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# Differences in Children's Construction of Gender Across Culture

## An Interpretive Approach

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*The authors examine gender segregation and cross-sex play in a comparative perspective. Although some level of gender segregation seems to be a universal feature in children's play, taking an interpretive view, it was found that children in some peer cultures emphasize gender differences and ritualize cross-sex interactions and in other cultures, children seldom enforce gender boundaries. Gender identity varies in salience and practice among Italian children, lower-class African American children, and upper-middle-class White American children. Thus, studying gender segregation as something that is constructed and negotiated in children's peer cultures rather than a universal phenomenon that is strictly based on biological or cognitive factors provides a clearer picture.*

*Keywords:* children; gender; play; cross-cultural; interpretive reproduction

**One of the most important** identities that children learn to define themselves and others by is gender. As Maccoby (1999) points out, infants are able to distinguish between adult men and women by the end of the 1st year, and by the middle or end of their 3rd year, children become very accurate in identifying their own gender along with the gender of others. As children grow older, most establish a preference to play in same-sex, gender-segregated groups. Researchers have proposed different explanations for the onset of these gender divisions, with some insisting that gender identity derives from social and cultural context and others claiming that gender segregation is a result of cognitive development. As cognitive developmental theorist Kohlberg (1966) states,

The social learning syllogism is "I want rewards, I am rewarded for doing boy-things, therefore I want to be a boy." In contrast, a cognitive theory assumes this sequence: "I am a boy, therefore I want to do boy things, therefore the opportunity to do boy things (and to gain approval for doing them) is rewarding." (p. 89)

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Both social learning and cognitive development theorists have conducted studies of children in an attempt to determine whether the origin of the gender culture derives from adult social reinforcement or the individual child's perception of their gender. Although the influence of adults and the cognitive psychology of children are surely important factors in the development of concepts of gender, more research must be done to reveal the nature of gender in the children's own unique peer cultures. Here, sociological theories based on ethnographic research maintain that children are not merely the passive recipients of adult culture, they interpret and reproduce gender roles in ways that are often surprising to us. One example of children's unique interpretations of gender comes from our observations of children in a midwestern upper-middle-class preschool group. Two girls (Anita and Sarah) chase Sean and David, who run to a large rock they designate as home base. As they run, the two girls start to pull up their shirts and say, "You want to see my bra?" Anita says, "I have a bra for my belly button" as she holds up her shirt. Sarah then turns to the researcher and says, "I really have a bra at home!" Here the girls use their knowledge of secondary sex characteristics (breasts and bras) to tease their male classmates. Through this interaction, we can see that although the girls themselves lack breasts, they recognize that breasts are associated with their gender and they tease the boys in an effort to signify their difference.

Likewise, a child's cognitive development is not a solitary experience; it is shared with peers and articulated in their group culture. As Corsaro (1997) notes, "Children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own concerns" (p. 18). By examining the ways that children shape their own culture, we can begin to understand gender as the children themselves construct it.

Many studies have addressed gender segregation, gender-role knowledge, cross-sex play, and other gendered aspects of children's lives. Some researchers note gender segregation in children as young as age 3, but most gender segregation becomes apparent around the age of 5 and reaches its peak in early elementary school (Corsaro, 1997; Martin, 1994; Thorne, 1993). Some studies suggest that the origin of gender segregation derives from compatibility of interest among members of the same sex (Fabes, 1994; Serbin, Moller, Gulko, Powlishta, & Colburne, 1994). Serbin et al. (1994) found that children play more interactively with a partner of the same sex, whereas in opposite-sex dyads, children had a tendency to observe rather than play or to engage in more passive and less creative parallel play. These researchers did not propose a reason for why same-sex play seems to be more active and creative. However, it was clear in their research that as children choose to segregate themselves with members of their own sex, the play styles of boys and girls begin to diverge.

Mixed-sex play is not always a rare occurrence, however. In an ethnographic study of Italian children, Corsaro (1994; Corsaro, Molinari, Hadley, & Sugioka, 1999; Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998) found that mixed-sex play was quite prevalent and children of both sexes highly valued verbal negotiation and debate.

Traditional, sex-typed activities such as sports and superhero play for boys and playing with dolls for girls were same-sex activities, but both boys and girls participated in certain types of dramatic role-play, often thought of as primarily girls' activity. The children especially enjoyed reenacting one television game show that featured a gypsy fortuneteller. Both boys and girls took turns portraying the woman, which illustrates that the children were willing to modify this adult show to their needs without letting the sex of the characters dictate who plays the various roles (Corsaro et al., 1999, p. 9).

Serbin et al. (1994) found that children who segregate show no more awareness of gender roles and gender identity than their nonsegregating peers. This finding seems to contradict cognitive theory, which would suggest that the most cognitively developed children would be more inclined to associate themselves with children "like me." The researchers therefore conclude that gender segregation is mainly a result of peer preference for a companion with a similar style of play.

These arguments are intriguing considering sex segregation and differences in boys' and girls' play styles are quite widespread. Martin (1994) found that boys and girls ranging in age from 3½ to 6½ demonstrate a strong bias for playing with and desiring to play with same-sex peers. Whereas 65% said they avoided opposite-sex peers and played with same-sex peers, 24% reported that they played with both boys and girls and 10% that said that they played with other-sex children more (Martin, 1994, p. 43). Although the majority does prefer to play with same-sex peers, there does seem to be a significant number of children who desire to play in mixed-sex groups. Cross-sex play is not always possible however because of the nature of same-sex groups.

