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## Section:

# PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSONALITY

## AN INDIVIDUAL'S GENDER EXPERIENCE: SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

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**Abstract.** The article highlights gender experience development in an individual. The socio-cultural context of gender identity development is addressed from the perspective of social constructivism. The author describes the mechanism of constructing gender schemas and norms which reflect socio-cultural experience. Drawing on poststructuralist ideas, the author explores cultural texts which encode assumptions and concepts that serve as schemas for perceiving and understanding reality, for reflecting the processes of an individual's development as a discursive being in his or her interpretation of socio-cultural experience. The article also analyzes masculinity and femininity models shaped by socio-cultural schemas and explores gender role expectations among the young people in Ukraine.

**Keywords:** gender experience, gender schemas, social constructivism, cultural texts, socio-cultural experience, interpretation, masculinity, femininity.

With the emergence of poststructuralist and postmodernist ideas, which reflect a new style of philosophical speculation based not on a search for traditional alternatives (the opposition between the general and the individual, the individual and the social, the masculine and the feminine) but on the recognition of multiplicity and rejection of alternativeness, it has become possible to address a previously disregarded research problem – a gender-conscious individual developing in a certain historical and cultural environment. The main focus of analysis is society in terms of its impact on the development of an individual's gender identity and experience embedded in a system of social expectations and conventions, which determines the ability of an individual to identify themselves and compare themselves with an abstract perfect model of a 'real' man or woman. Therefore, we consider it important to explore an individual's gender experience development.

Social constructivism has provided a new perspective for the interpretation of gender, with a distinction being made among sex as a biological category, sex as a social category which incorporates social sex characteristics, and gender as a category which is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction. In our opinion, social constructivism is the most instrumental methodology to argue for the existence of gender experience as a contextually determined phenomenon. Social constructivists argue that the ideas of masculinity and femininity are artificial, being created and legitimized by social institutions through human interpretation. In social interaction, individuals acquire an understanding of femininity and masculinity models created in a certain context. In other words, they acquire the experience of how to be men or women and how to be perceived as such; by doing so, they maintain

and enhance gender schemas typical of a certain community, ethos, culture. This necessitates an analysis of an individual's gender experience construction.

Conceptualizing gender as a structure or a process provides a perspective to argue for the existence of socio-cultural experience, expectations as to what men and women should be like, what society wants them to be like. This experience is systematic and logical in character and is rooted in culture, social context, gender relations in different historical periods in different societies, ethnic groups, social classes, communities, generations. Therefore, researching gender experience involves analyzing its development in a certain culture, society, community.

Drawing on post-structuralism and postmodernism, we regard culture as a text which is created over a certain time period and is composed of assumptions and concepts that serve as schemas for perceiving and understanding reality. Consequently, culture is a textual space where there is a continuous creation and circulation of new assumptions and concepts on the basis of other texts, even other cultures, and this maintains the development of culture.

Any text is made up of a great number of cultural codes, which the author does not always use consciously. A cultural code is a code of human knowledge, social assumptions, opinions, etc. Weaved from a number of equally important codes, a text itself gets braided into an eternal fabric of culture and becomes its memory; it 'remembers' not only the past and present but also the culture of the future. Grasping the texts of a culture, an individual develops as a discursive being, which is the basis for acquiring socio-cultural experience through understanding, interpreting and internalizing the most significant texts of a culture [1]. Interpreting a text from a certain culture, an individual gives it a new significance, which helps to create new senses. In this way, an individual not only acquires socio-cultural experience but also constructs it, adds new meanings to it. Therefore, as regards gender experience, we use the term 'construction'; by analyzing cultural texts, we trace how their meanings developed.

