

GENDER AND SEX IDENTITY IN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract: *This article presents the theoretical framework and results of research carried out on adolescents regarding gender and sex identity. These results indicate the approach of youth to masculinity and femininity from a social point of view as well as from a biological one. Socialisation factors that influence the forming of these types of identities are: parents, the peer group of friends and mates, and mass media.*

Key words: *gender identity, sexual identity, parental models, gender roles.*

1. Introduction

This article describes the way in which gender identity is configured in adolescents. In literature, there are several components, such as social and personal identity, vocational, moral-spiritual, or ethnic identity.

Starting with childhood, there are various questions regarding our existence as social actors, our role in this world: *Who am I? What am I doing on this earth? Where am I going in life?*

Identity shapes, as a well-organised concept, one's own being and one's relation to the world; it consists of values, beliefs, and aims, to which the individual is devoted (Harwood, 2010).

The construction of identity is continuous and complex and it lies ahead throughout one's entire life. The social roles that we play, as we mature, determine continuous changes in identity. We make commitments, especially in adolescence and in adult age, both on a personal and professional level, which will form various areas of identity. Exploring new roles and opportunities, we interact with new persons, and we acquire new responsibilities. Thus, our identity is constantly changing (Marcia *apud* Harwood, 2010).

The concepts of gender and sex in a sociological sense are different in significance. Sex is defined from an anatomical, biological, and hormonal standpoint (Iluţ, 2001).

From a socio-biologist standpoint, sex is set at the moment of conception, when both parents contribute to the forming of the 23 pairs of chromosomes – the biological inheritance of the child. The mother can contribute only X type chromosomes, while the father can contribute either an X chromosome or a Y-chromosome. If the father

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contributes an X to the mother's X, the differentiating embryo that forms will be an XX pair and it will develop into a female child; if the father contributes a Y, the embryo will have an XY pair, which is male (Goodman, 1992).

Thus, there occur differences in the physical constitution of the body. The hormonal substance produced in women is *oestrogen*, which makes their immune system stronger against infections as compared to men; it is the hormone that creates the sensation of being well, and contentment, with progesterone triggering maternal feelings (Tudose, 2005).

Testosterone is a hormone specific to men that produces more aggressive behaviours in men than in women, with sexual stimulation being higher for the former.

There are *biological sexual characteristics* that differentiate women from men by the reproductive sexual organs (vagina, uterus, and ovaries in women and penis, scrotum, and testicles in men), but also *secondary sexual characteristics* that lead to different features in women and men (e.g. a wider hip, pubic hair and large breasts in women and greater pilosity, developed muscles, and deepening of the voice in men). The differences in height, weight, and muscular mass make a clear distinction between men and women.

There is also talk about the different *laterality* of the brain in men and women, on the basis of which the *left cerebral hemisphere* is more developed in men, specialised in spatial and mathematical abilities, logic, deduction, analysis, and order; while in women the *right cerebral hemisphere* is more developed, being specialised in the functions of language, artistic propensities, intuition, and creativity.

Gender is the sociocultural dimension that supposes parallel and socially unequal division between females and males. The term *gender* does not refer only to individual identity and to personality, but at a symbolic level, to cultural ideals and stereotypes related to masculinity and femininity (Marshal, 1998).

So, gender is a social construct in being identified from early childhood as "being a boy" (masculinity) or as "being a girl" (femininity) through the process of early socialisation. This segregation of status and socially specific roles occurs in: the public arena, society, as well as in the private environment, family; in work, the sexual division of work; in institutions and organisations; in political life; and in other social spheres of interest (Iluţ, 2001).

Gender identity is "*the capacity to fundamentally belong to one sex or another*". Kohlberg (1966) adopted this term and regards, "*the ability of a child to discriminate with accuracy between women and men and to identify one's own gender status correctly through the development of the constancy of the gender*" (apud Zucker, 2005).

In literature, we find a series of theories that lay emphasis on the development of gender identity (Dworetzky, 1993):

- a. *The psycho-analytical approach of Sigmund Freud* that mentions the Oedip complex and Electra complex (girls feel attraction to their father, and boys to their mother);
- b. *The theory of social learning of Albert Bandura* through which children are rewarded or punished depending on fulfilling demands and role expectations related to masculinity and femininity;

- c. *The constancy of the gender mentioned by Sandra Bem* through which, at about seven years of age, children become aware that their sex is permanent and irrevocable because they begin to acquire minimal anatomy knowledge.

