

## Sociocultural Perspectives on Masculinity and Femininity as Gender Identity Components

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**Abstract:** *Distincția dintre cele două aspecte ale identității de gen apare ca rezultat al unui proces complex ce implică evoluție biologică, psihologică și socială. Articolul de față analizează modul în care literatura, psihologia și științele educației au fost influențate de abordările și cercetările feministe.*

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*“Other societies assign roles to men and women that are quite unlike ours. But no country I know of has tried to bring them up to think of themselves as similar. Such an attempt would be most unprecedented social experiment in the history of our species” (Spock, 1974).*

Each generation tries, using different methods, to create a correct society, in which justice and social equality to be considered as key concept for social and cultural development.

Late 1960s was marked by shaping a new trend in literary criticism under the mark of „women’s liberation movement”, aiming to highlight the influences of gender stereotypes promoted at socio-cultural level on literary tradition. Feminism, as a new developed scientific paradigm, causes essential transformations within the academic subjects and beyond.

As it tries to impose egalitarianism as a social principle of individual adaptation to new requirements and conditions, attempts to extend the definitions of masculinity and femininity across the set of cultural stereotypes are outlined. Gender roles suffer changes and transformations, sometimes even at their core level, determined on the one hand by changes at the society level and on the other hand by the requests of the society members from the desire to increase the adaptation level to the environment. However, at content, organization and methodology level used in the elaboration and the development of a various academic subjects a maintenance of traditional gender issues is to be noticed.

The key concepts underlying the issue of gender and making the object of many studies and scientific research are the femininity and the masculinity, as components of gender identity. Femininity and masculinity have had various representations in all areas, from art and literature, to science and technology; they undergo the changes occurring at the social level.

Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of social context and its role in the formation and the development of relations and gender roles, the theories and the models inspired by it becoming extremely influential in the psychology of gender (Deaux, 2001, Gergen, 2001, apud Enns, 2008). Thus, new theoretical approaches to gender issues try to highlight the perspective of social relations established in the society. Based on these considerations, Crawford and Unger (2004) proposed a pattern that highlights the action of gender on the individual, interpersonal and social structure level, each of them putting its imprint on individual adaptation to the norms and values promoted at socio-cultural level.

The individual level includes aspects of the self-perception, cognitions, affects, behaviors and gender role definitions. Researches conducted to date have attested the importance of childhood to build one’s own identity, an adequate representation of gender and meanings of femininity and masculinity concepts. Thus, in agreement with these, individuals form their particular beliefs, have some feelings and develop a specific behavior towards gender.

The interpersonal level includes gender-related social interactions, referring in particular to how the beliefs, gender stereotypes and gender schemas of one person interact with gender characteristics or behavior of another person. Thus, interpersonal relations are

dependent on how the individual is representing his concept of masculinity or femininity, on the ideas he has about what is appropriate or not for one gender or another, but also on the meanings they have for other members of the group to which the individual belongs.

Referring to the male role, O'Neil (2008) specifies that individuals can "devalue or restrict the others because of the deviations from, or conforming to the norms of masculinity ideology", or can experience negative reactions, personal intrusions or restrictions due to a nonconforming or a too strong compliance to these codes. Social psychology brings various evidences, the membership capacity of a group being dependent on how the individual is adapting to the ideology promoted by the group.

The level of social structure considers gender as a set of power relations, including the ways in which social policies, institutions and access to power restricts or encourages the gender role adaptation.

Many times certain aspects of a person's identity can be associated with privileges, while others can contribute to oppression or disadvantages.

Through socialization individuals will accept and adopt the dominant ideas of his culture, whatever form it might take it.

The social structure dimension of gender was the subject of many studies and researches, the feminist movement emphasizing, in particular, the unequal social roles and the gender discrimination existing at both social structure and the values levels promoted by the media.

Young's study in 1998 (apud Rice, 2002) suggests that reading is a basis for the construction of gender in a society and by adapting the literary discourse so that it could become important for girls and boys it creates the opportunity to modelling definitions that they give to masculinity and femininity.

