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Exploring the Power of Imaginative Play: A Comprehensive Study on Performances of Exclusion

Abstract

This article draws from field research performed in a Los Angeles preschool to explore the ways boys negotiate power, constructing identities that facilitate exclusion during imaginative play. Previous sociological research only discusses the female tendency to clique and exclude. This research ascertains that boys behave in similar ways. Imaginative play offers the rare opportunity for children to manipulate social status, something that is relatively stagnant in the rest of society. Authority is gained through creativity, a factor that is unique to children this age. In this study, to assert transient and momentary power, boys perform acts of exclusion. Power is exercised on the playground as a socially situated phenomenon that depended on children acknowledging the imaginative realms. The existence of those realms offered change to the hierarchies evident in the preschool's social-real realm. Because every child possessed power in different imaginative games, this research illuminates that children not only learn exclusion through the very act of being excluded, but through the influential performance of exclusion of others.

Lauren Elizabeth Lee

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The possible's slow fuse is lit
by the imagination.
~Emily Dickinson

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I examine the phenomenon of imaginative play in preschool. My attempt to understand the way children interact with one another within peer groups eventually expanded and developed into the research of the many ways children exclude and include one another within different games, social hierarchies, and imaginative realms. The emphasis of this study is on boys and their participation in power dynamics and negotiations.

This research addresses cliques as a feminine phenomena and questions why that gender connotation exists when boys perform exclusionary acts just as much, if not more, than girls do at the preschool level. I show that boys constantly re-negotiate power and challenge identities within imaginative play.

To begin this conversation, the terms *imaginative realm, social-real realm,* and *power* must be defined. The imaginative realm is a space that is organically built from within the idioculture of the children, in which no teacher intervenes, and develops into a realm where creation and imagination coexist. It is the space that children learn and experiment with new identities without inhibition. It is completely fictitious yet symbolizes their representations of self. Essentially, the children alone own this type of play and only they can penetrate the realms. They manipulate the props and spatial arrangement of the playground so that only they can see the boundaries of the created world.

Conversely, there is the real-social realm that is in essence the opposite of the imaginative realm. It exists within the preschool's classroom and structured settings. There are no games or pretending in this realm, and restrictive social hierarchies exist that label and confine children, which limits individual creativity. Those labels derive from the teacher's projected view of who is a "good" preschooler and who is not based on the children's behavior. The teachers construct this realm. I explore the way the children interpret these two different realms. This research is ultimately an attempt to investigate how a child exercises authority and influences power relations on the playground and within those imaginative realms.

The term power, when discussing children, is a controversial term. Many believe that children hold little autonomy and that their play is meaningless (Goldman; 1998), but for this research to be validated, one must believe that children are capable of exercising authority and power (Corsaro; 2005). Building off of Foucault's concept that power is exercised and not possessed, power in the imaginative realm is socially situated and exercised based on changing social interactions. This research reveals that children may exert power over one another and that children willingly enter into power relationships in effort to be a part of the social strata constructed both in the real-social and imaginary realms. This research makes obvious that children, especially boys, are not powerless, when entering the imaginative realms.

The ethnographic research, which was conducted over a ten-month span, studied the children's groups, games, language and the intersections of gender roles. Examining

the roles that the children assume and the ways that they negotiate those roles with one another widened my understanding of child identities. Clear and definite patterns developed in the distribution and application of certain roles especially when boys entered imaginative realms. Listening closely to the exclusive and inclusive language within imaginative play interpreted children's social constructions of one another.

Throughout this research the engagement in imaginative play revealed important differences in the way boys and girls constructed their social worlds. Through fantasy play, children show us how they come to *represent* maleness and femaleness (Carlson and Taylor; 2005, 94). The roles that the children embody during play express from an emic and internal perspective how they view themselves. Some children construct roles that reflect the "real world" (Dyson; 1997) and others utilize roles to delve into fantasy.

Understanding the phenomenon of play reflecting gender roles is essential to sociology because while the boys and girls on the playground often perform hegemonic gender norms in their imaginative realms, they also explore gender roles in unconventional ways. They create new meanings and realities that reflect how they understand their social identities, and resist social expectations and invent their own version of gender.

This research argues that during free play, children are excluding, including and constructing social hierarchies within the imaginative worlds. They utilize the element of creativity as the unit of analysis and justification for their actions. Access to power

depends on not only gender but also status in the social hierarchy. Those statuses, because of the many games played in one day's play-hour, remain fluid, in contrast to the static rank of social hierarchies later in life.

This paper examines how exclusion is practiced and learned through the construction of social hierarchies in imaginative play, and probes to understand why research has neglected to recognize and account for boys' roles in such phenomena. In this paper, I examine those concepts through the review of scholarly literature and draw on fieldnotes from ethnographic observation at Bird Rock Preschool and the imaginative events as the units of analysis. I analyze dialogue, props, nonverbal cues, rules and their regulation, and role distribution to better understand the phenomenon of imaginative play and the intersection of gender within it. The findings section grounds the theories that emerge in this paper and focal children help highlight the different social dynamics and power relations that frame the research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A FEMININE PHENOMENON

Scholars, sociologists, and parents alike are overwhelmed by how mean and exclusive girls are to one another. Sociological research has studied how girls manipulate social organizations and use hierarchies to declare group status, or individual status, over their peers. Academia's focus with the female tendency to establish cliques has been paralleled through the media through popularized television shows and new stories on the

negative effects of girl cliques. This current research however, seeks to evaluate an unnoticed phenomenon; cliques are also created and sustained by boys.

