GENDER SEGREGATION IN PRE-ADOLESCENT PEER GROUPS AS A MATTER OF CLASS
Results from two German studies

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This study examines social class differences in the gender segregation of children and pre-adolescents and draws upon data from two recent German studies. Based on longitudinal quantitative data from a representative children's survey, the first analysis suggests that in comparison to children from upper-class families, lower-class children tend to remain longer in gender-heterogeneous peer groups, a major proportion of students continue to have opposite-sex friends and changes between same- and opposite-sex peers appear earlier. In two further sections, material from a reconstructive study of 10- to 12-year-old pre-adolescents is used to describe more in-depth reflections of children themselves on gender segregation as well as orientations that develop in same-sex peer groups in contrasting social classes.

During pre-adolescence, boys and girls split up into gender-homogeneous groups. This has been shown by international research in many parts of the world (La Freniere et al., 1984; Oswald, 1993; Thorne and Luria, 1986; Zinnecker and Strzoda, 1996). During the last two decades, the so-called 'two-world approach' has been complemented by studies focusing on the process of segregation in different settings, as well as on acts of border crossing between the sexes and types of interaction between boys and girls (Breidenstein and Kelle, 1998; Tervooren, 2006; Thorne, 1993). This primarily ethnographic research has pointed out that the period of late childhood is characterized by collective and interactively produced gender identities within groups of girls and boys (Helfferich, 1994; Maccoby, 1998; Thorne, 1993). During adolescence young people develop individualized concepts of gender which are based on dealing with body changes and the construction of a sexual identity (Flaake, 1990; Kolip, 1997; Thorne, 1993).

The importance of gender segregation and border crossing has been highlighted using different methodological frameworks. The segregation of girls and boys during the period of late childhood has been investigated mainly by a quantitative research approach and a psychologically oriented research

tradition on childhood (Attili et al., 1997; Chen et al., 1992; Harkness and Super, 1985; Killen et al., 2002). Contrary to this, work on processes of interaction between girls and boys during late childhood and early adolescence are based mainly on the qualitative approach of ethnographic observation and analysis (Eder et al., 1995; summarized in Pellegrin, 2004; Thorne, 1993).

However, most existing studies on this topic have been carried out in the preschool, primary or middle school context, which, on the one hand, obscures the situation within informal peer contexts, and, on the other hand, makes it hard to draw conclusions about the interdependence of the production of gender and other social categories, such as class or ethnicity. At the same time, a few investigations that focus on cultural and class differences question the universality of the two-world hypothesis and suggest different types of same-sex aggregation within peer groups and gender-role learning in diverse social contexts (Aydt and Corsaro, 2003; Durham, 1999; Harkness and Super, 1985).

As the findings of some studies indicate, the existence of high levels of gender inequality and strict gender typing lead to stronger gender segregation during childhood and early adolescence (Maccoby, 1990; Whiting and Edwards, 1988). Contrary to these, a cross-cultural investigation in four non-western countries (Munroe and Romney, 2006) does not confirm consistent culturally related gender differentiation and gender segregation in peer groups, but rather describes significant variations in the degree of same-sex aggregation in the cultures investigated. Earlier studies in various western and non-western settings also provide evidence for culturally indicated differences in the gender-related construction of peer groups during childhood (Corsaro, 1997; Goodwin, 1990, 1998; Kyratzis and Guo, 2001).

While plenty of studies have been carried out concerning the universality of the two-world hypothesis in diverse cultural and ethnic settings, up to now only a few investigations have focused on variations for social class. Thorne and Luria (1986) suggest that the transition to adolescence and therefore the disaggregation of same-sex peer groups appears at an earlier age in working-class than in middle- or upper-middle-class schools. Another cross-cultural study (Aydt and Corsaro, 2003) similarly found profound differences between African American children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and white middle- and upper-middle-class children in the US. At the same time, the authors also report differences between Italian and American preschoolers, which indicates that there occur cultural as well as class-related differences in the timeline of gender segregation. Thus, upper-middle-class children have been found to construct gender mainly through joking and discussion rather than through obvious borderwork found in a lower-class school. Even if there are indications of differences in gender segregation and play during childhood and early adolescence, the focus of investigation is still set predominantly on white middle-class children (Goodwin, 2001).

