



# FROM SURRENDER STORIES TO PERSISTENCE STORIES: YOUNG GIRLS' NARRATIVES OF AGENCY AND POWER IN CHILD-PARENT CONFLICTS

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Article abstract

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## FROM SURRENDER STORIES TO PERSISTENCE STORIES: YOUNG GIRLS' NARRATIVES OF AGENCY AND POWER IN CHILD–PARENT CONFLICTS

**Maria Lahtinen, Eija Sevón, and Marja Leena Böök**

**Abstract:** This paper examines the dynamics of agency and power as revealed in young girls' fictional narratives about child–parent conflicts that are caused by incompatibility between the goals of children and parents in everyday family life. The data were collected from 26 girls aged 4 to 6 using the Story Magician's Play Time method. Narrative analysis yielded five types: mediation and compromise stories, surrender stories, persistence stories, solidarity stories, and standoff stories. In the girls' stories, agency and power were multifaceted and variable phenomena that were negotiated in a relational context in which the gender of the child and parent characters played an important role. Power relations tended to be narrated as more hierarchical and immutable in child–father conflicts, and more often as negotiated in child–mother conflicts. However, when narrated as deploying unyielding and tactical actions, the child characters were only able to exert power over the parent in girl–mother conflicts. Thus, some stories conveyed a clear, hierarchical generational order while others demonstrated children's agentic power to reshape adult dominance in child–adult conflicts in diverse ways. The practical implications of the findings are also discussed.

**Keywords:** child–parent conflict, generagency, narrative, power, young girl

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The notion of children as social actors and agents in their worlds is widely accepted. A key principle of the “new” sociology of childhood is that children construct and shape their lives reflexively instead of being passive recipients of parental and societal influence (e.g., Greene & Nixon, 2020; James & Prout, 1997; Leonard, 2016; Moran-Ellis, 2013). It is also acknowledged that children are rights holders, as stated in the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; 1989). Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have a right to express their views and have them considered. Further, the UNCRC states that children have the right to adults’ protection and care.

With the advent of children’s rights, traditional child–parent power relations have become more democratic and negotiable, and parents are no longer seen as having exclusive power over their children (e.g., Bjerke, 2011; Kuczynski, 2003; Sevón, 2015). However, even if the power dynamics of child–parent relations are more horizontal today than earlier, positionings in childhood and adulthood are interdependent and asymmetrical in many ways (Alanen, 2009, 2012; Kuczynski, 2003; Leonard, 2016). This power asymmetry manifests in conflicts in which the hierarchical child–parent relations may constrain young children’s agency (Sevón, 2015; see also Recchia et al., 2010; Sorbring, 2009).

Research on young children’s agency within the family, especially from the gender perspective, is lacking (see Bjerke, 2011; Sevón, 2015). This narrative study contributes to filling this gap by focusing on (a) children’s agency and power in fictional child–parent conflicts and (b) how children narrate, interpret, and make sense of these situations. We chose to study girls, as agency has traditionally been seen as a male attribute (Greene & Nixon, 2020), meaning that females, with less agency, power, and privilege, are also lower in status than males (Hourigan, 2021).

### ***Generagency and Child–Parent Conflicts***

Definitions of agency vary and are problematic and contested (Greene & Nixon, 2020). Agency can be described as the capacity to act creatively, have a sense of autonomy, and accomplish things through action and bring about change (e.g., Bjerke, 2011; James & James, 2012; Rainio, 2008; Sevón, 2015). In this study, children’s agency is also understood as a complex and constantly evolving process (Kumpulainen et al., 2018; Rainio, 2008; Sairanen et al., 2020) that in the family context is constructed and negotiated in reciprocal child–parent relations (Kuczynski, 2003; Leonard, 2016). Thus, agency is not something that children simply possess but something they achieve through their connection with other people (Moran-Ellis, 2013). In our view, children’s agency also includes the capability to interpret, reinterpret, construct, and reconstruct meaning from their interactions with adults and with information and practices from the adult world (Corsaro, 2018; Kuczynski, 2003; Leonard, 2016).

The theoretical framework of this study draws on the concept of *generagency* (Leonard, 2016), developed to address the problematic issue of the interplay between structure and agency in the sociology of childhood. The concept has gained traction, especially in the field of childhood studies (e.g., Horgan et al., 2020), and furthers the work of Alanen (2009, 2012; see also Mayall, 2013; Qvortrup, 2009), who used the concept “generational order” as an analytical tool when considering the dynamic position of children in generational structures. Leonard (2016) sees generagency as encompassing both the concept of children’s active agency in generational relations and that of the structural location of childhood. Leonard (2016) distinguished two subcategories of generagency: “inter-generagency” and “intra-generagency”.

### *Inter-Generagency*

Inter-generagency examines how children and adults, when performing their roles as “children” and “adults”, are able to exercise power and control and modify social life. It sheds light on the relationship between childhood and adulthood and how these are impacted by age, gender, ethnicity, and class. Moran-Ellis (2013) argued that hierarchical child–adult relations may form barriers to young children’s agentic abilities, as they position children as “development actors and hence repositions their actions as material for learning and correcting” (p. 315). Although power asymmetry permeates child–adult relations (Alanen, 2009, 2012; Leonard, 2016; Qvortrup, 2009), children have, to varying degrees, power to modify and shape decisions concerning themselves. Hence, power should be conceptualized as relational (e.g., Kuczynski, 2003; Leonard, 2016).

