



LEARNING MORALITY IN PEER CONFLICT

A study of schoolchildren's narratives about being betrayed by a friend

ELLY SINGER
University of Utrecht
JEANNETTE DOORNENBAL
RENN4 (Regional Centre for Expertise in
the Northern Netherlands)

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Mailing address:
Elly Singer
Department of Developmental
Psychology, University of Utrecht, PO
Box 80.140, 3508 TC Utrecht, The
Netherlands.
[email e.singer@fss.uu.nl]

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This article discusses the narratives of Dutch schoolchildren from varied cultural–ethnic backgrounds discussing experiences of being betrayed by a friend, and the lessons they learned from the experience. In line with earlier social constructivist research in western societies, the authors found that peers and friends acted as highly emotional forums for moral learning. Revealing intimate information led to awareness of two moral issues: the issue of norms of ‘true’ friendship and the issue of the dilemma between conforming to group norms and asserting personal opinions. To develop a personal morality in the context of Dutch schools, the children needed trustworthy friends with whom to share intimate information in order to protect them from the peer group pressure to conform. Although both girls and boys constructed shared norms of real friendship and conformed to group norms to avoid being teased, disclosing intimate information seemed to evoke more emotional chaos in girls than it did in boys.

Introduction

I'd told Annie that I liked Rob. She was my friend then, but now I think she's a bitch. Everybody was there, in the school yard. And then she shouted very loudly: 'Mieke wants to go with Robby, Mieke wants to go with Robby!' I got very, very angry with her. I dragged her into the school, into the toilets. And then she said: 'I didn't know it was a secret!' I think that's ridiculous. She'd betrayed my trust and she'd done that before. She's no longer my friend.¹

Mieke's lively narrative supports the finding of earlier studies that schoolchildren's friendships act as forums for moral leaning (Damon, 1988; Day and Tappan, 1996; Rizzo and Corsaro, 1988). Friendships are effective because the emotional stakes are high. Studies of children's lives in classrooms and playgrounds reveal a world full of turbulence, power struggles,

laughter, joy and the making and breaking of friendships (Adler et al., 1992; Berndt, 1986; Davies, 1982; Renold, 2002; Scott, 2002; Thorne, 1993; Thorne and Luria, 1986). Children care about their friendships. As a rule, childhood friendships are based on the assumption of reciprocity (Damon, 1988; Davies, 1982). Therefore, friends can issue directives to and receive directives from one another without hesitation. When friends disagree, they may expend great effort explaining and justifying their position to one another; and when they are unable to reach agreement on certain standards, it may seriously endanger their friendship. In interactions with their friends, children apply internalized concepts of friendship, including loyalty, honesty, reciprocity, commitment and intimacy (Deegan, 1996; Rizzo and Corsaro, 1988). When they notice failings in the behaviour of their friends, they often attempt to induce the necessary changes. The result may be the co-construction of shared standards, pragmatic compromises or the end of the friendship.

Although these children's standards look very much like adult moral standards, this should not blind us to differences at the content and the procedural levels. For instance, schoolchildren and adults share the rule that one should not break a promise by giving away a friend's secret. But the transgression of that moral rule can evoke different concerns in children and in adults. Preadolescent children can feel free to express strong moral disapproval because the consequences of breaking up, although unpleasant, are not uncommon at that age; most children have several 'contingency friends' (Davies, 1982). Among middle-aged adults, on the other hand, the social importance of repairing the relationship may dominate, because old friends are both scarce and irreplaceable. The procedure whereby a moral rule is enforced may also differ very much between children and adults (Thorne, 1993). In the example cited, for instance, Mieke openly argues, threatens and even physically attacks her friend, while such open opposition towards a friend is very unusual in the Dutch middle-class adult culture of her parents.

In this article, we discuss our study of Dutch schoolchildren's narratives about being betrayed by a friend. The aim of our study was to gain more insight into the inner logic behind the behaviour of 9- to 13-year-olds towards a friend who has betrayed a secret. We asked what our informants did; what their aims were; what moral, social or personal concerns were at stake; which emotions were evoked; and how they regulated their emotions. Were there gender differences? What lessons did the children learn from their experiences? We wanted to gain insight into the ongoing process of constructing personal morality in peer relationships. We first briefly discuss our theoretical framework and then present our study and the main findings. In the conclusion, we turn to the theoretical and practical implications of our study.

Theoretical framework

Our study was based on a social constructivist approach to moral development (Haste et al., 1998; Killen and Hart, 1995). In this approach, morality is understood to be more than moral debate and judgements about right and wrong, unlike in Kohlberg's cognitive theory (Kohlberg, 1976). Our approach entails a move away from a paradigm of cognitive representations and internally held principles in which the self is regarded as a disembodied, epistemic subject, towards a paradigm of social construction and possible forms of discourse, in which the self is assumed to be fundamentally relational (Day and Tappan, 1996). According to Walker et al. (1995: 372), morality is related to 'voluntary actions that (at least potentially) have social or interpersonal implications and that are governed by some intrapsychic mechanism (cognitive and/or emotive). . . . It prescribes people's activities, regulates their social interactions, and arbitrates conflicts.'

