

# *The Hidden Life of Girls: Games of Stance, Status, and Exclusion*

By Marjorie Harness Goodwin. 2006. Blackwell Publishing. 320 pages. ISBN: 0-631-23424-1 (hard cover), 0-631-23425-X (soft cover).

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[Review length: 1301 words • Review posted on February 13, 2008]

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This book's author, Marjorie Goodwin, sets out to challenge a cluster of assumptions about how girls interact with one another, using empirical data drawn from close observation of girls at lunch and at play on school playgrounds, settings where they achieve "a local social order" (6) and exercise "children's agency" (245). The stereotypes she addresses have both a popular and scholarly currency, and hold that boys are assertive and girls are nurturing, that boys are concerned with justice and girls with harmony, that boys use direct means and girls indirect means to advance their purposes. By listening to what the girls have to say to one another, Goodwin finds ample evidence to question these assumptions. The girls she observes exercise female assertiveness, not only in managing their same-sex activities but also in their interaction with boys who attempt to join their games. In one celebrated instance, the girls triumph over the boys in an effort to redefine access to the playground soccer field.

The remedy for the sway of misguided conceptions about what little girls are made of is attending closely to actual sequences of talk among girls at play. Goodwin draws on her field research in several settings, including long-term study of African American working-class girls in Philadelphia, second-generation Spanish/English-speaking Central American and Mexican girls in downtown Los Angeles, and "a group of children of various ethnicities and social classes in a private, progressive school in southern California" (211). Goodwin has previously written up her Philadelphia research in her much-acclaimed 1990 study, *He-Said-She-Said: Talk as Social Organization among Black Children*. Data from all three field sites enter this study, but its primary source is the more recent California research, drawn from some eighty hours of video and audio taping of talk as Goodwin followed a clique of popular girls from the third through the sixth grade.

Goodwin's perspective on these sessions of talk is shaped by the concerns and techniques of ethnomethodology (yes, Sachs, Garfinkel, Schegloff, and Jefferson ride again!), sociolinguistics, and conversation analysis mated with field ethnography, which she sees as "a powerful methodology for investigating how children ... become

competent social actors by learning how to use language appropriately” (245). Inspired by Erving Goffman’s uncanny feel for social life and focusing on “naturally occurring talk in context,” Goodwin assesses “how positions or stances with respect to appropriate behavior are produced in the midst of particular activities (such as games, assessments, and stories),” “how claims to social positions are negotiated,” and “how behavior of those who are felt to violate the local norms of the group is sanctioned” (5). The basic quest here is a search for how social values are constituted through talk, and how the moves in play activities both reflect and constitute a social system. The method is to present selected talk sequences and closely inspect them for evidence of social process.

Although *The Hidden Life of Girls* cannot be said to be a tract on children’s folklore, it does hold much of interest for the folklorist, both for the performance genres it addresses--hand clapping, jumping rope, hopscotch, songs, ritual insults, “gossip dramas,” pretend play, joking, and storytelling--and for the way these play forms are theorized as arenas where peer-group social organization is accomplished. There is an appendix with the texts of several jump rope rhymes, but this book views the genres of children’s folklore as resources for social interaction rather than as items of traditional culture. Folklorists will find that this approach offers many valuable insights as tokens of these familiar genres emerge in the crucible of social interaction. Moreover, our genres have consequence since they are seen to play a vital role in the development of moral judgment, the negotiation of social status, the marking of social boundaries, and the pursuit of social justice.

Let me briefly portray some of the riches folklorists can mine from the pages of this book. In reference to games like jumping rope and hopscotch, Goodwin observes a tension between the way players “treated the rules as resources” (36) and the way the witnesses to play served as judges, keeping close track of rule violations. She documents a deep concern with codes of fairness and justice and a propensity to engage in conflict behavior in order to enforce these codes, quite contrary to the claims of the reigning stereotype. Goodwin reminds us that the playground is “a place where social relationships based on power and status are played out” (250). As her sample for the hopscotch segment includes mostly Hispanic girls, she argues that her evidence defies “the essentialized stereotypes of Latinas as the hapless victims of a patriarchal culture” (72).

An examination of turn-taking in jumping rope illustrates that girls are quite capable of using direct commands as they sort out status relationships in the course of their play. When boys seek to join in the play, they are subject to the commands of female players until they acquire comparable expertise in the game. Goodwin concludes from this that “rather than being sex-linked, features of language use may be closely related to one’s achieved position in a specific context” (155). She notes in storytelling, “the most ubiquitous of all speech events” (161), a use of topic management, participation control,

and critical assessment, all geared to rendering and enforcing status hierarchies among the girls. In the realm of topic, for example, it matters if you can refer to up-scale stores and labels, and trips to exotic places. Even pretend play offers opportunities “to organize and orchestrate social roles” (186) in accordance with status hierarchies. Goodwin notes that the progressive school in southern California, ironically, is “a site where middle and upper class children teach one another how to put children of the working class in their place” (249). But a balance must be struck here, for Goodwin’s research indicates that there is a price to pay for “putting on airs.”

With regard to gossip, Goodwin notes that “negative talk about absent parties provides for vivid and varied forms of involvement” (209). But she finds in these sessions “processes through which girls come to construct notions of normative value and articulate their notions of cultural appropriateness and moral personhood” (209). Goodwin touches on themes with policy implications, such as the need for free play at recess and how to deal with bullying. A nice detail along the way is how the girls incorporate into their personal and ritual insults the vocabulary of their school’s social justice curriculum and mimic the voice of the school psychologist in taunting an excluded playmate.

In closing, I take note of a couple of uncertainties in the midst of this book’s many valuable contributions. One of these is methodological. Goodwin insists that her video and audio taping allowed her “to acquire a record of naturally occurring interaction” (4). But one may wonder about the effect of microphone, camera, and ethnographer and her crew on the behavior of the children. Goodwin tells us that she was able to remain aloof and neutral for the most part, but her talk segments exhibit several instances when the girls make explicit reference to these intrusive elements. One feature that does not enter into Goodwin’s calculations but should, arguably, is the tendency for children to play to the camera.

The other uncertainty has to do with Goodwin’s core postulate that society is formed through social interaction. As productive as this thesis can be, it can seem to disregard the more persistent features of social orders, the rules, regulations, and norms that shape social interaction. “Moral rules are emergent from local sequential contingencies of action” Goodwin tells us (190), and this assertion has its validity. But it seems equally true that people are often “playing by the rules” that have come to them through formal and informal instruction.