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Youth

The Origins of Gender Difference in Sport

Sports fandom is not only a man's domain—as it turns out, it is also a boy's. The gendered imbalance of sports fans, research shows, may be a phenomenon that begins before young boys and girls are even aware of any conscious choice to pursue or abandon venues for entertainment and enrichment.[1] To understand better why adult women do not live sports fandom to the same degree and in the same manner as their male counterparts, we need an examination into how and when the first sign of this partition, both real and self-perceived, enters the social sphere of young boys and girls.

Living Proof

In early spring 2011, we took a walk through Burns Park, a small park adjacent to an Ann Arbor elementary school's playground area. The playground space offered an array of different options for the Burns Park Elementary School recess participants, with basketball courts, tetherball posts, four-square areas, jungle gyms, swings, a field for soccer, and both grassy and paved patches on which the children could sit or stand. At first glance, we were convinced that, given our current immersion in research in young children's behavior, we were simply projecting our expectations onto what we were seeing, but a closer look

[1]Jacquelynne Eccles, Allan Wigfield, Rena D. Harold, and Phyllis Blumenfeld, "Age and Gender Differences in Children's Self- and Task Perceptions during Elementary School," *Child Development* 64, no. 3 (June 1993): 830–847.

at the division of activities on the playground led us to realize that we were not imagining things.

Of all the groupings, ranging from a single student wandering the play space without an immediately discernible reason or purpose, to a group of ten to twelve boys playing an organized game of basketball, we saw only one instance of gender mixing. One girl, probably about ten years old, had chosen to participate in a game of soccer on one of the grassy patches, making herself the only girl in a game of around ten total students. That one girl's choice to spend her recess among a group of boys represented the only deviation from the otherwise strict gender segregation that we could see.

In addition to the physical separation of play among boys and girl, the types of activities pursued by each gender group varied significantly. First, there was the difference in the size of the groups partaking in each activity. Overall, we noticed the boys playing in much larger groups, often ten or more of them split into multiple teams and playing organized games. Of a total group of approximately eighty children, we could only spot a handful of boys in groups of three or fewer. The games that these boys played were already created, their rules known by everyone who decided to play, as opposed to being any local and spontaneous invention by the boys themselves. They played basketball, soccer, and baseball, all games that would be easily recognized and named by any onlooker, activities that had become deeply institutionalized in the quotidian culture of contemporary American life.

It was not a warm day, and we wore warm jackets for the walk, but most of the boys had, since recess started, tied their coats around their waists or abandoned them in a heap on the ground. The boys' activities were fast-paced and physically demanding enough to compel them to ditch their jackets and roll up their sleeves, while most of the girls were wandering the area and wearing parkas and gloves.

After a close scouring of the playground, we found that most of the girls were divided into groups of two to three (in no cases do we recall a group of more than five). There was a lot of walking and talking between these small groups, with no clear "activities" or "games" being pursued. In some cases, the group would be on the swings or the jungle gym, but the activity or physical hardware seemed to serve as a backdrop to the primary purpose: talking to the others in the group. Often the girls would be sitting on a bench or on the ground; there was not one instance that day of any large group of girls splitting into distinctive teams or pursuing any detectable "goals," save the principal one of chatting and socializing with each other.

We did not venture close enough to any of these young females' conversations to glean their primary themes or topics (Gossip? Role-playing? Individual story telling?), nor did we get to witness the original formation of the boys'

teams or decipher much of the levels of competition between them, but the visuals we *did* garner that day served as shockingly blatant representations of those principles of young children's activities about which we had previously only read from scholarly sources.