In families, children exercise agency within and across the asymmetrical and generational child–parent relations. This power asymmetry manifests in child–parent conflicts, where, as Nordic studies have shown, parents may rather powerfully guide young children’s behavior (Sevón, 2015) and marginalize the child’s influence (Recchia et al., 2010; Sorbring, 2009; cf. Bjerke, 2011). However, these studies also found that power is not related exclusively to parental control but also to children’s possibilities to negotiate and resist, and thus bring about change in child–parent conflicts.

Resistance, which can be understood as an expression of agency (Kuczynski et al., 2018), can also be linked to the concept of “secondary adjustment” in describing situations where children resist indirectly and creatively and do not follow the rules set by adults (Corsaro, 2018). By opposing authority and questioning rules, children attempt to control their own lives and increase their opportunities for influence (Corsaro, 2018). Agency, however, should not be described solely in terms of resistance but should also encompass “intentionality, reflectivity, intended (and unintended) consequences” (Leonard, 2016, p. 124). Therefore, children’s more subtle and creative ways to perform agency, such as through compliance with and acceptance of parental authority, should also be foregrounded when considering children’s agency (Corsaro, 2018; Kuczynski, 2003; Rainio, 2008). Children may, for example, decide to comply now as a strategy to attain more important goals in the future (Kuczynski, 2003). Nevertheless, to support children’s

well-being, it is important that parents also see children's resistance as agentic rather than as always problematic and requiring suppression (Kuczynski et al., 2018).

Children's active efforts to resist parental power can also be interpreted as efforts to change the prevailing culture. Children do not simply internalize adult society but are active agents in challenging and changing the adult world (Leonard, 2016). Corsaro (2018) conceptualized this as interpretive reproduction or socialization, and it includes the active and creative participation of children in society as well as cultural reproduction. Therefore, children also reproduce, subvert, and redefine stereotypical understandings of childhood and thus shape childhood and its constructions (Corsaro, 2018; Greene & Nixon, 2020).

### *Intra-Generagency*

According to Leonard (2016), intra-generagency crystallizes relationships among children themselves and highlights the heterogeneity of their lives. Different structural boundaries, such as gender, intersect with childhood (Alanen, 2009, 2012; Leonard, 2016; Morrow, 2006). This means that despite occupying the same structural position, children have diverse agentic possibilities (Leonard, 2016). For example, girls are stereotypically expected to nurture and care for others (Klaczynski et al., 2020; Kollmayer et al., 2018) and be cooperative, dependent, and passive (Williams & Best, 1990). Girls should also be empathetic (Hourigan, 2021), sensitive, avoid being noisy or dominant (Koenig, 2018), and follow society's expectations of girls as kind (Greene & Nixon, 2020). Boys, instead, are taught to take an agentic role and be active and independent (Hourigan, 2021; Kimmel, 2011; Koenig, 2018; Kollmayer et al., 2018). Morrow (2006) argued that in this regard family practices are deeply gendered and, according to Morawska (2020; see also Sorbring, 2009), there is also evidence that parents respond differently to daughters and sons.

Irrespective of the cultural context, it is assumed that girls may encounter social pressures to exercise their agency in accordance with the prevailing gendered expectations (Greene & Nixon, 2020). However, this raises the question that, if girls focus on expressing passivity, nurturance, and dependence, what barriers might this create to the realization of the agentic rights which belong to all children, irrespective of gender? The findings cited above indicate that girls' agency and power need to be considered in a multidimensional way, detached from gendered connotations.

## **Method**

### ***The Present Study***

This study forms part of the first author's dissertation research on young girls' and boys' fictional narratives about child–parent conflicts. The aim of this sub-study is to analyze young girls' fictional narratives from the perspective of children's agency and power in child–parent conflicts. The following research questions were set: (a) What story types can be identified in the narratives of girls aged 4 to 6 about child–parent conflicts? (b) How do these girls position the

child and parent characters in relation to agency and power in the different story types? and (c) What role does gender play in these different story types?

### ***Participants, Data Collection, and Ethical Issues***

Finnish girls ( $N = 26$ ) aged 4 to 6 were recruited via three different daycare centers in Central Finland after research permission was granted by the municipal early childhood authority. First, the girls' guardians were informed about the study and its adherence to the relevant ethical principles of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK; 2019). Voluntariness, the right to withdraw, and the confidentiality of personal data and aspects related to the retention of material were emphasized (TENK, 2019). Because guardians can act as gate-keepers of children's voices, they were invited to meet the researcher before giving their consent (Powell & Smith, 2009). After receiving the guardians' written informed consents, the first author introduced the research aim and the data collection method to the participating children in the daycare centers. The first author met the participants in small groups and, with pictorial support, went through the process of the study and emphasized that they could refuse to take part or discontinue their participation at any point during the study (TENK, 2019). This was done to make the children feel they had as much control of the process as possible (e.g., Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). The children were also assured that the narratives they produced would be handled confidentially and securely stored (TENK, 2019). A further aim of the group meetings was to build trust between the children and the researcher, owing not only to the sensitivity of the topic but also to the asymmetry of power between researcher and child (Powell & Smith, 2009).

After the children had given their verbal informed consent, the data were collected using the Story Magician's Play Time (SMPT) method, which was developed for listening to young children's accounts and perspectives through pictures, storytelling, and play (Laakso & Turja, 2011; see also Koivula et al., 2020). SMPT is based on the fact that telling stories and playing are inherent ways for young children to take part in social activities (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Karlsson, 2013; Puroila et al., 2012). Together with the first author, each child created a story from a picture depicting a hypothetical but familiar conflict situation. The child was free to provide narration about situations, events, people, and circumstances related to the picture. The vignettes acted as "triggers" for storytelling, enabling the child to express the imaginary characters' feelings and views as well as the causes and consequences of actions without any need to talk about personal experiences (see Koivula et al., 2020). The use of SMPT also offered the child space to be agentic as they were in control of the kind of information they disclosed (Palaiologou, 2017).

