



“CAN FATMA COME OUT AND PLAY?” GENDER AND PLAY IN ISTANBUL

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ABSTRACT

This study explores gender's role in play activity in Turkey. We examine the kinds, locations, contexts, strategies for conflict resolution and the perceptions of justice in child's play. Gender and age differences in play activity are well documented worldwide. This study explores in Istanbul the findings in an American context of Carol Gilligan (1982; rev. 1993) and others regarding gender differences in children's differential sense of justice. Survey questionnaires were administered to 421 people over the age of 18 Istanbul, asking respondents to reflect on their childhood play experiences at two ages (6 and 16). Gender and other variables were found to be associated with differences in play locale, size and composition of play groups, levels of supervision, organized vs. non-organized play, strategies for conflict resolution, and standards of justice applied to conflict situations.

Introduction

This paper discusses gender's role in play activity in Turkey. Since Jean Piaget's early studies of childhood development, theorists of learning and of intellectual and moral development have emphasized the importance of social activities in children's development into adulthood and the critical role that play holds in that development (see Piaget and Inhelder 1969, and Piaget 2001). For example, L. S. Vygotsky (1967) argues that play is the leading form of activity for self development. In her review of the scholarly literature, Doris Bergen finds strong support for the impact of play on cognitive development (2002). A. Göncü (1993), A. D. Pellegrini and P.K. Smith (1998), D. Bruce Carter and Gary D. Levy (1988) and others stress the importance of play in inter-subjectivity and the development of self and mind. Children play themselves into mind and self and members of society [See Mead (1964) for a masterful sociological analysis of the development of self and mind through playing and gaming].

Review of the Literature

Studies show that social play is critical in children's moral development. Several authors argue that ethical values are instilled or reinforced in play, that moral sensibility is internalized in social play, and that play is a fundamental occasion for the development of empathy and a sense of fair play and justice [see Eisenberg-Berg, Nancy; Mussen, Paul (1978), Nucci and Nucci (1982), Gibbons, Ebbeck and Weiss (1995), Cannella (1997), Piaget (1997), Crick and Grotpeter (2008), and Paley (2000)]. Child's play, then, is a site of interaction where children learn to see the self in others, to learn reciprocity and fair play, to learn to see themselves as moral agents, and to understand themselves as recipients of just or unjust responses from playmates.



Child's play is also a locale for the development of gender roles. As Vivian Gussin Paley's astute observations of children playing in her Chicago kindergarten, in play girls and boys take on both gender-appropriate and gender-inappropriate roles. They explore those roles and pay careful attention to the responses of peers and adults to their inhabiting of roles. They experience reinforcement of gender roles seen as appropriate to their sex and punishment for roles seen as inappropriate to their sex (Paley 1986). Many studies show that play is structured both by the participants and by the institutions and settings within which play occurs to model, explore, reinforce and sanction socially approved gender roles.

The structuring of play includes the settings (indoors or outdoors, at home, in parks and playgrounds, by those who supervise or oversee play activities, and by the composition of play groups and the gender of playmates [see Thorne (1993), Leaper (2000), Lindsey and Mize (2001), Martin and Ruble (2004), Ostrov and Keating (2004), Rose and Rudolph (2006), and many others]. In her incisive study, Carol Gilligan shows that, in her American sample, gender differences in play activities and self-development lead to gender differences in a sense of justice, moral standards and moral actions (Gilligan 1982).

In our study, we examine the landscapes and settings of children's play to understand whether genders are actually "produced" through child's play. Further, we explored whether differences in play not only functioned to produce gender differences in general but also specifically differences in the sense of justice and the moral adjudication of conflicts. An earlier study by Janet Lever made a useful contribution to Gilligan's work. Lever investigated the locale, size of playgroup, type and duration of boys and girls play. She found that boys play outdoors more often than do girls; boys play more often in large and age-heterogeneous groups; boys more often play competitive games; and, boys' games last longer than girls' games. These characteristics are associated, Lever and Gilligan argue, with boys' high level of skill and higher levels of interest in their games. Further, boys therefore have more occasions to resolve conflicts and become more effective in resolving disputes (Lever cited in Gilligan 1982). Girls prefer to play games in which disputes requiring adjudication are less likely to occur (Kohlberg, 1969 cited in Gilligan, 1982); girls are more likely than boys to end their play when a quarrel broke out. Continuing play is more important for girls than is resolving the disputes through elaborating system of rules—thus girls subordinate the continuation of the game while privileging the continuation of relationships [Lever in Gilligan 1982].

