Key points from Renzetti & Curran, chapter 3

This chapter examines constructions of sex & gender from other times and places by considering evidence from archeology, primatology and anthropology.

Male archeologists have traditionally put forth “Man the Hunter” accounts of human evolution that bear resemblance to Western middle-class nuclear families—men do the providing; women do childcare. These accounts are ethnocentric and androcentric (male-centered).

Feminist scholars have put forward alternative, gynecentric (woman-centered) constructions. These constructions are not necessarily more accurate, but they force us to consider alternative versions of human prehistory.

Both types of constructions involve gender attribution, the process of linking archeological data with males and females.

Early studies of primates were also characterized by androcentrism (e.g., the killer ape perspective). Primatology doesn’t offer us clear information about early humans because of variations among the 200 species of primates, most of which are matrifocal (social organization and group life is centered on mothers).

Anthropological evidence also suggests that Western constructions of sex & gender aren’t universal. (1) All known societies have a division of labor by sex, but what is considered men’s vs. women’s work varies considerably. (2) A gendered division of labor does not necessarily produce gender inequality because work may be different yet equally valued. (3) There is also no evidence that the ability to bear children either automatically excludes women from some activities or automatically excludes men from child rearing.

Not every society has only two genders. Some societies include berdaches, who may adopt behavior usually ascribed to members of the other sex. In other societies, gender changes throughout a person’s lifetime. E.g., among the Hua of New Guinea older men and young women have the same gender.

What R&C don’t discuss is that other cultures also have different ways of dealing with intersexuals, who may be assigned to a third sex.