By performing ethnographies, sociologists have developed the body of knowledge on cliques and girls by observing youth in the school setting (mainly high school) and examining the actual act of clique creation (Hallinan; 1989). While it once could have been assumed that this was just an isolated occurrence in the storyline of movies, Hallinan's research finds a definite link between schools and clique formation. Her research documented a direct correlation between the education system and girls learning and participating in such hierarchies by noticing the onset of cliques solely in the classroom setting.

Other sociologists have studied popularity and the repercussions of such hierarchical rankings that are constructed within the years of elementary schooling (Adler 1992). Adler states that within same-sex peer subcultures, boys and girls create idealized images of masculinity and femininity and model their behavior based on those perceptions. Popularity ranking depends on very different things for boys and girls. Boys gain social status within their groups on the basis of athleticism, toughness, and their success in cross-gender relationships. While girls achieve rank due to their family's socio-economic status, their physical appearance, and academic success (Adler; 1992). Adler stats that the statuses that are obtained in the beginning of a school year are lasting and negotiation out of one's social standing is nearly impossible. Thus, because of the social pressure and currency placed on being popular, boys and girls tend to embody the

gender roles that are normalized in their peer culture in attempt to “ be cool.” This forces boys and girls to enact hegemonic performances that West and Zimmerman (2007) call “Doing Gender.”

Sociologist, Evaldsson (2007), observed 11 year old girls and remarked on their ability to create coalitions or cliques against a “bad friend” through negative person descriptions. The word *clique*, due to studies such as this, has developed a complicated and multi-layered definition, often implying cruelty and hatred as well as implicitly connoting femininity. This negative association is influential in framing this research because it lends itself to the correlation of clique formation and the performance of exclusionary acts of girls.

The sociological research that has been done on social hierarchies is overwhelmingly centered on females. Girls have been criticized for their participation in the groups and critiqued for their acts of discrimination. This article and its research dissolves the connection between the education system and female clique’s exclusionary actions and examines boys’ ability to construct cliques and negotiate power dynamics.

POWER NEGOTIATION

Michel Foucault says that, “at least for the study of human beings, the goals of power and the goals of knowledge cannot be separated: in knowing we control and in controlling we know” (Hoy; 1986). In the attainment of other’s acknowledgment, one gains the ability to perform power. As Foucault explains in “The Subject and Power,”

"something called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action" (Foucault; 1982, 209). Power is exercised and is not a possession; it is continually negotiated and challenged. Foucault's power distinctions are essential to this study because through the power dynamics on the playground at the preschool, children experimented with identities. Because the negotiation of rules and character identities existed in the imaginative realms, I utilize Foucault's work as a foundation for analyzing the boys' power struggles.

PRESCHOOL PLAY

Although the majority of social organization and exclusion research is performed at the elementary-high school level, there are many sociological articles that examine social interactions at an early age. William Corsaro has addressed children's construction of peer cultures and worlds. He asserts that we need to not look at preschool children's play as just meaningless play, but in fact substantial representations of self. Children experiment with social norms and relationships to help construct identities during play time that they will later rely on in the school structure to negotiate social realms and hierarchies (2005). Corsaro also adds that once children establish shared play, they produce a wide range of behavioral routines. The most symbolic is sharing rituals; collective activities that involve patterned, repetitive, and cooperative expressions of the shared values and concerns of a peer culture.

Corsaro also defined the difference between what he calls *spontaneous fantasy* and *socio-dramatic fantasy*. Spontaneous fantasy occurs around sandboxes and construction/building areas where the expectations of what children are to do in the areas are not well defined. The activity is highly creative and improvised and consists of fantastical, heroic, and fictitious characters. In socio-dramatic play, children relish taking on roles representative of the real world, like mother and fathers and occupational roles (2001). At Bird Rock Preschool, such roles were evident and assisted in my classification methods, but the children's roles were more complex and nuanced in comparison to Corsaro's typology. Socio-dramatic roles were often assumed within improbable adventure fantasy games and thus blurred the two definitions and allowed for more experimentation of identities during playtime.

In response to Corsaro's work, sociologists Van Ausdale and Feagin examined the way preschool children (mainly girls) participated in exclusion based on ethnic and racial lines (1996). They acknowledged that the majority of research focuses on children over five years of age and therefore very young children are rarely studied. Further, they discovered that race was a normalizing tool used by children to include or exclude children. Girls were the ones performing these acts of exclusion, while boys were using race as a reason to include even when their racial identities were distinct. Just like in the ethnographies of the schoolgirls who were forming cliques to exclude their peers

(Evaldsson; 2007, Hallinan; 1989) preschool girls manipulate social hierarchies based on race to ostracize one another.

Researchers have discussed how children manipulate pretend play by illustrating that preschool children assume both dominant and subordinate roles and request permission to enter games (Kyratzis; 2007, Griswold; 2007, and Goodwin; 2007). The pool of data focusing on young girls and the different ways they use social organization to influence their playtime is clear. I contribute to this body of work by investigating males. This research again shows that the boys are nice in comparison to girls. My research challenges the notion that only girls are exclusive.