What are the differences in style of play that emerge in gender-segregated groups? Generally speaking, girls find prosocial play, which involves social negotiation and cooperative interactions, more rewarding and boys are more likely to enjoy rough and tumble play. Fabes (1994) found that boys are more aroused by distress-inducing stimuli, whereas girls find sympathy-inducing stimuli more evocative. He suggests that physical differences in nervous system response make domination and rough and tumble play appealing to boys and intimacy and empathic relationships pleasing for girls (Fabes, 1994, p. 26). This discrepancy makes play with the opposite-sex often less rewarding and cooperative than play with the same sex (Serbin et al., 1994, p. 8). Simply put, girls and boys begin to avoid one another because peers of the opposite sex are less likely to propose playing in a way that the child will find stimulating.

Fagot (1994), on the other hand, found that differential rewards are given to boys and girls for certain behavior and these differential rewards heavily influence the development of "gendered" styles of interaction. Among infant playgroups age 12 to 14 months, Fagot observed interactions and categorized the interactions into two groups: assertive behaviors such as shoving, grabbing another's toys, and hitting and communicative behaviors such as babbling, gesturing, and talking. She found no differences in the frequency of these

interactions from girls to boys. What was compelling in this study was her observation of the behaviors of adult caretakers toward these behaviors. Boys that produced assertive behaviors received a response from the caregiver 41% of the time, whereas girls received a response only 10% of the time for the same behaviors. Girls were more likely to get attention from the caregiver for a positive type of communication 65% of the time, compared to boys who received attention for the same behavior 48% of the time. Of interest, boys who demanded attention by screaming, whining, crying, or pulling at the caregiver received attention 55% of the time, but girls using this strategy won the caregiver's attention only 18% of the time.

When Fagot (1994) studied the same children approximately 1 year later, sex differences appeared in the children's behavior. The boys acted more aggressively and girls spent more time speaking and interacting with the caregivers. This research indicates that gender roles can be communicated in subtle ways by adult caregivers because children are very perceptive of what makes them valued in their culture. As girls learn to influence relationships through verbal negotiation and appeals to authority, boys increasingly learn to respond primarily to aggression and domination by peers. According to Maccoby (1990), gender segregation begins when girls begin to prefer same-sex playmates because boys become less responsive to girls' input and suggestions as they age and therefore are less compatible for sustained play. Thus, we can infer that the level of segregation among children would vary according to the degree the adult culture considers men and boys to be aggressive and women and girls to be passive. This hypothesis is supported by a study by Whiting and Edwards (1988) that finds childhood gender segregation is most rigid in societies that have high levels of gender inequality. Accordingly, preferences of segregation in the peer culture of children should vary with the values that the adult culture communicates about sex-appropriate interaction.

If peer cultures tend to vary among the children of different larger cultures, why is it that gendered behavior among children is spoken of monolithically? Perhaps it is because of the homogeneous nature of the subjects that researchers have studied in the past. Most studies have only looked at middle-class White children, and although these studies have yielded interesting results, the information gleaned from this research cannot be generalized to all children. Are there notable differences in gender segregation and boys' and girls' interactions across cultures and across subcultural and ethnic groups within societies? If so, this suggests that psychological theories stressing biological, behavioral, or cognitive development factors are inadequate in explaining gender segregation among children. If there is something inherent in being a boy or girl that causes a child to choose a type of play interaction or gravitate toward others of the same-sex, we should find similar levels of gender segregation from culture to culture. It is only through comparative research that we can determine if gender segregation is universal or a reflection of the cultural context within which children participate and create their own peer cultures.

### STUDIES OF PEER RELATIONS AND GENDER SEGREGATION

Around the age of 3 is when most researchers find children beginning to exhibit a preference for play with others of his or her own sex (Maccoby, 1999; Thorne, 1993). Although gender segregation seems to be an emergent pattern in 3- and 4-year olds, by age 6 1/2, the ratio of same-sex to cross-sex play partners increases to 11:1 (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987; Serbin et al., 1994). It seems that around the age of 3, children begin to modify their play behavior based on the sex of their partner. Same-sex dyads exhibit more social interaction such as verbal engagement, physical contact, and working interactively toward a common end. Mixed-sex dyads conversely are characterized by higher incidence of parallel play and watching behavior (Serbin et al., 1994). The question this leads many researchers to ask then is why is there a difference between the nature of same-sex and mixed-sex interactions?

One hypothesis is that gender segregation is not the result of any division by gender alone but rather an issue of compatibility of play styles and social behavior. Serbin et al. (1994) propose that because even fairly young children are more likely to engage in more interactive play with members of the same sex, children will learn to seek out other children of their own sex, assuming they find interactive play more stimulating (also see Maccoby, 1999). Fabes (1994) suggests that boys' and girls' play styles may differ because they have different physiological reactions to distress and sympathy, which might make rough-and-tumble play more stimulating for boys and relational role-play rewarding for girls.

Simply desiring to play with children of the opposite-sex is not enough; the child's overtures to play must be accepted by their potential partner. Martin (1994) emphasizes that although there are many children who express a desire to play in mixed-sex groups, the likelihood of being rejected by an opposite-sex group is 47%, compared to 20% for a same-sex group.