Social constructivists observe that thoughts, affects and social behaviour form an indivisible whole in moral behaviour (Haste, 1993; Piaget, 1967; Vygotsky, 1987). This assumption requires theoretical concepts to capture relationships between these different aspects of human behaviour. In our study, we used the concept of cognitive-affective structures, that is, complex synthesizing structures that integrate cognitions (in the form of appraisals, expectations and beliefs), affects (moral, social and personal interests, goals and emotional action tendencies), feelings (both physiological arousal and sensory and bodily feeling) and actions (involving motor responses and social procedures and methods for acting) (Fischer et al., 1990; Miltenburg and Singer, 1999, 2000).

Cognitive-affective structures are based on the past history of experience of particular individuals in particular social contexts. Van Emde et al. (1991), for instance, propose that infants learn rules for reciprocity – for give and take – as a result of care-giving experiences. This non-verbal procedural knowledge is a basic form of morality. 'All systems of morality have a sense of reciprocity at their centre with a version of the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' (Van Emde et al., 1991: 261). Because the social contexts for interactions vary considerably, one can expect differences in cognitive-affective structures between different groups – in our study, between boys and girls (Van Emde et al., 1991). There is emphasis on the role of cultural practices and social processes in moral development, such as narratives and discourse in the construction of shared values and valued ways of life, and in the development of the individual's skills in meeting cultural expectations (Day and Tappan, 1996; Tappan, 1997).

Social constructivists assume that the capacity for self-control and self-determination does not have its source within the individual but is of a sociocultural origin (Vygotsky, 1978: 99–100). Shared rules and commit-

ments function as powerful, affectively charged psychological tools for overcoming one's primary impulses. And through his or her commitment to shared and internalized values, the individual acquires the moral strength to stand up to the social pressure to conform as well as to fight for his or her ideals (Colby and Damon, 1995; Tappan, 1997; Taylor, 1989). Thus, social dialogues and commitments form a basis for autonomy and the development of a personal morality.

These assumptions have stimulated new interest in morality in daily life in diverse national, cultural and ethnic contexts: for instance, indigenous moral concepts in the People's Republic of China; morality and social conflicts of young children in Japanese and American preschools; moral commitments in American inner-city adolescents (Killen and Hart, 1995). The development of children's shared commitments to honesty, justice, charity and religious faith has been studied (Haste et al., 1998) and attention has been drawn to the moral dimension in concepts of trust, love and esteem/self-esteem. According to social constructivists, a bond of love between partners, for example, is not simply a feeling, but also indicates that people have a shared (procedural and declarative) conception of 'the good'. Moreover, a love bond is a mutual contract and thus a moral obligation that people enter into, and they therefore expect to be treated on the basis of shared conceptions of 'the good'. In daily life, moral problems are frequently related to dilemmas involving trust/mistrust, honesty/dishonesty, caring and esteem/self-esteem in relation to partners, children, friends and/or colleagues at work in western contexts (Walker et al., 1995).

In daily life, moral behaviour, feelings and thoughts in specific social situations (i.e. cognitive-affective structures) often have a self-evident character. Moral assumptions or beliefs are embedded in children's daily activities, routines and procedural knowledge of interaction with their parents and peers (Van Emde et al., 1991; Fischer et al., 1990). We assume that behaviour in a specific situation is aroused by underlying cognitive-affective structures. For instance, when a 10-year-old girl observes that her two best friends are whispering and giggling, she immediately freezes. Based on earlier experiences she 'knows': they are going to tease her. But we also assume that these structures preserve their relational and situational character: in new relationships new cognitive-affective structures can be co-constructed and internalized (for an elaborate discussion of the social character of cognitive-affective structures, see Miltenburg and Singer, 1999, 2000).

Specific procedures are often automatically evoked in the child by specific situations. At a subjective level, both children and adults tend to experience their own actions as logical and sound. To capture this subjective experience, in our study we used the concept of the inner logic of children's behaviour. We assumed that the inner logic of children's behaviour reflects underlying cognitive-affective structures. Therefore, we operationalized the inner logic of a child's behaviour as the associations of the child between his

or her actions, the pursued goals, the underlying moral, social or personal interests, the aroused emotions and emotion regulation. In our study, we reconstructed the inner logic of a group of Dutch children by analysing their narratives about peer conflicts. In conflicts, people tend to become more articulate about their own inner logic.

Expectations

Because no earlier studies had specifically focused on analysing the inner logic of schoolchildren's narratives about being betrayed by a friend who divulges a secret, we had no a priori hypothesis regarding different or conflicting concerns and emotions that could result in specific profiles of inner logic. But earlier research had sensitized us to specific (e.g. gendered) concerns that are relevant to preadolescent children, and to specific gender- and/or age-related patterns of moral reasoning and of resolving conflicts.

