

[Special Contribution]

Acquiring Kilivila Pragmatics—the Role of the Children’s (Play-)Groups in the first 7 Years of their Lives on the Trobriand Islands in Papua New Guinea

Gunter Senft

Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

Trobriand children are breastfed until they can walk; then they are abruptly weaned and the parents dramatically reduce the pervasive loving care that their children experienced before. The children have to find a place within the children’s groups in their villages. They learn to behave according to their community’s rules and regulations which find their expression in forms of verbal and non-verbal behavior. They acquire their culture specific pragmatics under the control of older members of their groups. The children’s “small republic” is the primary institution of verbal and cultural socialization. Attempts of parental education are confined to a minimum.

Keywords: Trobriand Islanders, Papua New Guinea, acquisition of pragmatics, children’s socialization, (play-)groups, *biga sopa*

1. Introduction¹

This paper provides a survey of how children on the Trobriand Islands acquire the pragmatic rules and regulations that are constitutive for their culture-specific forms of verbal and non-verbal interaction. The article is based on observations and other data collected in interviews and during the general documentation projects of the Trobriand Islanders’ language and culture conducted in 16 longer and shorter fieldtrips between the years 1982 and 2012. The Trobriand Islands are located within the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea. The Trobrianders belong to the ethnical group “Northern Massim”, they are a matrilineal society with patrilocal residence. Their language Kilivila is a Western Melanesian Oceanic language belonging to the Papuan Tip Cluster (Senft 1986).

After a brief description of the first 18 to 20 months in the life of new-born children which end with the traumatic experience of abruptly weaning as soon as the child

¹ I express my great gratitude to the people of the Trobriand Islands, and above all my hosts, the inhabitants of Tauwema village on Kaile’una Island, and all my consultants for their friendship and patient cooperation. Without their help, none of my work on the Kilivila language and the Trobriand culture would have been possible.

can walk, I report on how the children find their place and position within the children's (play-)groups of their village. I elaborate on how the children in these groups gradually take over specific roles and internalize them; in these groups they also learn that they have to obey certain norms—norms which affect, for example, the understanding of gender roles and sex differences. These norms are implicit rules that govern social life and interaction within their community.

Between the age of about one and a half years or so and seven years the children also learn to control their emotions in order to behave according to the rules that are valid for the Trobrianders' community. During this time of their life they acquire a relatively strict form of self-discipline, which is necessary to keep the balance between the individuals within their open and very public society.

This implies that they also have to learn to laugh about themselves, even in situations when they feel deeply insulted. During this acquisition process the pragmatic concept of the "*biga sopa*"—the joking language, the language which is not vouched for (see Senft 2010: 149ff)—plays the most important role for the overall socialization process on the Trobriands. By gradually acquiring the basic concepts and the rules and norms of language use that is manifest in the *biga sopa* concept, children realize more and more that they can behave properly and adequately with respect to all situations they experience not only in their everyday life, but also in the ritualized forms of life within their community. This provides them with an important emotional security and with a general aplomb.

The practicing of the forms of verbal and non-verbal behavior that conform to the Trobrianders' social norms takes place while playing with other children: it is controlled by older members of these children's groups. Thus, it is the children's "small republic" (Malinowski 1929: 44f.) which provides the most important framework for their socialization into their culture. The attempts of parental education are also indispensable in this socialization process, however they are confined to a minimum.

2. The first months in a child's lifetime until it is weaned

During the first 13 to 20 months of their life, children receive the utmost loving care and attention imaginable—not only from their parents, but also from all their relatives. The few weeks-old sucklings spend most of the day on their mothers' lap or in their arms. As soon as the child starts to whimper, its mother gives the baby the breast and nurses it. The fathers tenderly deal with their babies very often, too: they cradle them in their arms, play with them and sing songs for them. As soon as the babies can hold their head by themselves, they are carried around by their elder siblings, cousins and other children of the neighborhood.

Both adults and older children are very much interested in the baby's learning to talk. After having established eye-contact, the Trobriand Islanders interact with their babies using elements of "baby talk" like rhythmical elements of talking, imitations of

the baby's vocalizations, raising the pitch, grimacing with the mouth, smiling, laughing and producing the so-called "greeting face" by raising the eyebrows and opening the mouth. These forms of interactional behavior have strong bonding functions (see Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989: 207; 234). However, despite the many contacts with other adults and children, a Trobriand infant is not brought up collectively. The mother is the most important and significant person for the child and its development.

