

Conflict Management & Socialization among Canadian Inuit

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Jean L. Briggs

Introduction

In selecting aspects of cultures to analyze, one is always in danger of focusing one's attention on matters of concern in one's own culture, rather than in the culture under study; in danger of reformulating the worlds of others in one's own terms. However, the problem of conflict management is, I think, of major concern to Canadian Inuit -- and perhaps to other Inuit too -- partly because of their very pervasive fear of aggression.

The roots of this fear of aggression may be sought in economic, social, cognitive, and psychological spheres, e.g.:

(1) Inuit are hunters and identify symbolically with the animals they hunt. This identification was classically expressed by a shaman whom Birker-Smith quotes as saying: "Life's greatest danger is that we live on souls" -- souls which can revenge themselves if killed, as humans would want to do if they were not well treated.

Physical violence is a real and necessary part of Inuit life and is visible to all. Weapons are everywhere; every male is a trained killer; accidents are a common occurrence; and impulsive killing is not unknown.

(2) A second fact of Inuit life which may be related to fear of aggression is the very high value that is placed on the autonomy of every household head and on non-interference with others' behavior. It is not surprising that, given such values, the social structure lacks an elaborated system of interpersonal controls.

(3) Fear of aggression is also inculcated in various ways during the process of socialization. I will discuss these at some length later on.

(4) The last factor that I want to mention is the practice of emotional control -- especially denial and non-expression of hostile and resentful feelings. The knowledge that one is oneself covering up such feelings can make people suspicious and fearful of what others may be feeling and thinking. It may also lead to a dangerous accumulation of feeling. As one woman said to me: "A person who never loses his temper can kill if he does get angry."

Seen from the point of view of Inuit individuals, I think the problem of conflict management is best phrased as a problem of keeping relations smooth, that is, keeping people happy, satisfied, unafraid, so that they will have no reason to be aggressive. This point of view was expressed very clearly by

one old man who was listening to a radio broadcast of a hockey game. Hearing the cheers of the spectators, he said: "They're happy; I guess they don't make war."

One can see the same emphasis on smoothness of relationships in expressions of approval for persons who are "patient" (ningngasaut...), "ready to accommodate" (angigasarait...), and "stable" in mood and behavior, "never changing" (su ragunmanangit...).

Principles Underlying the Management of Conflict

The problem of conflict management can be looked at from a variety of angles. One can look at the ways in which it is prevented, the ways in which it is expressed, and the ways in which it is resolved.

The same principles govern the ways in which Inuit manage all these aspects of the problem. These principles are (1) avoidance of confrontation, and (2) reassurance and pacification. It seems to me that (3) justice, and (4) the meeting out of deserved punishment are not Inuit ideas. I don't think conflicts are characteristically seen in terms of winning and losing. What is important is the preservation and/or restoration of peace.

Prevention

Not surprisingly, Inuit are actively concerned to prevent conflict, to avoid confrontations which might engender bad feelings, and they have many ways of doing this.

First, they are extremely cautious, both about putting themselves forward (making claims for themselves) and about making claims on others. An timidest person or one who likes attention is thought silly or childish. In the Central Arctic people may comment with amusement: "Huuugillaagtuq" (he thinks he's somebody). In the Eastern Arctic they may say: "Qagayug" (he likes being the center of affectionate attention and shows off in response to it). A respected person is reticent about his own accomplishments. He is realistic about his skills but does not call attention to himself and is certainly not boastful.

Avoidance of making claims on others takes many forms, some of which seem rather extreme to us. Direct requests are either avoided altogether or are phrased extremely modestly and considerately: "I just want (need) a little bit. Do you have enough? It's not your last? No, no, that's too much." Often requests are phrased as benevolent requests on behalf of someone else, usually a child, more rarely an old or sick or exceptionally needy person. In other words, the very high value that Inuit place on nurturant behavior is invoked. Both giver and asker bathe in its light, appearing as virtuous people.

Another very Inuit way of asking for something is to phrase the request as a joke, so that if one wants to refuse the request, both parties can pretend that there is no serious content to the interaction. In other words, there is no confrontation and there are no hurt feelings.

