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Correlates of Gender Identity in Adolescence

Monica Secui, Magda Danciu and Letitia Filimon
University of Oradea (Romania)

Abstract

Belonging to a gender category has important social and psychological implications that influence the process of social perception. This paper focuses on the relation between gender identity, ambivalent sexism, and gender stereotypes in adolescence. A sample of male adolescents were assessed for gender stereotype content, gender identity, and the level of ambivalent sexist beliefs. The results clearly emphasize the correlation between participants' self-defining in terms of masculine and feminine traits, the content of their gender stereotypes, and the hostile and benevolent beliefs toward women. The implications for how contemporary sexist beliefs contribute to the justification of the asymmetrical relation of power and status between sexes is discussed.

Gender beliefs system

Besides chromosomal and anatomical differences, gender is the most important criterion in the process of human differentiation, affecting individuals' entire existence, as all aspects of their social life are influenced by the participants' gender, namely,

- abilities
- self- and others' assessment
- interests and aspirations
- professional and family development.

All these components are strongly influenced by the opportunities and restrictions emerging from the social representation of the characteristics and roles assigned to male or female individuals. The biological differentiation shifts to the psychological and social dimensions, generating a complex system of beliefs regarding gender, that is,

- gender identity
- stereotypical female/male features
- attitudes towards role and position of the two sexes. (Deux and La France, 1998).

Gender stereotypes are socially shared opinions about characteristics and roles associated and matched to each gender (Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994), including beliefs related to:

- physical features
- types of personality
- favoured activities/professional fields
- specific competences and roles.

The content of gender stereotypes is still essential though there has been a shift to cognitive and motivational mechanisms of their emergence , evolution, and effects.

Researchers pointed to the items that lie at the bases of male/female differentiation, especially to those related to the identification of beliefs concerning personality, foregrounding the two initial clusters of features for male/female identification, generally described in terms of agency and communality (Bakan, 1966, apud Conway and Vartanian, 2000). The instrumental aspect of personality is associated to males (e.g. independence, assertiveness, ambition), whereas the emotional-expressive dimension goes with females (e.g. sensitivity, empathy, kindness).

Cross-cultural studies acknowledge the fact that ideology of gender roles originates in traditional cultures, while an egalitarian attitude towards both sexes is common to European and North-American communities (Williams, Satterwhite and Best, 1999); yet in both situations stereotypes influence social judgment and spontaneously induce a negative effect upon the image of the other and of the self (Devine, 2001).

Gender identity results from awareness of maleness or femaleness in accordance to the typical gender roles acknowledged by one's culture (Trew and Kremer, 1998). The constant process of gender development is more controversial in adolescence due to major changes characterizing this stage of life, such as:

- physical and sexual maturation;
- increase of cognitive abilities;
- interest in the opposite sex;
- concern for self-identification;

all of them crucially influencing attitudes and behaviours related to gender roles.

Early adolescence is the start for an intensified gender identification and causes a conspicuous differentiation between sexes, followed by a sexual self-discovery. Both girls and boys realize that a traditional gender identification enhances a personal appeal: femininity marked by attire and behaviour is associeted to a potential partner in a romantic relationship; building a strongly masculine image implies success and popularity (Hill and Lynch, 1983, apud Ruble and Martin, 1998).

This state of facts determines gender stereotypes to develop in the way in which man possesses features typical to the instrumental domain of personality while woman becomes the epitome of emotional-expressive dimension of personality. Though there is an increasing tendency towards levelling the traditional roles, still persists the question whether this shift in the traditional complementarity of gender roles derives from a real attitude reconfiguration, or whether it is but a more subtle way of concealing prejudices against women (Bryant, 2003; Glick, Lameiras and Rodriguez Castro, 2002).

The intricate feelings of people towards out-groups (Glick and Fiske, 1996, 1997) include sexism as well, which, because of the strong connection between men and women, differs from the traditionally accepted negative attitude, as women's image and representation are not constantly either negative or positive, and hostility is most often doubled by positive feelings of respect and appreciation. In the two authors' view, sexism is a multidimensional construct, including two sets of attitudes, hostile and benevolent. Hostile sexism can be assimilated to negative attitudes towards women, whereas benevolent sexism has developed on stereotypes with a positive connotation as

a whole. Even if benevolent sexism, due to its positive emotional attitudes, does not coincide with the traditional concept of prejudice, the authors see it as still being anchored in those traditional stereotypes and beliefs regarding male dominance, and state that the consequences of this positioning are negative. Benevolent sexism in social interaction might seem positive, but women may not perceive it in the same way in instances like chief-subordinate interaction when professionally irrelevant compliments, related only to personal, can undermine the woman's self-confidence of professional competence.

