

research and in our lives. We have written this account of gender from a broadly feminist perspective. As we understand that perspective, the basic capabilities, rights, and responsibilities of women and men are far less different than is commonly thought. At the same time, that perspective also suggests that the social treatment of women and men, and thus their experiences and their own and others' expectations for them, is far more different than is usually assumed. In this book we offer evidence that these differences in what happens to women and to men derive in considerable measure from people's beliefs about sexual difference, their interpretations of its significance, and their reliance on those beliefs and interpretations to justify the unequal treatment of women and men.

Learning to be gendered

Dichotomous beginnings: It's a boy! It's a girl!

In the famous words of Simone de Beauvoir, "Women are not born, they are made." The same is true of men. The making of a man or a woman is a never-ending process that begins before birth – from the moment someone begins to wonder if the pending child will be a boy or a girl. And the ritual announcement at birth that it is in fact one or the other instantly transforms an "it" into a "he" or a "she" (Butler 1993), standardly assigning it to a lifetime as a male or as a female.⁶ This attribution is further made public and lasting through the linguistic event of naming. To name a baby *Mary* is to do something that makes it easy for a wide range of English speakers to maintain the initial "girl" attribution. In English-speaking societies, not all names are sex-exclusive (e.g. *Chris*, *Kim*, *Pat*), and sometimes names change their gender classification. For example, *Evelyn* was available as a male name in Britain long after it had become an exclusively female name in America, and *Whitney*, once exclusively a surname or a male first name in America, is now bestowed on baby girls. In some times and places, the state or religious institutions disallow sex-ambiguous given names. Finland, for example, has lists of legitimate female and legitimate male names that must be consulted before the baby's name becomes official. Thus the dichotomy of male and female is the ground upon which we build selves from the moment of birth. These early linguistic acts set

⁶ Nowadays, with the possibility of having this information before birth, wanting to know in advance or not wanting to know can become ideologically charged. Either way, the sex of the child is frequently as great a preoccupation as its health.

353

Cherif Renclope & Sally Wic Connell - *Gender, Language & Society*, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 15-25.

up a baby for life, launching a gradual process of learning to be a boy or a girl, a man or a woman, and to see all others as boys or girls, men or women as well. There are currently no other legitimate ways to think about ourselves and others – and we will be expected to pattern all kinds of things about ourselves as a function of that initial dichotomy. In the beginning, adults will do the child's gender work, treating it as a boy or as a girl, and interpreting its every move as that of a boy or of a girl. Then over the years, the child will learn to take over its part of the process, doing its own gender work and learning to support the gender work of others. The first thing people want to know about a baby is its sex, and convention provides a myriad of props to reduce the necessity of asking – and it becomes more and more important, as the child develops, not to have to ask. At birth, many hospital nurseries provide pink caps for girls and blue caps for boys, or in other ways provide some visual sign of the sex that has been attributed to the baby. While this may seem quite natural to members of the society, in fact this color coding points out no difference that has any bearing on the medical treatment of the infants. Go into a store in the US to buy a present for a newborn baby, and you will immediately be asked "boy or girl?" If the reply is "I don't know" or, worse, "I don't care," sales personnel are often perplexed. Overalls for a girl may be OK (though they are "best" if pink or flowered or in some other way marked as "feminine"), but gender liberalism goes only so far. You are unlikely to buy overalls with vehicles printed on them for a girl, and even more reluctant to buy a frilly dress with puffed sleeves or pink flowered overalls for a boy. And if you're buying clothing for a baby whose sex you do not know, sales people are likely to counsel you to stick with something that's plain yellow or green or white. Colors are so integral to our way of thinking about gender that gender attributions have bled into our view of the colors, so that people tend to believe that pink is a more "delicate" color than blue. This is a prime example of the naturalization of what is in fact an arbitrary sign. In America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) reports, blue was favored for girls and bright pink for boys. If gender flowed naturally from sex, one might expect the world to sit back and simply allow the baby to become male or female. But in fact, sex determination sets the stage for a lifelong process of gendering, as the child becomes, and learns how to be, male or female. Names and clothing are just a small part of the symbolic resources used to support a consistent ongoing gender attribution even when children are clothed. That we can speak of a child growing up as a girl or as a boy suggests that initial sex attribution is far more than just a simple

observation of a physical characteristic. *Being a girl or being a boy* is not a stable state but an ongoing accomplishment, something that is actively done both by the individual so categorized and by those who interact with it in the various communities to which it belongs. The newborn initially depends on others to do its gender, and they come through in many different ways, not just as individuals but as part of socially structured communities that link individuals to social institutions and cultural ideologies. It is perhaps at this early life stage that it is clearest that gender is a collaborative affair – that one must learn to perform as a male or a female, and that these performances require support from one's surroundings.