Play interests are only one part of the picture, however. There are also differences in social behavior that emerge in preschool. As they age, girls increasingly use polite suggestions to influence others rather than direct demands, although this finding varies by race and class, as Goodwin (1990, 1998) found in studies of African American children and African American and Latina girls. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to use demands to get others to do as they want. Whereas girls remain responsive to the suggestions of teachers and other girls, boys soon become much less likely to comply with the wishes of anyone outside of their male peer group. Maccoby and Jacklin (1987) suggest that this difference might instigate sex segregation to some degree. As girls become aware that boys are unlikely to be responsive to their suggestions, the girls learn to avoid this frustration by playing only with other girls.

Eventually, same-sex playgroups begin to develop their own culture and cross-sex play becomes increasingly unfamiliar and difficult. As they age, girls and boys often become wary of one another and seem quite baffled by the opposite sex. When cross-sex interaction does occur in a sex-segregated environment,

it is often marked by semiritualized behavior that delineates gender boundaries. These activities, which emphasize between-group difference and promote in-group solidarity, are referred to as borderwork (Thorne, 1993). One popular form of borderwork is ritual pollution through "cooties." Although sometimes boys possess cooties, it is much more common for boys to label contact with girls as polluting. Because those who come in contact with polluting individuals are likely to be teased, this tends to discourage any sustained cross-sex contact. Another form of borderwork is invasion. Thorne (1993) reports repeatedly seeing boys, individually or with other boys, deliberately disrupting girls' games.

One form of mixed-sex play seen in many classrooms is animal family role-play (Corsaro, 1985, 1997; Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998). In this play, boys and girls blend family role-play with animal role-play by pretending to be young animals who are disciplined by a female mother. The young animals move around the room growling and scratching at one another and other children while one or two animal mothers keep the "children" in line by yelling and being physically aggressive (Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998). This finding suggests that children are capable of developing play within their own peer culture that stretches the boundaries of adult gender structure.

It is reasonable to believe that children's gendered play, or sex segregation, may not be as inflexible as we perceive it as adults. Children's concepts of sex-appropriate play are certainly influenced by the adult culture. However, children creatively interpret adult information to form their own peer cultures, which are different from what adults might expect. As the work of Goodwin (1990, 1998), Evaldsson (1993), and Corsaro (1997) show, children of different cultures differ somewhat in the peer cultures they construct with regard to gender. Therefore, we need comparative longitudinal ethnographies of children constructing gender in their peer cultures to be able to assess whether our understanding of gender among children is indeed universal.

Recent comparative research shows that children of various cultures differ in their construction of gender concepts and behavior. Goodwin (1990, 1998) found that African American and Latina girls value ritualized conflict and they frequently argued about the interpretation of the rules of games. Goodwin (1990, 2001) also found that African American boys and girls often engaged in playful, cross-sex arguments when they were in each other's presence. Kyratzis and Guo (2001) found cross-cultural differences in the gendered speech patterns of preschoolers in the United States and China. They found that among American children, boys tend to be more assertive than girls in same-sex interactions, but in China, girls are more assertive with one another than boys are. However, context is important in determining who dominates cross-sex interaction. Chinese boys take the lead in discussions regarding work but Chinese girls dominate when relationships and courtship are the themes. Both Chinese girls and American boys freely used bold, directive speech when they disagreed with their classmates, whereas American girls used mitigated, "double-voice" discourse during disputes (see Sheldon, 1997).

These cross-cultural studies demonstrate that there does not seem to be an essentialistic, universal difference in gendered speech and cross-sex interaction. Understanding the role that cultural context has in influencing the discourse and action of boys and girls is vital to any analysis of children's construction of gender in their play. As Kyratzis (2001) points out, theories that emphasize differences between boys' and girls' discourse as biologically determined "do not give sufficient emphasis to the role of social practices, activities, and contextual factors in affecting language" (p. 5).

## METHODS

To investigate whether levels of gender segregation are similar across cultures, we rely on data from four different ethnographic studies. Ethnography provides the rich context that is needed to delve into the state of gender segregation in each group. By studying both the content and the context of children's interactions rather than merely counting the number of mixed- or same-sex groups in a classroom or some other such technique, it is possible to get a better feel for the complex and nuanced relationships children have in peer interactions and their own peer cultures (see Corsaro, 1993; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001, for similar work on social class and race, respectively).

We have used a nonobtrusive, "reactive" method of observation that involves the researcher entering the field as a peripheral observer. Unlike other adults, who usually take a directive role in settings with children, we entered the play areas, sat down, and waited for the children to react to us (see Corsaro, 1985, 1994, 1996). Most adults such as teachers and parents take an active role with children, and they often initiate contact in the process of disciplining the children or asking them questions. By allowing the children to draw us into their play routines on their own terms, the children are less apt to see us as authority figures and alter their behavior. The reactive method enables us to see children interacting naturally with one another. We observed children at two sites in the United States (a private daycare and educational center and a government-supported Head Start center) and at two preschools (*scuola dell'infanzia*) in Italy: one in Bologna and the other in Modena.<sup>1</sup>

In data collection at these multiple sites throughout a 7-year period we primarily focused on documenting stable features of the children's peer relations and peer cultures. Gender interaction and identity is an important element of peer culture, and we have included discussion of gender in relation to children's peer interactions and friendships in earlier reports (see Corsaro, 1985, 1994, 1997; Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998). In the analysis for this article, we focused primarily on gender relations from a comparative perspective. Thus, we began analysis by selecting interactive episodes from field notes and videotaped data that we judged to be related to gender relations and gender identity, relying especially on the children's own language, including references to gender and their

organization of activities (gender integrated or segregated). We then carefully read through these examples searching for similarities and differences across the cultural and subcultural groups studied. Once we isolated specific patterns we searched both for additional evidence or negative cases that allowed us to develop and further refine the interpretive significance of the patterns.

