

## 2

## Schools, Mines, Sex and War

Often research is best approached through specific examples. In this chapter I will discuss four of the most notable examples of gender analysis published in the last decade. Three of them focus on everyday life in particular settings – a school, a workplace, a personal life – and one deals with gender change in a great historical transition. These studies come from four continents and deal with very different issues. Yet it is possible to see in them some of the common themes of gender research.

### Case 1: The play of gender in school life

Everyone knows what a school is. One of the most difficult tasks in social research is to take a situation that everyone thinks they understand, and illuminate it in new ways. This is what the American ethnographer Barrie Thorne achieves in her subtly observed and highly readable book *Gender Play* (1993).

At the time Thorne started her work, children were not much discussed in gender research. When they were mentioned, it was usually assumed that they were being ‘socialized’ into gender roles, in a top-down transmission from the adult world. It was generally assumed that there are two sex roles, a male one and a female one, with boys and girls getting separately inducted into the norms and expectations of the appropriate one. This idea was based on a certain amount of research using paper-and-pencil questionnaires, but not on much actual observation of gender in children’s lives.

Thorne did that observation. Her book is based on fieldwork in two North American elementary (primary) schools. She spent eight months in one, three months in another, hanging about in classrooms, hallways and playgrounds, talking to everyone and watching the way the children interacted with each other and with their teachers in work and play.

Ethnography as a method sounds easy, but in practice is hard to do well. Part of the problem is the mass of information an observer can get from just a single day ‘in the field’. You need to know what you are looking for. But you also need to be open to new experiences and new information, able to see things that you did not expect to see.

As an observer Thorne was certainly interested in transmission from older people, in the ways children pick up the details of how to do gender. Her funniest (and perhaps also saddest) chapter is called ‘Lip Gloss and “Goin’ With”’, about how pre-adolescent children learn the techniques of teenage flirting and dating. She was also interested in the differences between the girls’ and the boys’ informal interactions – the different games they played, spaces they used, words they spoke, and so on.

But Thorne was able to see beyond the patterns described in conventional gender models. She became aware how much these models predisposed an observer to look for difference. She began to pay attention, not only to the moments in school life when the boys and girls separated, but also to the moments when they came together. She began to think of gender difference as *situational*, as created in some situations and ignored or overridden in others. Even in recess-time games, where the girls and boys were usually clustered in separate parts of the playground, they sometimes moved into mixed activities without any emphasis on difference. There were many ‘relaxed cross-sex interactions’ in the school’s daily routine. Clearly, the boys and girls were not permanently in separate spheres, nor permanently enacting opposite ‘sex roles’.

Recognizing this opened up a number of other issues. What were the situations where gender was emphasized or de-emphasized? Thorne noticed that, though teachers sometimes emphasized gender – for instance, setting up a classroom learning game with the girls competing against the boys – most teacher-controlled activities de-emphasized gender. This is true, for instance, of the commonest teaching technique in schools, the ‘talk-and-chalk’ method where the teacher at the front of the room demands the attention of all the pupils to an exposition of some lesson that they all have to learn. In this situation the basic division is between teacher and taught, not between groups of pupils; so girls and boys are in the same boat.

Next, how did the children establish gender difference when they did emphasize it? Thorne began to identify a kind of activity she called 'borderwork': 'When gender boundaries are activated, the loose aggregations "boys and girls" consolidates into "the boys" and "the girls" as separate and reified groups. In the process, categories of identity that on other occasions have minimal relevance for interaction become the basis of separate collectivities' (1993: 65).

There are different kinds of borderwork in a primary school. One of the most interesting is chasing, a kind of game that is sometimes very fluid and sometimes not. I remember a chasing game at my primary school, a rather intimidating game called 'cocky-laura', which was extremely rule-bound. One of the implicit rules was that only boys could play, because the girls were forbidden by the school to be in the part of the playground where a big gum-tree stood that was one of the bases. In the schools Thorne studied, boys and girls could play together, and often chased each other, playing 'girls-chase-the-boys' and 'boys-chase-the-girls'. Indeed the one game would often merge into the other, as the chased turned around and became the chasers. Thorne notes that often boys chased boys, or girls chased girls, but these patterns attracted little attention or discussion. However girls-chasing-boys/boys-chasing-girls often resulted in lively discussion and excitement. It was a situation in which

Gender terms blatantly override individual identities, especially in references to the other team ('Help, a girl's chasin' me'; 'C'mon Sarah, let's get that boy'; 'Tony, help save me from the girls'). Individuals may call for help from, or offer help to, others of their gender. And in acts of treason, they may grab someone from their team and turn them over to the other side. For example, in an elaborate chasing scene among a group of Ashton third-graders, Ryan grabbed Billy from behind, wrestling him to the ground. 'Hey girls, get 'im,' Ryan called. (1993: 69)

Thorne's observation of children might alert us to parallel processes among adults. Borderwork is constantly being done to mark gender boundaries, if not by chasing then by jokes, dress, forms of speech, etc. Gender difference is not something that simply exists; it is something that happens, and must be made to happen; something, also, that can be unmade, altered, made less important.

The games in which the children make gender happen do something more. When the girls chase the boys and the boys chase the girls, they seem to be acting equally, and in some respects they are – but not in all

respects. For a rough-and-tumble version of the chasing game is more common among the boys. Boys normally control more of the playground space than the girls do, more often invade girls' groups and disrupt the girls' activities than the girls disrupt theirs. That is to say, the boys more often make an aggressive move and a claim to power, in the limited sense that children can do this.

