

Governance Systems of Playground Hierarchies: Power Dynamics and Policy Formation Among Children Fighting for Swing Access

Abstract

This thesis investigates the spontaneous governance systems that emerge on playgrounds, focusing on the swing set as a contested resource. Through observational analysis, the research explores how children navigate resource scarcity without formal regulatory structures. Children develop various mechanisms including procedural authority claims, distributive justice arguments, and strategic compliance behaviors. Drawing on frameworks from developmental psychology and political sociology, this analysis positions the playground as a sociopolitical space where basic patterns of human resource negotiation can be observed taking their first form.

Significant parallels exist between playground governance mechanisms and adult political systems, suggesting that certain aspects of political behavior may emerge naturally from human interaction rather than exclusively through formal education. While avoiding deterministic claims about the relationship between childhood play and adult politics, this thesis proposes that playground interactions offer valuable insights into how governance concepts develop and how humans balance individual desires against social constraints. These findings contribute to our understanding of how governance patterns emerge organically in human groups and how procedural power operates in both formal and informal contexts.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Traditional governance studies typically focus on formal institutions and codified structures, often overlooking how regulatory mechanisms emerge spontaneously in informal social settings. This gap becomes particularly evident when considering childhood social spaces, where governance forms without formal education in political systems. Corsaro (2018) suggests that children's social worlds constitute complex interpretive communities deserving serious academic consideration rather than dismissal as mere rehearsals for adult life.

The playground swing set presents an intriguing microcosm for examining how humans organize themselves around scarce resources. With typically four swings available to many more potential users and minimal adult intervention, children must develop their own systems for allocating access. These improvised frameworks reveal patterns that offer insights into fundamental aspects of human governance.

1.2 Relevance and Significance

This research potentially illuminates how governance patterns emerge naturally through social interaction rather than exclusively through formal education or institutional structures. Bloch and Pellegrini (1989) note that children's play serves not just as recreation but as a complex arena for social learning and status negotiation. This thesis extends their work by examining specifically how resource allocation systems develop spontaneously in these contexts.

Such an approach offers a fresh perspective on longstanding questions in political sociology and developmental psychology. Goodwin (2006) argues that children's social organizations constitute "serious business" that shapes their understanding of social order. By examining playground dynamics through a governance lens, we gain insights into how humans negotiate the fundamental tension between individual desires and collective constraints, a tension that persists in political systems regardless of their complexity.

1.3 Research Aims and Questions

This thesis analyzes the governance systems that emerge around playground swing sets and considers what these patterns might tell us about human organizational behavior more broadly. Rather than claiming that playground politics perfectly mirror adult governance systems, it seeks to identify commonalities in how humans organize resource allocation across different developmental stages.

The primary research questions guiding this analysis include:

1. What governance mechanisms emerge spontaneously when children compete for limited playground resources?
2. How do children construct and enforce procedural authority without formal regulatory structures?
3. To what extent do playground governance patterns resemble mechanisms in adult political and organizational contexts?
4. What might these similarities suggest about the developmental roots of human governance systems?

By addressing these questions, this thesis contributes to literature on childhood sociology, governance theory, and the developmental foundations of political behavior. It positions playground interactions not as perfect laboratories for political theory, but as relatively transparent stages for observing governance in its early form, unobscured by the sophisticated justifications that often mask similar dynamics in adult contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework: Governance and Power in Social Microcosms

2.1 Defining Governance in Social Settings

Governance encompasses the systems through which groups allocate resources, resolve conflicts, and establish norms. While traditionally linked to formal institutions, Kooiman (2003) describes governance more broadly as "the totality of interactions" aimed at solving problems or creating opportunities. This broader conception allows us to recognize governance processes even in settings lacking formal authority structures, including children's play spaces.

The concept of "governance without government," introduced by Rosenau and Czempiel (1992), provides a useful framework for understanding playground dynamics. They argue that governance can emerge through self-organizing networks even without formal authorities. The playground exemplifies this concept, as children create and enforce rules without adult direction. Bevir (2012) notes that governance involves not only institutions but also the activities of actors who negotiate the rules of interaction.

This approach allows examination of playground interactions not merely as play but as legitimate governance processes through which children negotiate access to resources within social constraints. The swing set becomes a contested resource around which governance naturally emerges.

2.2 Power Dynamics in Unstructured Social Spaces

Unstructured social spaces provide opportunities to observe how power dynamics develop organically. Foucault's (1980) view of power as productive and relational rather than merely repressive helps explain playground interactions. From this perspective, power circulates through relationships rather than being possessed by individuals, manifesting in the ability to influence resource allocation and behavioral norms.

In playground contexts, power emerges through various mechanisms: procedural authority (defining and enforcing turn-taking rules), social capital (friendship networks influencing resource access), and physical presence (the child who stands in front of an occupied swing, creating implicit pressure). These dynamics relate to what Bachrach and Baratz (1962) called the "two faces of power," distinguishing between direct authority and the subtler ability to control which issues are considered legitimate topics for decision-making.

The playground reflects what Bourdieu (1977) might call a "field" where different forms of capital (social, physical, procedural knowledge) compete for resources. Children who understand the procedural mechanics of playground governance access swings more reliably than those who simply wait, showing the practical advantage of procedural knowledge as social capital.

2.3 Childhood Development and Social Organization

Developmental psychology provides essential context for understanding children's governance behaviors. Piaget's (1932) work on moral development established that children progress from heteronomous morality (rules as fixed and externally imposed) to autonomous morality (rules as modifiable agreements). This progression appears in playground negotiations, where children of different ages approach rule-making differently.

