

Gendering in one Icelandic preschool

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The aim of this article is to shed light on gendering in preschool. It analyzes the opinions and beliefs of preschool teachers with regard to boys and girls in one Icelandic preschool, and how gender performative acts are manifested in the preschool's children. The preschool, which was observed for one school year, comprised 60 children, aged 18 months to five years, and 20 employees, of which eight were qualified teachers. The research material is analyzed in terms of Judith Butler's gender constructivism. Butler contends that gender is constituted by, and is a product of, society, and that the individual's empowerment is therefore limited in relation to society, with individuals typically seeking to identify themselves with the dominant norms concerning gender. The main conclusions suggest that "gendering" is prominent within the preschool. There is a strong tendency among the preschool teachers to classify the children into categories of boys/masculine and girls/feminine, and specific norms direct the children into the dominant feminine and masculine categories, thus maintaining and reinforcing their gender stereotypes. The children used symbols such as colors, locations and types of play as means to instantiate the "girthing" and the "boying". These findings are consistent with previous Nordic research and indicate a prevailing essentialist perspective towards both girls and boys. The originality of the research, however, lies in focusing on children's gender from the individual's perspective and how the individual child generally enacts gender performatively within the confines of society's norms.

Keywords: Gender, Gender performativity, Early childhood education, Preschool, Judith Butler.

Introduction

Although Iceland ranks among the most egalitarian nations in the world, according to various quantitative indicators, gender inequalities persist, and egalitarian attitudes among youth have declined in recent years (Bjarnason and Hjálmsdóttir, 2008). Thus gender equality still seems to be unstable in

Iceland and there is evidence of a backlash in recent years (Einarsdóttir, 2004). The preschool is an important place where children learn to “perform gender” based on society’s norms (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011).

This article revolves around teachers’ views and beliefs, and manifestations of gender performativity, in one Icelandic preschool. The research data were analyzed in terms of two theoretical perspectives. The former perspective draws on aspects of critical theory, specifically on the theories of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas advances the normative claim that societies can facilitate individuals’ increased awareness of their conditions and possibilities, with the aim of bolstering their autonomy (Outhwaite, 2005[1996]). As a starting point, Habermas (1991, 1996) considers it imperative to scrutinize and reflect on the normative views and beliefs that constitute performativity in a given social field, in order to create the discursive conditions for empowerment. The latter theoretical perspective is based on the constructivist ideas of Judith Butler (2004, 1990), who argues that sex and gender are shaped, and are a product of, the society in which the individual finds him/herself, and the individual’s empowerment is therefore limited in relation to society, with individuals typically seeking to identify themselves with dominant societal norms concerning gender. Butler’s views incorporate formal aspects from Heider’s (1958) attribution theory, as explained below. Substantively, however, her views fall into the category of queer theory which insists that gender is constituted and develops by means of norms associated with heterosexuality, and further explicates repetitive acts premised on specific stereotypes regarding the feminine and the masculine (Blaise and Taylor, 2012). Those norms then conduct the individual’s understanding of social acts. For present purposes, the ideas of Habermas and Butler are placed within the context of the preschool, through the lens of which manifestations of gender, revealed by the research data, are investigated.

At first sight, the two theoretical perspectives in question may seem to be incompatible, with one (Habermas’s) rooted in a modernist conception, sanguine about the possibility of empowerment and change, but the other (Butler’s) rooted in a postmodern framework that has given up on modernism’s emancipatory ideals. As we see below, however, Butler’s constructivism does not imply the deterministic conclusion that gendering norms are set in stone and cannot be changed through emancipatory efforts. Just as constructions are real, so are reconstructions. Our understanding is that while the relationship between the genders is socially constructed, it is also constantly changing and, indeed, changeable.

The article seeks to answer the following two research questions: What set of views are to be found among the preschool teachers regarding the preschool activities of girls, on the one hand, and boys, on the other? How are gender manifestations of children disclosed in the preschool?

