SHARING THE SAME WORLD, TELLING DIFFERENT STORIES: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CO-CONSTRUCTED PRETEND NARRATIVES

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It is difficult to separate reality from fiction in the playground. The two are in a happy state of confusion; like dinner-party hilarity, when nonsense rises on bubbles of champagne...

Iona Opie. *The People in the Playground.*

This chapter is concerned with the question of how linguistic processes connect individual minds and bodies in and to a larger social order. We will consider how language is socially situated in experience and how that experience shapes us. We will show that children’s talk with friends is an important medium for acquiring and displaying explicit and implicit knowledge of the world and of communal sociocultural norms.

Considering that girls and boys spend significant time in childhood with same-sex companions, we can ask if there are differences in these same-sex experiences which socialize children into gender-influenced, normative social practices? Social interaction often depends on shared knowledge and interests in order to be successful and satisfying. Are there differences in girls’ and boys’ shared knowledge or interests that are relevant to their interactions?

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1 This study was funded by a University of Minnesota Graduate School Grant-in-Aid to Amy Sheldon. Support was also provided by the Center for Research in Learning, Perception and Cognition and grants from the University of Minnesota Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program. We are grateful to the children and parents at the University of Minnesota Child Care Center and to the teachers and staff for their cooperation and assistance. We thank Kathleen Kremer, John Ogawa, Jeff Ringwelski, and Mike Young for their research assistance, and Aron Pilhofer and Jennifer Wesson for research assistance at an earlier stage.

2 Whiting and Edwards (1988, p. 81) say that the “emergence of same-sex preferences in childhood is a cross-culturally universal and robust phenomenon.” Leaper (1994) also discusses childhood gender segregation.
The degree of shared knowledge might be especially relevant for the interaction of young children because they have limited knowledge to begin with. That is, when children’s talk with one another is “scripted,” i.e., based on events that are familiar to them and valued by the group, their conversations and activities might reach greater levels of attunement. Consequently, their discourse might be longer and more elaborate than when the topic of conversation is not scripted, familiar, or similarly valued. The extension to gender is that young children would choose same-sex partners to play with since they would readily learn that gender is a cue for finding someone whose interests and knowledge they share, someone who is more attuned to them. We would expect, then, that developing shared scripts with one’s companions would make social life easier and more fun. A more global implication is that sex-segregation in play groups at early ages results from, but then contributes to, the development of distinct ways of interacting in girls’ and boys’ groups. Girls and boys would share the same material world, but act on it differently.

Dramatic play is a frequent activity among preschool children. Extensive oral texts are jointly constructed which embody their social interaction and their symbolic worlds. As Bretherton (1984, p. 32) notes, “The simulated territory of symbolic play is not necessarily a straight reproduction of real-world maps.” Still, however counterfactual, paradoxical or distorted children’s dramatic play may become, it is also based on their knowledge of event schemata, and conventionalized scripting of events, actions, objects, and roles.

Peer culture and language are important socializing influences on young children. This research examines how one aspect of peer culture, sex/gender, organizes the co-construction of stories during pretend play in a Midwestern community of preschoolers. We were interested in knowing the extent to which preschool children incorporate sociocultural prescriptions or cultural stereotypes about gender into the form and content of stories that they weave together in play. We noted that while there has been progress in studying children’s monologic narratives, we were interested in extending the research on collaboratively developed dramatic play episodes, what we will here call “stories” or “co-constructed narratives.” We were interested in how children’s gender knowledge can constrain the communal working of their socially shared symbolic imagination with same-sex friends.

This work is part of a growing body of research which demonstrates the ways in which gender prescriptions influence multiple aspects of children’s linguistic and socio-cognitive activity (Leaper, 1994; Maccoby, 1990; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Previous work has shown that gender organizes children’s language and thinking in some of the following ways: dispute talk (Goodwin, 1980; Kyratzis, 1992; Miller, Danaher, & Forbes, 1986; Sheldon, 1990, 1992a, 1992b, 1996; Sheldon & Johnson, 1994), talk during social

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3 The terms “sex” and “gender” are often used interchangeably, which results in confusion. By “sex” we mean the biological self which has reproductive potential. By “gender” we refer to the meanings and values that a community or culture gives to physical, sexual differences. These culturally constructed meanings, which constitute a gender order or system, are learned. Sex and gender are often interconnected, however. We have used “sex/gender” to indicate such overlap.
and pretend play (Leaper, 1991; Sachs, 1987), monologic stories (Libby & Aries, 1989; Nicolopoulou, Scales, & Weintraub, 1994; Tarullo, 1994), topic coherence and physical alignment (Tannen, 1990), MLU (Duveen & Lloyd, 1988), reactions to stories with feminist themes (Davies, 1989), and event knowledge (see review in Levy & Fivush, 1993).

HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses were tested:

   We hypothesized that co-constructed stories would be organized by and would reflect gender stereotypes and gender preferences. Based on above-mentioned studies of children’s monologic narratives and toy preferences, we expected that girls would prefer domestic story elements and themes which foregrounded kinship relationships and domestic activities. Boys would prefer stories which featured themes and elements of non-domestic fantasy and adventure, possibly including intense action, danger and threat. We hypothesized that story preferences would be independent of the resources available in the setting. Children would transform the material resources to fit their imaginary world and its co-constructed characters, roles, and events.

2. Object Transformation.
   We hypothesized that object resources would be transformed to fit gender-typed story preferences. Since girls were predicted to prefer domestic or culturally-appropriate “feminine” stories, scripted with activities such as preparing dinner and creating family relationships, they were expected to do little if any transformation of the domestic resources in the Housekeeping center. On the other hand, since it was expected that boys would prefer culturally appropriate “masculine” stories with elements of nondomestic fantasy adventure, we predicted that in the Housekeeping center boys would more frequently transform objects to fit such stories.

METHOD

Participants

Three-, 4- and 5-year-old female and male preschoolers from the Minneapolis-St. Paul area were videotaped in unsupervised play at their day care center. The majority of participants were White. The children and the day care center were well known to the first author. The children were grouped into same-sex triads on the basis of their friend-

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4 The discourse practices of this community of children have been discussed in Sheldon (1990, 1992a, 1992b, 1996) and Sheldon and Johnson (1994). In those studies the focus was on the gendered nature of their conflict talk. But conflict often took place during dramatic play, and many of the examples discussed there also reveal the gendered story elements in their dramatic play.
ships, using information provided by their teachers and from this author's previous observations. The children in the study were members of one of the two larger preschool groups in the center; they played everyday with others in their group.

**Procedure and resources available**

Each of six girl triads \((N = 18)\) and six boy triads \((N = 18)\) was brought into a familiar play room in their day care center on different occasions by the first author and a graduate assistant. They were introduced to the resources and played for approximately 25 minutes each time. Their play was unsupervised although the author and the assistant observed and took notes from an unobtrusive perch atop the loft at one end of the room.

On two of the occasions that the triads played in the room it was set up with different gender-typed resources for dramatic play: either a Housekeeping center or a Trucks & Dinosaurs center (e.g., see Almqvist, 1989; Caldera, Huston, & O'Brien, 1989; Eisenberg, Wolchik, Hernandez, & Pasternak, 1985; Lloyd, Duveen, & Smith, 1988; Parten, 1933). The total of twelve sessions (six girls' and six boys' sessions) in the Housekeeping center amounted to about five hours of play. In this chapter we will only compare the stories that emerged in the Housekeeping center, which each triad played in for one 25 minute session.

The resources in the Housekeeping center included a toy stove and sink, a basket of plastic replicas of food items, cooking pots, eating utensils, plates and cups, a child-size dining table and three chairs, a doll's high chair, a doll's bed with dolls and blankets in it, a telephone next to a child-size foam chair, dress up clothes, a mirror, and a doctor's kit. A sheet hung over the side of the bottom half of the loft to hide a storage area.

**Coding transformations**

*Phase one: Defining transformations*

Two broad classes of transformations were identified: 1) a concrete object is given a new identity and, 2) a function or quality is attributed to the object which it does not ordinarily possess (examples in Table 36.1). In the first category, the child makes the transformation explicit by renaming an existing object and thereby giving it a new identity.

In the second category, the transformation often was more subtle. In some cases an object retained its actual identity while some new quality or function was attributed to it (example 2c in Table 36.1). In other cases the transformation involved attributing a unique function for the object without reference to the identity of the object, per se (example 2a).\(^5\)

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\(^5\) It was not necessary that the transformation be explicitly stated by a child; in some cases a combination of speech and nonverbal activity was sufficient to identify a transformation of an object. For example, a child puts a toy banana to his ear and says "hi." In this case, one can infer that the banana is being used as a telephone and the transformation was coded accordingly. Transformations could involve multiple objects. In a few instances a set of objects was given a new identity: In one example a child arranged a table and chairs in a specific configuration and announced that this was "the baby
The two classes of transformations we identified can be distinguished from other criteria for transformations which have appeared in the pretend play literature. Matthews (1977) includes among transformations all behaviors in which a toy replica of an object is used as if it were the real object. We did not include such transformations in our criteria. The act of a child pretending to eat plastic food, or cook plastic food in a pot on a wooden play stove, for example, was not considered to entail transformations of the toy food, the toy pot, or the toy stove in our definition of transformations.