Further, the previous research that has been done at the preschool level investigates the social interactions during playtime. I broaden such work and examine children's social hierarchies through a gender lens because it reveals a nuance to sociology's body of knowledge on the subject of children. Through observation I discovered girls were not the only ones excluding and forming cliques. This article expands the current knowledge on imaginative play and explains its ability to facilitate role and power negotiation with relation to the social interactions of boys. Children's imaginative play complicates our understanding of social identities.

GAP IN BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

The objective of this article is to connect the two fields of study: (1) clique organization within the education system and (2) child playtime negotiations and to bring

in the missing part of the discussion: boys. I am seeking to nuance the majority of research that says cliques are solely about girls and that there is a correlation between clique formation and a school setting. This article addresses the research that has been done at the preschool level, but has yet extended to acts of exclusion through the lens of gender.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

Michel Foucault states that power is not a property or possession, but that is constantly negotiated between individuals (1995). He asserts that every person has the ability to exercise power in a social relationship and that there is always a chance to exercise power and to resist another's will and authority. Believing that every player has the capacity to rebel, revolt, or fight back, Foucault illuminates the possibility of challenging power dynamics. This research is framed by Foucault's notion of exercised power. That negotiation of power is the lens that demonstrates exclusionary acts within and across gender.

On the playground, children constantly engage in power negotiation with one another. Children gain power when the other children acknowledge it as such. Power is a social phenomenon and so a child cannot exercise it if they are alone on the playground. When a child initiates play and creates an imaginative realm, he or she needs other children to agree to play the game for it to begin. Creating the world itself is not enough to establish authority in a game because you could create the realm alone or someone else

could take on a role that has more authority within the imaginary world. The power comes from other children acknowledging the creator of the imagined game and following his or her demands. If the group does not reject a child's rules, they give the child leader power.

Power attainment was different for the children based on their social status in the real-social realm. A child with high social standing outside of the imaginative realms, such as Dominick, who will be discussed in depth later, was able to become the leader in imagined games that he did not create. Children with low status, such as Ryan, could only gain authority within the imagined game they created. The child that became the leader of the game was able to negotiate and obtain high authority role, and often chose to be a character that portrayed authority in the specific world or game. If the game was "house," the role of dad was fought over, as was the role of "captain" in adventure games. Either way, the role assumed by the leader was always higher in that micro-hierarchy than the rest of the children's characters. The dependence on the existence of other roles to exert authority is evidence that power was a socially situated phenomenon on the playground, and also that boys understand power and positionality within hierarchies just as much as girls have been proven to (Evaldsson; 2007).

During imaginative play, children exercise power for transient moments but are forced to renegotiate the power dynamics whenever the game is changed. Residual power does not exist, an no child, not even the leaders of the social-real realm of the playground, ever possesses all of the power because it disappears once the game ends.

Creators of the imaginative worlds have an advantage in the negotiation of power and roles because they have the creative knowledge of the world itself and can argue for higher status roles against his peers.

On the playground, power and status are constantly being negotiated. Many games consist more of arguing over character assignment than actually playing the game. Children wrestle over the sought-after imaginative game's identities that offer change in rank to the social-real realm's hierarchy. The child with low real-social realm status negotiates ruthlessly during imaginative games to change his imagined status to a higher rank in comparison to the real one. In settings later in life, roles and labels are static and thus only few persons possess tangible and exercisable power. In the social-real realm of the preschool, there are such static roles such as the "leader" and the "side-kick," but when the children enter the imaginative realm, they are given the opportunity to play and wrestle with identities. Essentially they are given the chance for a few moments when they participate in pretend play to negotiate power dynamics that normally are unchanging.

HYPOTHESES/ASSERTIONS

As stated earlier, the majority of research claims that girls form micro-hierarchies within their social structures once they are integrated into the education system. But there are more questions relating to gender that have not yet been addressed. Are these acts of exclusion produced solely in and because of the structure of schooling? Are cliques exclusively a female phenomena?

Formally, my research question asks: How and when do children begin to participate and experiment in acts of exclusion and gender as well as peer-to-peer discrimination? And comparatively, what particular types of exclusion exist and how is power mediated in the imaginative realms?

I argue that acts of exclusion begin as early as age four and that both boys and girls participate in many forms of discrimination. This assertion confronts the theory that exclusion is linked to the education system because four year olds are not yet participants in formal education settings and the performances occur during unstructured free playtime. My assertion also contributes to the body of knowledge on preschool children that has addressed the concept that children, mainly girls, are capable of constructing micro-hierarchies. Sociologists have not yet spoken to how and through what forms of play children perform acts of discrimination and exclusion between and within gendered peer cultures so I add to the research by doing just that.

Sociologist Cynthia Epstein contributes to my understanding of the phenomenon of peer-to-peer discrimination by her recommendation to all sociologists to consider gender issues in their studies to better understand the major institutions and social relationships in society (2007). I seek to respond by critically analyzing the imaginative play of both boys and girls and evaluating the different ways children perform the exclusionary acts in an attempt to understand why boys in particular are so often neglected from this specific field of research.