Theoretical background

The point of departure of this research is that individuals’ views and beliefs, including those of teachers, are the central formative aspects in their work (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Ekholm and Hedin, 1993; Jordan, 2004; Friðriksdóttir and Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2002; Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2007). The theoretical background of the research draws on the attribution theory of Heider (1958, 1988), who argues that the activity of individuals is determined by their self-attributed characteristics, along with the explanations they offer of their own actions. Attribution theory is a sub-set of psychological anti-realism, according to which there is strict identity between self and self-concept, or the collection of our own ideas concerning who we actually are. Heider (1958, 1988) believed, as previously mentioned, that individuals resorted to their own self-beliefs, rather than objective matters of fact, as means to interpret and understand themselves and their environments. Individuals categorize

phenomena in order to comprehend, control and predict their environments; and, eventually, the explanations become expectations and beliefs which the individual utilizes to understand, explicate and anticipate events. In this way, P's preconceived ideas regarding event F are considerably shaped by P's understanding of F, and by the causal explanations that P summons after the event has transpired (why something took place or why it did not) or prior to it (why something is likely to take place or not). Examples: "It went very well, I am very skilled in field studies" or "It went very well, the children love field studies", or "It went very well, I planned the trip well".

The article is premised on the view that the individual constructs the understanding of his/her own experience in this attributionist way, interpreting what he/she undergoes in terms of prior experiences and self-attributions (Bruner, 1996; Dahlberg, 2000; Vygotskij, 1995). Likewise, the individual consists of a myriad of dimensions which resist a categorization of either/or, for example, the individual is not either feminine or masculine, but rather "both", in the sense in which he/she is "created" through various means, different situations, expectations and views (Butler, 2004; Eidevald, 2009; Lenz Taguchi, 2004). The article also draws on certain normative features of critical theory, particularly the views proposed by Habermas (1996, 2007). Critical theory was largely shaped in the so-called Frankfurt School, which was established in Germany during the twenties when thinkers such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse criticized the instrumental rationality that characterized their time, according to which everything was ordered into numbers and systems, and an overemphasis placed upon the measurable at the expense of emotion and culture. Habermas (1996) contended that the "lifeworld" was the foundation of all communication. More specifically, the conditions and life-experiences through which individuals' norms are constituted create a person's lifeworld (Outhwaite, (2005[1996]). Habermas (1996) pointed out that all communication presupposes that individuals possess knowledge of the collective values of society. Communication facilitates our sense of belonging in relation to certain groups and institutions, and shapes us into individuals. At the same time, however, communication can also liberate us from the shackles of stagnant discourses and thus serve as a source of liberation. In order to know what to liberate, we need to know what those stagnant discourses look like – a consideration that motivates our exploration of gendering discourses in the preschool. The theoretical perspective of the research is, most importantly, grounded in the perspective of gender studies or feminism. As noted above, the research draws on the American thinker and philosopher, Judith Butler (2004, 1990), who proposes a constructivist thesis which assumes that sex and gender are constituted by way of performativity, which is a continuous process, much like the formation of the individual, a process which only ceases with that of the individual's life. More precisely, Butler reveals the instability of sex, gender and self-perception. Furthermore, Butler (1993) rejects ideas based on essentialism, i.e. that biological sex determines gender; a view largely inspired by the works of Jessica Benjamin (Salih, 2002). Here is also a link to Habermas's critical theory which insists that norms are interwoven with people's opinions and actions: communication adjusts to norms (Habermas, 1996, 2007) and is both an interpretation, and an example, of recognition. Recognition is not an event understood literally, nor strictly speaking performed, instead it "takes place" in and through communication, though not solely by means of spoken words, but rather through the way in which we "see" each other and are "seen". In brief, individuals change by virtue of the communications they participate in, and are a part of (Salih, 2002). Butler (2004, 1990) extracts this idea and transfers onto the construction of sex and gender; that sex and gender are constituted by, and a product of society, as already stated. Many scholars have noted that gender refers to socio-cultural meaning regarding what counts as feminine and masculine, and in this sense gender is determined by time and place (Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2007). For instance, girls and boys wear clothes now different from what they wore in the 18th century: the color of children's clothes in

today's Iceland is more conspicuous, and it is customary to choose specific colors as signifiers of gender (Harðardóttir, 2007). In this way, time exerts influence and so does place, for example, cultural differences can decide what kind of clothes individuals wear; children's clothes in China differ to some extent from children's clothes in Iceland.

