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8 Gender Differences and Symbolic Imagination in the Stories of Four-Year-Olds

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Ageliki Nicolopoulou, Barbara Scales, and Jeff Weintraub turn our attention to another source of difference in students' stories—gender. They portray the striking differences in the narrative styles of four-year-old boys and girls. These differences in symbolic imagination *raise thought-provoking questions about the ways in which young children construct their social worlds—and the ways in which teachers might further and expand those worlds.*

Most scholars and practitioners in the field of education are, for understandable reasons, more interested in stories written *for* children, which they read or which are told to them, than in stories that children *themselves* compose and tell. But of course the two subjects are not unrelated: when children tell stories, they reveal something important about who they are and how they see the world. By grasping the forms of symbolic imagination expressed in the stories that children *tell*, we can improve our understanding of how children comprehend and respond to the stories told *to* them and what kind of impression these stories make on them. But part of what makes children's storytelling so revealing, it is important to add, is that it plays a vital role in their own efforts to make sense of the world and to find their place in it. As both Bruner (e.g., 1986, 1990) and Paley (e.g., 1981, 1984a, 1984b, 1988, 1990) have emphasized in different ways, the stories children tell are themselves cognitive tools, and children's use of fantasy is a crucial element in their attempts to master reality.

One philosopher has argued that, if we listen carefully to children, we can see the ways in which they are little philosophers: they ponder the deepest metaphysical and ontological problems in their own way in an attempt to bring cognitive order to the universe (Matthews 1980). In a parallel fashion, this chapter will urge that we take children seriously as little artists. They use stories and other forms of symbolic expression in order to represent the world—to themselves and each other—and thereby to make sense of it. Simultaneously, they use their stories as a way of expressing certain emotionally important themes that preoccupy them and of symbolically managing or resolving these underlying themes. In constructing their stories, they draw in various ways on images and conceptual resources present in their culture, but they do not just passively *absorb* them—and the messages behind them. It seems clear that, even at the age of four, they are able to *appropriate* them and to some degree to manipulate them for their own symbolic ends. But once again, to see how they do it, we have to listen to them carefully.

The Study Plan

The present discussion is based on the analysis of a set of spontaneous stories told by a group of four-year-olds. The larger concern behind this investigation is to explore the different ways in which children use symbolic constructions to represent and organize reality—and, in this case, the ways in which these differences come to be structured by gender. Our findings suggest that, even at this early age, the boys and girls involved visualize and represent the world—and especially the world of social relations—in strikingly distinctive ways. Their differing orientations are expressed in their active use and imaginative elaboration of two distinctive and gender-related narrative styles that permeate this body of stories. Underlying these narrative styles are different forms of symbolic imagination, different emerging images of social reality, and different ways of coming to grips with that reality. They represent, among other things, quite different approaches to the symbolic management of order and disorder. In addition to broadening our knowledge of narrative diversity among young children, it seems likely that grasping these differences can help us understand tendencies toward the developmental emergence of different cognitive and cultural styles in men and women.

The Children and Their Stories

The stories we have been analyzing were composed by children attending a half-day nursery school affiliated with the Child Study Center of the University of California, Berkeley. The group involved was the class of four-year-olds, of which one of the authors, Barbara Scales, is the head teacher. The class consisted of 28 children, 14 boys and 14 girls.

The family backgrounds of the children in this group were primarily middle to upper-middle class, mostly professional or academic. In most cases, both parents worked outside the home. To prepare for some of the discussion later on, we want to emphasize that the nursery school attempts strongly and deliberately to create an egalitarian and nonsexist atmosphere; and we have every reason to believe that most of the children come from families which share this orientation.

The stories were collected by using a variant of a storytelling and story-acting technique pioneered by Vivian Paley. One optional activity in which any child in the school may choose to participate every day is to dictate a story to the teacher who is supervising the inside area that day. The teacher records the story as the child tells it. At the end of each day, all the stories dictated during that day are read aloud to the entire group at "circle time" by the same teacher. While the story is being read, the child-author and other children, whom he or she chooses, act out the story. This story-acting practice is aimed at fostering communication and the development of a common culture within the group of children by having them listen to and even actively participate in each other's stories.

The analysis is based on the complete set of 582 stories collected during the entire academic year 1988–89, which included stories told by all 28 children. About 60 percent (347) of these stories were dictated by girls and about 40 percent (235) by boys. (This corpus of stories is drawn from the "Child Study Center Archives of Children's Play Narratives" at the Institute of Human Development of the University of California, Berkeley.)