The seven different pictures used in this study draw on previous findings on common conflicts in child–parent relations (e.g., Sevón, 2015; Sorbring, 2009). Among the situations depicted were viewing a tablet, eating, and brushing one's teeth (see Appendix). The children were free to choose which picture they wanted to discuss, and were encouraged to tell the researcher who the characters in the picture were, what was happening in it, and what each character might say, think, and feel. As the characters in the pictures were non-gendered, the children could decide on their gender.

The story was then acted out by the child and the first author using props. Six emotion cards (joy, sorrow, anger, fear, embarrassment, and astonishment) were utilized to discuss conflict-related feelings. At session end, the child was asked how the conflict might be resolved to the satisfaction of all parties and whether they had experienced similar situations (Koivula et al., 2020). The hand puppet included in the method allowed the child to reflect on their solutions and the lessons that might be learned. The hand puppet was also used at the beginning of the data collection to ponder its own gender together with that of the child. The puppet “asked” the child what they think about their own gender: whether they feel like a girl, a boy, something else, or don’t know. All the participating children self-identified as girls.

The data collection took place in the children’s daycare centers. Of the 26 participants, 13 were from families where both parents had tertiary education, seven from families where one parent had tertiary education, and six from families where both parents had non-tertiary education. Twenty-two participants lived in nuclear families, three in divorced families, and one in a blended family. Each child participated in one to three child-specific SMPT sessions. All sessions were recorded and videotaped with the child’s consent.

Girls’ stories about child–parent conflicts can inform us about how girls understand conflicts in child–parent relations and how they make sense of the children’s and parents’ agency and power in these situations (see Nicolopoulou, 2011). The girls’ stories should be seen as combining personal processes by which they perceive their reality with additions and elaborations from their own imaginations (Engel, 2005). Therefore, the narrative approach offers an ethical way to approach sensitive topics (Barter & Renold, 2000) that does not impair children’s loyalty to their parents. Storytelling combined with play shifts the balance of power between the child and the adult, encourages the child to join in, and offers the child ways to make sense of their life-world (Palaiologou, 2017; Puroila et al., 2012). However, as the researcher inevitably becomes a collaborator in such narrative methods, all the narratives in this study must be seen as co-created by the child and the researcher (Puroila et al., 2012; Riessman, 2008). From an ethical point of view, it was important that the first author focused on listening to the child and only interrupted the child’s storytelling to ask supplementary questions to facilitate the child’s construction of the story. The aim was to allow the child as much freedom as possible to make sense of their thoughts about child–parent conflicts both to themselves and to the researcher (Nicolopoulou, 2011; Labov, 1976).

### ***Data Analysis***

The first author gathered and transcribed the data. The excerpts cited in this article are translations from Finnish to English by the first author. Prior to the analysis, the first author pseudonymized the data and wrote short summaries of the narratives. Although messy, rich, and multidimensional, the children’s narratives nonetheless formed temporal and plot-relevant entities (see Nicolopoulou, 2011; Riessman, 2008). The narratives were first subjected to structural narrative analysis (Labov, 1976) to identify their basic structure. This analysis focused on four

narrative elements: (a) orientation: the setting and the fictional characters in conflict and their behavior; (b) complicated action: something that prevents or facilitates events, in this case the child's or parent's reaction to the other party's resistance, propositions, and prohibitions; (c) evaluation: assessment of the course of events; and (d) resolution: who changed or had to change their behavior, and who achieved their goals.

In the narrative approach, it is assumed that all story types concern progress towards a specific goal, the outcome of which may be success or failure (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Plots can transform into one of three narrative forms in their evaluative shifts over time: regressive, stable, or progressive (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Applying this classification, the first author studied the evaluative shifts deployed by the child characters to achieve goals that deviated from their parent characters' goals during the conflict. In a regressive narrative, the storyline transforms to negative when the child is not allowed to get their way. This manifests as sadness, disappointment, or anger. In a stable narrative, the conflict remains unresolved or no conflict arises. The storyline is consistently negative or positive and the plot leaves the situation unchanged. In a progressive narrative, the child achieves the desired outcome, or the conflict is resolved to the satisfaction of both parties. The storyline thus transforms to positive and its aftermath is joy and a good mood.

According to Gergen and Gergen (1988), the different linear forms of narrative enable more complex varieties or genres of storytelling: comedy, romance, tragedy, and “happily-ever-after” (see Nicolopoulou, 2011). In comedy, challenges must be overcome before the happy final solution, and hence the storyline is progressive. Romance or heroic saga involves many victories and defeats, and therefore the storyline comprises both progressive and regressive phases. The protagonist survives conflicts as a hero. Thus, in both comedy and heroic saga, a regressive narrative is followed by a progressive narrative and the establishment of a new status quo. Tragedy, in contrast to heroic saga and comedy, follows a regressive storyline where the protagonist appears in opposition to others and is overthrown. In “happily-ever-after” stories, the progressive narrative is followed by a happy ending.