First, we built on the discussions about gender differences in moral concern and in friendship relationships from the work of Carol Gilligan (1982). In a study of male and female students at an American university, Gilligan found two gendered types of moral reasoning – 'care' and 'individual rights and justice'. According to Gilligan, female moral thinking is oriented towards interpersonal relationships, coupled with an ethic of caring and responsibility for other persons. Male moral reasoning, in contrast, is oriented towards the question of individual rights and justice. However, other researchers cast doubt on Gilligan's claim and failed to find clear gender differences (Walker et al., 1995; Wark and Krebs, 1996). Recent research suggests that when constructing their answers to real-life dilemmas, males and females draw on actual differences in their experience of daily life, such as the fact that women continue to be the primary caretakers of their children and spouse (Wark and Krebs, 1996). Thus research findings are contextualized: gender differences in moral problem-solving are only expected in situations in which men and women have different moral concerns and obligations.

These recent insights had interesting implications for our study. We expected that giving away a secret would affect the friendships of girls and of boys in different ways. Gender differences in the friendships of preadolescent children in western countries are well documented (Brown et al., 1999; Buhrmester and Furman, 1987; Davies, 1982; Graham et al., 1998; Parker and Asher, 1993; Renold, 2002; Scott, 2002; Thorne, 1993). Girls tend to have smaller groups of friends than boys do. They expect and receive more commitment, loyalty and empathic understanding from their best friends than boys do, and they are more likely to have intimate, self-disclosing relationships. Based on these findings, we expected that giving away a secret would be a more serious offence in friendships between girls than in friendships between boys.

In addition, boys and girls tend to use different means to settle dis-

putes. In a study in the US, Miller et al. (1986) found that boys used more direct, physical forms of aggression, while girls employed more moderate means, such as changing the subject, looking for compromises or simply leaving. Early adolescence in western countries appears to be especially stressful for girls' friendships and peer relations, as signified by a sharp increase in relational aggression, e.g. spreading rumours, gossiping and withdrawing affiliation for the purpose of controlling the behaviour of others (Brown et al., 1999). Thus we expected more compromising and relational aggressive behaviour in girls and more physical forms of aggression in boys.

Our study is anchored in research on the development of friendships among schoolchildren. Twelve-year-olds mention loyalty as a feature of friendship and disloyalty as a reason for ending a friendship more often than younger children do (Berndt, 1986). Preadolescent children show a growing recognition that motives, thoughts and feelings can be shared with close friends (Selman and Demorest, 1984). Therefore we expected that children aged between 9 and 13 would reflect on the consequences of disloyalty for the quality of friendship relationships (Davies, 1982). We expected them to teach their friends a moral lesson about the rights and wrongs in friendship relationships.

Finally, ethnographic research has shown the importance of being circumspect about preconceived notions and being sensitive to exceptions to the rule (Thorne, 1993). Davies (1982), for instance, criticizes the taken-for-granted adult-centred views of children's friendships in her study of Australian schoolchildren. Developmental psychologists often claim that children have low-level friendships because of their pragmatic motives ('I want someone to play with') and because they have contingency friends in case their best friend withdraws from the relationship. The adult spectator often does not understand what is going on: what may appear to be a rupture can in fact be a manoeuvre within a friendship. Davies concludes that children have concepts and practices that are alien to adults. Recent studies of gender, ethnic and class differences between children also warn against making simplistic generalizations and plea for a focus on differences within and between groups (Brown et al., 1999; Thorne, 1993). 'Psychologists need to consider the uneven, contradictory aspects of the human psyche and the complicated negotiation of a variety of social and contextual forces' (Brown et al., 1999: 219). We should focus on the transformative power of children's relationships.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were part of a broader research group of 173 Dutch children aged between 9 and 13 from varied cultural-ethnic backgrounds. This broader study focused on conflicts in the (foster) child and (foster) parent relation-

Table 1 Characteristics of the subjects in frequencies (percentages in parentheses), *N* = 75

	<i>Girls (N = 38)</i>	<i>Boys (N = 37)</i>	<i>Total (N = 75)</i>
Socioeconomic status ^a			
Low	11 (30)	12 (34)	23 (32)
Medium	13 (35)	12 (34)	25 (35)
High	12 (32)	8 (23)	20 (28)
Missing values	1 (3)	2 (6)	3 (5)
Cultural background			
Native Dutch	29 (76)	30 (81)	59 (79)
Immigrant Dutch	9 (24)	6 (16)	15 (20)
Family background			
Birth family	19 (50)	18 (49)	37 (49)
Foster family	19 (50)	19 (51)	38 (51)
Age			
9–10 years	18 (47)	13 (35)	31 (41)
11–12 years	20 (52)	24 (65)	44 (59)

^a The SES is based on the educational level of the natural/foster mothers for the natural/foster children. In the Netherlands, the educational level of the mother is highly related to the socioeconomic class of the family and to educational values and norms (Meijnen, 1984).

ship (Singer et al., 2004). If a child did not have a real-life story about a conflict with a (foster) parent who had disclosed a secret, we asked for a similar conflict with a friend or peer. In this way we collected the narratives of 75 children (38 girls, 37 boys) about being betrayed by a friend. These narratives about peer conflicts were a side effect of our broader study about foster children. During the analyses of these narratives, we were struck by the insights they gave into the construction of shared norms and gender issues by these preadolescent children. So we decided to focus on these issues.