When the toddlers can walk, they are abruptly weaned and the parents—especially the mothers—dramatically reduce the amount of pervasive care and attention that their children experienced before this traumatic moment in their lives. For the children the time of weaning is characterized by all kinds of bitter; grievous frustrations. Up till this point of their lives, by their faintest whimper children were comforted by their mothers' offering them their breasts, but now—at a moment's notice—all access to this source of consolation and comfort is denied to them. Weaned children often cry out their pain, their frustration and their fury for days without being comforted whatsoever. To compensate for this deficit in their experience of intimate social bonding, the children have to find a place within the children's groups—usually the one of the village sector in which their family lives. For the next five years the children's (play-)group will be the social institution that is primarily responsible for their socialization process. The group will become "their own little community" (Malinowski 1927: 45).

3. The children's socialization into the Trobriand community

Children with older siblings relatively easily find access to and are soon accepted as members of such a children's group, if their elder brothers or sisters are already established group-members. They do not always participate in the games played by the older children, but they find a new emotional foothold in this group, and with increasing age they also get recognized as a group member by the older children. The groups have a heterogeneous age structure. We can differentiate between young children that seek access to the groups, children whose position within the group is established as a fully-fledged group member and older group leaders. Mary Martini (2009: 158f.) made similar observations with respect to Marquesan children and their playgroups. She observed that the Polynesian children

... occupy one of four roles or positions in this group ...

1. the peripheral toddler position ...
2. the initiate member position ...
3. the quiet leader position ...
4. the noisy leader position ...

Peripheral toddlers ... join the group at about two years of age ... under the wing of a three- or four-year old sibling ... *Initiate members*: children remain peripheral to the group until they can keep up with the play ... Children move

on to leadership roles when (a) they master emotional self-control ...: (b) the oldest children in the group leave to attend school, creating a need and openings for leaders; and (c) their own toddler siblings join the group. Children become either “quiet” or “noisy” leaders, dependent on their personalities ...

Martini (2009: 165) summarizes these four roles and the relationship and interaction between the children occupying them as follows:

Noisy leaders introduce activities, direct group play, and keep players on track. Quiet leaders invent new play, monitor the bossiness of noisy leaders, and care for peripheral toddlers. Initiate members follow the leaders and support each other... They also care for peripheral toddlers and generally hold the group together from the inside. Peripheral toddlers are interested observers. Their incompetence highlights the skill of the older children. Older children gain status by helping and teaching dependent toddlers.

Like the Marquesan children, the Trobriand children take over specific roles and responsibilities within their groups when they gradually grow into these positions. However, we could not observe a distinction between the roles of noisy and quiet leaders in the children’s groups of Tauwema. Whether one of the group leading children took over one of these roles was dependent on his or her form of the day and current mood.

During this period of the children’s lives, “the child’s dominant activity [is] play” (Whiting and Whiting 1975: 48). *The games played can be differentiated into*

- dance, song and rhythmic games.
- games with objects and materials,
- role-playing games.
- construction games,
- fighting and competition games, and
- hunting games (see also Sbrzesny 1976).

These games have three main functions:

1. testing and developing motor skills and physical abilities;
2. getting acquainted and familiar with various materials; and
3. preparing children for their future roles in their social world.

The first two functions are rather basic and more or less self-evident. It goes without saying that they are important for the life of every child: they enable the child to meet its environment with its manifold phenomena without fear and reservation and to act in this environment in a way that is adequate with respect to its specific conditions. Due to space constraints, and given the importance and the complexity of the third function of play and its importance for our topic, I will only discuss the third function in more detail.

“Play among humans inevitably reflects the culture in which it occurs” (Bruner et al. 1976: 21). In play children take over specific roles which they gradually internalize and thus secure the continuance of norms that are accessible by appearance alone. In the various children’s (play-)groups the children learn that they have to follow certain norms which—as implicit social rules—govern social life and interaction within their community. Norms which affect the understanding of gender roles and sex differences or the social affiliation to a specific village sector are directly experienced by children when they are playing together. However, norms that define the *weltanschauung* of an ethnical group—like the one which is valid for the Trobriand Islanders—and that regulate which forms of behavior are acceptable and which are unacceptable and taboo within this community can only be learned in the course of the children’s guided socialization into the adult society and by their experiencing of reactions to their behavior not only by their peers within their children’s groups but also by their parents and other adults within their village community. Thus, although the children’s groups certainly play the most important role in the everyday socialization of children after the age of two, the parents who—with their way of living provide the example for their children of how to live their lives as socially estimated and acknowledged Trobriand adults—are also indispensable in the socialization process of their children.