In the symbolic realm, too, the boys claim power. They treat girls as a source of contamination or pollution, for instance calling low-status boys 'girls' or pushing them next to the space occupied by girls. The girls do not treat the boys that way. Girls are more often defined as giving the imaginary disease called 'cooties', and low-status girls may get called 'cootie queens'. A version of cooties played in one of the schools is called 'girl stain'. All these may seem small matters. But as Thorne remarks, 'recoiling from physical proximity with another person and their belongings because they are perceived as contaminating is a powerful statement of social distance and claimed superiority' (1993: 75).

So there is an asymmetry in the situations of boys and girls, which is reflected in differences among the boys and among the girls. Some boys often interrupt the girls' games, other boys do not. Some boys have higher status, others have lower. Some of the girls move earlier than others into 'romance'. By fourth grade, homophobic insults – such as calling another boy a 'fag' – are becoming common among the boys, most of whom learn that this word is a way of expressing hostility before they know what its sexual meaning is. At the same time, however, physical contact among the boys is becoming less common – they are learning to fear, or be suspicious of, displays of affection. In short, the children are beginning to show something of the differentiation of gender patterns, and the gender and sexual hierarchies, that are familiar among adults.

There is much more in Thorne's fascinating book, including a humorous and insightful discussion of what it is like for an adult to do research among children. For me, the most important lesson her book teaches is about these American children's *agency* in learning gender. They are not passively 'socialized' into a sex role. They are, of course, learning things from the adult world around them: lessons about available identities, lessons about performance, and – regrettably – lessons about hatred. But they do this actively, and on their own terms. They find gender interesting and sometimes exciting. They move into and out of gender-based groupings. They sometimes shore up, and sometimes move across, gender boundaries. They even play with and against the gender dichotomy itself. Gender is important in their world, but it is important

as a human issue that they deal with, not as a fixed framework that reduces them to puppets.

## Case 2: Manhood and the mines

In the late nineteenth century the fabulous wealth of the largest gold deposit in the world began to be exploited by the Dutch and British settler communities in South Africa. The Witwatersrand (Whitewater Ridge) gold deposits were immense. But the ore was low-grade, so huge volumes had to be processed. And the main deposits lay far below the high plateau of the Transvaal, so the mines had to go deep. The first wild gold rushes soon turned into an organized industry dominated by large companies, with a total workforce of hundreds of thousands.

Because the price of gold on the world market was fixed, the companies' profitability depended on keeping labour costs down. Thus the industry needed a large but low-paid workforce for demanding and dangerous conditions underground. To colonial entrepreneurs, the answer was obvious: indigenous men. So black African men, recruited from many parts of South Africa and even beyond, became the main labour force of the gold industry – and have remained so ever since.

Over a twenty-year period T. Dunbar Moodie worked with a series of partners to document the experience of men who made up this labour force, a key group in South Africa's history. Their story is told in his book *Going for Gold* (1994). Moodie studied the company archives and government records, directed participant-observation studies, interviewed miners, mine executives and women in the 'townships' where black workers lived. A key moment came when one of his collaborators, Vivienne Ndatshe, interviewed forty *retired* miners in their home country, Pondoland (near the south-eastern coast). Her interviews revealed aspects of the miners' experience which changed the picture of migrant labour profoundly.

Because the mines were large-scale industrial enterprises owned by European capital, it had been easy to think of the mineworkers as 'proletarians' on the model of European urban industrial workers. But the reality was different. The racial structure of the South African workforce – whites as managers, blacks providing the labour – might have kept labour costs down, but also created a barrier behind which the mineworkers could sustain cultures of their own, and exercise some informal control over their work. Most lived in all-male compounds near the mines, where they had to create their own social lives.

When the men signed on with recruiting agents – generally on contracts lasting four months to two years – and set off on the journey of hundreds of kilometres to the mines, they did not take families with them and did not intend to become city dwellers. This was not just because the wages were too low to support families in the cash economy of the cities. More importantly, the mineworkers mostly came from areas with a smallholder agricultural economy, such as Pondoland. They kept their links to that economy, and intended to return to it.

For most of them the point of earning wages at the mine was to subsidize rural households run by their families, or to accumulate resources that would allow them to establish new rural households on their return – buying cattle, financing marriages, etc. Being the wise and respected head of a self-sufficient homestead was the ideal of 'manhood' to which Mpondo migrant workers (alongside others) subscribed. The mine work was a means to this end.

This situation led to gender practices very different from those of the conventional European breadwinner/housewife couple. First, the men working at the mines and living in the compounds had to provide their own domestic labour, and if sexually active, find new sexual partners. Some went to women working in nearby towns. Others created sexual and domestic partnerships, known as 'mine marriages', between older and younger men in the compounds. In such an arrangement the young man did housework and provided sexual services in exchange for gifts, guidance, protection and money from the senior man. This was a well-established if discreet custom, which lasted for decades. For the individual partners it was likely to be temporary. In due course the younger man would move on; he might in turn acquire a 'mine wife' if he became a senior man in a compound. These relationships were not taken back to the homeland.

Back in the homeland, the rural homesteads had to keep functioning while many of their men were away at the mines. This too led to a significant adjustment, because the person left to run the homestead might well be a woman, such as the mineworker's wife. Now the older Mpondo men did not define manhood, *ubudoda*, in terms of warrior virtues, but in a very different way. As one ex-miner, Msana, put it:

'Ubudoda is to help people. If somebody's children don't have books or school fees or so, then you are going to help those children while the father cannot manage. Or if there is somebody who died, you go there and talk to people there. Or, if someone is poor – has no oxen – then you can take your own oxen and plow his fields. That is