

In what ways do play activities produce social hierarchies among children?



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This essay will focus on play activities amongst children, children being any individuals below the age of 18 according to the Convention on the rights of the Child (accessed 20 June 2011), and various forms of play relating to imaginary worlds, inclusion and exclusion games, lastly the separation of the sexes between girls and boys. This essay will assess how social hierarchies can appear during play activities.

Firstly, it will look at how rejection can happen during play, creating hierarchy and power, secondly how genderisation and heteronormativity can create a sense of hierarchy, thirdly how the tension between femininity and masculinity also reflect this and fourthly how some games reflect surrounding distaste for ethnic and economically impaired minorities and lastly how some children might actively not take part in socially hierarchical games. All of this will be observed within culture specific contexts.

It would appear that children's play often mirror what they can observe in their surroundings and daily life activities and also how they reflect structure and social values of adult society (Gregor, cited in Barnes and Kehily, 2003, p27). As in society, exclusion can happen. Mainly because an individual will not conform to a culturally specific norm or fails to pass some specific test required for her/his inclusion or lacks in some particular requirement to be included in a group.

This promotes a sense of power and hierarchy in children's cultural world as American sociologist Barrie Thorne observed (cited in Barnes and Kehily, 2003, p31). Children, to fit their specific needs, which will then prompt the

acceptance or rejection of another child, recreate values. In the video 3, bang 2, we can observe a form of exclusion happening because one of the girl is failing at sticking to the rules properly, which then prompts her exclusion from the game, girls are being eliminated until only one is left the winner, a sense of pride radiates from the girl winning the game.

This is only a temporary rejection. More cultural stereotypes and social prejudices can create longer-term exclusion or inclusion as Cohen noticed (cited in Barnes and Kehily, 2003, p21), such as sexism and racism, this will be referred to below. Being included can also mean a self-challenge. Sean in Oakland (Video 3, Band one) offers an example of such a situation where he sees challenging himself to compete with other boys to go through a pitch dark tunnel, which has a pit in the middle of it, as a display of a certain pride.

By doing so, he feels a sense of belonging to a group of other children just like him who achieved the same feat. He boldly challenges the viewer to the task that we cannot do. This is another form of inclusion or exclusion based on the individual self worth and ability at mastering their own fear. Here gender is not an issue as such, the self worth and ability to push your own boundaries are the key to the inclusion. But in other games gender and heteronormativity represent a cause of inclusion and exclusion and a sense of hierarchy. Heteronormativity is an accepted norm across most cultures around the world.

Daily habits and adult social interaction mirror this fact so do children in their play. Coming with this sense of heteronormativity is a notion of patriarchy. Female children can in turn suffer the same aggression and repression as

any women, being left out for who they are and considered inferior to take part in games with boys. An example of this can be found in Thorne's observation of a playground where girls are considered as carriers of contagious germs, then having to carry the label of 'cootie queen or king' depending on which boy got in contact with a 'contaminated' girl.

Boys, as she explains treat girls as inferior and anything related to them as polluted in some way. Girls did not replicate this form of identification regarding the boys. The playground is thus a reflection of the general mentality that is current in contemporary United States, reproducing inequities and hierarchy based on sex and gender differences. Also, gendered grouping also happens in the playground, where boys will have a certain tendency to group together and girls would do the same, this seem to happen across culture no matter what (Barnes and Kehily, 2003, p31).

Thorne coined the term 'borderwalk' to conceptualise this idea that single sex friendships get created during play times and that it also reinforce the boundaries that already exist originally and that reflect society. Thus instilling and repeating an heterosexual behaviour, behaviour that is also reinforced by teachers and other adult in schools (Epstein, cited in Barnes and Kehily, 2003, p32), it is also strengthened by the their games and song that readily portray heterosexual behaviour, offering no other possibility to identify differently, hence consolidating this sense of gendered hierarchy. This type of play and separation also has an impact on how children perceive their masculinity and femininity, offering another ground for social hierarchy. As was noted, children games reflect the culture and society they grow up in.

Mimicking the immediate surrounding adults in their life and therefore acting
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their own understanding of their world and customs, learning from an early age how to portray the gender associated to their birth sex and what it entails.

For girls, they can learn who to portray a sense of femininity, which can often be linked to reproducing motherly tasks in role playing such as feeding a baby, taking care of young children, scolding them, this can be observed during Mellissa and Hadley's role play, where Mellissa is actively playing the mum and reproducing the tasks mentioned above (Video 3, band 3). Girls seem also to be able to display feeling, during games, such as sorrow more readily, display of emotions often linked to a sense of femininity, this was observed by the folklorist Iona Opie (cited in Barnes and Kehily, 2003, p43).

Inherently, by reproducing this model, it reflects the general social gender hierarchy. If girls learn through play what is femininity so do boys learn how to perform masculinity. Amongst boys, boasting, parading, displaying smartness in coming up with a solution to a problem in the playground seem to be common occurrences, such attitude reinforcing and display a sense of power and superiority (Opie, cited in Barnes and Kehily, 2003, p42).

This is also reinforced in the context of group game playing and 'fighting' games, where they can display their sense of competition and achieving higher social position if they succeed in such games. It is also a time when they can display themselves as heroes over other cowards and 'baddies'. As a result the boys who cannot integrate this dynamic are seen as losers and can be rejected all together from the group play (Jordan, cited in Barnes and

Kehily, 2003, p32). Generally, displays of strength, boldness, and opportunism have the potential to show sign of superiority in games.

Proving one's superiority could also happen through promoting the superiority of one's own race. As in repeating and re-inventing skipping rhymes and other jingles that will make fun of ethnic minority groups such as the Asian subcontinent, as it has been noted by Phil Cohen when he observed the cultural and social stereotypes in the UK (cited in Barnes and Kehily, 2003, p31). Another way of reflecting culturally specific social superiority is by the reflection of the parents' economic situation on the toys that they can offer them.

If coming from a comfortable economic background, children will be able to have a variety of toys, like Peter Barnes, in the UK, can recall (Barnes and Kehily, 2003, p37). Coming from poorer families children will be left to make their own toys from scratch and won't be able to attempt a collection of them. The social dichotomy happening here will be reflected in that poorer children would not interact and play with wealthier ones, the middle-class parents would forbid such an attempt (Mary Jane Kehily, cited in Barnes and Kehily, 2003, p38).

Children as a result could feel isolated and resort to other kinds of play activities to fulfil some sense of power and hierarchy. This can happen in a different way, such as deciding to move games and social interactions on to imaginary worlds. In those worlds children, girls or boys, can become their own heroine or hero, where they get to create their own rules, their own character and where they can decide on who they interact with and who can

get to stay or not in their world, those imaginary worlds can be referred to as 'paracosms' (Silvey and MacKeith, cited in Barnes and Kehily, 2003, p29).

Silvey (UK) created such a world as a child that lasted many years where he got to create his own social ordered world with economic and political institutions. He was the one in power and could decide on how to regulate the inner chaos of his world. To conclude, children play activities do display a certain sense of social hierarchy often linked with a sense of empowerment over a certain individual or group of individuals.

Those play activities, ranging from imaginary worlds, group plays where inclusion and exclusion can play an important role, also often implicate a separation of the sexes, and a tendency to replicate stereotypical norms of behaviour of adult males and females in a specific cultural and social context. Hence, those interactions often mirror, in the children's own perspective on the situation, the social and cultural dynamics of a given place, portraying the social hierarchy inherent to a specific place. Doing this can also be understood as the children attempt to make sense of their own world and interactions. Sometimes, some children refusing to take part in group play activities or to interact with other children will find a sense of power, reproducing their own perception of hierarchy in their own imaginary world. Children find their own ways and language to display social hierarchy that are specific to the social and cultural world they belong to. Word counts: 1677 References: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2011), Convention on the Rights of the Child [online], <http://www2.hchr.org/english/law/crc.htm> accessed 20 June 2011 Barnes, P. and Kehily, M. J. (2003) 'Play and the cultures of childhood', in Kehily, M. J. and Swann, J. <https://assignbuster.com/in-what-ways-do-play-activities-produce-social-hierarchies-among-children/>

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