In addition to avoiding or minimizing direct requests, Canadian Inuit avoid issuing direct invitations and making promises. A promise might be broken and cause resentment. An invitation might be refused and as a result the feelings of the inviter might be hurt. Or else the invitee might feel he had to accept in order not to hurt the feelings of the inviter, which would create awkward feelings all around. So plans are formulated tentatively; people say "maybe" they will do this or that, rather than making definite commitments. And invitations are phrased as statements of what the speaker himself is going to do: "I'm going climbing." The person addressed is free to follow or not as he pleases. Often, no statement at all is made; one notices what others are doing and follows or not at will. (The unintended outsider may find him or herself lonely until s/he learns this pattern of behavior.)

Still another way of avoiding possibly offensive confrontations is not to ask questions about another's mental or physical condition -- that is, about his motives, thoughts, feelings, or health. This is especially true of open-ended questions which might put a person in the awkward situation of having either to invent an answer or to refuse to answer altogether. One should respect a person's privacy and autonomy with regard to the control of information. "Why?" is one of the rudest questions one can ask. If people wanted to know why I was silent, they might ask: "Are you feeling hungry? tired? sleepy? homesick?" But if I said "No" to all the items in the standard repertoire they would stop asking. The assumption is that if a person wants others to know something, he'll tell them. The initiative is left to him. One doesn't ordinarily ask questions about another's plans, either. Even the head of a household may wait for his adult son to take the initiative in informing him of his hunting or travel plans. I have more than once asked a young man's father (his "leader") whether his son was planning to go with some others on a certain trip that was being discussed, only to have the father reply: "He hasn't told me yet."

So far, I've been describing ways of avoiding conflictful confrontations by respecting the autonomy and privacy of others: being indirect, discreet, not putting oneself forward, not making claims on others, or attempting to influence them. Another way of avoiding confrontations is to deny that one is unhappy, angry, dissatisfied, resentful -- to "forget" the situation and "try to be happy," as Inuit have said to me. A very frequently used technique is to turn the situation into a joke, to laugh at it. I once observed a teen-aged girl teaching this attitude to her six-year-old niece. The latter was sulking because of something her younger sister had done. The aunt, noticing this, asked her niece: "Are you annoyed because of what your sister has done?" And when the child admitted that she was, her aunt said: "That's not annoying, that's funny."

The other major cause of conflict that I've observed -- especially between parents and adult children, and between spouses -- is the question of where to live or camp, and with whom. This problem is perhaps particularly

Interpersonal relations in Inuit society are often not at all smooth. There are many causes of disagreement, discontent, & resentment in Inuit society, as there are in other societies. As is evident from the examples I've given, two major sources of trouble are envy and jealousy and the associated feelings of deprivation and loneliness. The generous Inuit are extremely possessive of both material goods -- including, very importantly, food -- and people; and individuals are extremely inclined to compare what they do not have with what others do have and to feel aggrieved by the comparison. (Parenthetically, I don't think this mixture of generosity and avarice is a contradiction, but that's another subject).

SNOWMOBILE

Of course, these methods of keeping people happy and relationships smooth don't always work. In fact, though they prevent some resentments and conflicts from arising, they create others. For example, resentment can be created when people fail to take the initiative that others silently expect or wish them to take: when they fail spontaneously to perceive others' needs, or fail spontaneously to offer the information that others want to have, or that they feel is their due. Moreover, when people withhold or deny negative feelings instead of expressing them, they leave a wide field for others to imagine all that is not being expressed; and, as I've said, imagination is likely to be vivid when one is aware of all the thoughts and feelings that one is oneself suppressing.

Causes of Conflict

But a resentful person is not the only one who may try to turn a difficult situation into a joke. A person who has caused someone else to become unhappy or resentful -- by saying something critical or by refusing an ever-so-moderate request -- may also deny that his offensive behavior was 'serious' and by pretending that his behavior was frivolous -- even when it was not -- he will try to reassure the offended person that he has no reason to be upset. Reassurance is another very important Inuit technique of avoiding conflict. In addition to pretending that meaningful behavior was meaningless -- "only a joke" -- Inuit make a great effort to be helpful, obliging, and considerate (naalik-). They make an effort to anticipate and meet the needs of others, so that the latter never have to be demanding. A good deal of the 'welcoming' behavior that white visitors notice and attribute to simple warmth and good nature is in fact motivated by the wish to reassure the possibly dangerous and powerful stranger that he has nothing to fear, that Inuit are willing to help him, so that he will have no reason to attack or mistreat the Inuit, either. You'll remember that I said that Inuit believe that a major motive for aggression is fear, and that the only safe person is a happy one.

