The Professional Consequences of Shaping a Sexual Image Among Girls in the Social and Educational Processes

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2018.54.4.07

Abstract

This article concerns a significant problem of developing a sexual image among girls during socialization and education as well as its consequences for their position in society and in the job market. Provided analyses deal with the differences between boys and girls with regard to the theory of social construction and they emphasise the role of environmental factors in shaping a sexual image on the part of an individual. The results of research on young females' situation in the job market conducted among young women and employers have also been discussed by the author with relation to this issue.

Keywords: *gender, socialization, education, the job market*

Introduction

The issues presented in this article concern the development of a sexual image among girls during the processes of socialization and education as well as its consequences for their subsequent functioning in the job market, which are comprised in the area of social construction analysis.

The question of sex can be interpreted in various ways. One of them is essentialism, considering masculinity and femininity to be “natural” biological features and dealing with physiological and anatomical sex traits. Another one is social construction itself, claiming that the difference is caused by various social and

cultural interactions in relation to men and women (L., Brannon, 1999; C.M., Renzetti, D.J., Curran 2003). The school environment plays an influential role in developing a sexual image among children, by being a crucial place of social interaction and as such providing them with the context necessary for shaping their identity.

Theoretical background

The social construction theory has been popularised in sociology by P.L. Berger and T. Luckman (1966) in a book titled *The Social Construction of Reality*. The authors emphasise the fact that “society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. A human being is its product”. The social construction theory differs from other theories by claiming that an individual actively creates their insights while drawing upon the cultural output.

The social construction theory is incorporated in the interest area of philosophy, in which – according to the exogenous perspective – individual insights reflect the world, whereas according to the endogenous perspective, the knowledge about the world is acquired through sensual experiencing reality or thinking about those experiences (K.J., Gergen, 1982). As for psychology, K. Lewin’s theory is especially worth considering. In his view, an individual’s way of behaviour results from the function of features belonging to man and environment. It is quite different from the theories of behaviourism and psychoanalysis, the former one connecting the behavioural manners only with exterior factors and events, and the latter claiming that behaviour can be conditioned by personal qualities exclusively.

It can be stated that biological traits determine sex at birth, but its social shape is realised in the socialisation and education processes. That is why biology ought to be treated as the starting point, which should not be underestimated. However, this is the social and cultural factors which make biological traits meaningful.

The definition of *gender* existing in literature emphasises the importance of environmental factors for the development of a sexual image on the part of an individual. The term *gender* was introduced to psychology by R. Unger (1979). It determined the behaviour patterns perceived as suitable for men and women. In sociology, this definition, popularised by A. Oakley (1972), differentiated between the terms: biological and cultural sex, both of which accommodated features characteristic of human personality and behaviour determined on the basis of their biological sex, as well as of the value of society that they refer to. The concept of gender was defined by C. Sherif (1982, p. 376) as “the outline being used

for a social categorisation of individuals”. This outline is one of the methods for understanding and perceiving men and women (Bem, S.L. 1987). It allows for ordering the information about men and women. It may happen, however, that the expectations and ideas referring to a given gender can confirm the gender stereotypes developed by society.

Such stereotypical perception of men and women by society affects their functioning in many spheres such as social, professional, and family life, as well as it may lead to position or role conflict. Conflict of that type may be seen especially vividly in the case of a contemporary woman, who frequently faces considerable difficulties by fulfilling her numerous duties concerning social, professional and family life.

Social expectations towards women prioritise the role of mother and wife over the professional one. Due to the internalisation of the behavioural patterns acquired in the socialisation process taking place at home and at school, some women do not decide to undertake the efforts to find employment, while others resign from their professional life in the course of time. Women’s careers may also be delayed by their plans connected with starting a family and maternity. Nowadays, however, more and more young women decide to postpone their plans connected with starting a family and giving birth to their first child because of their desire to establish their position in the job market.

Research

Research General Background

Social construction has been used in the research on gender. The term gender was first used by R.J. Stoller (1968) in the research on shaping sexual identity during the postnatal period. In this research, it is worth remembering about the differences between men and women. According to some scientists, the differences emerging in the research based on comparing men and women are interpreted to the detriment of women and treated as their defects. This phenomenon, called the error of androcentrism, prevails in the whole society. A woman is regarded to be inferior, since the standards are determined by men, their behavioural patterns and traits. Adopting this line of reasoning places women and their values in a worse social position than men (L., Brannon, 1999).