Interpretive Analysis: Narrative as Symbolic Form

Material of this kind constitutes an especially rich source of data for research that explores the role of narratives in children's construction of reality and personal identity. This is true above all because of their voluntary and spontaneous composition and because the children's storytelling activity is embedded in the ongoing framework of their

everyday group life—in the "real world" of their classroom miniculture. Furthermore, because of "circle time," these are stories that children tell not only to adults, but to other children as well.

From a methodological standpoint, the question is what kind of approach can best take advantage of the possibilities offered by this material. While a considerable amount of work on children and narratives is being done now in the overlapping disciplines of psychology and linguistics, studies that deal with children's own stories are decidedly in the minority. Even in these cases, the stories are usually generated under conditions that sharply limit their spontaneous character (often for well-considered methodological reasons, to be sure). Furthermore, for several decades the great bulk of this research has tended to focus more or less exclusively on formal elements of the stories—most typically their narrative structure—and to neglect their symbolic content (for some reviews, see Mandler 1983; Romaine 1985; Slobin 1990; Stein and Glenn 1982). We are necessarily speaking in broad terms here, and there are significant exceptions, but even when attention is paid to the symbolic content, it is usually in an incidental and unsystematic way (e.g., Sutton-Smith 1981). On the other hand, some investigations deriving from a psychoanalytic perspective obviously focus quite heavily on symbolic content (e.g., Bettelheim 1977; Pitcher and Prelinger 1963), but these analyses tend to neglect the formal elements of the stories and the cognitive styles they embody.

However, a rigid divorce between form and content in the analysis of children's narratives makes it difficult to capture precisely those features which render them important and emotionally engaging for children. The child's story is fragmented into elements that, taken in isolation, do not fully capture the point of telling and listening to stories. Studies of children's narrative competence, for example, are often strangely abstracted from the uses to which children put this competence and their purposes in doing so. Overcoming this fragmentation—reassembling the phenomenon of story as a living whole—requires an approach that can integrate the formal analysis of children's narratives into a more comprehensive *interpretive* perspective. In particular, it requires that we treat narrative form as a type of *symbolic* form, whose function is to confer meaning on experience, rather than conceiving it only in terms of linguistic structure. As Bruner has cogently put it, "The central concern is not how narrative text is constructed, but rather how it operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality" (1992, 233).

Thus the interpretive framework we have developed to analyze these stories attempts to capture both their form and their content and to bring out the relationship between them. In working out our approach, we have drawn on a range of sources, including several of the contributors to this volume. One especially useful source of guidance has been the mode of cultural interpretation championed by Geertz, an anthropologist (e.g., 1973), and the broader "interpretive turn" in the human sciences for which he has been a particularly influential spokesman. The guiding insight of this perspective is that the interpretation of meaning is not only a key requirement for the study of human life, but is simultaneously a central condition of human thought and action itself. Accordingly, our starting point is the premise that the children's stories are meaningful texts that, if analyzed carefully, can tell us a great deal about the ways that children grasp the world and social relationships. The crucial concern of an interpretive analysis is thus to elucidate or decode the *structures of meaning* that the stories embody and express—reconstructing not only the surface meanings of the stories, but also certain deeper patterns that organize and inform them. When they are approached in this way, children's spontaneous stories, as well as other expressions of their symbolic imagination, can offer us an invaluable and privileged window into the mind of the preschooler.

Gender-related Narrative Styles in Children's Stories

When we first set out to examine these stories, we did not have gender differences in mind, nor were we searching for different narrative styles. They emerged in the course of the analysis, and indeed took us by surprise. It had been suggested that the use of this storytelling and story-acting practice seemed to generate greater cohesion and solidarity among the children, and it was this phenomenon of social cohesion we wished to study. Our original intention was to trace the ways that themes were transmitted and elaborated within the group and became part of the children's common culture.

But as we read systematically through the entire corpus of the stories, one profound complication in this picture became increasingly apparent to us: namely, that the stories divided overwhelmingly along gender lines. Despite the fact that the stories were shared with the entire group every day, boys and girls told different kinds of stories. In fact, the kinds of stories boys and girls told differed systematically and consistently not only in their characteristic subject matter, but also

in the overall narrative structure and symbolic imagination they employed.

We discovered, in other words, that this body of stories is dominated by two highly distinctive narrative styles, divided to a striking extent along gender lines, that contrast sharply (and subtly) in their characteristic modes of representing experience and in their underlying images of social relationships. In fact, these narrative styles embody two distinctive types of genuine aesthetic imagination (surprising as it may seem to assert this of four-year-olds), each with its own inner logic and coherence. In particular, underlying and unifying many of the surface themes in the stories is a preoccupation with issues of order and disorder; here we are indebted to the theoretical lead provided by Douglas, another anthropologist (particularly in Douglas 1966). In general—to anticipate our overall conclusions—the girls' stories show a strain toward *order,* while the boys' stories show a strain toward *disorder,* a difference that is expressed in both the form and content of the stories.