Disagreements can also arise within each sex concerning matters related to work: who is to do what and with whom. I have the impression that this is a more important problem for men, who need to have companions in the hunt, and who are sometimes dependent on large equipment, such as boats and motors, which are always owned by one person and used in conjunction with others.

'Serious' Methods of Coping with Conflict

The methods used to deal with problems when they arise are in keeping with the principles of avoidance, indirection, and reassurance which I've been describing.

One method is hinting. Sometimes a third person (c) may mention in conversation with A that B says A has not visited B for a long time, or that B wonders whether A bought cigarettes on his last trip to the settlement. Then A will probably take the hint and will visit B or give him some cigarettes.

I have mentioned that a person who never gets upset is very highly valued. A person who does get upset easily, one who "takes things seriously" (påkting) is not approved of. Nevertheless, it does sometimes happen that angry accusations are made directly; but even then, people refuse to escalate a conflict by arguing or by taking sides.

If the angry person is a child, a fool, or a female anthropologist, this refusal to participate is due to a belief that getting angry is childish and that it is demanding to lower one's own behavior to a childish level. Instead, others may laugh and turn the incident into a joke; may try to reassure the child that "it's nothing to get angry at, have some tea"; may comment disapprovingly: "you get angry easily"; or may just ignore the child's angry behavior. (I'll describe in a minute an interesting exception to this principle of pacification.)

If the angry person is not defined as "childish" in mentality and is therefore feared, people will again take care not to participate in or escalate the conflict, but in this case the motives will be different. People may stand aside, be silent, or retreat, owing both to their own fear of aggressive interaction and to the belief that answering back will make the angry person afraid, and, as I've said, fear is thought to be dangerous. A frightened person might attack in self-defense.

I observed a striking example of these attitudes one day while a large group of people were trying to haul a heavy boat out of the water. The rope slipped and struck a man named Jimmy in the face, whereupon Jimmy said loudly to Paulusi: "If you hadn't let go, this wouldn't have happened!"

The other major way of coping with conflict -- joking -- serves all the

'Playful' Methods of Coping with Conflict

It is clear that withdrawal serves a variety of functions. It's a way of preventing conflict before it happens; a way of expressing disapproval or fear in the presence of conflict; a way of solving or dissolving the conflict; and, finally, a way of sanctioning the persons who caused the disturbance, since being isolated is a very unpleasant experience, especially for people who don't enjoy solitude, who are very sensitive to public opinion and very disturbed by disturbances of the peace.

If a person is greatly feared -- for example, if he has killed a person or threatened to do so, or if he is violently insane -- he will be isolated in another way. Either he will be left to live alone while the others move away, or he himself will move away and live alone, because he knows that he is feared and that a person who is feared may be killed. And indeed, the last of the 'serious' modes of dealing with conflict in the traditional repertoire is to kill the difficult person, either by decision of one frightened individual or by decision of the group, to prevent his killing them. A modern alternative is to get the police, or sometimes the medical authorities, to intervene and to imprison or hospitalize the dangerous person.

Occasionally, isolation of the angry or easily upsettable person may be more than temporary. Ostracism is an extreme form of withdrawal, but even this behavior may be so subtly performed that the ostracizers can't be faulted. They may appear warmer and more nurturant (nalkik-) than ever -- to the untutored eye -- as it to say: 'the problem is not our fault, (the problematic person) has gotten angry or upset for no social reason (immi-^{nik}).'

Jimmy's departure illustrates a very common way of dealing with anger, namely isolation. If the angry person doesn't isolate himself, he may be isolated by others. A person who is spoken to angrily may withdraw into silence or may physically leave the house; and all those who have witnessed the incident may leave too, so that the angry person is left all alone. Later, the person who was angry may try to reassure the 'victim' of his annoyance that he had meant nothing by what he said, that he had not been angry at all but only "joking."

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So far, I've been talking almost entirely about 'serious' modes of dealing with conflict, but I have made passing references to the joking mode, which is of prime importance. It is pervasively used in everyday situations, and in its operation it is even more interesting than the 'serious' modes because it is more subtle.