On the one hand, while studying gender one must not exclude the sex differences, but on the other, excessive emphasising of those differences may be a source of sexual discrimination. C.M. Renzetti and D.J. Curran also confirm this phe-

nomenon, claiming that “numerous differences between men and women may be acknowledged, yet the fact that one sex is discriminated against the other due to those differences is socially unjust”.

Research Question and Methodology

Carrying out theoretical analysis and empirical research, I was looking for the answer to the question: What is the source of the differences between men and women? When do they start developing? How does the development of the differences affect the functioning of an individual in society and in the job market?

Gender differences between men and women already start to develop in the family environment and they are continued at school. That is why it is absolutely crucial to comprehend the consequences of the so-called gender practice for girls’ and boys’ growth and their functioning in mature lives. What makes this issue even more significant is that the achievements of both sexes are observed to differ accordingly, as well as there are differences in creating the identity on the part of boys and girls.

Women and men begin to accept their roles mainly due to the process of family socialization, school education and creating individual behaviour patterns by the media. The results of recent research confirm that children acquire suitable personality traits and behavioural modes characteristic of a given sex during their upbringing and education, which relates to creating stereotypical male and female images (L. Brannon, 1999; E. Kaschack, 1996).

That is why, the consequences of socialization and gender education for women’s social and professional situation have been made the main subject of my dissertation.

In the 1970s, the issue of women’s exclusion from professional life became widely popular. In the American “Wall Street Journal,” the concept of *glass ceiling* appeared for the first time (C., Hymowitz, T.C., Schellhardt 1986). It meant an invisible obstacle separating women from reaching the highest steps in the professional career and, in turn, prevented their promotion (L., Brannon, 1999). Needless to say, the above-mentioned concept concerns the implied obstacles being encountered by women in executive positions, who realise that the promotion perspectives are inaccessible for them. An article presenting various methods of acquiring the information about women’s family status as being applied during job interviews appeared in the already quoted “Wall Street Journal” (A.E., Barkeley, 1989, p. 14).

In 2004, “The Wall Street Journal” published another article about women in the top professional positions, which alleged that the “glass ceiling” already belonged to the past” (C., Hymowitz, 2004 p. 1).

There are, however, some questions which remain unanswered: Is the way to the top easier than it used to be? How many paths and of what kind lead to the top? What costs does climbing to the very top of professional careers involve? There are women that succeed in accomplishing their aims no matter how difficult it may be. Some of them must overcome numerous impediments, those easily noticed and those which are hard to identify.

Inequalities in treating both sexes are prevalent in every society. They exist in such areas as: private, domestic, professional and public ones. The fundamental principle of the European Union is that women and men have equal rights as regards taking equivalent jobs. Even though discrimination of women is officially prohibited, it still exists in various spheres of social life (political, professional, economic, educational, domestic, etc.). The spheres where it is especially visible are the workplace and home.

Discrimination of women by employers frequently takes place at the recruitment stage. Not only are women expected to be well-educated, highly skilled and qualified, but also they must be dispositional and mobile. Even if they fulfil all these requirements, they are offered worse employment conditions and lower salaries.

Research Results

Over the period 2010–2014, the situation of young women in the Subcarpathian job market was analysed as part of my research. I surveyed 291 employed and unemployed women at the age from 25 to 34, as well as 45 employers, who evaluated the employment conditions of women in the job market. In my research, I applied a diagnostic survey and the technique of opinion poll and interview. The female employees' posts were analysed. The most numerous group consisted of office workers' posts (26.9%), teachers (12.5%), shop assistants (8.8%), and accountants (6.3%). It is noticeable that the surveyed women are usually employed in feminized professions. Only a tiny proportion of women work in managerial posts (5.6%) or as customer advisors (5.6%).

The surveyed women described their experiences connected with searching for a job. They evaluated the situation in which a potential employer rejects their applications for various reasons (Table 1). Both working and unemployed women failed to get employment due to lack of professional experience (55% and 71.8%, respectively). Employers express their expectations concerning necessary job experience on the part of applicants. The unemployed women were often not competent or qualified enough (63.4%), which less frequently related to the employed female respondents (34.4%). Approximately one in three unemployed