In what follows I will briefly zoom in on the social roles which are conveyed and transmitted to the children in the various forms of gender and sex-specific role-play. Then I describe how norms that regulate life on the Trobriands are passed on and how they are controlled. I first look at how a child is socialized with respect to its emotional behavior and then present how it learns to deal with possession and with forms of behavior that control and regulate acts of requesting, giving and taking.

3.1. Gender and sex-specific role play

In role-playing games girls take over the activities of adult women: they play scraping *doba*-(banana)-leaves for making grass-skirts, they re-enact the gathering and the preparation of food, and they mother their younger siblings or toddlers of relatives or neighbors.

In many of their games boys imitate the activities which are reserved for men in the adult Trobriand society, like for example handling bush-knives, paddling canoes, doing specific kinds of work in the gardens. Neither the role-games played by girls nor the ones played by boys are initiated by adults.

Obviously the Trobriand Islanders’ division of roles and work which is mirrored in the children’s play has proven reasonable and therefore is not questioned at all—not least because of the fact that in this matrilineal society women, their work and their social status are respected in exactly the same way as men.

The Trobrianders—like any other ethnical group—have been developing their culture-specific construction of their social reality which regulates their lives. This construction encompasses much more than just gender roles. In what follows I discuss

how children learn and internalize some of the highly important aspects of sociality which have been governing the Trobrianders' life for generations and which still secure the social cohesion of their communities.

3.2. Tradition and control of norms with respect to the expression of emotions

When a child is especially fond of another child, it can express its affection in a number of ways. Children often share special goodies with siblings or with good friends, offering a banana, or a piece of coconut or papaya or the like with the prompt: "*Kukwam!*"—Eat! Human ethnologists like Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt have pointed out that offering and sharing food is a friendly gesture in contact situation; it has a bonding function helping to establish and continue good relationships with others (Senft 2014: 97).

Another sign of sympathy and friendship is presenting another child with a beautiful and fragrant blossom or a wreath of flowers. This present is not accompanied by verbose explanations or ceremonial gestures, either. The child who makes the present offers his or her friend the wreath of flowers in his extended hand, just stating: "*M bweta!*"—Your wreath of flowers!

Familiarity with someone can also be expressed by directly requesting something from a friend. In such a case the requester just states "*Agu bweta!*"—My wreath of flowers!—pointing at the decoration which is worn by the other child. To refute this request would be severely impolite and could result in the end of the mutual friendship.

Other forms of expressing sympathy like embracing, kissing or caressing someone can only be observed in interactions of older children with sucklings: in the contact situation with peers within the playgroups these forms of friendly behavior do not occur. Possibilities for older children to get in bodily contact with each other can arise during body care situations, like for example during mutual lousing or during rubbing ones hair or ones skin with desiccated coconut, the fat of which helps preventing the skin to dry out in the sun and saltwater, or during bathing when especially the girls wash each other's backs.

This norm to express affection to someone else mainly with gifts and—rather rarely—with severely restricted bodily contacts—which is the valid norm on the Trobriand Islands—is learned by the children within their children's group. The older children pass on this norm to the younger ones just by their behavior. The behavior of adults with respect to the exchange of tender caresses in public is certainly of high importance for this early acquired reluctance in children to have bodily contacts with each other. In public life the interaction between husband and wife is rather controlled as well. Married couples do not exchange any signs of tenderness like holding hands, kissing in public, or embracing each other, not even after some time of having been parted from one another. The relationship between a wife and her husband seems to be rather detached and sometimes even looks like avoidance behavior, at least in our eyes.