Indeed, we do not know how to interact with another human being (or often members of other species), or how to judge them and talk about them, unless we can attribute a gender to them. Gender is so deeply engrained in our social practice, in our understanding of ourselves and of others, that we almost cannot put one foot in front of the other without taking gender into consideration. Although most of us rarely notice this overtly in everyday life, most of our interactions are colored by our performance of our own gender, and by our attribution of gender to others.

From infancy, male and female children are interpreted differently, and interacted with differently. Experimental evidence suggests that adults' perceptions of babies are affected by their beliefs about the babies' sex. Condy and Condy (1976) found that adults watching a film of a crying infant were more likely to hear the cry as angry if they believed the infant was a boy, and as plaintive or fearful if they believed the infant was a girl. In a similar experiment, adults judged a 24-hour-old baby as bigger if they believed it to be a boy, and finer-featured if they believed it to be a girl (Rubin, Provenzano and Luria 1974). Such judgments then enter into the way people interact with infants and small children. People handle infants more gently when they believe them to be female, more playfully when they believe them to be male.

And they talk to them differently. Parents use more diminutives (*kitty, doggie*) when speaking to girls than to boys (Gleason et al. 1994), they use more inner state words (*happy, sad*) when speaking to girls (Ely et al. 1995). They use more direct prohibitives (*don't do that!*) and more emphatic prohibitives (*no! no! no!*) to boys than to girls (Bellinger and Gleason 1982). Perhaps, one might suggest, the boys need more prohibitions because they tend to misbehave more than the girls. But Bellinger and Gleason found this pattern to be independent of the actual nature of the children's activity, suggesting that the adults and

their beliefs about sex difference are far more important here than the children's behavior.

With differential treatment, boys and girls eventually learn to be different. Apparently, male and female infants cry the same amount (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974), but as they mature, boys cry less and less. There is some evidence that this difference emerges primarily from differential adult response to the crying. Qualitative differences in behavior come about in the same way. A study of thirteen-month-old children in day care (Fagot et al. 1985) showed that teachers responded to girls when they talked, babbled, or gestured, while they responded to boys when they whined, screamed, or demanded physical attention. Nine to eleven months later, the same girls talked more than the boys, and the boys whined, screamed, and demanded attention more than the girls. Children's eventual behavior, which seems to look at least statistically different across the sexes, is the product of adults' differentially different responses to ways of acting that are in many (possibly most) cases very similar indeed. The kids do indeed learn to "do" gender for themselves, to produce sex-differentiated behavior – although even with considerable differential treatment they do not end up with dichotomizing behavioral patterns.

Voice, which we have already mentioned, provides a dramatic example of children's coming to perform gender. At the ages of four to five years, in spite of their identical vocal apparatus, girls and boys begin to differentiate the fundamental frequency of their speaking voice. Boys tend to round and extend their lips, lengthening the vocal tract, whereas girls are tending to spread their lips (with smiles, for example), shortening the vocal tract. Girls are raising their pitches, boys lowering theirs. It may well be that adults are more likely to speak to girls in a high-pitched voice. It may be that they reward boys and girls for differential voice productions. It may also be that children simply observe this difference in older people, or that their differential participation in games (for example play-acting) calls for different voice productions. Elaine Andersen (1990, pp. 24–25), for example, shows that children use high pitch when using baby talk or "teacher register" in role play. Some children speak as the other sex is expected to and thus, as with other aspects of doing gender, there is not a perfect dichotomization in voice pitch (even among adults, some voices are not consistently classified). Nonetheless, there is a striking production of mostly different pitched voices from essentially similar vocal equipment.

There is considerable debate among scholars about the extent to which adults actually do treat boys and girls differently, and many note that the similarities far outweigh the differences. Research on

early gender development – in fact the research in general on gender differences – is almost exclusively done by psychologists. As a result, the research it reports on largely involves observations of behavior in limited settings – whether in a laboratory or in the home or the preschool. Since these studies focus on limited settings and types of interaction and do not follow children through a normal day, they quite possibly miss the cumulative effects of small differences across many different situations. Small differences here and there are probably enough for children to learn what it means in their community to be male or female.

