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*Gender Stereotype in the Context of Social Roles –
As Perceived by Older Preschool Children*

Stereotyp płci w kontekście pełnionych ról społecznych –
w percepcji dzieci starszo-przedszkolnych

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ABSTRACT

In the article, based on interviews with 158 six-year-old children from Opole, attention is paid to the children's perception of gender in the context of social roles played by men and women. The main aim was to establish children's perception of the roles. The questions covered an attempt at evaluating whether (and to what extent) the interest in the problem area, which has been present for years now, as well as the broadly expressed need for opposing role stereotypes relating to the sexes, have brought about expected effects in the form of changes in children's awareness. The results of the study confirm the thesis that the ways in which preschool children see social roles performed by women and men in their professional lives, with reference to duties at home, are not free from gender stereotyping. Still such influence is not as strong as initially assumed. Possibly, the obtained results are the effect of progressing transformation of social consciousness in the sphere of roles played by women and men as well as poorer experience of children at preschool age in comparison with experience of older children. With time gender stereotyping becomes stronger.

Keywords: gender stereotyping; social roles; children at preschool age

Gender makes the key dimension
of personal life,
social relations and culture.

(Connell, 2013, p. 9)

INTRODUCTION

Distinguishing between the sexes is one of the fundamental and the first categories which children experience and learn beginning with their earliest childhoods. “Gender is one of the fundamental aspects of the notion of *I* of each human being and the main trait mentioned while assessing the given person” (Schaffer, 2006, p. 205), thus it is providing basic information about the individual. Rearing a child depends, to a great extent, on its sex, parents, minders, teachers, who – from the earliest age – assign certain roles to the young, perceive and bring up girls in a different way from that applied to boys. It is not surprising then that the child’s perception of the sex and social roles played by women and men is heavily marked by the category of gender. While constructing the image of an individual, a child forms it in accordance with social messages which can be strongly tinted with stereotypes, since, as Ziółkowska (2005a, p. 436) underlines, “social norms determine also what and which forms of activity, that are behaviours and beliefs, do not become representatives of the given age group or sex”. Such perception of reality, based on social conventions, can turn out unfavourable and can lead to unequal chances arising in the social functioning of women and men, which is especially visible on the job market (cf. Gromkowska-Melosik, 2011; Connel, 2013).

Contemporarily, the situation in which women find themselves has changed and is still evolving as compared to that in the past. The socioeconomic transformations going on in Poland and in the world in recent years have brought about a change in the consciousness of societies and a need to “adapt social roles (also those connected with the sex) to the specifics of the new sociocultural reality” (Ziółkowska, 2005b, p. 570). Although the interest in the phenomenon of gender, including the problem of inequality of women and men, has been present for many years now, giving rise to “new gender orders” (Connell, 2013, p. 11). It has been reflected in richness of literature on the subject, still making a current and important topic of discussions on the part of psychologists, sociologists, educators and other researchers.

The primary reason for undertaking to deal with the problem is the author’s interest in matters relating to children at preschool age. It also results from the rather scanty recognition of the problem of perceiving gender roles with reference to the youngest.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE PROBLEM AREA

The word “stereotype” derives from the Greek *stereos* (tightened, hard) and *typos* (print, pattern). In the 18th century, it referred to printer’s plates and casts which were impressed with the use of the former (cf. Mandal, 2000). And even though the notion generally has a negative connotation, we often allow ourselves to be influenced by stereotypes and to many they offer a valuable (sometimes the only) source of information. The term “gender stereotype” is frequently used in the literature of the subject interchangeably or beside the following ones: understanding of gender, gender constancy, sense of gender identity, schema relating to gender, gender stability, notions of gender roles, process of gender typifying (cf. Schaffer, 2006).

In social sciences, we can notice more and more commonly used differentiation between biological sex and generic, social and cultural gender, which was introduced by Stoller in 1968. Gender means “a kind” or “cultural sex”, it is defined as a set of attributes, norms, attitudes and behavioural patterns as well as social expectations assigned to females and males in the community and in culture (cf. Lipsitz-Bem, 2000; Chomczyńska-Rubacha, 2004; Connell, 2013). The interest in gender in education arose in England and the USA at the beginning of the 1970s (stimulated by the approval of The Sex Discrimination Act in 1972 – the report revealing practices of discrimination relating to sex). It also reached Poland in the 1990s (cf. Chomczyńska-Rubacha, Rubacha, 2007). The problem itself has been provoking a lot of controversy which concentrates on criticism of separation of sex from biology, which – according to the opponents of gender – undermines the identity and dignity of man (Bujak, Oko, Benedykt XVI et al., 2014).