We can only speculate about why the expression of tender feelings is so severely

restricted in this society. The Trobriand society is an extremely public one. The major part of an individual's life takes place in front of the eyes of the village community. The Trobrianders only retreat into their houses when they go to sleep or when they are ill. But even within the houses there is hardly anything that resembles our idea of privacy—all members of a family sleep densely packed in the relatively small houses. If the major part of one's life takes place in public, the community needs to set standards that are compulsory for everybody but not too demanding for the individuals within this community. If the Trobrianders would tolerate married couples to exchange signs of tenderness in public, people could quickly differentiate between good and bad marriages. By banning these signs of tender feelings into the strictly private sphere of a couple, all married couples are respected equally within their social community. This supports the stability and the solidarity of this community. On the basis of this consideration it seems sensible that within the Trobriand Islanders' construction of their social reality an individual has to learn to suppress feelings that are—at least for this community—too spontaneous and therefore possibly destructive.

Summing up we can establish that children learn at a very early age to express their feelings of sympathy and affection for others only in the ways that comply with the Trobrianders' norms of behavior. We could not observe that the children violated these norms.

The children of Tauwema express feelings of animosity and antipathy with respect to another person usually in forms of aggressive behavior, like beating, biting, kicking, poking or pinching someone. Younger children direct forms of aggression to older children and vice versa. However, in most of these cases the aggressor is older than the aggressee. Thus, it is more likely that children act out aggressive behavior when they are confident to be physically superior to their opponent and therefore need not expect too many negative consequences of their behavior from the target of their aggression. A few cases of children's aggressive behavior were targeted at adults. This implies that physical superiority of an opponent need not always inhibit aggression in children. However, adults do not react at all when children beat, bite or kick them—on the contrary, they often laugh at these aggressive acts by belligerent children. Aggressive behavior directed towards peers or older children often results in resistance, while aggression towards younger children seems to have no consequences whatsoever. However, appearances are deceiving. Usually no third person—neither a child nor an adult observing such forms of aggression—interferes in a fight between peers, but children who attack significantly younger children will face sanctions for their behavior. One such sanction is that an adult or a child who is older than the aggressor slaps him or her in the face; this may be physically not too painful for the aggressive child, however, this sanction is humiliating to the core for the aggressor and usually results in a flood of tears. The other form of sanction for aggressive behavior directed towards significantly younger children can be observed much more often than the physical punishment: This punishment consists in humiliating the aggressor verbally. However, this verbal humili-

ation is not done in form of a verbose preachment—the punishment just consists of the contemptuously mumbled sentence: “*Kugisi avaka kuvagi!*”—Look what you have done! The child humiliated in this way also always immediately starts to cry as if it was beaten.

During the process of learning to control their aggressive emotions the children often have to severely struggle with themselves. This becomes most obvious with 6 to 7 year old children who have almost completed this learning process. When they fly into a passion, they often pick up a piece of wood, a stone or a handful of sand, stretch their arm to the back and—exactly at this moment the learned and internalized norm interferes and inhibits the children’s urge to throw something at their opponent. Often these children are standing there for seconds with their arm lifted and prepared to throw, staring at their adversary—but after some of these crucial seconds they drop their arm and run away, having won this fight with themselves, according to the valid norm of emotion control.

What is the benefit for the Trobriand society when children learn at an early age to suppress aggression? As already mentioned above, it is reasonable to not burden a small village community with problems in the relationships between its individual members. Although the Trobrianders have established with their “council of chiefs” an authority that regulates disputes, it is sensible if every member of the community learns to restrain him- or herself to prevent the eruption of assaults which could destroy ties between different families and their sophisticated economic networks within this community.

However, there is one form of aggression which is not suppressed on the Trobriand Islands, namely *schadenfreude* which can be acted out without any fear of sanctions. To give just one example: When Weyei, a man in his early 60s, pursuing his grandson at the beach to slap him in the face, stumbled and was rolling in the sand, all spectators of this scene—be it toddler or a venerable old woman—roared with laughter so that good old Weyei had no other choice but to join in their laughter. Some women have developed genuine pantomimic talents to perform such mishaps of others before an audience, making the spectators laugh their heads off. Besides the *schadenfreude*, verbal mocking, teasing, tricking and hoaxing someone are popular and even respected forms of expressing aggressive behavior.