### **CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER**

When we examine the field data from cross-cultural research on children, one question that begs to be asked is if the nature of play between boys and girls varies from culture to culture. If the nature of cross-sex play is based in biological determinates or stage-like cognitive development patterns, we would expect to see similar patterns of boy-girl interaction in all of the children's peer cultures studied. Of interest, however, there was some variation in the way gender is negotiated in everyday play. At both of the sites in the United States, the children were more likely to mark cross-sex play as something significant and do borderwork to establish gender boundaries. Conversely, among the Italian children, boys and girls were more likely to enter cross-sex play and were less likely to engage in ritualized borderwork. In each of the preschools, the children have developed their own unique peer cultures and these cultures develop the scripts that influence appropriate boy-girl interaction. By examining how boys and girls deal with gender in everyday play, we demonstrate that sex segregation in children's play is not a given but rather something that is socially constructed (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Although gender salience varied from class to class, children in each of the four sample groups participated in some form of borderwork. In Bologna, one common activity that the children took part in was a "wild time" where the boys and girls were allowed to run, jump, push, shove, and generally roughhouse with one another. Both girls and boys participated in this rough-and-tumble play but older girls tended to congregate with one another and run from boys in mock fear. Unlike older girls, younger girls freely roughhoused with children of both sexes. As the girls age, they are socialized into a peer culture that encourages ritualized avoidance of boys. Like all children, girls look to their peers to establish how they should interact with others. Just as younger children are socialized by older children on the proper way to play tag and establish friendships, younger girls also look to their older peers for cues on how to negotiate gender.

Another instance of borderwork occurred with some of the children in the Modena preschool, as shown in the following field notes:

There are a group of boys playing together (Angelo, Luciano, Biagio, and Mario) but Michela chases after them with mud on a stick and the boys pretend to be afraid of the mud. This is a bit of a reversal of boys-chase-girls routine. Other girls

(Carlotta, Sofia, and Marina) join Michela in the chasing. The girls threaten to throw the mud on the boys but they never do. Sometimes they fling it but seem to miss on purpose. Later some of the boys also get mud and chase the girls and each other.

Here is another instance of borderwork in which a girl invades a group of boys and incites other girls to join in the chase routine. The nature of this borderwork seems somewhat different from the typical invasion borderwork that Thorne (1993) reports taking place among the American children, although it seems to be a reversal of the old boys-chase-girls routine. Although gender seems to be a likely reason for the chase sequence because it appears to be “boys versus girls,” the children never articulate their reasons for chasing one another. In fact, incidents that could be interpreted as children’s attempts to erect or maintain gender boundaries were fairly rare among the children at the Bologna and Modena preschools.

Not only was borderwork infrequent among the Italian children but the Italian children did not routinely issue challenges that declared an area off limits to the opposite sex. Among the American children in the Head Start class however, this type of behavior was quite frequent. One climbing house in the gymnasium of the building was highly disputed territory and a site for frequent gender boundary work:

As we wait in line to go to the gym, several girls tell me that there is a girls’ clubhouse in the gym and the boys are not allowed in it. . . . Right after [a teacher-directed activity], several girls run to a climbing house and when I arrive I hear them say it is the girls’ clubhouse. They chase out two boys who resist at first, but then run off. There are seven girls involved in this play including two from another class now in the gym. It is clear that there is a history to this play. . . . Later the girls abandon the house and several boys enter and climb and say that “Now we got the clubhouse!” The girls are playing elsewhere and do not notice this invasion.

The conscious labeling of gender and negotiation of space demonstrates that gender is an important marker of identity within this particular peer culture. In this case, gender is a salient enough identity that two girls from other classes join into the play and are immediately accepted because they meet the gender requirement for being in the “clubhouse.” In both the U.S. and the Italian preschools, girls were most likely to initiate borderwork. Out of the nine incidents we coded as borderwork, seven were clearly initiated by girls, and in the other two episodes, it seems that boys and girls were equally responsible for instigating the exchange. This confirms research that demonstrates that girls tend to show preference for sex segregation at an earlier age than boys (Martin, 1994, pp. 37-38).

Although it is easy to suspect that this gender segregation may be something that is encouraged by adult teachers, it appears to be much more a product of the children’s culture. When we asked a teacher about designation of a boys’ side and a girls’ side in another episode at the Head Start program, the teachers said

they did not create the division but the children often insist on the separation. Thorne (1993) found similar behavior in the elementary school students who made a great deal of effort to establish single-sex lines, tables, and other spaces, despite many teachers' efforts to mingle boys and girls.

At Campus Heights Preschool, gender was much more likely to be constructed through joking and discussion rather than more obvious borderwork. When the children spoke about gender, they often did so in the context of discussion about adult relationships such as marriage. Indeed, they seemed fascinated by the idea of marriage and related topics such as babies and sex. They often joked with one another about getting married and having babies, as in the following interaction:

Ruth, Mary, and Anita are sitting at a table with the researcher. While working on her portfolio, Ruth says, "Oh, I remember this [a writing page]. I really loved doing this!" Anita says, "Well, if you love it so much, why don't you marry it?" All of the children laugh at the joke. Anita says she saw that on a commercial. Mary agrees saying it was a commercial for Cap'n Crunch. There is more talk about marrying it, and then Ruth says, "Why don't you kiss it and have babies with it?"

