

Gender Stereotypes of Young Adults and Styles of Sexual Education

Abstract

This paper is devoted to three basic problems: gender stereotypes, styles of sexual education and the relation between these two phenomena. The main question is: do the styles of sexual education experienced in a family determine the tendency to use gender stereotypes? Basing on the literature, a hypothetical model of relation between styles of sexual education and gender stereotypes was constructed. The model was a source of investigations conducted by the author and described in the paper. Young adults' tendency to use gender stereotypes seems to be determined by their mothers' stereotypes and by three styles of sexual education experienced in their families.

Key words: *gender stereotypes, sexual education, social development*

Introduction

Although the issues of gender stereotypes have been taken up in scientific literature for years, they still remain of genuine interest to researchers. This problem currently acquires new significance in the context of topical discussion on the issue of equal rights of the two sex groups and relations between men and women in the contemporary world. One of the problems widely discussed in gender literature is the genesis of gender stereotypes. They are defined, among others, as a set of beliefs in the features characteristic for men and women (Matlin, 1996). The structure of gender stereotypes was described by Deaux and Lewis (1984). On the basis of the research findings these authors set apart partially independent components, which

contribute to the overall character of femininity and masculinity stereotypes. Among these components one may find some personality features, unique behavioural and social roles on account of sex, differences within the scope of the outward appearance attributed stereotypically to men and women.

In this paper gender stereotypes are defined and understood as a kind of fixed, oversimplified schema, which is permeated with judgements and resistant to any change – it usually contains unverified and false judgement on women or men (Goldenson, Anderson, 1994; Stangor, Hewstone, 1999; Weigl, 1999). A set of features defining the schema of femininity or masculinity does not usually undergo rapid changes with time. It can be proved on the basis of the research conducted in the 1980's by Ruble (1983), who used a femininity and masculinity questionnaire constructed in 1974 by Spence and other researchers. This questionnaire consisted of 54 features stereotypically ascribed to women and men. Ruble's research showed that only one of all the 54 features – intelligence – ceased to be connected explicitly with a specific sex. Similar results can be found in the research findings of Bergen and Williams (1991).

In the search for the development of gender stereotypes, it may be hypothesised that they are connected with the styles of sexual education experienced by an individual in a family during his/her childhood.

Sexual education is usually defined briefly as a series of instructions on the physical, psychological and behavioural aspects of sexuality given in a family, at school and also in books and other publications (Goldenson, Anderson, 1994). It is also understood as the entirety of actions of social groups, undertaken by their institutions, programmes arranged by the mass media and international or religious agencies interested in sexual aspects of life. These actions concern sex and gender treated as the basic human features – they also pay attention to a reproductive function institutionalised in a family (in a different way in different cultures). Sexual education is said to aim at the development of an individual and the health of the population (sexual and reproductive health). It consists in providing knowledge (different at various life stages), but also in training the mind (self-cognition, experience appraisal, sex identity), emotion expression, behavioural competence (Jaczewski, Obuchowska, 1992; Krzywicka, 1994; Trawińska, Cendrowski, 1996).

In this research project sexual education is understood not only as a sexual explanation, but also as an integral part of the general process of education and upbringing in a family. This part of family education is to best serve the purpose of family and partner life preparation, developing the gender identity, competence to control the needs and sexual behaviours or respecting the patterns of social gender. The research findings published in the scientific literature show that family environment, as a primary source of any patterns, develops the picture of

gender (Matlin, 1996; Gormly, 1997). On the basis of these findings it can be assumed that the tendency of an individual to use gender stereotypes may be influenced by the styles of sexual education experienced in a family as a kind of method of accomplishing goals by the parents in this area of life.

The main goal of the research project described in this paper was to answer the following question: are there any styles of sexual education that generate the tendency to use gender stereotypes more frequently. The influence of the three styles of sexual education set apart during the first stage of the research project was of particular interest to the researchers, namely: (1) the style based on openness in interaction, (2) the style based on openness in interaction within the same sex, and (3) the style based on a lack of openness in interaction. A description of these styles will be presented further in this paper. It was assumed that the impact of individual styles of sexual education is not univocal – it depends on the contents transmitted within the framework of a given style. The main hypothesis was the assumption that the style based on openness in interaction influences the process of developing gender stereotypes in the strongest way. It was supposed that the information transmitted in the range of the style based on openness in interaction within the same sex favours the development of the concept of differences in the two “worlds” – the world of femininity and masculinity.