Some researchers offered children books in which characters were assigned to non-traditional roles, the children failed to identify with them, transforming the gender incongruous characteristics with stereotypes of gender they already formed in traditional ones that confirmed the existing gender patterns.

Through actions, behaviors and literary discourse, the authors can change, transform or even form new values and ideas that will contribute to a better psycho-social adjustment of the reader to the life and social interactions.

Children are the most exposed to cultural influences because their cognitive schemas are in training. Their social life experiences are influenced by the attitudes, the beliefs and the conduct of literary characters, by the way they are presented and the situations they have to face. Authors become responsible for the construction of patterns whose representations will be internalized, being inner part of the child's personality.

The concepts of masculinity and femininity are learned from the first year of life, the child receiving the first definition in the family, among his friends and within the group and later in the educational environment.

It is to be noted that the non-traditional female characteristics are more easily accepted than the male ones, this explaining the existence of a greater number of books for children that describe non-traditional female characters more than male characters that feature typical female role.

Regardless of how they are perceived, the mentioned patterns change, explicitly or implicitly, the gender schemas of the individual either strengthening them or altering their content. Thus, the literature puts its mark on gender identity formation and development of the child. It influences the definitions the child gives to masculinity and femininity and he encounters the situation in which he must accept or oppose to the conformism promoted through the values and norms of the society in which he grows.

Literary characters represent patterns of behavior that once internalized and developed they become components of already formed stereotypes or contribute to their formation, the individuals being taught to give meanings and to behave accordingly to stereotyped gender schemas.

Gender identity formation and development becomes addicted to the information the individuals receive through reading or through the media in general.

The child will learn from the very first years of life to separate information about himself and the others in distinct categories determined by sexual affiliation, this influencing decisively the evolution of the individual, his way of relating to socio-cultural environment, his actions and his beliefs.

Dupuy, Ritchie and Cook (1994) studied the degree to which gender issues is included in counseling and adult education programs. They pointed out that although most of them consider gender, gender role and gender identity as important aspects of individual's social adaptation, less than half include gender issues in their curriculum and less than one third have a special course. They concluded that „... although there may be awareness of the need for more emphasis on women's and gender issues ... however, awareness of the inadequacy does not necessarily lead to curricular changes (apud Hoffman and Myers, 1996).

The study of education can be regarded as research into how a person develops within a culture, education representing in this situation the way in which an individual receives a set of values, ideas, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors appropriate to the society he lives in. The membership capacity of a culture is acknowledged when the individual adopts and follows the rules represented by the activities, relationships, places and practices that describe the specific of that culture.

Each society can be described according to existing social categories, each based on different criteria: gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. The gender differences, the characteristics of femininity and masculinity, the definitions that the cultures establish for these concepts are different and sometimes contradictory.

The distinction between male and female, between masculinity and femininity surpasses the biological level, being extended to psychological, sociological, artistic and other areas of social life that describe individuals and society. The vast majority of cultures includes in this categorization and distribution of labor, employment or social functions that sustain human life as well.

As the changes appear in society, changes occur in human personality as well at the level of attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviors. They are forced to adapt themselves to new socio-cultural conditions, by opposing the conformism and reducing resistance to change.

Because school is deeply rooted in society, in as far as its history and values are concerned it is necessary to make a reassessment of the educational institutions in terms of their adaptability to the socio-cultural environment in which they operate, so they could provide a link between the content of school subjects and the need to develop an identity in which gender stereotypes and prejudices are eliminated.

Psycho-pedagogical research in recent years have pursued the adaptation of academic subjects to the demands and needs of a changing society and to explore the ways in which teaching and learning can be built so that the period of schooling could become a means of developing the individual's personality, regardless of his age or type of education he receives.

Through the education provided both within the family and in the specialized institutions of the state, the individual should expand his own definitions of femininity and masculinity, determining changes in the society, overcoming the stereotyped barriers of his culture he is part of.

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