In this episode, the children display some knowledge of how love, marriage, and sex are connected and they are eager to talk about such matters. Furthermore, at least some of this knowledge has been gathered from the media, in this case a commercial for a popular children's cereal. Ruth further expands the initial joke by using her peers' familiarity with the connection between marriage, kissing, and babies to get a laugh. Joking and teasing about getting married and having babies was a frequent theme in discussions at Campus Heights Preschool. In another exchange, we can see how the children interpret what they have heard from adults and peers about getting married:

Veronica . . . says that she and Martin are going to get married. Martin agrees and says they are going to be doctors. "And live in New York," says Veronica. "Are you going to kiss and do sex?" asks Mark. The others laugh at this and then meeting time is announced.

Children are often intrigued by what they have heard about adults and their lives and occasionally they use this information to predict what their own life courses may be like. In this episode, discussion leaps from talk about Veronica and Martin's idealized future to joking about kissing and sex. These activities seem to be firmly connected in the children's minds, and for them, this connection is a rich vein of humor. It is not apparent how much the children know about more taboo subjects such as sex. However, the information they do have is likely to be passed on to them from their peers or gleaned from mass media, and the children like to demonstrate their competence in this area to their peers.

Although the children enjoy joking about subjects they find titillating, it becomes apparent from this particular discussion that marriage is considered

very important, if not inevitable, by the children: “At snack, Sean says he will not get married when he grows up. Mark says, ‘You have to or you will live alone and be lonely!’” Mark seems surprised to hear Sean dispute the idea that people must marry when they become adults, and he reacts by pointing out the problems Sean would have with a solitary life. Although this exchange is brief, such discussions among peers are important because they represent peer culture knowledge on what constitutes proper relations between men and women. Based on the children’s discussions, marriage seems to be an inevitable outcome for the lives of all people. By asserting the importance of getting married, Mark reconfirms the focus the Campus Heights peer culture has on matrimony as central to male/female relationships.

Unlike the other children we observed, the children at Campus Heights Preschool were much more preoccupied with talking about future life course events such as marriage and having children than either the Head Start or Italian children. This “marriage talk” is significant in that it provides a script for what a close relationship between a male and a female entails. This script changes the way children look at their opposite-sex classmates and it encourages children to think about relationships between people of the opposite sex as fundamentally different than relationships between people of the same sex. Because there is no well-defined model of what a close platonic friendship between a boy and a girl might look like, cross-sex relationships are likely to be coded by the children as romantic in nature even when they seem completely platonic.

Although childhood crushes seem fairly innocuous, it is still clear that the children are aware of the power of sexual talk. In an example we discussed earlier, during free play outside one day, two girls used sexual talk to try to threaten two boys:

There are some run-and-chase games with Anita, Ruth, and Sarah chasing Sean and David who come over to a big rock where [the researcher] is sitting and claim it is a home base. Once when Anita and Sarah chase Sean and David they start to pull up their shirts and say, “You want to see my bra?” Anita says, “I have a bra for my belly button” and holds up her shirt to show her belly button. Sarah tells [the researcher], “I really have a bra at home!”

Although the girls are far too young to actually have breasts, they are aware that women develop breasts and have to wear bras. Furthermore, they seem to grasp that displaying breasts is threatening for boys in some way, and they use this knowledge to enhance their run-and-chase play. Although the children at Campus Heights were by no means completely gender segregated, it seems that consciousness of these scripts influenced the nature of cross-sex interaction and provided a charged atmosphere that made boy-girl play seem risky. Of all the sites, Campus Heights demonstrated the highest levels of gender segregation, and this climate is likely a contributing factor.

As many researchers have pointed out, another possible reason why boys and girls prefer same-sex playmates is because they discover that their attempts to

initiate play are less likely to be rebuffed by a child of the same sex. In fact, among children, especially elementary-school-age children, a child who consistently plays with others of the opposite sex is likely to be labeled a “sissy” or “tomboy.” These labels, especially that of sissy, can carry powerful social stigma, and many children are very conscious of the problems that can come with being labeled. One incident in the Head Start preschool showed how such labels are used to rebuff attempts to establish cross-sex play and friendships:

Alysha and Delia are putting together a large puzzle of a school bus on the floor near the circle area. They are working together to fit the pieces properly. Since the puzzle has such large pieces, it is not demanding and the girls make quick progress. When they are about to finish the puzzle, Ramone comes over and asks to play. Delia says, “If you play with girls, then you are a tomgirl!” Ramone takes this as a rejection and moves away briefly, but then comes back and picks up a piece of the puzzle. Delia takes it away and says that when she plays with boys she is called a tomboy so if Ramone plays with them he is a tomgirl. She also says that they do not want Ramone to play anyway and Alysha agrees. Ramone now moves to another part of the classroom.

To give some context to this interaction, it is important to note that Ramone had been trying to establish a close friendship with Delia for at least 3 months, at times even claiming that they were boyfriend and girlfriend. Ramone often stayed close by Delia and he claimed that the two were friends, and although Delia played with Ramone, she never verbally agreed to his assertions of friendship. These thwarted attempts at friendship were a continual source of frustration for Ramone, but he was persistent in trying to establish a relationship with Delia in spite of her resistance. Even though he rebounds from the initial rejection in this instance, Ramone eventually leaves when Delia reasserts her objections and the girls assure him that they have no intention of playing with him.