We also did not include transformations in the absence of any concrete object to represent the created object or situation, e.g., 1) transformations that involved creating objects (e.g., “I’m cutting the ropes,” where the child invents “ropes” on an object being used as a spaceship), or 2) creating situations (e.g., “Let’s say it’s Christmas”), or 3) creating locations (e.g., “Let’s say this is space,” where the child refers generally to the play area). Our primary reason for constraining the coding was that the sheer volume of such transformations made coding impractical, since the children were engaged in pretend play for extensive periods during each session.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 36.1. Two Types of Transformations Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Giving a new identity to a familiar object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. “Here’s our space shuttle” (child lies down in the crib). the crib = a space shuttle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. “...this is the baby store.” (describes a table and chair arrangement). the table and chairs = a store</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Using an object in a nonconventional way; ascribing functions or qualities to an object that the object doesn’t ordinarily possess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. “Me going.” (child grasps legs of overturned table and makes motor noises). the table = a vehicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. “That’s to show where bad guys are coming.” (referring to blood pressure cuff). b.p. cuff = shows bad guys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. “Our bed is magic.” (magical quality attributed to bed).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. “I’m going to shoot you. ‘Shhht.’” (child uses his own hand as a gun). a hand = a gun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A second reason for focusing on transformations which changed the identity or function of objects had to do with our particular research question. We wanted a measure that would reveal the extent to which girls’ and boys’ imaginative constructions during play were consistent or inconsistent with the resources available to them in the Housekeeping setting. Both the boy and girl groups made use of the objects as represent-
tations of the real thing. While this provides a measure of how consistent their play was with the Housekeeping setting, it does not provide a measure of inconsistency. The definition of transformation that we used identified transformations that could be either consistent or inconsistent, making it possible to compare and contrast the girls' and boys' transformations on these dimensions. Therefore, we focused on transformations which changed the identity or function of a given object, as these strongly suggest the priority of imagination in directing play — over and above the influence of the obvious stimulus properties of the resources available.

As stated previously, we did not include as transformations speech events or actions that created objects in the absence of any material resource to represent that object. For example, if a child pretended to have a sword in hand when she or he did not in fact have anything in hand, this was not coded as a transformation. This kind of transformation is in many ways complementary to the types of transformations that we did code. Creating objects which reside in the shared imagination of the group — rather than in the physical surroundings — suggests how the content of play is directed by imagination rather than being elicited by the physical properties of the environment. Thus, an examination of these imaginary objects (along with the creation of imaginary locations and events) would be a useful direction for future work. Although we have yet to examine these, our sense of the data is that these transformations operate in much the same way as transformations of the material objects which we did analyze.

Phase two: Coding data

Using the criteria of transformation of identity or function of an existing object, one of the researchers (Rohleder) identified all instances of transformations occurring in each of six girl and six boy Housekeeping sessions, using the videotapes and transcripts. Although we identified two kinds of transformations (Table 36.1) we did not differentiate these for the current analyses. The differentiation was made primarily as a guideline to the coder for the kinds of transformations to include. In each session, the entire session was examined and the first instance of each transformation was identified.

Phase three: Distinguishing transformations as domestic or non-domestic

Each transformation which had been identified was then coded as to whether it was consistent, or not consistent, with the Housekeeping setting, i.e., whether it was a "domestic" or "nondomestic" transformation. Most of the objects available for play in the Housekeeping center were consistent with a domestic theme (having to do with kinship and activities occurring in the home). However, there were some which we did not consider distinctly or primarily domestic. As a result, we developed a coding scheme which took into account the domestic/nondomestic status of the object before it was transformed and as a result of its transformation. The following examples show how objects were coded and give a flavor of the gendered stories, especially the nondomestic ones that the boys developed.

0. NONDOMESTIC → DOMESTIC (ND→D). An object (or part of an object) that is
not domestic is transformed into a domestic object. *Examples:* a hand becomes a telephone receiver (B1); the floor becomes a baby’s bed (B3) and a child’s bed (G4); the syringe warms up food (B4) and shoots out sugar (B4).

1. **DOMESTIC → DOMESTIC (D→D).** A domestic object (or part of the object) is transformed into another kind of domestic object. *Examples:* a banana becomes a phone (B1); cauliflower becomes a marshmallow cake (B1); a piece of food becomes a strawberry “Ho-Ho”⁷ (B4); an oven becomes a freezer (B5); a scarf becomes a blanket or a quilt (G2), (G3), (G4); a door on the stove becomes a door to the basement (G3); a toy pear becomes a jar of baby food (G3); a table and chair become a baby food store (G3); a food item becomes baby food (G4); an oven becomes a cupboards for utensils (G5); a kitchen table becomes a bakery (G5).

2. **NONDOMESTIC → NONDOMESTIC (ND→ND).** An object (or part of the object) that is not “domestic” is transformed into some other object that also is not domestic. *Examples:* the stethoscope is used as a microphone (B3); the microphone on the lapel of their research vest and the button on a back pocket are used as a walkie-talkie (B3); the button on their vests controls which way the robots go, makes the robots fly, makes them explode, and makes them invisible (B3); a hand is used as a walkie-talkie (B3); a syringe becomes a weapon to shoot bean-bullets (B4); a syringe gets the space ship to turn on (B4); some “red stuff” is a child’s blood (B5); a syringe is a gun (B5) or a weapon (B6); a hand is a gun (B5); spots on a sheet are bears marks, or tigers, or frogs, or leopards (B6); the ear scope is a camera (B6); a gauge becomes a clock (G1).