METHODOLOGY

I performed an ethnography at a private urban preschool, called Bird Rock, located on a private college's campus, beginning in February 2009 and completed in November of that same year. The preschool was originally built for the children of the college's faculty, but it is now open to members of the community as well. Tasha, the director of the preschool, informed me that professor's children get priority admission, but the community is welcome to enroll their children when free spots open up. Financial aid is not available however, so one must assume a certain socio-economic status about the children's family, being that the program is highly acclaimed in the area and thus admission is competitive. The preschool was divided by age into three groups of children: the Twos, the Threes, and the Fours. I observed the Fours, a diverse group of sixteen children made up of eight girls and eight boys as they interacted during playtime in the mornings. Seven of them were multiracial and nine were white. Three were adopted and two had single-sex parents. I witnessed the different games that the children independently decided to play during their hour-long free playtime. Observation was not performed during school time because the research question was specific to play. I soon began to recognize trends and patterns during negotiation of roles within imaginative play and the different spatial arrangements that affected the children's interactions, which focused my data and evidence for the conclusions.

It must be said however that the findings that I observed were particular to this single group of children. Thus, my assertions do not hold the explanatory power to

describe the actions of all preschool aged children, but rather this particular group of sixteen children in this specific setting and context.

THE SITE

The playground was large and had many different landmarks. To better imagine the landscape, Diagram 1 (Appendix) depicts the general spatial arrangement.

The play structure, shaped like a Giraffe, had a slide, three levels, a swirly ladder, and a fire-pole. The Giraffe was in the sand pit, which was usually filled with different sand toys such as shovels, pails, buckets, bowls and trucks.

In the sand pit the children constructed buildings and castles, participated in baking or cooking rituals and played chase games. They used both the Giraffe's structure as well as the surrounding sand area to create their boundaries of play.

The Fallen Tree was in the woodchips. It looked like a large piece of driftwood and the children climbed on it freely. It was weathered from all the years of kids playing rough on it. Also, in the woodchips area, against the fence was an imaginary "Elevator," which will be discussed later. There was no definite object in the area, but it was known in the children's realms to exist.

The Racetrack was a cement circular path around the garden on the right side of the diagram. The children rode bikes, scooters or cars around the track. The arrows indicated the direction they were to move and were painted on the ground.

The block area was where either Legos or large cardboard blocks were set out. It was the area where the kids created houses or other building structures.

The kids congregated into groups when they began games and their imaginative play. Certain games had permanent locations of action that were unchanging such as Spaceship, which was always played either on or near the fallen tree. Elevator, which was more of an imaginative realm rather than a game, was always set against one particular panel of the fence in the right hand corner of the woodchip area.

The children had free range during outside playtime to run and explore any area on the playground. Though the layout of the playground was not new, they often acted as though they were discovering the land for the first time and discovered new ways to utilize the space during their play. The physical layout of the playground was important to the research because, while it determined play boundaries, it also gave props for them to explore and fostered new construction of realms and imaginative possibilities.

STAFF

Sarah was the head teacher of the Fours and Candice was her co-teacher. The two of them were distant from the children during outside playtime and I saw little of their pedagogical techniques. The children had minimal interaction with them during the hour of free-play. It was the one time during the day other than naptime that they did not have

an agenda or lesson plan to execute so I believe the two women used it as a break time from the Fours.

Sarah and Candice continuously held personal conversations about their social lives or the preschool gossip over the heads of the children. Candice would often create art projects for the children to do during the outside play such painting or clay. She also took care of Aiden, a child who cried daily and was somewhat of a loner and did not have many friends. She clung to Candice, which forced Candice to be more engaged with the Fours than Sarah. Candice did not work at the preschool for money and in fact the job was more of a way to fill her days.

Sarah was usually distracted by projects such as gardening or building holiday wreathes from the grape vines on the fence. Her physical presence served as a disciplinary tool, although she did not intervene in the play very often. Sarah was rigid and authoritarian and though I never understood why her demeanor was so cold, it was clear the children recognized her stiffness as well in the way they physically avoided her whenever possible.

I came to understand that Sarah believed conditioning was the main purpose of preschool. Her ultimate goal was to socialize them and prepare them for Kindergarten. She theorized about the behavior of boys and girls and her expectations were based on these gendered notions. She gave verbal approval to them when they performed hegemonic gender performances such as when the girls acted “cute” and the boys were

"strong or tough." She represented the predominant expectations of society and essentially attempted to condition them to fulfill such societal standards.

Sarah referred to the kids as a collective such as: "All Tiger Friends" or simply "Tigers" and when she prompted them, they agreed verbally in unison that they were collectively friends. But the playground showed differently; the kids, in fact, were not all friends, and there were clear divisions between kids and the groupings in the different imaginative games and realms. Those dysfunctional relations were ultimately what illuminates gender and power dynamics for this research and thus her misconstructed perception of their collectiveness only complicates the data.

MY ROLE AS A RESEARCHER

Because the ethnographic research was on exclusionary acts, it was imperative that the children understood my role as an objective researcher and not as a disciplinary figure. I never outwardly disciplined any of the children in attempt to become someone who they felt comfortable performing their acts of exclusion and inclusion around. I also never interviewed the children, though I did allow them to tell me whatever they wanted me to hear.

Constantly, in the heat of a confrontation with another child, the children would storm up to me and say things such as: "He hit me!" "She is not being nice!" or "*So and so* did this or that!" and I would have to remind them that I was not going to get anyone in trouble.