The studies generally focus on the severe impact sexist prejudices have when related to a complexity of negative phenomena such as

- accepting the myth of rape and victim blaming (Viki and Abrams, 2002),
- tolerance towards sexual harassment (DeJudicibus and McCabe, 2001),
- acceptance of domestic violence (Sakalli, 2001).

The results prove the importance of studying this problem in order to better understand the phenomenon and to design prevention programs, thus limiting the negative effects of this kind of ideology on potential victims.

Aim and hypotheses

Considering the fact that adolescence is a crucial period for defining one's self and gender identity, our study is meant to examine the existing relationships among the components of gender belief system, that is,

- gender identity
- stereotypes referring to traits characterizing the two sexes
- prejudices regarding woman's role.

Taking into account that this system is cognitive balanced and coherent, and that masculine self-definition is associated with gender stereotypes' content and with sexist ideology, those features that adolescents designate for females vary according to the level of either hostile or benevolent prejudices regarding women.

Hypothesis 1. While completing the process of identification with gender roles, the representation of the personal group (in-group), gender-structured, will closer follow the stereotype. Adolescents with a high degree of masculinity assume that the representative of their own category possesses a stronger instrumental role in his personality.

Hypothesis 2. Awareness of affiliation to a group profiled in terms of traits related to force, power, and success, is associated with a negative attitude towards a woman engaged in modern gender roles challenging the masculine position. There might also be a condition of acceptance, of appreciation for a woman, matching the traditional gender pattern afore mentioned. Male adolescents' levels of masculinity will probably be correlated both to the hostile prejudice against the woman in her modern posture and to the benevolent attitude towards the representation of the woman's traditional role.

Method

Our survey was carried out on a sample of 196 teenage boys, aged 13-18 (68 participants between 13 and 14 years old, 63 between 15 and 16 years old, 65 between 17 and 18 years old).

They were randomly selected from five schools in *Oradea* (103 subjects) and two schools from the village *Vadu Crisului* (93 subjects).

The present study made use of the following instruments:

1. Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence, Helmreich and Stapp, 1978, apud Lenney, 1991) employed to assess gender identity in terms of masculinity and femininity as well as the respondents' self-perceived possession of personality traits, stereotypically believed to differentiate the two sexes, but considered socially desirable. The questionnaire has 24 items, equally grouped into three scales, out of which we used but two :

- the scale for masculinity evaluation
- the scale for femininity evaluation,

accepting the theory which acknowledges masculinity and femininity as being two distinct orthogonal dimensions.

2. List of 40 attributes selected from Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) and Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) to foreground the content of the gender stereotypes, including 30 socially desirable traits typical for women (15 attributes) and men (15 attributes). The remaining 10 items are neutral from the viewpoint of gender stereotypes, five of them are positive, and five of them are negative in terms of social desirability. The task of the Romanian male teenage subjects consisted of evaluating, by using a five-points Likert scale (not at all, little, average, much, very much characteristic), the degree at which each of the 40 attributes on the list generally features women, respectively, men, seen as mature, healthy, and socially adapted individuals.

3. Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick and Fiske, 1996) to make an inventory to operate with attitudes towards women's position and role - hostile, respectively, benevolent sexism. In the original version, 22 items are grouped into two scales (hostile sexism and benevolent sexism), and the subjects' task is to show their degree of agreement to each statement on a six-points scale. The Romanian variant includes 16 items, with scales of 8 items, and the level of response was reduced to four.

The questionnaires was administrated collectively, with the subjects' consent. Each questionnaire started with instructions read by the operator. The participants were explained the items they showed difficulty in understanding. The survey was carried out during educational classes; the operator suggested that the subjects should use a kind of identification name in order to get further details, personally relevant.

Results and discussion

From the gender stereotypes point of view, we have chosen to illustrate the attributes by mentioning the modal values of the subjects' evaluations. We may notice that a part of the traits included in the traditionally masculine stereotype are equally attributed to both men

and women : defending own beliefs, activeness, self-confidence, dominance, willing to take risks, ambition. Consequently, the vision regarding abilities and traits characteristic to women and men is more egalitarian, as an effect of women's emancipation and their involvement in the modern roles. The traits that differentiate sexes, being still strongly associated to the masculine gender, are: leadership abilities and behaviour, willing to take stand, independence, competitiveness, standing up well under pressure. These elements are those our subjects associated mostly to a man as the representative of the category, a „tough core" of masculinity, comprising characteristics commonly considered predictors of performance in leading positions.

Assignation of feminine features draws the attention by the subjects' tendency to almost equally attribute both man and woman the next traits: kindness, warm, affectionate, aware of others feelings, understanding. Women are generally attributed features as sensitivity to others need, compassion, gentle, eager to soothe hurt feelings.

