Early Childhood Gender Socialization (R&C, ch. 4, Coltrane, ch. 5)

Three types of theories explain gender socialization: psychoanalytic, social learning and cognitive developmental.

Freud’s psychoanalytic theory focuses on children’s observations about their genitals (e.g., castration anxiety, penis envy). It has not marshaled much empirical support.

Social learning theories are behavioralist theories that rely on reinforcement and modeling explanations of behavior—the environment makes people do things.

Cognitive developmental theories posit that “children learn gender (and gender stereotypes) through their mental efforts to organize their social world.”

One problem with some variants of this perspective is the assumption that children learn gender because it is a natural facet of the world, rather than that it is an important facet of the social world.

Research shows that the importance children place on gender varies by class, race, family structure, sexuality of parents, etc.

A social constructionist perspective, such as is proposed by Bem and Coltrane, is a version of the cognitive development perspective.

Bem has identified three key “gender lenses” (hidden assumptions): gender polarization (men and women are different and these differences constitute a central organizing principle of social life), androcentrism (males are superior to females; male experience is the normative standard); and biological essentialism (the first two lens are due to biological differences between the sexes).

She recommends substituting an “individual differences” lens that emphasizes “the remarkable variability of individuals within groups.”
A social constructionist approach (advocated by Bem & Coltrane) views gender acquisition as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The most important insight from research on gender socialization is that because boys and girls are treated differently and put into different learning environments, they develop different needs, wants, desires, skills, and temperaments; in short they become different types of people—men and women—who hardly question why they are different or how they ended up that way.…

[T]he basic underlying model is that of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Because people think boys and girls are supposed to be different, they treat them differently and give them different opportunities for development. This differential treatment promotes certain behaviors and self-images that recreate the preconceived cultural stereotypes about gender. The process repeats itself over and over in an unending spiral across the generations, so that although gender stereotypes are being constantly re-created and modified, they seem natural and impervious to change. (Coltrane, p. 114)

Children learn about gender and how to “do gender” because it is central to the way we organize society. Children “learn culturally appropriate ways of thinking and being as they follow routine rituals and respond to the everyday demands of the world in which they live… [T]o be considered competent members of society, they must learn how to fit in as appropriately gendered individuals.” (Coltrane, p. 114)

Gender socialization turns children into “cultural natives,” who know their culture’s reality without realizing that other realities are possible.

Both R&C and Coltrane review research showing that boys and girls are treated differently.