Butler (2004, 1990) considers the need for recognition as essential to the human being, and this fact places the individual outside him/herself and onto the societal stage of norms; norms that produce and sustain the individual's standard of living. The norms then regulate the individuals' understanding of social acts. To claim that gender is a norm is not the same as stating that there exist common beliefs concerning the feminine and the masculine, although, in Butler's view, such is clearly the case. Gender is not literally what one "is", nor exactly something which one "has". A norm is in effect only a norm to the extent it functions within social reality and is ceaselessly repeated. In the experience of the first author, preschool children do not only position themselves but seek to position others in accordance with societal norms; one example concerns the words of a four year old boy who answered the question: "Is this your dad?" which his schoolmate had posed to him, in the following way: "He "is" not dad, he "is" Bjarni, he only works (in parental leave) as a dad!" One can wonder whether the boy is grappling there with similar things as Butler, i.e. that gender does not strictly concern what one "is", or what one "has", but rather refers to a norm and is performed.

Butler (1993:7) argues that already at the birth of a child, the girl is "girded" and the boy is subject to "boying", and by way of repeated girling and boying the children learn to which group they belong and what norms apply for each group. Performances are continually repeated and through this shape our understanding of sex and gender, and in this way, the human subject is gradually constituted.

Butler (1990, 1993) points out the inconsistency that pertains to the fact that we are in need of norms in order to survive and to know how we want to alter our social environment, yet the norms simultaneously limit us to the extent that they become a hindrance where social justice encourages reactionary struggle. Therefore, norms become both guiding principles and obstacles. As an example, norms regarding the normal "man" and "woman", seen as bodies, can produce ideas and norms which encourage insecurity in those who do not fall under the heading of what the normal calls for. Butler flatly rejects such dualism in relation to gender: feminine = womanly = woman, masculine = manly = man. Life is much more complex than these bifurcations suggest, and that applies equally to gender. When the norm is limited in this way, that which does not subscribe to the norm is consequently deemed different, and this often leads to conflicts when individuals attempt to be different, which can take on a multitude of forms, such as name-calling, ridicule, bullying, etc.

Christian Eidevald (2009:25) contends that few studies focus on children's gender from the individual's perspective; most research looks at girls as one group and boys as another. Furthermore, Eidevald believes that many descriptions offered by researchers, preschool teachers and parents in relation to girls and boys strengthen traditional stereotypes rather than challenging such conceptions. The studies moreover show the stereotypes harbored by adults toward the genders, for example that girls are calm and boys active, and how they refrain from addressing whether this applied to all the girls and all the boys. Barrie Thorne (1993) has also noted a common viewpoint, namely, how the behavior of a small number of children is projected upon a group. Here it is worth considering whether researchers also populate the group that seems "blind" toward gender, and who further facilitate "gender blindness", rather than questioning it. Likewise, whether researchers, consciously or unconsciously, frame their studies in terms of essentialism or dualism. Mindy Blaise and Affrica Taylor (2012) and Eidevald (2009) hold that queer theory can provide the opportunities required in order to reconsider gender studies/equality within preschool education as is the aim of this study.

Butler (1990, 2004), considers acts, gestures and performances, as they are normally defined, as acted in the sense that the centre of self-consciousness, which the individual believes he/she is expressing, is in fact a fabrication, which is constructed and sustained by way of embodied signs and through discourse. For example, clothes, acts, play and behavior can both affirm gender, if they corresponds with the individual's sex, or undermine all ideas about an inner essence of gender, through acts such as drag, where gender does not accompany sex. Children in the preschool age frequently enact gender, and generally there can be found designated areas for such play in preschools. Such areas are often titled role-playing areas, home areas or doll areas. A variety of clothes and other objects are accessible to the children, which they use in order to stage the role playing games. Research has shown that children have great need to play and to assume different roles, and if children are limited in their play, they seek and use every opportunity to do so, even via trips to the bathroom (Öksnes, 2012).

As previously noted, Butler's ideas harmonize well with Heider's (1958) attribution theory, i.e. that individuals categorize phenomena in order to understand, explicate and anticipate events and themselves. Butler's famous example of anticipation-related acts, where women are expected to sit cross-legged instead of sitting wide-legged (Butler, 2004), illustrates this point.