Playground Dynamics

Research suggests that the gendered gestalt of a Burns Park Elementary School lunch recess is not an anomaly in contemporary America, nor, for that matter, in comparable contexts in other advanced industrial democracies, such as Austria and Germany, first-hand familiar to Markovits. It usually requires just a glance at any typical elementary school's playground to discover that children are aware of their gender. Boys and girls—beginning at ages as young as preschool (three or four years old)—are almost completely segregated as far as their social group composition. Furthermore, the activities in which each gender group tends to participate are highly aligned with the most stereotypical behaviors and preferences that hegemonic culture expects of them as they continue through adolescence (when awareness of gender difference is often most heightened) all the way to adulthood.[2]

The nature of boys' play is aggressive, competitive, and often combative. There are "sides," there are "good guys" and "bad guys," seemingly impossible percentages of participants "die," and most importantly, there are almost always winners and losers.[3] Research done by Elizabeth Grugeon shows that boys' activities are relatively chaotic and occur on some type of wide-open athletic field, while the girls' play is characterized by a theme of "closeness and intimacy," featuring role-playing (often in the positions of members of a typical family), collectivity (commonly seen through unison songs, chants, and clapping rhythms), and gossip, all activities that share a "universality of their sociability and friendliness."[4]

The above distinctions might not be particularly surprising, especially considering the crucially formative role that one commonly accords "nurture" in shaping an individual's development (and the concomitant discounting of variations between boys' and girls' behavior as the direct results of innate biological differences between them). Research conducted by Beverly I. Fagot,

[2]Elizabeth Grugeon, "Gender Implications of Children's Playground Culture," in *Gender and Ethnicity in Schools: Ethnographic Accounts*, ed. Peter Woods and Martyn Hammersley (London: Routledge, 1993), 11–24; and Barrie Thorne, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 29–49.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid., 12.

Richard Hagan, Mary Driver Leinbach, and Sandra Kronsberg has shown that the stereotyped *expectations* that adults (parents, teachers, playground supervisors) place on children actually affect the way that a particular act by a child will be perceived by those adults.[5] That is, if an individual adult or a group of adults *expects* that a boy, for example, will display more aggressive behavior than his female peer, then any remotely aggressive acts on his part will be more closely and more often noted. Even relatively nonaggressive acts are more likely to be interpreted as aggressive when there is an underlying expectation that a child is, by nature, going to be more aggressive. This pattern, Fagot et al. find, often has the consequence of eventually contributing not only to the adults' genuine view of that boy as a relatively more aggressive child, but also to the boy's own perception of *himself* as comparatively aggressive. That is, the boy will internalize the preconceived expectations that are placed on him and will be more likely to perceive himself as reflecting those expectations.

While a young girl may actually be acting very similarly to that particular boy, the adults' expectation that she comport herself more passively results more often in ignorance, neglect or even active suppression or denial of any demonstrated aggression on her part. Fagot et al. further show that, in a sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the boy's belief in and perception of himself as an aggressive child often translates to him actually *becoming* one by more frequently carrying out aggressive acts. In other words, he begins to see himself as an individual who is reprimanded for this type of behavior more often than others, and so, even if he did not originally exhibit such behavior, he begins to pursue the very acts that he has come to believe are characteristic—and tacitly expected—of him.[6]

The important concept within this hypothetical example is that expectations and assumptions placed on young children do have the power to have real consequences in terms of the way a child develops his or her character and identity. In a process that involves adults' socially and culturally conditioned perception of children's behavior and the corresponding ways that children are praised or disciplined in response to their behavior, children can end up internalizing the stereotypes under which they operate in a manner in which they grow up to truly embody them. In this way, the widespread fulfillment of stereotypes should not be seen as a proof of their objective truth, but rather as a reflection of their strength in shaping our self-perceptions.

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[5]Beverly I. Fagot, Richard Hagan, Mary Driver Leinbach, and Sandra Kronsberg, "Differential Reactions to Assertive and Communicative Acts of Toddler Boys and Girls," *Child Development* 56, no. 6 (December 1985): 1499–1505.

[6]Ibid.

