The Social Construction of Gender Relations
(Kimmel, chapter 5)

“When we say that gender identity is socially constructed, what we do mean is that our identities are a fluid assemblage of the meanings and behaviors that we construct from the values, images, and prescriptions we find in the world around us. Our gendered identities are both voluntary—we choose to become who we are—and coerced—we are pressured, forced, sanctioned, and often physically beaten into submission to some rules. We neither make up the rules as we go along, nor do we fit casually and without struggle into preassigned roles.

“For some of us, becoming adult men and women in our society is a smooth and almost effortless drifting into behaviors and attitudes that feel as familiar to us as our skin. And for others of us, becoming masculine or feminine is an interminable torture, a nightmare in which we must brutally suppress some parts of ourselves to please others—or simply to survive. For most of us, though, the experience falls somewhere in between: There are parts we love and wouldn’t part with, and other parts where we feel we’ve been forced to exaggerate one side at the expense of others. It’s the task of the sociological perspective to specify the ways in which our own experiences, our interactions with others, and the institutions combine to shape our sense of who we are. Biology provides the raw materials, while society and history provide the context, the instruction manual, that we follow to construct our identities” (p. 100).

One of Kimmel’s major arguments is that gender is a property of institutions. Institutions produces gender differences. He illustrates this with various examples and thought-experiments. What if women were world leaders instead of men? Why are public restrooms gendered differently than bathrooms in people’s homes? Kantor’s corporate ethnography. Career training for doctors, lawyers and professors.

Gender is also produced through interactions. We “do gender.” People who don’t do gender in the “normal” way, e.g., transsexuals, transvestites, intersexuals, illustrate both the work and the artifice of gender.