The present analysis attempts to overcome this limited perspective and is concerned with class differences related to gender segregation among pre-adolescent peer groups of German children. The analysis is based on two recent investigations using different methodologies: whereas one is a longitudinal survey of children between the ages of 8 and 13 (Betz et al., 2007), the other consists of a qualitative study of 10- to 12-year-old children and their peer groups (Krüger and Pfaff, 2008; Krüger et al., 2008a, 2008b). In a first step, based on the longitudinal quantitative data, this article describes the development of same- and opposite-sex friendships within and outside school differentiated by social class. The second step uses group discussions with peer groups of children from different social classes to draw attention to the diversity of gender roles pre-adolescents construct in daily interactions within various social contexts.

Methodology

The two different studies on which this article is based refer to a recent approach in the research of childhood, which understands children as active individuals who participate in the construction of their social environment and suggests a special importance of the social world of peer groups (Corsaro and Eder, 1990; Younniss and Smollar, 1998).

The Children Longitudinal Study was carried out by the German Youth Institute (DJI) in three waves of data collection – autumn 2002, spring 2004 and autumn 2005; its general goal was to examine conditions and factors of influence in the psychosocial development of children ages 8–13 and to evaluate risk factors for children's competence development (Alt, 2004). Therefore, in the first wave approximately 2200 children in two age cohorts as well as their parents were interviewed. In the second wave, nearly 2000 children again participated in the survey, and the third and final wave numbers around 1200 children (see Alt, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). The analysis in this article focuses on the children of the older cohort who were on average 8.6 years old at the time of the first, 10.0 years old at the second and 11.5 years old at the third wave. Among others, the questionnaire includes items on sociodemographic information, social networks, competence development, personality traits, school achievement and performance, leisure time preferences and institutional affiliation.

The analysis presented in this article focuses on the development of gendered peer group segregation between ages 8 and 12 in two segments of society, children from the upper and lower social classes. The aim of this investigation is to highlight the existence of differences in the organization of peer culture in the contrasting social settings of lower and upper class. Whether these differences are determined by class itself or by class-related living conditions, such as educational and cultural participation, or by social networks, is not the topic of this study. The analysis therefore asks

differentiated questions about the peer networks of children and indicators of socioeconomic status, and is mainly based on interval coefficients of variation carried out on the sample of around 500 children from the older cohort who participated in all three waves of the survey. Based on the earlier analysis of Traub (2005), the investigation uses three indicators. First, there are two criteria for the measurement of peer and friendship relations, developed by Traub (2005), based on a differentiated measure of the two. One indicates the size of the peer group based on the number of playmates ($M^1 = 5.77$, $SD^1 = 2.8$; $M^2 = 5.78$, $SD^2 = 2.8$; $M^3 = 5.50$, $SD^3 = 2.8$; range = 0–12), the other selects those peers that have been named as good friends by the child him or herself ($M^1 = 3.81$, $SD^1 = 2.7$; $M^2 = 4.3$, $SD^2 = 2.7$; $M^3 = 4.09$, $SD^3 = 2.8$; range = 0–12). The third indicator in the analysis is a five-level characterization of social class based on family income, qualifications and current job of the parents. This resulted in the following divisions: lower class (10.4 percent), lower middle class (26.2 percent), middle class (33.8 percent), upper middle class (19.3 percent) and upper class (10.5 percent); in the following calculations this indicator is used in a binary model contrasting the two poles.

For further analysis the article draws on qualitative data from the longitudinal reconstructive study 'Peer Groups and Selection Processes within the Educational System', which investigates the impact of formal and informal peer groups on the school career of children and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 15. The multi-method design of this project includes a preliminary quantitative study of 200 students at five different types of schools in the German educational system, narrative interviews with about 60 children, as well as ethnographic fieldwork and group discussions with 10 children and their peer groups from different social backgrounds.[1,2] The analysis in this article only refers to the group discussions, collected during the first wave of the project in 2006 when the children were between 10 and 12 years old and seeks to reconstruct the practices and orientations of the pre-adolescents with regard to gender segregation and gender roles. Therefore selected segments of the children's discourses are analysed employing the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2003; Bohnsack and Nohl, 2003; Pfaff et al., 2010) which aims to reconstruct the implicit or tacit knowledge that underlies everyday practice and orientates habitualized actions independently from subjective intentions and motives (see, for example, Bohnsack, 2003). The method of documentary interpretation consists of four working steps, beginning with a thematic overview of the material, the interpretation and classification of relevant topics, the decodification of orientation frames based on the analysis of the discursive construction of topics and finally the comparative analysis, which highlights the specifics of a certain group (for further details on the procedure, see Bohnsack, 2009). The discussion in this article comprises the last two steps of the analysis.