The teenagers' tendency to assess sexes in close terms can be interpreted as

- levelling the subjects' mentality regarding the two sexes' traits, following to the impartial growth of social role distribution, of women's participation to professional and social life, to the androgen, even masculinized image of the woman, promoted in some mass media productions,

- the subjects' tendency for favouring in-group (group serving bias).

When examining the relationship between the degree of gender identification and stereotypes content in case of male individuals, we postulated that there would be variations at the level of self-stereotypes caused by inter-individual differences regarding participants'masculinity. The hypothesis is sustained by the results according to which subjects with a high degree of masculinity, unlike those with a lower degree, considered that the prototype of their own category is better characterized by the traits included in the male stereotype. The high or low degree of masculinity was established using the average score of the subjects, that is, a higher score than average means a higher level of masculinity, whereas a lower-than-average score means a lower level.

The comparisons regard the frequency of the typically masculine traits. They point to the fact that male subjects with a higher degree of masculinity strongly believe that men do have these qualities 87.77% of the answers); boys with a lesser degree of masculinity show a more moderate belief (73.16% of the answers, chi square - χ^2 =69.488, p < .01).
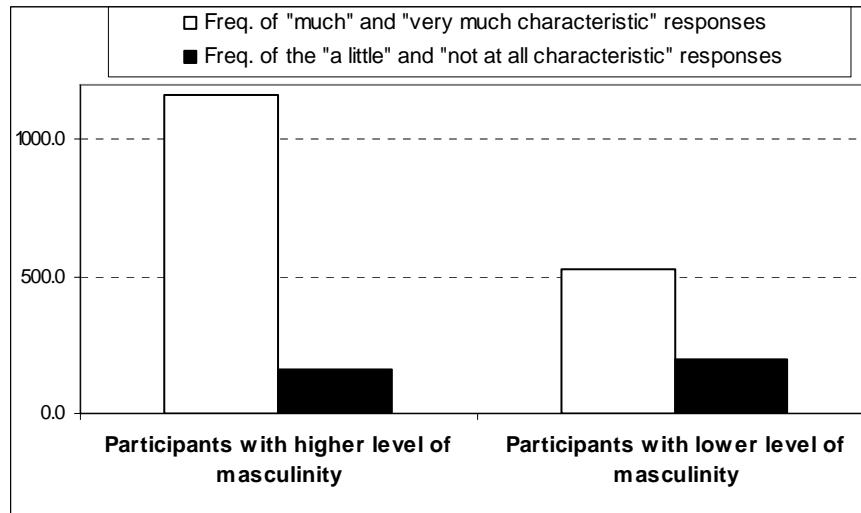
Figure 1: Comparison between the participants with high and low masculinity level regarding their attributions for the masculine traits of the male representative

Our second hypothesis postulated that the degree of masculinity is directly related to the hostile sexist attitude towards women in their modern condition of gender role, on the one hand, and on the other hand, with a benevolent attitude towards the woman with traditional gender roles. The results sustain partially the hypothesis, that is, the level of masculinity is directly correlated to hostile sexism ($r_{Pearson}$=.146, p <.05), whereas it is not significant from the statistical point of view when related to benevolent attitude. ($r_{Pearson}$=.007, p >.05).

When this relation is analyzed at different age groups, and we calculate the correlations for each age group, expanding the association of the variables to the subjects' degree of femininity, we observe that

- in early adolescence the relationship between masculinity and hostile sexism does not exist (r=.015), but the relationship between femininity and benevolent sexism is strong (r=.464).
- between 15-16, there is an increase in the intensity of the association between hostile sexism and masculinity, without reaching the level of statistical significance (r=.117), whereas the relationship between femininity and benevolent sexism decreases (r=.256), still remaining significant.
- for participants of 17-18, the degree of masculinity is strongly associeted with hostile sexism (r=.332), and the relationship between femininity and benevolent sexism is not significant (r=.136).

Consequently, in case of male adolescents the direct relationship between masculinity and hostile sexism is significant in their late teenage, while the relationship between femininity and benevolent sexism is significant between 13-16.

When discussing the correlation between the level of both hostile and benevolent sexism seen by Glick and Fiske (1996) as being interrelate within sexist ideology, we noticed that our results do not sustain the assumption; the value of correlation between the two

variables, calculated for the scores of all boys being of -.226, significant at .002. When examining the results in terms of age groups, we realize that

- the relation is not statistically significant for boys between 13-14 (r= -.166),
- the relation is significant for subjects between 15-16, (r= -.328), with a negative correlation, pointing to the fact that intensely negative attitudes are accompanied by slightly positive ones, and the ambivalent sexist ideology is missing,
- with male teenagers between 17-18, the relation is still insignificant (r= -.098), meaning that the two attitudes towards women independently coexists.