There is a lot of laughter in Tauwema—but this is no wonder: The Trobrianders differentiate and metalinguistically name varieties or registers of Kilivila that they use in specific situations with various intentions (Senft 2010a: 149f.). The default register they use in everyday interactions is called “*biga sopa*” which can be translated as “the joking language”—but also as “the lying language”. This variety is absolutely characteristic for Trobriand forms of talk. It is based on the fact that Kilivila, like any other natural language, is marked by features that include ‘vagueness’ and ‘ambiguity’. Both these features are used by its speakers as stylistic means to avoid possible distress, confrontation, or too much and—for a Trobriand Islander at least—too aggressive direct-

ness of certain speech situations. If hearers signal that they may be insulted by a certain speech act, speakers can always recede from what they have said by labelling it as *sopa*, as a ‘joke’, a ‘jest’, ‘fun’, ‘nonsense’, as ‘something they did not really mean to say’. Thus *sopa* signals the speakers’ unmarked non-commitment to truth. Trobriand etiquette then prescribes that hearers must not be offended at all by those utterances that were explicitly labelled as *sopa*. If they feel offended and display this feeling publicly, then they lose “face”.

The Trobriand Islanders employ this variety in everyday conversation, in small talk, in flirtation, in public debates, in admonitory speeches, in songs and stories as a means of rhetoric to avoid possible conflicts and to relax the atmosphere of the speech situation. The *biga sopa* variety also contributes to put forward arguments because it allows speakers to disguise their thoughts verbally and to disagree in a playful way without the danger of too much personal exposure. Moreover, the *biga sopa* variety is used for mocking people. As a means of irony and parody it can be used to criticize certain forms of sociologically deviant behavior, relatively mildly asking for immediate correction. Finally, the *biga sopa* variety offers the only license for the verbal breaking of taboos and thus for the licensed use of insults and swear words—not only for adults but also for children.

The *biga sopa* serves the function of a so-called “safety valve custom” (Heymer 1977: 187). This ethological concept needs some explanation: Every society puts some of its realms, domains and spheres under certain specific taboos. However, the stricter the society is in regard to its observance of these taboos, the more these taboos are ignored. But a society can secure its members’ observance of certain taboos, especially of taboos that are important for its social construction of reality by allowing the discussion of its taboos—especially of the sociologically less important ones—as topics of discourse. It may even allow its members to imagine the ignorance of taboos—in a fictitious way, of course. And this is exactly how and why ‘safety valve customs’ develop. Genres of *biga sopa*—including insults and swear words—are first of all classified as *sopa*—as play, as something fictitious in Trobriand society. The *biga sopa* thus generates a forum where the breaking of taboos is allowed, if it is done verbally! This forum permits a specially marked way of communication about something ‘one does not talk about’ otherwise.

In sum, the ‘*biga sopa*’ variety channels emotions, it keeps aggression under control, and it keeps possibilities of contact open. This concept with its tension releasing functions secures harmony in the Trobriand society and contributes to maintaining the Trobriand Islanders’ social construction of reality.

Acquiring Kilivila and getting familiar with the concept of the *biga sopa*, the children also have to learn to laugh about themselves, even in situations when they feel deeply insulted—because, as pointed out above, the Trobriand norm of verbal interaction requires that hearers of the *biga sopa* must not be offended at all by utterances that were explicitly labelled as *sopa*—otherwise they will be mocked by all and lose face.

Like the adults the children cherish *sopa* as a source of amusement. Children at an early age actively practice the use of the *biga sopa* within their children's groups. And as just mentioned, the first step in learning how to use *sopa* requires that children learn to laugh about jokes older children make about them. The ability to actively produce jokes and to amuse other children within the peer group develops at about the age of five years.

Another reason for communal laughter is provided by the "*butusi*"—the mocking songs. The village youth compose catchy melodies and come up with lyrics that caricature someone with a specific vice or virtue. Children join in singing these songs, and sometimes even intoning just the first line of such a mocking song results in roaring laughter.

Children not only have to learn how to deal with their personal joy all by themselves, they also have to learn how to cope with grief, pain and disappointment all alone. Soon after our arrival in Tauwema we noticed that children often cried heart-breakingly for a relatively long time without taken care of by playmates or adults. And to our great surprise these children completely ignored attempts made by us to comfort them; that is, they could not cope with our ways of consoling. To understand the behavior of these children we have to look at the development of crying in children. Sucklings and toddlers who are breastfed hardly ever cry. If they are with their mother, they are immediately breastfed. Calming words are unnecessary. Fathers react to the crying of their youngest children by taking them into their arms, rocking them and singing a lullaby or another song. The young children who sit on the village ground in the afternoon are comforted by their elder siblings or children who are their relatives when they start to cry. Verbal means are only sparsely used for consoling—the exceptions being "*Desi, desi*"—"Enough, enough" or the production of the adequate kinship term like, for example "*O bwadagu*"—"Oh my little brother". Instead, the older children take the little ones in their arms or put them in their lap and rock and pat them until they stop crying. These attempts to console a child abruptly cease with the weaning of the child. If a weaned child cries, nobody cares: the reason for their crying is added up with their frustration of being let alone all by themselves.