Collectivity Versus Chaos, This Time on Paper

The types of play that research has found that girls and boys prefer—girls centered on collectivity and family-themed role-playing, and boys on competition and chaos—seem perhaps to be more than just a preference in activity. Instead, these markedly different preferences appear to reflect a way in which boys and girls construct their worlds. Research conducted in 2008 by Ageliki Nicolopoulou looked at three- to five-year-old boys and girls in Massachusetts and their distinctive "forms of narrative coherence" in storytelling.[7] Nicolopoulou observed her subjects for a couple of years, throughout which they were invited, at certain times of the day, to dictate a story, any story they wished, to their teacher. There were no "rules" as far as theme, characters, or length of the stories, no requirement that any given child produce a quota of material, and no prompting at any specific moment to generate an idea.[8] After being transcribed by a classroom adult, all stories were eventually read aloud by that adult to the entire class while the child author selected a cast of peers (only, of course, if the story required multiple actors) to act out the story in front of the rest of the class.

Nicolopoulou's research objectives included examining the "narrative purposes and intentions" that the children were aiming to achieve, as well as their "handling of events and event structures" and the methods they employed in their portrayals of "characters and the relations between characters."[9] After years of plot lines (or a lack thereof), characters, and performances, this research found significant differences in the narratives produced by the boys and those produced by the girls (interestingly and notably, differences that correspond closely to those delineated by research into playground behavior). "Although the children's stories were shared with the entire class every day, they divided systematically along gender line," Nicolopoulou writes.[10]

To best organize the categories of responses, Nicolopoulou delineated two main genres: the female-favored "family genre" and the more male-leaning "heroic-agonistic genre." These genres differed along several dimensions, including their foundational images of (dis)order, their portrayal and focus on interpersonal (or, in some cases, inter-creature) relationships, and their presentation of the story's broad social context.[11]

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[7]Ageliki Nicolopoulou, "The Elementary Forms of Narrative Coherence in Young Children's Storytelling," *Narrative Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (2008): 299–325.

[8]Ibid., 310.

[9]Ibid., 300.

[10]Ibid., 310.

[11]Ibid.

The girls' stories, Nicolopoulou notes, were far more stable than those of their male classmates, in terms of both the relationship networks in which their characters were embedded (and remained until the story's end) and the specific settings and activities in which their stories were played out. Family was a popular theme in these girls' stories, with the typical (even benign) routines of family and home life often serving as the foundation for the characters' relationships as well as the plot. Even when drawing upon images and characters from external pop culture influences (e.g., movies, fairy tales, and television), the girls pulled various princesses, princes, kings, and queens into their stories, effectively incorporating an element of fantasy into an otherwise domestically conventional narrative.[12]

The girls' stories often started with an introduction of the group of characters and a recognition of their relationships to each other (that would remain stable throughout the story). Rarely did the female storytellers center their pieces on an individual protagonist; it was overwhelmingly about the (family) group.[13]

"Once there was a little girl and she lived with her Mom and Dad and her big sister," one girl wrote.[14] "Once upon a time there was a princess, a prince, a queen and a maid," another wrote, and again in a setup focused on familial ties, another girl wrote, "Once upon a time there was a beautiful little princess. Then a prince came . . ."[15]

The girls also employed the frameworks provided by the characters' established relationships to drive the story's plot forward, allowing them room to introduce more complicated plot components while maintaining order within their original band of characters' connections. The characters remained linked, and, in the case of most of the girls' stories, returned "home" as a final conclusion to the story.

"And then [the little girl, her Mom and Dad, and her big sister and their grandma] went for another little walk and they came home again," one girl concludes. The story about the princess, prince, queen, and maid continued when they went on a walk on which they "met a unicorn and brought her back . . . met a tiger and a bear . . . went back home and took the bear but not the tiger home," went to sleep, woke up, had breakfast, and "went to the mall [while] the unicorn and the bear guarded the house," where the princess "bought something and she bought a new gown." The story concludes, "They went back home. The end."[16]

[12]Ibid., 311.

[13]Ibid., 314.

