

The Family and Modern Trends: How to Construct an Optimal Model of Roles Played in the Family

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Abstract

The modern family faces a variety of ever-changing circumstances which greatly inhibit the selection of clearly defined roles or behaviours that might bring about the good of the whole family. The article describes three models which regulate the roles adopted by individuals within the family. The text defines the optimal method of role creation and selection as one which allows for the simultaneous consideration of not only the variety of possibilities, but also the needs of all family members.

Keywords: sex, family, gender, optimal model

Introduction

The modern Polish family is faced with a number of variable circumstances which greatly inhibit the selecting of an appropriate role or behaviour in order to best benefit the family as a whole. Primarily, the woman's role has changed; she has gained more rights and been offered more possibilities to meet her needs. At the same time, the demands that society imposes on her, as well as those she imposes on herself, have greatly multiplied. These changes have led to a corollary transformation of the position and identity of the man. One model which defines this phenomenon is known as reversed gender polarisation (Allen 2006, pp.88–108). According to this model, the woman is responsible for steering family life, with the man quickly losing ground. In the opinion of J.MacInnes, in modern society traits which would have once been attributed to typical masculinity and would have

been seen as a starting point for the man's role as caregiver to the woman serve, at present, as a starting point to attack the man. He writes that strength, courage, independence, heroism in battle, a strong spirit, and sexual initiative are seen as a symbol of aggression, competitiveness, evidence of the woman being subjugated, proof of emotional inadequacy, sexual obsession, infantilism and the depreciation of masculinity. For instance, sons attack fathers for the latter's absence from their lives. Female partners condemn their male partners for their inability to express their feelings. Employers are starting to prefer communicativeness, expressiveness and empathy over masculine energy and brawn (MacInnes, 2002). Both the man and the woman have become lost in these new circumstances, even in the case when they are very committed to one another and both express their honest desire to be with each other and to build a family (The article touches upon family problems which stem from the parents when the woman and the man live beside each other in a new set of social circumstances. Thus, despite the fact that the key notion in the title is the family, the article concentrates on the relations between the woman and the man). These new circumstances in which the married couple find themselves within the family are overlapped by gender-based differences that form a series of six divergent strands: first, analytical thinking; concentrated, linear, logical – among men – and the type of thinking known among women as “facilitating the whole brain;” second, action among men and emotion among women; third, among men attitudes based on fight or flight and among women attitudes based on care and friendship; fourth, an inborn interest in objects among men and an inborn inclination towards interest in other people among women; fifth, men's ability to survive thanks to hierarchy, power and competition as compared with women's ability to survive through empathy, relations and bonds; finally, an inborn ability to systemise among men as compared with the inborn ability to be empathic among women (Cunningham, Roberts 2012, p. 16).

Many psychologists (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, Surrey, 1991; Jordan, Surrey, 1986, pp. 81–104; Marcus, Oyserman, 1989, pp. 100–127; Stewart, Lykes, 1985, pp. 2–13) agree that our way of thinking is connected with gender and research confirms this belief. As Cunningham and Roberts have stated, the inclusion of gender in the 'Me' system can also have an impact on the way in which an individual thinks. In the case of women, the main attributes of traditional female schematics are calmness and understanding, care, protectiveness, responsibility, consideration for others and sensitivity. All these characteristics require the presence of another person in order to be observed or expressed. In other words, in order to define themselves, women find it necessary to engage in relations with other people, whereas men possess the typical main attributes of the conditional

masculine schematic as independence, assertiveness, instrumentalism and the need for competition (Ecler-Nocoń, 2013, pp. 71–93). The author argues that although contemporary men accept the fact that women are well educated and want them to work, after giving birth they expect them to get back to their patriarchal gender role and, at the same time, are not able to fulfil their own gender role and become a breadwinner for the entire family. This leads to a paradox: a woman who identifies with her assigned social role (caregiver, feeder, etc.), contrary to the new cultural, social and economic conditions, fulfils all the tasks by herself including not only household duties, but also professional ones. The woman fulfils all her duties, but at the same time starts to experience the feeling of inequality, injustice and harm. The woman senses a certain expectation drift. She expects that the man will be her alter ego and when he fulfils her wish, she reacts with dislike. She desires a strong partner who, above all, wants to succeed outside of home. The man feels disapproved of and therefore loses his sense of identity and adequacy. Thus, it is common for the relations between the man and the woman in a family to be based on an internal feeling of a lack of symmetry or adequacy, disproportion, incommensurability and inequality. Frequently, both women and men fail to locate the key to this model of relationship, one that would consider their needs, wishes and possibilities. This thesis was confirmed by qualitative studies conducted by the author between 2003 and 2009. Based on the research analysis, it is clear that a transformation of thinking patterns in both men and women living in a relationship is necessary. From the author's point of view, an evolution of thinking patterns should follow the optimal model described below.