After identifying the basic structure of the story and following the procedure regarding storylines proposed by Gergen and Gergen (1988), we focused on how the child and parent were positioned by the narrator (see Table 1). We adopted Bamberg's (2020) system of three dimensions for positioning the self and others in narratives: sameness/difference, agency/passivity, and continuity/change. First, we determined whether the child and the parent were positioned on the basis of sameness or difference. Second, we focused on agency versus passivity by seeing what possibilities, if any, the child had to exercise agency: for example, did they resist the parent, or have no alternative but to comply? Third, we examined whether the positioning of the child and the parent changed during the conflict. We also considered how the characters were gendered and whether the story types differed in this respect.



Table 1. *Story Types, Course of the Conflict, and the Position and Power of the Child and Parent*

Story type (no. of stories)	Parties involved (no. of stories)	Course of conflict	Child’s position	Parent’s position	Child–parent power relation
Mediation and compromise (19)	Girl–mother (8) Girl–father (3) Boy–mother (5) Boy–father (3)	The child may resist, but the conflict also includes negotiation, compromise, and accommodation from both parties. Conflict ends through co-determination.	From negotiator to compromiser	From negotiator to compromiser and reasoner	Power is negotiated and shared between child and parent.
Surrender (16)	Girl–mother (8) Girl–father (3) Boy–mother (1) Boy–father (4)	The child resists but has to comply with the parent’s demands. Sometimes the child gives in unwillingly and sometimes willingly. Conflict ends favoring the parent.	From complier to reconciler and mind-changer	From ignorer to threatener	The parent has power over the child.
Persistence (12)	Girl–mother (12)	The child resists unyieldingly and acts tactically. Conflict ends favoring the child.	From unyielding to tactician	Mind-changer	The balance of power shifts but the girl momentarily has power over the mother.
Solidarity (7)	Girl–mother (4) Boy–mother (1) Boy–father (2)	The child resists but has to comply with the parent’s demands. The child takes responsibility for the parent’s feelings. Conflict ends favoring the parent.	From complier to solidaristic	Ignorer	The parent has power over the child but the power relation is also blurred.
Standoff (7)	Girl–father (3) Boy–mother (1) Boy–father (3)	The child resists, refusing to yield or to comply with the parent’s demands. Conflict ends in a standoff.	Unyielding	Unyielding	The child and the parent both struggle to have power over the other.

After identifying the plot structure and how the child and parent were positioned, individual stories were compared, scrutinized for differences and similarities, and grouped into suitable categories to form story types. Through this process, five story types were identified (see Table 1): (a) mediation and compromise stories (comedy), (b) surrender stories (tragedy), (c) persistence stories (heroic saga), (d) solidarity stories (romanticized tragedy), and (e) standoff stories (stable).

## Findings

Of the girls' 61 stories, 15 involved viewing a tablet, 13 putting away toys, 12 brushing teeth, 12 buying a toy in a supermarket, 7 eating, and 2 going to a daycare center. In 40 stories, the conflict was between child and mother, and in 21 it was between child and father. Thus, stories about child–mother conflicts occurred almost twice as often as those about child–father conflicts. In 41 stories, the child character was described as a girl, and in 20 as a boy. Some of the narrators stated that they chose a girl character because they were girls themselves, or a boy because the child in the picture card looked like a boy to them.

Each story began with a description of a conflict caused by incompatibility between the child's and the parent's goals. The story types — mediation and compromise, surrender, persistence, solidarity, and standoff — are presented separately below, and are described in Table 1. Each is preceded by a description of the picture chosen by the child and an excerpt from the transcript that illuminates the plot of the story and how the child and parent are positioned. To condense the excerpts, all fillers such as “well” and “um” have been removed.

### *Mediation and Compromise Stories*

#### *The Child Wants to Continue Viewing the Tablet (Rosa, 6)*

Researcher: What do you think, what might happen in this picture?

Rosa: That girl secretly took the tablet but then her mother comes and says, “Now is not the time to play with the tablet.”

Researcher: How might the mother feel?

Rosa: Maybe the mother gets a little angry because the girl secretly took out the tablet.

Researcher: The mother gets a little angry. How about the girl?

Rosa: [pondering] I think the girl is embarrassed.

Researcher: What do you think they might say to each other in your story?

Rosa: The mother says, “You should go and do something else”, and then the girl says, “Can I play this game to the end?”

Researcher: What might the mother answer?

Rosa: The mother says, “Okay, but then you need to put the tablet away.” Then the girl invents some fun play.

Researcher: How do you think the girl feels now?

Rosa: Happy.

Researcher: How about the mother?

Rosa: Just happy after that.

The majority of the stories were of the mediation and compromise types, where a progressive storyline dominates after the child character's initial challenges to parental authority are resolved by child and parent together. The storyline proceeds as a comedy, without many problems, before coming to a happy end (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). A slightly larger proportion of the mediation

and compromise stories were narrated between child and mother characters than between child and father characters.

In the mediation and compromise stories, the child was narrated as occasionally resisting the parent, but the described conflict also included negotiation, compromise, and accommodative initiatives from both parties. This is shown in Rosa's story, in which the child was narrated as secretly taking out the tablet and thereby breaking a rule agreed upon together or set by the parent. This was narrated as embarrassing the child and slightly angering the mother. However, despite the initial challenges in this story type, the child and parent were always narrated as reaching a mutually agreed solution. This came to the fore in Rosa's story, in which the child was described as showing initiative by negotiating with her mother. By asking permission to complete the game against her mother's wishes, the child was described as proposing a compromise to which the mother accedes. Thus, in this story type, the child's attempts to negotiate were answered and the child was listened to and considered (Bjerke, 2011; Lundy, 2007). In some stories, the child was described as agreeing with the parent after listening to sufficiently convincing parental reasoning. This can be interpreted as evidence of the child positioning the parent as an authority whose opinion merits consideration. Therefore, in the mediation and compromise stories, the child was positioned as a negotiator and compromiser, and the parent as a negotiator, compromiser, and justifier.