Method

Critical theory provides, as previously noted, the normative framework of the research, and when such is the case, the normative framework also strongly influences the methods and analyses of the research findings. By virtue of the particular nature of the subject matter and research perspective employed in this research, a qualitative research method was chosen in which subjects are scrutinized without a narrow presupposed frame (Cohen and Manion, 1994). The research seeks to provide an intensive and holistic description of certain aspects of preschooling, which in this case is a gender-studies perspective of preschooling. A particular unit is scrutinized over a limited period of time, and within a delimited space (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995; Cohen and Manion, 1994; Schwandt, 2003), which in this study involved activities in one general preschool in urban Iceland, viewed over one school year. There were 60 children in the preschool in question, aged 18 months to five years, and around 20 staff members, of which eight were qualified preschool teachers. The research data were gathered amidst as normal circumstances as possible, in order to comprehend them in the context of mundane experiences of the participants and to unearth the essence of those experiences. The research data consisted of field notes, journal entries, and interviews and meetings. The first author, hereafter researcher, visited the preschool twice per week on average during the school year, sat meetings and conducted interviews with the preschool teachers. Here, five interviews with preschool teachers and three meetings of the preschool teachers are analyzed from a gender-studies perspective. On average, four preschool teachers attended each meeting and the aim of the meetings was to discuss activities in the preschool. The meetings and interviews were recorded, transcribed and read in detail. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

Bo Eneroth (1984) claims that qualitative research displays credibility and accuracy in a different way than quantitative research, characterized by "deeper" understanding. In the current research, the participants' words and actions were meticulously recorded through field notes and interviews: 17 field notes, 5 individual interviews with teachers (recorded and transcribed verbatim), 22 visits to the preschool (diary) and 6 meetings (recorded and transcribed verbatim). This article is based on 50.271 word data; 60-90 minutes semi-structured interviews with five of the teachers, where they could explain their work and vision of the school's work; one hour teacher-meeting where

teachers met with three year old children ; one hour teacher-meeting in which teachers met with children in the age of four ; two field notes written by the researcher of the preschool children (aged five) in role-play; one field note recorded by the researcher of the preschool children's (aged four) discussions as they worked on a sowing assignment. Finally, the study data were read in detail in search of common themes; words/discourses in the context of children's gender in preschool (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011).

The aim is to create an active and comprehensive account of the children's preschool activities. In the research here presented, the participants were both adults and children. Informed consent was obtained from the school committee of the municipality which runs the preschool in question, as well as from the director of the preschool, staff and parents of the children, and furthermore, The Icelandic Data Protection Authority (*Persónuvernd*) was notified of the research. The researcher introduced the contents of the research to parents at a parent-teacher meeting and as a result, the parents provided their consent with a signature. The parents decided whether their children participated or not, the children were not asked themselves, and it is worth wondering whether this was indeed the right decision, but on the other hand, the children were aware of the existence of the researcher, as she frequented the school in the course of one school year.

Results

As stated above, Butler (1990) assumes that sex and gender are constituted by way of performativity. This can clearly be seen in the teachers' discussions about the children's play. During the teacher-meetings, the teachers typically referred to the children in terms of two groups: Girls and boys. Only if the children did not fall neatly into the categorization of girl or boy, did the teachers refer to them as individuals. Following is a lucid example from a discussion at a teachers-meeting of just that:

The girls were drawing a lot, the girls can sit and potter away, and play around with drawing – and Oddur, he sat for roughly an hour drawing one picture [...] he looks more toward the girls. [...] Yes, he identifies more with the girls, because they can be bothered with pottering away, drawing and stuff which is what he likes to do. It is quite amazing that we try to get him to play a certain game with somebody, he somehow always withdraws. [...] And seeks out the girls. (Teachers-meeting; teachers who teach the four-year-olds).

Here the conclusion can be drawn that the teachers consider it preferable that Oddur plays with other boys, rather than with girls. It is quite clear that the teachers tend to influence and sustain the norms; preferring to talk collectively about groups of girls and groups of boys.

Grete Nordvik's and Randi Moe's (2012) research revolves around locating traces of gender discourse in preschooling, and in their findings, various traces of gendered discourse appear among the staff. Included here are discourses which created possibilities of diversity in being a girl or a boy, and discourses which facilitate stereotypes concerning gender. The findings reveal that the children responded in synch with the dominant discourse at each given time. Here is a clear connection with Habermas's critical theory people's which says that norms are interwoven people's beliefs and actions: Communication adjusts to norms (Habermas, 1996, 2007). Also related to this finding is Butler's (1990, 2004) point about the social environment and performativity.

Group division, boys versus girls, was also manifested in the interviews with the teachers. One of them phrased it in the following terms:

I have five of each gender, they play completely gender separate, [...] but then there are individuals who seek company with the opposite sex, and playing with them somehow suits them better, like Anna, she goes for the boys a bit, and it works well for her, then also Rafn, he goes for the girls, for the calmer games (Teacher Unnur).

