of risk, shared danger, or rule breaking such as sports, paramilitary games, wild parties, and hostile jokes. In these contexts, strength implied the substitution of a group identity for a personal code that might extend to commitment and care for others (cf. Bly 1982).

In the guys' world, aggression was identified with strength, and defined as loss of control only if it was angry. The fraternal bond was built upon an emotional balance between aggression and anger, for life of the group centered upon the mobilization of aggressive energies in rule-governed activities, especially sports and games. In each arena aggression was defined as strength (toughness) only when it was rule governed (cool). Getting angry was called "losing control," and the guys thought they were most likely to lose control when they experienced themselves as personally dependent, that is, in relationships with women and at work. The sense of order within fraternal groups is based upon the belief that all members are equally dependent upon the rules, and that no personal dependence is created within the group. This is not true of the family or of relations with women, both of which are intimate, and, from the guys' point of view, are "out of control" because they are governed by emotional commitments.

The guys recognized the relationship between their male bond and the work world by claiming that "high officials of the University know about the way we act, and they understand what we are doing." Although this might be taken as evidence that the guys were internalizing their father's norms and thus inheriting the rights of patriarchy, the guys described their fathers as slaves to work and women, not as patriarchs. It is striking that the guys would not accept the notion that men have more power than women; to them it is not men who rule, but work and women that govern men.

REFERENCES


Gary Alan Fine

THE DIRTY PLAY OF LITTLE BOYS

The tormented Earl of Gloster moaned in King Lear: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to gods; they kill us for their sport." These mordant lines may tell us more about the interests of boys than gods. Why do boys kill flies for their


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sport? Why, as Plutarch noted, do they throw stones at frogs; or why, as they are depicted, do they pour salt on sparrows’ tails? What are boys like on a point, the point, what do boys do? While mountains of tomes have been written on scientific, development studies of boys, few researchers have spent time on them on their own turf.

My chosen site was around the world of sport. For three years I spent spring and summers observing ten Little League baseball teams in Minnesota, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts as they went through their seasons. I observed at practice fields and in dugouts, remaining with the boys after the games and arriving early to learn what they did when adults were not present. As I came to know these boys better, I hung out with them when they were “doing nothing.”

My goal was to elucidate the process by which the rich veins of preadolescent male culture are developed — particularly those areas considered morally unacceptable by adults. In sport and in informal male activity, sex role development and display are crucial — certainly in the view of the participants. If we hope to understand how adult sex roles are shaped, we must observe the blossoming of these roles in childhood peer groups.

Preadolescence is a difficult period to define, covering the twilight zone between the perils of the Oedipus complex and the Stürm und Drang of puberty. Yet preadolescence is more than a way station to puberty. Child psychologists Fritz Redl once cleverly suggested that preadolescence is the period in which “the nicest children begin to behave in the most awful way.” This pithy description captures the basic split personality of this period. By preadolescence, the boy is a part of several social worlds: same-sex groups, cross-sex interaction, school, and family life. Each of these settings requires a different standard of behavior. Because there is not total segregation of the child’s life with friends from that with parents, parents tend to be aware of boys’ awfulness, even if they are unaware of the details.

The conflict derives from the fact that the preadolescent has neither the right nor the ability to keep these two spheres of social life separate. When removed from peers, juveniles may be sweet, even considerate, and sometimes tender. Yet, placed in a social situation in which they do not have to be on their best behavior and given situational constraints which militate against proper behavior, they may engage in aggressive sexuality, prejudice, and destructiveness. These are “good boys” engaging in “dirty play.” These patterns of behavior reflect both biological and social factors, and provide internal and external constraints on a child’s behavior. These factors constitute the child’s imperatives of development.

In examining the social lives of these middle-class, suburban white preadolescent baseball players, I focused on their friendships. For these boys, as for most of us, friendship constitutes a staging area in which activities improper elsewhere can be tested in a supportive environment. The moral choices children are experimenting with are played out with their chums. Boys are “boys only when they are with their peers.”