Locating the Optimal Model for Family Roles

In the attempt to find an optimal model for family roles for both men and women, an inspiring cognitive function may be observed in a student's reminiscence concerning the lives of Vera and Vladimir Nabokov. Having observed their common, but at the same time clearly divided, functioning, he/she described them as "the couple multiple, inseparable yet self-sufficient (Schiff, 2007, pp.181–182). Herein is a significant clue to the new perception of the coexistence of women and men. The lives of Vera and Vladimir did not fall into any type of schematics, rather they both assumed such roles as they attributed to themselves within the relationship. They seemed to be satisfied with this arrangement in their lives and the schematics worked out by both of them simultaneously provided the rationale for the functioning of their relationship. "The couple multiple" is a term which

brings us closer to an understanding of the properties of the model for which we are searching. The needs, possibilities and duties arising through being in a relationship and which are significant to both partners have a tendency to multiply and to take on a new character. This dynamic process does not necessarily follow a previously planned direction or method which can be generalized statistically. Indeed, it is likely that each relationship creates its own, unrepeatable algorithm.

From an analytical standpoint, it is interesting to specify the conditions for developing such an algorithm in woman-man (wife-husband) relations. In these searches, what is crucial is the answer to the question about the conditions which the algorithm should meet. This algorithm has the characteristics of an optimal and universal algorithm. Is it possible to identify such an algorithm? In her attempt to seek a universal algorithm in relations, the author bases on mathematical (adopted from technical sciences) process of searching for an optimal solution with the necessity to take into account many assessed criteria and characteristics (M.Peschel, C. Riedel, 1979). The application of mathematical rules has allowed the author to formulate three models of sharing roles within the family (in woman-man relation). Two of them are similar to the models of relations which are known from the practice of social life. The first of them, which can be defined as a classic model (rooted in culture), the second one in a sense newer, being the result of social changes and searching for new solutions, which can be called "half and half", since each of the family roles is divided between the spouses. Both models of sharing roles have considerable flaws, which may lead to conflicts in family relations. Additionally, these flaws are connected with the arbitrary and a priori accepting of importance, meanings for particular areas of cooperation in a relation. The third model of sharing roles in the family can be considered as optimal and universal. It takes into account both real capabilities of each of the spouses and the needs of the family. At the same time, it can be adjusted to many variables in a situation of particular relations between spouses.

The algorithm is an Old-English term borrowed from the world of mathematics. Its definition is that of leading a given system from its initial phase to its desired end stage. This leads us to examining how certain other mathematical principles might prove helpful in finding solutions. When using a mathematical (technical) representation of a relationship between individuals, it is tempting to discuss how such an 'organization' of the mutual activities of two people (in this case a woman and a man) would lead to the optimization of such a relation by means of an integration between the woman and the man (cf., Peschel, Riedel, 1979). In technology, in order to perform an optimisation process, it is necessary to introduce two conditions. The first is the method of optimisation, and the second

is the so-called target function f . First, however, we must offer a few definitions with the appropriate signature that will explain the logic of implementing optimisation with regards to the fulfilment of family roles. In other words, a transposition of actions undertaken in the family by men and women into the nomenclature of optimisation rules:

Thus:

$x_i - i$ – this is (possibility, need) a female trait (e.g., affection, planning skills, empathy, child feeding, professional engagement, free time, etc.)

$y_j - j$ – this is (possibility, need) a male trait (e.g., physical strength, the ability to focus on a single task, professional engagement, free time, etc.)

wx_i, wy_j – the gravity/value of (possibilities, needs) female and male traits

f – target function

q – the value of the target function

Q – collection of compromises

Let us begin the discussion with the function. This function is a sort of criterion in accordance with the value of which the choice of the best solution is made from among all the available solutions. The function must possess characteristics that permit a scoring system. Thus, the value of the target function is dependent on the characteristics being compared, in this case female x_i traits (understood as possibilities) and male y_j traits. This leads to the following equation $q = f(x_i, y_j)$. The key problem in the process of optimisation becomes the choice of the target function. In addition, it is also a key issue in the relationship between men and women. Three different target functions simultaneously imply the three aforementioned models.