Every culture has basic narratives which reflect its world model and serve as cultural programmes, matrices, interpretative schemas. They were created in the ancient world in the form of myths, which were later incorporated into fairy tales, works of philosophy, religion, art. There are special texts which reflect the most significant values of gender-conscious culture. Such texts encode a system of schemas, conceptions, models and ways of organizing life, without which no society can exist. Through certain norms and a system of gender organization, such texts promote the development of an individual's gender identity and abilities, orient them towards certain occupations, determine various masculinity and femininity models. A gender-conscious culture has various texts which encode norms, schemas, stereotypes determining the construction of an individual's experience in line with a relevant gender model. Such texts are divided into symbolic, which encode the main symbolic sense of a gender-conscious culture (myths, fairy tales, fiction, music, works of fine art); metaphoric, which contribute to the creation of new senses; and theoretical (conceptual), which reflect the main concepts of a culture such as gender norms, requirements, rules (gender ideology, various theories on the essence and purpose of the masculine and the feminine, etc.). Therefore, there are grounds to claim that cultural texts encode the gender schemes of socio-cultural experience which are legitimized within socialization institutions (families, pre-school education institutions, schools, mass media, communities, etc.); such institutions transmit gender schemas and facilitate their acquisition by an individual in socialization process.

There are societies where masculine or feminine cultural schemas dominate. According to Geert Hofstede, masculine and feminine societies differ in terms of a whole range of social and psychological characteristics. Masculine societies legitimize and demonstrate cultural models based on the schemas of personal achievement and high social status, which indicates personal success. In such societies, everything great and massive is highly valued; the children are taught to admire the strong; those who fail become outcasts; demonstration of success is regarded as good manners; rational thinking prevails; family roles are clearly differentiated; self-esteem is highly significant.

On the contrary, feminine cultures emphasize a search for consensus, place great value on caring for others, sparing their feelings, serving them. Small is considered beautiful; the suppressed are

treated with compassion; modesty is highly valued; intuitive thinking is predominant; group membership is encouraged [5]. Thus such ideas reflect socio-cultural experience, create schemas for constructing the gender experience of the individuals living in such societies and interacting with other gender-conscious individuals in gendered institutions. Additionally, from a social constructivism perspective, not only do gender-conscious individuals construct their identity in accordance with gendered institutions, but institutions also create gender and reproduce the differences constructed by people.

Therefore, socio-cultural gender schemas or stereotypes reflect the social experience of a certain culture and society. They are not only legitimized by the institutions which transmit them; the demonstration of gender schemas involves their simultaneous construction. Being constructive elements of gender identification, gender schemas do not exist on their own, independently of people; they determine gender experience construction. They are true abstractions derived from routine life and represent generalized images of men and women typical of a certain culture. The reason for the emergence and survival of gender schemas is that society is made up of a great number of mature adult individuals who represent certain institutions, stereotypical consciousness and behaviour patterns. Not institutions, but people with their interpretations are the vehicles of transmitting gender consciousness. That is why gender schemas exist and are 'real' as long as they are reproduced by people and supported by institutions. Gender schemas stop existing as soon as they are no longer recognized. In this sense, gender schemas exist in social reality because by transmitting them, people treat them as reality.

In the basic narratives of a certain society or culture, the models of femininity and masculinity are created and transmitted on the basis of socio-cultural schemas. Masculine characteristics include social status, physical, intellectual and emotional stamina, anti-femininity. A man's social value is determined by his earnings, career success, and motivation for professional growth. A man is supposed to be physically strong, biologically active, emotionally reserved, reasonable in all his actions and reactions; he is also expected to avoid women-specific activities and modes of self-expression.

The above-mentioned masculinity characteristics are also stereotypical in the situations when it is difficult to maintain the standards of traditional gender behaviour, when men are under stress, which leads to a lower self-esteem and depression. A man's attempt to constantly conform to cultural schemas can cause self-humiliation, which results in abandoning the male role. I. Kon refers to such a situation as a crisis of masculinity [4].

Femininity characteristics include orientation towards motherhood as the main way of self-realization, the desire to be a good housekeeper, emphasis on interpersonal relations and developing competence in interaction, the importance of preserving attractive appearance as an important feminine attribute in interacting with others, regarding appearance as part of the I-image [3]. According to O. Zdravomyslova and A. Tiomkina, the absence of such characteristics causes a crisis of female identity. The authors attribute this to the aggravation of the conflict between family and work. In spite of their socio-cultural origin, patriarchal stereotypes are very common in modern society, with the personality of a woman being regarded only in connection with motherhood, family, material well-being. Professional success is not associated with a female image despite the recent tendency for the mass media to construct an image of a successful career lady. However, such an image is always coupled with an unhappy private life and is quite masculine. Such a situation complicates the process of identifying with an image of 'a business lady'.