When I was done with my research I had to find a way to explain to them that I would no longer be coming every week in a way that they would understand. I told them that my notebook ran out of pages and that meant that it was time for me to write my story about them. They enjoyed the idea of being in a story and that provided me an easy transition into finding pseudonyms for them. I found it relevant that the majority of them chose Disney character names. The only child that could not think of a name was Aiden, who is extremely shy and simply never responded when I spoke to her, so I chose to use her middle name. I thought it imperative to have them create their pseudonym on their own because it provided an emic perspective of how they viewed themselves.

FOCAL CHILDREN

I entered my research intending to observe all of the children equally. I was interested in the larger groups' dynamic and the way that all of the children interacted as a whole. However, there were some children that caught the eye of my research more so than others because of their dominant role in the social-real realm of the playground.

Dominick, Michael, Takeshi (as a group/clique):

I saw Dominick as the boy leader, the alpha-male, of the entire class of children. He routinely was with Michael and Takeshi, Michael identifying often as Dominick's sidekick.

It was not by coincidence that when asked to choose their pseudonyms Michael begged to be called Luigi, the supporting role to the well-known cartoon character Mario from *Super Mario Brothers*, a game they often played. The same roles could be identified when they played *Alvin and the Chipmunks*, Dominick would be Alvin and Michael would always be Theodore or Simon. Michael viewed himself in relation to Dominick. His identity was constructed around whatever Dominick was. If Dominick's character did not exist in a realm then neither did his.

Dominick was the boy that suggested and decided most games. He was the one who exercised the power to decide whether a person could join a game or not and thus had the ability to exclude certain kids. The reason he held this authority was because of Michael and Takeshi. The two boys submitted to Dominick's authoritative rule and legitimized his decisions by following his directions and self-created rules. Dominick possessed the characters within the imaginative realms and easily took away roles from kids who challenged his authority. As West and Zimmerman refer to it, Dominick was "performing gender" by dominating the playground and presenting himself as boys are expected to: hyper-masculine and tough (1987: 125). Dominick never was openly sad, nor did he display any emotions or tattle on any other child- all of these things being because they were against the "boy code" of the playground. I often viewed him as a bully because of his tendency to coerce the rest of the group to be hateful and exclusive towards certain children he deemed inferior, which will be addressed in discussion of

Ryan, another focal child. Michael and Takeshi were his loyal subjects and together the three boys embodied the boy clique. Dominick represented what it was to be a "boy" on this particular playground.

Ryan:

Ryan was Dominick's most regular victim. Ryan was the "tattler." I understood Ryan as the social pariah of the socio-real realm of the preschool because he was excluded by both girls and boys and rarely was allowed access into imaginative play. He appeared less mature and was physically shorter and smaller, thus making him "weaker" than the rest of the boys. His physicality caused him to resort to tattling to solve his problems and confrontations. As mentioned before, tattling broke the code of solidarity on the playground, and thus he was unable to gain respect. Dominick asserted his dominance over Ryan and utilized Ryan's low status to establish his authority. As a result, the rest of the children perpetuated this discrimination, finding little reason to include or be nice to Ryan. Excluding Ryan became a way of forming solidarity for the rest of the children. Asking Dominick things like, *"Ryan is a poo-poo head right?"* (Fieldnotes 32) gained a child status in Dominick's eyes because it proved affiliation against Ryan. To hide from Ryan and to make him feel left out became a game to Dominick's clique and the few other boys that rotated in and out of that circle. Ryan ultimately represented the attributes that children justified as reasons to exclude one another.

FINDINGS

IMPACT OF IMAGINATIVE PLAY

In elementary and middle school settings, children separate themselves by gender. Some researchers attribute such division by using a biological rationale (Sadkers; 1995), while others believe it is a social norm to surround oneself with other people that can relate to ones interests. Either way, within these school groups children establish and construct self-identities that dictate their peer-to-peer relations.

Social-hierarchies develop based on those constructed affiliations. Boys and girls create idealized images of masculinity and femininity and model their behavior based on those impressions. As stated previously in the literature review, popularity ranking depends on very different things for boys and girls (Adler; 1992). Due to social pressures, children embody the gender roles that are normalized in their peer culture.

The hierarchies that exist within the elementary and middle school system are very different than at the preschool level in that they are more static. Students' positions within them are as defined and restrictive and do not tolerate change. Labels are associated to the leaders such as, The Queen Bee or The Captain of an athletics team. The rest of the group identifies as sidekicks or followers of their leader. Those labels are assumed and embodied throughout school and remain unchallenged.

I discuss the fixed positions within social-hierarchies in elementary and middle school so as to compare them to the way in which preschooler's construct hierarchies. The structure that the four year olds participate in is informal. No teacher interaction occurs during playtime, and gender norms do not inhibit their perceptions. In essence, the dominant concepts of masculinity and femininity have not imposed on their constructions of self during play. As such, they are able to participate in imaginative play without the restraints of norms or expectations.

Imaginative play allows for the negotiation and experimentation with various roles and identities. New identities are assumed in place of their real self and often their individual identity completely disappears during imaginative play. Hierarchies are perpetuated within the games placing emphasis on assigning characters. Children are fixated on their roles in the games and negotiate their placement on the game's unspoken social-ladder. As mentioned earlier, the assignment and negotiation of the roles often takes more time and effort than the actual playing of the games.

