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A Game-Playing Approach to Interviewing Children About Loneliness: Negotiating Meaning, Distributing Power, and Establishing Trust

The new paradigm of studying childhood that has emerged in the past 15 years has significant implications for rethinking research with children. This article examines some methodological and ethical issues related to the role and responsibility of a researcher in the process of designing, structuring, and conducting research on childhood experiences and the role of children in such research. The main conceptual points are illustrated through examples from the process of developing and employing a game-playing approach to initiating conversations with young children about loneliness. Excerpts from a tape-recorded game-playing session with a 10-year-old child are used to illustrate how the approach facilitates negotiating meaning, distributing power, and establishing trust between the interviewer and the interviewee. The role of the game-playing approach as a research tool for involving children in the research process is examined.

Dans les quinze dernières années, il s'est développé un nouveau paradigme concernant l'étude de l'enfance. Il comporte des conséquences importantes relatives à la recherche impliquant les enfants. Cet article porte sur certaines questions méthodologiques et éthiques liées d'une part, au rôle et à la responsabilité du chercheur dans la conception, la structuration et la direction des recherches sur les expériences des enfants et d'autre part, du rôle des enfants dans ces recherches. Des exemples tirés du développement et de l'emploi d'une approche basée sur le jeu que l'on emploie pour initier des conversations avec les enfants au sujet de la solitude viennent illustrer les éléments conceptuels clés. Nous présentons des extraits d'une séance de jeu enregistrée avec un enfant de dix ans pour démontrer la façon dont l'approche facilite la négociation du sens, la répartition du pouvoir et l'établissement de la confiance entre l'intervieweur et l'interviewé. Nous nous penchons sur le rôle que joue l'approche basée sur le jeu et employée comme outil de recherche dans les études impliquant les enfants.

Although interviewing is one of the most commonly used qualitative data-gathering methods, the challenges of interviewing children about their experiences are still not fully understood. In their recent review of the methodological issues related to researching children's experiences, Greene and Hill (2005) stated,

> Researching children's experience is a project that is fundamentally problematic. The process is highly inferential. We assume that it is possible to learn about children's experiences *both* by enquiry into their active engagement

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with their material and social worlds, whether the focus is on actions or words, and from their own reports on subjective worlds. (p. 6, original emphasis)

In my dissertation research on childhood loneliness (Kirova-Petrova, 1996), the challenges of accessing children's experiences of loneliness inspired me to develop a board game to facilitate my research conversations with elementary schoolchildren. In this article, I examine how this game-playing approach illustrates the new paradigm of studying childhood that has emerged in the past decade. More specifically, I examine my role as an adult-researcher of childhood phenomena in the light of some current methodological and ethical issues related to the role and responsibility of a researcher in the process of designing, structuring, and conducting research not only on childhood experiences, but also with children. The issues of developing trust, sharing power, and meaning-making in the interview process are examined through an example of an interview with one of the research participants in my study of childhood loneliness.

Children's Rights and the New Paradigm of Studying Childhood
Mayall (1999) argues that traditional approaches to research involving children were dominated by "certain psychological theories" (p. 10) about children and child development. The main assumption underlying these theories, she elaborates, is the "adult proposition that [children] lack essential characteristics of adulthood … [and] that adults may steer them through dangerous waters towards adulthood" (p. 10). In this fundamental tenet, children are subordinate to adults and have little or no input into their own lives or in decision-making structures either in their own families or in the wider society (Archard, 1993). Thus as their "caretakers," adults act on behalf of children, albeit in their "best interests" (Ackers & Stalford, 2004).

Based on the new version of adult autonomy rights being applied to children found in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the new approach to advocate for the study of childhood pioneered by James and Prout (1990) is reinforcing calls for children's rights of autonomy. Statements about children's rights to form and express views freely in all matters affecting them and for these views to be heard and be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (Morrow & Richards, 1996) emphasize that children should be provided the opportunity to express themselves and to participate in decisions about their own lives. Accordingly, children are to be recognized as competent agents who are capable of providing valid accounts of their own lives (Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke, & Graig, 1996).

In the light of the rights of the child movement, the child-adult duality in traditional research has been criticized for treating children as "objects of study" (Greene & Hill, 2005; Hill, Laybourn, & Borland, 1996; James & Prout, 1990; Mayall, 1994b). The shift toward recognizing children as competent agents in their own lives (Valentine, 1999) has resulted in a critical examination of traditional research methods. Several areas of concern have been identified: (a) the position of children and young people in research (Fals-Borda, 2001); (b) issues of power and control, especially in relation to age and competence (Mayall, 1994b); and (c) the ability of research to empower and change the lives of the children who participate in it (Dawes, 2000, in Veale, 2005).

Although the new conceptualization of childhood has resulted in an increased attempt to not "theorize the incompetent child" (Alderson, 1995; Light & Littleton, 1999), researchers rarely examine their *adultness* as researchers of childhood experiences. Further, they are "seldom explicit about how they perceive the interview context, what model of the child they assume or evoke, how they conceptualize the interviewer's role, and the processes by which they create meaning from what is said in the interviews" (Westcott & Littleton, 2005, p. 141).

Unequal Power

Although it has been argued that any research situation creates imbalance in power between the researcher and the research participant, the unequal power between adults and children in research situations is even more pronounced. One of the contributing factors is how researchers access children as research participants. As Valentine (1999) explains,

> Children's interdependence on adults, parents' anxieties about their safety at the hands of strangers, and the extent to which children's activities are timetabled, organised and circumscribed by adults (e.g., at school, after school clubs and so on), produces a situation where parents, guardians, teachers and social workers all act as "gatekeepers" who mediate researchers' access to children. (p. 145)

Whether parents, teachers, and other adults either hamper researchers' attempts to access children or coerce children to participate in research, Hood, Kelley, and Mayall (1996) advise researchers to recognize that individual children's interests are not necessarily coterminous with the values of home and school. In addition, researchers are advised to consider that children, particularly in a school context where they are used to rule-following behavior, may comply with the wishes of adult authority figures or feel under peer group pressure to join in (Ireland & Holloway, 1996). More specifically, "children's responses to interviews that take place in school environments tend to follow the IRF classroom discourse patterns" (Westcott & Littleton, 2005, p. 148), which consists of teachers *initiating* (I) a discussion with a question, a child providing an expected *response* (R), which is in turn commented on by the teachers, and then *feedback* (F) is provided.