The characteristics described above are stereotypical and socially constructed; they reflect social assumptions about male and female traits, sex role behaviour patterns in various spheres of social life and are constantly maintained because people try to adhere to them.

Gender schemas are highly normative because they encode not only group observations but also social expectations, 'background expectations' (E. Goffman's term) which refer to socially approved behaviour which may be unconscious and non-reflexive. In other words, gender schemas are in fact manifestations of sex role norms and roles of a certain society. A discrepancy between an individual's

behaviour and background expectations in any sphere of social activity results in his or her being condemned by others.

The stereotypical idea that women are more emotional and caring and men are more rational and action-oriented, contained in the narrative texts of a certain culture, is encoded in background expectations and is supposed to be learnt. In other words, gender schemas of a culture, society, group serve as background expectations, determine what a real man and woman are supposed to be like, to look like and how to behave in a certain situation.

Thus gender schemas are generalized models of masculinity and femininity and encode a system of ideas about gender behaviour of men and women encoded in the background expectations of a certain culture, society, group; gender schemas arise out of the psychological needs of an individual to behave in a socially approved manner, to feel their integrity and harmony. Such schemas serve as the so-called cognitive constructs on the basis of which a person perceives information about male and female roles and expresses their attitude to them.

As cognitive structures, gender schemas function as indicators of typical and non-typical male and female behaviour. The male and the female are perceived in binary opposition, which allows for only two options to choose from. When a person perceives a schema non-critically, without speculation, he or she is influenced by background expectations. Background knowledge, which emerges within groups, promotes similarity among group members because its nature results from collective interaction. For instance, in every culture and society there are a few femininity and masculinity models – from dominant to marginal. Dominant models reflect gender assumptions shared by majority. Marginal models of masculinity and femininity are characteristic of certain groups, communities, subcultures.

Various age groups have their own background expectations of masculinity and femininity. Characterizing the image of a man or woman, teenagers draw on the main family roles. The ideas of femininity and masculinity in senior schoolers are based on their relations with peers of the opposite sex. At this age, the dominant image of a man is a strong, brave, goal-oriented, proud knight (who is supposed to defend, respect, be attentive and noble, etc.). Girls think that a woman should be sweet and tender. As for teenage boys, their ideas of a man and woman contain few characteristics that would reflect male-female relations. The dominant female characteristics include, apart from appearance (beautiful, elegant, neat, etc.), activeness, confidence, responsibility, which is the reason to conclude that a teenage boy has an androgenic image of a woman.

Young people associate male and female characteristics with major social roles. That is why both young girls and boys expect a woman to be a caring mother, tolerant in relations, determined in achieving her goal, a good housekeeper. A man is active, successful, able to provide for a family, confident, strong. According to our respondents, a man strives to be a leader, is mathematically inclined, has logical thinking, is authoritative in communication, whereas a woman takes care of children, is emotional and permissive.

Adult men and women tend to exaggerate the differences between the sexes. Such differences mainly refer to the spheres where an individual's sex is viewed positively; while analyzing negative characteristics, both men and women tend to disregard the differences between the sexes. Thus women emphasize differences in family and household life; and men, in social and professional spheres. Women regard men as less competent in resolving family and household issues. Men tend to disregard women's professional and social achievements. Therefore, the existing gender schemas, masculinity and femininity models in culture and society, are rather stereotyped and determine certain cognitive observations of individuals, their attitude to themselves and to others, promote self-expression, influence the construction of their gender experience.

Gender schemas are a combined product of society and people. Created in a society, group or community, gender schemas are assimilated through background expectations in the process of interpersonal interaction and are then reproduced. Being reproduced, schemas can undergo some changes while being interpreted in a certain context; in turn, they determine the formation of renovated

or totally new socio-cultural schemas. Therefore, at any moment, gender schemas are reflected in an individual's personal and socio-cultural experience.

In Ukrainian society, gender schemas are rather rigid, stable constructs which reflect the characteristics of sex-role behaviour patterns existing in patriarchic families with an emphasis on a woman's secondary role in social processes. What follows are examples of gender stereotypes about occupational roles: household work and child rearing are women's jobs; a husband can at best help his wife about the house; a woman's happiness is impossible without family and children; nothing can replace the happiness of motherhood and marital life; a man is capable of realizing himself outside the family by concentrating on work; a man's success is measured mostly in terms of high social and material status [2, p. 133-135]. The gender schemas encoded and legitimized in cultural texts have seen few transformations, which determines the modern ideas of sex roles to a great extent.