3. **DOMESTIC → NONDOMESTIC (D→ND).** An object (or part of an object) that is domestic is transformed into an object that is not domestic. *Examples:* corn cob, a pan, two plastic knives, toast and a knife, are competitively offered by the boys as a camera to take a picture of a polar bear (B6); a plastic knife becomes a magic wand used to turn a threatening bear into a piece of gum (B6); a spoon is a flashlight for an “explore” (B6); a spoon is stolen jewels (B6), eating utensils are tools for the “explore” (B6); beans become bullets (B4); eggplant becomes a sword, (B3); banana becomes a gun (B3); toast is used as a transmitter for robots (B3); a knob on the stove makes the robots go (B3); the crib arm fires lasers (B3); crib, stove, foam chair, table become part of a spaceship (B3); the oven becomes a machine to give a sick baby medicine and to make the baby hot (the baby is placed in the oven) (B1); the foam chair becomes a chair in an airplane (B2); the funnel is used to check a child’s mouth (G1); a strainer is used to look at rabbits (G2).

**Phase four: coding for domesticity**

After the transformations were identified by Rohleder (Coder 1), a graduate student in child development, another graduate student in child development (Coder 2), who was

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⁶ In parenthesis are abbreviations for the boys’ (B) and girls’ (G) groups described in the tables.

⁷ A “Ho-Ho” is a commercial brand name for an individual cake.
naive to the hypotheses of the research and to any identifying information about the
subjects, also served in the next phase of coding. This naive coder was given a descrip-
tion of the resources and set-up in the room for the Housekeeping sessions, was advised
that some of the objects were considered "domestic" and others "nondomestic," and that
a transformation of an object could involve either domestic or non-domestic objects.
Coder 2 was then provided with the four categories and definitions (ND→D, D→D,
ND→ND, D→ND) for classifying each of the transformations and was asked to classify
the transformations found by Coder 1. Both Coder 1 and 2 independently classified the
transformations as either domestic or non-domestic.

Reliability

Reliability was assessed between the naive Coder 2 and the researcher (Coder 1). The
reliability (Cohen's Kappa) between the researcher and Coder 2 was .83. Out of 104
transformations identified, there were 12 disagreements, which were resolved through
discussion. An example of a disagreement was the boys' transformation of a spoon into
a flashlight which was coded as D→ND by Coder 1 and D→D by Coder 2. It was
resolved after discussion as D→ND.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Girls' triads (N = 18)</th>
<th>Boys' triads (N = 18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G1</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G2</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G3</td>
<td>B3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G4</td>
<td>B4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G5</td>
<td>B5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G6</td>
<td>B6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotals</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>90</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **% of total trans-
| formations**     | **13.5**               | **86.5**              |

RESULTS

Table 36.2 shows that the boys' groups produced more than six times as many object
transformations (90) compared to the girls' groups (14).\(^8\)

\(^8\) The one boy's group (B2) with a low rate of object transformations (3) comparable to the girls' rate
contained younger, 3-year-old, boys.
This difference in the proportion of transformations produced by boys compared to girls is consistent with Matthews' (1977) finding that 4-year-old boys produced more transformations of features of tangible objects in dramatic play than girls did.9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls’ groups</th>
<th>ND → D</th>
<th>D→D</th>
<th>ND→ND</th>
<th>D→ND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column totals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall totals</td>
<td>11 (78.6%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 (21.4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boys’ groups</th>
<th>ND → D</th>
<th>D→D</th>
<th>ND→ND</th>
<th>D→ND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column totals</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall totals</td>
<td>16 (17.77%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>74 (82.22%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A comparison of the end result of transformations to a domestic or nondomestic mode is presented in Table 36.3. Here again there is a dramatic difference. In the same

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9 Matthews' study was set in a laboratory playroom that contained a variety of play materials, including "dolls, trucks, pounding boards, blocks, puzzles, pots and pans, etc." This setting contains a composite of gender-typed play materials, compared to the Housekeeping center in our study, which was designed with materials that would create a girl-preferred play space.
setting with the same resources, the majority of the girls’ object transformations kept the object in a domestic mode. The comparatively low rate of transforming objects to a domestic mode in the girls’ groups (two of the girls’ groups did not have any transformations to a domestic mode) indexes the fact that girls’ play in the Housekeeping center was primarily domestic.

Only three out of a total of 14 transformations made by the girls (21%) changed an object to a non-domestic mode and these three transformations were produced by just two of the six girls’ groups. The other four girls’ groups did not produce any non-domestic transformations. However, eighty-two percent of the boys’ transformations converted an object to a non-domestic mode. Transformations whose end results were non-domestic occurred to objects classified as “non-domestic” about as often as to those classified as “domestic.”