The broader research group was recruited in two ways. First, teachers at nine primary schools were asked to give the parents of children of our target age group a letter describing our research so that they could contact us. Second, we contacted five regional organizations that provide counselling to foster care families. These organizations informed the foster parents of children within our target age group about our research. If a child wished to participate and the foster parents and other involved authorities gave their permission, the foster parents contacted us to make an appointment to conduct the interview at their home. We took care to recruit children from different socioeconomic backgrounds (see Table 1). The immigrant Dutch children

had different ethnic backgrounds: Moroccan, Turkish, Caribbean, Iranian and Surinam. All the children went to schools with a predominantly native-Dutch population (50% or more of the children).

Interview instrument

We developed a semi-structured interview and used it to investigate the children's inner logics. We began by discussing a fictitious situation in which 'Maarten's secret' (for boys) or 'Merel's secret' (for girls) – namely that he or she is in love with a certain, named person – is betrayed. Subsequently, we asked each child whether he or she had ever experienced a situation in real life in which a secret had been given away. We started with the fictitious story to clarify the kind of experiences we were interested in, and to make children familiar with our interview questions. Since every child could answer questions about the fictitious story, children without a narrative about their own experiences did not get the feeling of having failed.

Straightforward questions like 'what did you do?' and 'why?' are inadequate stimuli for children to verbalize the inner logic of their behaviour. Nine- to 12-year-olds have not yet developed the meta-cognitive and introspective skills that are needed to fully answer these questions (Singer et al., 2004). Therefore we developed a structured interview with open concrete questions. We were encouraging the children to reflect on the 'why question' by asking them concrete questions about their actions, their goals and the concerns motivating their behaviour, as well as about their emotions, and how their emotions were regulated externally and internally.

We used props to gain and hold the children's attention and to engage them in the task. These props were a story and a picture of a fictitious situation, a thermometer with which the child could indicate the degree of severity, emotion faces, and a stop sign to indicate that he or she did not wish to answer a question or wanted to stop the interview.

Eight female interviewers (two developmental psychology graduates and six graduate students in pedagogy or psychology) were given a two-day training programme, with a special focus on our interview instrument. During the research, they were debriefed after every two interviews; later, the debriefings were held after every four interviews. The transcripts of their interviews were discussed during these sessions.

All interviews were held at school or at the home of the child/foster child in the absence of the parents/foster parents. The interviews lasted 30–45 minutes, depending on whether or not the child could relate a real-life story. Longer interviews were a result of pauses during which children showed their 'treasures', played soccer or chatted and relaxed a little. Most children enjoyed their interview.

Analysis

We first developed a category system to analyse separately the elements comprising the inner logic of children, including actions, goals, concerns and emotions.

- To develop categories of *actions* we made use of earlier research on children's coping strategies (Band and Weisz, 1988; Beaver, 1997). We distinguished 'other-related actions' (e.g. enforcing, whining, deceiving, arguing/asking why, communicating emotions, going away) and 'self-related actions' (e.g. crying while alone, worrying, cognitive restructuring, self-diversion).
- We based our categories of *goals* on Selman and Demorest's (1984) theory of levels of negotiation strategies. Characteristic of a low level of negotiation is that the child uses a unilateral goal perspective: the child either tries to rescue him- or herself by conforming or masking behaviour (unilateral-self-saving), or tries to enforce his or her will on the other person (unilateral-coercive). At a medium level of negotiation, the child tries to repair the relationship and to find a compromise between his or her wishes and those of the other person (reciprocal-influential). At a high level of negotiation, the child tries to find a mutual solution based on shared concerns, values and norms related to friendship (collaborative-mutual goals).
- With regard to *concerns*, we distinguished moral, social and personal concerns. *Emotions* were categorized into distinct emotions (e.g. anger, sadness, guilt, shame, confusion), either expressed or hidden. We altered and readjusted these categories while analysing the interview material. After the coding process, we transposed these data into a numerical system for the purpose of statistical analyses. We used Cohen's kappa (Wickens, 1989) to determine the inter-rater reliability for the main variables. The test results were satisfying: acts: .83; goals: .81; concerns: .68; emotions: .96; emotion regulation: .82.

We then focused on the relationships between the main categories in order to reconstruct the child's inner logic in the conflict situation, namely the connections the child made between his or her acts, goals, concerns, emotions and emotional regulation. This led to the construction of profiles of groups of children with a similar inner logic. The first step was based on the 'action' categories. We distinguished three groups of children who used different categories of other-related acts, namely (1) showing negative emotions (anger or sadness), enforcing behaviour, arguing/asking why; (2) concealing negative emotions, arguing/asking why, joking; (3) seeking help from adults (teachers, parents) and no or only very weak reactions towards the other child. The second step was to look at the intended goals and the underlying concerns and emotions of those within these three groups. This resulted in

Table 2 Profiles of inner logic in narratives about being betrayed by a friend, frequencies (percentages in parentheses)

<i>Profile</i>	<i>Girls</i> (N = 38)	<i>Boys</i> (N = 37)	<i>Total</i> (N = 75)
1. Real friends keep secrets	13 (34)	15 (41)	28 (37)
2. Stop teasing me!	15 (39)	4 (11)	19 (25)
3. Pretending not to be hurt	9 (24)	14 (38)	23 (31)
4. Mom, mom, help me!	1 (3)	4 (11)	5 (7)

four profiles of inner logic, the inter-rater reliability of which was .86 (Cohen's kappa). Finally, we used descriptive statistics to analyse differences between girls and boys with regard to their profiles of inner logic.