In the mediation and compromise stories, the initial negative tone turned into joy and happiness as power was shared between child and parent. The consent and adjustment of both parties was required to reach a compromise and hence conflicts were seen as a site for negotiation and shared decision-making (e.g., Bjerke, 2011). This story type can, therefore, be interpreted as highlighting the shift in families towards a culture of equality in the positioning of family members (Leonard, 2016; Sevón, 2015). Even if the generational order was clearly present in the girls' stories, parental power and control were also resisted and negotiated in child–parent conflicts.

### ***Surrender Stories***

#### *The Child Does Not Want to Put the Toys Away (Lara, 6)*

Researcher: Could you tell me what might happen in this picture?

Lara: The father says, "The toys need to be put away", and the girl says, "I want to play."

Researcher: How might the girl feel when her father says, "The toys need to be put away"?

Lara: [looks at the emotion cards and shows emotion card expressing anger]

Researcher: The girl is angry. What might her father be feeling? Can you find one?

Lara: Similar.

Researcher: When I think about it, they're in this tricky situation. Both are in a bad mood, and the father looked angry when the girl said: "I want to play." Would either one say something?

Lara: [pondering] The father says angrily: “No more playing!”

Researcher: What about the girl, what might she say to the father?

Lara: No, she doesn’t say anything. She starts putting away the toys.

Researcher: What do you think, what mood is her father in when she starts putting the toys away, does his mood change or not?

Lara: [looks at the emotion cards and shows emotion card expressing joy]

Researcher: The father is happy now. How about the girl?

Lara: She’s still angry.

The surrender story, where the storyline was reminiscent of tragedy (Gergen & Gergen, 1988), was the second most common type. The child was narrated as being in opposition to the parent and unable to overcome the obstacles preventing her desired outcome. The storyline was regressive; most commonly the ending was represented as unhappy and unfavorable for the child character and favorable for the parent character. A larger proportion of the surrender stories were narrated between child and father characters than between child and mother characters.

In the surrender stories, the child was described as resisting the parent and sometimes also as expressing dissenting views in a subtle way, as in Lara’s story, in which the child was narrated as voicing her desire to continue playing. However, the parent was always narrated as ignoring the child’s opinions and responding by angrily commanding the child to obey. Sometimes, to get the child to obey and resume behaving acceptably, the parent was described as threatening to withhold important privileges from the child, such as access to an amusement park. In this story type, the child was narrated as giving in to the parent’s demands, an ending which was described as arousing sorrow and anger in the child. In Lara’s story, feelings of anger were described as remaining after the conflict was over. This can be interpreted as an expression of agency, despite the absence of action (Kuczynski, 2003). In this sense, this story type describes a child who was able to utilize her agentic capabilities privately, beyond the reach of parental power (see Kuczynski et al., 2018). In a few stories, the child was described as conciliatory and the child’s compliance as a change of mind, and thus in these cases the child was deemed to be acting on their own volition. This can be seen as a subtle and creative way to perform agency (Corsaro, 2018; Kuczynski, 2003; Rainio, 2008) and as a desire to maintain agency within the lower and devalued position reserved for children in the generational order (see Alanen, 2009). Thus, in the surrender stories, the child was positioned as a complier, reconciler, and mind-changer, and the parent as an ignorer and threatener.

The surrender stories described the child character’s lack of choice in responding to parental demands and depicted the parent as ignoring the child’s views and attempts to join in the decision-making process (cf. Bjerke, 2011). The parent was positioned as the sole decision-maker. However, these stories revealed that the child characters were not wholly passive in the face of parental power but were also able to creatively interpret conflicts and construct possibilities for their own agency (Corsaro, 2018; Sevón, 2015). Therefore, the surrender stories can be interpreted as highlighting children’s active attempts to reposition themselves as actors with the power to

influence things meaningful to them. In this way, the child is able to maintain a sense of agency in child–parent conflicts, even though the parent has power over the child.

### ***Persistence Stories***

#### *The Child Wants to Buy a Toy in the Supermarket (Ira, 6)*

Researcher: Have you got an idea what could happen in this picture?

Ira: This girl and mother went to the supermarket and the girl says, “Can I have a toy?”

Researcher: What might the mother say?

Ira: [pondering] The mother says, “No toys this time, let’s buy one another time.”

Researcher: The mother thinks no toys this time. What might this girl say to her mother?

Ira: “I’d like that toy — will you buy it?” Then, while her mother was shopping, the girl suddenly slipped it into the trolley. Then her mother was in a good mood: “Okay, let’s buy that toy.”

Researcher: I wonder why her mother let her buy that toy, even though she said no at first?

Ira: Her mother had to buy the toy, guess why? Because her mother can’t listen to this whining, this girl whines all the time. So, her mother let her buy the toy.

Researcher: What might her mother say to this girl?

Ira: “Okay then. You can buy that toy, but this is the last time you buy a toy.”

Researcher: How does her mother feel when she buys it?

Ira: The mother is happy.

Researcher: How about the girl?

Ira: She’s also in a good mood now she’s got the toy.