The Classic Model – A Historical, Social and Cultural Model Most Common in Relations between Men and Women

The first case is a target function which has been assigned highly varying values in connection with specific traits (possibilities), both female and male. In other words, women are naturally placed in the sphere of the household, whereas men are identified with activities outside of the home. Let us assert that we are considering two large sets of activities containing a number of possibilities and needs which we jointly describe as the raising of children and professional work (upbringing is understood here as all actions undertaken by parents in order to prepare the child for an adult life, including nursing; an occupation is understood

here as all activities undertaken outside of the family in order to meet its economic needs). The function is as below:

$$\begin{aligned}
 q &= f(x_i, y_j) = \sum_i wx_i \cdot x_i + \sum_j wy_j \cdot y_j = \\
 &= wx_{work} \cdot x_{work} + wx_{upbringing} \cdot x_{upbringing} + wy_{work} \cdot y_{work} + wy_{upbringing} \cdot y_{upbringing}
 \end{aligned}$$

Examining anthropological experience, statistical data, etc., we begin with the assumption that women are more predisposed to activities connected with raising children (the sphere of the household), whereas men feel better and have more possibilities for acting away from home and outside of the household. We have assigned values according to the appropriate relations, while retaining a balance between the proportions of the characteristic traits:

$$\begin{aligned}
 wx_{upbringing} &\cong wy_{work} \\
 wx_{work} &\cong wy_{upbringing} \\
 wx_{upbringing} &\gg wx_{work} \\
 wy_{upbringing} &\ll wy_{work}
 \end{aligned}$$

With these values, the effect of the optimisation process will be a solution in which women are placed only within the sphere of the household and men away from home (here, within a working environment). As we know, this is a model which has for ages been perceived as optimal and which is at present receiving strong criticism because in the contemporary situation where women have the means to meet their needs and possibilities outside of the household, this theoretically optimal division closes the doors to those possibilities in front of them. Moreover, according to this model, the possibilities which the man has within the sphere of the household are not addressed, either. The model sets certain possibilities in each defined sphere. For instance, if we assume that men tend to be more aggressive and women to be more prone to making peace, then the first of these traits (possibilities) has to be linked to the sphere away from the household, whereas the second would be placed within the household. In this model, peace has no chance of existence in any wider cultural sense. The use of the rules of optimisation shows that this method of realising activities as a couple, however functional, does not facilitate the full potential (described here as grades) of either women or men. It also strips the relation, which is paramount from an anthropological point of view, of any attributes of equality.

The Innovative ‘Half and Half’ Model

In the second case, we will consider a situation in which the optimisation between the genders is also based on two sets of activities (as in the first case). This time, however, we will attempt to eliminate inequalities (injustices, by default) by equalising all values (this idea is characteristic of our times). The engagement is also considered here to be equally important, regardless of whether it concerns the sphere of the household or the outside of the house:

$$wX_{upbrining} \cong wY_{upbrining} \cong wX_{work} \cong wY_{work}$$

In this case, the effect of the optimisation process will be a situation within the relationship between the man and the woman (husband and wife), in which both perform exactly the same activities. It seems that it is becoming popular. Let each woman and each man take on any task or role which they deem important with respect to the family’s interest as well as their own. The solution seems to be fair and should bring positive results to relations within the family, and serve as a source of satisfaction for both genders. Contrary to the initial assumptions, when this model is introduced, it does not, in fact, lead to freedom within the relationship. An incessant desire to retain equality between the partners leads to the loss of certain rights, possibilities and, in fact, the needs of both the woman and the man; the husband and wife are both burdened with a place in the relationship which has been predefined. For instance, from this point of view, it may seem optimal that a maternal leave be split between the partners (facilitating so-called “paternal leave”), that the man must play an equal part in the night-time feeding of the baby, and that both work and take care of their offspring to an equal degree. Although it cannot be said that these solutions are wrong in every case, it is, however, a mistake to assume that the maximisation of activities and possibilities in relation to gender must be solved through the introduction of a fixed half-and-half division. This model does not take into consideration the differences between possibilities and concentrates only on the execution of equality. It must be said that the optimal solution is not always based on dividing everything in half. For example, while both father and mother are able to calm or soothe their baby, it is quite possible that the mother will do so more quickly and effectively, especially in the case of a newborn child (Ellison 2005). It is possible that the trait which is typically connected with women in research, i.e., the ability to think about a number of things simultaneously, gives her more confidence in relation to a variety of household activities. Likewise, the man is likely to have a predisposition towards focusing his

attention on objects, will be better able to solve one complicated and important problem of the household. Thus, we come to an important question: in light of the different possibilities attributed to each member of the family, is the fixed half-and-half division (one equal mathematically) in fact equal and optimal? Even at first glance, the answer appears to be negative. The half-and-half division fails to take into consideration a number of additional criteria which seem to be significant for the optimal functioning of the family. It is determined neither by the specific possibilities of each family member nor by their actual needs. Above all, this model is totally schematic, without concern for any specific example. Each family is unique and characterized by the specific needs and possibilities of its members. Thus, we require a model which takes into consideration particulars and not mere abstracts.

