

PERFORMING CHILDLORE AND GENDER ROLES IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL IN METRO MANILA

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Abstract

The present study, based on my participant observation among selected elementary school students in a public school in Manila, seeks to investigate the reproduction of gender roles in the performance of play by children. Observing the performance of popular childlore and analyzing the lyrics, it employs Huizinga's phenomenological approach to play, Vygotsky's socio-cultural approach to child development, and poststructuralist feminist theory of identity, in analyzing rhymes and actions involved in child's play. The study attempts to explicate how children are socialized into the adult's gendered universe of meanings, while at the same time emphasizing the contradictory nature of childlore. That is, while childlore, especially chant games, initiates children into the gendered world of adults, it also offers children liminal spaces where children can suspend rigid gender roles.

Keywords: *Childlore, gender, play, feminism, performance*

Introduction: The School as a Field of Contestation for Gendered Childlore

Generally, children's folklore or "childlore" refers to "those traditions that are learned, and performed by children without the influence of adult supervision or formal instruction" (Grider, 1997, p.123). The earliest scholars of children's folklore were interested in preserving what they regarded as the dying traditions of childhood and focused on games, especially games with a spoken or sung component (Ronstrom, 1997, p. 130).¹ In the present study, I want to connect childlore and children's play with the formation of gender identity.

Given the fact that gender issues are very much manifest in early childhood interactions, the present study is an attempt to contribute to the field of gender studies and folklore by focusing on the play of schoolchildren. The most succinct definition of folklore is given by Klintberg: "traditional cultural forms that are

communicated between individuals through words or actions and tend to exist in variation” (quoted in Klein, 1998, p.332). This definition embraces folklores common among children. Although children’s play and games have been one of the earliest materials that folklorists had studied (Beresin, 1997; Grider, 1997; Sutton-Smith, 1968), the folklore shared among children was not often seriously studied by folklorists (Sutton-Smith, 1970).² The primary objective of this study, however, is not just to add to the growing literature on the subject, but to look at the persistent, unacknowledged ‘symbolic violence’ in the performance and transmission of gender roles in children’s plays. Bourdieu (1990) contrasts symbolic violence with the overt violence of the usurer or the ruthless master; symbolic violence is

gentle, invisible violence, unrecognized as such, chosen as much as undergone, that of trust, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, debts, piety, in a word, of all the virtues honoured by the ethic of honour. (Bourdieu, 1990, p.127).

This study focuses on children’s play involving rhymes and actions to investigate the gender reproduction in the performance of play by children in a public elementary school in Quezon City.

Schools are one of the major institutions where secondary socialization occurs. Considering the school as a site for studying folklore has not been typically appealing to most anthropologists and folklorists,³ yet there are a few studies that investigate the oral transmission of childlore in the school setting (e.g., Barnett and Kruidenier, 1981; Berkovits, 1970; Gulliford, 1992; Mechling, 1997; Mergen, 1997). As schools seek to instruct children in certain values and beliefs of the community, they are at the same time sites for production and reproduction of childlore. By sequestering children of the same age in one place, the school provides a fertile ground for children to create their own lore, to share their common symbols and meanings, and to transmit these meanings and symbols to others (Bruner, 1960). Through peer association, children learn to anticipate their future roles within and outside the school setting. Peer association produces networks of young people who share a more or less well-defined subculture or way of life. It is through this network that children can create their own lore and even distinctive ways of behaving as children of the same social set (McDowell, 1999).

En-Gendering Folklore and Deconstructing Gender in Play

Socialization is not innocent. It positions the subject into the existing competing discursive fields arranged along gender axes. The individual only

becomes a sexed subject through identification with a discursive field. This is also the thrust of the Lacanian ‘sexuation of the subject’. In this view, there is no pre-given subject prior to its entry into the symbolic order. The sexed subject is a position within a given symbolic field (Zizek, 1992). Yet, as feminists and Marxists have pointed out, discourses compete with each other within a given social field. Individuals, therefore, are both the site and subject of discursive struggle.

In a society constituted hierarchically along gender inequalities, the more powerful discourse reproduces itself through the constitution of the subject especially during the formative period of subject-making. And as George Herbert Mead, the father of symbolic interactionism, has shown, one of the most powerful arenas where the subject’s identity emerges is through play and games. As the child enters into the adult world, play and games become powerful rituals where children learn the “normal” subject-position relative to their sexed identity. Hence the importance of childlore.

