000.

Coding involved identifying teasing events in terms of the types of teasing, the participants involved, whether the teasing was elaborated in form, and the socio-emotional aspects of the teasing events.

Results/Discussion

Across the videotaped sessions involving the eight target children, teasing was found to be common. Participants engaged in these teasing events included children, adult staff (i.e., site coordinator and site assistant), and community members (e.g., Popsicle vendor, parents).

The Latino children demonstrated skillful use of various types of teasing to accomplish many purposes. Their teasing was often elaborated, with participants building on one another’s contributions. Teasing interactions tended to be multiparty (beyond dyad) engagements involving teasers, teasees, and those who observed or listened in on the teasing events. Most of the time teasees and teasers both appeared to be content when engaging in teasing – even in the cases of teasing events that involved name calling, taunts, or insults. There were only a few occasions when participants in teasing appeared to be upset or disturbed. The complex, dynamic nature of teasing involving the Latino children points out the importance of understanding the communicative practice of teasing in cultural context.

References

References upon request.