In the 1980s, Deaux and Lewis described sex stereotype, defining its four components: personality traits, social roles, physical appearance and profession (cf. Mandal, 2000).

Social stereotype is defined as

a simplified mental image of reality – true or false – very inaccurate, usually containing a simplified truth, but – at the same time – resistant to alterations, formed rather through a social message, not as a result of one’s own experience. It is of both individual character – expressing personal beliefs of an individual, concerning features and properties of an object, and collective – being a set of views on a given group of people. (Pankowska, 2005, p. 19)

Stereotypes are rigid and lasting. It is with difficulty that they can be modified, being heavily conditioned by civilisation, culture as well as religion. In the process of rearing, they are passed down by one generation to another and those relating to women and men are fairly deeply rooted in social awareness. They function in the spheres connected with sexes (convictions of what types of activity suit females and which apply to males) and in traits attributed to the given sex regarding physical appearance and personality.

Looking for sources of stereotypes, it is most often pointed to a family in which parents use a rigid division of roles taken on by individual family members and pass it down in the process of bringing up their children: they furnish the girl's bedroom in a different fashion from that in which the bedroom is arranged for a boy, they buy types of clothes for girls that are different from those designed for boys, they also apply a different system of evaluation. "It is already in the case of male infants that many behaviours are interpreted as aggressive, whereas the same behaviours in girls are explained in a different way" (Brannon, 2002, p. 21).

Listing all the successive causes of gender typifying, one cannot forget to mention impacts of the peer group, messages derived from the media (especially TV and the Internet), literary works (including also stories and tales), illustrations or, last but not least, advertisements. Due to the limited space and character of the present discussion it is not possible to make broader references to the factors mentioned above.

An educational institution – kindergarten or school – is yet another source of stereotypical behaviours. Here, it is especially worth emphasising the role of schoolbooks and teachers (as far as the preschool age is concerned, it is mainly women – mothers and women-teachers – who primarily take part in the process of rearing and socialisation). In the Polish literature, the problems of stereotyping and sex-related discrimination in education have been studied, among others, by Pankowska, Mandal, Kopciewicz, Chopczyńska-Rubacha, Lewartowska-Zychowicz, Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska. For example, Kopciewicz (2008) draws attention to the fact that streaming children due to their sex is a common practice both in kindergarten and at school. Gender typifying is visible in evaluation and treatment of children, assigning tasks to them, amount of attention paid to them, or expectations with reference to girls and boys.

Lewartowska-Zychowicz stresses that

the image of the world, as created by schoolbooks conditioned by the curriculum, becomes reduced to a homogeneous path of life set specifically for women and men. This not only does not represent the social differences in possible situations and social arrangements in which people function, but indeed favours lowering life aspirations. (Lewartowska-Zychowicz, 2009, p. 177)

This state of things presented in schoolbooks is also confirmed by Pankowska (2005) and Kopciewicz (2009). Additionally, Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska (2010) draw attention to the phenomenon of "language invisibility of women", pointing to the substantial differences between the sexes, regarding language and the lack of corresponding feminine names denoting professions and functions, and also application of masculine forms of verbs, adjectives and pronouns, particularly those found in instructions contained in schoolbooks and formulation of tasks. Kopciewicz (2009) refers to this practice as "language androcentrism" and perceives this phenomenon to be present in teacher-pupil relations and in schoolbooks likewise.

DEVELOPMENT OF ROLES CONNECTED WITH THE SEXES

Children are also subject to sex typifying, which researchers of the problem try to explain by means of the two following theoretical perspectives: theory of learning (based on conditioning and strengthening through rewarding behaviours suitable for the given sex and eliminating improper behaviours through punishing) and theory of social learning, in which the main mechanism of action is imitating (Schaffer, 2006). As regards Pankowska (2005, p. 71), “thanks to observing other people, chiefly its parents, a child finds out about behaviours which are suitable for its own sex and about those which are so for the opposite one”.

Child learns its sex identity very early. Schaffer (2006, p. 205) observes that “already in the late infancy children are able to recognise faces, being directed by the criterion of sex”, while “two-year-olds are capable of using names which determine sex with reference to themselves and others”. The researcher underlines also that being between the second and the third year of their lives, children will choose toys in agreement with the sex stereotype; around the third year of life, they are more willing to select their peers of the same sex as companions to play with. After turning 3–4 years old, preschoolers begin developing stereotypical thinking about professions and activities which – in their assessment – are typical for individual sexes. Five-year-old children attribute different psychic features to men and women and at a very early time start to look for principles which define the ways in which men and women should behave (Schaffer, 2006).