Why does the crying of these young children no longer function as a comfort appeal to peers and adults? We have pointed out above that self-discipline is important for the Trobrianders' control of emotions, because this ability contributes to the social balance within their community. Children have to acquire this quality—the earlier the better—because the early period of their integration into the children's group requests the children's acquisition of this character trait. In crying out their grief and anger, the children find a temporal outlet for these emotions; however, they soon learn that—with the exception of their personal relief—this strategy has no effect whatsoever in their environment and they realize that as soon as their time as a suckling has come to an abrupt end, crying has lost its function to elicit care. Therefore children at the age of about 5 years can hardly be observed crying publicly.

In sum, children have learned to control their emotions to behave according to the norms that are valid within their community when they are 7 years old. They have acquired a relatively strict form of self-discipline, which is necessary to keep the balance between the individuals within their very public society. It is often difficult and sometimes even painful for the children to acquire this quality, nevertheless they all manage to cope with the experience of being socially forced to repress and control their emotions. At the age of 7 years the children of Tauwema are quite self-confident and self-assured: therefore the early experience of the social repression of uncontrolled display of emotions does not seem to have any negative effects on them. On the contrary, it seems that the children's awareness that they can behave adequately with respect to all situations they experience in everyday life within their community provides them with an important emotional security and with a general aplomb. The practicing of the forms of behavior that conform to the Trobrianders' social norms takes place while playing with other children in the playgroups; it is controlled by older members of the children's groups.

3.3. Tradition and control of norms with respect to requesting, giving and taking

Children hardly possess anything else than their clothes. Toys are short-lived—being made out of natural materials. They are temporarily used by the children, but not retained or 'owned'. This relationship to personal items has resulted in a very specific form of giving and taking. If most of the things in the environment are common property, then everybody is entitled to use them. Therefore it is superfluous to develop specific ways of politeness—like for example ways of formalized requesting, because everybody's due can be requested by everybody else. Thus, it conforms with Trobriand etiquette if a child who is watching a relative chewing betelnuts simply states "*Mesta buva!*"—Give me betelnuts!—or "*Agu buva!*"—My betelnuts! There is no need for Trobrianders to cajole someone who is in the possession of something to make him share it—everybody can request their owing share. There is no word for "please" in Kilivila. But there is a word for the action of requesting, "*-nigada-*". However, somebody who constantly makes requests is labeled a "*Tonigada*"—a "beggar", and this is an epitheton ornans that Trobrianders do not really like. It is Trobriand etiquette—which is binding upon everyone—to pass on something like a betelnut or a cigarette almost immediately to someone who asks for it. If Trobrianders refuse to do this just by saying "*Gala.*"—No —, there are only two explanations for this inappropriate behavior: They are either temporarily ill, and do not realize how improperly they behave—this can be excused, if the "illness" does not last too long, or they are just mean. Meanness, however, is not tolerated in a society that is based on a generous exchange of goods, and mean persons—"*Tomekita*"—have to face being asked to leave the village in which they live. Giving and taking freely and generously is one of the cornerstones of the social construction of Trobriand reality. This kind of requesting, giving, and taking can be described as a form of ritualized communication that serves

the function of testing and monitoring in a daily routine whether all the members of the community still adhere to values that are basic for the social construction of their reality. As long as these tests turn out to be positive—according to the standards of the community—the society's coherence is not endangered and need not be questioned. Any infringement upon the few items of personal property, however, is sanctioned as a severe offence, and the malefactor is publicly scolded to be a "*Tovelau*"—a "thief".

3.4. The role of the children's "small republic"

Trobriand children indeed "enjoy considerable freedom and independence" which give "scope to the formation of the children's own little community" to which Malinowski referred as "their small republic" (Malinowski 1929: 44f.).