In Gergen and Gergen’s (1988) narrative procedure, the storyline of persistence stories resembles that of the heroic saga, as it takes a progressive turn after several progressive–regressive phases. This story type, in which the child character emerges as the hero, can be interpreted as a story about the attainment of the child character’s goal. The end was typically represented as happy and satisfactory for both parties, for both the girl and mother characters, the dyad in all of the persistence stories.

In the persistence stories, the child was narrated as resisting the parent unyieldingly and acting tactically while also being aware of the hierarchical difference between child and adult. This was exemplified in Ira’s story, in which the girl was first narrated as asking her mother for permission to buy a toy. When the mother refused to buy the toy, the girl was described as secretly slipping it into the shopping basket. By demanding and secretly resisting (i.e., through secondary adjustment; Corsaro, 2018), to which the mother adapts herself, the girl was narrated as being able to achieve her goal. Therefore, in the persistence stories, through imaginative and tactical strategies and the mother’s change of mind, the child was able to take advantage of the possibilities offered by the situation to bring about change. This can be interpreted as evidence of a child’s capacity to

influence the mother in a conflict situation (Kuczynski, 2003; Moran-Ellis, 2013). Thus, in this story type, the child was positioned as unyielding and as a tactician, and the mother as a mind-changer.

The girls' persistence stories showed that the relative power positions of a girl and her mother are not immutable but are constantly constructed and negotiated in reciprocal child–parent relations (Leonard, 2016). This story type also transcends the traditional and narrow stereotypical gender role expectations regarding girls, revealing that, at least in girl–mother conflict stories, girls can be dominant, independent, and uncooperative (e.g., Hourigan, 2021; Koenig, 2018; Williams & Best, 1990). Although the mother was described as having the power to set the rules, the girl was narrated as being able to resist her mother's power. In this story type, by creating different strategies to challenge parental demands, the girl was able to reconstruct the asymmetrical power relations in the generational order and to contribute to changing rules and practices (Corsaro, 2018; Leonard, 2016). Thus, the girls' narrated actions in these stories can be interpreted as their active attempts to momentarily blur or even reverse the traditional understanding of power.

### ***Solidarity Stories***

#### *The Child Wants to Continue Viewing the Tablet (Eea, 4)*

Researcher: This was your favorite picture. Who do you think are in this picture?

Eea: [pondering] A father and a boy.

Researcher: What do you think the boy is doing in this picture?

Eea: He is playing with the tablet.

Researcher: He is playing with the tablet. Could either one say something in your story?

Eea: The father says, "You can't play any more; the battery might run down."

Researcher: How does the boy feel about that?

Eea: [looks at the emotion cards and shows the cards expressing fear and anger]

Researcher: How do you think the father feels?

Eea: He is angry.

Researcher: What makes the father most angry now?

Eea: The father is angry because the boy started crying when he was forbidden to play.

Researcher: Okay. What might happen next?

Eea: [pondering] Now the boy feels happy, and he gives his father flowers from the garden, then his father feels happy.

Researcher: Why was the boy in a happy mood?

Eea: Because his father was in a happy mood.

In the solidarity stories, the storyline resembles that of romanticized tragedy, as it takes a slight progressive turn after the regressive phase (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). The feelings of happiness at the end were represented as satisfactory for both the child and parent characters. In this story type,

a slightly larger proportion of the stories was narrated between child and mother characters than between child and father characters.

In the solidarity stories, the child was described as resisting the parent but nevertheless having to comply with the parent's demands. This was evident in Eea's story, where the child was narrated as being forbidden to play with the tablet, causing him to feel fear and anger. However, the parent was never narrated as paying attention to the child's wishes and feelings. The child, instead of being described as continuing to pursue his own goal, was narrated as constructing both the solution to the conflict and maintaining intergenerational ties through solidarity with his parent. The child was positioned as taking responsibility for the parent's feelings (see Notko & Sevón, 2018). Sometimes compliance was described by strategic actions, as in Eea's story, where the boy gave his father flowers to put his father into a good mood. Thus, in this story type, the child's possibilities for agency were manifested through actions aimed at making the parent feel better. In the solidarity stories, the child was positioned as compliant and solidaristic and the parent as an ignorer.

In the present solidarity stories, children felt the need to initiate actions and take responsibility for their parent's emotional state. In this context, although the child–parent relation was narrated as hierarchical, the boundary between child and parent was somewhat blurred through the child's strategic actions. These stories were also in line with the cultural discourse of the “good” (i.e., obedient) child, and how a child should behave when positioned in this way. Thus, in this story type, the child followed the cultural script regarding appropriate behavior, including in conflict situations (see Sevón, 2015), which offered the girl narrators an opportunity to correct the disharmonious and unstable child–parent relation before ending the story (Nicolopoulou, 2011). However, from the perspective of power and dependence, it may be that opportunities for a shift in the dynamics of agency and power in child–parent conflicts open up when a child adopts, embraces, and implements acts of solidarity.

### ***Standoff Stories***

#### *The Child Doesn't Want to Go to the Daycare Centre (Elsa, 4)*

Researcher: What do you think, what might happen in this picture?

Elsa: That boy doesn't want to go to kindergarten even when his mother asks him to.

Researcher: The boy doesn't want to go to kindergarten. What do you think, why not?

Elsa: Maybe because he doesn't like it there.

Researcher: That may be the reason. How do you think the boy feels?

Elsa: I think he is happy because he doesn't want to go to kindergarten.

Researcher: How might his mother feel?

Elsa: [looks at the emotion cards and shows the card expressing astonishment]

Researcher: What is his mother wondering about?

Elsa: Probably why he's not going to kindergarten.

Researcher: Could his mother say something to him?