Findings

Most of the children (48% of the boys and 70% of the girls) related a real-life story about a friend or best friend who had disclosed the fact that they were in love with someone. Probably this was because the fictitious story was about revealing the secret of being in love. The other stories concerned the betrayal of family secrets (illness of a parent); secrets such as being a foster child, having a mother addicted to drugs, or an unknown father; or embarrassing behaviour (bed-wetting, writing love-letters to the teacher, making a silly mistake at school, having had the wrong hairstyle, a stupid photo). The foster girls related more painful family secrets compared to the foster boys and girls and boys living with their own parents. The foster girls had also experienced more bullying than had the other girls and the boys/foster boys. Most stories were about conflicts between children of the same sex.

All the children with the exception of eight of the boys reported that they felt angry when a friend betrays them. However, they sharply differed in wanting to express or, conversely, to conceal their anger. We reconstructed four profiles according to the degree of openly expressed anger towards the perpetrator (deliberate expression, concealed anger, no emotion of anger) and to the underlying motives (goals, concerns, emotions) (see Table 2).

Henceforth in this article, those who fit profile 1, 2, 3 or 4 are referred to as profile group 1, 2, 3 or 4, respectively.

Profile group 1: I'm angry/very angry. A real friend doesn't betray a secret!

A third of the children had told a narrative that fitted profile 1. These children said that they expressed their anger openly to communicate that they

did not accept betrayal of confidence by a friend. Some of them reacted fiercely by hitting, shouting or dragging their friend into the toilet (like Mieke, quoted in our introduction). Others glared angrily at the friend, or threatened to break up their friendship. A minority of these children used very subtle ways of communicating their displeasure. Hans was a champion in this respect. He once showed his anger by deliberately choosing a different sandwich filling from that of his best friend (peanut butter instead of cheese), thus deliberately breaching their intimate rules of togetherness. Besides anger, the girls mentioned such emotions as sadness, guilt and confusion. However, these emotions were either concealed or subsequently expressed towards another girlfriend, a teacher or the mother.

The main goal of these children was to let their friend know that a basic norm of friendship had been violated: *real* friends *never* reveal a secret. Although some of these children were worried about the consequences of such a revelation – and especially about being teased by other children because of their secret – their main concern was the quality of the relation with their friend. As Laura (9) put it:

I can't gain much by yelling and shouting. But she has to know that I'm very, very angry. She'd promised to keep her mouth shut! I think it's important that she knows what I feel. Because otherwise, she'll think 'I can do that again', and then . . . yes, then it will go on for ever. So I think you really have to show your anger.

The narratives of these children confirm the conclusion of researchers who point to conflicts between friends as privileged contexts for co-constructing and internalizing moral standards and values based on reciprocity. A good example is the narrative of Sabine (12, foster child), who explained how she and her best friend had learned to commit themselves to the 'golden rule' after a rough period of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. While out riding horses, her friends Evelien and Mia had revealed Sabine's secret that she was in love with a much older boy (14): they had divulged the secret to the boy in her presence. Sabine felt terribly ashamed and angry: 'They made a fool of me.' Her first reaction had been to say nothing and to run away. She had not wanted to show her embarrassment, because she had not wanted to share her inner feelings. They had talked it over, but because they had continued to reveal her feelings towards the boy, she had taken revenge: she had revealed the romantic secrets of her two girlfriends. In the end, the lives of the three girls had become unbearable as a result of scolding, betrayals and refusals to play together: 'We made fools of each other.' Therefore they had proposed to come to an agreement: 'If you don't betray me, I won't betray you.' Evelien had agreed and had kept her promise. But Mia had said: 'It's okay by me if you keep your promise, but I don't know if I will when we have a big row.' From this, Sabine had concluded that Mia could not be a real friend: 'Because you have to be sure that your friend won't make a fool of you.' Sabine still plays with Mia, but she differentiates between Evelien

as her best friend and Mia who is just a friend.

All these children were quite explicit about the moral and social lessons they had learned from this type of experience. Six were happy that they had repaired their friendship after the conflict. Their norms of friendship had been confirmed, and they were satisfied with the way they had dealt with the conflict: 'My friend said sorry, that he hadn't done it on purpose' (Willem, 12), and 'She [the best friend] understood why I was so angry. She promised never to do it again' (Anja, 10).

Five girls and two boys had decided to break up their friendship or to distance themselves: 'Because I don't trust her anymore' (Ellen, 9). These children intended to be more selective in their future friendships. One boy deeply regretted the loss of his best friend: 'Next time I'll remain more cool. When someone betrays me, I'll say "How could you do that?" but not break off the friendship right away.' One of the boys had come to the opposite conclusion: he had decided never to share a secret again. 'Then [when he has a secret] I'll try to give nothing away and try to go on playing as usual.' After a temporary split with his friend, he had patched up the relationship. But to this boy, friendship and sharing intimate secrets were no longer connected.