Communication with Child Participants

Other factors creating or contributing to power disparity for children have included: biological age; bodily size; lack of comparable social, political, and economic status; or life experience and knowledge (Landsdown, 1994; Valentine, 1999). A major risk in conducting research with children concerns "infantilizing them, perceiving and treating them as immature and, in so doing, producing evidence to reinforce notions of their incompetence" (Alderson, 2000, p. 243). A commonly shared view is that "communication with children needs to be adapted to their level of cognitive and linguistic development … and [needs] to convey instruction in a manner that makes sense from a child's perspective" (Garbarino, Scott, & Erikson Institute, 1992, in Hill, Laybourn, & Borland, 1996, p. 133). Although these concerns have not necessarily resulted in research practices that have endorsed talking down to children or oversimplifying the tasks and concepts explored with them, it has certainly limited

children's participation in the research process. Alderson (2000) reports that research with children has tended to involve them in the data-gathering stage of the process, but not in the analysis and dissemination of the research results. Hill (2006) points out that although children are typically passive about the choice of method of data-collection, they do exercise control over time and privacy and manifest the extent to which they find the data-collection methods comfortable and engaging.

Developing a Research Procedure to Involve Children in Conversations about Loneliness

Although the new conceptualization of childhood suggests that researchers should not take for granted any adult-child distinction, they should be "open to methods that are suited to children's level of understanding, knowledge, interests and particular location in the social world" (Greene & Hill, 2005, p. 8). James (1999) also suggests that researchers need to become more adventurous in their methodology so that they can engage children in research. In my hermeneutic-phenomenological study of childhood loneliness, for example (Kirova-Petrova, 1996), the challenges of accessing children's experiences of loneliness inspired my development of a research procedure that engaged children in constructing meaning through dialogue prompted by the content of a specially designed interpersonal communication board game. These dialogues in turn allowed me to access each child's unique experience of loneliness.

Exploring Children's Roles as Research Participants
in Childhood Loneliness Research

A large body of literature on childhood loneliness has been developing since the mid-1980s. This research shows that children as young as 5 years of age are well acquainted with loneliness (Burgess, Ladd, Kochenderfer, Lamber, & Birch, 1999; Cassidy & Asher, 1992; Youngblade, Berlin, & Belsky, 1999). Research findings that demonstrate that even young children can and do experience loneliness have led to attempts to assess these feelings. Considerable research efforts in the area have taken the form of scale development (Terrell-Deutsch, 1999).

The role of the researcher in the above-mentioned studies was clearly that of a *detached scholar* (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Designed in the culture of traditional research, the studies based on the self-report measures for assessing loneliness fell short of engaging directly with children; it was research on but not with children. As James (1999) explains, "the methods of developmental psychology tend to define a researcher-child relationship in which children are objects of study, to be observed, tested and experimented on" (p. 234). As mentioned above, in the experimental paradigm, the child is constructed as a passive participant (Westcott & Littleton, 2005).

In a relatively small number of studies, researchers have attempted to acccess elementary schoolchildren's understanding and experience of loneliness through interviews. Cassidy and Asher's (1992) study, for example, reported that kindergarten and grade 1 children's knowledge of loneliness was similar to that of adults. Hayden, Tarulli, and Hymel (1988) interviewed children in grades 3-8 about their knowledge of loneliness and described the dimen-

sions they identified in the children's responses. Their interview schedule included open-ended questions about children's own descriptions of instances of loneliness as well as "questions of a more general nature [that] preceded those that required children to disclose more personally relevant information" (p. 83). Hayden et al. stated that the children appeared comfortable and displayed no apparent difficulty in disclosing their thoughts in response to open-ended interview questions. They did not, however, report how the children were invited to participate in the interviews and relate their understandings and experiences of loneliness.

In examining interview-based studies, I became concerned that research on childhood loneliness had not acknowledged the need for the interviewer and the interviewee to engage in a meaning-making process as a part of the interview. Shared meanings between interviewers and interviewees seemed to be taken for granted. Neither the context of the interviews nor the roles of the interviewers or the interviewees were described. Although the researchers reported that they "endeavored to enlist children as co-collaborators, relying heavily in our analysis on their personal accounts of loneliness, allowing these to inform, to the fullest extent possible, the descriptions at which we arrived in the course of our investigation" (Hymel, Tarulli, Hayden, & Terrell-Deutsch, 1999, p. 83), I wonder if these interviews aimed at "knowledge gathering" rather than "knowledge production" (Veale, 2005, p. 254). How did the children contribute to the interview context?

Exploring Alternative Methodological Solutions in Childhood Loneliness Research
The important methodological question for me became: What method would engage children in a conversation about their subjective experiences of loneliness? The lack of open discussion about the relationship between researchers and research participants in the field of childhood loneliness research was surprising given the evidence from the literature on adult loneliness that clearly indicates that "lonely people are reluctant to disclose their condition" and that "loneliness is more often discussed with family and friends than a helping professional" (Perlman & Joshi, 1989, p. 63). It appeared to me that the issue of the procedures for preparing and conducting interviews with children was the key not only to the quality of the collected data, but to their potential to provide answers to research questions.