These results support the Gender-typed Story Preference Hypothesis and the Object Transformation Hypothesis. These hypotheses predict girls’ preference for domestic stories which foreground kinship relationships and domestic activities, and boys’ preference for stories which feature elements of nondomestic fantasy and adventure which might include intense action, danger and threat.

DISCUSSION

The gendered difference in girls’ and boys’ stories can be more fully appreciated by examining some in which the transformations figured. Although the volume of transformations may be relatively low in some groups, a transformation could have important effects on the direction that the story development took, its length, and the other children’s coparticipation in its development. Transformations could create a focus of interest and excitement in the group and draw the other children in as codevelopers of the story elements.

Gender-typed stories and degree of elaboration

The gender-typed stories seemed to result in longer and more complex dramatic play. Thus, girls’ play in which domestic themes were scripted developed very complex and detailed story elements and activities. There were either no danger themes (nondomestic or domestic), or ones which were minimally developed and not necessarily set outside of the home, such as the mention of a scary ghost, or a sick child emergency at home, or a fire in the house.

Boys’ groups did enact domestic themes, but those did not seem to reach the same level of complexity and they differed in some other interesting ways from the girls’. For example, boys’ play either did not contain certain domestic elements that girls’ play did, such as cleaning up after dinner, or did not go into the same degree of detail, e.g., no boys’ group enacted scripts for preparing baby for bed, whereas five girls’ groups did. Only two boys’ groups did anything related to baby’s bedtime, and it was the simple act of lying down with the baby. One boy said it was to “guard” the baby. On the other
hand, boys’ play in which adventure and fantasy themes were developed had very
detailed story elements and activities, more than girls’ play did for such themes.

These preliminary results suggest an extension of the Gender-typed Story Hypothesis to account for our observation that gender-typed co-constructed narratives seem to have deeper and more extensive story development, with more complex construction, and more detail. A fuller comparison of differences in the story elements in the girls’ and boys’ domestic play is an important topic for future analysis, posing its own analytical challenges, but it is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Examples of boys’ gender-typed stories

All of the boys’ Housekeeping sessions contained transformations of an object to a non-
domestic mode, which then had a function in developing their stories further. Often at
the beginning of the session, the boys did interact with the resources in some domestic
mode, but they also slipped into a nondomestic scenario. Some of these nondomestic
story threads were especially well-developed and complex, and transformed the setting
from the domestic sphere to another world. The following are examples from some of
the boys’ groups:

(B3): spun a story in which they were police and then robots, they hunted robbers who
were getting other people’s money, they flew on an airplane to San Francisco
where some people were getting hurt, they went in a space ship and fired on the
bad guys’ ship;

(B4): developed a narrative which involved getting the “bad guys at the 69 turret,”
shooting lasers, getting in a space shuttle and blasting off;

(B6): went on an “explore,” inventing a swamp, a cave, and dangerous animals and
characters.

These three groups produced the most object transformations per group and the most
complex gender-typed stories. (The B5 group threw the dishes off the table and turned
it over, using the overturned table as a house; needless to say, none of the girls’ groups
interrupted the Housekeeping setting).

A summary of a story that was co-constructed in the B6 group gives a flavor of how
complex the non-domestic story line could get and the role of some object transforma-
tions in the story.

Example: Transforming domestic objects and setting into non-domestic ones

(B6): “There’s the bear in our house!”

In this example, the boys made multiple and different types of transformations in
their imaginative play. The complexity of the resulting story isn’t fully captured by
counting object transformations alone. Not only did they transform objects, they also
transformed their play space, creating an alternative non-domestic world to the House-
keeping center. They moved the setting out-of-doors to a less hospitable and safe place,
populated it with exciting wild animals (bears, tigers, leopards, a panther, alligators, a
lion, frogs, a bat), scary fictional and nonfictional characters and things (a demon, a
dragon, witches, goblins, ghosts, “bad people,” the Queen of Mystical, lumpy things), and
created different settings (a hideout in the kitchen area, a cave, a swamp). Not only do they slip back and forth between the out-of-home and the in-home spheres, the home setting itself also shifts from a tranquil place to a chaotic one and back again.

The session starts out with the boys engaging in a similar but less well-developed domestic script compared to what is found in the girls’ sessions (e.g., they prepare food, they eat at the table with their doll-babies). They shift out of the domestic mode when Connor stages an event that takes them out of the home, represented by the Housekeeping center.

He announces that they are leaving the house, “We’re going out for a walk, right? ... there's a bear around here somewhere,” which he reframes a few minutes later as, “We’re tiptoeing in the woods, remember?,” and then recasts as, “Hey, we’re going out for another explore, right, Mark?” Mark agrees, “Yeah, but this time we’re hunting for alligators.” Each reannouncement of leaving the house becomes more adventurous because of the wild animals which are also described to be nearby. The boys create a mood of excitement and anticipation of danger.