Games with rules are the most prominent form of play during middle childhood (Piaget, 1962). However, girls and boys differ in their concern for and imagination of justice: girls are more tolerant in their attitudes towards rules, more willing to make exceptions, and more easily reconciled to innovations (Gilligan 1982). Janet Lever (1976 cited in Gilligan 1982) found that through childhood boys become increasingly more fascinated with the legal elaboration of rules and the development of fair procedures for adjudicating conflicts than do girls. Boys more often than girls enjoy the debates on rules and rule-application and offense adjudication, often finding these resolution activities to be as interesting as the game itself. This respect for and investment in rules, however, is deeply related to moral development [see Kohlberg (1969), Piaget and Inhelder (1969), and Piaget (1997)]: the application of rules to conflict is an essential ingredient in the development of universal standards of justice (see Kohlberg 1981). The moral lessons inherent in girls' play appears to digger from those in boys' play and justice for boys seems more focused on a legal sense ('you are not following the rules!') while for girls' justice is more focused on maintaining relationships and ongoing sociality.

Our study examines a sample of residents of Istanbul. We explore the kinds of play people engage in, the location of their play activities, the composition of their play groups, and how they deal with conflicts emerging in their play activities. Our focus is on gender differences in child's play.

Method



This cross-sectional study explores gender's role in play activities in Istanbul, Turkey. We examine the kinds, locations, contexts, strategies for conflict resolution and perceptions of justice among children in Turkey. We used observation, interviews, and survey research in our study.

This study grows from a semester long set of activities in a spring 2012 social research class.¹ The class is required of all sociology majors in our university. Each student researcher conducted two one-hour observations of children at play in public locations (parks, streets, schools). In a later project, our student researchers interviewed neighbors and members of their family. In the interviews, respondents were asked to recall and describe their play activities when they were six and sixteen years old. These qualitative semi-structured interviews explored the locations, settings, kinds of play (for example, was the play organized, free, supervised, voluntary or part of school or other settings), playmates and solitary play at those two points in time. Further, they were asked to identify how conflicts emerged in their play and how those conflicts were resolved. The student researchers and their instructor then designed a survey instrument operationalizing these same variables. In both the interviews and the survey, respondents were asked to note their age, sex, level of education and socioeconomic statuses.

The survey questionnaires were administered face-to-face to 421 Turkish people (219 male, 202 female) over the age of 18 who are residents in Istanbul. The purpose of the interviews was explained to the respondents and they were asked for their consent to be interviewed. The survey was conducted in May of 2012. The survey was conducted by Fatih University sociology students enrolled in an undergraduate research methods class. About 30 students each administered 25 questionnaires—five to family members, five to Fatih University students, and fifteen to non-students selected in public places throughout Istanbul. A total of 421 surveys were collected.

In both the interviews and in the survey, respondents were asked to recall their childhood experiences. For some respondents, their childhood may have been many years earlier—respondents were asked to take a few moments to recollect their memories.

The student researchers asked respondents about their parents' levels of education, their place of residence between age 6 to 16, their number of siblings, whether their mother worked outside the home at their age of 6 to 16, about their playmates at the age of 6 to 16, about the locations they have played at 6 to 16 age, how they have solved the arguments aroused during plays at their age of 6 to 16.

Our dependent variables included style of play, location of play, composition of play groups, and strategies for conflict resolution. Our survey included several independent variables: gender, parents' education level, childhood residence, and who provided childcare for the players.