Adopting an approach typical of the information-processing theory (Canon, Stotland, 1972), it was assumed that the clear division into two social groups may facilitate the construction of gender schemas of a still higher level – it may also become the cause of attribution errors and illusory correlation, which are treated as important sources of stereotypes by many researchers (Stangor, Hewstone, 1999).

While analysing the theory of social learning, attention was paid to two basic mechanisms: instrumental and observational learning (Bandura, Walters, 1963; Mischel, 1966 Hall, Lindzey, 1990). The aim of the research was to demonstrate on the basis of empirical knowledge that gender stereotypes may result from the different treatment of boys and girls and diverse model of rewards and punishments depending on the sex. On the other hand, deliberations on the mechanism of observational learning in the process of development of gender stereotypes attracted attention to gender stereotypes displayed by the parents as the models imitated by the children.

In order to understand the mechanism of the development of femininity and masculinity stereotypes, one should also refer to the cognitive-developmental theory, which points at the changes in cognitive development that enable the creation of notional categories “men” and “women” and improve the process of perceiving inter-sexual differences (Kohlberg, 1966; Kaplan et al., 1976; Matlin, 1996).

Research problem

The main goal of the research project was to answer the question:

What is the range in which the tendency to use gender stereotypes connects to styles of sexual education experienced by the research sample in the family?

Within the scope of the general problem delineated above, more detailed problems were formed:

- To what extent do young adults display the tendency to use gender stereotypes?
- Does the tendency in question depend on the gender stereotypes of the parents?
- What were the kinds of styles of sexual education experienced by the research sample in the families?
- Is there a connection between the styles of sexual education experienced in the family and the tendency to use gender stereotypes?

While trying to answer these questions, attention was paid in turn to the three fundamental issues: (1) the range of occurrence of the tendency to use gender stereotypes in relation to parents' gender stereotypes; (2) styles of sexual education used in Polish families, and (3) relation between the styles of sexual education and gender stereotypes used by the sample.

Research method

Research sample

The sample consisted of 120 people (60 women and 60 men) studying liberal arts, at the age of early adulthood, and their parents.

The sampling was of a random character. During the research project over 200 sets of questionnaires were distributed. The questionnaires were handed out to the students of Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz during their lectures chosen randomly from the students' timetables.

Measure

Styles of sexual education questionnaire

In order to identify the styles of sexual education, a group of 120 young adults was asked to provide a detailed description of the styles of sexual education experienced by them in their families. On the basis of those answers a list of 43 items

describing the experienced styles of education was created and then a questionnaire was drawn up. The said questionnaire was used to examine a group of 60 people at the age of early adulthood. The analysis of the factors and the Kaiser's criterion proved the existence of three styles of sexual education. The contents analysis of the items of the said styles allowed to distinguish the following styles of sexual education:

(1) The style based on openness in interaction

Within the scope of the style based on openness in interaction the parents do not censure the inflow of information and they both eagerly participate in the process of education. They are the main source of information on the issue of sexuality, which is discussed without any feeling of shame or embarrassment. This style is based on the assumption that the development of sexuality begins at birth. Each following stage of development has certain characteristic forms of sexuality ascribed to it. In this style a distinction between the notions of intimacy and taboo is made. Here intimate behaviour encompasses all aspects concerning the sexual relationship of two people, the experience of which is reserved solely for its participants. Hence the child is no stranger to the sheer fact of the parents having their own sexual life, yet the child is excluded from any participation in this life. The taboo refers to the crossing of the norms and the stages of development as well as the boundaries defined by intimacy. The human body is viewed as an integral part and no distinction is made as to the parts of which a person should or should not be ashamed. Nudity of both the parents and the children is natural – yet people from outside of the family are allowed to see the nudity to a certain degree.

