

Firstname Lastname

Professor Marron

FAS 204 Gender Relations

13 November 2013

Topic#4: Four-year-old Caroline and seven-year-old Jenny are sisters who live and have been raised in the United States. Jenny plays a game in which she is a mother and her stuffed animals are her children. Jenny hugs them and pretends to carefully feed them. Later, young Caroline repeats the same hugging and feeding behaviors with her dolls. Caroline's mother sees this and states, "Caroline, someday you'll be a good mommy." How would anthropological theory of gender explain Caroline's behaviors? How would cognitive development theory explain Caroline's behaviors? Make sure you address "maternal instinct" in your answer. (Chapter 2)

Theories of Gender

The anthropological theory of gender would explain Caroline's behavior by stating that her culture, in this case the culture within the United States, is "profoundly shaping her gender identity" (Wood 56). In other words her culture and society plays a huge part in how young Caroline expresses her gender identity. This statement indicates that expression of gender identity would be distinctly different if Caroline were in another culture/society and this is exactly what the anthropological theory of gender holds to.

For instance in the United States "women are still regarded as caretakers and they are expected to provide most of the care for infants, elderly relatives, and others who are sick and disabled" (Wood 57). Thus pretending to be a caretaker is part of how Caroline expresses her gender identity. Caroline can see that her older sister Jenny pretends to be a mommy and takes care of her stuffed animals by pretending to feed them and giving them hugs. And Caroline perhaps sees that her own mother provides food for her and hugs her. Caroline can also see that she, her sister and her mother are females. So Caroline mimics this behavior as an expression of her gender, she pretends to hug and feed her dolls and her mother praises her by saying,

“someday you’ll be a good mommy”. It is acceptable in our society for women to be viewed as caretakers and for women and girls to express these types of behaviors.

However, in some cultures outside the U.S. gender is expressed differently, women being the caretakers are not the norm. For instance in the Mundugumor tribe in New Guinea “mothers [are] not nurturing and spen[d] very little time with newborn babies, weaning them early instead” (Wood 25). Women as well as men in that society are socialized “to be aggressive, independent, and competitive” (Wood 25). If Caroline grew up this New Guinea tribe we can hardly imagine her pretending to feed dolls because in this society being a caretaker is not how women express their gender identity.

To give another example of how gender is expressed differently in the U.S. than in other cultures, we can look at clothing. In the U.S. when a baby is born, girls typically wear pink and boys wear blue, girls wear dresses and boys do not, the gender of the baby is expressed by clothing and as it grows into a child, the child’s gender is expressed by clothing. The clothing tells adults whether to treat children as boys or as girls from the time they are born. However in the Dominican Republic boys may wear dresses and be treated as girls until they reach puberty at which point “his dresses are discarded, and he is treated as a male” (Wood 55). Boys wearing dresses and being treated as girls are the norm within that society.

We can see from looking at these two examples that the culture that one is born into has a huge influence on how individuals express their gender.

Cognitive development theory would explain Caroline’s behavior differently. Cognitive development theory “focuses on how individuals learn from interaction with others to define themselves, including their gender” and it “assumes that children play active roles in developing their gender identities” (Wood 52). A key part of cognitive development theory is a concept

called gender constancy, the understanding of a person “that he or she is male or female and this will not change” (Wood 52). According to this theory, gender constancy appears at around 3 or 4 years of age. And once children understand gender constancy they “become motivated to learn how to be competent in the sex and gender assigned to them” (Wood 52-3). Children learn how to be competent in the gender assigned to them by seeking out models to learn from and imitate. So cognitive development theory would explain Caroline’s behavior by saying that since she is 4 years old she realizes that she is female and that she will stay that way. Caroline has observed her older sister playing with stuffed animals by pretending to feed and hug them so she is modeling this behavior, she is enacting what she thinks is female behavior. When Caroline models this behavior by pretending to feed and hug her dolls, Caroline’s mother gives her behavior positive reinforcement by saying, “Caroline, someday you’ll be a good mommy.” So now Caroline has learned that this behavior is appropriate female behavior and she will probably continue behaviors such as this and will continue to imitate her sister and mother in the future.

Another explanation that some would give for Caroline’s behavior is that it is maternal instinct. One dictionary definition of an instinct is “the innate capacity of an animal to respond to a given stimulus in a relatively fixed way” another says it is “a natural or innate impulse, inclination or tendency” (“instinct”). So according to some, Caroline’s behavior is a natural impulse and an innate capacity. However I have to disagree on two levels. (1) I disagree because Caroline is not a mother therefore she cannot possess a so called maternal instinct. In order for it to be a maternal instinct, the stimulus that makes the instinct kick in would have to be that of giving birth and since 4 year old Caroline has never given birth I would not call her behavior maternal instinct. (2) Humans do not respond to stimulus in relatively fixed ways, there is a vast array of ways that humans react to things that happen to them and certainly all women react

differently to being mothers, some are more nurturing than others, still some mothers will kill their children, and others will have abortions. The existence of a maternal instinct also does not agree with either theories of gender presented here.

The anthropological theory of gender does not agree with the maternal instinct because it believes that gender expression is determined largely by the society and culture that we grow up in, it does not believe that gender expression is determined by natural instincts or impulses. If a woman grows up in a society where mothers are very nurturing and spend a lot of time with their children then by and large all women will act this way towards their children. However if a woman grows up in a society like the tribe in New Guinea mentioned above then by and large she will not be very nurturing towards her children and will not spend a lot of time with them because that is not a part of how females express gender identity in that society.

The cognitive development theory does not agree with maternal instinct because it believes that gender is learned from interactions with others rather than being something that is innately within us. So if a female child grows up in a house with a mother who is very nurturing, when the child grows up and has children she will model the way her own mother acted towards her and will thus be very nurturing to her children. However if a female child grows up in an abusive household then when she grows up she will likely model this behavior and act abusively towards her children. Cognitive development theory would also support the thought that mothers learn how to be mothers by watching other mothers, one does not instinctively know how to sooth a crying baby, how to breastfeed, how to change a diaper, and how to love a child, this is learned by watching, modeling, and referencing others mothers or other sources.

Works Cited

"instinct." *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. HarperCollins

Publishers. 12 Feb. 2012. <Dictionary.com

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/instinct>>.

Wood, Julia T. *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*. 9th ed. Boston, MA:

Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011. Print.

SAMPLE