The boys see a bear on their “explore.” It is a sleeping polar bear. They want to photograph it. Robert, using the doctor kit thermometer, observes, “The bears are not awake yet. See how cold it is, the bears are- can’t get awake.” The following excerpt illustrates how the boys compete with each other to manufacture a “camera” to photograph the sleeping bear.

(Overlapping talk is printed on the same line in another column. Speaker names are abbreviated: Ma = Mark, Co = Connor, Ro = Robert)

001 Ma: I got to get a picture of the polar bear.
002 Ro: Hey, where's the camera?
003 Ma: Where's the camera?
004 Co: Hey, it’s light! It's- the polar bear's beginning to break our house in pieces!
005 Ro: What? What did you- what did you say?
006 Ro: What? What did you say?
007 Ma: But where- where- where’s the camera?
008 Co: There's the bear! There's the bear in our house!
009 Ma: Where's the camera?
010 Ro: I got a camera. ((picks up cooking pan from stove top))
011 Ro: No, I got a camera.
012 Co: Oh, it's light still. It's still light! I'm gonna shot that bear!
013 Ma: No, don't shoot him! Let me- let me take a picture of him.
014 Co: One shot. He's dead. ((Pushes ear scope

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10 The temperature surfaces as a topic a few times in this group. For example, the boys change it from hot to cold and cold to hot as a way of controlling the polar bear, whom they acknowledge likes the cold and not the heat.
through space))
No you didn't shoot him.
He's too quick for me.
You gotta have a camera.
I got the camera.
Click! ((scrapes two plastic knives together in a flourish)) Got him.
I got the camera. Where's the camera? ((rummages around among food and utensils on the kitchen table))
I got the camera. (holding his two knives)
No, that's the camera.
Nah-ah, I have-
The corn's the camera.
((in teasing sing-song)) I got the camera.
((scrapes knife across a piece of plastic toast))
There's the bear!
Quick! I'm ma- I'm - I'm putting together our camera.
And I'm makin' a- you don't have- you don't have a camera.
Robert, I need that. I need this, 'cuz-
((tries to grab ear scope from him))
No, I have it.
No, but we- you're- you-
Click, click, click. ((holds ear scope up to his eye as if taking a picture and taps knife on ear scope))
You're breakin' our camera! You're breakin' our camera!
I've got-
You- you missed him.
I got the bear without his feet!
No, I found- I had it first.
Shot.
Robert, you can't- you using-
you're not using the camera.
Yes I am.
No you're not.
Got him! I got him!
No, you didn't. You never got him.
Now if- if you don't give that,
we'll never make a camera.
Have it.
062 Ma: Robert, you're not making a camera.
063 Now that's a thing, that's for sure.
064 Ro: Get this, I gotta get this in.
065 Ma: ((demonstrating his toast/knife-camera to
066 Robert)) You- if you put this ((knife)) on  Co: Come on.
067 top ((of toast)) and then- ah- and- it- and-
068 and then- and I can put my knife in there.
069 and I can put my knife on, then we get his picture.
070 Ro: Yeah, I got - NO, you can't have that back.
Shortly later, at the hideout in the house:
071 Ro: ((talking to others)) No, we needa make a
072 hideout. Make a hideout.
073 Make a hideout, ok? Make a hideout.
074 ((they all crouch down in a "hideout" behind
075 the stove))
076 Ma: Let's go- let's wait for the pictures to dry out.
077 ((goes over to kitchen table and puts his
078 toast/knife-camera on it))
079 Co: The polar bear's around here somewhere.
080 Ro: But- but how can we- but then- but then we-
081 but then- but lookit- then this stuff. Co: I took a quick
082 picture of him.
083 Ro: But then they can get IN here.
084 Co: ((loud whisper)) They- but they KNOW
085 that we're IN here, right? We must hide.
086 Ro: I'll lock the door up. ((turns a kitchen chair
087 on its side to make the door on one empty
088 side of their hideout)) Let's say they can't
089 break anything, right? Of this, right?
090 Ma: But he can jump over.
091 Ro: No, but let's say he couldn't.
092 Ma: Yes he can. Put another chair on top.
093 Co: ((loud fearful whisper)) But what if- but what if
094 the bear knocks down our gate?
095 Ro: ((reassuringly)) He won't. ((turns another kitchen
096 chair on its side and places it on top of the other one))
097 Co: If we make a high wall maybe he won't.
098 Ma: ((Gasps)) I- I know just what to do. ((Climbs out)).
099 Ro: This is what to do- I got it. Got a strong door.
100 ((he has finished making the side of the hideout out
101 of piled up chairs, which are now their "strong door"))

The bear comes after them. His "knocking on the door" of their house turns into "breaking the walls." The Housekeeping center comes under siege (008 Co: "There's a bear in our house!"). The polar bear breaks down their home's imaginary door and gets
into the imaginary refrigerator. They counter this danger by making the refrigerator hotter (as measured by the thermometer in the doctor kit), because as Mark says, “Polar bears like the cold.” The bear escapes to the imaginary freezer and they make the freezer hot too. That’s not sufficient so they make a fire, and finally they transform a plastic butter knife into a magic wand, say an incantation, and turn the polar bear into a piece of gum . . . but not before it lays an egg and . . . a baby polar bear emerges. The image of a baby polar bear defuses the out-of-home danger and reintroduces the element of domesticity.