Thus, even though it is pretend play, children provide themselves the opportunity to assume different roles that challenge the real-social realm hierarchies that they know. There are leaders in the real-social realm just as in elementary and middle school groups; however, at the preschool level, new positions are acquired in the imaginative realm.

Children who identify as sidekicks or as kids who constantly are being excluded can then become a leader within the imaginary realm. This process is dependent on

creativity. Authority is often given to the child with the most creative game. Essentially, any child can suggest a game and take control of the entire group no matter their social standing. When a child takes control of a game, they gain access to power through the ownership of the idea. As such, even the social pariah of the playground can possess power with a good enough idea. Moreover, everyone recognizes that the game is transient, and that the new leader's power will be gone the moment the game concludes. That power is not a challenge to the authority of the leaders in the real-social realm because they exercise it at all times outside of imaginative games.

Nonetheless, the power that is possessed for those fleeting moments is substantial. As part of playing games, the child that controls the game learns exclusion and the exercise of power. Moreover, the implementation of that power is a tool to hold their position in the imaginary realm for a longer period. Thus, children do not learn about exclusion through being excluded, but rather through those brief moments of performing the exclusionary acts themselves. It is so much more powerful and influential to possess the ability to exclude because it signaled their rank in the imaginative realm.

Experimenting with identities in their imaginations deepens the children's growing understanding of their identities outside of play. When they assume the roles of something they are not, like the *dad* or the *captain of a ship,* they try on new personality traits. To them, those attributes are positive and it is their way of deciding how they want to be perceived by their peers.

Creativity being the currency of the playground is counterintuitive to the way elementary and middle school groups function. There, physical appearances and mental toughness are applauded, as is the ability to “be cool.” They no longer value creativity the way the preschoolers clearly do, simply because it is “little kid stuff.” The children in preschool clearly have not encountered hegemonic norms that reinforce the concept that says boys do not show emotions and girls are subordinate. The children construct their own realities and norms separate from mainstream notions.

Dane is a boy who was neither the leader, nor the underdog, and kept to himself quite often. He was however perceived by the children as incredibly creative. He invented a game called *Elevator*, which consisted of standing against a wall and pushing imaginary buttons. According to Dane, the elevator could take the riders to different levels of any imaginary building. The children were drawn to this open ended game. It provided the opportunity to go anywhere and exist in any realm. Because Dane was the inventor of the particular pretend realm he was always a part of the games that included the elevator. Dane exercised authority and control over that game and thus gained knowledge of what it is to utilize power.

Similar to Dane, Ryan, the social outcast of the real-social realm, was able to afford authority in one particular imaginative realm for a few transient moments. He invented the *Golden Rock* game, which consisted of searching the woodchips for mythical and beautiful rocks. Only he was able to determine whether or not a rock was

golden or not. Because he was creative enough to give himself exclusive authority early in establishing the rules he dominated the children when they participated in the pretend game. Thus, despite the fact that he was repeatedly experiencing exclusion and rejection, these were the few moments when he held legitimized power and exercised exclusion. As a result of the children's incessant torment he made sure to exercise an authoritative and imperious performance. He made his best effort to force of the children that had been so mean to him to feel the pain and sadness he experienced. His desire for power was larger than Dane's because he endured extreme exclusion daily.

It is evident that the way children learn exclusion is much more complex than was previously believed. While it is true that children ascertain the knowledge of rejection by being the victim to it, they also learn ways to perform it and possess power at an early age, which is incredibly influential to their developing understandings of power. Those power dynamics are constantly being negotiated and interchanged within and outside of imaginative realms. No one child is dominant the entire time, which is once again dramatically different than at the elementary or middle school dynamics.

EVIDENCE OF EXCLUSION

In the introduction, I argue that children are capable of exercising power. To help illuminate this case, I utilize an interaction between Cameron and Alyssa. One morning, Alyssa was monitoring the door to the playhouse. Cameron tried to come inside, and

Alyssa, the current leader of this particular imaginative and real realm, told her it was a "Princess Ballet Castle," and that she was not allowed in. Cameron then walked away and pretended to put on an imaginary ball gown. She acted out the actions of putting on a crown and mimicked the action of looking for her wand; all of this was performance for Alyssa. When Cameron came back to the door, expecting to go inside, Alyssa rejected her again because she did not have a pair of fictitious "ballet tights on" (Fieldnotes p. 11). These "rules" were constructed right in the moment, but the rest of the children inside of the playhouse supported Alyssa and Cameron was alone. Cameron could not argue with the regulation, the only way she would have been allowed in was to adhere and follow Alyssa's demands. Alyssa exercised her authority and power, and Cameron was forced to perform imaginary acts despite her will. Cameron did not shrug off the rejection and go play elsewhere, but bought into the newly created rules and legitimized Alyssa's authority.

Both girls and boys perform acts of exclusion on the playground every day. Their performances however can be divided into different categorizations such as, prop manipulation, imaginative rules and regulations, and verbal phrasing. These categorizations help structure this section.

Prop manipulation: Children gain authority on the playground in their imaginative realms by using and manipulating props and the spatial organization of the playground. Moreover, props strengthen and create legitimacy in power relations of the micro-

hierarchies. At the preschool level, props can really be anything. Many times they are real, tangible objects such as balls, bikes, or sand toys but often, they exist only in an imaginative reality and are invisible to the rest of the world. In these cases, children create props that are only visible to the participants in the particular game.

Because prop ownership entitles the child to exercisable authority the quest for legitimate possession often motivates social interaction. If a prop was previously deemed necessary for a game, the child automatically gains authority when they possess that prop because the others do not. This ownership often leads to the control of the particular game, meaning the child is able to create the rules and regulations, and the rest of the children abide by those rules if they want to continue in the play. To elaborate on a previous example, Ryan's *Golden Rock* game illuminates the authority a child gains through prop ownership. When Takeshi thought he found one of the rocks he excitedly showed it to Ryan. Ryan, who had not yet found one, dismissed Takeshi immediately even though the rock had all of the qualifying characteristics to be categorized as a Golden Rock. Ryan's authority was not challenged even though the interaction exposed the flaws of his rules. Essentially, because he had ultimate say, the children willingly chose to abide by whatever he demanded despite the fact that there were holes in his rationale.

Another observation concerning prop negotiation is when children intentionally share props to exclude others; basically they manipulate the classic preschool rule of

sharing to work for their own exclusive agenda. When a child chooses a "friend" with whom to share something, they ultimately exclude the rest of the children either unconsciously, or purposefully. And because the child has ownership of the prop, they have complete control over who will play, and frequently it is done with malicious intentions.

On one occasion, when Brandon was playing in the sand, Sam approached him and asked permission to join. It was rare to see someone seeking access from Brandon because he followed around another boy who was more powerful on the playground, thus inhibiting Brandon from ever performing direct exclusion. Brandon however, did grant him admission and gave him a plastic cup that he himself was not using. Alex, a quiet boy, then requested entry into the game. Bandon then took the cup from Sam and told them both that he would decide who would be allowed to play by picking one of them to be his "Best Friend." Recognizing that he could exercise authority, which he very often did not experience, Brandon paused for a few moments to soak up his transient status. The intensity was high and both Alex and Sam appeared nervous while he was deliberating. In the end, he chose Sam who jumped up and down exuberantly and accepted the now highly symbolic and trophy-like plastic cup. Alex, on the other hand, was forgotten as he slouched into himself, holding back his tears. The two boys scurried off to another area of the play yard and in fact did not continue the original sand game.

This example exemplifies how quickly props can dictate authority and thus exclusion in the imaginative realms.

Props become vessels of deeper meanings such as exclusive friendships and legitimization of authority. They hold currency, which can be traded and exchanged within the imaginative realms. The authority that the props hold is confirmed through the belief that the game and the prop are more authoritative than their individual roles within the game.

Imaginative rules and regulations: The rules of the playground are universally understood. The teachers created some, such as no screaming or throwing sand, but the children themselves created many others. The rules that they invented stemmed from their own games and were individual and unique to this particular group of 4 year-olds. A rule in the imaginative realm of "Spaceship" was that once the ship had blasted off, no one else was allowed on, because the ship was essentially in "space" and it would not make sense for a child to be able to climb onto it because it was no longer was on the ground. This rule was created and manipulated as a tool of exclusion by a group of boys. They often would quicken the "launch" along if they noticed someone they did not want playing approaching the ship.

There were two universal rules of the playground that correlated to the construction of the micro-hierarchies on a day-to-day basis. One was to never point out that the imaginative play was fake or not real. And second, that it was never allowed to

tattle about imaginative play and the occurrences during such play. To elaborate on the "Spaceship" example, Michael once fell off the tree log (the spaceship) during the "Blastoff Count Down" and then attempted to climb back onto the log as though nothing had happened. Dominick, the "Captain," however would not allow it. He reminded Michael that they had already taken off and were in space. Michael then broke a universal rule and said, "Oh come on Dominick… It is JUST PRETEND!!" in a very angry, deep voice. He verbalized what they all knew, that in fact, the log was still on the ground and that it was all make believe. He broke the regulation of pointing out the imaginative play and on top of it, breaking character by calling Dominick by his real name. As a result, he was shunned by all of the children for the rest of the day. Michael however did not tattle on Dominick or any of the other participants because he also knew that if he were to do that, it would truly lower his status on the hierarchical structure (Fieldnotes p. 27). These rules and regulations were manipulated by the children, both boys and girls, to force children out of their games and also used to keep others in their realm of control.

Another example of an implicit rule of the playground is of the time Dominick, Michael and Karina were running around the entire landscape of the playground. They were racing and Dominick led the way while Karina struggled to keep up. Suddenly, Karina fell face first into the sand and burst into tears while the two boys finished the race without her. Ashley, who was near by ran and replaced Cameron in the race line up.

She stood in between the boys on the step, exactly as Cameron did. Cameron looked up from the sand and saw Ashley and screamed, "ASHLEY I was playing with THEM! I wanted to play!" Her words were barely comprehensible through her tears. Dominick then looked down at Cameron from above and said, "Cameron there is no crying in this game." He then pushed her when she tried to join them on the step and counted down from three and the new race began without Cameron (Fieldnotes p. 52). In this excerpt, Dominick enforces the unspoken rule of "No Crying" on the playground. The rule also is indicative of Dominick's conforming to a hegemonic masculine ideal. He exercised his dominance by deeming Cameron replaceable in the game.

Verbal Phrasing: I observed that when children ask permission to join games, the child being asked automatically gains authority (Corsaro 2005) because they hold the ability to say yes or no to another's entry. I also witnessed that boys openly and verbally exclude more than girls do. Girls actually have more subtle ways of excluding, which is counter-intuitive to the research I discussed earlier that says girls are the ones creating micro-hierarchies in their play.

There are many different ways to gain entry into a game and then in turn there are just as many ways to reject that entry. There are permission seeking phrases such as, "Can I play?" or "Can I be the ____?" which are used when kids want to join a game that is already being played and they request a particular role. These questions create a power

dynamic and relationship where the child being asked holds the authority to dictate their entry or not.

There are also invitation phrases such as, “Who wants to play ____?” or “Do you want to play ____?” which initiate new games and invite others to join. Whoever asks the question is likely to become the leader of the group, the game, and most likely would assign the roles, either who is “It” or who is who in the imaginative realm, assuming that the child is high enough on the hierarchical ladder.

There are exclusion phrases such as, “You can’t play with us.” “There are only ___#___ in this game.” “You can’t be anyone.” “Can I play?”—“No.” Children use these phrases to negotiate the entry of another player. There are also more subtle ways that the kids exclude each other, which is by avoiding or ignoring such permission-seeking questions. When a child is being ignored it causes them to continuously repeat their question, which builds up anger and frustration to the person doing the ignoring. This frustration often forces the child to tattle on the group, and that only lowers the child on the social status ladder.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

I categorized all verbal acts of exclusion that included the “You can’t” phrases as well as the subtle ignoring occurrences. I also recorded the usage of props and when those were used for explicit exclusion. I divided the acts by gender because that is the emphasis of this research.

Chart #1 (Boys)

Boy – Boy exclusion using **words**	20
Boy – Boy exclusion using **props**	7
Boy – Girl exclusion using **words**	11
Boy – Girl exclusion using **props**	0
Boy – Boy exclusion by **ignoring**	3

Total acts of exclusion performed by boys: 41

Chart #2 (Girls)

Girl – Girl exclusion using **words**	9
Girl – Girl exclusion using **props**	4
Girl –Boy exclusion using **words**	2
Girl – Boy exclusion using **props**	3
Girl – Girl exclusion by **ignoring**	3

Total acts of exclusion performed by girls: 21

Total acts of exclusion performed by both boys and girls: 62

The numbers in the charts indicate the number of occurrences of the particular exclusionary practice. *Using words* implies an exclusionary phrase. *Using props* implies the manipulation of an object to exclude or include. And *by ignoring* I mean the child excluded someone by disregarding his or her permission-seeking question.

Boys performed acts of exclusion almost twice as often as the girls did (41:21). Chart #1 displays that boys excluded other boys 30 times and excluded girls only 11 times. Boys outwardly denied one another more than girls did. Girls excluded a total of 21 times but excluded other girls 16 times, leaving the other 5 times for boys. Clearly the girls excluded one another more than they did to boys, but only about half as often as boys excluded one another. Research neglects the idea of boys ever performing exclusion acts and solely addresses girls. Not only does this research illustrate that boys are participating in acts of exclusion and hierarchical manipulation, but it shows that they do it more than girls.

CONCLUSION

Through extensive observation, this study has captured the richness of children's participation in imaginative realms. It has been shown that boys exclude one another on the playground and that the majority of the research that feminizes clique formation is flawed. Preschool children wrestle with identities that might never be experienced otherwise. Leaders in the social-real realm are not always the leaders within the imaginative realms. At the preschool level legitimacy is given to a fantastical reality. It is also noteworthy that authority and legitimacy are gained through one's level of creativity, which is something that becomes more nuanced in later social organizations outside of play and in schooling. The child that is the leader of an imaginative game participates in

exclusion and learns that to exercise it is a way of asserting power. Thus children not only learn about exclusion by being subjected to it but also by performing it. Children are capable of learning about real world social-hierarchies through experimentation because the preschool setting allows them to explore multiple identities with little consequence.

Ultimately, my research questions asked, how and when children participate in acts of exclusion, and what does it look like? Through extensive observations, it was demonstrated that children, especially boys, as young as four years old, engage in acts of discrimination and exercise power to negotiate identities on the playground. Through research, I challenge the notion that cliques and discrimination are a female phenomenon by demonstrating that boys at Bird Rock negotiate power dynamics and perform exclusionary acts more often an girls do, at least at the preschool level.

I agree with Hallinan's observation, which confronted the lack of research that has been done about young children and their social organizations and thus attempt to contribute to sociology's understanding of the power dynamics between children especially in relation to young males. Further research should be done that overlaps certain variables in addition to gender, such as socio-economic status, race, or ability to deepen the understanding of children's creation and manipulation of social hierarchies within and outside of imaginative play. More work must be done that examines gender constructions within imaginative play and the consequences of children choosing to participate in particular games. We need to reevaluate research that solely studies girls and begin to include boys as a topic of knowledge. Because so little is known about

imaginative realms and the impact of play on children's perceptions, there is quite a lot of room to broaden the body of knowledge. We must recognize that social interaction on the playground holds depth and often explains the creation of identities. Imaginative play is more complex than just "princess ballet castles" or spaceships; it is essential that sociologists recognize that studying imaginative realms is a way to understand the beginnings of power and gender negotiation.

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Appendix

Diagram 1: