Interaction in elementary school classrooms presents children with their first opportunity of interaction on a societal level; as such, procedures at school illustrate what life is and should be like. Unfortunately, all too often, activities both inside and outside the classroom suggest that gender can always be defined along dualistic lines. Social relations in school illustrate how we "do" gender—both at an individual and social level—results in the formation of the gender natural attitude, where gender is considered a moral quality that we are accountable for.

When discussing gender formation, it is important to note that gender is that: a formation. The distinctions that are made within the classroom and shaped within oneself are constructions into the professed ideal forms of male and female. The distinction between genders began as a difference in biology: "gender activities emerge from and bolster claims to membership in a sex category" (West and Zimmerman 1987, p. 127). Sex refers to different anatomical makeup of males and females—from reproductive capacity to gonads to genetics. Though even these (presumed) differentiating characteristics are not finite and there are many empirical exceptions (Fausto-Sterling 2000, p. 3), the prevailing societal thought is that the sex of males and females is different. Because of the suggested division between the male and female sex, colloquial use of "gender" has evolved into associating the biological division with the cultural division. The result is that we create and maintain socially significant different meanings of people based on their reproductive capacity. Gender should be understood as a social institution originating in culture—not biology—that establishes patterns of expectation for individuals, orders the processes of everyday life, and is built into major social institutions (Connell 2002, p. 10).

As a social institution, it is important to note that gender is something in which we engage in everyday life. In the words of West and Zimmerman, gender is something we "do." Doing gender involves more than gender display (Goffman) because gender is not simply a role

one can choose to play at certain times; it is an "ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction" (West and Zimmerman 1987, p. 130). It can be observed through the individual level in the formation of gender identity: one's associations with a specific gender. In the classroom, Barrie Thorne observed that the girls used makeup to "embrace[sic] teen culture" (1993, p. 148). They are doing so because cosmetics to them is a characteristic of older girls. It makes sense, then, that the girls who primarily put on lip gloss were the most mature and, often, physically developed in the class. These girls had an advanced idea of female identity that they chose to appropriate through the wearing of lip gloss.

Gender is an action on an individual level, but it happens on a social level as well. Gender is not one of "free action" because it is deeply engrained into structure and culture (Messner 2000, p.770). In the school setting, gender plays out as a social process through the teachers' organization of the classroom and the recess activities chosen by the kids. The kids in Miss Bailey's class sat divided between boys and girls. She "framed the overall gender separation as a matter of student choice…but she…ratified the gender divide by pitting the girls against the boys in…contests" (Thorne 1993, p. 38). The notions of a difference between boys and girls shaped the interaction in the classroom. The gendered interactions confirmed gender's cultural construction: the separation became a social process by the repeated attention given to the gender divide. Verbal marking of gender perpetuated its effect when teachers resorted to the paired terms "boys and girls" as terms of address (Thorne 1993, p. 34). On the playground, boys primarily "controlled the large fixed spaces designated for team sports," which would support their suggested essential aggressive nature, while girls took up the spaces closer to the building which were much smaller and thus more fitting for their sex's suggested passive role (Thorne 1993, p. 44). Though these recess activities were chosen by the children without teacher

influence, the recognition of the gender differences in how boys should play more aggressive activities than girls became a social process through their repeated widespread pattern. Once children have incorporated the "gender dichotomy of biology into their rules for seeing gender," they are able to collaborate in its social construction (Kessler and McKenna 1978, p. 109).

Doing gender involves the individual action of exerting behavior that can be classified through essential characteristics, but also the attribution of others' behaviors into the dichotomous gender categories. We engage in the gender attribution process when we decide if a stranger is male or female based on the evidence we observe and when we make suppositions of her or his future actions based on the gender category we have placed her or him in. Lorber explains that our beliefs about gender influence what we see so that what we "know" beforehand influences our interpretation of what we observe (1994, pp. 37-54). This plays out on the playground through borderwork and teasing. Thorne observed that boys and girls engaged in "invasion" when they run over and invade the other group's claimed territory. It becomes assumed that boys approach girls jump-roping only to cause disruption—not to engage in the typically feminine activity—because they are boys. When teachers presuppose this action by "shoo[ing] away boys from areas where girls [played] even when the boys hadn't done anything to provoke [the teachers' actions]," they are engaging in the gender attribution process.

Because gender is an institution that we do both on an individual and social level, its construction develops into what Kessler and McKenna (1978) call our gender natural attitude. The interaction between these levels engrains how we "do" gender so that we reflect and reproduce it as second nature. Even when we come into contact with exceptions to the essentialized roles of men and women, we relegate the differences as abnormalities and practice the idea that there are and always will be only two forms of gender. "Insofar as a society is

partitioned by 'essential' differences between women and men and placement in a sex category is both relevant and enforced, doing gender is unavoidable" (West and Zimmerman 1987, p. 137). Though girls were usually the ones engaged in jump rope, a boy named Brian chose to play (Thorne 1993, p. 121). As a boy, he represented the exception to the norm, yet teachers dismissed this fact when shooing away other boys because the recess activities as divided by gender were shaped into their gender natural attitude. Girls who played in more typically masculine activities at recess were called "tomboy" while boys who acted less masculine than was expected were called "sissy" (Thorne 1993, pp. 114-116). Even though the children may have occasionally participated in activities usually assigned to the other gender, when their peers evidenced exceptions, they resulted to labeling because their individual and social ideas of gender had formed their gender natural attitude.

Gender develops as a moral quality because we are held accountable for it. The morally accepted idea is that everyone falls into either the male or female category. If we stray from our expected identity, we are reminded of it. We must continually "do" our gender; it is "a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment" (West and Zimmerman 1987, p. 126). Gender is omnirelevant. It is compulsory and always present: "the 'doing' of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production" (West and Zimmerman, 126). Gender is a constant background to our culture so that even if you do not want to "do" it, you have to because you will be held accountable for your gender performance whether you like it or not. Our internal notions of gender are reflexively shaped into the broader social pattern of gender construction.

Gender persists because of the individual and social processes in which we "do" it, but more importantly, because of the interactional relations between these processes that endure it through our gender natural attitude. Highlighting these gender differences inside and outside the classroom teaches children to continue to "do" their attributed gender. The practices in elementary schools persist the idea of gender accountability and encourage the further dichotomous construction of gender as a social institution.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Connell, R.W. 2002. "The question of gender." Pp. 1-11 in *Gender.* Malden, MA: Polity/Blackwell.

Fausto-Sterling, Anne. 2000. "Dueling dualisms: male or female?". Pp. 1-5 in *Sexing the Body*. New York: Basic Books.

Kessler, Suzanne J. and Wendy McKenna. 1978. *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Lorber, Judith. 1994. "Believing is Seeing: Biology as Ideology". Pp. 37-54 in *Paradoxes of Gender*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Messner, Michael A. 2000. "Barbie girls versus sea monsters." *Gender & Society* 14, 6: 765-84.

Thorne, Barrie. 1993. *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

West, Candace and Zimmerman, Don. 1987. "Doing gender." *Gender & Society* 1, 2: 125-51.