The subsequent discussion will flesh out what we mean in speaking of a "strain toward order" and a "strain toward disorder," formulations we have arrived at through a very flexible appropriation of some ideas in Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1958). But let us caution immediately against a possible misunderstanding: both styles involve ways of bringing order to experience. As Douglas makes clear, an image of disorder always implies a background image of order against which it is conceived; and, furthermore, the disorder of the boys' stories itself represents a kind of order. The key point is that the styles of the boys' and girls' stories represent two very different approaches to the symbolic management of order and disorder.

In this chapter we can only sketch out some of the most characteristic features which define and distinguish these two narrative styles and the cognitive and symbolic modes they embody. Although the basic patterns are rather clear once they have been mapped out, the subtleties and nuances involved produce a much richer and more complex picture than we can fully present here. To complicate matters further, individual children are often able to put their own unique stamp on the styles they employ. But here is a beginning.

The Girls' Stories: A Strain toward Order

Let us first characterize the girls' stories in terms of both form and content. The girls' stories, but *not* those of the boys, tend to have a coherent plot with a stable set of characters and a continuous plot line.

One way in which the girls *give* their stories this coherence is by structuring their content around stable sets of *social relationships*, especially (though not exclusively) *family* relationships. In fact, the extent to which the girls' stories, but not those of the boys, revolve thematically around the family group is overwhelming. Not all the girls' stories contain an explicit depiction of family relationships, but most of them do. And while the girls also represent stable and harmonious relationships in other ways, the portrayal of the family group is their prototypical mode of doing so. Therefore, it can serve as a useful focus for illustrating some of the most characteristic and pervasive features of their distinctive style. Thus the prototypical girl's story introduces a cast of characters who are carefully situated in a set of kinship relationships. Here is an example:

> Once upon a time there was a cat and a dog. And they lived in a warm snug house. And there was a mommy, a daddy, a sister, and another sister that was the big sister, and there was a brother that was the big brother, and there was a baby. And all the kids played together until it was dinner time. And then they had a lovely dinner of spaghetti and meatballs. (Martha, 4–4)

This story brings together almost all the elements that are typical of the most distinctive form of girls' stories: it revolves around a *family*, it meticulously articulates their kinship relations, and it takes place in the *home*, which is both a specific physical setting for the story and also the center of order ("a warm and snug house"). Another important element that often gives the girls' stories their coherence and continuity is their depiction of the rhythmic, cyclical, and repeated patterns of everyday domestic family life, which the girls like to recount:

> Once upon a time there's a mom, a dad, and there's a baby and a brother and a sister. The mother and father go to work and the big sister and big brother take care of the baby. Then the mother came home from work and their father came home from work. They ate dinner, and went to sleep, they woke up, and then the mom came and fed them breakfast. (Polly, 4–8)

Thus we often find that the family—after all its members have been carefully enumerated—goes to the park and comes back home. Or the parents go to work (this often specifically includes the mother) and the kids go to school, but then they come back home. Or they come home and have dinner and go to bed and wake up and have breakfast—and so on. (Boys' stories, on the other hand, very rarely depict cyclical or rhythmic action, whether in a family setting or in any other context.)

In short, these examples show that girls' stories focus on *stable settings* and *stable relationships;* they contain relatively little description of action—particularly sudden or violent action. As we will see, the boys' stories are very different in these respects.

In addition, girls' stories—again, unlike the boys'—often include romantic or fairy-tale images of kings and queens, princes and princesses, and so on. But it is striking that they are assimilated to the *family* romance, since they characteristically get married and have babies. In addition, when the girls talk about animals, they often bring them into the family by making them into pets. Here is another example:

> Two queens and two princesses lived in two houses. Once they shared the house with the queens and the princesses, two princesses came and wanted to marry two princes. And two kings came and wanted to marry the queens. Five ponies came and been their pets; two rabbits were the ponies' friends, and they were the other pets; the two zebras are the princesses' pets. The end. (Dora, 3–11)

This story also illustrates a tendency toward formal symmetry (*two* queens, *two* kings, *two* princesses, *two* princes, *two* zebras, and so on—marred, in this case, only by the five ponies) that is common in the girls' stories but very rare in the boys'. And let us point out another important contrast: boys may occasionally mention families, but in their stories practically no one *ever* gets married. (There were just three exceptions in the hundreds of stories we have.) But girls are fond of marriages and babies:

> Once upon a time there was a princess named Beauty. And she had two sisters and one dad and a mom. And then she went to a castle where a beast lived, and his name was Vincent. And then they get married. Then she has a baby. (Sonia, 4–11)

Thus the ideal world of the girls' stories tends to be centered, coherent, and firmly structured. Princes and princesses, brothers and sisters, even animals and beasts can all be enfolded harmoniously within the most stable system of social relations, those of the family unit. This is an orderly world. And, in fact, whenever order is disrupted or threatened, the girls are typically quite careful to reestablish it before ending the story—most characteristically by absorbing any threatening elements within the family unit:

> Once upon a time there was a mom. The mom was playing with two babies and there was a dad. The dad went to work. And the mom went to work. And then there came a dinosaur in a boat.

> It rode into water in the house. The parents came back home. The babies were gone. The dinosaur robbed the babies. The dad came home and said, "Babies, we're home. It's your Birthday!" Then the dinosaur branged them home and they were friends. The babies blew out the candles. They were two years old. The end. (Polly, 4–3)

The crucial point is that the girls' stories are not just orderly; they show a positive *strain* toward order.

The Boys' Stories: A Strain toward Disorder

In contrast, the four-year-old boys' stories show a strain toward disorder. Their stories are far less likely than the girls' to have either a stable cast of characters or a well-articulated plot; nor do they develop their themes in the steady and methodical manner of the girls' stories. Rather than the centered stability of the girls' stories, the boys' stories are marked by movement and disruption and often by associative chains of exuberant imagery. One might say that, if the girls' stories focus on creating, maintaining, and elaborating structure, the boys' stories focus on generating action and excitement; and the restless energy of their stories often overwhelms their capacity to manage it coherently. Thus their stories are more likely than the girls' to verge on the chaotic and often seem to begin or end almost randomly. The vigorous action that dominates the content is typically linked to an explicit emphasis on violence, conflict, and the disruption of order.

Let us begin with content. The boys' favorite characters tend to be big, powerful, and often deliberately frightening; warriors of all sorts are particularly fancied, along with monsters and huge or threatening animals. Besides the monsters, their stories are full of bears, tigers, dinosaurs, and so on—all of which are rather rare in the girls' stories. The animals that girls introduce into their stories tend to be cute and nonthreatening ones such as butterflies or bunnies. Nonviolent but scary elements such as ghosts and skeletons are also common in the boys' stories. The impulse toward disorder that lies behind their preoccupation with physical violence also comes out in bursts of extravagant, deliberately startling, and even grotesque imagery.

If the explicit depiction of the family group is a prototypical feature of the girls' stories, the corresponding motif in the boys' stories is the explicit—and generally enthusiastic—depiction of active violence. For example, here is a story that no girl in the sample would have told:

> Once upon a time there was a Triceratops, and a Tyrannosaurus Rex came. He bit Triceratops. But an Anatosaurus duckbill was watching another Anatosaurus eating plants. Tyrannosaurus Rex came and watched them. The duckbills run away. A Nodosaurus came and ate plants. A Voltursaurus came and they fight. All of the dinosaurs fight. Tyrannosaurus fights Triceratops. All the dinosaurs are dead except two dinosaurs: Tyrannosaurus is not dead and Triceratops is not dead. They become friends and smile. (John, 4–9)

As with content, so with form. As we noted earlier, the boys' stories, in comparison with the girls', tend to be lacking in overall formal coherence, as well as stability and continuity of time and space. The typical boy's story consists, rather, of a string of dramatic and powerful images and events, often juxtaposed in loose association. The characters, rather than being firmly linked together, are often introduced sequentially into the story for the sake of action and thrilling effect. The story just quoted is exceptional in having a clear resolution; in general, the boys are much less concerned than the girls to bring their plots to resolution. Instead, what marks the boys' stories is a consistent striving toward action, novelty, and excess. As the next story brings out well, the boys often strive for escalating images:

> Once upon a time there was a bear that went to the forest. Then a big wolf opened up his mouth. Then a beam of light came into a bunny's heart. Then he was a *Vampire* bunny. And soon some monsters came. A giant alligator came. And crocodile came to get the alligator. A big egg was rolling around. It belonged to the alligator. A tiger ran and ran and ran after a bat. And he was safe from the tiger. (Toby, 4–3)

As these two stories illustrate, the setting is often vague or amorphous in the boys' stories; either it is not specified, or the action seems to shift from one unrelated setting to another. Very few stories center on an explicitly delineated setting, especially the home. Insofar as the boys' stories have a plot, it is very frequently dominated by fighting and destruction. However, as we have noted, physical violence is not the only means by which disorder can be generated. Rule-breaking is another common theme in the boys' stories; and the story just quoted brings out their fondness for startling and disruptive imagery.