2. Gender Specific Differences

Starting with primary socialisation, in the traditional family, features of gender role are obvious: the girls are dressed in colours such as pink or red; boys have blue and green clothes. Girls play with dolls (plush toys, Barbie), boys with cars (trucks, race cars). A toy department destined for boys comprises numerous weapons: knives, machine guns, pistols, and bows; which implicitly endows them with latent or explicit aggression, while toy departments for girls offer many games and toys with princesses and dolls, this way teaching girls tolerance (Coman, 2005).

Gender roles are learned through direct experience as well as by observing the behaviour of parents in an indirect manner. Since they are little, girls are encouraged by their family to be mild, attentive, dependent, their sensitivity is recognised; parents talk more to them and use support discourses; while boys need to be active, tough, independent or they are treated more roughly than girls when they make mistakes, they are forbidden to cry, they are trained that it is desirable to control their feelings. In patriarchal societies, crying in men is sign of weakness; "you are not allowed to join the army if you cry" (Coman, 2005).

In secondary socialisation (school), *the groups of similar age* also have their importance in the formation of gender roles. Thus, in the middle of childhood (before the age of ten and in the first years of adolescence) boys take up team activities (such as sports) in which competition and rules are extremely important. Girls often get involved in less organised and more spontaneous activities that have less stringent rules (e.g. skipping rope, talking and singing).

Also, schools through their educational practices influence the formation of gender roles. Some studies certify that manuals were reproducing gender specific roles. Boys were active, girls passive; girls were playing with dolls and boys with trucks. Women and men were presented in roles characteristic of parents. School curricula reflected traditional gender roles. Boys attended commerce and science, and girls attended economics and literature (Goodman, 1992).

Along the gender socialisation, girls have the tendency to speak and write earlier, thus obtaining greater results in grammar and diction; while boys have the tendency to be more skilful in manipulating objects, construction of 3D-forms, and performing mental operations with complex images. It is that probable that girls are more permissive, reflective, and empathetic; their game tends to be more ordered. Boys are physically active, aggressive, they play in large groups and spaces, they are delighted by noise and by games that stimulate their physicality (Eisenberg and Fabes *apud* Coman, 2005).

Girls complete various development stages before boys. Boys are more vulnerable physically than girls because they engage in more difficult specific activities. Boys reach higher levels than girls: they can jump farther, they can run more rapidly, and they can throw farther. Girls have advantages in terms of gross motricity: they jump over the

skipping rope, they hop (they have balance); but also in terms of fine motor skills: they tie laces even more easily; they write more neatly; and they cut out things (Harwood et al., 2010).

Girls have verbal abilities, boys have spatial abilities; girls are more competent in the area of social humanities, boys in that of exact sciences: mathematics, logic, geometry; girls have abilities and better social skills than boys.

In the past, in the traditional family, women used to have only expressive domestic roles, of being a good mother and wife, of taking care of the health and education of children, while the father was attributed especially instrumental roles, specific to the public arena: to earn money for the household, to enquire about the necessities of the family (Kulik, 2000).

With the occurrence of the feminist movement toward the end of the eighties, when women proclaimed equal voting and educational rights, the situation changed. Thus, in contemporary society, girls are taught from early on, to be independent, active, not to depend on men financially; regarding boys socialisation, nothing changes, they continue with the trio of mobility, activism, and autonomy, acting mainly in the public arena (Tudose, 2005).

3. Ways of Transmitting Gender Identity to Adolescents

The main mechanism in creating identity is socialisation. From early childhood children assimilate from parents a series of attitudes, values, behaviour models, which are interiorised. Gender and sex identity are created in primary and secondary socialisation depending on how the child learns his or her role. The social network that influences the creation of identity also comprises grandparents, and brothers/sisters (Sanrock, 1996). Gotea (2014) underlines that although both family and friends are sources of personal wellbeing and identity formation, it seems that we tend to appreciate the importance of family members and neglect the impact that friends are having in our lives.