How is it that these boys are willing to engaged in activities so abhorrent to adults — what I have called “dirty play.” The concept of dirty play is borrowed loosely from sociologist Everett Hughes’s discussion of “dirty work.” Hughes asked how it is that some in our society become involved and they become satisfied with what the rest of society consider to be dirty work — those acts...
itics that no "decent" person would do. Hughes's focus was on the occupational order, but the issue applies equally to the world of preadolescent play. Why do our children do these things? Hughes noted that some people had to engage in some very unpleasant behaviors to keep the social order functioning, and that other members of the society did not wish to know about this in order to "keep their hands clean." In some of Hughes's formulations these dirty work activities were behaviors no decent person should agree to, such as the behavior of Nazi SS officers. But Hughes recognized that some dirty workers (grave diggers, janitors) are necessary for all smoothly functioning social systems. Because of the "pollution" of the work, the rest of society closes its eyes and the dirty workers remain a closed society. A membrane protects the rest of society from contamination from these dirty workers.

The same membrane may be necessary in regard to children's dirty play. Dirty play may well be necessary for effective socialization (at least to our society as it currently exists), but it may be best for adults not to know what their offspring are doing. Children's play, perhaps, should remain in the closet. The dirty play of children seems to be a natural outpouring of some of the developmental imperatives of growing up, but how it is handled depends very much on the situations in which children and the adult guardians find themselves. I begin my analysis by describing some forms that this preadolescent dirty play takes. Specifically I focus on: aggressive pranks, sexual talk and activity, and racist remarks.

Some children's pranks can, on occasion, be elaborate and distressing. Consider the following: A group of boys wraps dog feces in newspaper, lights the newspaper on fire, rings a homeowner's doorbell, and runs away to watch. When the victim comes to the door, he stomps on the flaming package. At that point another boy rings the back doorbell and the man, not thinking, rushes through the house, tracking it with dog excrement.

AGGRESSIVE PRANKS

Such accounts suggest that children are continually engaging in troublesome behavior. However, we need to be careful not to overgeneralize this behavior. Talk about these legendary pranks is far more common than their doing. After their original occurrence, the story is told and retold. Talking about the prank conveys the meaning of the event with far less danger to the participants. Pranks represent an attempt by preadolescents to explore the boundaries of moral propriety. In their talk, preadolescents place a premium on daring behavior as expressed through what they term "mischief."

Pulling a prank is a form of social behavior, both in that pranks vary from community to community and because preadolescents who play these pranks invariably do them with those closest to them. In one suburb, "moonying" cars (pulling down one's trousers while facing away from the traffic) was the most common prank; in another "egging" cars and houses was most common, and in the others the most frequent prank was to ring doorbells and run away. Virtually all of the boys who play these pranks do so in the company of their best friends. In one community, of the forty-eight boys who named their prank partners, 89 percent of these were described as "best" or "close" friends. Friendship, therefore, serves as the staging area in which this type of ritualized dirty play
occurs. Given the value placed on taking chances, the copresence of friends is likely to promote the performance of aggressive pranks in defining the action as legitimate, providing status for the boy if he succeeds, and goading him if his fear of adults threatens to stand in his way.

Rather than defining pranks as expressions of an aggressive instinct directed at those who control them — the traditional psychiatric approach — I see pranks as social action designed to shape a boy's public identity. The dirty play has something of a status content about it, where the goal is not to do harm, but to gain renown for being daring. The prank is but the set-piece that provides the basis of identity attributions — not an aggressive end in itself.

SEXUAL TALK

Whatever latency might have been during Freud's childhood, in contemporary America preadolescence is a period of much sexual talk and some sexual behavior. This sexual talk, among boys in particular, with its aggressive overtones is worrying to parents who are unable to understand how their sons could possibly talk that way about each other and about girls. Yet, however much we might object, boys strive to be "masculine" and they talk about girls in terms both unflattering and too explicit for what their parents expect them to know.

Males maturing in our sexualized society quickly recognize the value of being able to talk about sexual topics in ways that bring them credit. As with pranks, sexual talk is a social activity and is a form of presenting oneself in desirable ways. In fact, given the reality that many of the talkers have not reached puberty, we can assume that their sexual interests are more social than physiological. Boys wish to convince their peers that they are sexually mature, active, and knowledgeable.