The use of multi-methods allows for complementary approaches to the scientific understanding of social reality (Bryman 1992; Fielding and Fielding 1986); whereas in the following analysis, the survey data supply general information about the interrelationship of same-sex aggregation among children's peer groups from a limited developmental perspective, the reconstructions of qualitative material are used to give an insight into the interactive constitution of gender within pre-adolescent same-sex peer groups in different socioeconomic contexts.

Gender segregation in children's peer groups – developmental and class effects

Concerning the development of gender segregation, there are a variety of studies indicating that the phenomenon is already visible by the age of 3 (Jacklin and Maccoby, 1978; Wassermann and Stern, 1978), but the peak of the selection of same-sex friends and playmates can be observed between middle childhood and early adolescence (Maccoby, 1990; Thorne and Luria, 1986). As the German Children Longitudinal Study includes data from children between the ages of 8 and 13, it focuses exactly on this age span. Thus, the following analysis explores class differences in same-sex affiliations in friends and peer networks of children between these ages. To achieve a maximum contrast only the data from the upper- and lower-class children are used.

In a first analysis of friendship patterns of children based on the German Children Longitudinal Study, Traub (2005) made a differentiation between peer networks, which includes all children the respondents named during the interview, and friends, which include only peers being named as 'good friends'. The differentiation has been verified by the survey results itself: friends are attributed to offer more support, and a relation between a higher number of friends and less problem behaviour, as well as more openness and a positive self-image, has been indicated. On average, the peer network of children included five to six children in all waves, while the number of good friends was around three or four. Concerning peer network and friendship, Traub (2005) showed (based on the data of the first wave of investigation) that children who live in conditions of poverty (defined as earning 40 percent or below of the average family income) have a significantly lower number of peers and friends and suffer a higher risk of loneliness. Class indicators, however, only show effects in the third wave of the longitudinal survey, where lower-class children on average have one friend less and a slightly smaller peer network than upper-class children.

In relation to the gender composition of the peer and friendship networks, at a first glance class seems to have only a limited effect, but some tendencies are suggested (see Table 1). Overall, children's peer as well as friendship networks are rarely fully segregated according to gender. At all points of investigation and across all social groups, around 20 percent of the children

report having either mixed or other-sex friends (see also Thorne, 1993; Traub, 2005). In general, for both groups selected, concerning the peer network a trend towards same-sex affiliations can be observed between the first and second wave. In contrast, the network of friends is more strongly organized in same-sex affiliations at all survey points and seems to remain stable over time. Concerning both indicators, peers and friends, upper-class children seem to be organized more often in same-sex networks than are children from the lower class. Mixed or other-sex friendships and peer relations appear on average 10 percent more often for lower- than for upper-class students. This difference remains stable over the whole period of investigation, but reaches significance only at certain points.

Questioned about their peer networks at the age of 8 or 9, more than half of the lower-class children report having mixed or other-sex peers, while for upper-class children this is only one-third. This tendency also exists with regard to friends and in relation to both indicators at the second point of investigation. However, a much stronger effect can be found at the third point of investigation, when the difference between upper- and lower-class children in the gender-related composition of both their peers and friends appears to be significant. While nearly 40 percent of the lower-class students report mixed or other-sex peers and one-third of them names other-sex friends, this is true for only one-quarter of the upper-class students with regard to peer network and only 10 percent with regard to other-sex friends.

Overall, these first results support the hypothesis of Thorne and Luria (1986), according to which, lower-class children seem to open their peer and friendship networks for other-sex contemporaries earlier than upper-class children. At the same time, the findings suggest that lower-class students enter the separate worlds of gender later than their upper-class peers. These findings can be confirmed looking at the development over time (see Table 2).