Today, social constructionism, which defines gender as a form of discourse, is the ascending dominant paradigm in analyzing gender issues (see Weedon, 1987).⁴ Prescinding or detaching from Foucault’s poststructuralist analysis of text and Derrida’s deconstruction, contemporary post-feminists have shifted the focus of analysis from anatomy and biology to the power of discourses to create and sustain gender-biased stories and narratives.⁵ According to the social constructionist paradigm,

The fixing of meaning in society and the realization of the implications of a particular version of meanings in forms of social organization and the distribution of social power rely on the discursive constitution of subject positions from which individuals actively interpret the world and by which they are themselves governed. (Weedon, 1987, p.97)

It must be emphasized here that contemporary poststructuralist feminists introduce the notion of the body as necessary touchstone for the analysis of subjectivity. Discourses operate within the body and shape the body. Therefore, to study the discursive constituting of gendered identities, one must locate it within the body (Schiebinger, 2000). This emphasis on the body is all the more interesting considering that children’s plays always involve the body. The young and fragile bodies of children are the primary locus by which gender scripts and other mnemonic devices are imprinted. Studying childlore, therefore, essentially presents a dilemma. That is, it should recognize the intricate process by which sexuation through childlore is not a simplistic process of creating docile sexed bodies of children.

Game versus Play, the dilemmatic meaning of gender in play

For the present study, the concepts of ‘free play’ (*paidea*) and ‘play game’ (*ludus*), originally analyzed by Vygotsky (1992), will be used as a frame to analyze childlore. Both play and games have rules, so what is the main difference between them? Callois employs the term *paidea* to refer to “prodigality of physical or mental activity which has no immediate useful objective, nor defined objective, and whose only reason to be is based in the pleasure experienced by the player” (see Frasca, 2003, p.223). *Ludus* on the other hand, is a term suggested by Gonzalo Frasca to refer to a particular form of play that is “organized under a system of rules that defines a victory or a defeat, a gain or a loss” (Frasca, 1999). Usually, play activities are associated with children, while games are thought to be more adult activities. The reason is that games have a strong social component, and young children need first to be socialized in order to perform these kinds of activities. After that period (approximately age 7 onwards), *games* start to be played.

Turning now to contemporary developmental study of childhood, most studies on children and play had been dominated either by the behaviorist paradigm (e.g., Pellegrini & Galda, 1991), or the cognitivist tradition championed by Jean Piaget (1962). The earliest attempt to analyze play from a phenomenological point of view is the pioneering study of Johan Huizinga (1950). Huizinga gives the following definition of play:

...play...[is] a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary life’ as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest. And no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (1950, p.13)

Based on this definition, Huizinga enumerates four fundamental characteristics of play. First, play is free. One engages in play voluntarily. Second, play is non-ordinary. Players step out of the real life into a temporary sphere of activity that is a product of make-believe. It lies outside the immediate quest for satisfaction of life. Third, play is staged within certain limits of time and space, yet the moment it is enacted, it is transmitted and becomes a tradition. Fourth, it creates order, it is order; it has rules that captivate the players and controls them. Fifth, play develops a play community that develops an aura of secrecy (Huizinga, 1950, pp. 8-13).

Like rituals, children's play is performed in privileged spaces and time, set off from the periods and areas reserved for work and study. Play transforms the space and time around it by setting itself off from the rest of the world. During play, children are relatively self-absorbed in the performance itself and suspend the spatio-temporal dimensions of the outside world. It creates a separate frame (Goffman, 1972). Or, as Huizinga says, play "is rather a stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (1950, p.8). As Vygotsky points out, in play, action is subordinated to roles. Playing for fun serves as an exclusionary boundary against those who refuse to play.⁶ Play is a way of 'framing', of delineating what is "acceptable" from what is not (Goffman, 1972).⁷

Huizinga's phenomenological analysis leaves hanging the account of interaction among children themselves and how such activities constitute the individual identities of children. In short, there is a need to look for a theory that can explain how play itself creates selves and minds among children. Or, to put it differently, how play creates and positions subjects in relation to culture and society. This missing dimension is supplied by the revolutionary theory of Lev Vygotsky and George Herbert Mead (1967). Vygotsky's views veer away from attributing the character of play to the psychological and developmental nature of the child.⁸ His analysis of play is based on sociohistorical analysis of the genesis of the mind and individual development. Central to Vygotsky's sociocultural analysis of the mind is that people's higher mental functions are derived mostly from social context. Secondly, these higher mental functions are mediated by language as a tool for communication (Wertsch, 1991, p.21). One cannot abstract the meaning of a sign from the social context where it is used (Wertsch, 1991, p.29).