The distinction between 'serious' and 'playful' between plikk- and plingnag-, is very important in the Inuit scheme of things. I've said that Inuit value a happy person because a happy person is not likely to create conflicts. A happy person doesn't make others afraid, and therefore he is liked. He is also safe, because if others like him and don't fear him, he won't be attacked. People frequently insist that they don't wish to be frightening (litranag), and in part their desire to be untrifling is self-protective.

One way to prove that one is a happy person is to laugh and joke a lot, and Inuit do laugh and joke a lot. Indeed, I think that this is the preferred mode of interaction. To be 'serious' has connotations of tension, anxiety, hostility, brooding. To "think too much" is considered dangerous, both to one's own health and to the health of others, since concentrated thought can kill. On the other hand, it is highest praise to say of someone: "he never takes anything seriously."

I've presented joking so far as a means of avoiding confrontation, a means of reassuring both the joker and others that there is nothing to fear. But joking is also a means of airing grievances and keeping them in the forefront of everybody's consciousness without appearing to do so. It is a means of testing responses to a grievance without appearing to do so, and a means of sanctioning others -- criticizing or humiliating them -- without appearing to do so. In other words, because of its ambiguity, joking is not only a means of avoiding confrontation but also a means of confronting -- without committing oneself to the 'serious', and therefore frightening, consequences of confronting.

It is a very powerful means of confronting because as long as one is defined as 'joking' one need not limit oneself to presenting one's grievance in realistic terms. One can exaggerate and dramatize, threaten to pull a person's hair, burn down his house, steal from him, or kill him. Joking is also powerful because the exaggerations and dramas, the playful threats, resonate with real vulnerabilities and fears, which have been aroused by past experiences and which provide strong motives for resolving the conflict. Let me tell you as an example, of a situation in which joking was used to deal with my annoyance:

One day while I was making bannock, two teen-aged girls came in to visit. (Rosi was 15, Jeela 14.) At one point

First, it is obvious that one has to learn one's place in the social system, especially -- in our terms -- relations of belonging and of power: who will support one and who won't, who is us and who is them; who has the power and/or the authority to injure and to sanction. A more inuit -- psychologically real -- system of classification might be: who is

Socialization for appropriately inuit management of conflict involves several interrelated processes. I will present them sequentially, but they are not learned sequentially.

Why do these indirect, playful ways of keeping the peace work?

Socialization

It's clear that these 'jokes' hint at power relationships and at violent behaviors which are rarely or never actualized in 'serious' interaction, but which are nevertheless feared. In the case I've just described, what I feared -- ostracism -- had in fact happened -- in another camp, an incident that my two 'tormentors' knew nothing of. But in many cases, the fears were originally aroused not in 'serious' experiences but in 'playful' ones, when the frightened person was a child, and adults were playing with him or her as an object. And so we come to the question of socialization.

of the evening, several hours later.
(X's house). "They went out and didn't return until the end
tion of fear). The girls said to each other: "Let's go to
a 'wild' voice, & with a smile, "Atlat!" (which is an exclamation of fear).
how she would shove it. Her smile never changed. I said in
us, "I'll push your lamp (gullig) over," and she demonstrated
cause you want to cry?" Jeela: "If you attack (ningautt-)
"Why?" Jeela: "Because we'll cry" (qianiarannuk). I: "Be-
said: "Attack us" (pigialaurit -- uatinnik). I asked,
(ningauttaurit). Somewhat startled, I said, "What?" Jeela
a manner that looked to me 'amused', said: "Please fight."
So I smiled back and said, "Not at all!" Jeela, smiling in
earlier when my irritability had caused me to be ostracized.
I recalled with most unpleasant vividness a time 16 years
me, smiling: "Are you angry (ninggak-), Jean?" Immediately
at Kosi suspiciously, she smiled at me. Then Jeela said to
whispered to Jeela: "She scolded." (suag-). When I looked
when I swore, Kosi (who understood a few words of English)

It.
knife, and finally succeeded in moving it to where I wanted
swore -- in English -- stabbed the bannock with my butcher
a puddle of water on the side platform of my tent. I
kept slipping off my pocket knife and finally fell into
bannocks. It was too hot to pick up by hand but it
I had difficulty in picking up one of the newly fried

frightening, socially (litranaq) and/or physically (lpsinaq) vs. who is helpful (kayurumayug). In other words, with whom does one need to be most circumspect and obliging, and with whom can one be most expressive and relaxed?