(2) The style based on openness in interaction within the same sex

In the case of the style of education based on openness in interaction within the same sex, one of the parents is excluded from active participation in the process of sexual education of a child. The reason of this exclusion lies in the sex of the parent, which is opposite to that of the child. What characterises the said style is that there is a taboo against any sexual issues to be discussed, against nudity and any participation in the intimate life of the opposite sex. Here the taboo is based on the notion that sex similarity justifies intimate relationships and even allows bridging the generation gap. The concept of two separate worlds, the world of femininity and the one of masculinity, gives support and guarantees a sense of belonging to one of the worlds. Becoming a member of a group at birth, a child has an opportunity to constantly experience the fact that as a member of this particular group s/he enjoys equal rights despite all the aspects that make him/ her different from the adult members of the group. A very characteristic feature of this style is how

the taboo is constructed and then observed. The idea is to develop a belief in a child that the belonging to a female or a male group is natural and that it is both a must and a privilege. While a boy almost exclusively receives information highlighting the advantages of being a man, a girl, upon acknowledging the fact of being a woman, is prepared to reconcile to this fact rather than show pride in it. The same strategy is employed by the families when a taboo is at stake. In such a situation a child may be rejected by the members of the group and doomed to loneliness; the reason being that the ban on getting under the influence of the opposite sex allows for no exception. For that matter it could be perceived as a form of punishment for a boy to find himself under the influence of his mother and other women from the family because it would mean lower prestige and age regression, the fact that can only be justified by being a little child.

(3) The style based on lack of openness in interaction.

On the other hand, what characterises the style based on a lack of openness in interaction is an insufficient amount of clear and unequivocal information concerning sexuality from both of the parents. Here the parents do not constitute the main source of information on the subject of sexuality, which is associated with a feeling of shame and embarrassment – it is also the case that the issue of sexuality is not discussed with a child at all. This style is usually present in the families which view the issues of sex as inextricably connected with a given age (adulthood) or a status of an adult person (marriage). According to this style, a normal child does not reveal any interest in sexuality, and this natural behaviour of a child should be maintained by separating the child from any stimuli, bringing about his/ her interest in eroticism. The parents censure the inflow of information and administer punishment if needs be. Following this style of education, the parents acknowledge the fact of the process of puberty, yet only in terms of physical and psychological changes, without taking into consideration the accompanying changes of a sexual need. Under this style, paying attention to sexual issues is wrong and the number of forbidden behavioural patterns ample.

The calculated Cronbach – alpha internal cohesion factors of the questionnaire items ranged between 0.82 and 0.89 in the respective sub-scales, which shows a high reliability of the used tool.

Gender stereotypes questionnaire

Gender stereotypes displayed by young adults and their parents were examined with a questionnaire consisting of 30 stereotypical features (15 with reference to women and 15 with reference to men).

Stereotypical features ascribed to women and men are presented in Table 1.

Tab. 1 Polish femininity and masculinity stereotype

Polish femininity stereotype	Polish masculinity stereotype
gossip, bad driver, talkative, works at home, loves children, emotional, has mood swings, spendthrift, inquisitive onlooker, romantic, flirtatious, protective, intuitive, sensitive, gentle	dominating, good driver, never cries, does not express emotions, messy, likes sport, mentally and physically strong, self-confident, able to make up his mind, jealous, brave, works outside the house, proud, egoist, likes drinking alcohol.

The calculated Cronbach – alpha internal cohesion factor of the questionnaire items (0.85) shows a high reliability of the used scale.

Research results

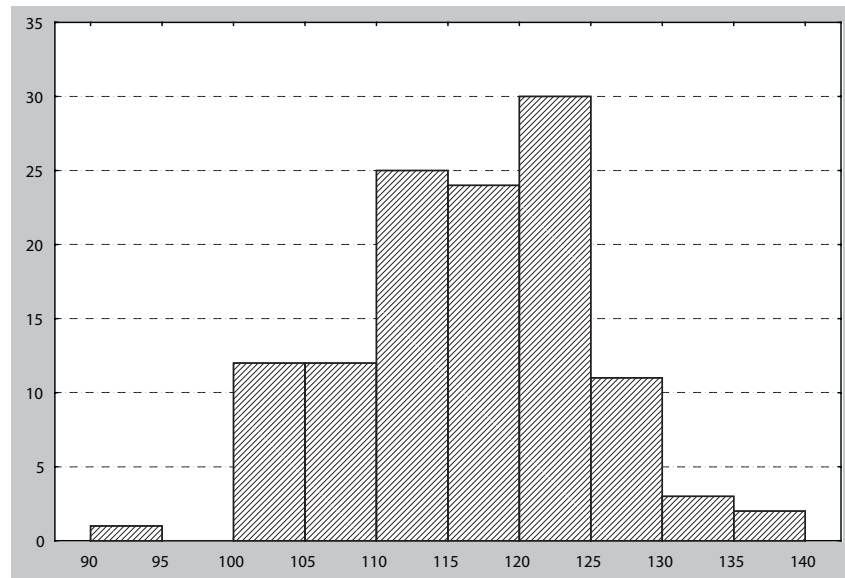
The most important research findings may be divided into three main groups of results.