Vygotsky, therefore, conceives of play as a "leading edge in the child's development because through it [the child] begins to sever the direct connection between a thing, a situation, and an action" (Lee, 1985, p.90). What is important in Vygotsky's analysis is that in play, the child learns to subordinate her impulses to the semiotic meanings of objects rather than to the objects themselves (Lee, p. 90).

Newman and Holzman (1993) have rightly proposed that the proper reading of Vygotsky's sociocultural analysis of play is to see it as contradictory or 'dilemmatic':⁹ On the one hand, play is revolutionary activity insofar as it involves imaginary situations and is concerned with meaning-making which is often novel and creative. On the other hand, play is also constraining. During play, the players lose their selves and are subordinated to the rules and semiotic meanings of the objects. The same observation is made by George Herbert

Mead who, like Vygotsky, realizes that in play children create imaginary roles, yet these roles subordinate children to rules. From this role-taking the self emerges.

Children get together to “play Indian.” This means that the child has a certain set of stimuli which call out in itself the responses that they would call out in others, and which answer to an Indian. In the play period the child utilizes his own responses to these stimuli which he makes use of in building a self. The response which he has a tendency to make to these stimuli organizes them. He plays that he is, for instance, offering himself something, and he buys it; he gives a letter to himself and takes it away; he addresses himself as a parent, as a teacher; he arrests himself as a policeman. He has a set of stimuli which call out in himself the sort of responses they call out in others. He takes this group of responses and organizes them into a certain whole. Such is the simplest form of being another to one’s self. It involves a temporal situation. The child says something in one character and responds in another character, and then his responding in another character is a stimulus to himself in the first character, and so the conversation goes on. A certain organized structure arises in him and in his other which replies to it, and these carry on the conversation of gestures between themselves. (Mead, 1964, p. 151)

If play is a process of identity formation, then one must be attentive to the specificity of the gendered character of such process.¹⁰ Definitely, play is a means of transmitting and creating culturally defined roles, roles that are specific to each category of people who learn them. Like any other activity, play also structures the sexual character of identity formation. To play is to enter and participate into the ongoing narrative of life. Children gain access to the adult world via the mediation of the discourses contained within the play. This living of narrative is a way of inducting children to the adult life. Play positions the child within the space and time of the social narrative.

Play is a world in itself. It is only during play that children become so absorbed with an activity; similar to what Victor Turner (1986) calls “flow”. Yet, while it becomes a self-contained activity, an imaginary world of make-believe, the freedom of activity within play is not absolute. For the freedom in play is already pre-defined by existing discursive rules and meanings (Newman & Holzman, 1993).

As pointed out earlier, the sociocultural analysis being pursued here considers the relationship between play and gender as a dilemmatic situation: the interplay of gendered meanings in play is contradictory and ambiguous. In play, children, to some degree, freely create their own situation and perform

imaginary roles. Yet they do so only within the existing competing discourses already in place. Now, how do children construct and resist received discourses about gender? This is the main question this paper explores as a study of the relationship between schooling and how gender roles are reproduced through the process of childlore performance.

Methodology

This study was conducted in a public elementary school in Quezon City. Participant observation was used among the schoolchildren at play outside the classroom. The ages of these schoolchildren ranged from 10- to 12-years-old (all Grade 3). Video recording of performance through camera¹¹ was employed. Active interviews were conducted among the children, both active participants who were instructed to perform the chant play and non-participants who were not informed about the observation process while playing.

Two classes were also instructed to submit a written account of their 'plays' as assignment. This included lyrics and verses, the rules of play, the goal of play, who can play, and the reason for playing. The assignments were gathered and compared to come up with the final version, the 'official format' of the play. The data interpreted came from four sources: text, performance, participant observation, and interviews. In all, I collected five 'plays' with chants and rhymes. They became the object of my analysis.