The Optimal Model of Family Relations

The third case to be considered is a situation wherein no value is attributed to any of the traits (activities, behaviours, abilities, and engagements). In technology, this situation arises when there is a need for a multi-criteria optimisation (poli-optimisation). There is no individual target function in this model, but a significant number of elementary functions. In the case considered herein, it is worth noting that it can be presented graphically as follows – both for the raising of children as well as work:

$$q = f(x_i, y_j) = \begin{cases} x_{work} \\ x_{upbringing} \\ y_{work} \\ y_{upbringing} \end{cases}$$

The solution to the problem of optimisation, formulated in such a way, cannot be singular, as it was in the previous cases. This must be a *set* of optimal solutions – a so-called set of Q compromises. All of the elements belonging to this set of compromises differ from each other both in their value as well as, which is important, in the fact that each one of them is in itself optimal. In the two previous cases, the result is a specific optimal solution which encompasses ‘all’ of the participants of the process. In this case, there are many solutions, and in connection with this, in order to be able to implement them, one must select one specific solution from

the set. Each of these solutions takes into consideration the possibilities available to the woman and the man, their desires, as well as a number of variables from their lives. The advantage of this approach is that the choice might just as well be made individually for every specific case (e.g., for one specific family, as for a mixed set of individuals, e.g., in the workplace, etc.). This approach may also be re-evaluated when conditions change while still retaining the optimal properties of every solution. In order to better understand this multi-criteria situation, it has been presented in the illustration below.

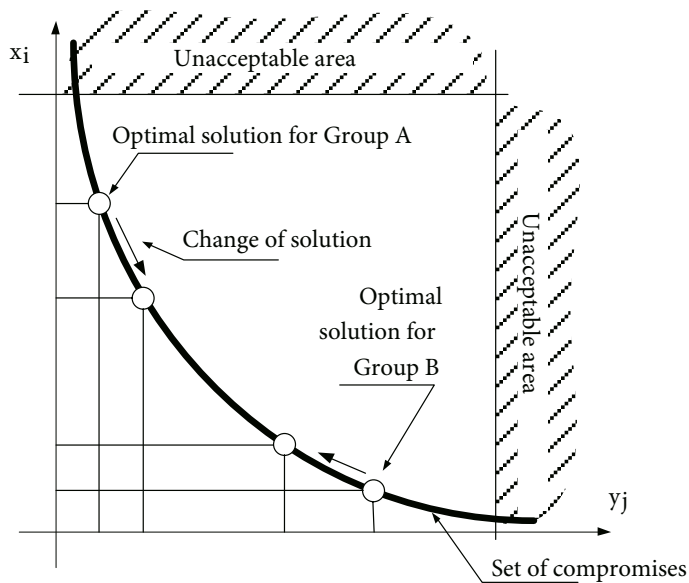


Figure 1. Optimal solution for Group A / B

We are, however, left with the important question of how to find the specific optimal solution for a given family at a given moment in time. The mathematical tool, despite its seeming usefulness in solving the differences in the construction of relations between men and women, does not allow for direct transplanted into the field of anthropology. Undoubtedly, however, an optimal and multi-criteria contemplation of the needs and abilities of every family member, the family as a whole, and in the family is certainly possible. In order to follow such an approach, we require the love and openness of both spouses, the sensitivity of the wife and

husband to each other's individual options and needs, with consideration for the good of every family member. With such mutual openness, it seems possible to produce an algorithm (in any situation) which would find its justification in each specific family and in the specific potential of its members. Taking this view, we will not refer to any fixed division of roles; this division should be linked within a specific constellation of possibilities and needs. If this model is truly optimal in a given family, while creating it we will undoubtedly facilitate both the gender potential of woman and man, as well as their individual available possibilities, which shall be confronted with not only the needs of the individual members, but also the well-being of the whole family. We may assume that, within every given family, this model will be implemented in a different manner, through a different division of roles and responsibilities.

Conclusion

In Poland, nowadays, along with the changes which affect families, there is also a discussion about the crisis of the family as such. Social changes, however, can be the source of constructive processes which will bring about an evolution in family dynamics. In a way, evolution itself is inclusive of change. Here, however, the juxtaposition of these two concepts is performed for the purpose of focusing attention on the character of these changes. Traits, talents and possibilities are strengthened through being in the relationship; they take on a new character through the process of multiplying. This will not happen in a direction planned beforehand or in any way prone to statistical generalisation. Every relationship possesses the possibility for producing its own inimitable algorithm. Producing such an algorithm allows for respecting the rules of equality and differing rights when each partner sincerely attempts to breach their egoistic 'Me' through mutual friendship, love and affirmation. In this process of integration, both partners may experience a new quality of existence and perception; this is a multi-criterion view, one which takes into consideration a variety of needs and possibilities. The optimal solution reached by individuals in the relationship may be different every time – it is defined by the relationship itself.

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