Table 1 Gender-related composition of peer and friendship networks for lower- and upper-class children

Indicator and wave	Upper-class children (N = 65)		Lower-class children (N = 65)		Significance (Fisher, exact, one way)
	Same-sex	Mixed or other-sex	Same-sex	Mixed or other-sex	
Peer network					
Wave 1	64%	36%	47%	53%	0.042
Wave 2	77%	23%	64%	36%	n.s.
Wave 3	76%	24%	61%	39%	0.004
Friends network					
Wave 1	78%	22%	67%	33%	n.s.
Wave 2	80%	20%	65%	35%	n.s.
Wave 3	91%	9%	68%	32%	0.011

Source: DJI German Children Longitudinal Study; own calculations.

Table 2 Development of gender-related composition of peer and friendship networks for lower- and upper-class children

Indicator and wave	Upper-class children (N = 65)		Lower-class children (N = 65)	
	Changes towards same-sex	Changes towards mixed or other-sex	Changes towards same-sex	Changes towards mixed or other-sex
Peer network				
Wave 1 to 2	17%	7%	30%	14%
Wave 2 to 3	15%	5%	15%	17%
Friends network				
Wave 1 to 2	11%	9%	23%	20%
Wave 2 to 3	10%	0%	16%	5%

Source: DJI German Children Longitudinal Study; own calculations.

While in most cases the gender-related composition of the social networks of contemporaries remains constant and does not change significantly between the ages of 8 and 12, where development happens it can be described as process of gender homogenization.

For upper-class students the number of changes towards a more same- or other-sex structure of the peer and friendship groups remains low in general and is characterized by a tendency of homogenization. This process is even stronger between the first two points of investigation for lower-class children, who as indicated earlier, remain longer in gender-heterogeneous peer groups and show a strong tendency towards the development of same-sex peer networks during the first survey period. At the same time, both peer and friendship networks of lower- class children show higher rates of hetero-genization at all points of investigation.

Summarizing these few descriptive quantitative results, it can be stated that gender segregation in the peer groups of children seems to indicate an effect of social class. The results suggest that upper- and lower-class social contexts provide different timelines and dimensions of same-sex affiliation in late childhood and early adolescence. It can be hypothesized that lower-class children remain longer in gender-heterogeneous peer groups, a major proportion of them continue to have opposite-sex friends, and the changes between same- and opposite-sex peers are more frequent than in the upper-class group. These first descriptive results can be validated by further investigations and determination analysis.

The meaning of the other – children's own reflections on the phenomenon

Differences in the development and dimension of gender segregation lead to the assumption that the process itself might have different meanings for children from various social classes. Based on the qualitative material from

a reconstructive study, this section presents an insight into children's own images of and orientations towards the other sex in the context of same-sex peer groups. The analysis mainly draws on material from group discussions with selected children and their friends, from various social backgrounds. Thereby, upper- and lower-class affiliations are recorded with regard to the educational background of the children, due to the fact that there is a strong relation between social background and the distribution of children among the various school types of the highly segregated German school system (see Prenzel et al., 2007: S. 18).

Thorne (1993) states that most explanations of gender separation in late childhood and early adolescence draw more on individual motivation or social function than on group mechanisms or interactional processing. Instead, her study suggests that by establishing gender-related actions in various forms (see also Breidenstein and Kelle, 1998), such as same-sex friendships and types of borderwork, children create a group-related sense of their own and the other sex. While most ethnographic research on the topic is based on the observation of interaction and behaviour and therefore disregards respondents' views of themselves and others, the following analysis explores the perspective of children with regard to the opposite sex.

Most of the groups investigated in the project 'Peer Groups and Selection Processes within the Educational System' had been selected by the children themselves, and were gender-homogeneous in composition. During the group discussions, the teenagers expressed their meanings of friendship, spare-time activities and school, and, without being questioned, images of their own and the opposite sex (see also Pfaff et al., 2008). First of all, children often reflected on the phenomenon of gender separation in their discussions, although, in most cases, same-sex affiliation was seen as a natural behaviour:

> Well, what I mean is . . . that only boys with boys and girls with girls, that's just nature. (Tim, age 11, Gymnasium)[3]

As stated in other studies in the field, deviations from this norm in most cases lead to the exclusion of children from peer groups, or represent, if tolerated, a high social status of a particular child (Oswald, 1993; Thorne, 1993). At the same time, violations of gender-related peer homogeneity are used by children to legitimate exclusions of contemporaries from play. This is usually also true for gender-untypical behaviour (Eder et al., 1995; Renold, 2004, 2005). While these aspects are widely described in existing studies on gender segregation, there is less work done on the children's own perspectives on this phenomenon.