The significance of the small difference can be appreciated from another perspective. The psychological literature tends to treat children as objects rather than subjects. Those studying children have tended to treat others – parents, other adults, peers – as the primary socializing agents. Only relatively recently have investigators begun to explore children's own active strategies for figuring out the social world. Eleanor Maccoby (2002) emphasizes that children have a very clear knowledge of their gender (that is, of whether they are classified as male or female) by the time they are three years old. Given this knowledge, it is not at all clear how much differential treatment children need to learn how to do their designated gender. What they mainly need is the message that male and female are supposed to be different, and that message is everywhere around them.

It has become increasingly clear that children play a very active role in their own development. From the moment they see themselves as social beings, they begin to focus on the enterprise of "growing up." And to some extent, they probably experience many of the gendered developmental dynamics we discuss here not so much as gender-appropriate, but as *grown-up*. The greatest taboo is being "a baby," but the developmental imperative is gendered. Being grown-up, leaving babyhood, means very different things for boys than it does for girls. And the fact that growing up involves gender differentiation is encoded in the words of assessment with which progress is monitored – kids do not behave as good or bad people, but as *good boys* or *good girls*, and they develop into *big boys* and *big girls*.⁷ In other words, they do not have the option of growing into just people, but into boys or girls. This does not mean that they see what they're doing in strictly gendered terms. It is probable that when boys and girls alter the fundamental frequency of their voices they are not trying to sound like girls or like boys, but that

7 Thorne (1993) and others have observed teachers urging children to act like "big boys and girls." Very rarely is a child told "don't act like a baby – you're a big kid now."

they are aspiring for some quality that is itself gendered – cuteness, authority. And the child's aspiration is not simply a matter of reasoning, but a matter of desire – a projection of the self into desired forms of participation in the social world. Desire is a tremendous force in projecting oneself into the future – in the continual remaking of the self that constitutes growing up.

Until about the age of two, boys and girls exhibit the same play behaviors. After that age, play in boys' and girls' groups begins to diverge as they come to select different toys and engage in different activities, and children begin to monitor each other's play, imposing sanctions on gender-inappropriate play. Much is made of the fact that boys become more agonistic than girls, and many attribute this to hormonal and even evolutionary differences (see Maccoby 2000 for a brief review of these various perspectives). But whatever the workings of biology may be, it is clear that this divergence is supported and exaggerated by the social system. As children get older, their play habits are monitored and differentiated, first by adults, and eventually by peers. Parents of small children have been shown to reward their children's choice of gender-appropriate toys (trucks for boys, dolls for girls) (Langlois and Downs 1980). And while parents' support of their children's gendered behavior is not always and certainly not simply a conscious effort at gender socialization, their behavior is probably more powerful than they think. Even parents who strive for gender equality, and who believe that they do not constrain their children's behavior along gender lines, have been observed in experimental situations to do just that.

Learning asymmetry

While it takes a community to develop gender, not all participants in the community are equally involved in enforcing difference. In research on early gender socialization, males – both children and adults – have emerged as more engaged in enforcing gender difference than females. In the research by Rubin *et al.* cited above, for example, fathers were more extreme than mothers in their gender-based misassessments of infants' size and texture. Men are more likely than women to play rough with boys and gently with girls, fathers use differential language patterns to boys and girls more than mothers, and men are more likely than women to reward children for choosing gender-appropriate toys. There are now books aimed at men who want to become more involved in parenting than their own fathers were. But the message is still often that parenting a girl is quite a different enterprise from parenting a boy. On a self-help shelf encountered at a tourist shop, *How to Be Your Daughter's*

Daddy: 365 Ways to Show Her You Care by Dan Bolin (1993) stood right next to *How to Be Your Little Man's Dad: 365 Things to Do with Your Son* by Dan Bolin and Ken Sutterfield (1993).

It is not only that male adults seem to enforce gender more than female. This enforcement is more intensely aimed at boys than at girls. Adults are more likely to reward boys for choice of gender-appropriate toys than girls – and fathers are more likely to do so for their own sons than for other boys. Boys, in turn, are more rigid in their toy preferences than girls, and they are harder on other boys than on girls for gender-inappropriate play styles. A study of three to five year olds (Langlois and Downs 1980) showed that while girls tended to be neutral about other girls' choices, boys responded positively only to boys with male play styles, and were especially likely to punish their male peers for feminine choices. The outcome is that while activities and behaviors labeled as *male* are treated as appropriate for females as well as for males, those labeled as *female* are treated as appropriate only for females. One way of looking at this is that female activities and behaviors emerge as *marked* – as reserved for a special subset of the population – while male activities and behaviors emerge as *unmarked* or *normal*. This in turn contributes to the androcentric (male-centered) view of gender, which we will discuss in the following section of this chapter.