Elsa: Maybe, if she says “Come along!” and the boy says, “I’m not coming!”, then the mother will probably be angry.

Researcher: The mother has asked the boy to come twice. What might happen now?

Elsa: [pondering] I don’t know.

In the standoff stories, the situation relative to the parties’ goals remained unchanged (Gergen & Gergen, 1988) and thus the plot of the story did not progress from the starting point. Both the child and parent characters were narrated as wanting different things and being unable to resolve the problem. Thus, a stable storyline was constructed. All but one of the standoff stories were narrated between child and father characters.

In this story type, the child was narrated as refusing to yield or comply with parental demands. If either party was described as showing a willingness to negotiate, the other did not respond to this. Moreover, even when the child was narrated as using different strategies to resist the parent, or the parent as using different strategies to get the child to comply, neither party was able to initiate change. Thus, in the standoff stories, child and parent were narrated as equals, as highlighted in Elsa’s story. Typically, in this story type, both the child and parent were positioned as unyielding.

In Elsa’s story, as in all the other standoff stories, the narrator did not offer a resolution (Labov, 1976) without the researcher asking how the conflict could be resolved to the satisfaction of both parties (Koivula et al., 2020). The fact that the characters in the standoff stories remained in conflict can also be explained the narrator’s inability to devise a satisfactory narrative structure for ending a story where both the child and the parent (most commonly the father) are positioned as relentlessly struggling to achieve their goals. Although the child gained agency by open resistance to the parent, the child–parent relation can be interpreted as indicating a symmetrical power relation, in which neither party has power over the other (cf. Recchia et al., 2010; Sorbring, 2009).

## Discussion

This study investigated what story types can be found in young girls’ fictional narratives about child–parent conflicts. The focus was on how the girl narrators positioned the child and the parent from the perspective of agency and power in different story types, and on the role of gender in each. We identified five different types: mediation and compromise stories, surrender stories, persistence stories, solidarity stories, and standoff stories. These story types can be understood as representing the girls’ ways of constructing reality and making sense of child–parent conflicts (e.g., Engel, 2005; Nicolopoulou, 2011). They also illustrate how young children are able to exercise agency within the generational order and what resources they are able to draw on to support their agentic efforts in conflicts (see Moran-Ellis, 2013).

The girls’ stories demonstrate that diverse narrative structures are available to children in making sense of conflicts between children and parents. The most common story type in this study,



mediation and compromise, narrated situations where power was shared between child and parent; thus the child's agency was practised through negotiating, making compromises, and engaging in decision-making. In this story type, the children were acknowledged as rights holders who were able to express their views and have their views taken into consideration (see United Nations, 1989). This story type also reflects the ongoing shift towards more equal child–parent relations (Kuczynski, 2003; Leonard, 2016; Sevón, 2015) in which parents are open to being influenced by their children's views (Lundy, 2007). The children in the mediation and compromise stories were also offered opportunities to act responsibly (Leonard, 2016), highlighting that conflicts can provide important opportunities for children to learn social rules, practise navigating social relations, and express their agency in a socially competent way (e.g., Della Porta et al., 2019; Kuczynski, 2003).

In both the surrender and solidarity stories, the parent was narrated as maintaining the hierarchical generational order and exercising power over the child, who had no choice but to comply with the parent's demands. Although their agency was narrated as suppressed, these children were nevertheless able to exercise agency in a variety of ways (e.g., Leonard, 2016) despite not being able to achieve their goals in the conflicts. On the one hand, these children were narrated as being able to hold on to their feelings of anger despite complying with their parents' demands. Further, some girls also described the child characters as changing their mind and complying of their own volition, and thus the child's agency was manifested as creativity in interpretation (Corsaro, 2018). The child's agentic position in child–parent conflicts was maintained in creative ways, even if it was not always presented as action or realized verbally (see Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski et al., 2018). On the other hand, by exhibiting solidarity, these child characters were narrated as wanting to please the parent rather than trying to achieve their own goals in conflicts. This reveals that even young children can have the ability to read a parent's emotions, control their own emotions, and modify their behavior to restore harmony in cases of child–parent conflict (see Notko & Sevón, 2018). Thus, these story types reflect the girl narrators' understanding of the intergenerational hierarchy and the child's lesser position in the generational order, as enshrined not only in the traditional expectations of children's obedience towards parents (e.g., Hungerland, 2016), but also the position of young children as development actors with limited agentic possibilities (Moran-Ellis, 2013).

In the persistence and the standoff stories, the child's agency was narrated as becoming visible through unyielding resistance to parental authority. In the former story type, power in the child–parent relation was narrated as shifting, and the child was described as momentarily having power over the parent. This story type exemplified how a child was able to instigate change, redefine the rules, and reconstruct the child–parent power relation through persistence and strategic action (see Corsaro, 2018). It also demonstrated young children's capability to act purposively, strategically, and effectively (Moran-Ellis, 2013), and thus influence the structures and the relations that surround them (Leonard, 2016). In the standoff story type, the child and parent were narrated as struggling for power. The conflict remained unresolved, and thus the story ended without closure,

as if the girls lacked the kinds of narrative structures needed for a solution in a situation where neither party is willing to compromise. Both these story types challenge the notions of the immutability of asymmetrical child–parent relations and the traditional generational order, in which parents have exclusive power over their children. These story types thus emphasize that the positions of child and parent within the generational order are not unchangeable but are fluid over time (Leonard, 2016).