According to Piaget (after Chomczyńska-Rubacha, 2009, p. 111), a child is ready to accept and process stereotypes in perception of the world “from the moment of acquiring cognitive stability in perceiving objects, which manifests itself in the first categorisations: small – big, strong – weak”. Child’s understanding of the gender consists in “making itself aware of: identity, stability and permanence of a person’s sex. These three aspects develop in the above-mentioned order during the first 6–7 years of life” (Schaffer, 2006, p. 225).

Contemporary rearing should develop a model in which the biological sex is not a determinant of a different treatment of an individual and does not become a factor in generating social inequality. Consequently, there is a need for changing the way of thinking about the roles that women and men play in the modern world. This, in turn, requires abandoning the schema (a mould, a stereotype) which is deeply rooted both in social practice and consciousness, as well as passed down to succeeding generations, most often highlighting the dominance of males.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Undertaking to empirically examine the problem under analysis (sex is considered here in the sociocultural context), attention was focused on children’s perception of gender in the context of social roles performed by women and men.

The subject of the study was defined accordingly. The aim was to check whether contemporary children at the age of six take over the model of thinking about women's and men's roles, which is written in the historically conditioned stereotype. It was accepted that stereotypes, although being of lasting nature as a rule, are of the dynamic character as well and can be modified (however slowly) if changes appear in concrete environments. Therefore, the research problem was formulated in the following way: Have (and to what extent) the interest in the problem, which has continued for years, and the widely expressed need for opposing stereotyping gender roles brought about effects in the form of changes in children's awareness and in their perception of women's and men's social roles?

In an attempt to formulate the research hypothesis, the following assumption was made: Contemporary six-year-old children clearly comply with stereotyping social roles which are traditionally attributed to women and men. Such a perception is the result of their experiences and in the future may lead to acceptance of the state of inequality of the sexes and consequences related to this.

The study covered children at the age of six, who attended eight groups in four public institutions of preschool education based in the City of Opole. The author carried out the studies in her own person, with the use of a diagnostic survey in the form of an interview, applying the relevant survey questionnaire. The group consisted of 158 children in total, including 80 girls (50.6%) and 78 boys (49.4%). The variable of the respondents' sex proved insignificant in the light of the obtained results. Therefore, it was resigned from presenting it with reference to the analysed aspects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The examination of children attending the most advanced preschool group concentrated basically on two aspects. The first was related to the children's perception of professional roles performed by women and men. The other focused on the preschoolers' perception with reference to housework and jobs proper to women and men.

The link between professional roles and the sex has existed for ever. This has resulted in inequality of the sexes, in discrimination on the labour market and in social differentiations. Accordingly, the first part of the interview conducted with the examined children concerned the sphere of professional roles which – in their opinions – could be taken up by women and men.

Table 1. Professional roles played by women and men, assessment by six-year-old children, N = 158

Professions/occupations	Who can do it?*		
	only a woman	only a man	both
Shop assistant	10.1	1.3	88.6
Cook	12.7	2.5	84.8
Teacher	19.0	2.5	78.5
Police officer	–	21.5	78.5
Medical doctor	16.5	5.0	78.5
Veterinary surgeon	7.6	15.2	77.2
Firefighter	–	34.2	65.8
Bus driver	1.9	38.0	60.1
Soldier	–	60.8	39.2
Lorry driver	–	79.7	20.3

* the table presents values in percent

Source: author's own elaboration.

The conducted interviews did not prove a strong gender typifying with regard to children's perception of professions. In the opinions of the majority of interviewed children, the eight examined professions can be done by both women and men. The list, however, included such occupations that are traditionally associated with males (a police officer, a firefighter or a bus driver). It is only those of a soldier and a lorry driver – in the perception of the majority of respondents (still not all of them) – that suit men more than women. Another point is that while making their choices, the children added all sorts of comments, such as: “a woman can stay a police officer, but it is much riskier”, “a woman can do it, but men run faster and are stronger”, “it's better if a woman is a vet, because she has gentle hands”.

The second part of the interview was intended to find out about the children's opinions on the right person responsible for doing selected chores and activities at home. The children, like before, referred their answers to their mothers and fathers, despite the fact that it was clearly stated in the questions that it was women and men who were concerned. Still, the respondents' interpretation was accepted as a typical manifestation of children's thinking, which at their age is still closely linked to their closest experience. In the traditional model of Polish family, there is a visible “division of duties and tasks in compliance with gender typifying and traditional conceiving of women's and men's roles: the man maintains the family economically (professional work), the woman deals with the household and bringing up children” (Pankowska, 2005, p. 141). Whether or not the outlined tendency found its confirmation in the results of the conducted studies can be seen upon analysing the values inserted in table 2.