One can judge from the teacher's words that she does not find children's gender division a fruitful structure, a point that is further emphasized when she claims:

But then sometimes good periods arrive, where a girl and a boy are playing together, but if a third person arrives, then conflicts are likely to take place, regardless of whether it is one lady or one boy, or, in a way, sometimes, the gender which is in minority ends up withdrawing (Teacher Unnur).

From the teachers' discussions in the meetings one could surmise that they consider the girls' games more advanced than the boys' games; one of the teachers said: "*The girls they obviously can – continue playing for very long but the boys are perhaps not as developed for it – well not everyone.*" The teachers claimed that the boys mostly play action games, as one teacher said:

Just rollicking around [...] in games with pillows, you know, jumping around and they are play-fighting and having fun with that [...] they are already destroying things at a very young age, build it and then destroy it" (Teachers-meeting; teachers who teach the three year olds).

The interviews additionally revealed that the teachers believed there was a difference in the subjects the sexes chose, Anna said: "*Girls are actually more active with projects – they think that's fancy – draw a lot and such. I think that is quite typical actually*" (Teacher Anna).

Not only are playschool teachers typically quick at allocating gender roles, they also provide their own justifications for those allocations. In this context, the studies of Annika Månsson (2000:156), Birgitta Odelfors (1996) and Browne (2004) should be mentioned. A vast majority of the preschool teachers in Browne's (2004:99) research believed there was a tangible difference between the genders, for instance, that boys were more "lively" and found sitting still more difficult. On the other hand, the teachers thought girls were more "active" in calmer activities, such as drawing and writing. The boys were more physical, the girls sensitive and organized, more motherly, they appeared to have a stronger sense for caring. Some contended that running was in the nature of boys. In light of the aforesaid, one can wonder whether the teachers believe that an individual born as a girl has by nature different qualities than someone born as a boy. Such a view is obviously opposed to Butler's (1990, 2004) ideas regarding how the individual is shaped, and shapes, sex and gender.

In the interviews, the teachers expressed that the genders played differently, and they chose different areas for play, although, this aside, little difference remained between them. For example one teacher claimed that: "*There are as many boys using the clay [...] they [the girls] are for example very interested in woodwork*" (Teacher Hulda). The conclusion being that clay is a "girlish" and woodworking a "boyish", a reinforcement of ideas based on gender essentialism. Here is also a connection to Habermas (1996) and communication; how the teachers communicate their ideas and thereby maintain the stereotypes of the genders, despite the fact that the genders mix in clay and woodwork. This view is further manifested in the teacher's claim that the girls were more interested in an area intended for role playing, the boys did not spend much time there. The boys were more inclined toward the construction area, where in fact role playing was also a possibility, or in the words

of one teacher: *“But they are more engaged in building and making traps, and “you have to jump over this”, and something in this vein, rather than the girls, who make houses and get mattresses and dolls”* (Teacher Hulda). Another teacher said: *“There is the girls’ strong point, mainly in the doll-corner. Yeah, they organize, playing at being mom”* (Teacher Lisa). Additionally, the teachers brought to light that boys were more disposed toward hero games than the girls: *“They are more interested in Spiderman and those hero games, but the girls less so”* (Teacher Unnur). Furthermore, according to the teachers, girls and boys played differently even within the same play area, and a teacher had the following to say regarding a water-game of a boy and a girl: *“She had the pot and was making dinner [...] he was spilling a bit and making coarse movements with the water the entire time”* (Teacher Linda).

The findings of Naima Browne (2004), Ylva Odenbring (2010) and Solveig Østrem (2008) bring to light traditional gender divisions between children, both in terms of the choice of friends, preschool areas and games. In Browne’s (2004:67-68) research, where preschool children were interviewed about their friends, it was revealed that girls typically mentioned girls, and boys named boys. The children appeared to form friendship groups divided by sex. Some children, on the other hand, choose both girls and boys – the findings showed that the children were conscious of their choices and they argued why they did not choose a girl/boy as a friend. Among other things, they expressed a disinterest in “boy’s games” / “girl’s games”. The results of Odenbring’s (2010) and Østrem’s (2008) research support the findings of Browne’s study, namely, that of the traditional division of sexes, both in choice of preschool areas and games. Browne (2004:74) contends that the preschool staff facilitates the stereotypes of the genders, and in Østrem’s research it was also underlined how these stereotypes were rarely challenged by the staff. They additionally showed that perspectives of gender equality did not score high on the staff’s list of priorities.