Building on Piaget, Kohlberg (1984) proposed a more detailed stage theory of moral development that helps explain children's evolving approaches to fairness. Younger children typically follow "might makes right" principles or simple equality, while older children incorporate concepts of equity and procedural justice.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes how children's social organization forms through interaction with more experienced peers. The playground becomes a zone of proximal development where children learn governance skills by observing and participating in resource negotiations. Corsaro (2018) notes that children don't simply internalize adult models but collectively produce their own peer cultures with unique regulatory norms.

These developmental frameworks help avoid the methodological error of interpreting children's behavior exclusively through an adult lens while still recognizing legitimate parallels between playground governance and more complex political systems. Children's governance behaviors reflect their developmental stage and limited social experience, yet still demonstrate fundamental patterns in how humans organize resource allocation.

3. The Playground as a Sociopolitical Space

3.1 Physical Resources and Social Competition

The playground is not merely a neutral recreational space but constitutes what Lefebvre (1991) describes as a "social space" produced through social relations and embedded with power dynamics. The physical layout of playground equipment, particularly the swing set with its inherent imbalance between supply (typically four swings) and demand (potentially twenty or more children), creates conditions that necessitate governance. This scarcity transforms the playground from simple recreation into an arena of social competition and negotiation.

Swing sets hold particular significance in this analysis for several reasons. Sutton-Smith (1990) observes that swings offer a uniquely desirable form of play combining sensory stimulation with a sense of mastery. Unlike equipment that accommodates variable numbers of users, swing sets have a fixed capacity that makes competition inevitable. Additionally, the extended duration of typical swing use creates temporal conflicts requiring social resolution.

This competition for physical resources resembles what Olson (1965) identified as the fundamental problem of collective action: how to allocate limited common resources balancing individual desires against group needs. The playground becomes a microcosm of resource politics where children confront questions of distributive justice, property rights, and governance systems.

3.2 Territorial Claims and Ownership Concepts

Territorial claims emerge as a primary mechanism through which children establish resource rights on the playground. The declaration "I was here first!" represents what Locke (1689/1988) might recognize as a rudimentary form of property right through first possession. This claim demonstrates an intuitive understanding of a fundamental legal principle that persists in many adult property systems.

Taylor (1988) notes that territorial behavior in children follows predictable patterns, with claims based variously on prior occupation, investment of effort, or social status. On playgrounds, these claims manifest in statements like "I was waiting longer than you" (temporal investment) or "I left my jacket here" (symbolic occupation), serving to establish privileged access to resources.

Such territorial claims constitute what Ostrom (1990) identifies as informal property rights regimes that emerge organically in response to resource competition. While children lack sophisticated language of property theory, they intuitively develop concepts of ownership, possession, and legitimate transfer allowing them to navigate resource conflicts. These emergent property concepts form the foundation for more complex governance systems, as children develop mechanisms to judge competing territorial claims.

3.3 Temporal Authority: The Politics of "Taking Turns"

Perhaps the most common governance mechanism on playgrounds is the concept of "taking turns," a temporal approach to resource allocation attempting to balance individual access against collective need. As Piaget (1932) observed, turn-taking represents one of children's earliest attempts at distributive justice, emerging naturally in play contexts without adult instruction.

The politics of turn-taking involve implicit negotiations about what constitutes a "turn" (How long? What activities count? When does it officially end?). Goodwin (2006) documents how children develop elaborate strategies to negotiate these temporal boundaries, creating and contesting definitions that serve their interests. The child who announces "Everyone gets two minutes" establishes herself not merely as a participant but as a procedural authority, creating and enforcing the temporal framework determining resource access.

This temporal authority resembles what Weber (1978) would call bureaucratic power, authority derived not from direct resource control but from control over processes governing resource allocation. The child positioning herself as timekeeper wields disproportionate influence over swing access without necessarily occupying the swing longer herself. This

separation of procedural authority from direct resource consumption parallels bureaucratic systems in adult governance.

The swing set thus becomes more than equipment; it becomes the focal point for complex negotiations about time rights, procedural authority, and distributive justice. Through these negotiations, children begin to develop understandings of governance extending beyond simple "might makes right" approaches to resource competition. They create temporal regimes attempting, however imperfectly, to balance individual desires against collective access, the fundamental challenge of all resource governance systems.

4. Procedural Authority in Playground Dynamics

4.1 Rule Creation and Enforcement

A striking feature of playground governance is the spontaneous emergence of procedural systems that govern resource access without requiring constant renegotiation. Ostrom (1990) demonstrated in her analysis of common-pool resource management that sustainable governance typically requires clearly defined rules adapted to local conditions. On playgrounds, we observe this phenomenon as children create contextually specific rules for swing access rather than relying solely on case-by-case negotiation.

The confident eight-year-old who announces "Everyone gets two minutes" exemplifies this rule-creation process. Without formal authority, she nevertheless establishes a regulatory framework that others largely accept. This process aligns with what Hart (1961) described as the transition from primary to secondary rules in legal systems, moving from direct prohibitions to rules about how rules are made, changed, and enforced. The timekeeper child creates not just a primary rule (swing duration) but a secondary system (how turns are measured and transitions managed).

This phenomenon is particularly noteworthy because it emerges without adult instruction. Corsaro (2018) observes that children don't simply imitate adult rule systems but create their own regulatory frameworks adapted to their specific social contexts. The playground thus offers a window into rule generation as an organic social process rather than an imposed structure.

4.2 Legitimacy Construction in Child-Created Systems

The effectiveness of child-created rules depends heavily on perceived legitimacy, the collective acceptance that gives a rule binding force despite lacking formal enforcement mechanisms. Weber's (1978) analysis of authority types provides a useful framework here, as playground governance exhibits elements of both traditional authority (established practices: "we always take turns") and rational-legal authority (procedural correctness: "everyone gets the same amount of time").