One means by which a person can convince others that he has an appropriate sexualized self is through sexualized behavior. This can include behavior among same-sex peers (mutual masturbation, homosexual experimentation, or autosexual activities such as measuring the length of one's penis) or behavior with girls. These behaviors, like pranks, although not frequent for any one child, may be notable and remembered. One public kiss, if done well, can serve for a thousand private caresses. The second "proof" of sexuality is talk — both talk that has a behavioral referent and talk that is in itself an indication of a sexualized self. In the first instance, the talk presents behavior that should, by rights, remain private ("kiss and tell"), and must be convincing as narrative; the latter serves as an end in itself — such as sexualized insults and talk about biological and physiological processes. This indicates that the child knows, in the words of one preadolescent, "What's a poppin'." These expectations are primarily social, and are based on the desire to reveal what preadolescents consider adult competences, although adults will consider these same things to be dirty when performed by preadolescents.

A boy must walk a narrow line between not showing enough involvement with girls, in which case he may be labeled effeminate, immature, or gay, and showing too much serious, tender attention, in which case he may be labeled "girl crazy." For these reasons, much talk indicates that boys are interested in girls sexually, but they are not so interested that they find any to their liking. While preadolescent boys have girlfriends, they must be careful about what
they say about them to other boys. Girls can easily break the bonds of brotherhood among boys.

A related fear among boys is that of being tarred as homosexual or gay. During my research (in the late 1970s) boys attempted to define their sexualized selves in contrast to “improper” sexual activity. To be sure, most of these boys have never met anyone whom they believe really is a homosexual, and they have, at best, a foggy vision of gay sexual behaviors. Despite this, it is common to hear boys saying things like “You’re a faggot,” “What a queer,” and “Kiss my ass.”

Being gay has little to do with homosexual behavior; rather it suggests that the target is immature. Indeed, some homosexual behavior (for example, mutual masturbation) occurs among high-status boys who would never be labeled gay. Being gay is synonymous with being a baby and a girl. In each instance the target has not comported himself in accord with the traditional male sex role. Homosexual rhetoric has an additional benefit for the speaker in that its use suggests that the speaker is mature himself, and can be differentiated from the boy who is scorned.

RACIST INVICTIVE

When I inform white audiences that I found considerable racial invective in the middle-class suburban communities I studied, many are surprised; most of the blacks I tell are not. These boys had little direct contact with blacks, but as they lived near major metropolitan areas, they were well aware of racial tensions.

One of the Little League teams, a team in southern Rhode Island, was particularly notable for the racial epithets uttered by players. The team was lily-white, but there were four black children on other teams in the league and this team had a black coach two seasons before. The talk by one of the star players was particularly virulent, and his hatred was particularly reserved for two of the black children in the league, Roger and Bill Mott: “I was talking with some players about the best home-run hitters in the League, and I mentioned that Billy Mott was pretty good. Justin replies with disgust: ‘That dumb nigger.’ He immediately described how ‘two niggers tried to jump me.’” Most racial talk was not serious in intent, but was joking. In driving some boys home one day in a Massachusetts suburb we passed two black youths walking quietly through town. One boy leaned out of my car window and yelled “Get out of here, you jungle bunnies.” The other boys broke up in gales of laughter. Or: “One of the groundskeeper’s helpers is a swarthy adolescent. Justin playfully tells his friends Harry and Whitney that the boy is a Puerto Rican and, therefore, is ‘half nigger and half white.’ Justin calls him a ‘punk’ and Justin and Whitney both call him ‘half and half.’ The boy, within earshot, is becoming angry: Justin, Harry, and Whitney run away laughing.”

Remember that most times this rhetoric occurs it is not spoken in anger, but in play — although play of a rather nasty disposition. Preadolescents, emphasizing status and position among peers, are very concerned about group boundaries. It should be no surprise that they draw lines between those who are part of the group and those who must remain outsiders. This explains some of the concerns about sexuality and gender at this period and also explains the concern
with race, class, nationality, and geographical affiliation (school, town, etc.). Further, during preadolescence children learn the adult significance of these boundary issues. Even if parents do not tell white children that blacks are inferior, the children still learn that race is a crucial division in our society, and preadolescents will assume that those who are not "us" are suitable subjects for attack. Although such an analysis does not work equally well for all children with regard to each demographic or social category, it is fair to emphasize that social differentiation is common to the period and is reflected in remarks adults find disquieting and offensive.

WHY DIRTY PLAY?

The prevalence of dirty play in the lives of children, and their evident enjoyment of it, should give pause to all adults. Rarely do children behave fully in accord with adult moral standards. This is particularly dramatic in societies such as our own in which adults believe in the innocence of children. The existence of these forms of play suggests either that children are not really innocent or that they have been corrupted. Either charge is troubling.