Examples of girls’ gender-typed stories

The girls produced fewer object transformations overall compared to the boys, and the end result of most of their transformations was domestic. Their play had a quality describable as “life as usual.” They produced well-developed and complex domestic scripts, as the following examples show:

(G3): having a meal, feeding baby, constructing a dinner party;
(G5): having a meal, feeding baby, taking care of a sick baby, cleaning the house, creating a birthday party, going shopping;
(G6): having a meal, pretending to be at a restaurant, creating sick child emergencies.

The girls’ scripts featured a larger range of domestic activities and roles which were developed in greater detail, a composite picture of these activities collected from the girls’ groups reveals multiple activities around food preparation that were enacted or planned, e.g., setting the table, eating, feeding the baby, cleaning up after dinner, shopping for groceries, going on a picnic, going to a restaurant, having a birthday party. There were also a variety of activities connected to taking care of the baby when it was well and when sick, and other home-centered activities, e.g., getting and making phone calls, going to bed, etc.

The degree of detail connected to food preparation in the girls’ sessions, and an illustration of one kind of activity connected to taking care of baby, are shown in the following excerpt from the G2 group.

Example: Life as usual in girls’ domestic play

G2: “Sit down at the table and put your chair up while I’m making jam.”

Sue is in the kitchen area preparing food while Mary and Lisa are playing with the dolls at the doll bed. There is cross-talk between the two play areas as Sue includes Mary and Lisa in her food preparations. The two domestic scripts play out side by side. They are represented in separate columns below.

(Su = Sue, Li = Lisa, Ma = Mary)

001 Su: (preparing food) Lisa,
002 do you want eggs?
003 Li: I want eggs, yeah, 
004 eggs are really good.
005 Ma: I want eggs.
006 Ma: Let’s cut it in half, so we um-
007 Su: I'll cut it in half.
008 Ma: I'll cut it in half. One for Lisa, one for
009 me, 'kay?
010 Su: Now I'll cut this in half, I'll cut sandwich
011 in half. One for Lisa, one for you, and one for me.
012 Ma: ([at the doll bed]) No. Well, I gotta
013 put the quilt on while I'm waiting, Lisa.
014 Li: Quilt?
015 Su: I got a peanut butter sandwich.
016 Ma: ([sings]) Holding the quilt.
017 Li: The quilt on here.
018 Su: The quilt on here? The quilt?
019 Li: I'm not- I'm- I'm- I'm not on
020 there so you can put it right on
021 there.
022 Li: ([to Mary who is standing near])
023 Are you waiting for me to move?
024 Su: I'm putting jam on yours.
025 Ma: I don't need jam.
026 Li: I don't want jam.
027 Ma: I don't want jam.
028 Su: But you- I'm gonna have jam.
029 Do you want butter?
030 Ma: Yeah, I want butter.
031 Ma: I want butter
032 Su: Okay, you guys can have butter
033 and I'll have jam.
034 Li: ([at the doll bed]) Mary, are you
035 playing- are you playing with
036 this doll?
037 Ma: Yes
038 Li: Okay, then, I won't get it. I'll just- I'll
039 just put-.
040 Ma: Let's put these- um, put this-.
041 Su: I'm gonna have peanut butter on my jam.
042 Li: Peanut butter on your jam? Oh.
043 Su: Do you want peanut butter?
044 Li: Yeah, I want peanut butter on my jam.
045 Su: Do you want peanut butter, Mary?
046 Ma: No, I want butter, I want
047 just butter.
048 Su: Want just butter, ok?
049 Li: I want peanut butter.
050 Ma: ([To Lisa who is attending to the doll])
051 I'm waiting.
052 Li: ((attending to baby in doll bed)) You
053 waiting, waiting.
054 Su: I'm making jam for you, jam for you.
055 Sit down at the table and put your chair
056 up while I'm making jam. Will you do that?
057 ((To Mary)) You're waiting for the jam?
058 Ma: No, I'm waiting to put this blanket on.
059 Su: Oh, I could give you a jam.
060 Ma: I'm waiting, Lisa. Su: We're gonna have it
061 outside
062 Li: Well- well you- well you- well-
063 well you can't put it ((the quilt)) on
064 now.
065 Ma: No, no, um- this is- um- my baby's
066 nightgown, so don't change-
067 her nightgown ((sings under her
068 breath)).
069 Li: I won't change her nightgown. Su: Yeah. This is the
070 coffee.
071 Ma: ((Sings to self)).
072 Li: Baby can't wear this outfit, it's too big
073 for her.
074 Su: Lisa, want this spoon? I get some spoons.