The questionnaire responses were coded and stored in an SPSS file. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using SPSS.

Presentation and Analysis of the Data

Description of the sample

Our respondents mostly come from the same locations as our students' places of residence, spread across different areas in Istanbul. The 421 respondents were almost equally divided by gender (52% male and 48% female). Of our respondents, 80% are older than the age 35, while the other 20%, students at Fatih University, and are between the ages of 18 and 35. Our respondents' parents' level of formal educational attainment was fairly low: 48.7% of the fathers and 58.9% of the mothers completed their education at the primary school level, although almost one fifth of both the mothers and fathers completed high school or a higher level of education. The typical respondent was middle or upper-middle class.

¹ We are very appreciative of the work by the students in SOC 104 for the spring 2012 academic semester. They worked hard and effectively at applying their growing methodological skills both in the design of this study and in gathering the data for the study.



Almost 70% of the respondents resided in a big city or metropolis during their childhood with the other 30% residing in small towns or rural areas. The mothers in our respondents were usually (82%) not employed outside the home. The majority (60%) of the respondents had fewer than three siblings. Four of five of the answers were provided childcare predominantly by their mothers; the remainder were provided childcare no one, their grandparents, their siblings or their neighbors. More than half of the respondents did not have a computer (56.5%) or internet (64.8%) during their childhood. Nearly 70% of our respondents' families were not migrants to their place of childhood residence.

We do not claim that our sample represents a larger population. Our study is exploratory and we did not have the resources to draw a representative sample. Our findings, then, should be seen as illustrative and tentative: no further generalization to a larger population can be drawn. However, this sample provides a useful set of respondents and is adequate to our study's purposes.

Settings and Kinds of Play

Seven of every ten respondents were not involved in organized, formal play activities. Most did not play on organized sports teams or in other forms of formal play. Most of the respondents spent their play time in self-organized, voluntary, unscheduled play activities. Our respondents were almost evenly divided in the social setting of their play: about half usually played alone, almost half usually played with others.

As children, our respondents played both inside the home and outside the home. Inside play locations included in their home in general, in their own room, and on balconies or in gardens. We found that the location of play activities shifted with age. At age six, nearly 70% of the respondents played mostly in their home, most frequently in their own room. However, by age sixteen, the majority of the respondents never play in their rooms (57.6%) and less than half (42.3%) play at home.

Our respondents as six year olds were nearly evenly divided in how they resolved conflicts, with half (48.7%) stating that at the age of 6 they settled arguments by compromise, in ways that maintained ongoing relationships, while a slight majority (51.3%) state that they appealed to rules and fair play—following the rules were more important than relationships. Strikingly, our respondents report a greater likelihood (62.2%) at age sixteen to privilege maintaining sociality over appeals to rules. Our respondents were divided in the way they describe their level of aggressiveness towards their playmates. Forty percent of the respondents claim either to have been passive towards their playmates in their play activities or to be neutral between passive and aggressive actions. The remainder described themselves as aggressive players, especially in game settings.

Gender and Play

Gender is a powerful predictor of differences in child's play. One way ANOVA was used to test whether gender differences among the respondents were significant. In the following paragraphs, F scores and level of significance are reported for those differences which reach levels of significance lower than 0.05.

Among our sample, girls at both age six and age sixteen are more likely than boys to play at home (age six, $F = 2.308$, $sig = 0.003$, age sixteen, $F = 4.373$, $sig = 0.037$), to play in their rooms (age six, $F = 2.526$, $sig = 0.045$, age sixteen, $F = 5.567$, $sig = 0.004$), to play in small groups or alone (age six, $F = 3.423$, $sig = 0.034$, age sixteen, $F = 6.335$, $sig = 0.006$), to engage in free play (age six, $F = 3.316$, $sig = 0.038$), to be supervised in their play by their mothers, and to describe themselves as non-assertive in their play (age six, $F = 3.970$, $sig = 0.047$, age sixteen, $F = 6.995$, $sig = 0.008$). Further, these differences become more pronounced as girls and boys age: these differences are greater between girls and boys at age sixteen than they are at age six.