The first group of results concerns the range of the use of gender stereotypes by young adults. The research results shows that young adults display a strong tendency to use femininity and masculinity stereotypes. It is indicated by the high values of mean and the right-sloping of the layout of the research sample on the scale of results reached by the sample in a gender stereotypes questionnaire. This tendency may be observed on both the femininity and masculinity scales, but on the other hand it appears that young adults' tendency to use femininity stereotypes is a little stronger than their tendency to use masculinity stereotypes. Femininity stereotypes seem to be more common in Polish culture than masculinity ones.

It is also important that some connections between parents' and their children's gender stereotypes were found. The regression analysis results (cf. Tab. 3) allow to speak of the impact of fathers' femininity stereotypes on the development of gender stereotypes of their children.

On the other hand, in the case of mothers it was found that both their femininity and masculinity stereotypes influence their children's tendency to use gender

Fig. 1. The layout of the occurrence of the tendency to use gender stereotypes



Tab. 2. The frequency of gender stereotypes occurrence in the research sample

Scales of gender stereotypes measure	N	Mean	Min. result	Max. result	Stand. dev.
Scale of femininity Stereotypes	120	60.27	49.00	74.00	4.73
Scale of masculinity Stereotypes	120	56.82	46.00	68.00	5.04
General scale of stereotypes	120	117.10	95.00	136.00	8.33

Tab. 3. The impact of parents' gender stereotypes on the development of gender stereotypes of their children – regression analysis results

	Mothers' femininity stereot. (β)	Mothers' masculinity stereot. (β)	Mothers' general scale (β)	Fathers' femininity stereot. (β)	Fathers' masculinity stereot. (β)	Fathers' general scale (β)
Young adults' femininity stereotypes	.58**	.54**	.64**	.44**	.10	.32**
Young adults' masculinity stereotypes	.31**	.39**	.39**	.21*	.13	.20*
Young adults' general scale	.51**	.54**	.59**	.37**	.13	.30**

*p. <.05; **p. <.005

stereotypes. Furthermore, the comparison of the values of *beta* coefficients lets us conclude on the predominance of the impact of mothers' gender stereotypes over the impact of fathers' gender stereotypes on the development of the tendency to use gender stereotypes of their children.

The second group of results refers do the problem of the styles of sexual education experienced by the research sample in the families. The analysis of the frequency of occurrence of these styles in the objects' experience (as shown in Tab. 4) proves that the style based on openness in interaction within the same sex was most frequently used by the parents, and then – in diminishing order – the style based on openness in interaction and – the least frequently used – the style based on lack of openness in interaction. The differences among these frequencies are not statistically significant.

Tab. 4. The frequency of occurrence of the styles of sexual education in the research sample

Styles of sexual Education	Mean	Min. result	Max. result	Stand dev.
Style based on openness in interaction	2.34	1.00	4.00	.856
Style based on openness in interaction within the same sex	2.46	1.10	4.00	.859
Style based on lack of openness in interaction	2.17	1.10	3.60	.667

The Third group of results refers directly to the main research goal and concerns the relations between styles of sexual education experienced in a family and gender stereotypes used by young adults. Summing up the findings of the regression analysis (cf. Tab. 5) a conclusion may be drawn by pointing out a statistically significant impact of the styles of sexual education experienced by the people surveyed on their tendency to use gender stereotypes.