Legitimacy can be established surprisingly quickly through confident procedural declarations. The child who simply begins counting down "30, 29, 28..." creates an immediate sense of procedural inevitability that others accept despite having no formal right to impose such a system. This demonstrates what Beetham (1991) identified as the performance aspect of legitimacy, where authority reinforces itself through ritualized enactment that signals rule compliance as the expected norm.

However, this legitimacy remains contingent and negotiable. Rawls (1971) noted that perceived procedural fairness significantly influences rule acceptance. When children detect inconsistent application, such as when the timekeeper subtly extends a friend's turn through creative counting, legitimacy erodes. The playground thus demonstrates both the power and fragility of procedural authority, showing how governance systems require ongoing legitimacy maintenance through at least the appearance of fair application.

4.3 Procedural Knowledge as Social Capital

One of the most significant insights from playground governance is how procedural knowledge functions as a form of social capital, conferring advantages in resource competition beyond formal rights or physical dominance. The child who understands the mechanics of playground governance, knowing when and how to invoke rules, how to position themselves as procedural authorities, and how to create legitimacy through confident declarations, accesses swings more reliably than the child who simply waits their turn.

This pattern reflects what Bourdieu (1986) termed "cultural capital," knowledge and skills that confer social advantages, often in ways less visible than economic or physical capital. Children who possess greater procedural literacy navigate the playground's informal governance systems more effectively, securing disproportionate access to desired resources without necessarily being perceived as rule-breakers or bullies.

Lukes (1974) would recognize this as the "third face of power," the ability to shape the very terms of engagement in ways that advance one's interests. The child who positions herself as timekeeper doesn't simply compete within an established system; she shapes the system itself in ways that enhance her influence over resource allocation. This procedural advantage mirrors mechanisms in adult institutions, where procedural expertise often trumps formal authority in determining actual outcomes.

The playground reveals something important about human organization: our systems often drift toward control by those who master procedural mechanics rather than those with formal authority or theoretical rights of access. Habermas (1984) might observe that the ability to set the terms of discourse, to establish what counts as a "turn" or a "fair" allocation, constitutes a form of power that operates below the surface of formal rights declarations.

This insight has significant implications for understanding governance more broadly. The playground demonstrates how procedural literacy, the ability to navigate, manipulate, and create regulatory frameworks, functions as a distinct form of power that operates alongside and sometimes supersedes formal authority structures. Those who understand "how things

work" rather than just "what the rules say" gain disproportionate influence over resource allocation across contexts from playgrounds to bureaucracies.

5. Resource Allocation and Distributive Justice

5.1 Fairness Concepts in Childhood

Children's negotiation of playground resources reveals evolving concepts of fairness and distributive justice that mirror fundamental principles in political philosophy. When a child protests "But you've had three turns already!" they invoke what Deutsch (1975) identified as the equality principle, the notion that resources should be distributed equally among participants. This principle, while straightforward, represents one of the earliest fairness concepts to emerge in childhood development.

Damon (1977) documented how children's justice concepts develop sequentially, beginning with self-interest justifications ("I should get it because I want it"), progressing to strict equality ("everyone gets the same"), and eventually incorporating more nuanced concepts of equity and desert. The playground provides a natural setting for observing this developmental progression, as children of various ages bring different justice concepts to bear on the same resource conflicts.

These fairness concepts emerge spontaneously in playground contexts without formal instruction. Turiel (1983) demonstrated that children distinguish between moral, conventional, and personal domains from an early age, treating fairness as a moral issue with universal implications rather than merely a conventional rule. The playground reveals this moral dimension clearly, as children express genuine indignation at perceived violations of fairness principles rather than simply noting rule violations.

5.2 Equity vs. Equality in Playground Negotiations

The tension between equality and equity principles becomes particularly evident in playground resource conflicts. While younger children typically advocate strict equality (identical time allocations regardless of circumstances), older children begin to incorporate considerations that Rawls (1971) would recognize as equity-based, distribution according to relevant differences rather than strict mathematical equality.

These equity claims take various forms on the playground: "She just got here and I've been waiting forever" (temporal investment), "He's too big for the baby swings" (appropriateness of use), or "She doesn't even swing properly" (resource utilization efficiency). Each represents an attempt to move beyond strict equality toward distribution based on considerations that the child deems morally relevant.

The evolution from equality to equity principles parallels what Gilligan (1982) described as the development from a "justice perspective" focused on abstract rights to a "care perspective" that considers concrete circumstances and relationships. Older children increasingly incorporate relationship considerations into their distributive decisions, adjusting rules to accommodate friends or younger children in ways that reflect emerging concepts of need-based distribution.

This progression shows how children naturally develop more sophisticated justice concepts through social negotiation, moving from simplistic equality principles toward more complex equity considerations that balance competing moral claims. The playground thus serves as a developmental space where children refine their understanding of distributive justice through practical application to concrete resource conflicts.

5.3 The Emergence of Merit-Based Allocation Systems

Perhaps the most sophisticated distributive systems to emerge on playgrounds are those based on merit, allocation according to skill, effort, or contribution. These systems reflect what Nozick (1974) termed "entitlement theory," where distribution is justified by the process of acquisition rather than by need or equality considerations.

Merit-based allocation manifests in playground contexts through competitions that determine resource access: "Whoever can jump from the swing the farthest gets to go next" or "Let's see who can swing the highest." These systems represent a significant evolution in distributive thinking, creating procedural frameworks that justify unequal access through performance rather than wait time or other more egalitarian metrics.