The best way to study childlore, especially plays involving chants and rhymes, would be to observe them in a natural setting. Unfortunately, these plays are not allowed inside the classroom. For the duration of my study, I failed to watch children playing these activities in the natural environment, so I had to ask them to perform these plays for me. The lyrics of the songs during the plays have different versions, so I crosschecked the 'official' lyrics by comparing different versions and asking the children themselves which is the 'right' one. There were variations in the spelling and some semantical differences.

Findings, Analysis and Interpretation

The Significance of Play in the Everyday Life of Children. As discussed above, childlore can be free play or play game. In either case, these plays can be played by an individual or by a group. The children would engage in free play either as individuals or as a group especially when the teacher was not around. These individualized free plays also included the following: stomping on the table, writing on the board, looking outside near the window, and making faces.

The temporal dimension and spatial location of these free plays are very specific. First, they are performed inside the classroom. Second, they are done in times when the disciplinary gaze of the teacher is absent. The children engaged in playing to get rid of classroom boredom. In my fieldwork, I often overheard pupils commenting, “*Ang tagal naman ng oras*” [time is so slow]. Once, when I observed a class with no teacher, a pupil asked me what time it was. Then she calculated how much time was left before dismissal.

As groups, they also engage in play games like *mataya-taya* [tag], *taguan* [hide-and-seek], and, the most common, *habulan* [‘running after each other’/tag]. Group free play includes *tuksuban* (teasing). Group free play was done by some children even during class time in the playground, but never in the room. The fact that there are spaces and time for these plays means that when children engage in play, they are not completely without constraints. Consequently, these constraints also have some bearing on the way children relate to rules and prohibitions.

The group game plays are usually done outside the room. The playground is the site of these plays and is designated as a space for playing. Insofar as the playground is a site for multiple activities, it is a contested space for demarcating play and non-play activities. When I asked some children why organized free plays cannot be done in the classroom, the children simply laughed at my question. These rough plays are not allowed in the class! It is because the teacher says so. The children are therefore very excited if the teacher decides to let them play outside. In short, within a prescribed and given space for play, children also exercise their playful expressions.

In play, children invest their desire in play itself. To use the Lacanian vocabulary, play itself becomes the ‘*objet petit a*’, the object-cause of desire. (As such, play is opposed to work.) Children say they play ‘because it is fun’. All other reasons are subordinated to this end. Some typical responses by both boys and girls when they were asked why they play are: “*Wala lang, kasi nakaka-enjoy pag-bored ako*” [There’s no reason why I play, just because it’s enjoyable when I’m bored], “*Gusto ko lang maglaro*” [I just like to play], “*Masaya kasi*” [Because it’s fun].

In my interviews, most children said they prefer more animated or action-oriented play. They equate the pleasure they derive from play with its excitement. Excitement means more action and laughter. And children usually prefer their popular ‘plays’ rather than the pedagogical ‘plays’ taught by their teachers.

Girl: *Pangit kasi yong "Pass the Message" kasi tabimik lang laruin, di masaya. Di din ako nananalo at napipikon ako.* ["Pass the Message" is not such a nice game because it is quietly played, so it's less fun. And I get annoyed because I never win.]

Girl: *Mas gusto namin ng maraming action kasi mas masaya. Pag konti lang di masyadong masaya.* [We prefer more action because it's more fun.]

Girl: *Minsan lang namin nilalaro ang mga tinuro ni teacher kasi mahirap...* [We rarely play things the teacher taught because it's harder.]

Textual Analysis of the Rhymes. In the following analysis, I will only focus on the most common chants that are widely known among children. The most common chants include themes about the family and the roles of its members, and about intimate relationships and love. They may incorporate traditional folk songs.

Chant about the family:

Nanay, Tatay, gusto ko ng tinapay [Mother, Father, I want bread]
Ate, Kuya, gusto ko ng kape [Older Sister, Older Brother, I want coffee]
Labat ng gusto ko ay susundin ninyo [All that I want you must follow]
 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10
 10 - 9 - 8 - 7 - 6 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1

This free play is one of the shortest chants with clapping hands that I recorded. It is played among four players. There is no ultimate winner; it is played simply for the fun of chanting and playing it. This play chant is very popular among the girls. Boys tend to have reservations playing this play chant and, when they do participate, they often disrupt the play.