Tab. 5. The impact of styles of sexual education experienced by the people surveyed on their tendency to use gender stereotypes – regression analysis results.

	STYLE O (β)	STYLE O1 (β)	STYL L (β)
Femininity stereotypes scale	-.47***	.20*	.41***
Masculinity stereotypes scale	-.45***	.30**	.39***
General scale	-.54***	.30**	.47***

*p. <.05; **p. <.01; *** p. <.001

The analysis of the *beta coefficients* shows a negative impact of the style based on openness in interaction (style O) on the tendency to use femininity stereotypes (-.47), masculinity stereotypes (-.45) and on the results in the general scale (-.54). This analysis also indicates that the other styles of sexual education determine significantly young adults' tendency to use both femininity and masculinity stereotypes. The analysis of these data does not confirm generally the main research hypothesis stating that the style based on openness of interaction within the same sex (style O1) influences the development of gender stereotypes in the strongest way. It follows that the values of *beta factors* indicate a stronger impact of the style based on lack of openness in interaction (style L) on the tendency to use gender stereotypes when compared with the influence of the style based on openness in interaction within the same sex (style O1).

Discussion

The analysis of the mean values and the layout of gender stereotypes occurrence shows that young adults display a relatively strong tendency to use gender stereotypes. It is also worth mentioning that all the young people surveyed seem to demonstrate a stronger tendency to use femininity stereotypes when compared with their tendency to use masculinity stereotypes. Femininity stereotypes seem to be far more deeply ingrained in Polish culture than less frequently displayed masculinity stereotypes. This fact may be connected with a definition of masculinity, which has been maintained since the very beginning of the feminist movement – a definition that is based strongly on a counterbalance to femininity (Brod, 1987). It is possible that the traditional way of analysing masculinity as a certain standard might have paid special attention to the “typically” feminine features as different to those of the standard one.

A lot of research and research findings show the co-occurrence of stereotypes among children and their parents, who are the very first models of behaviour and attitudes (cf. Gormly, 1997). The research findings presented herein indicate that young adults' tendency to use gender stereotypes is determined, by and large, by the tendency of the mothers to use both femininity stereotypes and masculinity stereotypes.

The analysis of the average means of the styles of education followed by the parents carried out within the group of the people in the survey shows that the style based on openness in interaction within the same sex was relatively the most frequent one applied in the families. The fact that the style based on openness in interaction within the same sex was most frequently followed by the parents can be

linked, to a certain extent, to the specific features of its assumptions, which is the sex based division of a family. In fact such an internal family structure has a long tradition and can be traced back to the periods of matriarchy and patriarchy.

The main research hypothesis indicated that the style based on openness in interaction within the same sex influences the process of developing gender stereotypes in the strongest way. It was assumed that the sex based division of a family into two groups leads to the separation of two worlds – a world of femininity and masculinity – which in turn facilitate the development of categorisation processes and cognitive schemas that favour the tendency to use gender stereotypes. Still, research findings show that the strongest impact on the tendency to use gender stereotypes can be ascribed to the style based on lack of openness in interaction. In this style, parents censor the inflow of information and administer punishments and prohibitions – this strategy leads to lack of information on sex and gender. Many researchers have already stated that lack of knowledge is an underlying cause of stereotypes. So, on the basis of the research results presented in this paper it can be observed that that lack of knowledge is more likely to be the source of gender stereotypes than the distinctive differences between the group of men and women.

To sum up, the research findings indicate that the style of sexual education based on openness in interaction is the most favourable one from the perspective of the process of developing gender stereotypes. By the same token, the least favourable is the style based on lack of openness in interaction because it is strongly linked to the tendency to use gender stereotypes. The conclusions concerning the impact of sexual education styles on developing gender stereotypes are of significant and practical value – they favour the concept of sexual education assuming the necessity of openness in relations between children and parents, and the necessity to provide the child with complete and honest information on sex differences. Stereotypes indeed serve a useful purpose: they facilitate social interactions and in a quite unique way “economise” social cognition. But still, generally speaking, stereotypes are not favourable from the social point of view because they contain oversimplified and, sometimes, negative judgements, which deprive individuals of their indisputable right to be treated as separate individuals with their very individual features.

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