It's also obvious that one has to learn the dramas of everyday life, that is, learn to recognize--and indeed, to anticipate ahead of time-- situations which might lead to conflict: the dangerous situations in which people might feel envy, jealousy, anger, or resentment. One must also learn the appropriate ways of defusing those situations, that is, the appropriate values, behaviors and feelings to display.

What is perhaps less obvious is that one must learn to think and feel like an Inuk, not only to behave like an Inuk. In other words, one must learn the appropriate vulnerabilities and sensitivities, which will make the dramas work in predictable ways. It is not enough to recognize dangerous situations, one must fear them.

These fears and associated sensitivities are of several sorts. One must learn to fear aggression and conflict, that is, learn to anticipate and fear their consequences. One must learn to fear being the center of attention, fear putting oneself forward. One must learn to associate these situations with self-exposure and the possibility of ridicule and rejection, or possibly even physical attack, so that one will be motivated to avoid conflict and be conciliatory. One must also learn to suspect 'serious' meanings in 'joking' remarks--to perceive, interpret, and fear hints, both about the wishes of others and about sanctioning power which is rarely, if ever, directly exercised.

In other words, one must build up a backlog of emotional experience before it's needed, so that when a conflict occurs, redirection will work: the aggrieved person's grievance will be 'heard', even if it was only jokingly alluded to, and the person who caused the grievance will be motivated to pay serious attention to it, even though it was only jokingly alluded to.

So, how do children learn to recognize potentially dangerous situations and how to deal with them? How do they learn the appropriate psychological sensitivities when adults do everything in their power to keep conflicts from occurring and, when they do occur, try to make them seem other than what they are? How can children learn to fear the possible consequences of aggression and conflict in a society in which children are rarely or never aggressed against in a 'serious' mode--in anger or as a punitive measure--and often are given what they want when they scream for it? A society in which even adults rarely aggress against each other in 'serious' mode and are pacified more often than not? How can children learn to fear being the center of attention when they get

a lot of gratification from being the center of everyone's affectionate attention? How can they learn to suspect and fear hidden meanings when they are benignly treated and cherished? And how can they learn to fear sanctioning power which is very rarely exercised?

The answer to all these questions--perhaps predicatably--through play. I have said that adults can express in jokes all sorts of grievances and violent fantasies which could not be expressed seriously. They can do the same when playing with children. All the problem areas of adult life are dramatized in vividly exaggerated form in interactions with small children. I call these interactions 'games' because, if asked, adults would claim to be "only playing" (pinguag-, nqanngnag-), but they deal with very real problems--all the ones that cause conflicts: envy, jealousy, possessiveness, doubts about belonging and being loved. They deal also with fears of many kinds--of being abandoned, attacked, humiliated, loved too much--fears that both cause conflict and motivate people to solve conflicts.

I think that, in part, the adult players are relieving their own feelings when they play, but, often, the children who are played with have the same problems. Indeed, since the games are consciously conceived of partly as tests of a child's ability to cope with his or her problems, the tendency is to focus on a child's known or expected problem areas. If a child has just acquired a sibling, the game may be: "Do you love your new baby sibling? Why don't you kill him or her?" If it's a new piece of clothing that the child has acquired, the game may be: "Why don't you die so I can have it?" And if the child has been recently adopted, the game may be: "Who's your daddy?"

Often, too, I think the games suggest problems to children; they structure and interpret the child's world for him, so that he begins to feel before, in the situations in which I must expect those emotions to be felt.

Let me give you some examples of games, and some idea about what children might learn from them with regard to conflict management. I want to emphasize, however, that I am outlining only a few of the many possible lessons that could be contained in these games. I do not assume that all possible lessons are perceived by all children on every occasion on which a given game is played; only that some lessons may be picked up by some children on some occasions, and that any lesson that is perceived will be reinforced by many other games on many other occasions.

From this game a child might learn (1) some doubts about the benignity of the outside world--about the wisdom of expecting or demanding to be given things, and about the power of others to sanction undesirable behavior. S/he might also learn (2) a little watchfulness, suspicion, too.

*to be
wary*

An aunt holds out a piece of bannock and jam to her 1-year-old niece, who happily reaches out for it. The aunt slaps the child's face. The child cries, and is cuddled and nursed by her mother. The aunt holds out the bannock again . . . and the sequence is repeated until the child no longer reaches out for the bannock but instead looks at her aunt 'warily'.