Generally, description of contacts with the opposite sex seems to occur in the form of evaluation of the other, which, in most cases, goes along with the depreciation of a certain behaviour or individual members of the opposite sex, and can be found in all social groups investigated. One mode that appears quite often among both feminine and masculine peer groups is the reprobation of

the other's particular behaviour. In this context, girls' groups refer especially to boys' offensive behaviour towards them:

*A*f*:* after school ehm we also play football with the others (.) actually this is
*S*f: also with boys, actually they are quiet nice if we join the game. they don't say
　　no go away
*I*f:　　　　　　　　　　　　hm
*A*f:　　　　　　　　　　　　you are a girl you can't play
*S*f:　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　they don't say so
*I*f:　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　hm
*M*f: but in our class the boys they really don't know how to behave
*I*f:　hm-m?
*M*f: well they often say bad words to us.
　　　　　　　　(Aylin and friends, age 11–13 years, Hauptschule)

In their discourse, the girls construct a contrast between boys in different contexts. While the boys outside school act as playmates, those in school behave aggressively towards the girls and insult them. The way the girls present the whole story shows that their play with the boys depends on the will and friendliness of the boys. Even if there is cooperative play for these girls it is based on a hierarchic construction of gender, where boys, no matter if in a insulting or friendly way, dominate the interaction. Boys with whom one can share a game are unusual, and this is against a background of the general depreciation and denial of the girls' abilities on the part of the boys. From their point of view, the boys dominate shared games whether by letting them to join in or behaving in an insulting and aggressive way – both forms of action leave the girls passive and receptive. Even if the depreciation of boys by girls can be found in most of our material, the evident passivity seems to be an effect of Aylin and her friends' social background; they live in a milieu of second-generation migrants in urban areas and attend a Hauptschule. Even so, the perspective of Aylin's classmate René and his friend appears very similar:

*R*m: Or there is always this little girl she really gets on my nerves
*B*m: Well ok ok actually she's ok
*R*m:　　　　　　　right (4)
*B*m: Nina-Paula
*R*m: she really gets on my nerves
*B*m:　　　　　　　　　　well actually (*laughs*) right (*laughs*)
*R*m: and then she runs there no (2) and says hey do you maybe have(?) ey girl shut
　　up or shell I beat you a bruise in your cakehole (?) no no no (allright)
*B*m: but she always talks big
*R*m:　　　　　　　　yeah true
*B*m:　　　　　　　　　because she thinks I'm afraid of a 14-year-old
　　　　　　　　(René and friend, ages 10 and 13, Hauptschule)

The girl being discussed is part of the handball team and seeks equal participation during the game which the boys respond to with the threat of violence and aggression. Her proactive and straightforward manner towards

them is constructed not as her right to behave in the same manner as them but in the chance that the girl will call on an older boy to protect her. This type of strong hierarchical structure can only be found in the discussions among the working-class children attending Hauptschules. Even if there are exceptions, for instance in the case of a group of rural girls who show somewhat equally aggressive behaviour towards the boys, the construction of male dominance over the female children is very obvious in the lower social class.

A different type of depreciation of members of the other sex can be found in the groups of girls from an elite Gymnasium:

Interviewer: And with boys you don't really want to have something to do
Mf: Nooo
               (*laughs*)
Bf: No,
               not necessarily, (*laughs*) about the boys in our class we just laugh
               (*laughs*)
Mf: they only played football the whole time nothing else (.) yesterday at
               the bonfire lit on easter they just played football with small kids.
Bf: No this was no small child this was Fritz (*laughs*) (3)
Mf: (*laughs*) (3) (*laughs*) he is (*laughs*) he is just as big (.) he is just as tall
               and is in the fourth grade
Bf: Well I thought who I thought who is this?
Mf: Well I thought this as well the
               whole time
Bf: and then hey, this might be Fritz
                              (Melanie and friend, age 11, Gymnasium)

Melanie and her friend confirm the suggestive question of the interviewer (which is a reaction on the girls' preceding discourse, which hasn't included discussion of boys as playmates up to this point), and bring up two arguments for keeping their distance from the boys. On the one hand, boys serve more as a topic for conversations and derision than as interactive partners. On the other hand, the girls underline differences in leisure practices between the genders (Thorne, 1993), which makes interaction impossible. If boys 'only play football the whole time' they are not considered worthy playmates. This attribution is associated with a diagnosis of boys being developmentally backward. Fritz, a boy in the fourth grade they could not identify at first, is made fun of – here the girls demonstrate their habit of laughing about boys.