Despite the fact that the teachers mostly referred to the children in terms of two groups, girls and boys, as has been discussed above, they said that they could not perceive a difference in the way that the children applied their body; for example, the boys had equally developed as fine motor skills as the girls. According to Butler (1993) there is a difference in how gender is constructed from the perspective of the body and from the perspective of the mind. This is clear in this teacher’s words:

I can’t see any difference in way they work, not in the practical parts ... but on the other hand on the subjective side, as you heard, there were differing opinions on whether boys could wear skirts or dresses, some insist on the fact that boys can wear skirts, and are strongly for it, but it was mostly the girls that claimed that this not the case. This is a typical gender thing, maybe (Teacher Unnur).

In light of abovementioned research findings, one could argue that teachers often suffer from “gender blindness”, namely when the effects of gender are not scrutinized (Olofsson, 2007). The teachers do not seem to be aware of the fact that the traditional stereotypes of the genders are bound to the preschool community, and the teachers expedite the gender blindness, rather than undermining it. One could further claim that it is not simply a question of a lack of diversity, but also of certain unawareness that such a lack exists.

According to the teachers discussion about gender mainly took place when the children were working on projects, there the children discussed the topic of gender frequently, for instance, whether boys could wear skirts. Butler (1990, 2004) argues that individuals often play out their gender in concert with their biological sex, or in opposition to it.

The manifestation of the children's gender-roles in play was similar to what many studies have shown, such as Browne (2004), Nordvik's and More (2012), Odenbring (2010) Öksnes (2012) and Östrem (2008). The children protected the "girls' and boys' games" and "girls' and boys' play areas". For example, when Berglind and Alma (aged 5) were in the block-area, in which large holed blocks were gathered, and which is right by the doll-area. They had arranged a few blocks into a square and were role playing with dolls. Hannes (aged 5), walked over to them and asked if he could join the game. Alma answered immediately that he could not and further told him that "only girls were allowed". Hannes stood rooted to the spot for a while, and then replied, "you cannot only allow girls." Alma then asked Hannes to join the game. After a little while, he asked whether he could play a dog, to which the girls agreed. It is interesting that Hannes chose to become a dog, which denotes a lower position to the girls (animals are usually conceptualized as inferior to men). It can be assumed that the children were working within what Habermas (1996) calls the "lifeworld" and was discussed above. The children perform and play out life experiences relative to norms, and here power is constituted.

Before Hannes joined the game with the girls, he sought accomplices, i.e. he sought out Fannar (aged five), who was elsewhere in the room and told Fannar that if the latter would join him in becoming a dog, then he could also participate. Fannar agreed to this, but on the way, Hannes warned him: "though not a super-dog". The boys entered the block area, where Alma paced hurriedly back and forth around the area, clutching a box of lipstick, and asked Berglind whether she wanted pink or white lipstick. Berglind refused the lipstick. Alma put on the lipstick and exclaimed she was going to kiss, and chased the boys who both fled from her. Hannes said he was not in a kissing mood and ran away. Meanwhile, Berglind built using the blocks and claimed she was making a doghouse. She went over to the doll area and pulled out a duvet and a pillow from one of the beds, walked toward the block area, turned quickly around, and said: "a sleeping bag also", and then proceeded further into the doll area and picked up a blue sleeping bag for dolls. She then asked Hannes if he wanted a duvet and a pillow or a sleeping bag and a pillow. Hannes answered that he wanted neither. Helga (preschool teacher) entered the play area and Berglind said to her: "I offered Hannes a duvet and a pillow, but he didn't want them, then he will have to sleep on the blocks." Hannes lay in the fetus position on top of two blocks.

As the game proceeded, Berglind voiced her desire that "the spell" would be lifted from Hannes, and she told him, "you are not a dog like Fannar, you are just a person." At which Hannes began playing with Fannar, by going over to the doll area and picking up a teddy bear, and tossing it over to the block area, where Fannar was standing, and said "fetch". Fannar ran to fetch the teddy bear, bit it and crawled around with the teddy bear in his "jaws", over to Hannes, who took the bear, and then threw it again, to which Fannar responded in the same manner as before. Berglind, in the meantime, busied herself with making the beds and discussing with Alma how she loved Hannes, that she was very fond of him.