Kagan, Hans, Markowitz, and Lopez (1982) were among the few researchers to stress that because children may be reluctant to talk about or admit to feelings of loneliness, there is a need to consider more indirect indicators of such self-evaluations. These authors suggested triad-sorting of self and peers and coding of empathic involvement in response to films, for example, leaning toward the television screen, smiling, and speaking when a particular character appears. Weiss' (1973) indirect method included presenting respondents with potentially loneliness-evoking pictures and asking them to describe what might be happening in the picture, what the person might feel, whether they had ever felt that way, and if so how recently and how frequently.

The development of the Loneliness Anticipation Questionnaire used the method of presenting children with a series of hypothetical situations that earlier studies had found gave rise to loneliness. The questionnaire includes the following eight situations: temporary absence, loss, dislocation, conflict,

broken loyalties, rejection, exclusion, and being ignored (Hymel et al., 1999). In describing the situations, the researchers tried to avoid focusing children's attention on the need to identify the situation as one that he or she had experienced. Although the situations were assumed to elicit only one emotional response—loneliness—providing situations to which children could respond held rich potential for initiating conversation about their lived experiences of loneliness (for more detailed analysis, see Kirova, 2003). I was convinced that for this to happen, children and the interviewer needed to be engaged in a process of making meaning about the possibility of experiencing a given situation differently. To paraphrase, Morson (1994) stated, "to understand a moment is to grasp not only what did happen but also what might have happened" (pp. 118-119). In discussing the meaning of hypothetical situations, a child would have an opportunity to identify the experiential elements that distinguished one human experience from another. Loneliness, then, could be seen as only one such possibility. Yet I was still concerned that I might ask children about something they might not feel comfortable telling a stranger. I was also concerned with possibly labeling their perhaps unrecognized feelings. Should I ask the questions directly? If not, how should I approach the children? Could I assume that the words meant the same to the children as to me? Would they understand the questions as I did? Reflecting on all this, I now see that the questions were not only methodological, but more especially ethical and that they concerned the much larger issues about the role of children in research.

Using Creative Methods in Research with Children
The exploration of some alternative methodological approaches to studying children's experiences of loneliness opened new avenues of thinking about involving children in an interview process intended to access their lived experiences of loneliness. A further review of literature on collecting data from children revealed that structuring interviews around a range of specific activities provided a more appropriate alternative to the rigid interview format for young children (Backett & Alexander, 1991). Activities such as drawing, writing, reading, sorting cards, and talking were found particularly useful for young children in helping them to focus on a research topic especially where the research topic was abstract or not immediately salient in children's lives (Mayall, 1993; Turner, 1991; Williams, Welton & Moon, 1987). The use of diagrams, play materials, word choice, vignettes, and trigger stories (Hill & Triseliotis, 1990) were also found useful in engaging and sustaining young children's interest in participating in conversations for research purposes. The use of such techniques acknowledged that children did have varied abilities and were encouraged to demonstrate these abilities and skills in various communication media.

 Developing an interpersonal board game. As an early childhood educator who in addition to teaching young children for a number of years also worked in a research team that designed and tested play materials at the Research Institute for the Development of Toys and Sport Equipment in Bulgaria, I decided to devise an interpersonal communication board game with which to engage children at the beginning of our meetings. I expected that playing a board game would be a skill that most children would have, and that use of this medium would result in a play situation that as a social situation would allow shared

meanings to be constructed. Because a genuine game-playing situation re-quires and creates a sense of togetherness, I believed it would also enable the establishment of an equal relationship between players.

Role of the researcher. Adopting the role of a *play partner* and entering into genuinely playful situation did not mean becoming childish. The word childish here is not used in its common negative connotation. It does not mean that children at play are viewed as being less serious or mature than adults or that they engage in specific behaviors during play that would be inappropriate for adults. Rather, it implies that pretending to be a child and engaging in be-haviors identified by adults as belonging to children and representative of childhood is unethical and can ruin the relationship in a study between the adult researcher and the child participant. As Rich (1968) suggested, "This is ruinous—children are quick to spot such a phony approach" (p. 42). However, sharing an object, in this case a board game, could create a genuine play situation that could naturally unite me as the researcher and the child as the participant in the study.

As the adult in this play situation, I was not an authority figure. In her ethnographic study of preschool children in daycare centers, Mandell (1988) defined the play situation role as "the least-adult role in studying young children" (p. 435). In her conceptualization of this role, Mandell drew on Mead's (1938, in Mandell) philosophy of action. Three main points formed the basis of her conceptualization of adult-child studies. The first required the adult to cast aside the assumption of adult superiority based on age and cognitive maturity in order to gain entry into the child's world. The second stressed that children's views, beliefs, and experiences be taken seriously. The third called for creating shared understanding as a social product in the process of using a shared object. Although mine was not an ethnographic study, I believe that because I assumed the role of a play partner who also sought the child's opinion on the game, it would be possible to create common under-standing through turn-taking and negotiating meanings.

The interview about experiences of loneliness came after the game-playing episode and after the children's consent for this follow-up interview was sought. I expected that inviting children to play a newly developed board game and asking them to evaluate it would minimize the usual power structure of most interviews with children. I anticipated that at the end of the game, the shared experience of playing it could evolve into a research situation, which itself is a lived situation and implies an interpersonal context with a dialectic exchange between the researcher and the participant (Giorgi, Fisher, & Murray, 1975). Entering the child's life world would enable me to gather lived experi-ence as both the starting point and end of the phenomenological research (van Manen, 1990). I hoped that the dialectic exchange would provide insight into how loneliness was experienced by the children.