These merit systems are noteworthy for their combination of procedural legitimacy with distributive inequality. Bell and Schokkaert (2000) observe that merit-based systems often gain acceptance despite producing unequal outcomes because they satisfy procedural justice intuitions. The process itself seems fair even when results vary significantly. Children who might protest direct claims of superior access rights ("I'm better so I get more turns") often accept the same outcome when produced through a competition ("I won the contest so I get more turns").

The emergence of these merit systems demonstrates how playground governance naturally evolves toward more complex justifications for resource allocation, incorporating performance metrics alongside more basic fairness principles. This evolution parallels the development of adult justification systems for unequal resource distribution, suggesting that the fundamental tension between equality and merit has developmental roots in childhood social organization.

Through these evolving distributive systems, the playground reveals children grappling with the same essential questions that animate political philosophy: What constitutes a fair distribution of limited resources? Which differences between individuals justify differential access? What procedural systems produce legitimately unequal outcomes? Their answers may be developmentally limited, but the questions themselves reveal the emergence of fundamental governance concepts long before formal political education.

6. Performative Compliance and Authority Figures

6.1 Adult Supervision as External Governance

The presence of adults fundamentally alters playground governance dynamics, introducing what Foucault (1977) would call an external disciplinary gaze, a form of power that operates through observation rather than direct intervention. Adults constitute a meta-governance layer existing alongside children's self-organized systems, creating complex interactions between internal and external authority structures.

James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) note that adult supervision of children's spaces typically operates through a combination of distant monitoring and occasional intervention, creating a regulatory environment where children retain significant autonomy while remaining aware of potential adult oversight. This awareness produces what Goffman (1959) called "audience segregation," the maintenance of different behavioral performances for different observers.

The adult regulatory presence is interesting because it operates primarily through potential rather than actual intervention. Hope (2005) observes in his analysis of surveillance in educational settings that the mere possibility of observation often proves sufficient to alter behavior, creating authority that requires minimal active enforcement. Children modify their playground behavior not because adults consistently enforce rules but because they might observe and intervene.

This adult governance layer creates a complex regulatory environment where children must navigate both peer-created norms and adult expectations, sometimes finding these systems in tension. The playground thus demonstrates what Rhodes (1997) terms "governance as multi-level governing," the interaction of multiple regulatory systems operating simultaneously within the same social space.

6.2 Behavior Modification Under Observation

When adults approach playground areas, children's behavior undergoes remarkable transformation. Competitive resource claims suddenly give way to performances of turn-taking and rule-following. This pattern exemplifies what Bernstein (1990) calls "recontextualization," the rapid adaptation of behavior to match the expectations of a new authority context.

The speed and completeness of this behavioral shift suggest that children maintain dual regulatory awareness, simultaneously tracking both peer-established norms and adult expectations. Corsaro (2018) notes that children develop sophisticated "underlife" strategies allowing them to navigate adult authority while maintaining peer culture norms, creating parallel behavioral systems rather than simply submitting to adult governance.

This behavior modification isn't mere obedience; it represents strategic compliance designed to minimize adult intervention while preserving maximum peer autonomy. As de Certeau (1984) might observe, children's performative rule-following constitutes a tactical response to adult strategic power, working within imposed constraints while creating spaces for autonomous action. The child who loudly announces "I'll give you a turn next" as an adult approaches isn't simply following rules but actively managing adult perceptions to maintain the social space's autonomy.

The playground thus reveals children as sophisticated governance participants who understand, intuitively if not explicitly, that authority operates largely through perception management. Their behavioral shifts demonstrate not moral development limitations but practical understanding of how governance systems interact, and how strategic compliance can maintain autonomy within supervised spaces.

6.3 Dual Systems of Operational Reality

A significant insight from analyzing adult-child governance interactions is the emergence of dual operational realities, different behavioral and regulatory systems that operate depending on adult proximity. This duality exemplifies what Meyer and Rowan (1977) termed "decoupling" in organizational contexts, the separation between formal structures and actual operational practices.

The swift transformation of playground dynamics when adults approach, suddenly "taking turns" becomes the narrative regardless of what was happening moments before, reveals children's early understanding of this decoupling phenomenon. They develop what Argyris and Schön (1996) would recognize as the distinction between "espoused theory" (what we claim guides our behavior) and "theory-in-use" (what actually guides our behavior), presenting the former to authority figures while operating according to the latter among peers.

This pattern continues into adult institutions, as Brunsson (2002) demonstrates in his analysis of organizational hypocrisy, where companies create environmental policies for public consumption while lobbying against regulations behind closed doors, or nations sign human rights treaties while violating them domestically. The playground offers an early, transparent version of this performative compliance, a pattern that persists throughout human governance systems.

This observation is valuable because it reveals how early humans develop the capacity to maintain multiple operational realities, conforming outwardly to official expectations while operating according to different internal norms. This capacity doesn't indicate moral failure but represents a sophisticated adaptation to complex governance environments where multiple, sometimes contradictory, regulatory systems operate simultaneously.

The playground demonstrates how humans learn to navigate multi-layered governance systems not through formal education but through practical negotiation of everyday resource conflicts. Children develop an intuitive understanding that governance involves both official rules and operational realities, and that successfully navigating social systems requires competence in both domains. This insight has implications for understanding how humans

approach governance throughout life, recognizing formal structures while simultaneously developing practical systems that operate alongside, beneath, or despite those structures.

7. Developmental Aspects of Governance Learning

7.1 Age-Related Differences in Governance Participation

Children's participation in playground governance systems shows clear developmental progression, with distinct patterns at different ages. Selman (1980) provides a useful framework through his stage theory of perspective-taking development, which helps explain how children's approach to resource negotiation evolves as they acquire greater capacity to consider multiple viewpoints simultaneously.