This asymmetry is partially a function of the cultural devaluation of women and of the feminine. One way or another, most boys and girls learn that most boy things and boy activities are more highly valued than girl things and girl activities, and boys are strongly discouraged from having interests or activities that are associated with girls. Even where they do not encounter such views formulated explicitly or even find them denied explicitly, most boys and girls learn that it is primarily men and not women who do "important" things as adults, have opinions that count, direct the course of events in the public world. It is hardly surprising then that pressures towards gender conformity are not symmetrical.

This asymmetry extends to many domains. While females may wear clothing initially viewed as male, the reverse is highly stigmatized: western women and girls now wear jeans but their male peers are not appearing in skirts. Even names seem to go from male to female and not vice versa. There are girls named Christopher, but no boys named Christine. A girl may be sanctioned for behaving "like a boy" – particularly if she behaves aggressively, and gets into fights – on the grounds that she is being "unladylike" or "not nice." But there is a categorization of "tomboy" reserved for girls who adopt a male rough and tumble

style of play, who display fearlessness and refuse to play with dolls. And while in some circles this categorization may be considered negative, in general in western society it earns some respect and admiration. Boys who adopt girls' behaviors, on the other hand, are severely sanctioned. The term "sissy" is reserved for boys who do not adhere strictly to norms of masculinity (in fact, a sissy is a boy who does not display those very characteristics that make a girl a tomboy).

A child who's told she has to do more housework than her brother because she's a girl, or that she can't be an astronaut when she grows up because she's a girl,⁸ is likely to say "that's not fair!" A boy who is told he cannot play with dolls because he's a boy, or that he cannot be a secretary when he grows up, may find that unfair as well. But the boy who is told he can't be a nurse is being told that he is too good to be a nurse. The girl, on the other hand, is essentially being told that she is not good enough to be a doctor. This is not to say that the consequences cannot be tragic for the boy who really wants to play with dolls or grow up to be a nurse. He will be deprived of a legitimate sense of unfairness within society's wider discourses of justice, hence isolated with his sense of unfairness. But gender specialization does carry the evaluation that men's enterprises are generally better than women's, and children learn this quite early on.⁹

Now there are some counterexamples to these general trends, many of them prompted by the feminist and gay rights movements. Some men are taking over domestic tasks like diaper-changing and everyday cookery that were once women's province. Others wear jewels in their ears or gold chains around their necks, adornments reserved for women when we were teenagers. But the dominant pattern that restricts men in moving into what are seen as women's realms and thereby devalued is by no means dead.

Separation

To differing degrees from culture to culture and community to community, difference is reinforced by separation. Boys play more with boys.

8 These examples may seem anachronistic, but such explicit messages persist. The first is reported by some of the young women in our classes at Stanford and Cornell (though certainly not by all or even most). And the second message was relayed to astronaut Sally Ride in 2001 by a girl whose teacher had offered her that discouragement. 9 Even a child whose own mother is a physician is sometimes heard saying "ladies can't be doctors." Of course kids sometimes get it wrong. An anecdote circulated during Margaret Thatcher's time as prime minister told of a young English boy asked "do you want to be prime minister when you grow up?" "Oh no," he replied, "that's a woman's job."

girls with girls. And this pattern repeats itself cross-culturally, in non-industrial societies as well as in industrial societies (Whiting and Edwards 1988). The extent to which individuals in western industrial countries grow up participating in same-sex playgroups varies tremendously, depending on such things as the genders and ages of their siblings and their neighbors. Some kids spend more time in same-sex groups at one stage of their lives, less at other stages. The fact remains that however much kids may play in mixed-sex groups, there is a tendency to seek out – and to be constrained to seek out – same-sex groups. This constraint is stronger for boys – girls who prefer playing with boys are tolerated, perhaps admired, while boys who prefer playing with girls are not.

Psychological research shows that many American children begin to prefer same-sex playmates as they approach the age of three (Maccoby 1998), which is about the age at which they develop a clear sense of their own gender, and this preference increases rapidly as they age. Eleanor Maccoby notes that this preference emerges in institutional settings – day care, preschool, and elementary school – where children encounter large numbers of age peers. On the same theme, Thorne (1993) points out that schools provide a sufficiently large population that boys and girls can separate, whereas in neighborhoods there may be less choice.