In chanting this, the players seem to assume the position of a *bunso* or the youngest child in the family. As revealed in this play, in Filipino culture the youngest child is often the center of attention (Dalisay, 1983; Guthrie, 1961) to the point that, as expressed in the lyrics, the youngest has a much stronger power to demand and so reverses the hierarchical power relations in the family. The child capitalizes on his/her helplessness and vulnerability. The overtone here is that of demanding total submission of the adult members of the family to the caprice of the child. The demands in the first part of the chant are quite 'legitimate': the child only asks for bread and coffee. Yet the youngest child may also demand whimsical objects as implied in the phrase "*labat ng gusto ko*" [everything I want]. This last part is also, to use a deconstructionist term, 'undecidable' (Culler, 1986). Because the unconditional demand is introduced

by legitimate demands (food), it seems to suggest that the child merely demands legitimate things.

Play About Love and Relationship: **BC apple**

Lemon juice
Tell me the name of your sweetheart
For example
I love you...

“*BC Apple*” can be played by two or more persons where the remaining two players will have to settle between themselves who will be the winner. They do this through the traditional rock-paper-scissors hand game. The ending of the game adds more to fun to the game. The lyrics of this chant do not rhyme. It is short, yet the melody jibes well with the body movement and the hand movements of the participants. It is interesting to note that the lyrics are in English and the concepts are about America. First, “apple” stands for the American way of life. Since American colonialism, Filipinos have equated the apple with what is American. “Lemon juice” is also American, which must be contrasted with the local citrus variety of *kalamansi*. And third, the romantic love component is also American, even Hollywood-like.

While the lyrics are about a very intimate theme, the children do not take them seriously. The attention of the players is focused on the fun of chanting and playing and not on the meanings associated with the lyrics. While children are seriously playing the game, they also are able to bracket the meanings and real life implications of the lyrics. Taking the lyrics literally would lead them to reveal their romantic infatuations. By playing this play game, children are able to discuss openly issues related to intimate relationships, without disapproving adults.

Chant about gambling and parents:

B - I - N - G - O
Tatay mong nag-Bingo [Your father who played Bingo]
Binato ng beyntesingko [Had a 25-centavo coin thrown at him]
Sabi ng Nanay “Bingo!” [Said Mother: “Bingo!”]

Through this play, the children form an image of a parents’ quarrel involving Bingo. The lyrics reflect the popularity of Bingo games and other gambling activities among Filipino adults (Locsin, 2001; Nery, 2003) especially during fiestas and community parties. The mother’s frustration with the father who plays Bingo is expressed in throwing a twenty-five centavo coin at him.

As expressed in the lyrics, which are quite short, this play is a comic sketch of ‘typical’ parents’ behavior. Yet, while self-absorbed in play, the children subordinate or bracket the practical meaning of the lyrics. As a girl explained (in response to the question “Does your father mind when you chant ‘Bingo?’”), her father would not mind this because “He knows that it’s not him” (since her father does not play Bingo).

In my observation of children’s performance of play, the enjoyment children get from playing also derives from the experience of play as *liminality*.¹² This is borne out by the reaction of children to my question on whether they take the lyrics seriously. All of them simply laughed at my question. As an 11-year-old girl told me: “*Di naman po kami seryoso.*” [‘We are not serious.’] Yet, they know what the Bingo game is. In fact, some of them told me that their parents play Bingo. And interestingly, some of the children had played Bingo. To those who told me that their parents play Bingo, I also asked them whether their parents quarrel about the game. Most of those who said their parents play Bingo said that it is their mothers who often play Bingo. The lyrics, therefore, are a reversal of this state of affairs. Children make fun of this game while being aware of its reversal.

It follows from this that play is a fluid process¹³ in which players constantly frame their activity, ever watchful of intrusion and the flow of space and time outside play.

Transmission: The Politics of Learning. The children’s playlore had been transmitted primarily through family members (sisters and brothers) and relatives (“*pinsan*” or ‘cousins’). Many girls stated that they learned from their elder sisters. It may also be transmitted from neighbors, or through classmates and friends in the school. It is quite interesting to note that learning these plays was not only through oral transmission but also through mass media. As one boy narrated, “*Nanunood lang po ako sa TV. Tapos pinag-aaralan ko.*” [‘I just watch TV and I study how to play it.’]