I suggest four rationales for these "disturbing" behaviors: (1) control, (2) status, (3) social differentiation, and (4) socialization to perceived adult norms. These four themes do not apply equally well to all examples of play. If asked, most preadolescents would admit to engaging in these activities because they are "fun," but this sidesteps the question of why these sorts of things are seen as fun. Thus, we must go beyond this simple explanation.

Dirty play can be seen as a claim-making behavior. Each instance attempts implicitly to make a statement about the rights of preadolescents to engage in a set of activities and have a set of opinions in the face of adult counter-pressures. When children behave in accord with adult prescriptions, which they often do, their play causes little comment, but when a preadolescent chooses to play in a way contrary to adult authority the play becomes an issue. Preadolescents recognize this problem and are typically sophisticated enough to engage in their dirty play out of the eyesight and carshot of their adult guardians. They are claiming for themselves the right to make public statements about race, sex, or authority. This play is remarkably sophisticated in that it deals with those areas of adult social structure adults typically wish to preserve for themselves.

These acts are sociopolitical, although playful. While the content of this dirty play is troubling to many, it is also troubling that our children feel competent to make judgments and act on them. They reflect a judgment on adult social order and, typically, on one different from that which adults officially put forward, although one that (especially in the case of racial and sexual remarks) they may privately believe.

The adult emphasis on decorum and politeness is significant in light of the age-graded power structure. Politeness is a tactic used by those in power to keep those without power subservient. Politeness and decorum structure collective action so as to preserve order and process. If all that children can do to "get their way" is to request things politely from adults, then adults have full power to make their own decisions without consequences from those who are asking. Once a request has been rejected by the authorities there is nothing the requester can do, under this model, other than accept this decision gracefully. The implicit benefit for those without power is that on the next polite request the
authority might be more willing to accede. However, there is not certainty of this and, even so, authority still remains unchallenged.

It may be apt to speak of these examples of dirty play that question the adult authority structure through the metaphor of playful terrorism. Ultimately such "terrorism" is politically impotent because of the lack of organization of the "terrorist groups," their lack of commitment and uniformity of beliefs, the tight control adults have over them, and the rewards that can be offered to those who conform. Still, it is hard to miss the potential threat to the authority structure inherent in some of this play which tests boundaries and legitimacy.

The dirty play I have described is important in shaping relationships within the group, as well as outside. Its performance is a technique for gaining status within a peer group. Preadolescent interaction can be seen, in part, as a status contest at an age at which status really matters. Status matters at all ages, but during preadolescence, with its change in orientation toward adult status symbols and a social world outside of the eyes of adults, the evaluation of peer position is of particular importance.

Boys gain renown from participating in these actions. There is a premium on being willing to do things that other boys wish to do but are afraid to. If there is some consensus that the prank is desirable, the boy who performs it or leads the group gains status for breaking through the barrier of fear in which others are enveloped. There is risk involved in throwing eggs at houses or at moving cars; one could get caught, beaten, grounded, or even arrested.

The costs, coupled with the lack of status rewards, suggest why it is apparently so rare for preadolescents to engage in these behaviors when alone. It is not that they have a personal, destructive impulse but, rather, they want to show off in the presence of friends. To think of these children as bad misses the point; they are, more or less, amoral — in that enforcing the dictates of morality is not one of their primary goals; rather, their aim is to get by with as much interpersonal smoothness as possible. The concern with those wonderful Goffmanlike images of "presentation of self," "teamwork," and "impression management" is omnipresent.

One of the collective tasks of preadolescents is to define themselves in contrast to other groups that share some characteristics. In my empirical discussion of dirty play among white middle-class boys I focused on racial and sexual differentiation. Whites are not blacks, and boys are not girls. Also, there is the belief held to fiercely by many of those whom I have studied that whites are better than blacks, and that boys are better than girls. Given the stance of today's tolerant, egalitarian society and particularly those social scientists who choose to write about it, such beliefs are heresy, morally repugnant, and represent a social problem. Yet, from the standpoint of the preadolescent white boy they seem perfectly natural. Ethnocentrism always does. Indeed, when we look over the lengthy landscape of human history we see that social differentiation has been more the rule than the exception. People always wish to make their own group special and distinct. This basic need of humanity is sometimes (particularly) overcome, but surely the desire for differentiation is not a mark of Cain.