What is intriguing about this exchange is the use of the term “tomgirl” to discourage Ramone from playing with the girls. Not only does this term seem to be an interesting adaptation of the “tomboy” label but it also changes the nature of the rejection from “Don’t play with me” to “Don’t play with girls.” Furthermore, when Delia explains the unfamiliar term “tomgirl,” she reveals that she herself has been teased for playing with boys. Delia perpetuates the use of these labels as part of their peer culture even though she makes it clear that the main reason she does not want to play with Ramone has nothing to do with his gender. From this exchange, we see the complexity of how children construct gender and perpetuate the use of gender as a tool to categorize and exclude in this peer culture.

If we were only to look at instances of borderwork among the Head Start children, one might envision the Head Start center as strictly divided by gender. Conversely, there seemed to be substantial flexibility in the children’s play despite some vocal borderwork. In fact, there was a significant amount of nonstereotypical play among boys:

#### Family Center

Luke, Tony, Morris, and Jeffrey select the area by placing their name tags in the holder on the poster with pictures of the various areas of the school. When they reach the area, each boy begins taking out dishes, setting the table, taking clothes off hangers, and so on. Shortly after they arrive, another boy (Charles) tries to enter and they tell him that he cannot because there are already four people and they suggest that Charles find another area. Charles goes off to do so without protest. The boys continue to make food, sweep the floor, make phone calls, and try on clothes. There is little coordination of these activities into a particular play theme, nor are clear roles assigned. After about 10 minutes, Tony leaves with no marking and then Joseph enters the area shortly after. There is some coordination for a few minutes as the boys serve food to the researcher and ask some questions. There are also a few sustained telephone calls. The play ends with the announcement of cleanup time.

This and other similar play episodes demonstrate that many of the boys are in fact interested in activities that are usually only participated in by girls. There was, in fact, quite a bit of flexibility in play, which seems to contradict assumptions about a correlation between interest in single-sex activities and gender boundary work. If the reason that children affiliated themselves with members of the same-sex was simply due to interest in the activities traditionally associated with one sex or another, it seems that gender would be less salient among the children who are more flexible in their interests. Instead, we see that there is a rich culture among the Head Start children that includes both vocal gender bordermarking and flexibility in sex-stereotypical play.

Another way to examine assumptions about gender and children's play is to find examples of behavior that challenge what we may think about the way boys and girls play. Maccoby (1990) claims that girls tend to segregate themselves from playing with boys because boys are more aggressive and they tend to order one another around, whereas girls are more gentle and polite with one another. Other researchers, such as Corsaro (1994), Goodwin (1990, 2001, in press), Kyratzis (2001), and Kyratzis and Guo (2001), have pointed out that these assumptions are based solely on White, middle-class, American children and do not reflect the behavior of children of other groups. Goodwin (1998) found that African American and Latina girls were quite assertive in their speech and actions during games of hopscotch and Kyratzis and Guo (2001) found that in same-sex and some cross-sex contexts, Chinese girls used many more bald imperatives than their male counterparts.

With both the Head Start children and the Italian children, assertive, directive speech from girls was quite common. For example, one girl in the Head Start class showed little hesitation with aggressively disputing a classmate's claim to a notebook during police play:

A girl Delia asks to write her name in the researcher's notebook when she sees him taking notes in jail [where he has been locked up by boys playing police]. He lets her, but as she writes Dominic comes over and wants the notebook. Delia tells him,

“Get out of my face while I write this name!” The researcher tells her she is talking to the police. She then says, “Get out my face, police!”

Overall, this type of behavior was not unusual in any sense as the African American girls were, on the whole, more assertive and independent in their relations with each other and with boys than were the upper-middle-class White girls we studied. Italian girls also were part of a culture that valued *discussione*, spirited debate among peers. Consider the following summary of a videotaped discussion from the Bologna preschool:

Three girls and three boys are sitting around a table drawing pictures when a discussion emerges regarding the existence of werewolves or bad wolves. Sara claims they do not exist, but Giovanna quickly contradicts her saying they do. Sara gives in a little, responding, “They don’t exist, only their bones.” Franco now enters the debate, stating emphatically, “It’s not true, wolves do exist!” Luigi quickly agrees and Franco goes on to claim that they only exist in the mountains. Paolo, who had been painting nearby, now enters the debate saying, “It’s true, they exist!” as he waves his paintbrush near Sara’s face. Sara waves Paolo away saying he is not in the discussion. This statement upsets Franco who pokes Sara in the chest saying then she is not in the discussion. Sara pokes back and starts to say something but is cut off by Franco who says, in so many words, that Sara has no right to exclude others and that wolves do exist. Paolo now extends the discussion by saying ghosts don’t exist. This leads to a series of denials and affirmations with the children eventually agreeing that ghosts live in abandoned houses under the sea.

We see in this typical round of *discussione* that the debate is lively and animated and both boys and girls actively participate (see Corsaro, 1997, for a more detailed analysis of this example). In fact, Sara is chided by Franco for trying to exclude Paolo because everyone has the right to participate in discussions in the peer culture. As a result, it was quite common to see girls asserting their thoughts and opinions with both male and female peers in extended debates during the school day. Both African American and Italian girls, then, seem better equipped to deal with challenges from boys that might cause upper-middle-class White girls to avoid mixed-sex play.

Analysis of the U.S. and Italian sites demonstrates that the nature of cross-sex play and gender segregation varies substantially across racial and ethnic groups in the United States as well as in the different cultures we studied. The children in the Head Start program participated in quite vocal gender boundary maintenance, but boys and girls did not always exhibit the sex-stereotypical behavior that previous researchers have associated with sex segregation. The upper-middle-class White children of Campus Heights Preschool demonstrated a keen interest in gender, frequently making references to marriage and sex, but segregated many of their activities by sex. Bologna and Modena were very similar to each other in that the children enjoyed more cross-sex play and had a collective spirit that undermined division by gender. These examples illustrate how widely

boy-girl interaction varies in different peer cultures and that gender segregation is something that is socially negotiated through peer interaction rather than a universal, individualistic process.

## DISCUSSION

Examination of children's interactions across four different preschool settings demonstrates that although there are some similarities in cross-sex play, the salience of gender and the quality of interaction varies substantially from peer culture to peer culture. Although at least some level of gender segregation seems to be a universal feature in children's play, some peer cultures emphasize gender differences and ritualize cross-sex interactions and in other peer cultures, children do very little to enforce gender boundaries. If children do indeed develop their own unique peer cultures by adapting and interpreting adult culture for their own particular means, it seems logical that children of different cultures would negotiate gender differently in their play. As we saw, Italian children, economically disadvantaged African American children, and middle- and upper-middle-class White American children attribute differing levels of importance to gender identity. This finding suggests that we may get a clearer picture by studying gender segregation as something that is negotiated in children's peer culture rather than a phenomenon that is strictly based on universal biological or cognitive developmental features that inevitably lead to strong segregation between girls and boys.

Studying the children in the Modena preschool, we found that four of the most popular boys at the school and several of the girls frequently participated in cross-sex play. This is not to say that the children did not participate in traditional sex-segregated play such as girls' doll play and boys' sports and superhero play; however, these activities were complemented by dramatic role play that incorporated both boys and girls.

In many play scenarios, then, gender of the participants did not seem to be a salient issue. One likely reason for this difference is that the Italian children were much more familiar with one another because of the structure of the educational institutions in which they were enrolled. Because the Italian children stayed together as a single class throughout their 3-year stay at their preschools with the same teachers, the children were not reshuffled into classrooms with unfamiliar children every year. This format is very different from both the Head Start and the Campus Heights preschools, where the composition of any given class shifted from year to year and long-term acquaintance with classmates is much less common as a result. If, in fact, children do segregate themselves according to their perception of common interests and likeness, as Martin (1994) claims, children who know each other more intimately would be familiar with each other's play interests and would be less likely to rely on gender alone to give them clues about a potential playmate's common interests.

Among the children Martin studied, she also found that a group of the opposite sex was more likely to reject a child's attempts to join in play than a same-sex group. Just as familiarity might lessen the likelihood that children would rely on categorical assumptions about compatibility of play interests, familiarity might make it more likely that children would be evaluated on an individual basis when they attempted to play in an opposite-sex group. As Fernie, Davies, Kantor, and McMurray (1993) found in their study of preschoolers, gender is not the only identity that influences who successfully enters play with opposite-sex playmates—relevant cultural knowledge, social competence, and an even temperament also were passports to cross-sex play. These are all possible factors that mitigate any formalization of cross-sex avoidance in play.

At the Head Start program preschool, gender borderwork was frequent, yet many of the children were flexible in choosing to play in a way that is traditionally seen as marked for the opposite gender. Several of the boys enjoyed acting out traditional household duties such as ironing, washing dishes, and food preparation in the center's family play area and they never expressed reservations about being involved in "girls' play." At times in fact, the family play area, with a maximum allowance of four children, was totally occupied by boys playing house. When Serbin et al. (1994) looked for a correlation between play with sex-typed toys and gender segregating behavior, they found that boys who segregated were not any more likely to play with masculine toys than their nonsegregating peers. The case of these boys seems to confirm these findings because gender-reifying borderwork was common among the Head Start children, but it also shows that children's interpretations of gender within their peer culture can sometimes differ substantially from adult norms.

Of interest, the girls in the Head Start school differed substantially from their White middle-class peers at Campus Heights Preschool in their interaction with boys. The girls were more assertive in their speech with one another and with the boys they interacted with, displaying the kind of "oppositional talk" noted by Goodwin (1990, 1998, 2001, in press) in her research with African American preadolescent girls and boys and African American and Latina preadolescent girls. Similar to the Italian girls who were raised in a culture that valued spirited debate (Corsaro, 1994, 1997; Pontecorvo, Fasulo, & Sterponi, 2001), the girls at Head Start were confident in speaking their minds in interactions with boys and each other. Some researchers have proposed that a likely origin of sex segregation in play is that boys act aggressively and are unresponsive to girls' suggestions (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987; Martin, 1994). Perhaps as a result of their relative comfort with confrontation and their ability to "hold their own," the African American and Italian girls were less likely to avoid play with boys than the White girls at Campus Heights.

The children at the Head Start center, especially the girls, seemed to relish playing with gender boundaries. On several occasions, we observed the children declaring space off limits for the opposite sex. The clubhouse in the gymnasium was one site that had a history in the peer culture as being "disputed territory"

between the boys and the girls. The fact that even girls from different Head Start classes were allowed to join in the play demonstrates that the children viewed gender as an identity that is salient enough to be a basis for affiliation on its own merit. Overall, however, gender segregation was not as complete at the Head Start preschool as it was at Campus Heights Preschool. Boys and girls often played with one another despite frequent borderwork and, if anything, the borderwork seemed more playful than sanctioning.