It is interesting that the ‘significant others’ (immediate family members and clique) are primary agents of transmitting the childlore, but also that the mass media are not far behind. In fact, the imagery in the lyrics of the aforementioned childlore are mostly derived from what they watch on television (about Bingo, ‘apple’, and romantic relations). Mass media becomes the source of the lyrics while the performance and transmission themselves are lodged in the peer and family members. Here the mass media play a vital part in the politics of gendered constitution of child’s subjectivity. Meanwhile, the practical materialization of these scripts and imagery resides in the face-to-face interactions among the children.

Sexuation in Play. Among the children I observed and interviewed, there seems to be an emerging play community that is defined along gender lines although this is not yet clear and distinct among the children. In general, for instance, girls perceive boys to be more rowdy during play than girls. Hence, most girls prefer fellow girls for a play group:

Girl: *Mas gusto ko mga babae rin kasi naiilang ako at inaasar ako ng mga kaklase ko [pag kalaro ko mga lalaki]. Mas makulit ang mga lalaki kasi nanggugulo ng laro. Magulo maglaro at kung anu-ano ang ginagawa. Mas makukulit ang mga lalaki, nandadaya sila.* [I prefer to play with girls also because I feel uncomfortable and get teased when I play with boys. Boys are more pesky and try to break up the play. They don't keep order and do all kinds of things, and they cheat.]

Girl: *Pag naglalaro kami tinutulak kami [ng mga lalaki].* [When we play with them, they (the boys) push us.]

Boy: *Sa room mismo kami naglalaro. Babae ang madalas na nagyaya ng laro. Mas maingay ang mga lalaki maglaro.* [We play in the classroom. Girls are usually the ones that initiate play. Boys tend to be noisy when they play.]

Girl: *Mas madalas maglaro ang mga lalaki pag wala si mam.* [Boys play more often when the teacher is away.]

From the foregoing, play may be said to belong to the feminine logic of desire in the Lacanian formula of sexuation. The feminine desire (not-all) has no exception. It has access to *jouissance* or enjoyment beyond the purely symbolic or phallic order. This implies that girls tend to obtain pleasure from play chants beyond what the boys could imagine and experience. This may also explain why girls tend to be more expressive and love to play more than boys.

Girls tend to identify more with the play than the boys. In many performances of the plays involving chants and rhymes that I observed, usually the boys only partially identify with the game and therefore they can also easily dissociate themselves from the play. This is borne out by the fact that the boys tend to be non-serious during the plays. The boys easily break out from the play and they refuse to follow the accepted rules. In two cases, a boy broke up from the play circle and walked away. These behaviors often annoy the girls but the girls often request the boys to come back. In other cases, the girls even warn the boys: “*Hoy, wag nyo namang babuyin yong laro. Kung ayaw nyo, wag na lang kayo sumali.*” [‘Hey, don’t mess up the play. You better not join if you’re not serious with it.’] The boys simply ignore these pleas.

Insofar as the frame of play is fun, it is unimaginable for children in the play that some children do not enjoy playing or refuse to play. It is to reject the frame of play. Said one child: “*Sa mga di naglalaro sinasabi naming ‘di kayo magiging masaya’*” [To those who do not play, we tell them “you won’t have fun”].

In this sense, the girls see play as an end, while boys see it more as competitive exercise, a means to reward.¹⁴ By breaking away from the play circle and messing up with the play, the boys tend to display their indifference to the end of the play.

Romantic Love in Liminality. In Grade 3, (around ages 8-10) there is already keen awareness among some children about intimate relationships with the opposite sex. In the interviews, some girls disclosed to me that they avoid playing with particular boys because others see it as a form of courtship or of being already in a relationship.

During one of my group interviews, the group identified a boy and girl couple, so I asked them if they play together. The identified girl said:

Girl: *Ayaw ko pong makipaglaro sa kanya at sa kanila [the male friends of the boy] kasi mga maniakis sila.* [I don’t like to play with him and with his friends because they are ‘maniacs’]

Boy [the one who was referred to]: *Talaga? Di naman e!* [Really? That’s not true!]

What we can learn from this incident is that in group play friendship is emphasized, and it becomes a site for ‘fishing’ who has an attraction to whom. Identified ‘couples’ become so mindful of their peer’s perceptions that they avoid playing together. In my observations, even if the ‘couples’ play together, they stay physically apart from each other.