Content of the game. Communication board games have been widely used in analytic child psychotherapy, especially with children who have difficulty responding to traditional approaches that required self-disclosure (Frey, 1986). However, as I have discussed elsewhere (Kirova, 2001, 2003; Kirova-Petrova, 2000), the game that I developed was not designed for therapeutic purposes; it was designed to orient children to oral expression of their feelings and to

facilitate conversation. The name of the game, *How do they feel?* was intended to cue the child about its thematic content. The game included one game board (Appendix A), four game markers (various colors), and 30 game cards (Appendix B) that presented concise descriptions of situations in various school contexts. Single printed words were used as prompts to help children identify the feelings of the characters involved in presented situations (in the process of playing the game) and to assist the interview process (after playing the game).

Research on children's understanding of everyday emotions suggests that preschool children can produce many verbal labels, including *happy, sad*, and *angry* after the age of 3 (Michailson & Lewis, 1985). I was mindful, however, of the fact that "researchers have tended to use age in a way that disregards the wide diversity of abilities and interests that can be found in any group of children of the same chronological age" (Greene & Hill, 2005, p. 9). The words *happy* and *proud* were chosen not because they were age-appropriate, but because I did not want the game to focus only on unpleasant feelings. By including these words I intended to "lighten up" the process of game-playing and to give children an opportunity to talk about some pleasant experiences as well. Any of the words *bored, sad*, *angry*, and *lonely*, as well as *happy* and *proud* could be selected to describe the feelings of characters in presented situations. This gave the children some flexibility in their choice depending on the positive or negative meaning assigned to an emotional experience. I did not, however, assume then that the words I selected for the game meant the same to the child as they meant to me.

Creating the Research Situation

The Setting, the Particpants, and the Procedures

As noted by Morrow and Richards (1996), children behave in varying ways in varying settings, so the choice of where to conduct research is as important as how to conduct it. The setting was an elementary school in western Canada in which I had been involved for four years in various parent volunteer activities and where most of the children and parents knew me personally. The participants in my dissertation study were 75 children from kindergarten to grade 6 (for more details see Kirova, 2003; Kirova-Petrova, 1996, 2000). My familiarity with students in the school allowed me easy access to each of the six classrooms. I felt comfortable telling the students that I had invented a board game that I would really like them to play with me and give me their feedback.

At the beginning of playing the game, I explained to the children that there was no right or wrong choice of a word and that the only restriction was to choose one of the words on the board. Also, when it was my turn, I asked the children to help me with my choice of words, which allowed for a short discussion about why one word might be more appropriate than another for a particular situation. Thus the choices made by the child allowed me to gain initial understanding of the meaning each child assigned to the given situation and to use this information in our follow-up conversation. Reflecting on this, I now see how the role of the child-research-participant allowed me to play my role as an adult-researcher.

Playing the Game with Ben

The following excerpts are from a tape-recorded game-playing session with a 10-year-old boy whom I call Ben. In contrast to an earlier (Kirova, 2003) illustration of the game-playing approach, I chose the example of Ben for this article in spite of its atypicality, because it highlights the importance of taking children's points of view seriously while negotiating in interview situations. As Mayall (1994a) notes, in the data-collection stage, children can refuse to participate or invert, challenge, or resist the researcher's methods. The game playing session with Ben is discussed in terms of negotiating meaning, shifting power, and establishing trust between myself as the interviewer and the child as the interviewee.

Ben:	(On our way to the room in the school designated for the interviews) Why are we going upstairs?
Researcher:	Because the game is in the small room on the third floor. We can play there without anyone disturbing us.
Ben:	Is it going to be fun?
Researcher:	I hope so, especially if you like playing board games.
Ben:	Not really … (looks somewhat disappointed)
Researcher:	Do you mean that you don't like playing board games? Even Monopoly?
Ben:	Well … if I win …
Researcher:	Who do you play Monopoly with?
Ben:	Sometimes with friends, sometimes with my sisters … I usually win when I play with my sisters but it's not much fun. They change the rules all the time. It's not fair.
Researcher:	How does it make you feel when they do that?
Ben:	Mad (without hesitation). They don't understand … they are so little.
Researcher:	How about your friends? Do they do the same … changing rules, I mean?
Ben:	Sometimes … when they see that I am winning.
Researcher:	And how do they make you feel when they do that?
Ben:	I get mad when they cheat.
Researcher:	We are almost there.
Ben:	(In the room) Is it difficult to make a game?
Researcher:	It is not easy. You have to think about all the rules … Here it is. Do you like it?
Ben:	It's OK, I guess (not very enthusiastically).
Researcher:	I am glad you think so, Ben. Do you want me to tell you how it's played? But before we start, I just want to ask you something.
Ben	What?
Researcher:	Because everything you say is very important for me and I want to remember everything the way you said it, I am wondering if it would be OK with you if I use this tape-recorder (pointing to it) to tape all the things we will talk about.
Ben:	It's OK.
Researcher:	You can listen to the tape once we finish the game.
Ben:	Is it going to be long?
Researcher:	I don't really know … it depends.

As this segment shows, the interview began as soon as we left the child's classroom. Walking to the interview allowed time for the child to ask some important questions. He wanted to know if playing the game would be fun and

if it would take a long time. Unlike most children, Ben did not want to know more about the game before seeing it. Playing board games was not his favorite pastime. The conversation revealed that this was at least partly because his play partners did not follow the rules. Regardless of the motives (e.g., his partners not understanding the rules or deliberately changing them in order to win), the rule changes made him "mad." Winning the game did not always bring satisfaction to Ben, especially when playing with his younger sisters. My emphasis on the importance of his feedback through my request to audiotape everything we talked about was accepted with no particular enthusiasm. Although Ben did not seem anxious, he appeared to have no clear expectation of a pleasant experience in playing the game. As a result, I had to reevaluate my position quickly for this interview if the child did not in fact enjoy playing the game.

The game proceeded as follows.

Step 1. Reading the words on the board by the child or me, depending on the child's level of reading skills.

Step 2. Asking the child to say something that he or she knows about each word on the board.

Researcher:	Well, Ben, what do you see on the board?
Ben:	Words, markers, cards ...
Researcher:	Can you read these words?
Ben:	Sure.
Researcher:	Let's start with this one (pointing to proud, the first word on the lower left corner of the board).
Ben:	Proud.
Researcher:	Great! What is proud?
Ben:	When you are good at something.
Researcher:	Is there anything that you are really good at?
Ben:	Nintendo.
Researcher:	Does it make you feel proud when you play Nintendo by yourself or …
Ben:	Yeah, I guess, when I win the game (pause).
Researcher:	Do you like winning the game when you play with your friends?
Ben:	It's more fun.
Researcher:	Does that make you feel proud or …?
Ben:	Yeah.
Researcher:	Let's look at the next word.
Ben:	Bored.
Researcher:	Do you know what bored is?
Ben:	When what you are doing is not fun.
Researcher:	What do you mean?
Ben:	Like right now.
Researcher:	I see. Is this boring for you?
Ben:	Yeah.
Researcher:	What do you suggest we do?
Ben:	Can I go back to the classroom?
Researcher:	Sure you can. Any time you want … only that I was really hoping that we can finish quickly reading and talking about all these words on the board and then play the game. How does this sound to you?
Ben:	I will go …

| Researcher: | OK. Do you want to see just one of these cards (pointing to the Drawing Pile) before you go? |
| Ben: | Mmm … (after a few moments of consideration) OK, I will stay.… What is the next word? |

Negotiating Roles, Shifting Power

These two initial steps of the game-playing situation provided an opportunity to explore meanings. It was important to define the child's point of reference. This phase also presented some unexpected challenges to both the child as a research participant and myself as a researcher in terms of negotiating our roles in the process. In this phase, I was still an adult in a more or less typical position of power. It was I who knew the rules of the game, who decided how to go about examining the content of the game, and who asked the questions. My role reflected on Ben, placing him in a subordinate, passive position as research participant. Although I was aware of his subordinate position as Mayall (2000) suggests researchers should be, my awareness did not change how he felt about it. Apparently this role was not satisfying for him as he was not engaged in the task, but was simply answering my questions. He felt bored and no longer wished to be part of the process. His role changed dramatically when he exercised his right to opt out of the research and asked to return to his classroom. The power suddenly shifted. It became clear to both of us that without him my role as an adult researcher would be impossible. There was no doubt that Ben was "adept at undermining the power of adults by such tactics as resistance, subversion and subterfuge" (Greene & Hill, 2005, p. 10). I was reminded that consent is a continual rather than a one-off decision (Valentine, 1999). Being given the choice to go back to the classroom or to stay and finish the task before beginning the real game put Ben and me in a position of interdependency and thus in a more equal relationship. Aware of this change, but without any elaboration on it, we moved to the next step of the game.

Step 3. Taking turns in attributing one of the words on the board to the situations described on the cards as read by the child or me (depending on the child's level of reading); then moving a marker to the spot on the board that had the same word and color on it. The player whose marker first reached the *End* position won the game.

My planned research role for this phase of the game was that of an *incompetent adult* who asked the child to help choose the word to describe the feeling of a person in a situation. Knowing how easy it is to influence a child's opinion and how eager and accustomed young children are to pleasing adult(s) (Mercer & Fisher, 1992), I did not wish to give the child any—or at least as little as possible—indication as to what kinds of situations I associated with loneliness. I did, however, choose some of the words alone, especially those about the *happy* or *proud* situations. This allowed the necessary turn-taking to occur as well as for building trust as I shared some of my thoughts about the choices I made.

Negotiating Meaning

While answering the question on a card, both the children and I had the opportunity not only to choose a word on the board that we felt was the most descriptive of the person's feelings in that particular situation, but to consider some other experiential options and negotiate meaning. This allowed us to

discuss what defined the experience and why it was not otherwise. The information gathered during this phase helped me add to information provided during the previous phase and to gain a better understanding of which situations the child had experienced or—following the findings of the earlier studies—was likely to experience with feelings listed on the game board. Thus instead of asking the children directly if a particular situation had ever happened to them, I gathered this information indirectly based on their choice of responses, which allowed me to reflect on the meaning each individual child assigned to the described situation.

The following is an excerpt of my conversation with Ben during this phase of the game.

Researcher:	Ben, you start the game, OK?
Ben:	(nods not very enthusiastically)
Researcher:	Do you want to read the cards yourself or do you want me to read them to you?
Ben:	You do.
Researcher:	(Reading the card while holding it at the child's eye level and pointing at the words on the card): *It was recess time. Everyone but Mina was having fun. "May I join you?" asked Mina gently. No one even bothered to answer her. How was Mina feeling?*
Ben:	Lonely (without hesitation, moves his marker accordingly to the place on the fist hexagon).
Researcher:	What makes you think that?
Ben:	They didn't even notice her.
Researcher:	How else could Mina be feeling?
Ben:	Sad, I guess.
Researcher:	What makes you choose lonely then?
Ben:	(After a few moments of deliberation) She is not crying or anything.
Researcher:	So people are crying when they are sad, but not when they are lonely?
Ben:	(Nods) Now it's your turn.
Researcher:	Let's see what my card says (reading the card while holding it at the child's eye level and pointing at the words on the card): *"Look guys, I've got a new ball," said Harry. "Do you want to try it?" "No, we are playing something else, don't you see? We are playing 'Let's get lost.'" How was Harry feeling?*
Ben:	Sad. (without any hesitation).
Researcher:	You think so?
Ben:	Yeah, they didn't want to play with him … That's sad.
Researcher:	Do you think that he might feel a bit lonely too?
Ben:	No, he is more sad. He didn't get to play and didn't have fun with his new ball.
Researcher:	Could he be feeling anything else?
Ben:	(Thinking for a few minutes) He might be angry too. They told him to get lost!
Researcher:	Would that make you feel angry?
Ben:	Depends …
Researcher:	On what?
Ben:	(Thinking) If the guys are the ones that I really want to play with, I will be sad, but if they say that to get back with me, I will be angry.
Researcher:	I see. Now it's my turn.

This exchange of thoughts and informal talk about other children's feelings in each of the situations described on the cards provided a number of opportunities for both of us to clarify and negotiate meaning while drawing on our personal experiences or those of others in similar situations. As Grossen and Pochon (1997) point out, "interviews are communication situations that are culturally rooted and whose meanings have to be constructed intersubjectively during the interaction" (p. 269). The excerpts provided above illustrate the clues Ben used to identify the feelings of the hypothetical characters. Not having fun was the clue he used to decide that the person in the situation felt sad rather than lonely (in Harry's situation). This conversation also added another context in which one might feel lonely: when a request to join a group of peers already engaged in play is denied (in Mina's situation). The point of distinction between a person feeling sad or feeling lonely was the presence or absence of tears. It seemed that loneliness in Ben's experience did not involve tears. Once again, this conversation enabled me to see the complexity of children's feelings and their ability to consider experiential possibilities depending on the intentions of the persons involved. In Harry's situation, for example, Ben clearly indicated that the intentions of the boys who rejected Harry's offer to play with his new ball would evoke different feelings (e.g., sad or angry). I used all these defined and negotiated meanings in the interpretation of the interview data.

Step 4. The winner had to choose one of the words on the board and tell about one time he or she felt that way.

From Game-Playing to Interviewing
The following is an excerpt from my conversation with Ben at the end of the game.

Researcher:	Congratulations, Ben! You played very well and you won. Now you get to choose one of the words on the board and tell me about one time you felt that way. OK?
Ben:	(Taking some time, examining the words on the board). Lonely. I will tell you what happened yesterday.
Researcher:	What was it, Ben?
Ben:	I came home from my friend's house. It was about 7:00 p.m. so it was already dark. I entered my home … it was dark.
Researcher:	And you don't like dark places?
Ben:	No, I don't.
Researcher:	What happened next?
Ben:	I put the lights on and saw a note on the kitchen table.
Researcher:	What did it say?
Ben:	Let me think … "Dear Ben, we have gone to the Mall. We'll be at home at about 10:00. Love, Mom."

The conversation continued and revealed that this was not the first time Ben had arrived home before everyone else, but it was somewhat different this time. The following is the description of his experience as extracted from the interview transcript.

I took the bowl of cereal and walked down to my basement. Whenever I am alone, I like to go to my basement because there I feel like I am not alone. All my stuffed animals are down there so I don't feel alone. I like my basement

very much. It is very special for me. When I come back from school I always go down and rest for a while. My sisters almost never come down so I can do whatever I like. Sometimes I play my Nintendo, other times I don't do anything special there but I like to be there. The basement has small windows with curtains, so nobody can see me from outside.... Nobody could find out that I was alone at home … I put the TV on. I don't remember what was on. Then I sat on the couch … the couch is warm and cozy. I like it. I like to lie on it and think about all sorts of things. But it was different this time. For me this time it was more important that it was alongside of the wall so nobody could come from behind. I didn't want to move from the couch … I could not bear the thought that I may go upstairs. But even in the basement I didn't feel secure enough. I felt lonely, very lonely and scared … I looked at my watch … Oh, God, when is everybody going to be home?

Apparently, at the end of the game, Ben felt comfortable telling me a story that did not make him feel good—a story in which he was not proud of himself, and it was not about his newest game. Given the somewhat difficult beginning of our game-playing sessions, this detailed recollection of his recent experience of loneliness surprised me. I attributed this expression of trust to how often negotiation of meaning had taken place during the game. My *listening* to Ben during the game entailed not imposing my views on how one should feel in any given situation and thereby allowing his personal experiences to guide his choices. I also asked his opinion in making my word choices. Ben's sharing of his recent experience of feeling lonely in his dark, empty house was an indication of how much the process of game-playing had "broken the ice" that had been there at the beginning of the interview.

Of the 75 children interviewed Ben had the most uncommon attitude toward the game-playing session, but he also exhibited the most noticeable change from the beginning to the end of the session. He was also the only child who when asked to choose a word from the board and tell about a time when that feeling was experienced chose the word *lonely*. With all other participating children, I needed to have follow-up interviews to invite them to talk about experiences of loneliness.

Making Sense of the Data

The purpose of this article is to discuss some methodological issues related to conducting interviews with children in general and to describe the approach used to gain access to children's lived experiences of loneliness in particular. Thus I do not engage in an in-depth analysis of Ben's account (for more details see Kirova-Petrova, 1996). I only briefly point out the specific experiential elements of loneliness that are revealed in it after a systematic thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990). In Ben's experience, it was not his being alone that made him feel lonely. In fact he liked being alone in his basement, which seemed to be his secret place—a place where he usually felt comfortable and free from having to participate in the activities involving his two younger sisters. This time, however, the silence in the house made him aware that he was alone and lonely. These feelings transformed his secret place; it was no longer inviting. He sat on his favorite couch, motionless and alert. He could not feel completely at home in this place. He could not find a way to "come to himself" in a place that he no longer trusted. He could not be *with* himself; he was *by* himself.

Loneliness, then, transformed Ben's secret place; it became a hiding place. When the basement was experienced as a secret place, Ben daydreamed on the warm, cozy couch, played his favorite Nintendo game, or just thought "about all sorts of things," not really paying attention to time. Now anticipation of potential danger let clock time rule the place. It was time for his parents and sisters to come home. Time only expanded Ben's sense of separation and isolation from his family. He felt the anguish of loneliness, not the tranquility and joy of solitude. Ben's account reveals that in loneliness, we cannot be with ourselves. In solitude, experienced in a child's secret place, he or she is in tune with the surrounding world. In loneliness, a child realizes the need to be with others. And the silence filling the emptiness of his lived space brought this realization to life. Loneliness, then, is an experience that expands our awareness and sensitivity of the world, others, and ourselves.

Why Use a Game-Playing Approach in Researching Childhood Experiences?

The game-playing approach to initiating conversations with children about their experiences of loneliness presented here is suggested as an alternative, creative method of involving children in research not only on loneliness, but also on other childhood experiences. It demonstrates how it provided me with an opportunity to engage the participating children in a dialogue that led to a deep understanding of important aspects of childhood loneliness that were not elucidated by the most commonly used large-scale project measurements of the phenomenon or in more traditional interview approaches (Kirova, 2003). The experiential accounts that were made accessible in the study using the game-playing approach also made it possible through the process of phenomenological reflection to distinguish among similar yet distinct phenomena such as loneliness, aloneness, solitude, boredom, and separation (Kirova-Petrova, 1996). Evaluating the game-playing approach now, I see it as being situated in a larger category of creative methodologies in participatory research with children (Veale, 2005) that have been prompted in part by increasing awareness about children's participation rights (Ennew & Boyden, 1997).

Developing and using the game-playing approach presented in this article as a possible way of initiating conversations with children about their experiences was an attempt to address the unequal power relationships that exist between adult researchers and children as participants (Mauthner, 1997; Mayall, 1994b). Using this approach made me aware of how I stand in the world as an adult, an educator, and a human science researcher. I entered the dialogue as an educator who wished to gain better pedagogical understandings of questions about children's experiences of loneliness. My pedagogical commitment to children was expressed in my consideration of how I should talk with them and engage them in conversation about their childhood experiences in general and their experiences of loneliness in particular. The inception and the use of the game were motivated by my deep commitment to involving the children in my research as partners in a dialogue by providing a context for this dialogue. By developing and using this game in my research, my intention was to avoid using a research tool that asked only questions that were important for my research without giving children space to tell me what they meant by the choices they made. Nor did I intend to impose my adult concepts and understandings on children. The situations described on the game cards were

those that I have observed in schools, heard colleagues discussing, or read about in educational journals. In addition, children's views and language were reflected in the rules of the game and the descriptions of the situations because I involved my elementary-school-aged son in wording them. I also included the suggestions of the kindergarten children at the university lab school with whom I piloted the game. I acknowledge that the situations provided were necessarily limiting in that they did not exhaust all possibilities that occur in real life. They were also limited because they focused on gaining access to each child's life world as it was related to loneliness.

The use of the game-playing approach also allowed me to establish trust between the children and myself in my role as a researcher so that they would enjoy sharing with me their reflections on past experiences of loneliness. In describing their experiences, they grasped reflectively from their present standpoint and gave meaning to these. Thus by creating a game-playing situation, I was able to participate, in however limited a way, in the child's current life world, as well as to gain access to his or her past experiences. Now, a few years after the study itself, I am still convinced that the door to the children's life worlds relevant to their experiences of loneliness would have not been open to me if I had not used the game. Being granted access to these experiences not only challenged me, but profoundly transformed how I looked at the complexity and richness of young children's life worlds, how they live in them and experience them, and how they are able to make sense of them and talk about them.

My attempts at designing other creative methods of involving children in the entire research process have evolved since the development of the game-playing approach. They include arts-based research methods such as drama, tableau, photography, and visual storytelling in the form of fotonovelas (Emme & Kirova, 2005a; 2005b; Kirova, Mohamed, & Emme, in press). Thus my work with children on a number of research projects has allowed me to change how I see children's role in research—from participants in the research process to researchers of their own experiences.

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Appendix A
The Game Board
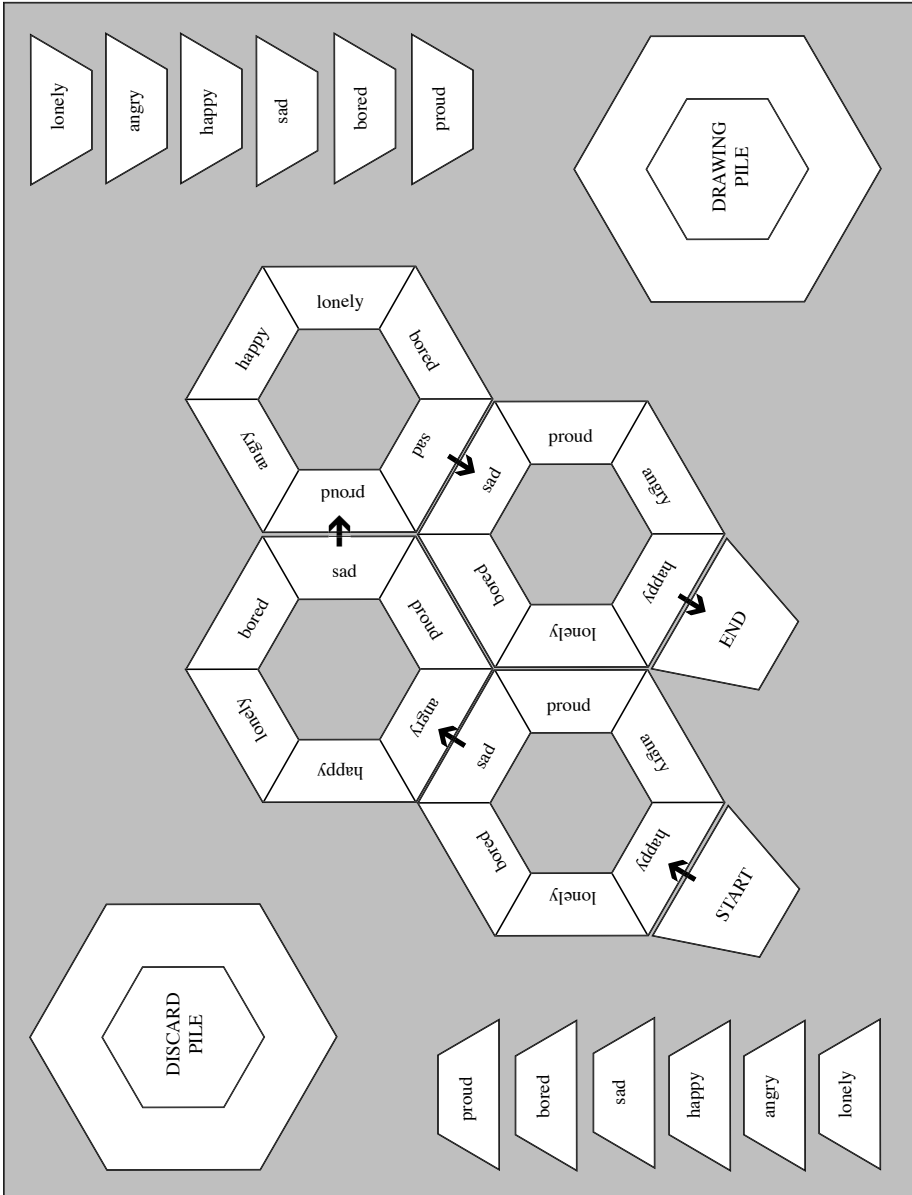
Appendix B
Interpersonal Communication Game Cards

1. Joseph was sitting silently in a corner constantly sucking his thumb. No one seemed to notice him. No one ever spoke to him.
   How was Joseph feeling?

2. It was recess time. Everyone but Mina was having fun. "May I join you?" asked Mina gently. No one even bothered to answer her.
   How was Mina feeling?

3. Brenda sat staring at the ground. She didn't even notice that she was hungry. "Why did Ben invite everybody but me to his party?" Brenda wondered.
   How was Brenda feeling?

4. Ted was having problems with his math assignment. He was trying to get help from other students in the group but no one seemed to notice his efforts.
   How was Ted feeling?

5. Kim's best friend just moved to another city. "I wish he were here now. I really miss him," said Kim and sighed.
   How was Kim feeling?

6. "It's not fair! I never get to choose the game," said Rob with eyes filled with tears.
   How was Rob feeling?

7. "Look guys, I've got a new ball," said Harry. "Do you want to try it?" "No, we are playing something else, don't you see? We are playing 'Let's get lost.'"
   How was Harry feeling?

8. "How do you like my picture?" asked Andy. "It's ugly," said Ted and turned his back.
   How was Andy feeling?

9. "But please, Dad, everybody is going on this trip. I'll be good, I promise!" said Mary almost in tears. "No, you are not going!"
   How was Mary feeling?

10. "My cat got lost yesterday," said Ann to her friend and brushed away a tear.
    How was Ann feeling?

11. "The doctor said that I have to stay at home for at least three more days. I guess I'll have to miss your birthday party," said Mina to her best friend with a trembling voice.
    How was Mina feeling?

12. Bob's best friend had an accident with his bike and had to stay in a hospital for a week. "I wish that had never happen to him," said Bob and sighed.
    How was Bob feeling?

13. "Who do you think will be the best choice for this role?" asked the drama teacher. "Don, of course!" yelled the students. "Thank you," said Don and his eyes shone.
    How was Don feeling?

14. "Kim, could you please help me with this question? I know that you are very good at math." "No problem," said Kim confidently.
    How was Kim feeling?

15. "You did it! You won!" yelled Tony's friends. Tony's eyes shone.
    How was Tony feeling?

16. "That is a very good picture, Lora," said the teacher. "You did a great job!" Lora smiled and said, "Thank you."
    How was Lora feeling?

17. "Stop bugging me! Don't you see I'm busy now? Leave me alone!" shouted Ted and turned his back.
    How was Ted feeling?

18. "You're cheating all the time, Mina," shouted Lora. "I'm not playing with you! I'm not your friend anymore!"
    How was Lora feeling?
19. "Stop teasing my little brother!" said Bill in a loud voice. His eyes flashed.
    How was Bill feeling?
20. Ann saw Bob grab the toy car from the little boy. She ran toward Bob, shouting, "Give that back to him!"
    How was Ann feeling?
21. Jack laughed until tears came to his eyes. Wendy and Jack became quiet. Suddenly they burst into laughter again.
    How were they feeling?
22. Everybody in the school was getting ready for the Halloween celebration. The younger kids were impatient to put their costumes on. They were jumping up and down. Their faces were glowing and their eyes were sparkling.
    How were they feeling?
23. "You may have a birthday party, Ben," said Ben's mother. Ben clapped his hands and jumped up and down.
    How was Ben feeling?
24. Finally Don's best friend has got permission from his parents to sleep over at Don's house.
    How was Don feeling?
25. Mark knew that his friends were collecting money for his birthday present but when he opened the box he couldn't believe his eyes. "Thank you, guys!" said Mark.
    How was Mark feeling?
26. "I'll be your best friend for ever," said Donna to Kathy. "I'll be yours too," answered Kathy. They looked at each other's eyes and smiled.
    How were they feeling?
27. Rob looked at his building blocks, then at his Lego sets, then at his toy cars. "There is nothing to do," said Rob to himself.
    How was Rob feeling?
28. "Let me see what I've got to play with here," said Bob to himself in his new classroom. "There is nothing new I guess," said Bob after a while and sighed.
    How was Bob feeling?
29. "Today will be the same as yesterday I guess," said Lora to herself. "Even my favourite TV show is not on today."
    How was Lora feeling?
30. "I thought that you found this book interesting," said Andy's mom. "Not anymore," answered Andy lying on the floor and staring at the carpet. "Why don't you make your space models?" asked the mother. "But Mom, I made them yesterday. There is nothing to do now!"
    How was Andy feeling?