Profile group 2: I show my anger to frighten them, because I don't want to be teased

The children who fit profile 2 (25% of the total) also showed their anger openly. However, their goals and concerns differed from those of the children in profile group 1. They feared the consequences of everybody knowing their secret and wanted to avoid being ridiculed, teased or punished. 'Just hit back hard if they do anything to you', seems to be the kernel of their inner logic when they are betrayed by a peer. For instance, a friend of Nannie (12) made her look a fool at school by saying that Nannie was in love with a pop star: 'I said in a really firm voice "Stop it, or I'll tell the teacher!" I had to say it twice, and then they stopped because I got very angry and they all became frightened. I don't want to be teased.'

Many of the foster girls fit this profile: 58 percent compared to 21 percent of the girls who lived with their birth parents and 11 percent of the boys/foster boys. These foster girls related serious conflicts, such as having their real family name revealed, being in love with their teacher or being humiliated by gossips passing on intimate information about them. The stories related by all these children (and by those in profile group 3) were more about being teased than about being betrayed by a friend. The teasers were brothers/foster brothers, sisters/foster sisters or peers who deliberately passed on secret or intimate information. We return to this later.

These children were also concerned with norms and with moral and social learning: not learning what it means to be a good friend (profile 1), but learning the norms of being 'normal' and the social dangers of deviating

from peer norms. Deviations must be kept secret, because once known they will lead to teasing. They therefore fear being in love with an 'ugly' girl or an 'older' boy, and that their foolish mistakes will be made public. They struggle with the fact that falling in love is both a personal feeling and a public affair that is scrutinized by their peers ('Do I have the right feelings for the right person?'). On top of that, the object of their love may not reciprocate their feelings and may reject them:

I told him, don't do that again or I'll thump you. I'd really feel bad if he passed it on to everybody else. He had to keep his big mouth shut. And I also didn't want the girl to know: she'd think I was a nerd. I felt ashamed of being in love in front of my friends – and especially in front of the girl. I wanted to keep it to myself. (Bert, 12)

These peer conflicts forced children to take their own stand with regard to the norms of the group. For some children, this resulted in the development of their personal morality. For instance, Bert subsequently concluded: 'Next time I think I'll be honest. Then I'll go up to the girl and ask if she wants to go out with me.' But for most children, the tendency to conform to the norms of their peers was reinforced. This was especially the case with the betrayal of secrets that are less common, such as being a foster child or being in love with a teacher. To protect their vulnerability most children tried to hide their 'weaknesses' – feelings of fear, guilt, shame and sadness – from their peers. The only feeling they voluntarily expressed was their anger.

Profile group 3: Pretending not to be hurt: 'I'm tough, so they stop teasing me'

The 23 children (31% of the total) who fitted profile 3 did not protest at all when a peer betrayed or teased them. 'If you don't respond but hide your hurt, they stop teasing you' is the core of their inner logic. There were two variants within this profile group. Nine of the girls and six of the boys pretended or tried to pretend to feel nothing, but inside they felt shame, anger, confusion, sadness, guilt and/or fear. The other eight boys claimed to feel nothing special.

These children had the same goal and concerns as those in profile group 2 (namely not to be teased) but their strategy was exactly the opposite:

I wanted them to think that they can't tease me with that [being in love], that they don't have to abuse me with that, because it doesn't work. But inside I feel sad and guilty, because I shouldn't have trusted her. (Janneke, 10)

These children put a lot of energy into hiding their feelings. They cried alone in their bedroom, and tried to distract themselves by doing or thinking about something pleasurable. They were frightened that showing their feelings would only make things worse. Some of these children reported that

they were really confused, because they had not expected to be betrayed or teased. They had thought that being in love was something normal. Some of the children were angry with themselves: they should not have shared their secret, and they felt guilty because they had been mistaken in their peer's trustworthiness.

Eight of the boys (the second variant of this profile) acted tough in the situation. They felt 'normal' and experienced no special emotion when teased. Yet they admitted that their main goal was to stop the teasing. Some boys switched the situation round by joking and joining in the laughter of their peers. For instance, Bob (10):

Glenn [his friend] wrote on the blackboard 'Anouke goes with Bob' and he started to yell 'Anouke goes with you-ou!' I wanted him to stop it. So I beat him at his own game. And I wanted to see his reaction (*laughs*). Then we can laugh at him and we can make jokes. Just a little bit of teasing.

Besides stopping the teasing, boys were concerned with maintaining good relations with their friends and peers. Maarten (12) talked about his well-developed strategy for preserving good relations at school:

I take good care to be friendly with the whole class. They're not all my best friends, but I take care that they're not my enemies. By being friendly. Not sucking up. I make jokes back, stay neutral and go my own way.

Like those in profile group 2, these children learned the hard way the social norm of being normal, and the subsequent reflections of most of these children concerned their desire to conform to peer norms. The inner need to conform can go quite far. The girlfriend of Herman (9) had revealed the fact that they were going out with each other:

Herman: Even the boys in my class were laughing at me. They said 'You have to break it off'. I said: 'Yes of course.' I said that to a friend and he said to the girl that it was over.

Interviewer: How did you feel about that?

Herman: Not so bad. She was ugly anyway.

Interviewer: So you would have broken it off anyway?