In short, the world of these stories is a world of violence, disruption, and disorder. What they express is a positive *fascination* with disorder.

Now let us emphasize another point. Both the boys and the girls draw images from popular culture (including material transmitted by television, videos, and children's books), but what is interesting is that they do so *selectively*. They have already developed a differential sensitivity and preference for the elements presented to them by their cultural environment; they appropriate different elements and find ways to weave them into distinctive imaginative styles. For example, whereas the girls are particularly fond of princes and princesses and other fairy-tale characters, the boys favor cartoon action heroes such as Superman, He-Man, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and so on. The next story brings together many of the characteristic elements of the boys' stories:

> Once upon a time a teenage ninja turtle with a gun shot down a rock. Leonardo cuts that rock into half pieces. Leonardo has two swords. And the guy up high shoots the gun at Leonardo. A girl comes and has a gun in her pocket and shoots. She rides something very fast, and it runs and has two legs, and it's funny. A doggy-guy comes; he is a teenage ninja turtle, but he doesn't have any shell on his back. Doggy takes out his gun and shoots the guy up high. His name is Cone-a-lest, and he shoots back at Doggy. And they fight. They hear a voice say, "Doggy guy." It was a lion. Anything happened. And it was a saber tooth tiger. It roars and it doesn't see the lion or the guys down below and it left. The end. (John, 4–8)

"Anything happened": a typical boy's touch. In short, while the girls' stories are structured so as to maintain or restore order—cognitive, symbolic, and social—the boys' stories revel in movement, unpredictability, and disorder.

This brings us to another significant point. Given what we saw in the girls' stories, what is particularly striking about the boys' is the *absence* of stable social relationships and their frequent tenuousness when they are mentioned. The boys do sometimes identify characters as *friends*. In fact, this is the relationship they mention most commonly, though still far less commonly than the girls dwell on family relationships. But at least at the age of four, they do not yet seem to have developed a very powerful image of male friendship. In their stories, friendship is often a vague or transitory relationship, and at all events it is no guarantee of stability or harmony. Here is an especially telling illustration:

> Once upon a time there was a monster and there was a pig; and the monster wanted to kill the pig but the pig ran too fast and got away. Then the pig went into the forest and saw a live chicken and they were friends. But they were fighting because the chicken was the greatest, so the pig went to the park; but the chicken couldn't because he was roasted by the pig and ated him all up. (Paul, 4–8)

Summary

The stories told by the boys are systematically different from those told by the girls, and the opposition goes beyond surface dissimilarities in attitudes or plot elements. The stories display two distinctive forms of symbolic imagination and involve quite distinctive ways of representing society and social relationships. It is not too much to say that these four-year-olds have already developed two distinct aesthetic styles. The style informing the girls' stories tends toward what might be called "socialist realism," while the style of the boys' can usefully be termed "picaresque surrealism." What they involve, at the deepest level, are two sharply different approaches to the symbolic management of order and disorder.

Some Illustrative Statistics and Their Interpretation: Structures of Meaning and Symbolic Reworking

Now that we have sketched out the basic patterns, let us offer some figures to illustrate some of the points we have been making. Summarized below is the frequency (technically, the mean proportions) of two of the most pervasive and significant content themes that run through the stories: explicit depictions of the family group and of active violence.

	Boys	Girls
Family group	14%	54%
Active violence	62%	18%

This is a simple comparison, but it makes a strong point. The reader will notice that the contrast between the boys' stories and the girls' stories is so striking that it hardly seems to require much comment. Obviously, the relative frequencies support the argument we have been making.

But, in fact, in certain important ways these figures actually *under*state the contrast involved. When we explore the deeper patterns behind these statistical comparisons, the real differences stand out even more sharply.

In the first place, the specific themes captured in these figures are, in both cases, only the most conspicuous manifestations of larger

symbolic orientations. These figures for depictions of the "family group," for example, are based on a coding scheme that used fairly stringent criteria. If more lenient criteria for family themes are used, then the gap between the boys' and girls' percentages increases; and this holds even more strongly if we code for "stable and harmonious social relationships," rather than for the more specific category of family situations.