Concepts of gender and identification with it, begin at early ages, around the age of three, sexual identity outlines, when the child explores his body and becomes aware through comparison that he is a boy or a girl, which is called the "constancy of gender". Studies show that in the first phase any child irrespective of his sex is subject to maternal influences but he learns to become mature through the identification with the same sex parent and later with representative persons of the same sex around him. In the beginning both boys and girls identify with their mother but boys detach from her to affirm their masculinity, while girls continue to remain attached to her. Masculinity and not femininity is perceived as a loss. The boy is obliged to detach from his mother and take his father as a model. The rural environment allows for an easier identification of the boy with his father because he can visualise his roles more clearly. In the urban environment, this identification is not necessarily favoured, the model is less visible and the adolescent can discover other values. The development of masculine identity is essential through separation from the mother. The boy that does not have beside him an adult man encounters identification difficulties, he has a more reduced capacity of expression and he is more effeminate (Mitrofan, 2003).

In early and middle childhood, boys are beside their mother, but the child knows to differentiate between specific male characteristics and feminine ones starting from an early age - approximately 5 years. (Lynn, 1969).

One also takes into account the expectations of parents before the birth of their children. If one or both parents had expectations opposed to the gender of the child (they wanted a boy but got a girl), they might manifest contrary to the role prescriptions: the father might take the girl to football matches, fishing, and automobile workshops, this way the girl assimilates masculine specific features (she is more boyish). The reaction of the father towards his daughter also has an important role. If the girl physically resembles her mother (who is very feminine), he will have the tendency to treat her like a woman. If the father does not have a son and would like one and his daughter has a robust and vigorous constitution, he will be tempted to treat her like a boy (Mitrofan, 2003).

There are adolescents that place themselves at all levels: from not accepting one's own gender (girls are not satisfied with the gender to which they belong and prefer the company of boys and borrow masculine traits) to complete contentment with belonging to one's own gender; the same thing can happen to both adolescent girls and boys (Modrea, 2006).

Studies also show that boys that grow up in single parent families, usually the mother, are more effeminate than those who grow up having both parents and having both paternal and maternal models (Muntean, 2006).

The mother endows the child with *resources of expression* (affection, mildness, mercy, cheerfulness, humour); the father has instrumental roles (courage, strength, energy, perseverance, balance, and wisdom) (Stănciulescu, 1997).

The results of a study on the topic parent to adolescent relationship show that Romanian mothers promote attachment, cohesion, close liaison, social courtesy, and parental authority. This offers maximum supervision (instrumental control) and also emotional attachment in relation to their children, especially with girls, boys are less exposed to maternal control and encouraged to accept risks. A mother spends twice as much time with adolescent children than fathers, the latter getting more involved in recreation activities.

Mothers more often, fathers more rarely, have discussions with adolescent boys and girls about menstruation, first kiss, first dates, adolescent friends, success or failure at school. The father offers the adolescent money, benefits, resources, solves concrete problems: he pays for camps and festive activities. Fathers are centred on normative development, what you have to learn, what you have to do, what you need. There can also be an absent father, if he is preoccupied only with his professional achievements (Stănciulescu, 1997).

The frequency of conflicts is higher between mothers and adolescents because they spend more time together, they participate in the household chores, than between fathers and adolescents because the father spends less time at home.

Behaviour typical to gender can be learned whilst children grow up, the behaviour of parents is different: fathers are tougher with boys because they expect them to be more hostile, active and aggressive; and milder with girls because with girls they encourage an assertive, emotional, sensitive behaviour. They teach boys from infancy to control their

emotions: “boys are not allowed to cry”, give them more independence, while with girls aggressive behaviour is discouraged (Mitrofan, 2003).

Fathers are tougher with boys and milder with girls, in adolescence a change takes place though: boys are offered more freedom: they can go out more often and longer, they are left unsupervised longer, the freedom of girls is restricted – they need to get home from the disco or other activities at a certain hour (Dworetzky, 1993).

Girls consider that they do not have the same freedom as boys, they want to spend more time with friends, to travel alone, to go to camps unattended, to come home late.

Girls benefit from more attention, they are listened to and supported more often especially when they need more help, while boys are encouraged in their trials to distinguish themselves, they are taught to be more confident in their own abilities and to see a real challenge in any activity (Tudose, 2012).

Regarding sexual identity elements, these are related to the perception of one’s own body, reference to intimacy, ways of satisfying sexual needs. This fact is due to an increase in sexual interest in puberty and adolescence. The main sources of experiencing and informing in the process of sexual socialisation are: mass media, Internet, magazines of the type “Cool Girl” and “Bravo Girl”, groups of friends. Increasing interest in sexuality in pubescents and adolescents is due to increasing contact with pornographic materials accessed on the computer, tablets, phones or TV.