Table 1. The reasons for which women were not accepted by employers

Nr.	The reasons for women's rejection by employers	Women surveyed according to the causes of rejection by employers									
		Definitely yes	Rather yes		Rather not		Definitely not		Hard to say		
		em- played	unem- played	em- played	unem- played	em- played	unem- played	em- played	unem- played	em- played	unem- played
1	Age	L 8	19	20	25	53	39	65	37	14	11
		%	5.0	14.5	12.5	19.1	33.1	29.8	40.6	28.2	8.8
2	Sex	L 11	8	21	28	53	49	68	41	7	5
		%	6.9	6.1	13.1	21.4	33.1	37.4	42.5	31.3	4.4
3	Health condition	L 2	2	9	7	49	45	96	75	4	2
		%	1.3	1.5	5.6	5.3	30.6	34.4	60.0	57.3	2.5
4	Ancestry	L 5	3	4	9	38	42	107	73	6	4
		%	3.1	2.3	2.5	6.9	23.8	32.1	66.9	55.7	3.8
5	Lack of work experience	L 44	49	44	45	33	23	36	10	3	4
		%	27.5	37.4	27.5	34.4	20.6	17.6	22.5	7.6	1.9
6	Too high competences, qualifications	L 21	34	34	49	53	36	48	7	4	5
		%	13.1	26.0	21.3	37.4	33.1	27.5	30.0	5.3	2.5
7	Too low competences, qualifications	L 10	10	14	9	61	54	65	46	10	12
		%	6.3	7.6	8.8	6.9	38.1	41.2	40.6	35.1	6.3
8	Appearance	L 5	1	1	14	63	53	81	49	10	12
		%	3.1	0.8	0.6	10.7	39.4	40.5	50.6	37.4	6.3
9	Plans of starting a family	L 9	7	20	22	49	38	71	55	11	9
		%	5.6	5.3	12.5	16.8	30.6	29.0	44.4	42.0	6.9
10	Plans of extending a family	L 8	6	21	18	57	42	67	57	7	8
		%	5.0	4.6	13.1	13.7	35.6	32.1	41.9	43.5	4.4

Note: the data do not make a total of 100 due to the possibility of giving a few answers

women was rejected by an employer due to her age (33.6%) and her plans connected with starting a family (31.0%). The unemployed women were more frequently rejected than the working ones (27.5% and 20%, respectively). The rarest reasons for which the women were turned down by their employers were: health condition (90.6% of employed, 91.7% of unemployed ones), ancestry (90.7% of employed, 87.8% of unemployed ones), appearance (90% of employed, 77.9% of unemployed ones), too high competences or qualifications (78.7% of employed, 76.3% of unemployed ones).

Employers admit that sex is taken into consideration while choosing employees for the executive, administrative and support posts (service), as shown in Table 2 and Figure 1. It is confirmed that sex is important especially while choosing applicants for the executive posts (48.9% of the respondents). Employers are more willing to accept men for these posts (51.1%) than women (8.9%), whereas for 40% of respondents, sex does not make a difference. More thorough analyses show a discrepancy between general declarations and real preferences of some employers with regard to the sex of potential employees. It is especially noticeable in the case of executive posts. Only 26.7% of the respondents admit that they take sex into consideration during the recruitment process, while for 66.7% of them it seems to be meaningless, yet another group (6.7%) does not mind. Further analysis reveals, however, that 31.1% of the respondents would choose a male employee for administrative posts and only 26.7% of them – a female one. Thus, more than a half of the employers favour a particular sex over the other while choosing candidates for administrative posts. As far as post-recruitment support is concerned, employers are consistent in their choices. For more than a half of them it is meaningless and those who take this category into consideration would rather employ men (26.7%) than women (17.8%).

Table 2. The importance of gender while recruiting candidates for particular posts according to employers

Nr	Post	Employers surveyed according to their claim that sex plays a role while recruiting candidates for particular posts					
		yes		no		don't know	
		L	%	L	%	L	%
1	Executive	22	48.9	20	44.4	3	6.7
2	Administrative	12	26.7	30	66.7	3	6.7
3	Support (service)	16	35.6	25	55.6	4	8.9

Figure 1. Gender preferred by employers during recruitment for different posts

Salary disparities are the next example of men's and women's differentiated treatment in the job market. 64.4% of the tested employers realise the difference between the salaries of men and women employed in Subcarpathian workplaces. All the respondents who notice the salary disparities claim that this is men who earn more while holding executive posts (cf., Figure 2). It is alarming that as many as 89.7% of the employers pointing out the salary differences in relation to both sexes report that men earn more in the support posts, and 72.4% of them report that men earn more in the administrative ones.