[14]Ibid., 315.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

The boys, Nicolopoulou found, were more comfortable in the heroic-agonistic genre, often beginning their stories with an individual protagonist whose character was a product of his actions as opposed to his relationships and who was usually immediately faced with a specific problem to which the solution was quickly determined to be some sort of conflict, most often a physical fight.[17] Where the girls' stories often featured ordinary characters ("moms," "sisters," "friends," etc.), the boys preferred "big and powerful animals, real or mythical (e.g., wild horses, growling bears, T-Rex, Godzilla, huge monsters), or else superheroes . . . drawn from pop culture (e.g., Batman, Superman, Captain Hook, etc.)."[18] These boys' stories invariably featured some sort of conflict. Specifically, their stories were eager to determine which character was "the best" and who was the "winner" (a title often awarded by default to any character still alive at the end of the story). The boys' stories depended on aggressive violence, chaotic destruction, and active conflict, and were virtually devoid of consistent relationships (or even an initial recognition of any relationship of any kind, except perhaps one of animosity between "rivals" or "enemies") between characters. The characters in these stories, Nicolopoulou describes, "functioned as little more than vehicles for action and movement."[19]

> A Batman came. He got the policeman dead. And Robin came. He can shoot the monsters. A wolf comes. A knight comes. The dragon killed the princess. The knight killed the dragon. The wolf bites the dragon. The end.[20]

The variations in these stories can be seen as reflective of important differences that young boys and girls start to exhibit at very young ages, most notably the girls' propensity for group identification, relationships, and collectivity over the male tendency toward the glorification of individual dominance and authority. Beyond those specific characteristics, though, is the simple fact that, even after only three years on earth, and probably only one in social settings with peers, there is a distinct and consistent line drawn between how girls see the world and are prepared to recount it as opposed to how boys do both. That is, before many adults would even credit them with having an understanding of the world, these children, through their stories, are displaying the influence of "socially constructed patterns bound up with the formation of gendered

[17]Ibid., 312.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., 318.

[20]Ibid.

subcultures and the sociocultural dynamics of the children's peer group life."[21] All of these patterns are beautifully borne out in Messner's research of the soccer lives of four- and five-year-old boys and girls in an American Youth Soccer Organization community in Southern California. The girls chose sweet and cutesy team names, such as "Blue Butterflies," "Beanie Babes," "Sunflowers," "Pink Flamingos," and "Barbie Girls." The boys, in contrast, opted for power names, such as "Shooting Stars," "Killer Whales," "Shark Attack," "Raptor Attack," and "Sea Monsters."[22] While the boys across all age categories (four to seventeen) were much more prone to choose power names for their teams as opposed to any from the cutesy or even neutral categories (such as "Galaxy," "Pink Panthers," "Little Tigers," "Flower Power," or "Blue Ice"), this was particularly pronounced among the youngest group. Messner noticed an interesting progression on the girls' side: Whereas the youngest among them opted in great proportion for teams with cutesy names, by the time the girls reached fourteen to seventeen, such team names all but disappeared. But even at this age, a higher segment of the girls chose neutral or paradoxical team names than did the boys.[23]

Messner also demonstrates that both girls and boys picked up on the different gender roles that their parents expect them to assume and in which they revel: "'They are SO [*sic*] different!' exclaims one smiling mother approvingly. . . . In the entire subsequent season of weekly games and practices, I never once saw adults point to a moment in which boy and girl soccer players were doing the *same* thing and exclaim to each other, 'Look at them! They are *so similar*!'"[24]

Differentiation in Self-Perceptions of Competencies

Given these tenets of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" in the case of the overly aggressive boy as well as the evidence of the practical differences in boys' and girls' internalization of their social worlds, let the discussion now turn to another significant component in the question of the developmental gaps between young boys and girls: the differences in their self-evaluations of their competencies in different realms of academia and society.

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[21]Ibid., 311.

[22]Michael A. Messner, "Barbie Girls Versus Sea Monsters: Children Constructing Gender" in *The Sport and Society Reader*, ed. David Karen and Robert E. Washington (New York: Routledge, 2010), 187.

[23]Ibid., 188

[24]Ibid., 184, 185, emphasis in original.