In connection with this independence and autonomous behavior of children, the human ethologist Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1989: 600f.) points out that in general

[c]hildren learn at an early stage that they are part of a larger community, particularly in the smaller kin-based societies of village and tribal cultures. ... As soon as a child can walk he will participate in the children's playgroup and it is in such playgroups that children are truly raised. The older ones explain the rules of play and will admonish those who do not adhere to them ... Thus the child's socialization occurs mainly within the playgroup ... There is a children's culture, which is transmitted from the older children to the younger ones without adult intervention. Distinct rank order relationships prevail in children's groups ... In the children's group the child grows into the community, learning social competence through the acquisition of social and technical aptitude, and ascending in rank while doing so.

The ethologist also emphasizes the importance of the fact that these children groups are mixed age-groups. He states: "In tribal societies the child grows up in mixed age groups and, with increasing age, experiences a change from being guided to being a guide to the younger child. A child thus experiences (and experiments with) all possible roles" (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989: 314). As mentioned above, in these hierarchically structured mixed-age groups children pass through a number of different roles which require different forms of rule-governed behavior and imply a number of different responsibilities which the children take over for themselves and for the group as a whole. As the Whittings rightly point out, "older children can be expected to practice their newly acquired knowledge of the rules of the culture by making responsible suggestions or reprimanding anyone who deviates from these rules" (Whiting & Whiting 1975: 184). Thus, younger children learn from the older children in the group—who socially control it—the culture-specific norms of verbal and non-verbal behavior which are fundamental for their society and which govern its members' behavior. Play is decisive for this learning process: "If the rule structure of human play and games sensitizes the child to the rules of culture, both generally and in preparation for a particular way of life,

then surely play must have some special role in nurturing symbolic activity in general. For culture is symbolism in action” (Bruner et al. 1976: 19). When the children have finished these phases of social learning in which they have internalized the norms they are confronted with in their social environment, that is within their (play-)groups, they have also gained social safety: Now they can predict the behavior of others within their group as well as the reactions of these others to their own forms of behavior. Thus, the children’s “small republic” provides the most important framework for their socialization into their culture.

4. Parental education

In this paper I have shown that the Trobriand children’s groups have a decisive educational influence and impact. Living together within these groups the children experience the tradition of values and norms and the rules and regulations that constitute the basis for acquiring the social conventions for the adequate multimodal interaction with their fellow human beings. After the child is weaned, the parents attempt to educate and treat their children in such a way that they can and want to live their lives as autonomously and independently as possible. The relationship between parents and children grants the young children a very high degree of independence and autonomy. Attempts of parental education are confined to a minimum and affect mainly personal hygiene, social morals and norms, the leading of the children to do some work in the household and the gardens and the passing on of intellectual cultural assets. Parents only sporadically request strict obedience from their children. The adult Trobrianders themselves consider their function as parents primarily as a priming one. Mothers and fathers emphasize that they believe in the power of the ‘good example’, the proper ‘role model’. If the parents lead an orderly life—a concept which is expressed in Kilivila as “*keda bwena*”—“good way”—, then their children will also do so.

References

- Bruner, J. S., A. Jolly & K. Sylva (eds.). 1976. *Play—Its Role in Development and Evolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Eibl-Eibesfeldt, I. 1989. *Human Ethology*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Heymer, A. 1977. *Vocabulaire Éthologique: Allemand-Anglais-Français*. Berlin: Parey.
- Malinowski, B. 1927. *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Malinowski, B. 1929. *The Sexual Life of Savages in Northwestern Melanesia*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Martini, M. 2009. “Peer interactions in Polynesia: A view from the Marquesas”. In P. B. Smith & D. L. Best (eds.) *Cross-Cultural Psychology, Volume 2: Developmental Psychology*, 147–168. Los Angeles: Sage. [first published 1994 in J. L. Roopnarine, H. E. Johnson & F. H. Hooper (eds.) *Children’s Play in Diverse Cultures*, 73–103. Albany: State University of New York].

- Sbrzesny, H. 1976. *Die Spiele der !Ko-Buschleute unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer sozialisierenden und gruppenbindenden Funktionen*. München: Piper.
- Senft, G. 1986. *Kilivila: The Language of the Trobriand Islanders*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Senft, G. 2010. *The Trobriand Islanders' Ways of Speaking*. Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton.
- Senft, G. 2014. *Understanding Pragmatics*. London: Routledge.
- Whiting, B. & J. W. M. Whiting—in collaboration with R. Longabaugh. 1975. *Children of Six Cultures—A Psycho-Cultural Analysis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.