Hannes seeks to play with the girls, first, though, he is denied participation, in response to which he refers to norms/rules, i.e. "you cannot only allow girls". Berglind and Alma agree to his participation and offer him to choose what he wants to be. One can surmise that Hannes realizes that he is requesting participation within a "forbidden zone"; when he gets the opportunity of choosing, he decides to become a dog. Hannes then recruits an accomplice, by seeking out Fannar and offering him participation. Hannes also seems conscious of the fact that choosing to become a dog means entering a submissive position to the girls; Hannes points this position out to Fannar with the accompanying warning, "but not a super-dog".

In line with Butler's (2004, 1990) ideas, i.e. that the genders are constituted by way of performativity, it is interesting to view how the girls Berglind and Alma reflect gender attitudes in

their play with Hannes above. Both Berglind and Alma show Hannes attention, although in differing ways. Alma is romantic towards him and expresses a woman's beauty, when she puts on lipstick and attempts to kiss Hannes, who flees and claims that he is not in a "kissing-mood". Berglind expresses the role of care and love, by offering Hannes a duvet and a pillow, although Hannes prefers to sleep on the rough blocks, rather than accepting Berglind's caring gesture. Berglind reacts to this by rescuing Hannes from his spell of being a dog, and tells Alma that she is in love with Hannes. The children's play shows what Butler (2004) calls anticipations-related acts and which have been discussed above.

The children who worked on a sewing assignment discussed whether it was appropriate that boys wore dresses or skirts. Each had their own opinion on the matter, although the girls seemed more resolute than the boys in that the latter should not wear such clothes. The boys extended their arguments for them wearing dresses: Leo, one of the boys, said: "Well, in Scotland boys are born wearing a dress!" The girls unanimously rejected this assertion. Brynjar then advanced the following defense: "I saw on TV that they can wear quilts." The girls all laughed. The teacher then moved the discussion towards how clothes are worn during role playing games, and said: "When you go over to the doll area, kids, you try the clothes there don't you?" The girls exclaimed, with much eagerness, that they wore dresses. To which the teacher responded, "and you boys also put on the skirts?" Brynjar then answered, "boys can wear dresses [...] guys can be girls – while playing with dolls." Leo added, "boys can also be moms", and Brynjar, "and you know, girls can also play dad". Here is connection to Butler (2004, 1990) about that gender does not strictly concern what one "is", or what one "has", but rather refers to a norm and is performed.

The boys Leo and Brynjar engage in dialogue about gender-norms and we can say that they discuss "gender benders"; they transcend the traditional norms, when they say "boys can wear dresses [...] guys can be girls", "boys can also be moms", "and you know, girls can also play dad".

Four girls (aged 5) were role playing in the building area, they played out a wedding and the birth of a child. Klara, one of the girls, had placed a doll under her sweater, walked over to the researcher and said she was considering the name for the child, and then asked what the researcher thought on the subject – looked at the researcher and asked: "Should she be called Íris?" The researcher asked Klara if she knew it was going to be a girl. Klara claimed she knew, withdrew the doll from under her sweater, who had a plastic head, and torso made of cloth to which overalls with pink patterns on it had been attached. The researcher asks how she knows the baby will be a girl. Klara responds by grabbing the legs of the doll, pushing them apart, and says: "She doesn't have a penis, see, [points with finger to the area of genital organs] that's how I know she is a girl." Here, Klara defined the sex of the baby in terms of the masculine, i.e. that which does not have a penis is a girl. Within feminist psychoanalysis it has been discussed that the woman is specified using the criteria of the male; it is the woman's pelvic return from absence: A woman is the absence of man, she is missing the phallus. Furthermore, Butler (1993) consigns the penis, conventionally described as "real anatomy", to the domain of the imaginary. To clarify, it is also right to point out that in Icelandic the same concept is used as a term for men's genitals of all ages, but many terms are used for women's genitals, those terms are usually "pseudo concepts", such as "mouse", "private-place", "secret-place", in the society there is still shyness in regard to the name of women's genitals with its own name, vagina, and even certain stigma, but the same would not hesitate to say penis (men's genitals). Concerning this analysis, it may be so that Klara (aged 5) has not learned or is not comfortable using concepts describing women's genitals and instead of saying a word that she is uncomfortable with or does not have, grabs the obvious one, that is, "the doll has no penis".