For a story to be coded as depicting a "family group," for example, it required explicit mention of a family situation involving at least two forms of kinship relation—a mother, a father, and at least one child, or one parent with several children. If we add stories that mention only one kinship relationship (such as brother-sister or mother-child), the relative frequency for the boys' stories goes to 20 percent and for the girls' stories to 65 percent. Furthermore, many of the girls' stories which do not explicitly construct an entire family situation include one implicitly, and they are noticeably more likely to do so than the boys' stories. But even more important is the fact noted earlier that the explicit portrayal of the family group is only *one* of the ways that the girls emphasize stable and harmonious social relationships in their stories. Often they dwell on relationships of this sort which very much resemble a family situation, and these shade off into relationships which seem to constitute, in this respect, the functional equivalent of a family situation. Here is an example of what we mean, and we have chosen what we think is one of the *less* obvious examples:

> Once upon a time there were three bees, three butterflies, and three ponies that were playing near the ocean. They went home and ate dinner. After dinner the butterflies, the bees, and the ponies went to bed. When they woke up the bees and the butterflies flew over the ocean, and the ponies went into the ocean. The end. (Polly, 4–2)

Correspondingly, we coded for "active violence" when characters in the stories explicitly fought, hurt, killed, ate, or actively threatened each other, or when they were explicitly depicted producing physical destruction. If the criteria are relaxed in various ways—for example, if physical destruction is depicted without an explicit agent being specified—then the boys' totals go up disproportionately (69 percent versus 20 percent). But again, physical violence is only one of the means that the boys use to generate disorder in their stories. Furthermore, the figures for the girls' stories mask the fact that the ways they *use* violence in their stories and the *attitude* displayed toward it tend to be very different from the boys' approach. For example, girls mention violence quickly rather than describing it in detail—often using the passive voice—and their accounts tend to lack the enthusiasm characteristic of the boys' stories.

This last point brings out the really crucial consideration, both methodologically and theoretically: the coding of specific themes or elements, though necessary, will always be inadequate by itself in this kind of research because an interpretive analysis is indispensable even to code intelligently. In many ways, in fact, the boys' and the girls' stories are so different in structure and intent that it is no simple matter to design uniform coding schemes which fully capture what is going on in both of them. In particular, even if the same element appears or is mentioned in a girl's story and a boy's story, its *significance* is often different in the two cases because it is *used* differently and fits into a different *structure of meaning*. Let us give an example. The following boy's story is one of the 14 percent which we coded as depicting a family group:

> There was a dad and a mom and two babies. They went to the park and there was a monster and he ate the family up. After he ate the family the monster died because there was too much family and he was fat. (Andrew, 4–4)

It is obvious that, in this story, the family imagery is not used to establish order and security, but rather to express the typical boy's fascination with violence and disorder (and it is hard not to suspect some ironic intent). Here is a milder, but equally instructive example from the same 14 percent; the family is associated with order and rules, but precisely in order to reject them:

> Once upon a time there was a bumblebee, then a yellow jacket came. They played. Then their mother came and said "clean up your room, brush your teeth, put on your pajamas, and go to bed, turn off the light, and pull up the covers." They didn't do that because they didn't want to. They wanted to play some more. Then a ghost came and took them on a ride. (Tom, 4–4)

The methodological point is that thematic elements cannot be taken in isolation and simply aggregated; each element can be understood only in the context of the larger structure of meaning within which it is embedded. In other words, as we have just indicated, what is required is an interpretive analysis that can elucidate these structures of meaning and grasp how they give significance to the particular elements. And when we undertake such an interpretive analysis,

the systematic differences between the boys' and the girls' stories are even more striking than the figures themselves reveal.

These contrasting structures of meaning are brought out especially vividly if we analyze what happens when a girl introduces a typical "boy's" element or theme into her story, or vice versa. In each case, these elements are modified to conform to the characteristic model of the gender-specific narrative style.

We have already seen examples of how this is done. When a potentially threatening or disruptive animal enters one of the girls' stories, it is characteristically rendered nonthreatening. This is frequently done by identifying the animal as small or a "baby." Even the occasional monster can be neutralized with the cautionary comment that it is "a nice monster" or "a baby monster." Significantly, animals can be rendered nonthreatening by making them into "pets"—that is, by bringing them into the family and its framework of stable social relationships. In boys' stories we also see this kind of symbolic reworking, but in the opposite direction. The classic boy's counterpart to the "nice monster" is probably the "Vampire bunny," which appeared in a story quoted earlier.

This process of symbolic reworking provides one of the most convincing indications that we are dealing with a genuine contrast between two styles of aesthetic imagination—each constructing the world in accord with a distinctive symbolic *intention*—rather than a mere distribution of story traits. (Along similar lines, special insights can be gained from the analysis of "marginal stories"—that is, stories by both boys and girls that fit less sharply than most into one of the two gender-related narrative styles, and even incorporate some tension between them. Space limitations preclude further discussion here, but it is worth noting that, once the main outlines of important narrative styles are identified, "marginal stories" should not be viewed as an embarrassment, but instead merit special attention as a key to refining the analysis.)