Depreciation of the other sex can be especially found in girls' groups of all social backgrounds, but emerges in different forms. Girls from higher social backgrounds seem to attribute developmental or cognitive deficits to boys, as the following comparison of school achievements indicates:

Tf: Remember the card Mrs Thingey made for us where the boys always had 26
     mistakes and the girls had (*laughs*) 13 mistakes (*laughs*) and now it is that the
     girls (.) ehm (.) have around three or four mistakes and the boys meanwhile
     have how much did Max have? Andy had 14 I know
Nw: he had 16 or so
                      (Nadja and school friends, age 10 and 11, Gymnasium)

From the girls' perspective, the boys take longer to learn to write competently, which also makes them unappealing for interaction and friendship – especially in a social context where intelligence and qualifications are valued in a particular way. This type of depreciation is strongly related to the educational context the girls are embedded in and is not observed in the comments of girls from the Hauptschules, where, instead, children construct hierarchical, aggressive gender relations.

First pairings – views on the way to adolescence

Relevant ethnographic studies describe peer-mediated pairings, among others such as bodily changes or youth cultural affiliations, as a first step towards the breakup of the same-sex affiliations typical of middle and late childhood (e.g. Eder et al., 1995; Thorne, 1993). Relatedly, Aydt and Corsaro (2003) find differences in children's imaginations and practices concerning pairing, which suggest that upper-class children already show a high fascination for hegemonic relationship, family values and practices, while lower-class children still practise distinctive borderwork.

This section of the article further investigates these differences between children from different social backgrounds. Again, the analysis is based on statements and discourses from the group discussions with the children and their friends and therefore focuses more on the children's own perspectives and interactive constructions of the phenomenon of early heterosexual pairings rather than on their observable behaviour.

First of all, in nearly all the groups investigated, children of the opposite sex are an important topic of conversation. The following discourse illustrates this importance:

> *J*f: then if we s if we stay at someone's place over night we talk about boys
> *M*f: yes
> *J*f: and how we best win them round
> *M*f   yes
> *J*f: especially we talk every day just about boys [...] we must try to get Anna and
>   someone and Rolf together and me and Marcus
> *M*f: and we have a competition me and
>   Anna currently
> > (Anna and friends, age 10–11, Hauptschule)

The girls agree that boys are their most important conversation topic and this is orientated around strategies for the development of relationships. The shared effort is to procure each other one of the most popular boys, which, on one hand, appears to be a common aim and, on the other, creates a competition between the friends about who succeeds first. Another example from the same group illustrates this further:

> *A*f: One time when I then (.) well I was I went with Ania, Marlena and ehm Marta
>   we went all three and made a bet, yes, ehm who gets Benni and well, yes, oh

> well and I just wanted to trade on this I wanted to prove Janine that I can do
> something. at the end I got Benni. then she was bitchy
>
> *J*f: eh eh first he wanted to
> have me and because I said well take Anna
> *A*f: oh well
> *J*f: yes you owe me that all.
>
> <div align="center">(Anna and friend, age 10–11, Hauptschule)</div>

For the two friends, finding a boyfriend is a challenge. It is used as a game on the way to adolescence to prove one's own development and abilities versus the others. In the case of this group of girls, their friendship seems to be a stabilizing factor, guaranteeing a continuity of the personal network and giving rise to reflection on their own behaviour, as well on the limited importance of relationships with boys per se. A very similar attitude is shown by two boys from the lower social class talking about their girlfriends:

> *R*m: I got to know mine at the fun fair. last fun fair. why are you laughing?
> *B*m: I did not laugh
> *R*m: ehm when I break off with the one the other affect- was affected by me
> *B*m: has been affected
> *R*m: and since this time I'm together with her [...]
> *B*m: well we also met at the fun fair because actually she had been a friend of
>   René's girl friend before
>
> <div align="center">(René and friend, age 10 and 13, Hauptschule)</div>

Similar to the girls' construction of pairing as a game and competition, René and his friend don't show an intense interest in the girls they are going out with but legitimize their relationships mainly for practical reasons.