When boys torment girls or jeer at blacks, we may see this as a kind of dirty play that does not necessarily adhere to the moral selves of these social actors. The positive side of such group actions is that the preadolescents are learning some measure of communal feeling, even though it is directed at another group. It is significant that much of what we consider to be dirty or cruel play is at the
expense of some other group or members of another group. Even disagreeable play that is internally directed typically is focused on a boy who is to be differentiated from the group in some significant way: such as because of some physical handicap or because of the belief that he can be morally differentiated (for example, as “gay”).

Preadolescent dirty play does not simply appear from nowhere. It is a transformation of things that boys see enacted by older boys or by adults, or learn about through the media. The content does matter. Yet, this is often material that many adults sincerely wish they had not communicated. Unfortunately we cannot shield preadolescents from that which we do not want them to learn. They are information vacuum cleaners and, of the information gained, will selectively use that which fits their purposes.

The themes of preadolescent dirty play are far from unrecognizable. Aggression, sexism, and racism are found in adult activity. These themes are also indicated in dramatic media representations, even when the themes are ostensibly being disparaged. Still, audiences can choose to select whatever information they wish from a media production, even if this material is incompatible with the official morality of the society. The best example of this during the research project was the reaction to the film, *The Bad News Bears*. Although the film ostensibly warned against the dangers of over-competition and excessive adult involvement in youth sports, the images that preadolescents took from the film were techniques of talking dirty and acting grossly (“stick this where the sun never shines”).

We all know that often a moral message is but the sugar coating for sexual or aggressive doings that the producers use to capture an audience. This technique is as applicable to media productions aimed at adults as those aimed at children. In the case of children this may be compounded by the fact that preadolescents often attempt to act mature. Maturity does not have a clearly defined meaning; however, maturity as a concept implies a change in behavior. To validate that we are acting maturely, we need to act differently from the ways we have acted before. This typically takes the form of doing those things we had not known about or had not been allowed to do under the watchful eyes of adults. As a consequence, many of these markers of maturity will be precisely those things that adults see as dirty play. It is not that the children are being childish or immature in their view, but the contrary. They are attempting to live up to adult standards of behavior, and address adult issues from which they had previously been excluded.

Socialization to society’s expectations has been well established as one important feature of children’s play; yet, what is learned through play is diverse and some of what is learned may be formally offensive to those given the task of guiding children’s development. The agenda for children’s development is not always set by adults, although it typically is based on a reflection of what they do.

**TAMING DIRTY PLAY?**

Each of these four component motivations of dirty play should help us understand that playing dirty, by adult standards, is not identical to being morally bad. The issue, as Everett Hughes raised it in light of adult “dirty work,” is the extent to which a person can get away with doing dirty work without that
dirtiness adhering to his public self. In some cases that would appear to be relatively easy; in other cases, almost impossible.

The connection of a boy's dirty play with his moral self is a matter of negotiation, with different ideologies prevailing at different times, places, among different groups, and depending on the relationship of the judge to the person judged. The likely intention of the actor, the presence of others supporting the action, the social supports for the action, and the actual expected outcome influence the way in which children's dirty play will be evaluated.

Children's dirty play is virtually inevitable. There are so many needs and traditions connected with the doing of these actions that we would be hard pressed to visualize a serious program that would eradicate these behaviors. These are play forms we must live with. We do have one weapon—a long-term weapon, but a dramatically effective one as many of us can testify: guilt. In planting the seeds that this type of behavior is morally objectionable, we may recognize that these teachings will not work when given. Yet, often they will eventually be effective when reward structures change and when social needs alter. The seed of morality will (imperfectly) bloom at some later date and in some other place. As children grow older, and their needs for presentation of self-change, they come to believe that such behaviors they used to delight in are morally offensive. While we object to children playing concentration camp guards, holding mock lynchings, or simply torturing their peers in the name of fun, we should recognize that this too may pass. Although sometimes morality does not change, if the new "improved" morality is supported by the subtle reward structures of adult society, we can say with a fair measure of confidence that dirty payers emerge into saintly adults—at least adequately saintly adults. Children, in dealing with a transformed version of the raw, emotional issues of life, distress adults but they need not permanently smudge the very core of their angelic souls.

SUGGESTED READINGS