Boys among our respondents are more likely than girls to play outside their rooms (age sixteen, $F = 2.588$, $sig = 0.018$), to play away from home, to play outside (in parks or on streets) (age six, $F = 2.288$, $sig = 0.035$), to play in larger groups (age six, $F = 2.271$, $sig = 0.037$), to play in organized games (age



sixteen, $F = 6.929$, $\text{sig} = 0.001$), to play unsupervised, and to describe themselves as assertive or aggressive in their play and towards their playmates. Again, these differences increase with age: they are greater at age sixteen than at age six. Boys and girls play differently in setting, style, type, and composition of playgroups. These differences grow more pronounced with age.

Few of our respondents report playing in mixed-gender groups at age six and far fewer report mixed-gender playgroups at age sixteen. Boys and girls occupy different play worlds in Istanbul and experience those worlds differently and draw different attitude and propensities from play activities. As they age, boys and girls are deeply segregated in their play activities, their play settings, and their play experiences.

Boys and girls report significant differences in their play. Play socializes girls and boys separately and differently in Istanbul.

Gender also predicts significantly the approaches to conflict and conflict resolution of boys and girls in our sample. Our female respondents report being significantly more likely than the male respondents to have experienced fewer conflicts in their play, to having resolved those conflicts cooperatively, and to having chosen resolutions that privilege the continuation of the play activity over appeals to fairness or rules. In our female respondents' recollections, relationships were more important than justice. Staying friends was more important than being in the right.

On the other hand, our male respondents were significantly more likely to recall a greater frequency of conflict in their play, to have been more aggressive in their play, to having experience more conflict in their play (and in the interviews to recall relishing those conflicts as part of the play), and to appealing to and arguing about the rules of play and their fair application. For our male respondents, childhood play bore strong relationships to developing a sense of masculinity, independence, assertiveness and adult attitudes and propensities. Being right was more important than was the feelings of playmates. The game was more important than the player. Gender is a significant predictor of strategies for adjudicating disagreements, with girls more likely to settle disputes peacefully and boys more likely to use aggression or physical means to settle disputes (age six, $F = 4.909$, $\text{sig} = 0.027$; age sixteen, $F = 1.752$, $\text{sig} = 0.022$).

Conclusions

This exploratory study of adults in Istanbul recalling their childhood play activities supports studies of play in other times and places. All our respondents recall that childhood play was important for them and they recall those play activities with nostalgia and fondness.

Gender and age differences, however, mark significant differences in the childhood play of our respondents. For girls, there was a greater continuity in the kinds, settings, locales and playgroups over time. For boys, the ten years between ages six and sixteen were a period of greater independence, greater involvement in larger play groups, more frequent play away from home, greater involvement in organized play activities ('games' superseded 'play'), and a higher frequency of conflicts among playmates in play activities.

At age six, gender pointed to significant differences in play; at age sixteen gender pointed significantly to even greater differences.

A major finding of our study supports the arguments of Carol Gilligan, Vivian Gussin Paley, and other researches on the role of play in gender differences in boys' and girls' moral development. The play world provides a setting where distinctly gendered moral development occurs. As girls and boys develop through their play, the simultaneously develop different moral stances and different standards for making more judgments. Girls' sense of moral responsibility is situational and interactive while boys are more likely to appeal to universal, impersonal standards of fairness and justice. While it is easy for boys to yell "Foul!" in a football game, it is much harder for girls to yell "Foul!" when playing house.



This study suggests further research. While retrospective studies are useful in social research (see Belsky and Isabella 1985 for a useful example), they are not ideal. Direct observation of children at play would provide more robust data. In addition, these findings need to be confirmed by a representative sampling method. This study was conducted in Istanbul: further research to determine if similar patterns occur in smaller towns and in rural areas would be fruitful. Further, we choose to examine play at ages six and sixteen because we felt those ages would help us see change over time. Studies at other ages would strengthen the power of the research design.

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