Table 2. Women's and men's responsibilities at home – perception by six-year-old children, N = 158

Activity	Who should do it?*		
	only a woman	only a man	both
Taking care of children	6.3	2.6	91.1
Playing with children	7.6	3.8	88.6
Doing shopping	7.6	6.3	86.1
Working in the garden	6.5	21.7	71.8
Reading to children	30.4	–	69.6
Cooking	35.4	1.3	63.3
Tidying up	38.0	2.5	59.5
Washing up	53.2	3.8	43.0
Ironing	67.1	5.1	27.8
Washing car	2.5	81.0	16.5
Repairs at home	–	96.2	3.8

* the table presents values in percent

Source: author's own elaboration.

The analysis of the data contained in table 2 indicates that the children's assessment of the selected items of housework is marked with stereotypical thinking, yet it is so not to a very large degree. Seven (out of eleven) listed types of chores can be carried out both by women and men as far as the examined children's opinions were concerned. It was only washing up and ironing, which – in the majority of respondents' choices – were qualified as chores designed for women, whereas washing car and repairs at home were typically attributed to men. There were also responses which pointed to the fact that some of the selected activities are more and more often done by appliances or specialist services, e.g., a dishwasher, an iRobot vacuum cleaner, or a carwash. It is worth mentioning here that some of the six-year-old children offered their answers indicating that a given activity can be attributed to both sexes, still – they would add – it is more often done by a woman or a man, which most probably is the effect of the models existing in their family homes, messages obtained from the media, found in books or seen in illustrations, and the like. It can also result from the experience of division of duties in the homes of the questioned children.

It can be satisfying to note the values of the results with reference to cooking, cleaning, washing up or ironing as shown in table 2. Although Pankowska (2005, p. 75) observes that “girls are usually more inclined than boys towards matters of running home and doing housework”, preparing meals, washing up dishes, the interviews with the children revealed that – in the responses given by a numerous group of children – the above-mentioned chores can be the responsibility of both

women and men. Additionally, there often appeared logical comments such as “everyone can tidy up”, “who has eaten, washes up”. Attention was also paid to the children’s utterances in connection with the question connected with playing with children and reading to them. Sadly, answers like “nobody plays with me”, “nobody reads to me”, “I play on my own”, “my parents (unfortunately) don’t have time”, “only my brother plays with me, my parents – never” were given quite frequently. And even if this does not relate directly to the topic under discussion, it leads to the pessimistic conclusion, which is often repeated, that contemporary children are experiencing the lack of involvement in their rearing on the part of their parents.

Essaying to compare the obtained results with others that are available in the literature of the subject, it needs stating that such an analysis is hard to make. In this respect, the author’s own results can be juxtaposed only with those published by Drost-Rudnicka in 2012. The researcher conducted similar studies in a group of schoolchildren of grades 1–3 of primary school. The results she obtained, however, differ substantially from the ones presented in this article. The relevant data are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Jobs which – in children’s opinions – ought to be done exclusively by women – a comparative juxtaposition

Jobs which ought to be done solely by a woman	Study by Drost-Rudnicka	Author’s own study
Taking care of children	72.0*	6.3
Doing shopping	64.0	7.6
Tidying up house	88.0	38.0
Cooking	76.0	35.4
Washing up dishes	80.0	53.2

* the values in the table are given in percent

Source: author’s own elaboration based on Drost-Rudnicka (2012).

The analysis of the results of study including preschool children and schoolchildren in early education points to the fact that in opinions offered by older children the stereotypical perception of activities done at home by women and men is visible to a much greater extent than in younger children. The biggest differences concern such jobs as: taking care of children (the difference in results amounts to 65.7%), doing shopping (65.4%), cleaning the house (50%) and cooking (40.6%). The clearly marked differences in the results can be explained, on the one hand, with the children’s more advanced age and experience gained, and on the other, as a result of transformation which is going on in perceiving individual sexes and actions undertaken for gender equality, which lead to alterations in the ways of thinking about women and men.