Younger children (approximately ages 3-5) typically engage in what Parten (1932) categorized as parallel play, exhibiting limited awareness of resource coordination needs. Their governance participation tends toward basic territorial claims ("Mine!") and direct appeals to adult authority when conflicts arise. DeVries and Zan (1994) note that these younger children have limited ability to create shared regulatory systems, relying instead on external authority or simple possession claims.

Middle childhood (approximately ages 6-9) brings significant expansion in self-governance capacity. Children at this age, as Hartup (1992) observes, develop more sophisticated peer networks and begin creating complex rule systems to govern their interactions. This age group produces the most elaborate playground governance structures, detailed turn-taking systems, formal role assignments (timekeeper, line organizer), and explicit appeals to fairness principles rather than mere wants or possession.

Older children (approximately ages 10-12) often exhibit what might initially appear as governance regression, less elaborate rule articulation and fewer explicit authority structures. However, as Nucci (2001) demonstrates, this shift reflects not decreased governance capacity but increased internalization of norms, requiring less explicit articulation. These children navigate resource conflicts through subtle social cues and shared understanding rather than formal declarations, representing a more sophisticated if less visible governance approach.

This developmental progression shows how governance participation evolves not merely through increased knowledge but through fundamental changes in cognitive and social capacity. The playground reveals governance as a developmental process that transforms qualitatively across childhood rather than simply a static skill to be acquired.

7.2 Social Skills Acquisition Through Resource Negotiation

The playground functions as what Vygotsky (1978) termed a "zone of proximal development" for governance skills, a context where children develop capacities beyond what they could achieve independently through interaction with more skilled peers. Resource negotiations around desirable equipment like swing sets provide natural opportunities for children to develop social competencies that form the foundation for later political participation.

Eisenberg and Mussen (1989) identify several key prosocial competencies that develop through such peer negotiations, including perspective-taking, conflict resolution, and compromise formation. The child who successfully navigates swing access learns not just about turn-taking but about balancing self-interest against collective expectations, a fundamental political skill that transfers to other governance contexts.

Particularly notable is how playground negotiations foster what Shouse (1996) calls "practical social epistemology," knowledge about how social systems actually function rather than how they theoretically should. Children learn through direct experience which appeals work ("It's not fair, I've been waiting longer"), which role positions confer advantage (timekeeper versus line-waiter), and how to interpret subtle social cues that indicate resource availability or contested claims.

This practical knowledge acquisition differs significantly from formal civic education, which typically emphasizes abstract principles rather than operational realities. Lareau (2011) notes that children develop "natural growth" competencies through unstructured play that often prove more valuable for navigating real-world power structures than theoretical knowledge acquired through formal instruction. The playground thus constitutes an important learning environment for governance skills that formal education often overlooks or undervalues.

7.3 Long-term Implications for Adult Behavior

While this analysis avoids deterministic claims about direct continuity between playground behavior and adult political participation, substantial evidence suggests that early governance experiences shape later approaches to organizational and political systems. Putnam (1993) demonstrated how early experiences with collective problem-solving and self-organization correlate with later civic engagement and institutional effectiveness.

Matthews and Limb (1999) argue that children's experiences in negotiating social spaces directly inform their development as political actors, shaping both their expectations of governance systems and their skills for navigating them. The child who masters procedural authority on the playground develops competencies that transfer readily to adult contexts where similar procedural knowledge confers advantage, from workplace negotiations to community organizations.

Particularly relevant is Henrich's (2020) work on cultural evolution, which shows how behavioral patterns acquired in childhood often persist as implicit models for later social

interaction. The governance patterns children develop through playground negotiation, whether emphasizing strict equality, merit-based allocation, or procedural manipulation, likely influence their intuitive approaches to resource allocation throughout life, operating below the level of conscious political ideology.

The playground thus serves not merely as a stage for childhood governance but as a developmental space where humans acquire fundamental orientations toward resource allocation, authority structures, and procedural systems. While these orientations evolve throughout life, the basic patterns established through early resource negotiations potentially shape adult governance behaviors in ways that formal political education cannot easily override or replace.

This developmental perspective suggests that understanding human governance requires attention not just to formal institutions and explicit political socialization but to the implicit learning that occurs through everyday resource negotiations beginning in childhood. The playground offers insight into this formative process, revealing governance not as an exclusively adult domain but as a fundamental human activity that emerges naturally throughout development.

8. Methodological Considerations for Playground Observation

8.1 Observational Ethics and Limitations

Studying children's playground interactions presents distinct methodological challenges that must be acknowledged to maintain both analytical rigor and ethical integrity. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) emphasize that research involving children requires special consideration of power dynamics and consent issues that differ from adult-focused research. Playground observation, even when conducted with minimal intervention, inevitably influences the interactions being studied.

This analysis acknowledges these limitations, recognizing what Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) call the "observer effect," the unavoidable impact of observation on observed behavior. The presence of an attentive adult potentially shifts children's governance patterns toward greater conformity with adult expectations, creating methodological challenges for capturing authentic peer interactions.

Furthermore, as James (2007) notes, adult interpretations of children's behavior risk imposing adult-centric frameworks that misrepresent children's actual experiences and intentions. The adult observer may perceive governance strategies where children experience only play, or may miss subtle governance mechanisms by focusing on more explicit rule articulations. Corsaro's (2018) ethnographic approach, emphasizing prolonged immersion and attention to children's own interpretive frameworks, offers a valuable corrective to these tendencies, though it remains an ideal rather than a fully achievable methodological stance.