We notice that the anticipated relations between variables are confirmed by the results we obtained, thus demonstrating that the system of beliefs related to gender is balanced and coherent. When analysing gender identity and the way in which prototype of their own group is portrayed, we clearly see the link between gender identity, in terms of masculine traits, and the degree at which these traits are descriptive for their own category**.** It is worth mentioning that the degree of masculinity is unlikely to be manipulated directly, so the study is quasi-experimental as it is impossible for us to ascertain a relationship in which the defining of the self determines the way in which one's own category is perceived or vice versa.

The essential cognitive theories on gender identity formation lay emphasis on the development of cognitive schemata regarding traits, roles, preferences of persons of the same sex as being prior to self-definition in terms of awareness of belonging to a certain group (Martin and Halverson, 1981). It is possible that a better perception of the stereotypes of one's group to induce a self-definition corresponding to assumed gender roles in late adolescence, but only future longitudinal studies could confirm this perspective.

It is interesting to observe that in case of Romanian teenagers, the relation between masculinity, femininity, hostile sexism and benevolent attitude towards women vary according to the boys' age, as follows:

- the relation between hostility and masculinity is insignificant for 13-16 year-old boys, and becomes relevant for those of 17-18;
- the relation between femininity and benevolent attitude is remarkable in early teenage, and becomes insignificant for older teenagers;
- boys become more and more aware of the ideology of supremacy of their own group as they advance in age;
- boys' self-definition based on typically masculine traits is associated with negative feelings towards those women who compete against men, who fight for equality; they consider that these women silently aim at changing the state of things in favour of their personal group;
- boys do not relate the self-evaluated femininity with the idea that they should be valued due to their emotional-expressive traits.

When dealing with the relation between hostile and benevolent sexism, we rely on Glick and Fiske's theory (1996) according to which there is a direct relation between the two

forms, thus justifying the ambivalence of the sexist prejudice: a high degree of hostile sexism is accompanied by a similar degree of benevolent sexism.

With Romanian subjects, there is a reverse relationship between the hostile and benevolent attitudes towards women, statistically significant for age group of 15-16, and as a whole, the two positions being seen as two ends of a continuum, excluding any ambivalent ideology defined by the afore-mentioned authors. The question we pose is whether we can discuss about a sexist-ambivalent ideology at any age or whether they represent two separate dimensions.

This aspect is referred to as a transitional evolutionary stage, from a simple cognitive form of the position towards the opposite sex, to an ambivalent form appearing later. Thus it is possible that in case of Romanian boys, as shown by our study, this transition does not occur, developing later, once they understand the nature of the relationships between sexes, the interdependence of the partners, and once their future plans envisage the idea of a stable couple. This is to be investigated in future.

In case of Romanian participants, the relationship between the intensity of sexist prejudices and the personal gender identity is obvious. The participants' high level of the degree of masculine traits, considered self-descriptive, is directly associated with hostility towards women, seen as challenging men's dominant position and as trying to compete with and manipulate men.

The boys who assess themselves as possessing most instrumental masculine traits – socially associated with greater success than feminine traits, and personally associated with self-esteem (Woodhill and Samuels, 2003) – are those who are more convinced of the superiority of the group they belong to and are bound to preserve this status. Consequently, they nurture stronger feelings of adversity towards the women who try to undermine man's superiority; they deny the idea of women's justified discontent and their legitimate claims to counterbalance this discrimination.

On the other hand, boys who think that women should be appreciated and respected for their social qualities deriving from their traditional feminine role, as compared to those with a lower degree of positive attitude, credit women with more desirable traits.

Conclusions

The results of the survey carried out on Romanian boys foregrounds the ways in which the system of beliefs towards one's self and the opposite sex, in terms of masculinity and femininity, is structured. The boys' degree of identification with gender roles (self-conferred typically masculine traits) is associated with a more stereotyped image of their own category and with a more conspicuously negative attitude towards modern women.

Specialists examined reverse discrimination and observed that the superior group members perceive it in terms of a traditionally marginalized group getting to be favoured and preferentially treated in certain areas, such as women are easily offended by men's comments and behaviours, women see men as being sexist, women exaggerate the problems they have at work, women try to obtain advantages and privileges while claiming equality.

The efforts and difficulties of the members of personal groups are systematically minimized when discovering men's fear of being turned into „the second sex" in the future (Cameron, 2001). The issues related to reverse discrimination coexist with the denial of women's disadvantages – a typical feature of modern sexist prejudices, pointing to the disadvantaged group that is benefited of by the other category, thus enabling men to legitimize their status and to justify the existing state of things. Yet women perceive sexist discrimination as foregrounding the inequity of the present position of their own group, and start claiming social and mentality changes. So we conclude that personal beliefs of both sexes regarding gender issues should be studied within a context defined by status and power relationships among groups.

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