This shyness about terms such as vagina is an interesting angle, as it calls for a discussion of how the power of language is used to silence ideas and affect behavior and even thinking. However, in this article there is no space to reflect further on those ideas.

Discussion

Let us now return to the initial questions: What set of views are to be found among the preschool teachers regarding the preschool activities of girls, on the one hand, and boys, on the other? How are gender manifestations of children disclosed in the preschool?

The answer is, briefly, that there was a strong tendency with the teachers toward categorizing the children into girls' and boys' "categories", and these norms directed the children toward dominant feminine and masculine norms. Some children did not fall under those headings, and a few teachers pointed those children in the direction of the "appropriate" norms. The findings reveal traditional gender divisions of the children both in the choice of friends, play areas and games. For example, certain symbols, such as colors, positions and contents of games, denoted "girling" and "boying". The girls kept watch over the divisions when the boys attempted to transgress the divisions, or when the boys intended to enter the "wrong zone".

The findings of this research, namely that preschool teachers believe there is a natural difference between the qualities of boys and girls, are consistent with previous Nordic research (Browne, 2004; Månsson, 2000; Odelfors, 1996; Odenbring, 2010; Østrem, 2008). One must wonder whether the teachers, by means of such views, actually maintain stereotypes regarding sex and gender, and directly facilitate the "girling" of the girls, and the "boying" of the boys. The preschool teachers, however, claimed that this was simply a question of traditional gender divisions between the children, both in the choice of friends, play areas and games. This normalization of prevailing discourse also supports previous findings (Browne, 2004; Østrem, 2008).

As has previously been elucidated, the authors' point of departure is that teachers' views figure as the central developmental features in their work (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Ekholm and Hedin, 1993; Jordan, 2004; Friðriksdóttir and Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2002; Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2007). The theoretical background of the research revolves around the idea that people's acts are largely determined by their self-perception and life-experiences (Outhwaite, (2005[1996]), and that for communication to succeed, people must have tacit knowledge of collective societal values. The communication in question then leads to a certain sense of belonging, both to institutions and particular groups, which constitutes people as individuals (Habermas, 1996). The main theoretical perspective of the research is a feminist one, drawing on Butler's ideas (2004, 1990), who advances a constructionist thesis that revolves around the ways in which sex and gender are performatively shaped: in other words that sex, gender and self-image are and historically conditioned (cf. Butler, 2004; Eidevald, 2009; Lenz Taguchi, 2004). These ideas are clearly borne out by our findings.

The research findings also disclose that the children reflected on the norms which dominated within their environment. They discussed for example whether boys were permitted to wear a dress. Most of the children understood their acts in light of the teachers' feminine or masculine norms, and as a consequence, one could claim that the children were minimally or insufficiently empowered, which again corresponds both with Butler's descriptive thesis and Habermas's normative thesis about the necessary preconditions for empowerment. A number of children reacted against dominant norms, however, for example when the girls played with the boys, and vice versa. One could say that the children had learned the "girl-and-boy values" of the preschool community, but some of the children made an attempt to widen the horizon of the prevailing norms. They, but not their teachers, thus took

on the role of agents of empowerment! In the preschool documented in this study, the children were divided into groups by age, not by sex, and thereby they had the opportunity to play with peers of both girls and boys. In this context, it should be noted that in 2012 there were 262 preschools in Iceland (Hagstofa Íslands, 2013); in at least 18 of which the children are divided by sex. There is still no Icelandic research available about children in preschools who fall outside the traditional classification of gender: females and males. However, this would make for a worthwhile research project, albeit one that cannot be pursued here.

This study shows how important it is that preschool teachers are aware of how children's gendering takes place and the preschool teachers' role in shaping it. In this study, the researcher searched for an approach that avoided "blindness" toward gender, for example, by reviewing the data from a feminist perspective. By scrutinizing the way in which the field notes were written, during the process of the inquiry, the researcher noticed that in her writing there appeared texts written in precisely the terms of the prevailing discourse. For example, "when Ragnar rushes across the hall, Hallveig comes floating from another direction...". Here, the researcher had summoned a traditional gender discourse which employs stereotypical terms in describing the movements and play of the children; the boy "rushes", and conversely, the girl "floats". This once again underlines Butler's point about the deeply rooted gender-specific stereotypes, which not even the researcher could fully eschew.

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