These limitations necessitate epistemological humility in analyzing playground governance, recognizing observations as interpretive rather than definitive accounts of children's social organization. The patterns identified represent plausible interpretations grounded in observation, not scientific findings with statistical validity or comprehensive ethnographic authority.

8.2 Distinguishing Patterns from Formal Structures

A crucial methodological consideration involves distinguishing between observable behavioral patterns and formal governance structures. Giddens (1984) emphasizes in his structuration theory that social patterns emerge through the interplay of individual actions and structural contexts, creating regularities that may lack formal articulation or conscious design.

The playground exemplifies this distinction, exhibiting governance patterns that emerge organically without formal institutions or explicit rule codification. These patterns resemble what Ostrom (1990) terms "rules-in-use" rather than "rules-in-form," operational principles that guide behavior without necessarily being explicitly articulated or formally established. Children create and follow turn-taking systems without committee meetings or written constitutions, demonstrating governance as an emergent property of social interaction rather than exclusively a designed structure.

This distinction proves methodologically significant for analyzing playground interactions, as it shifts focus from formal declarations to practical behaviors, from what children say about playground rules to how they actually allocate resources in practice. Bourdieu (1977) might observe that the researcher must attend to the difference between official accounts of social rules and the practical logic that actually guides behavior, recognizing that the latter often reveals more about governance systems than the former.

The methodological approach employed here thus focuses on identifying recurring patterns in resource negotiation rather than documenting formal governance structures. It examines how children actually secure swing access rather than merely how they articulate swing rules, recognizing that the most significant governance mechanisms may operate through embodied practice rather than explicit declaration.

8.3 Avoiding Overinterpretation of Childhood Behavior

Perhaps the most significant methodological challenge in analyzing playground governance involves avoiding what Boyatzis (1998) terms "projection," the imposition of adult frameworks onto childhood behavior in ways that overinterpret or misrepresent children's actual intentions and understandings. This analysis acknowledges this risk, recognizing that children's playground negotiations reflect their developmental stage and limited social experience rather than sophisticated political strategy.

Piaget (1932) emphasized in his work on moral development that children's understanding of rules differs qualitatively from adult conceptions, evolving through distinct developmental stages that reflect cognitive limitations rather than merely incomplete knowledge. The child

who claims "I was here first" isn't consciously invoking Lockean property theory but expressing a developmentally appropriate understanding of resource rights based on limited perspective-taking capacity.

This methodological awareness necessitates what Clifford (1986) termed "partial truths," interpretations that acknowledge their own limitations and contingency rather than claiming comprehensive explanatory power. The analysis recognizes playground patterns as suggestive rather than definitive, offering plausible interpretations while acknowledging the impossibility of accessing children's full subjective experience or intentions.

However, acknowledging these limitations doesn't require abandoning interpretation entirely. Corsaro (2018) demonstrates that careful observation can reveal meaningful patterns in children's social organization without imposing inappropriate adult frameworks. The methodological approach here attempts this balance, identifying governance patterns while remaining attentive to developmental context and avoiding deterministic claims about children's intentions or the relationship between playground behavior and adult politics.

This methodological stance allows recognition of significant parallels between playground governance and adult political systems without suggesting that children are consciously manipulating social systems. It positions the playground as a valuable observational space precisely because it reveals governance emerging organically from human interaction rather than through formal design or explicit political intention, offering insights into the developmental and social foundations of human organizational behavior that more formal political contexts often obscure.

9. Comparative Analysis: Playground Politics and Adult Governance

9.1 Parallel Structures in Formal and Informal Systems

The playground reveals governance patterns that, despite their developmental limitations, show structural parallels with adult political systems. The confident eight-year-old who establishes herself as timekeeper, wielding procedural authority rather than directly occupying the coveted resource, demonstrates what Weber (1978) would call bureaucratic authority, power derived from controlling processes rather than resources. This same mechanism operates in adult contexts where procedural experts (lawyers, bureaucrats, parliamentarians) wield disproportionate influence through mastery of system mechanics rather than formal authority.

These parallels extend to resource claim justifications as well. Walzer (1983) identifies multiple "spheres of justice" in adult political systems, each with distinct distribution principles. The playground exhibits similar differentiation, as children invoke various justification frameworks depending on context: territorial claims ("I was here first"), temporal investment ("I've been waiting longer"), need-based distribution ("She's younger, let her go"),

or merit-based allocation ("I can swing higher"). These mirror the justification systems that animate adult political debate about resource allocation.

Similarly, the emergence of informal property regimes on playgrounds, systems that recognize prior occupation, symbolic markers (a jacket left on a swing), or temporal investment as establishing resource rights, mirrors what Ellickson (1991) documents in his research on property norms among adult communities. His study of cattle ranchers in Shasta County revealed property systems emerging through social interaction rather than legal declaration, much as playground property concepts emerge without formal instruction or enforcement.

These structural parallels suggest not that playgrounds perfectly mirror adult governance, but that certain organizational patterns emerge consistently when humans negotiate scarce resources, regardless of age or formal political education. The playground reveals governance not as an exclusively adult domain but as a fundamental human activity that emerges naturally throughout development, albeit in forms appropriate to cognitive and social capacity.

9.2 Similarities in Resource Competition Strategies

Beyond structural parallels, playground and adult governance reveal similarities in specific resource competition strategies. The playground child who establishes procedural authority as timekeeper mirrors what Carpenter (2001) identifies as "agenda-setting power" in legislative contexts, where the ability to control process often proves more significant than voting power itself. Similarly, the child who creates rule exceptions for friends ("That wasn't a full turn because your feet touched the ground") demonstrates what Stone (2012) terms "strategic representation" in policy contexts, selectively applying general principles to advance particular interests.