This excerpt gives a flavor of some of the extensive conversational detail in the two frequently story elements in the girls' groups: food preparation and putting baby to bed.

CONCLUSION

Co-constructing stories in dramatic play with friends is a mundane activity for preschoolers in this community. This study underscores the importance of talk as a medium through which children's knowledge of sociocultural prescriptions about gender is coordinated. Planning and enacting co-constructed narrative play with same-sex peers provides daily opportunities to observe, learn about, transmit and practice gender-stereotyped knowledge as well as other sorts of knowledge about the world. Co-constructing stories requires children to coordinate their individual knowledge states. Furthermore, children are implicitly attaching value to that knowledge and to the satisfying, and often exciting, interpersonal experiences which they create with it.

The power that gender-related knowledge has to shape the stories that emerge in group play is seen in how a room which is set up with the same material resources can be transformed into various symbolic worlds with quite different meanings. The House-keeping center is a setting in which groups of girls and groups of boys coordinate their imaginations to create narrated symbolic worlds with different events, actions, contexts,
conversations, and affect. The same objects are reinterpreted to fit gender-typed themes and to play pivotal roles in how the story unfolds. These object transformations (or nontransformations) reflect the way that gender-typed knowledge shapes preschoolers' symbolic imaginations and frames their narrative play. Such cultural understanding can facilitate (or resist) the construction of gender-typed scripts.

The bias in these groups toward composing gender-typed stories seemed to result in better developed domestic scripts by girls and more developed non-domestic scripts by boys. This selectivity toward the content of dramatic play with same-sex friends, which appears to result in more in-depth enactment and sharing of gender-typed knowledge, creates a divergence in the socially shared story-making experiences of girls and boys. It suggests that girls' and boys' accumulated dramatic play histories — subjective experiences of the world — are different in crucial ways. Displaying gender-typed knowledge in co-constructed play narratives may further encourage sex-segregated play, reflecting the fundamental roles that language and cognition play in sociocultural development.

The asymmetry in girls' and boys' story preferences seen here may be an artifact of some aspect of the context in which the stories were composed, for example, the housekeeping setting, or the sex/gender of their playmates. We might wonder if the bias toward gendered stories continues when girls and boys play together in a housekeeping center or if they play in same-sex of mixed-sex groups in other settings? What form and content do stories in those contexts take? Do girls and boys continue the same sort of thematically asymmetrical narrative play in mixed-groups? Can they? Do they arrive at a division of roles and "imagination-labor" in mixed-sex play which reflects the division of labor in "real world" gender arrangements? A story constructed in mixed-sex play might have elements of both the feminine and masculine narratives, with gender-typed roles given to or predictably claimed by the girls and boys. On the other hand, it is possible that the sort of thematically asymmetrical narrative play found here might be reduced to some degree in mixed-sex peer play. These are important questions which should be pursued in the future.

We opened this chapter wondering about how experience shapes us. Given the results of this study, it is apparent that besides the important adults in a child's life and other obvious sources of information about gender-appropriateness (books, television, movies, songs, toys, clothes, etc.), children's own companions are powerful agents of socialization as well. Implicit in this statement, and often overlooked, is the fact that the child herself or himself is a major participant in their own experience of gender. She or he does gender by acquiring knowledge and attitudes, and by behaving in gender-consistent ways, which usually entail language. Maintaining and perpetuating the

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11 While we must be cautious in hypothesizing the degree of complexity in the children's underlying knowledge representations, i.e., the cognitive basis for what gets told or not told in these stories, our finding of an asymmetry in story preferences should be of interest in light of speculation that girls' mental representations of scripts for "masculine events" would be equally developed and complex as their representations of "feminine events," whereas boys' representations of masculine scripts would be better represented than feminine scripts (Levy & Fivush, 1993, p. 141).
gender beliefs, attitudes and linguistic style of one’s peer and/or adult communities is essential to the process of taking gender on, accepting it (more or less), and “getting it right.” We do not assume, however, that gender socialization is achieved, or even desired, to the same degree by every child. One direction for future research raised by this work is to study the extent to which, and the reasons why, individual children do or do not join in or lead their peer culture in its behavioral displays of gender-appropriateness, and the extent to which children actively resist such displays.

A major goal of this study of object transformations has been to look at the relation between stories these children construct during play and the material resources available for creating stories. The results show that object transformations are one feature of their stories which reflect preferences for gender-stereotyped themes in social play in the Housekeeping center. The results of this study indicate that young children’s co-constructed stories can be a major vehicle for learning about and perpetuating gender knowledge and the community’s gender arrangements. Children’s imagination, knowledge, social and linguistic skills combine in stories to gender their world. Girls and boys might live in the same physical world, but to some as yet unknown degree they act on it differently, creating different symbolic, narrative, and subjective worlds.

REFERENCES


12 There are other types of transformations which we are studying, as well as thematic differences.