Furthermore, contrary to the traditional hierarchical gender relations that were discussed earlier with regard to children from the lower social class, these quotes suggest stronger action on the part of the females in the development of relations between girls and boys. The girls describe themselves as the proactive partner and planner of their relationships, while the boys also construct the girls as having chosen them. The developmental maturity the girls from the upper class call on to depreciate their male classmates seems to appear an unquestioned female pattern of behaviour in this lower-class context too.

Similar descriptions with regard to pairing up are heard among the upper-class children. The girls are equally described as being the initiators of relationships between girls and boys. But, nevertheless, the construction of pairing has another connotation:

> *F*f: Actually Nadja why are you talking about Tim all the time (*laughs*)?
> *Several girls:*   (*laughs*)
> *P*f: Well, you know she is (*whispering*)
> *F*f: ah yes
> *N*f: Funny (2) I thought Patricia
> *Several girls:*   No
> *F*f: No Patricia now is together with K with C
> *T*f: No Patricia likes playing football but (.) exactly
> *N*f: I see.

*F*f: [*to Patricia*] well, best you also take Kevin at the same time or (.) no I'll not
    say it
*T*f: I do not change so often
*P*f: two at the same time that's indeed interesting
*O*f: or
    Timothy?
                (Nadja and friends from the strings group, age 10 and 11, Gymnasium)

First of all, the girls talk about each other being in love with a boy, which appears to be a construction of pairing, as one of the first steps to adolescence, which is more about personal feelings than about the realization of a relationship. Also, this attribution is connected to a feeling of shame (as the laughing and whispering suggests), which indicates that it is not as familiar for these girls as it is for the lower-class girls we analysed earlier. Furthermore, the construction of Patricia and Kevin being together is framed as a shared liking for the same sport, which at the same time questions the seriousness of their relationship, as does the hint to the friend to take another boyfriend at the same time. However, the seriousness of this suggestion, which seems to characterize the early pairings of the lower-class children in this context, is dubious for two reasons: on one hand a moral statement is made ('I do not change so often'), on the other hand, in the curiosity shown by Patricia herself ('that's indeed interesting'). Both objections suggest that in this context it seems to be more important for the girls to demonstrate a certain feeling for one special boy than to just realize a relationship. The same construction of unambiguity of relationships between girls and boys can be seen in the following discourse between a group of boys:

*T*m: Anna and Maximilian (4) […] are together now (.) since
*A*m: four da- no wait
*T*m: since a week
*A*m: no
*T*m: yes
*B*m: yes, since a week
*A*m: six days   since six school days
*B*m: one week   since one week (2) Maximilian told me that he got
    letters from Anna at the weekend
*T*m: via snake mail […]
*B*m: on friday at the bowling he got the first one from Julia (*laughs*) we saw that all
    exactly (*laughs*)
                        (Tim and friends, age 10 and 11, Gymnasium)

Arguing about the exact time their two classmates have been a couple, the boys make it clear that the peer group is very carefully observing the process of beginning relationships between girls and boys. At the same time, this is orchestrated by the girl as a public process, everybody could see her first step. The final realization of the relationship is marked by the handover of the letter.

Thereby, we can see similarities as well as differences in the concepts and orientations of children from lower- and upper-class families and in

contrasting educational contexts. Children of both social contexts have in common an understanding of the first pairing and being in love as important steps to adolescence. Similar as well is the construction of girls as taking the active part and being the initiator of relationships between boys and girls. Differences appear especially on the level of the general construction and organization of pairing and being in love. For the lower-class children the fact of simply having a relationship seems to be more important than the particular partner or the associated feelings, and the realization of the relationship is treated like a kind of game or competition. For upper-class children, however, the game consists of the attribution of the feeling of being in love or in the public setting of these feelings.

That the timeline of the realization of contacts with the opposite sex must be understood as a social question can finally be underpinned by the orientations of a girl whose family are Muslim immigrants:

> I also had to sit next to a boy once because there came some people to us from the eight grade which had had detention in our class very early and there I had to sit next to eh a boy (.) there they said well you are together with him and this boy (.) because you sit next to him all the time already two hours or so [*breathes*] well this I think is really mean too because they know that I just have to sit there for some hours because others were added to the class. (Aylin and friends, 10–13 years, Hauptschule)

Unlike the other girls and boys, for which a relationship, as well as an attribution of being in love or a pair, is not a problem at all but rather a complement to their development, for this girl the attribution appears to be an insult that questions her honour and respect. The physical contact of being made to sit next to each other is constructed as a danger to their good school record and beyond.