The rapid transformation of playground behavior when adults approach, suddenly "taking turns" becomes the narrative regardless of what was happening moments before, parallels what Brunsson (2002) terms "organizational hypocrisy" in institutional contexts. Organizations maintain official policies that satisfy external stakeholders while operating according to different internal logics, just as children maintain dual behavioral systems that satisfy adult expectations while maximizing peer advantage.

Even negotiation tactics show remarkable consistency across contexts. Fisher and Ury's (1981) work on principled negotiation identifies how successful negotiators shift from positional demands ("I want the swing now") to interest-based solutions ("What if I count to 30 for your turn, then it's my turn?"). This same transition from position-based to interest-based negotiation can be observed on playgrounds as children develop more sophisticated resource allocation strategies.

These strategic parallels suggest that humans develop fundamental approaches to resource competition through practical experience rather than formal instruction. The playground represents not a primitive version of adult politics but a context where these strategies can be observed in nascent form, without the accumulated justifications and formalizations that often obscure similar dynamics in adult contexts.

9.3 Divergence in Justification Complexity

Despite these significant parallels, playground and adult governance diverge substantially in justification complexity, the sophistication with which resource claims are articulated and defended. Habermas (1984) observes in his theory of communicative action that adult political discourse involves elaborate justification systems that appeal to universalizable principles rather than merely personal desire. Children's resource claims, while evolving toward greater complexity with age, generally remain tied to concrete interests and limited perspective-taking.

This divergence reflects not merely rhetorical sophistication but what Kohlberg (1984) identified as fundamental differences in moral reasoning development. Where adult political justifications typically involve "post-conventional" appeals to abstract principles and universal rights, children's playground justifications generally remain at "conventional" levels focused on social approval and rule consistency, or even "pre-conventional" levels centered on punishment avoidance and self-interest.

Furthermore, adult governance systems incorporate what Taylor (2004) terms "modern social imaginaries," complex shared understandings about social order, individual rights, and collective welfare that extend beyond immediate interaction contexts. Children's playground governance, while increasingly sophisticated with age, typically lacks this temporally and socially expanded framework, focusing on immediate resource allocation rather than sustained social order.

These differences highlight the developmental nature of governance participation, reminding us that playground parallels represent emerging governance capacities rather than fully realized political systems. Children are not engaging in politics per se but in developmentally appropriate resource negotiations that contain the seeds of later political participation without its full complexity or scope.

However, acknowledging these differences shouldn't obscure the significant insight that playground observation offers: many fundamental governance patterns emerge naturally through social interaction rather than requiring formal political education. The basic mechanics of procedural authority, distributive justification, and strategic compliance appear across developmental contexts, suggesting they represent fundamental aspects of human social organization rather than exclusively adult political behavior.

This comparative perspective positions playground governance not as a miniature of adult politics but as a valuable window into how humans approach resource allocation before acquiring sophisticated political frameworks, revealing both the developmental roots of governance behavior and the fundamental patterns that persist across contexts despite increasing justification complexity. The playground doesn't show politics in its "purest form," but rather governance in its developmental emergence, a perspective that enriches our understanding of human organizational behavior more broadly.

10. Conclusion

10.1 Key Findings and Theoretical Implications

This analysis of playground governance systems yields several significant insights with broader theoretical implications for understanding human organizational behavior. First, the playground demonstrates how governance emerges naturally through social interaction rather than requiring formal instruction or institutional structures. Children develop complex regulatory systems around scarce resources without adult direction, suggesting that governance represents a fundamental aspect of human social organization rather than merely a specialized adult domain.

The patterns observed around playground swing sets reveal particularly noteworthy governance mechanisms. Procedural authority, control over the processes that determine resource allocation rather than direct resource control, emerges as a powerful form of influence across developmental contexts. The child who positions herself as timekeeper exercises disproportionate influence over swing access without necessarily occupying the swing for longer periods, demonstrating what Weber (1978) identified as bureaucratic authority operating naturally in childhood contexts.

Similarly, the rapid transformation of playground behavior when adults approach reveals children's sophisticated understanding of what Meyer and Rowan (1977) termed "decoupling," the separation between formal compliance and operational reality that characterizes many institutional contexts. Children maintain dual behavioral systems that satisfy adult expectations while maximizing peer advantage, demonstrating an intuitive grasp of performative compliance that persists into adult governance systems.

Perhaps most significantly, the playground reveals how procedural knowledge functions as a distinct form of social capital, conferring advantages in resource competition beyond formal rights or physical dominance. Children who master the mechanics of playground governance, knowing when and how to invoke rules, how to position themselves as procedural authorities, how to create legitimacy through confident declarations, access desired resources more reliably than those who simply wait their turn. This pattern exemplifies what Bourdieu (1986) termed "cultural capital," demonstrating how governance knowledge operates as a form of power that shapes resource distribution across contexts.

These findings suggest that certain aspects of political behavior may emerge naturally from human interaction rather than exclusively through formalized education or institutional design. The playground offers a unique window into governance in its developmental emergence, revealing patterns that persist, albeit in more sophisticated forms, throughout adult political and organizational systems.

10.2 Limitations of the Analysis

This analysis acknowledges several important limitations that constrain its theoretical scope and empirical validity. First, the observational approach employed lacks the methodological rigor of systematic empirical research, presenting interpretive patterns rather than statistically validated findings. Hammersley (1992) emphasizes that observational data

requires cautious interpretation, particularly when researcher positionality may influence both observation and analysis.