As part of the research process, our students were involved in a survey. When asked what makes a typical male and female researcher, they cited intelligence, industriousness and logical thinking. These characteristics pertain to a male stereotype and are opposite to what mass consciousness expects of women. At the same time, emotional traits, interest in surroundings and social problems are not attributed to a typical researcher. The stereotype which associates research and a typical researcher with the male sex is a strong factor determining career choices. The students associate a woman researcher with non-feminine appearance. Famous female researchers are regarded by our student respondents as exceptional cases of women combining femininity and high intellect.

Our student respondents appear more positive about demanding male teachers explaining this by their integrity and professionalism. Demanding female teachers are perceived as too emotional due to being dissatisfied with their private life. Thus our students have an image of 'male' research work, but there is no such an image as 'female' research work. The students' image of a researcher is based on the stereotype that a real researcher must be male. Such ideas are undoubtedly determined by gender schemas which are created and legitimized in a certain culture and which are reconstructed rather slowly.

In order to be competitive in research work, women face the necessity of adopting male behaviour patterns and system of values. Our observations of women researchers prove that female university researchers differ from the control group of women in terms of the same characteristics which make them similar to successful male researchers.

Smart girl students try, sometimes subconsciously, to seem unintelligent and helpless in order to be perceived as more feminine. This phenomenon is referred to as "the rule of being two steps behind men". However, lately there has been a tendency, especially among young people, to be more tolerant to women in research work, business, career growth; this is more the case in big cities.

Thus socio-cultural gender schemas serve as clichés, interpretive frameworks, which provide a simple and reliable tool for categorizing, simplifying and schematizing social reality. Categorization is not just classification but also a schema which urges a person to act in a certain way. It is called a stereotyped schema; to some extent, it promotes interpersonal and intergroup understanding and cooperation, facilitates the perception and interpretation of the world by performing the adaptation function. On the one hand, such a schema needs to be rigid enough to ensure the transmission of socio-cultural experience; on the other hand, flexible enough to promote the development of culture, society, the construction of new experience which would create favourable conditions for an individual's self-discovery and self-expression regardless of their sex.

Being created in socio-cultural environment, certain stereotypical ideas about personal characteristics, ways of interpersonal interaction prevent men and women from being perceived and evaluated as individuals with their own abilities, traits, aspirations. Stereotypical ideas are fixed in an individual's experience and determine their self-expression.

At socio-cultural and individual levels, there exist so-called definitions of male and female occupations. This explains the origin of the idea that only a man can make a good leader of an organization or group; the typical female role is that of a subordinate. In fact, both men and women can be efficient leaders since the ability to perform various functions depends on the individual

characteristics of a person and their proficiency level, not on sex. Both men and women think that men are better at performing managerial functions; men are considered creators who are capable of building 'strong ties and relations' and leading others. At work, like in a family, a woman prefers to be 'behind a man's strong back', behind the back of her supervisor who is willing to accept responsibility for business.

Most of our respondents attribute a higher social status to men; the women who manage to achieve a high status are usually narrow specialists. In our research, 78 per cent of respondents (both male and female) think that being director of a firm, plant, bank is a male role.

According to the great majority of our respondents, women are better as middle-level supervisors; they are also good at record keeping, working with personnel, etc. Such ideas are undoubtedly stereotypical, and the reason is that men tend to dominate; and women, to be dominated. Other research also reveals the existence of the stereotype of male domination in human social experience. The American researcher R. Kanter focuses on women's occupational experiences and concludes that women face special pressures. She identifies two social groups in organizations: dominants and tokens. The former is made up from men; the latter, from female managers in a men's business world. Women are only seen as representations of their category in a male group, as symbols (tokens) rather than individuals. Tokens are more visible and are perceived more stereotypically; they are more intensely scrutinized than dominants.