Discussion

Even if gender segregation seems to be a phenomenon that occurs in most societies, research meanwhile has exposed some significant cultural differences (e.g. Aydt and Corsaro, 2003; Munroe and Romney, 2006). At the same time, it is obvious that also within societies there are differences in the impact and meaning of same-sex affiliation in middle and late childhood. This article has investigated class differences in the appearance and interpretation of gender segregation as well as in the orientations towards first pairings as an important barrier to adolescence.

Summarizing the results of two empirical investigations with samples of German children it can be assumed that social class makes a difference concerning the occurrence as well as the configuration of gender segregation and interaction with the opposite sex during pre-adolescence.

As the brief descriptive quantitative analysis suggests, lower-class children enter gendered worlds of peers later and leave them earlier than upper-class children. Also, the extent of gender separation in the lower class, where a

greater mobility between same, mixed and other-sex friends and peers appears during late childhood, never reaches the same extent of segregation found among upper-class children. These results, however, have to be proven by more elaborate statistical analysis, taking into account the relevance of other background variables on the relation between class and gender segregation within peer cultures. Even if the social function of gender separation during childhood clearly remains the same within all societies where this phenomenon can be observed, the qualitative findings show that the process itself seems to be associated with different meanings for different social groups. The findings show constructions of traditional gender-related hierarchies between girls and boys in lower-class peer contexts where the first pairing seems to be understood as a developmental advantage and a game on the way to adolescence. Contrary to this, upper-class girls appear to be deprecate their male contemporaries in relation to leisure time activities and physical and cognitive development and construct the first pairing in the sense of being more advanced emotionally. Concerning the first relationships between boys and girls, in particular, there also appear huge similarities which indicate that in pre-adolescence, girls are seen as the initiators of first pairings and that the involvement in an early relationship is understood as a sign of personal development. But even these class-independent significances of gender relations can be reconstructed as a question of the social context – in a different cultural or religious ambiance there might be contrary interpretations.

These differences should be the topic of further investigation if research on childhood, youth and gender seeks to understand different gender relations in different segments of society and their interactive production in childhood and early youth. In particular, cross-cultural research has to be aware of the diverse meanings and forms of gender-related peer segregation in pre-adolescence and beyond. Furthermore, childhood research in general has to overcome the focus on white middle-class children and instead gain aware-ness of social and cultural differences within societies studied. This means including children from different social classes as well as those from a minority background and not simply to investigate them in special studies focusing on certain advantaged or disadvantaged social groups.

Last but not least, school and other pedagogic institutions should be aware of the special significance and organization of gender-related segregation in peer cultures in order to avoid compromising individual children in front of others as well as to support those who are victims of discrimination and social exclusion because of gender-related norms and behaviour.

Notes

1.	For detailed description of the German school system see, for example, Marsh et al. (2001). Our investigation took place in grade 5, when the children were already separated into different educational careers. Thus, the data collection included a high level school

(*Gymnasium*), which is the equivalent of a grammar school; a compulsory school, which includes and integrates all different educational levels (*Gesamtschule*); a secondary modern school (*Sekundarschule*); and the low level extended elementary school (*Hauptschule*), which tends towards more vocational eductaion. To avoid unnecessary simplifications the following presentation uses the German terms.

2. The study led by Heinz-Hermann Krüger is based on financing of the German Research Foundation (DFG) and is carried out at the Center of Teacher and School Research (ZSB) at Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg. For detailed information and results on the different children see the contributions in Krüger et al. (2008); for the analytical framework and methods used in the study, see Krüger and Pfaff (2008).

3. The German extracts have been translated by the author. The speakers are identified by capital initials, and a small f or m to indicate their gender. The following transcript conventions are used: pauses are represented by number of seconds within parentheses e.g. (2); where text is indented, this indicates overlapping speech; laughter, incomprehensible or inaudible speech is written within parentheses; and a cut in the extract is indicated by […]. For a detailed description of the children and their groups, see Krüger et al. (2008a).

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