Herman: No, I wouldn't.

Only a few children (e.g. Maarten) reported remaining in touch with their private feelings and norms while keeping up appearances.

Profile group 4: Parents or teachers have to help me

In all profile groups, there were children who looked to adults for comfort after conflict with peers. They turned to either their mother or their teacher to express the feelings they had tried to hide from their peers. But there were only five children who relied on adults' help during the conflict, such as Arno (11) – who was often teased terribly by his peers and who felt powerless – and Sarah (12), who tried to manipulate adults to enhance her own power. When Sarah's friend Barbara broke her promise not to tell anybody

about Sarah's feelings for a boy, Sarah chose the following strategy to stop her persecutors:

I've told my mother about it, my teacher and my friend's mother. I hoped that my mother would disapprove of what Barbara had done, that my teacher would stop the teasing at school, and that Barbara's mother would talk with her, and be angry and punish her.

Relying on adults to solve peer conflicts is an unusual strategy for preadolescent children in the Netherlands. Even Sarah seemed to be aware of that. For her it was normal to go to the teacher, but she remarked that 'the other children in the class looked surprised'. Sarah had violated the norm that children, as equals, sort out their own problems without the intervention of adults (Thorne, 1993).

Gender differences

We did not find significant gender differences between the four profile groups, nor did we find significant differences between children from different social class and ethnic backgrounds. Boys and girls from different backgrounds seemed more or less equally committed to the norm that friends have to be trustworthy (profile 1) and that to avoid being teased and bullied the best thing to do is pretend not to be hurt (profile 3). Contrary to our expectations, more girls (39%) than boys (11%) used their verbal and physical power to stop the teasing (profile 2). However, this difference was strongly related to being a foster child. We return to this issue later.

We also looked for gender differences within the different profile groups. First, we found that in all profile groups, after a conflict, the girls, compared with the boys, more often tended to share their emotions with a girlfriend, female teacher or their mother. Some girls started a new friendship by disclosing intimate information about their former best friend. Females, especially mothers, seem to be the privileged consolers of both girls and boys. Thus talking about conflicts with friends/girlfriends is a gendered pattern.

Second, consistent with our expectations, the girls in all the profile groups seemed to be more strongly affected at an emotional level than the boys. On average, the girls mentioned significantly more emotions than the boys did: 74 percent of the girls mentioned two or more emotions compared to 27 percent of the boys. This gender difference was especially evident in profile group 3 (pretending not to be hurt). Both girls and boys tried to appear cool and to ignore their persecutors. But all the girls reported experiencing shame, guilt, fear, anger and/or confusion. They experienced an emotional turmoil that was hard to conceal, whereas most of the boys in this profile group reported no special feelings at all.

Third, contrary to our expectations, both the girls and the boys were equally concerned with protecting and repairing the relationship. In fact, the

tough boys in profile group 3 were very keen to remain 'one of the lads' and were able to transform the situation through jokes. On the other hand, the girls who were teased were mainly preoccupied with saving themselves and were less interested in maintaining a good relationship with their persecutors. In our study the girls broke off the friend relationship more often than the boys did. This is consistent with Thorne's (1993) finding in a study in the US, that preadolescent girls frequently break off and start new friendships. But Davies (1982: 100) cautions against misinterpreting this pattern because of our adult-centric norms: 'What appear to be breakages are, rather, manoeuvres within friendship'. When loyalty and sharing intimacies are central characteristics of a friendship, as is often the case among girls, violations of this norm have to be punished. Several of the girls, and also some of the boys, reported that they threatened to break off or actually did break off a friendship for a while. Only after repeated violation of friendship norms did the breakage become final.

Co-construction of personal standards in peer conflicts

Conformity to peer pressure and the growing awareness of being different

As expected, peer conflicts provide children with a charged motivational context for moral, social and emotional learning. But the harshness of this motivational context was not foreseen. Children who fell short of the demands of friendship were confronted with verbal and physical force, and with losing or threats of losing their friend. Teasing seemed to be a prime means whereby Dutch preadolescents enforced and reinforced conformity to the norms of the group. The children feared that deviations from peer norms would be severely punished. Two-thirds of the children (profile groups 2 and 3) told us that their main concern was either to stop their persecutors teasing them or to avoid being teased. Thus the issue of sharing and revealing secrets is closely related to the pressure to conform to peer group norms in early adolescence (Brown et al., 1986; Olweus, 1994).

To survive in the peer group, both boys and girls in our study had developed skills to hide their 'weaknesses' (sadness, confusion, fear, shame, guilt) during a conflict. They showed a keen awareness of the need to keep up appearances. Probably this is related to the fact that these preadolescent children based their self-concept on social comparison with peers and on their growing sense of being different (Brown et al., 1986). In order to escape from the social control of the group, the children needed a friend with whom they could share intimacies and personal opinions. But sharing intimate information implies the risk of being betrayed: thus, a friend has to be reliable. Perhaps this explains the intensity of the conflicts: children hammer out moral rules with their friends/former friends.