The stereotypes of dominance and subordination encoded in women's social experience determine their defensive behavioral strategies. S.Walsh and C.Cassell identify the following five 'gender management strategies':

- 'overfunctioning at work': women tend to work harder than men;
- 'feminizing strategies': women resort to flattery, belittling their own abilities, and flirting as negotiating tools with men;
- 'working behind the scenes': women do unpaid jobs such as resolving conflicts, dealing with emotional problems, etc;
- 'mothering skills' are used with male colleagues (especially those whose social status is high); they include listening to men's problems, caring for them as a way of acquiring influence in the organization;
- 'the mask': women hide their emotions and personal life in order to avoid being labelled as less efficient.

Such behavioral strategies benefit the organization a woman works for but are damaging to her psychological health.

Therefore, gender schemas determine an individual's behaviour and interaction with others. Undoubtedly, they help a person to adapt to the social world they live in; however, the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, which identify a man and woman with traditional masculine and feminine characteristics, prevent women from getting successfully incorporated into the world of business, science, economy and political management. Gender stereotypes, which absolutize masculinity and femininity, can be harmful to men and women, as well as to society in general. When a man or woman is regarded not as an individual with unique personal qualities but as a member of a certain social group, there appear certain limits within which they are supposed to act. If a female potential is not realized in any sphere, it is a loss not only for concrete people but for society in general.

In Ukrainian society, the most prominent male roles are those of a breadwinner, successful businessman, politician, banker. In other words, masculine identity is centered around material and social success. One of the criteria of being successful is high social status which is proof of 'real' masculinity. A young man can develop unrealistic expectations and orientations only towards objective factors of social status (high pay and position) and disregard the psychological essence of success (fulfillment of one's professional potential, pursuing one's interests), which inhibits his self-realization and life in general. However, it is natural that few manage to achieve such masculinity, and this results in tension and a feeling of insecurity.

Only 18 per cent of our male respondents (aged 30-35, having higher education) expressed satisfaction with their status. In answer to the question, 'What a "real" man should be like?', the majority of the respondents cited material success and status because these factors determine the well-being of their families and esteem from others. Starting from adolescence, boys are more motivated to choose a gender-appropriate profession than girls are. The majority of teenage male respondents from Precarpathian schools choose professions which are in line with the male gender role. Only 5 per cent of our respondents dream of becoming cooks, fashion designers, or hair stylists; none plan to become teachers or nurses. As for girls, 25 per cent dream of becoming business ladies, supervisors, etc. Such results show that boys are more dependent on gender stereotypes in choosing a career; gender stereotypes also have a significant impact on the fulfillment of young people's professional potential in general.

Therefore, gender schemas encoded in narratives and cultural texts determine the type of gender society (masculine or feminine), where genderized institutions legitimize and recreate them. Gender schemas or stereotypes are rather stable constructs, which can last a whole epoch. They can change with the changes in social norms and events due to being interpreted by community members, which, in turn, determines their transformation and the construction of new experience. The dynamics of gender schemas in any culture is the most salient indicator of dramatic internal changes in cultural contexts, socio-cultural and individual experience.

Gender schemas are cognitive constructs; to a certain extent, they determine an individual's system of assumptions, perceptions, evaluation of gender models, reflect the schematization of masculinity and femininity images, direct behaviour, interaction and self-realization strategies. In our opinion, it is important to explore the construction of gender schemas at an individual level, in other words, to identify how an individual assimilates socio-cultural schemas and constructs gender experience.

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У статті висвітлено проблему конструювання гендерного досвіду особистості. Обґрунтовано соціокультурний контекст формування гендеру на основі теорії соціального конструктивізму. Розкрито механізм створення гендерних схем, норм, які відображають соціокультурний досвід суспільства. Спираючись на ідеї постструктуралізму, висвітлено культурні тексти, які містять смисли, концепти і відіграють роль схеми сприйняття та розуміння реальності, що дозволяє особистості розвиватися як дискурсивному суб'єкту й засвоювати у процесі інтерпретації соціокультурний досвід. Проаналізовано моделі маскулінності і фемінінності, які задаються соціокультурними схемами й визначають формування гендерного досвіду особистості. Розкрито уявлення молоді щодо гендерних ролей в українському суспільстві.

**Ключові слова:** гендерний досвід, гендерні схеми, соціальний конструктивізм, культурні тексти, соціокультурний досвід, інтерпретація, маскулінність, фемінінність.