Second, the focus on playground swing sets necessarily limits the analysis to a specific resource context that may not generalize to other governance situations. Ostrom (1990) demonstrates that resource characteristics significantly influence the governance systems that emerge around them. The fixed capacity and extended usage time of swings creates specific competitive dynamics that may not apply to other playground equipment or resource contexts.

Third, developmental considerations constrain direct comparisons between playground and adult governance. Children's cognitive and social limitations, as Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1984) documented, create qualitative differences in their understanding of rules, fairness, and social organization. While playground patterns may contain the seeds of adult political behavior, they necessarily reflect developmental stage rather than fully realized political understanding.

Finally, cultural and contextual factors significantly influence playground governance, limiting generalization across settings. Henrich (2020) demonstrates that normative behavior varies substantially across cultural contexts, suggesting that playground governance may take different forms in different communities and educational settings. This analysis, grounded in primarily Western observational contexts, cannot claim universal application across cultural variations in childhood socialization.

These limitations remind us to approach playground governance not as a perfect laboratory for political theory but as a valuable observational space that reveals governance in its developmental emergence. The patterns identified represent plausible interpretations grounded in observation rather than definitive accounts of children's social organization or its relationship to adult political systems.

Despite these constraints, the playground offers something rare in governance research: a context where regulatory systems emerge spontaneously, without the accumulated justifications and formalizations that often obscure similar dynamics in adult settings. By observing these emerging patterns, we gain insight not into "politics in its purest form" but into the developmental and social foundations of human organizational behavior, insight that enriches our understanding of governance as a fundamental aspect of human social experience.

11. Academic Outlook

11.1 Future Research Directions

This analysis of playground governance opens several promising avenues for future research that could extend and refine our understanding of how governance emerges through social interaction. First, systematic empirical research using mixed-method approaches could provide more rigorous documentation of the governance patterns

identified here. Corsaro's (2018) ethnographic methods combined with Goodwin's (2006) conversation analysis techniques would allow for detailed mapping of how children create, contest, and enforce procedural systems around playground resources.

Longitudinal research designs offer particularly valuable opportunities for exploring the developmental progression of governance participation. Following Lareau's (2011) approach to studying childhood socialization, researchers could track how individual children's governance strategies evolve over time, potentially illuminating connections between early playground participation styles and later approaches to organizational and political contexts. Such research would require careful methodological design to avoid deterministic claims while identifying meaningful developmental patterns.

Cross-cultural comparison represents another fertile direction, addressing the limitation of cultural specificity noted earlier. Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa (2009) demonstrate in their comparative study of preschools across cultures that childcare environments reveal significant cultural differences in approaches to social order and authority. Similar comparative research focused specifically on playground governance could illuminate which aspects of resource negotiation represent cultural specifics versus potential human universals.

Experimental approaches also offer intriguing possibilities, particularly for isolating specific variables that influence governance emergence. Following Henrich's (2020) experimental approaches to studying cooperation across cultures, researchers could design play contexts with controlled resource constraints to observe how different conditions influence the governance systems children develop. Such experimental designs could help distinguish which aspects of playground governance reflect resource characteristics versus social dynamics or developmental factors.

Finally, interdisciplinary collaboration between developmental psychologists, political scientists, and organizational theorists could yield particularly valuable insights. Abbott (2001) argues that disciplinary boundaries often obscure connections between related phenomena studied in different academic contexts. Collaborative research examining parallels between childhood resource negotiation and adult governance could bridge these disciplinary divides, creating more comprehensive theories of how humans organize resource allocation across developmental contexts.

11.2 Methodological Recommendations

Future research on playground governance would benefit from several methodological refinements that address the limitations identified in this analysis. First, combining observational approaches with participant interviews could provide greater insight into children's subjective understanding of playground rules and resource rights. Graue and Walsh (1998) demonstrate in their work on researching children's experiences that age-appropriate interview techniques can access children's perspectives without imposing adult frameworks, potentially revealing governance understandings not visible through observation alone.

Video ethnography offers particularly promising methodological advantages for capturing the subtle details of playground governance. Goodwin's (2006) use of video recording to analyze children's social organization demonstrates how this approach can document ephemeral interactions that might be missed in real-time observation, creating more comprehensive and revisable data for analysis. This approach would be particularly valuable for identifying the non-verbal aspects of playground governance that traditional observational methods might overlook.

Participatory research methods involving children as co-researchers rather than merely subjects could provide unique insights into how children themselves understand playground governance. Hart's (1992) work on children's participation in research demonstrates how age-appropriate involvement can generate perspectives inaccessible through adult-centered methods. Children could potentially document their own governance experiences through guided journaling, peer interviews, or photo-voice techniques, revealing understandings that might not emerge in adult-directed research contexts.

Mixed-method approaches combining quantitative mapping of resource access patterns with qualitative analysis of governance strategies would provide more comprehensive understanding than either approach alone. Thorne's (1993) work on gender and playground interaction demonstrates the value of such methodological triangulation for capturing both behavioral patterns and their social meaning. Tracking swing access times and frequencies while simultaneously documenting the justification strategies used to secure access would create a more complete picture of how governance mechanisms influence resource distribution.

Finally, greater methodological reflexivity about the impact of adult presence on playground governance would strengthen research validity. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) emphasize that adult researchers inevitably influence children's behavior, particularly around rule-following and resource negotiation. Research designs that explicitly account for this observer effect, perhaps through extended habituation periods or strategic researcher positioning, would generate more authentic data on how playground governance operates when adult authority is minimally salient.

These methodological refinements would address the limitations of the current analysis while building on its conceptual framework, potentially yielding more rigorous empirical findings about how governance emerges through social interaction in childhood contexts. Such research would contribute not only to our understanding of childhood social organization but to broader theoretical questions about the developmental and social foundations of human governance systems.

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