The vulnerability of girls who deviate from the norm

Because of their mutual self-disclosure, girls ran a bigger risk than boys of being betrayed, i.e. of being the victim of gossip, ridicule or the revelation of secrets (Thorne and Luria, 1986). This aspect of girls' friendship can be especially troublesome for girls whose parents or family deviate from the norm: the foster girls reacted violently when friends told others that they lived in a foster family or that their mother was a drug addict (profile 2). The foster girls were overrepresented in profile group 2. This may be a sign of their vulnerability in the girls' friendship culture. Further research in this respect is needed. We did not find differences in this respect between the foster boys and the boys who lived with their biological family.

Personal standards

Besides strong pressure to conform, we also observed instances of personal moral growth in children. During the interviews, we asked the children about their subsequent reflections on the conflict. These questions turned out to be too difficult for children under 10. But several 10- to 13-year-olds were eager to share what they had learned from the conflict. Their stories illustrate Day and Tappan's (1996) and Damon's (1988) theoretical statement that preadolescents' friendships may act as forums for moral learning; the stories also illustrate Colby and Damon's (1995) and Vygotsky's (1978) statement that social commitments and rules enable children to stand up to the social pressure to conform as well as to control their own primary impulses. A good example is Sabine, the 12-year-old girl we discussed in the section about profile group 1. Sabine gave us a lively and detailed report of her transition from 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' morality to the mutual acceptance of the 'golden rule': 'life became unbearable' for her and her friends as a result of repeated acts of revenge. Some children had decided to stand up to their persecutors in the future and to reveal their personal feelings; however, these children were exceptional. For instance, they had arrived at the conclusion that being in love is perfectly normal, nothing to be ashamed of and a personal matter, and therefore not open to group condemnation. Many children reported that they had become more critical in their choice of a best friend: they were now more aware of their norms about friendship, and they differentiated between 'friends' and 'best friends'. In this respect, we found no differences in the way boys and girls reflect on what it means to be 'best friends'.

Discussion

In our study, the children's narratives are clearly contextualized, first, because of the fictitious story about a 'romantic secret' that is given away by a friend, which focused the children's attention on their own experiences with romantic secrets. Second, the stories were told during a formal inter-

view session. These conditions bear on the interpretation of the children's narratives.

Social constructivist theory stresses that cognitive-affective structures of particular individuals are embedded in past and current social relationships. A particular cognitive-affective structure is and remains characteristic of a person-in-context (Wertsch, 1990). In line with this insight, the profiles we have reconstructed should not be interpreted as a general characteristic of a child or group of children. The profiles refer to the inner logic of children's behaviour in a specific social context. In response to the fictitious story, 70 percent of the girls and 48 percent of the boys talked about a situation in which their romantic secret had been given away by a friend or peer. The other children talked about family secrets or characteristics about themselves that made them feel ashamed. All the narratives focus on an experience of being put to shame in a peer group. Narratives about romantic and other secrets were equally distributed over the four profiles. But that should not blind us to the fact that the gender differences we have found might be context specific. Significantly more girls than boys reported an experience of a romantic attachment being betrayed. Probably this reflects the preoccupation with notions of love and romance in preadolescent girls' cultures in western countries (Adler and Adler, 1992; Brown et al., 1999; Renold, 2002; Thorne, 1993). If our hypothetical case had involved a betrayal of loyalty towards the group – for instance shoplifting by one of the members – we would probably have evoked very different narratives. In our study we found no differences related to social class or ethnic backgrounds. But we expect that betrayal of group loyalty will call forth different narratives related to ethnic and social class differences in norms about group loyalty and individual responsibility. Giving away a group secret might also evoke stronger emotional turmoil in boys than in girls, because a basic concern of male groups might be violated. Thus, depending on the issues at stake and the concerns that are violated, girls might be cooler than boys and vice versa. We expect that future studies of the betrayal of secrets in different social contexts will further substantiate the complex reality behind our and other researchers' conclusion that boys and girls are both the same *and* different (Brown et al., 1999; Thorne, 1993).

Our second point of discussion is related to our interview method. The children were individually interviewed by an interviewer they had never met before at home or at school. The children voluntarily participated in the interview and were positioned as experts on their own world. Almost all children liked the attention of the interviewer and the opportunity to explain themselves. The big advantage of this formal interview situation and our semi-structured interview instrument is that these conditions encouraged the children to reflect on their psychic and social behaviour. We were able to gather reflective and introspective data about preadolescent Dutch children and their conflicting goals and concerns, their priorities, strategies to

influence their peers, actions to regulate their emotions, and their co-constructions of the meaning of friendship. Based on the children's reflections, we gained insight into the ways in which children are negotiating the pressure to conform to and to differentiate themselves from peer norms. But of course this interview method also has disadvantages. We did not see the power relations of children in action as can be done by participant observation. We did not observe the daily fluctuations in friendship relationships, the struggles of some children not to be excluded, and the diverse strategies which the same child can use depending on the social context. Formal interviews, informal chats and participant observation are complementary methods. But even when we have the luxury of combining all these methods in one study, we should remember James's warning, that writing 'from "the child's" perspective, is not to make claims to reveal the authentic child but, more humbly, to provide a rendering of what childhood might be like' (James, 1996: 315).

Note

1. All the names in the article are pseudonyms of children who cooperated in our study.

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