Convergence and Divergence in the Symbolic Management of Order and Disorder

Before closing, we would like to emphasize one additional point, which in the space available can only be asserted rather than demonstrated. In this discussion, we have stressed the contrast, in both themes and formal structure, between the narrative styles informing the boys' and the girls' stories. But this is *not* to suggest that the

preoccupations expressed in these stories, and the underlying issues they address, have nothing in common. On the contrary, what a close analysis of the stories reveals is that *both* boys and girls are preoccupied with issues of danger and disorder. What is different is the way they deal with them. The girls deal with threatening or disruptive elements by muffling or suppressing them: burying them under a structure of order, alluding to them indirectly, or, as we have indicated, incorporating any disturbing or potentially unpredictable figures into the structure of the family unit. In contrast, the boys deal with these elements by dwelling on them explicitly, elaborating them, and intensifying their dangerous and thrilling aura. As we put it earlier, the boys' and girls' stories represent two very different *approaches* to the symbolic management of order and disorder.

The girls' approach is exemplified by the crucial (and especially revealing) fact that they are usually careful not to end their stories until all potentially disruptive elements have been neutralized or resolved—in particular, until the family has come back home or has otherwise reestablished its grip on order. The fundamental divergence in this respect between the symbolic imagination underlying the girls' stories and the boys' could not be illustrated more sharply than by the contrast between the last two stories we will quote. Here is a girl's story:

> Once upon a time there was an old, old house. A family was living in it. There was a baby, a mother, a father, and a sister. And all the kids played Candyland. And one day when the family was out shopping, there was a fire on the street to their house. When they came back home and saw that their house wasn't there, they went to find another one. (Martha, 4–5)

The home is the locus of order, so having it burn down is disturbing. The girl is not going to end her story until she has the family find another one. On the other hand, here is a boy's story about the home:

> Once upon a time there was a moose. His name was Moose-moose. And he lived in a person's house. And he knocked a telephone off the wall. And he broke the house. And he ripped up the skeleton and he knocked the table out. And he broke the windows. Then he knocked down the house again. And then he drew on his face. And he turned the lamp on, and he let the birds out of the cage. *The end.* (Bobby, 4–7)

The story ends with chaos triumphant: a classic boy's story. But it is interesting to note that the house is always around to be destroyed a second time.

Some Lessons and Implications

This analysis has, we hope, vindicated our suggestion that we can learn a good deal by taking children seriously as little artists and by recognizing the genuinely aesthetic impulse behind their storytelling activity. The expressive imagination that animates their stories is a resource they employ for making experience intelligible and rendering it emotionally manageable and satisfying. Furthermore, underlying the different narrative styles that they use and elaborate are distinctive ways of visualizing reality, distinctive modes of ordering and interpreting the world. Exploring and elucidating these distinctive visions can deepen our understanding of the active role of children's symbolic imagination in their construction of reality and in the formation of identity, including gender identity. While the line of research on which this chapter is based needs to be further extended and refined, it is already clear that the findings reported here have implications for a wide range of issues in development and education.

The most striking implication of these findings is simply the extent to which systematic gender differences in social and symbolic imagination have begun to crystallize even at the young age of four years. A range of work in a number of fields lends support to our judgment that the contrasting narrative styles we have identified are not peculiar to our data and that they do, indeed, point to deeper differences in symbolic imagination and in cognitive and sociocultural styles. While surprisingly little systematic study of gender differences in children's spontaneous stories has been undertaken (the major exception being the work of Paley), the distinctive gender-related patterns delineated in this study appear to be broadly consistent with a number of other findings from research on gender differences in children's play (e.g., Black 1989; Paley 1984a, 1984b; Sachs 1987) and in the narrative and conversational styles of children and adults (e.g., Goodwin 1990; Goodwin and Goodwin 1987; Sheldon 1990; Tannen 1990a, 1990b). More tentatively, our findings would seem to have some bearing on the recent line of discussion, associated above all with the work of Gilligan (e.g., 1982; Gilligan and Attanucci, 1988), which has argued that men and women follow somewhat different paths of moral development and that women's moral imagination and moral reasoning are much more likely to be anchored in a concern with stable patterns of social ties and obligations. Our results also appear to resonate, in suggestive ways, with certain patterns identified in Chodorow's analysis of the social formation of gender differences in emotional and personality development (e.g., 1978, 1989).

