Girls and Boys Together… But Mostly Apart
Barrie Thorne

Participant observation/grounded theory study of gender arrangements in elementary school

Thorne criticizes the “two worlds” model for studying gender segregation, which assumes boys and girls are different. She conceptualizes gender as a system of relationships and asks “In a given situation, how is gender made more or less salient or infused with particular meanings?” In other words, sex segregation is not a given, but a phenomenon in need of explanation.

Sex segregation is done by both teachers and students. However, boys and girls do things together as well as apart.

Four types of cross-sex interaction:

1. Borderwork: cross-sex interaction that affirm gender boundaries
   
   Examples include contests, chasing, rituals of pollution and invasions.

   Borderwork illustrates that worlds of boys and girls are not equal. Boys control more space than girls and invade girls’ space more. Girls are more likely to be defined as polluted.

2. Interactions infused with heterosexual meaning

   Children’s interactions are sometimes given heterosexual meaning, particularly as a form of teasing. Girls’ culture includes more romantic themes than boys. By the fifth grade, some children began to affirm heterosexual courtship rituals. Starting with adolescence, heterosexual dating provides the dominant set of meanings.

3. Traveling across boundaries to the world of the other sex

   Mostly done by “tomboys”; boys are more stigmatized for crossing gender boundaries.

4. Relaxed cross-sex interactions

   These often take place when adults are responsible for forming the groups or when children are away from school in their neighborhoods.