Of particular interest in the stories was the meaningful role played by gender in the girls’ understanding of a child’s agentic possibilities in child–parent conflicts. Only in girl–mother conflicts, as highlighted in the persistence stories, was the girl character positioned as a powerful child — a hero — who momentarily blurred and reversed the traditional generational order. Thus, only girls were accorded a momentary dominant position in these conflicts. Contrary to stereotypical expectations of girls’ agency, the girls who participated in this study did not describe girl characters as solely communal, caring, and empathetic, but also described them as autonomous, uncooperative, and dominant individuals who possessed power, agency, and privilege (e.g., Hourigan, 2021; Klaczynski et al., 2020; Koenig, 2018; Kollmayer et al., 2018). By contrast, in story types other than persistence, the protagonist could be narrated as either a boy or a girl, and the protagonist roles were presented similarly in either case.

Moreover, in the girls’ stories, power was more often negotiated with the mother and the child was more often able to influence the resolution in child–mother than in child–father dyads. That is, in the fictional child–parent conflicts the mother characters were described as engaging in democratic power relations more often than fathers, while almost all the unresolved conflicts were narrated as taking place between child and father. This means that, in the girls’ stories, the child and the father were not described solely in terms of inequality or asymmetry but were also positioned as equal actors in the generational order. However, mothers appeared to be more sensitive than fathers in listening to the child and making compromises, thereby supporting the realization of the child’s right to be heard and considered (Lundy, 2007; United Nations, 1989). This prompts the question of whether the girls were constructing conflict stories that followed an “ideal” and desired pattern from the child’s perspective — that is, conflicts in which the mother listens to the child and values the child’s views — or whether they regarded the mother in their stories as a parent who values her child’s agency, and perceives her child’s resistance through an agentic lens rather than seeing it as stubbornness and unacceptable behavior (see Kuczynski et al., 2018). Interestingly, the parents in the girls’ stories were not described as responding differently to daughters and sons (cf. Morawska, 2020; Morrow, 2006; Sorbring, 2009).

It is important to acknowledge that this study has certain methodological limitations. Because the culturally and socially situated narratives were inevitably produced in collaboration between the child and the first author, the position of the author as a co-creator cannot be ignored (Riessman, 2008). However, the researcher was careful not to lead the girls’ storytelling in any particular direction and instead focused on ensuring that the storylines, and the actions taken by the characters, were as far as possible the child’s own. Although the children were told that all kinds

of stories are welcome and important, the adult researcher's more powerful role in relation to the child must nevertheless be recognized as children tend to say what they think the adult researcher wants to hear (Palaiologou, 2017). In this study, this ethical challenge was met by using the SMPT method, which has the particular strength that children are not asked to tell stories directly related to their own experiences, but to create imaginary stories based on characters depicted in drawings.

The SMPT method produced diverse material, which was reflected in both the structure and the content of the stories. Although some of the girls' stories were firmly structured and coherent, the girls also produced stories that were complex, incoherent, and loosely structured. Therefore, the participants did not, unlike those studied by Nicolopoulou (2011), structure their stories just around harmonious and stable child–parent relations. Some of the girls' stories were marked by disruption and social disorder, and some were left unresolved (cf. Nicolopoulou, 2011). It is also important to note that the stories are not to be considered as representing the children's real-life experiences. Instead, they can be seen as offering insights into the ways in which young girls understand and interpret child–parent conflicts in the specific sociocultural and situational context in which they live (Riessman, 2008). In this regard, however, it needs to be acknowledged that during the past few decades a shift away from hierarchical child–parent relations to more negotiated ones has taken place in Western countries, where children's rights are well established compared to many other countries (e.g., Hungerland, 2016; Pells, 2012). The reliability and credibility of this study is enhanced by researcher triangulation (Patton, 2015), the fact that each story could be identified as belonging to a specific story type, and that children and parents were also positioned according to story type. Moreover, the quotations from the data enable readers to evaluate the trustworthiness of our interpretations. In the future, to widen our understanding of the role of gender in child–parent conflicts, the narratives of young boys should also be investigated. Young children's narratives of unresolved conflicts could also be further researched.

### **Conclusion**

This study highlights the heterogeneity of young girls' narratives of fictional child–parent conflicts. While the girls' stories confirm the existing structural position of children, they also show that children have several possible means of exercising agency and influencing the power relations within the prevailing generational order. Moreover, the girls' stories challenge the simplistic idea of child–parent conflict as a power struggle between parent and child over disobedience, and instead demonstrate that conflicts also furnish both parties with opportunities for negotiation, compromise, and reconciliation. Nevertheless, a relatively large proportion of the stories highlighted parental control and power over the child, suggesting that child–parent relations based on authoritarianism have not been completely replaced by more democratic relations.

This study has practical implications both for the well-being of young girls and the position of children in families and society at large. The girls' stories suggest that adults need to be sensitive and open to children's different ways of expressing themselves and participating in negotiations

concerning matters that affect them (Lundy, 2007). It is thus harmful to assume that girls exercise their agency narrowly according to stereotypical expectations of gender by being passive, nurturing, and dependent (e.g., Greene & Nixon, 2020; Klaczynski et al., 2020). Instead, girls' agency needs to be considered from a multidimensional perspective that transcends stereotypical gender boundaries. To empower children's agency, their ways of expressing themselves, including resistance, should be seen as manifestations of their agency and not as "bad behavior". Like van der Kapp-Deeder et al. (2017), we believe that as long as children's agency remains suppressed, children's rights as laid down in the UNCRC will not be realized, and their overall well-being will be impaired.

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Appendix

*The Pictures Used in Story Magician’s Play Time*