Because the subject of gender differences in development is so complex and contentious, a cautionary note is in order. The fact that the four-year-old boys and girls in this study already display such distinctive styles of representing and grasping reality, and that they spontaneously reproduce and elaborate these differences in a classroom setting devoted to building up a common culture among them, is a significant phenomenon that demands further consideration. By themselves, however, these findings do not tell us where these differences come from, nor do they necessarily suggest that such differences are immutable. But they do bring out both how far and how deeply the processes of gender differentiation have already developed in the first four years of life, and they underscore the complexity of the dynamics involved in the formation of gender identity.

At the same time, these findings highlight the need to approach the social formation of mind and personality in a way that does not treat the child as a passive bystander in this process. In constructing their stories, both the boys and the girls draw on images and other elements that are presented to them by their cultural environment and that shape their imagination and sensibility in profound and subtle ways. But we also find that, when given the opportunity, they are able (and eager) to use these elements to put the world together in quite distinctive ways.

One larger implication of this striking fact is to remind us that the formative effect of culture is neither simple, unmediated, nor one-way. Quite practically, this means that the impact on children of the various cultural materials to which they are exposed—from TV shows to children's books to classroom curricula—will never be direct or uniform because, even at a very young age, the children bring to these materials their own distinctive interpretive frameworks, underlying concerns, and modes of appropriation. Thus the projects of adults who try to shape and advance children's development—from parents to teachers—encounter the multiple projects (themselves culturally shaped) that the children themselves are trying to pursue. The results of these encounters are neither simple nor easily predictable. Without having some sense of the inner logic of the children's own projects, adults cannot take for granted what the effects of their interventions will be.

The situation on which our research is based may provide an instructive example. The patterns we have identified seem to emerge from the complex and mutually reinforcing interaction of two ongoing processes. First, the children's distinctive narrative styles express un-

derlying differences in their emerging cognitive modes and symbolic imagination. Second, at the same time, the use of these different styles is probably part of an effort by the boys and girls to mark themselves off from each other symbolically into different groups and to build up a sense of cohesion and shared identity within each subgroup. Therefore, the use of the storytelling and story-acting practice to build up a common culture within the classroom may also, ironically, have provided the children with a framework for the articulation of differences within this common culture. There is some indication—though at present this can only be tentatively suggested—that the narrative styles of the children's stories, rather than becoming more similar, actually polarized in certain ways during the year, precisely as the boys and girls became more familiar with each other's styles. (A dialectic of this kind would be consistent with the pattern suggested by Davies [1989] in her stimulating analysis of the dynamics of preschool children's symbolic construction of gender identities.) The lesson, once again, is the need for studies to take seriously the complexity of the relationship between culture and individual development.

All these considerations lead back to the recognition, which is a unifying theme of this volume, that understanding narrative diversity is a matter of considerable practical significance for education. This is especially true because children's narrative styles involve not only different ways of representing reality, but—simultaneously—different modes of grasping and understanding it. The cognitive and symbolic modes for which these narrative styles serve as vehicles constitute important resources for children in learning and development. But at the same time, these different tools for mastering reality carry with them different emphases and sensitivities, different strengths and weaknesses.

This diversity can emerge along a number of axes. For example, studies such as those inspired by the work of Heath (e.g., 1983) and Michaels (e.g., 1981) have analyzed the different narrative styles brought to school by children from culturally distinct communities and have showed the impact of these narrative styles on the children's different routes to literacy and to broader educational success (or lack thereof). The outcomes are crucially affected by the extent to which educational practice can recognize, develop, and build on their distinctive strengths (and also recognize and address their distinctive gaps and weaknesses). But community of origin is certainly not the only source of narrative diversity within and between classrooms—as attested by the boys and girls discussed in this chapter, whose notable

differences emerged within a context of very similar family and socioeconomic backgrounds. The results of our study underline the need to address the dimension of gender in understanding the sources, forms, and implications of narrative diversity.

Here again, it is important to add a note of complexity. Not only does narrative diversity emerge along a number of axes, but understanding it is not simply a matter of dividing children into sharply demarcated subgroups. Children—like adults—need not be restricted to a single narrative mode, but are likely to have a range available to them for various purposes. One of the aims of education ought to be to help develop the range and richness of the narrative styles they can master and effectively employ. But if we are to foster and encourage this development in effective and educationally rewarding ways, it is important to recognize and appreciate the distinctive kinds of foundations on which it can build.

In the long run, of course, mapping out the emergence of gender differences unavoidably raises an even deeper question: Why do they occur? This is a big and difficult subject, which we can be excused for not attempting to address here. But we will venture to say that, in order to formulate intelligent questions about what causes gender differences in development, it is important to understand these differences and their developmental emergence in depth. The type of analysis presented in this chapter can contribute to that goal. It may be that appreciating and understanding the imaginative gulf between boys and girls suggested by this research can help us think about ways of starting to bridge it.

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