Childlore therefore becomes an anticipatory socialization for proper gender relations with the opposite sex. It is a ‘proximal zone’, to use Vygotsky’s term, where children can learn proper adult roles with regard to having relationships with the opposite sex. (Insofar as my research deals with heterosexual relationships, my conclusion may only apply to such kind of relationships.)

Many of the boys I interviewed, however, said they prefer a mixed play group or that they do not prefer any sex. Meanwhile, it appears that girls prefer to play in a same-sex play group more than with boys. In general, however, there is not yet a fully developed preference for gender in playmates among the children I observed.

Conclusion

Plays and games must be analyzed primarily in their own terms, rather than be subordinated to higher goals of the adult world. There is much to be learned from analyzing the childlore of free plays and game plays in the context of an educational setting. Childlore reveals the world of children and how it is different from the adult world. Playlore also reveals how the children are already inducted to the gendered adult world, although the rules and roles associated with sexual identities are still very much fluid.¹⁵

But the learning process is not just a simple transmission.¹⁶ As shown in this study, playlore enables the children to unplug themselves from the quotidian flow of time and activities. By performing the plays involving chants and rhymes children are able to suspend the established gender scripts of the adult world. They do so with much awareness of the contradictions involved, yet because of the nature of the play, they are able to make the “serious” something “frivolous” and “light”. Play offers the young, the small and the powerless, an authority and freedom unthinkable in non-play life. It is an arena of choice in many contexts where life options are limited. This means that in performing childlore, children can transform rigid adult gender scripts into trivial matters. The children’s meanings are interpreted in a humorous manner. The rhetoric of “just playing” allows them to distance themselves from the real and consequential implications of the sex-related roles the adult world expects from them. This frivolity should be understood as an expression of Frasca’s notion of “*ludus*”. When schoolchildren engage in playlore, they tend to subordinate instrumental goals outside the play itself to the pleasure they derive from the performance.

So the tension between freedom and constraint must be maintained. This is very true especially because society cannot attain complete harmony. It is split not only by gender biases and antagonism, but also by antagonism due to age and generation. In an age when everything is reduced to its instrumental value, schoolchildren’s playlore can teach us the value of living in the “eternal-now”. The right direction, therefore, is to transform plays into the original Vygotskian direction: a revolutionary activity that can suspend the prevailing norms of the dominant groups of society, in this case the andocentric character of adult gender scripts. However, this transformation, like a true revolutionary activity, must be conscious and deliberate in its attempt to unmask the unacknowledged “symbolic violence” arising from the arbitrary imposition of these norms to the second-sex.

Notes

¹According to Owe Ronström (1997), the earliest studies of children's folklore were undertaken by Lady Bertha Gomme and the American William Wells Newell, a founder of the American Folklore Society and first editor of the *Journal of American Folklore*.

²Recent feminist folklorists have attempted to question the complacent silence of folklorists on the issues of gender (Bachillega, 1997; Collin, 1990; Mills, 1993; Young, 1997). A "triviality barrier" tended to see childlore as non-serious (Sutton-Smith, 1981). Today, the study of folklore common among children has become part of folkloristics or formal study of folklore (see for instance, Opie and Iona, 1959; Knapp and Knapp, 1976; McDowell, 1983; Sutton-Smith, Mechling, Johnson and McMahon, 1999; Bishop and Curtis, 2001). As Sylvia Grider (2007, p. 128) points out, "Folklorists are unusual among humanists and social scientists for their acceptance of children and their traditions on the children's own terms, as a folk group worthy of study in its own right rather than an adjunct of an older or more sophisticated body of informants."

³For anthropologists and folklorists, going to distant communities is the norm for collecting and studying folklore. Another barrier is how many anthropologists collect childlore by asking adults to remember what they did and played when they were children (Fine, 1999; Sutton-Smith, 1999). The more appropriate method of course is to study children themselves during performance of plays and games (Hughes, 1999).