Even though children lean towards same-sex groups in these settings, they often maintain prior cross-sex friendships formed outside the institution (Howes 1988). It is important to note that the preference for same-sex play groups is not absolute, and that in fact children often play in mixed groups. Maccoby and Jacklin's study (1987) of individual children's choice of playmates in a preschool setting shows four and a half year olds playing in same-sex groups 47 percent of the time, mixed groups 35 percent of the time and other-sex groups (i.e., where the child is the only representative of her or his own sex in the group) 18 percent of the time. While these figures show a good deal of mixing, the same-sex groups are far greater than random playmate selection would produce. And at age six and a half, children in the Maccoby and Jacklin study were playing in same-sex groups 67 percent of the time. Maccoby (1998, pp. 22–23) suggests that the choice of playmates in school is a strategy for ensuring safety and predictability in an open setting, as children seek out others with a recognizable play style. This presupposes different play styles to begin with, presenting a complicated chicken-and-egg problem. For if sex-segregated play groups fill a need for predictable play and interaction styles, they are also a potential site for the production and reproduction of this differentiation. It has been overwhelmingly established that small boys engage in more

physically aggressive behavior than small girls. However, experimental and observational evidence puts this differentiation at precisely the same time that same-sex group preference emerges. Maccoby points out that this play style reaches its peak among boys at about the age of four and that it is restricted to same-sex groups, suggesting that there is a complex relation between the emergence of gendered play styles and of same-sex play groups.

The separation of children in same-sex play groups has led some gender theorists to propose a view that by virtue of their separation during a significant part of their childhoods, boys and girls are socialized into different peer cultures. In their same-sex friendship groups, they develop different behavior, different norms, and even different understandings of the world. Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982) argue that because of this separation, boys and girls develop different verbal cultures – different ways of interacting verbally and different norms for interpreting ways of interacting. They argue, further, that this can result in cross-cultural miscommunication between males and females. Deborah Tannen (1990) has popularized this view, emphasizing the potential for misunderstanding. The separation of gender cultures does not necessarily entail male–female misunderstanding, although it describes the conditions under which such misunderstanding could develop. Certainly, if girls and boys are segregated on a regular basis, we can expect that they will develop different practices and different understandings of the world. The extent to which this actually occurs depends on the nature of the segregation – when, in what contexts, for what activities – in relation to the actual contact between boys and girls. In other words, to the extent that there is separation, this separation is structured – and it is structured differently in different communities. This structure will have an important bearing on the extent of differences that will develop. It will also have a bearing on the extent to which these differences are recognized.

The miscommunication model that Maltz and Borker proposed and that Tannen has further developed draws on John Gumperz's work with ethnically distinct subcultures (e.g. Gumperz 1982). It hypothesizes both that male and female understandings of interaction are in fact different, and, critically, that they are unaware of these differences, and believe that they are operating from the same understanding. It is the unawareness that may be the most problematic assumption for this approach to gender-based miscommunication (or conflict), since the gender beliefs that most kids are industriously acquiring in their peer groups and outside them emphasize difference, to the point sometimes

of absurd exaggeration. Gender segregation in childhood almost certainly plays some role in the development of gendered verbal practice. But for understanding gender, separation is never the whole picture. Gender segregation in western societies is virtually always embedded in practices that bring the sexes together and that impose difference in interpretations even where there are great similarities in those actions or people being interpreted.

As we move farther along in development, the complexity of explaining gender differences increases exponentially. As kids spend more time with their peers, and as they enter into more kinds of situations with peers, not only does the balance between adult and peer influence change, but the nature of peer influence also changes. Peer society becomes increasingly complex, and at some point quite early on, explicit ideas about gender enter into children's choices, preferences, and opportunities. Whatever the initial factors that give rise to increasing gender separation, separation itself becomes an activity, and a primary social issue. Barrie Thorne (1993) notes that public choosing of teams in school activities constrains gender segregation, hence that games that involve choosing teams are more likely to be same gender, while games that simply involve lining up or being there are more likely to be gender-mixed. Separation can carry over to competitions and rivalries between boys' groups and girls' groups, as in elementary school activities such as "girls chase the boys" (Thorne 1993). These activities can be an important site for the construction of difference with claims that girls or boys are better at whatever activity is in question. In this way, beliefs about differences in males' and females' "natural" abilities may be learned so young and so indirectly that they appear to be common sense. It is not at all clear, therefore, to what extent differences in behaviors and activities result from boys' and girls' personal preference, or from social constraint.

The heterosexual market

Towards the end of elementary school, a highly visible activity of pairing up boys and girls into couples begins to dominate the scene. This activity is not one engaged in by individual children, and it is not an activity that simply arises in the midst of other childhood "business as usual." Rather, it is the beginning of a social market that forms the basis of an emerging peer social order (Eckert 1996). And with this market comes a profound change in the terms of gender separation and difference.