Pre-martial sexuality is also a fact today in Romania today, adolescent girls kick-starting their sex life from high school or middle school. If girls want to satisfy an emotional need through their partner, boys want to eliminate sexual tensions (Stănciulescu, 1997).

Many adolescents have, nevertheless, an unrealistic view with regards to sexuality, and don’t take into account the implied risks and not having enough information related to means of conception. Thus, sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies occur.

The solution for adequate sexuality is the efficient communication between parents and children. The family should be the first source of information besides school (through information campaigns and time with form tutors) and friends.

4. Objectives and Methodology

This article includes a part of the qualitative, exploratory, descriptive research. Me and my colleague Ioana Atudorei have applied semi-structured interviews between July 2017 and February 2018, with girls and boys aged from 16 till 20 years old. We went on Braşov high schools and applied these interviews to students from the 9th till 12th grades. These interviews were face-to-face and conducted until the information become redundant on the principle of methodological saturation. Then the interviews were transcribed, encoded and introduced into NVivo10 programme, on the basis of which we could subsequently analyse and interpret the data. The research is mainly aimed at describing the dimensions related to gender and sex identity. This was carried out through objectives, such as:

- specifying the elements that differentiate between men and women;
- presenting socialisation factors that influence the development of gender and sex identity;

- describing the implications offered through education by parents taking into account the gender of the child.

5. Conclusions

Following the qualitative research, a series of conclusions can be drawn with respect to gender and sex identity. Thus, it seems that the elements related to identity are transmitted from parents to children and they comprise values, attitudes, conceptions about the world and life and specific behaviour models. Thus, gender identity is learned through primary and secondary socialisation depending on the way the child assimilates gender roles, this approach - social learning roles appearing in the writings of Iluț (2001).

The first signs of the appearance of identity are those related to the “constancy of gender”, in which the exploring of the body takes place, becoming aware through comparison whether one is a boy or a girl, these aspects are performed through the identification with the parent of the same sex as the child. As appears in the literature (Bem *apud* Modrea, 2006) at the age of 7 children are aware that their sex is permanent and irrevocable, they start to have minimal knowledge of anatomy.

If the mother endows the children with resources of expressions such as tenderness or mildness, the father has an instrumental role such as courage, strength, energy, and perseverance. Girls are taught to be empathetic, while for boys others inhibit affectionate behaviour: “you are not allowed to cry, you are a man!”

With regard to models of forming identity in the traditional vision, mothers assign their daughters maternal and marriage roles, in the modern vision girls are taught to be financially independent and cherish their social status. This is an approach of the contemporary society with implications of the feminist movement, as it is also evident from the literature (Tudose, 2005).

The role of mothers in adolescence is to have conversations on topics such as first kiss, first date, role of friends, and success or failure in school. The role of the father is to solve concrete problems: benefits, and resources; they are centred on normative development: what you have to learn, what you need, and what you need to do.

Certain gender incongruences can appear when parents have other expectations as compared to how the child is, e.g. the father wants a boy but has a girl, it is probable that he educates her in a masculine spirit: taking her to football matches, automobile workshops, and such. This conclusion of the interviews about reversing expectations, is also found in the literature (Coman, 2005).

Boys are offered more independence while the freedom of girls is restricted.

There are also other sources of socialisation such as mass media, group of friends and neighbours, and the extended family. These, beside the nuclear family, have a lesser or greater influence regarding the forming of gender and sex identity.

With respect to the proliferation of information in terms of sexuality, we can say that this generates curiosity that adolescents are beginning to test. Today, mass media and implicitly the Internet, as well as magazines such as “Cool Girl” and “Bravo Girl”, offer numerous sources of exploring sexuality among adolescents. The main topics of discussion

are: abortion, contraceptives, sexually transmitted diseases, emotional intimacy, and sexual orientation.

As it appears in the literature (Santrock, 1996), few adolescents communicate, though, with their parents about these types of topics mentioning that the latter have different ways of seeing reality, are conservative, and don't have a modern vision.

Today, they talk about parental education due to the challenges that exist in modernity both for parents and for children: drug consumption, alcohol, cigarettes, and depression. The solution is represented by the cooperation of the mother and the father. The parents must be partners in their parental roles and also partners with other socialisation factors such as school and the group of friends/mates.

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