Figure 2. Salary disparities between men and women in the opinion of employers realising them (64.4% of the total)

The employers' unfavourable opinions are eased by the evaluation of the working women, the majority of whom positively assess the basic pay of men and women in their workplaces. Most working women (64.4%) claim that women's pay rates are equal to men's ones, while 28.1% of them say that women are less paid than men in similar jobs. Very seldom do the women admit they receive a higher salary (3.1%).

Employment of women is connected with maternity (Figure 3). The more children women possess, the more exposed they are to long-term unemployment, lasting more than 12 months. The women having three children remain unemployed for the longest time period (77.8%), and none of them is unemployed for less than half a year. Similarly, the women having two children often remain unemployed for longer than a year (68.4% of the respondents), they are unemployed for three months the least frequently (5.3%).

Figure 3. The number of children vs. unemployment period (%)

Discussion

The economic and social situation of women is strictly connected with family socialisation and shaping the sexual image in childhood during school education. Social construction representatives emphasise the fact that men and women achieve their identities during the socialisation process at home and at school. It is also the time when the child's self-esteem is developed. Only when it is high, does it facilitate the learning process. Unfortunately, girls often consider their cognitive competences to be lower than both their IQ test results and grades prove them to

be. Girls tend to underestimate their possibilities and exclude themselves from achieving success. On the other hand, boys usually have the reciprocal optimistic tendency. They are more willing to attribute their successes to the abilities they possess. Consequently, girls' low self-esteem related to the possibility of achieving success creates a development barrier, whereas high self-esteem generally possessed by boys stimulates their growth. Women's low self-esteem results in their resignation from pursuing a socio-professional career. In literature, it has been explained by two concepts: *glamour gap* and *reality gap*. The former shows a connection between youngsters' dreams, their real achievements and self-esteem. Thanks to their higher self-esteem, boys more often dream of splendid professions at every stage of adolescence. The *reality gap* concept consists in sexual differences with regard to the perception of one's living possibilities. Due to their earlier maturation, girls sooner become aware of their real living possibilities, including their dream impracticability. In contrast, boys reckon that "everything is possible" (Ch. H., Sommers, 1994).

The processes of institutionalised socialisation and education considerably affect boys' and girls' personalities as well as their future lives. Teachers still apply stereotypical behaviour in didactics and education, and their activities, confirming sexual stereotypes and excluding female students was defined by Coppock (1995, p.56) as "sexual politics in everyday school life". Not only does teachers' behaviour develop the stereotypical image of students' future lives, but they also influence students' prospective functioning.

The child is required to turn its attention to gender and to adopt a particular role, which is "a mode of behaviours expected and supported by society, being displayed by an individual in given situations" (L. , Brannon, 1999). According to psychologists, a child at the age from 12 to 18 months is already categorised as belonging to a specific cultural sex, and at the age of three it possesses a fully developed gender pattern (E., Kaschack, 1996). Having acquired, in the process of education and socialisation, the knowledge of traits and behaviours characteristic of their sex, women and men begin to realise the roles attributed to them.

Conclusion

Girls' and boys' socialisation experiences affect their educational accomplishments and determine their way of functioning in society, family and at work. That is why, it is essential to modify traditional socialisation training, which greatly limits young women's aspirations and prevents them from achieving success in

different spheres of life. Every human undergoes constant external interactions. Other people's activities trigger particular reactions on the part of an individual.

One of the primary human rights guaranteed by all the European Union countries is the equality of men and women during their vocational education and advancement, working conditions as well as functioning in the job market. It is also necessary to enable women to reconcile their private, family and professional life as well as to increasingly engage men in the process of looking after children (*Report on equality between women and men*, 2005, p. 13). For this purpose, specific measures ought to be undertaken. There is a need to spread the knowledge of sexual stereotype mechanisms and their consequences, hindering to a great extent the functioning of both men and women in society, family and the labour market. It is certain that every human being would like to have a clearly defined identity, free of any generalisations and schedules. Developing a positive attitude of young people to themselves and to each other as well as towards the surrounding reality, high self-esteem and respect for the opposite sex are thus of the utmost importance. In fact, contemporary women are often employed in executive posts proving that the difficulties and obstacles appearing on their way to professional advancement are possible to overcome. However hard it may seem, it is becoming more and more likely for women to pursue their careers and get upper managerial positions. Lots of various ways full of impediments might lead to one aim. Not all women are able to get through, but there are also some of them who succeed due to their abilities or mere luck. Whatever the reason, however, it should always be acknowledged as their great achievement, which used to be unattainable not so long before.

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