⁴Early pedagogical research on gender and play, like the early folklore studies, concentrated mainly on essentialistic definition of gender differences and looked into the differences among boys and girls in choosing toys (Fein, 1981; Jacklin, Maccoby, and Dick, 1973), the influence of mothers and fathers in choosing play (Caldera et al., 1989), and the amount of emotion and affect involve in the play (Campbell & Frost, 1985). Usually these studies, heavily inspired by experimental method, pursued the issue in terms of biology and culture, and nurture and culture (see Frost, 1992). Most psychological studies, regardless of their paradigms, emphasized the role of biology in early gender differences with regard to play. Conclusions drawn from such studies are often used as either correctives to or launch pads for existing pedagogical programs in schools. Women folklorists have questioned the androcentric biases in male-stream folkloristics (*Journal of American Folklore*, 1987), and this has led to the proliferation of feminist approaches to the study of folklore (for representative studies, see Bachillega, 1999; Farrer, 1986; Jordan & Kalcik, 1985).

⁵The pioneering works of Mills (1993) Jordan and Kalcik (1985), Farrer (1986), and Hollis and Pershing (1993) addressed gender issues in the study of folklore. Early folklore studies (dominated by male researchers) avoided the issues of gender and sexual identity. The equation of men with culture has undermined the specificity of women's experience (see Young, 1997, vol. 1, 287). With the publication of *Women and Folklore* in 1975, women's issues in folklore became an academic focus.

⁶Just as in performances where there is separation between audience and the performers, the sacred and the profane (Turner, 1988, p. 25), so in play there is also a drawing of boundaries.

⁷Frames are basic cognitive structures which guide the perception and representation of reality. On the whole, frames are not consciously manufactured but are unconsciously adopted in the course of communicative processes (Benford & Snow, 2000).

⁸This is very similar to Gergen et al.'s (1990) analysis of child development.

⁹For Billig and others “contrary themes of social knowledge are revealed in everyday discourse” (1988, p.21), and are “fundamentally born out of a culture which produces more than one possible ideal world, more than one hierarchical arrangement of power, value and interest” (p.163).

¹⁰A feminist who is sympathetic to the sociocultural approach to the mind suggests that “feminist and cultural-historical theory have some crucial contributions for each other.” (John-Steiner, 1999, p. 202). Both traditions acknowledge relationality in defining identity and the cultural foundation of mental processes. However, while Vygotsky’s sociocultural approach to ontogenesis is very similar to the standpoint of feminism that looks at the specificity of various fields of knowledge, Vygotsky and Mead did not address the question of gender in their respective sociocultural analyses of the mind. Both Vygotsky and Mead failed to theorize the specificity of gender as a cultural variable in their respective explanations.

¹¹A Sony-Ericsson K750i phone camera.

¹²Victor Turner (1988, p.25) defines liminality as a phase in ritual performance separating specified members of a group from everyday life, placing them in a limbo that is not any place before and not any place they would be in after.

¹³Play may be likened to Victor Turner’s concept of flow—

“an interior state which can be described as the merging of action and awareness, the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement, a state in which action follows action according to an internal logic, with no apparent need for conscious intervention on our part” (1988, p. 54).

Flow is present in play because there is “a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field, by means of framing, bracketing, and usually a set of rules.” (Turner, 1988, p. 54). Moreover, in play as in flow, “there is a loss of ego, the self that normally acts as broker between ego and alter becomes irrelevant” (Turner, 1988, p. 55).

As two followers of Vygotsky remark,

“play is much more a performance than acting...they are acting out their societally predetermined roles. We are all cast by society into very sharply determined roles; what one does in a role is act it. Performance differs from acting in that it is the socialized activity of people self-consciously creating new roles out of what exists for a social performance” (Newman & Holman, 1993, pp.102-103).

¹⁴The Lacanian formula of sexuation that separates the feminine from the masculine should not be seen as essentialistic dimorphism. For Lacan, sexual difference is the Real. It is a void, a gap that the feminine and masculine subject position cannot close (Mitchell, 1986; Žižek, 1992).

¹⁵In plays, as Vygotsky points out, the child “emancipates her/himself from situational constraints, such as the immediate perceptualized field.” Yet “being freed from the situational constraints, the child, paradoxically, also faces constraints imposed by play: the rules of imagination” (Newman & Holman, 1993, p. 99). Moreover, Vygotsky argues,

Play gives a child a new form of desires [rules]. It teaches her to desire by relating her desire to a fictitious “I,” to her role in the game and its rules. In this way a child’s greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic action and morality” (quoted in Newman & Holzman, 1993, p. 99).

¹⁶While Vygotsky emphasizes learning future roles, one must also balance it with Turner’s creative interpretation of play and performance:

Cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting design for living” (Turner, 1988, p. 24).

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