Example 2:

It is easy to see how such feelings can create conflicts, through suspicion and resentment of the imagined intentions of other people. But if the same feelings of suspicion and resentment are projected onto others: 'they feel suspicious of me', then the lesson taught by the game could ultimately be an awareness that such feelings are dangerous, and thus the groundwork is laid for a tendency to conciliate.

how?

Such uneasiness could in turn have several effects: (1) it could make him watchful to see whether people have intentions to deprive him; (2) it could make him cling more strongly to his mother--that is, could focus him on keeping what is his; and (3) it could make him anxious to please.

Some of the lessons that a child might learn from this game are: (1) that he belongs to his mother; (2) that he wants to belong to his mother; (3) that the person he belongs to will feed him; and (4) that the person he belongs to, and wants to belong to, could be taken away from him. In other words, he could learn to be a little bit uneasy about his life situation. He could learn that it is very important to belong, but that it is not quite certain that he can keep what he wants.

*the other way
around
the
child
wants
to
belong
to
his
mother*

A mother puts a strange baby to her breast and says to her own nursing: "Shall I nurse him instead of you?" The mother of the other baby offers her breast to the rejected child and says: "Do you want to nurse from me? Shall I be your mother?" The child shrieks a 'protest' shriek. Both mothers laugh.

Example 1:

These are not the only kinds of experience that teach the plots of everyday life and the emotions and behaviors appropriate to them; but they are important ones, because they are highly charged with emotion, and therefore children are strongly motivated to pay attention to the messages contained in them. The questions children are asked, the behaviors that are suggested to them, and the comments that are made about their behavior in the context of a game all focus their attention on the aspects of the event that inuit consider important and relevant, and suggest or reinforce appropriate emotional and behavioral reactions.

By arousing, and focusing on, anti-social and anxious emotions, games create possibilities for conflict which might not exist otherwise; but they also create the imaginative ability to empathize with others' feelings, or to project one's own feelings onto others, and it's partly this ability which makes it possible to anticipate conflict situations. In addition, and most importantly, the games help

Conclusions

Some of the lessons that might be learned from this game are: (1) that aggression hurts; (2) that adults consider aggressive behavior comical and childish; (3) that pacification is comforting and feels better; and perhaps also (4) that it's better not to be noticed than to be playfully made the center of attention and laughed at.

An aunt puts her niece's hand on the head of another child (both of them are 3 years old) and whispers: "Pull his hair." If the niece doesn't immediately pull, her aunt does it for her, with adult strength. The 'victim' shrieks and hits the aggressing child, who hits back. The conflict between the children becomes a battle royal. Adults urge them on and laugh: "Look, look! She's going to hurt him!" But before the children can do serious damage to each other, the adults stop them by distracting their attention, perhaps with the offer of food or a bottle of milk.

Example 3:

But perhaps the most interesting--because least obvious--way of learning to avoid conflicts is illustrated by the following example.

All of these feelings could become motives for being reticent, not putting oneself forward, not making claims which might cause conflict. And, as I have suggested, a feeling of suspicion may encourage one to be- come watchful of people's behavior and to learn to read complex meanings in apparently simple messages.

to create the fears that make conflict situations not only recognizable from afar but also dangerous to the child's own well-being, and thus motivate him to avoid or resolve those situations. As in a shadow show, they demonstrate the dangers inherent in the in-appropriate reactions and awaken the child's imagination, so that in future, when he seems in danger of really misbehaving, all that's necessary in order to bring him back into line is to remind him--jokingly--of experiences he had before he was sure how to interpret adult behavior in its complex mixture of 'serious' and 'joking'. All that's necessary is to reawaken his doubts. Finally, the games teach the appropriate responses to conflict. I have pointed out how children might learn to withdraw in response to being catechized, tested, and laughed at in play. That is one way in which they can defend themselves against being palyed with, and, as we have seen, it corresponds to one of the main ways of dealing with conflict situations. A child's other alternative is to learn to play, too, that is, to respond in the playful mode to being played with. The games are, themselves, models of conflict management through play. And when a child learns to treat a particular conflict game as a 'joke', people stop play--int that game with him as a 'victim'. They stop tormenting him. He has learned to keep his own relationships smoother--to keep himself out of trouble, so to speak--and in doing so, he has learned to do his part to smooth the relationships of others.