At the end of the interview, the children were asked what they wanted to be in the future, i.e. what profession/occupation they would like to perform. In view of the obtained answers, a certain difference was noticed in this respect between girls and boys. The latter generally declared their interest in jobs traditionally considered masculine. They most often chose the following: a football player, a police officer, a firefighter, a lorry/TIR driver, a soldier, a pilot, a computer programmer, a guard, a mechanic. Some individual respondents chose occupations of a miner, an ornithologist, a detective, a farmer, a musician, a traveller, or even a dustman. Girls, on the other hand, declared very different choices of professions, not necessarily stereotypically attributed to women, but rather associated with being “masculine”. Among the choices which appeared fairly often were the following: a woman-veterinary (what is interesting, girls generally gave that “feminine” version of the profession of a veterinary surgeon), a teacher, a policewoman, a singer, a doctor. There were also other ones mentioned such as a “woman-builder”, an architect, a football woman-coach, a horse-riding instructor, a beautician, a paramedic, a youtuber. The children’s responses gave rise to the conclusion that the child’s sex is of importance in the sphere of children’s making plans for their futures and cherishing visions of their professional lives. Here, boys appeared more traditional than girls and were more inclined towards being governed by stereotypes in their choices. Interestingly, their previous answers had not pointed to such a differentiation.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the author’s study allow formulating certain conclusions and offering a few reflections. It must be stressed, however, that a relatively small group of the examined, restricted exclusively to the urban environment, does not give firm bases to make wider generalisations. It becomes solely a contribution to statements which need confirming by studies ranging on a wider scale.

The results of the research conducted prove that older preschool children’s perception of social roles – professional and the ones at home – played by women and men is not free from sex stereotyping, yet its influence is not as strong as it was initially assumed and included in the hypothesis. Results obtained by other researchers with reference to the period of early school education allow concluding that with time, as children get older, they assimilate the roles traditionally attributed to women and men in an increasingly stronger manner. This strengthens the stereotypical defining of gender.

The analysis of the results proves that professions which are considered highly female-dominated (a teacher, a cook or a shop assistant), can also be practiced by men when it comes to children’s assessment, whereas occupations traditionally attributed to men (a policeman, a firefighter, a bus driver) can also be performed by women. Similarly, jobs at home (taking care of children and playing with children,

doing shopping, cooking or tidying up) – in children's opinions – are not exclusively restricted to being women's domains.

The obtained results may be the effect of progressing transformation in the social awareness in perceiving the roles played by women and men and still poorer experience which preschool children have at their disposal in comparison with that amassed by their older counterparts. In the latter, gender stereotyping turns stronger with their getting older.

As regards the sphere of education (work with children, preparation of school-books), stereotypical presentation of behaviours and roles which are traditionally attributed to women and men must be abandoned. Children should be made sensitive to equality of the sexes, which, after all, does not consist in superficial blurring the differences between females and males, however, it excludes discrimination of either of the sexes in a decisive manner in every aspect of social life.

If we agree with the thesis that we learn everything that is important to us in the kindergarten, it is worth making efforts for children not to learn stereotypical thinking about girls and boys, likewise about women and men. Working with young learners, including preschoolers, it is worth pursuing pedagogics that is sensitive to equality of women and men, which strives to change the image of the world in which certain roles are assigned exclusively to women or men and which builds a perspective of society in which various versions of models of women's and men's roles function on a par.

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ABSTRAKT

Postrzeżenie płci przez dzieci, podobnie jak przez dorosłych, naznaczone jest stereotypami zbudowanymi na społecznych przekazach i konwencjach. Może się to okazać niekorzystne i przyczynić się do powstawania nierównych szans w funkcjonowaniu społecznym kobiet i mężczyzn. W oparciu o wywiad przeprowadzony ze 158 dzieci sześciolletnich z Opola w artykule skierowano uwagę na dziecięce postrzeżenie płci w kontekście ról społecznych pełnionych przez kobiety i mężczyzn. Stało się to przedmiotem podjętych badań, których główny cel dotyczył ustalenia dziecięcego spojrzenia na role pełnione przez kobiety i mężczyzn. Pytania badawcze obejmowały próbę oceny, czy (i w jakiej mierze) trwające od lat zainteresowanie tematem i szeroko wyrażana potrzeba przeciwstawiania się stereotypizacji ról płciowych przyniosły skutki w postaci zmian w świadomości dzieci. Rezultaty przeprowadzonych badań potwierdzają, że spojrzenie dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym na role społeczne – zawodowe i domowe – kobiet i mężczyzn nie jest wolne od stereotypizacji płciowej, ale jej wpływ nie jest tak duży, jak wstępnie założono. Być może uzyskane wyniki są efektem postępującej transformacji świadomości społecznej w postrzeganiu ról pełnionych przez kobiety i mężczyzn oraz uboższych doświadczeń dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym w porównaniu z tymi, którymi dysponują dzieci starsze, u których z wiekiem wzmacnia się stereotypizacja płci.

Słowa kluczowe: stereotypizacja płci; role społeczne; dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym