

### THE GAMING OF GENDER

In my efforts not to homogenise children into one group we should 'draw out' some of the differences to be found within children's experience. Klein (1998) reviews some literature (particularly work by Emma Reynold) on the effects of gender on playground behaviour. My findings will show a similarity with Reynold's work and Thorne's (1993) in that boys are often found to be under the same pressures to conform as girls. As an additional angle on things, I present findings that there may well be a female version of the 'male machismo' at work. Competitive and normalising forces in girls play, that outwardly may seem cooperative in nature, also force girls into conformity along gender lines. But I will also suggest that for children who do attempt to 'cross over' in their play (by taking up a game usually associated with the opposite sex), girls are probably having an easier time of it.

In one class the gender divide was most apparent around the playing of football by boys and the playing on the parallel bars by girls. One or two girls played football and only one boy was ever known to swing on the bars. Using 'the bars' to swing on was seen as "a girls' thing", a 'bodily performance' (Valentine, 1988).

For boys, the playground is mainly a place for football if it is allowed. Social pressure to take part is strong for boys, perhaps even stronger than the pressure on girls not to play. The result is for many more girls to be easily recognisable as engaging in 'border crossing' in their play than boys. It is socially acceptable for girls to play rough and tumble games so long as they maintain allegiance to their gender group by demonstrating their difference from boys in at least some respects. In most cases, the 'cross over' is noticed but yet applauded by both genders if a girl is doing the crossing over.

Girls can play football if they want. Some girls are just as good as boys at football.  
(Upper primary boy)

By contrast, 'Crossing over' for boys is fraught with many more risks of social admonition especially from their own peer group. The boys did not come to voice worries about bullying to a team of (female) playground friends all aged eleven. The boys were 'afraid to come .. they might loose out on the football if they were found out' [that they had gone to the team of friends for assistance]. John occasionally played on the parallel bars (seen as the girls' preserve). When it came up in a class discussion he was very quick to show his behaviour as 'an exceptional lapse' from his normal boyish activities:

I *only* went on the bars for *one minute* and I only went around on them once. And then I played football. (Upper primary boy)

The aspect of gender difference in children's use of outdoor space is far from being fully documented though most studies add to the picture in some way along these lines:

Girl 1: Girls aren't allowed play football even in the playground. (Primary 7)

Girl 2: The boys get more choices. (Primary 6)

Girls' vocality in explaining their exclusion from spaces and activities is far more easily accessible to researchers but this may not be simply a representation of the narrative that girls are the predominantly excluded group in play terms. The girls in one school could actively show me where the 'line' was on the ground that divided them from the soccer area the boys had. Boys' silence in not wishing to be seen to even want to take part in the traditional games associated with girls games is perhaps indicative of their even greater exclusion from activities like skipping, playing with dolls, doing imaginative role play as nurses etc<sup>1</sup>. A story behind the playing of soccer shows that the oppression of women was not the only process involved. The janitor seemed to be very well liked. He regularly received hugs from the girls and gestures of affection. But he told me he did not allow the girls to play football because the training of girls in a team was out of the question. This, he explained, was because there was no arrangement made for a woman to be present while the girls would change. Neither was there any place the girls could change in privacy. The janitor demonstrated men's uneasiness around girls.

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<sup>1</sup> See Nabhan and Trimble (1994, pp66-67) for another story of a similar nature about the differences in boys and girls' games and permission to partake in them. Thorne (1993) gives an in-depth study of gender roles in play. Davies (1993) discusses gendered identities.

Societal pressure on men forces them to distance themselves from caring, affectionate relationships with children and especially girls. Parental and societal fears about strangers, especially men, places men even farther from the young and female except in very public and supervised settings.<sup>2</sup> Out of five primary schools I have visited recently with a total of almost sixty teachers, only two had actively teaching male members of staff; three had male heads; all had male janitors. This kind of learning experience, combined with the absence of many fathers from their homes, places maleness at a more distant reach from children's lives. Often 'the adult male' image is only mediated by television and computer games. A couple of children supported this view. When asked where they thought their mothers got the sense of concern for their safety outdoors, they reported that television was the source.

Because 'the bars' stood out as a focus for girls' activity in one playground I chose to interview some of the different ages that frequented the site. Younger ones claimed they were being pushed off; older ones claimed they were being protective of younger ones and kept them away from the bars; the janitor had other ideas entirely different from the girls about how many could get up at a time. Primary three is a time when access to the bars becomes an outside option. Most said that P3s were not allowed. P3s did not agree. P3s and P4s had mixed emotions about 'getting up', mostly fear mixed with excitement and challenge.

Girl: I'm afeared of goin' on them because people are walkin' along [nearby] an I fell off them.

Girl 2: You think you're goin' to fall off them.

Girl 3: It's just really fun.

Girl 4: There's another girl in primary five and she thinks she's the best 'swinger' ... she swings and swings .. and there's another girl in primary seven who swings and all that.

As it turned out this last mentioned girl was looked up to by some and thought of as a 'show off' by others. Even her best friend agreed with me in guffaws of laughter that she is

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<sup>2</sup> We can provide other stories that supports the view that men work around and under a fear of public admonition and accusation even when their motives may be harmless. A friend of a colleague of mine, now divorced from his wife, is father to an eleven year old pubescent daughter from that marriage. She has an obviously developing body. He reported his apprehension when his daughter expresses a wish to join him in bed for security when she would visit. His fears centred around the worry that should she report sharing her Dad's bed for the comfort a child often needs, others might think there were other interests being served.

thought of as ‘the queen of the bars’ with a ‘record of 108 spins non-stop!

*I: So you are the oldest, most regular users of the bars?*

Girls (P7Gs): Yeah.

*I: Does that mean that you are seen by the younger children in a certain way?*

P7Gs: Yeah.[emphatically]

*I: How do they see you then?*

P7G 1: They just push us off and try to get on the bars

P7G 2: We don’t want them doing what we do. I’d feel terrible if one of them hurt themselves doing what we do.

*I: So you feel protective of the younger ones?*

P7G 1: Yeah [less conviction]

P7G 2: Sometimes we come after school.

*I: And would you do more challenging things at that time?*

P7G 2: Yeah, .. you get dared.

...

P7G 1: Once I stood on the bars and jumped off but I wouldn’t do it again [during school time] .. because I’d be afraid they’d try to copy me.

The younger girls are faced with a difficulty here. They are excluded from access until in primary four because of the way the playground is segregated. They have to follow the janitor’s rules or break them (as most did) to have more than two on at a time. And, they were faced with the domination (as they saw it ) of the P7s of the bars during most of the playtime.

P4G 1: Joanne [a P7G], she’s a pain

P4G 2: If we’re on them [the bars] they’re just jealous.

The ability to ‘get up’ was elementary but initiatory and a necessary ability to become involved.

P4G: Caroline, she’s only able to get up on the bars.

After that, the ability to hang off them and swing in various directions were the next challenges.

P7G: I went to 109 [swings] once without stopping and then I fell backwards.

Clear peer control of this setting was one layer in the picture.

P4G: Some P5s push us off ... they like push you and climb on top of you.

We can usefully see this space as cognitively structured in terms of the functions it fulfilled physically and socially. Only *some* of the challenges facing these children could be described as developmental in any Piagetian sense. 'The bars' was a morally carved up space too with varying adult and child driven moral choices being imposed about who should go there and when in terms of age or gender etc.. Mainly, though, it was an aesthetic space 'just for fun'. It provided these young people with ample opportunity to navigate a course for life inclusive of the inconsistencies of their moral, aesthetic, and cognitive selves. The business of 'living a life' is seen by some as an improvisation. The sense of competition, the awareness of body strength and body contact, the use of whole-motor activity associated with bar use by the girls in my study are reminiscent of previous authors descriptions of boys' games (Sutton-Smith, 1989). Perhaps we need to look again at our stereotypical divide between the types of activity preferred by girls and boys in the late 90's.

The navigation of a life course is fraught with inconsistencies for most of us, adults and children alike. Life choices are about compromise. The girls in this discussion are telling how they make life choices in order to plot a course for an unknown destiny: their own expression of 'girl-identity' through their performances with their bodies and clothes. They navigate between stereotypical rocky outcrops (like 'being seen as a tomboy') upon which they do not wish to founder, yet chart a course that lies acceptably within ideas of what it is to be a woman / girl.

*I: Do you wear t-shirts to school so that you can use the bars?*

Girl 1: I wear them to keep warm.

Girl 2: I don't wear skirts ... I hate 'em.

Girl 1: If you have a skirt on you usually have shorts on underneath.

*I: Do you ever wonder if you might get called a 'tomboy' or something?*

Girl 1: No not like Jane!! [lot of giggles from both]

Girl 2: She's in primary five.

Girl 1: She's a tomboy.

*I: What does that mean?*

Girl 1: She dresses up like a boy and acts tough like a boy.

*I: So, what else makes up a 'tomboy' .. like what do you have to do, or be, or wear?*

Girl 1: She plays football ... which like ... am ... I do sometimes but not like she does.

*I: Go on.*

Girl 2: And she gets her hair cut short like a boy and she says she's gettin' her hair cut up to there [demonstrates how high]

*I: And is this something you would not like to be called yourself?*

Girl 1 and 2 : No! No!

Girl 1: I'd be too embarrassed to walk out the door [looking like that?]

*I: But you all play football as well?*

Girl 1: I only play football once a week and that's on Fridays [a girls' soccer team]

Hetherington (1996) draws on Hall (1990), agreeing that identity is a non-essentialist concept. He says that 'it is the use of difference to establish coherence that is the most significant in the process of identity formation. most notably , when the identity in question is an elective one.' (Hetherington, 1996, p43). The girls' wish for a sense of belonging with the fictional group of certain kinds of girls. They do this by not identifying with others that are different to create a story about their own otherness. Identity is not an innate derivation but 'a play of difference within identity positions which are articulated through a dialogue between their constituent parts.' (p43)