Gender borderwork among the Campus Heights children was mostly verbal in nature with a great deal of joking and teasing. Many discussions revolved around marriage, sex, and babies and how they were related. The children's conversations were frequently future oriented as the children talked about getting married, having sex, and having children in later life. Although such talk may seem fairly innocuous, it did affect the way that the children viewed each other in regard to gender. Because the children were so conscious of the framework of social relations that surrounds sexual and matrimonial relations between men and women, we argue that they tended to see all relationships between males and females as fundamentally different from relationships between those of the same sex. As a result, the children were more cautious in their interactions with those of the opposite sex because they knew that this relationship was more likely to be a target of teasing and humor. Of all the preschools, Campus Heights had the least sustained play between boys and girls and a likely reason for this is the focus in their peer culture on defining cross-sex relationships, even friendships, as romantic in nature.

Much of previous research has consisted of observation with a quantitative focus, counting the number of boys and girls in a number of different play episodes or coding play behaviors and correlating them with the sex of the child (Fagot, 1994; Martin, 1994). Other research has been experimental, with children studied in artificially created scenarios in a classroom or laboratory environment (Fabes, 1994). Another approach to discovering children's attitudes toward opposite-sex playmates and cross-sex interaction has been to interview either the children or their teachers. There are limitations to this type of information gathering, however, because children as young as preschool age are unlikely to be reliable reporters of their own activities and teachers may have difficulty reporting children's behaviors accurately, especially in a larger class setting.

Although such research is important, in many ways these approaches neglect the complexity of and the subtleties in the peer culture that are reflected in the everyday interactions that children have within their regular social networks. Our research differs in two important ways: First, children are observed within the natural context of their peer culture over long periods of time, and second, the thick description of the ethnographic data allows us to analyze not only the frequency of cross-sex play but also the quality and tone of play. The longitudinal aspect of our research is vital both in the way that this long-term involvement enables us to become well acquainted with the nuances of particular peer

cultures and in the way that it allows us to track children through important life transitions (Corsaro, 1996; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000). The intense ethnographic observation of children across cultural groups and over time enables us to fill in the details about children's lives that are often overlooked in larger, quantitative studies of children from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The behavior can then be interpreted with knowledge of the intricacies that comes with familiarity with peer social networks.

The thick description of interactive episodes is also important in analyses of children's attitudes and behaviors in cross-sex play. Much of children's peer culture is revealed through their dialogue with one another as we see when we look at the borderwork of the Head Start children, the *discussione* among the Italian children, and the marriage talk of the Campus Heights children. Looking at the way that children in Campus Heights Preschool use marriage talk to establish peer norms about the nature of male-female relations enabled us to understand why these children may see cross-sex play as something fundamentally different from same-sex play. Without familiarity with the peer culture of these children and long-term observation, such themes as marriage talk might be overlooked. For these reasons, our longitudinal ethnographic data is ideal for an in-depth cross-cultural analysis of the treatment of gender in children's peer cultures.

Although this analysis has yielded some intriguing results about how gender is negotiated in children's peer cultures, further research is needed to expand our understanding and answer some unresolved questions. First, although all of the research was done using similar methods, observations were carried out over a number of years, with the earliest observations taking place in 1983-1984 and the most recent observations taking place from 1996 to 1998. It would be very productive to analyze how children's peer cultures have changed over time to see if changes in society's handling of gender affect children's peer cultures, for example. Another line of analysis that might be productive would be to compare American schools with a class format similar to Italian schools to see if keeping classes together is the mitigating factor in reducing gender segregation or if cross-sex integration is related to some other facet of Italian culture. There are still many questions that need to be answered, and hopefully further research will examine these important issues and provide us with more insight into children's gender culture.

## NOTE

1. We observed at two sites in the United States: a private daycare and educational center we refer to as Campus Heights Preschool and a government-funded Head Start center. Campus Heights is in a small, midwestern university town. Because the cost for enrolling a child in the school was quite high at Campus Heights, the great majority of the children came from middle- and upper-middle-class families. The racial and ethnic makeup was mostly White, although there were a small number of Asian and African American children at the school. Our research at Campus Heights began in fall 1998 and continued as we observed in the classroom of 17 five- to six-year-old children and their two

teachers twice a week until the end of June. We observed and participated in the children's activities, recorded field notes, and did some audiotaping. We also videotaped several episodes of play and teacher-directed activities in the final months of the study. The Head Start center was located in the inner city of Indianapolis, Indiana. The overwhelming majority of children at the center were African American and from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in order to meet the needs-based rules for Head Start. We observed in two classes with around 15 five- to six-year-old children and their two teachers in each class once or twice a week from October 1989 until June 1990. Again, we took field notes throughout the period and videotaped several episodes of play and teacher-directed activities in the final months of the school term.

We observed in two Italian preschools. In Italy, preschools are publicly funded and more than 94% of all Italian three- to five-year-olds attend. The first site was in Bologna, where we observed a classroom of 35 three- to six-year-olds and their five teachers from 1983 to 1986 with our most intensive period of observation occurring in 1983-1984. We observed and recorded field notes on a daily basis in the intensive period and videotaped a number of episodes of free play and teacher-directed activities in May and June 1984, 1985, and 1986. The second site was in Modena. Here, we entered a group of 21 five-year-old children who had been together with the same two teachers for 2½ years. We entered the setting in late January of their 3rd year and observed on a daily basis until the end of the school term at the end of June 1996. We followed these children to continue our observations when they entered first grade in September and completed our observations in December 1996. We collected a large set of field notes and videotaped episodes of free play and teacher-directed activities mainly in May and June 1996.

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