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# CULTURE AND GENDER ROLE DIFFERENCES

Theoretical  
article

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## Abstract

*Culture influences thinking, language and human behaviour. The social environment, in which individuals are born and live, shapes their attitudinal, emotional and behavioural reactions and the perceptions about what is happening around. The same applies in the case of assigned/assumed roles in society based on gender. Cultural dimensions that reflect differences in gender roles, but also elements related to the ethics of sexual difference were highlighted by many researchers. The presentation of these issues from the interdisciplinary perspective is the subject of this article. Briefly, the article refers to: importance of communication in transmission of roles of those two sexes, cultural dimensions that reflect role differences in various cultures, discrimination issues and ethics of sexual difference.*

## Argument

Cultural determinism is a reality developed by many theories explaining default assimilation of socio-cultural values of individuals and their influence on attitudes, mentalities, perceptions and their behaviours. Obviously, the levels of culture are multiple, and each level has influence to some extent. In general, what comes from the national culture is considered to have the strongest influence, but there are cultural dominants with origin in ethnicity, religion, social class, age, gender, education - training, etc. We say "in general" because quite a few phenomena occur currently, that cannot be associated or cannot necessarily be associated with the national culture, even if they indicate the importance of a common cultural background for the members of a group that make up a community (including a virtual one). Other levels of culture or combinations of values set their fundament and jointly activities, one of them being determined by the belonging to a particular gender.

Issues underlying political decisions, including those relating to discrimination on various criteria become of interest in the context of economic and socio-cultural changes (based largely on an unprecedented evolution of IT). In the same context there are discussions about gender discrimination and the role of women in society. Numerous projects, programs, directives, international, European and national regulations, and also militant groups draw attention to these phenomena, many of them having their origin in the literature that has treated the role of sexual difference over the years and addressed issues relating to ethics differences. This is the reason why we decided to approach such an issue, somehow brought into attention by the political interest.

## Culture and role differences between sexes

Western studies distinguish between *gender* and *sex*. These terms are not synonymous; they serve to delineate anatomical and cultural differences between men and women. Significant differences are highlighted below: sex is a biological concept, gender is a social construct; gender is determined by genetics and biology, gender is produced / reproduced by society; sex is permanent, gender varies over time and across cultures; sex is an individual ownership, gender is a social and relational quality. Companies create gender meanings communicated through structures and cultural practices. Social prescriptions embedded in personal identity, make individuals become of a certain type (Anghel, 2010, *apud* Onea, 2014).

## Communication of role differences

Firstly, we draw attention to the importance of communication in the transmission of gender role, starting right from the meaning given to culture by the anthropologist Hall (1984), the father of intercultural communication: "Culture is communication and communication is culture". Role differences between sexes (culturally determined) are a product of communication, but at the same time, they influence communication (we may speak about a circular causality). Communication shapes the lives of individuals. Attitudes, mentalities, positions towards action and generated solutions are transmitted by communication. All these influence human behaviours and behaviours that have moral consequences. Therefore, communication involves moral responsibility (Mulvaney, 1994). In fact, communication (verbal, nonverbal, implicit, explicit) is the process that teaches us to be male or female, that means to behave accordingly to the gender. From childhood we have learnt different linguistic practices, culturally associated with gender behaviours. "*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*" said Simone de Beauvoir (2006/1949), appreciating the role of culture and thereby of communication in shaping the role of women in society, and the ensuing consequences. Religious, mythical, philosophical and political discourses transmit us values and norms about our roles based on gender: permissions - what do (can do) a man / woman, *prohibitions* - what cannot or should not be done by a man / woman, how it should be done etc. Some communication behaviours acceptable for boys / men are considered completely inappropriate for girls / women. In this way, differences in the manner of learning the language use and actual use occur. Therefore, *the language itself reflects the social role*: for women, communication is the essence of a relationship through the transfer of emotions and feelings, firstly; for men, communication is a form in which they exercise control, keep or demonstrate independence, improve their status, generally by transmission of information (data and facts presented in an analytical manner). Consequently, communication models (conversational style, linguistic strategies, conversational ritual, nonverbal behaviour, manner of use of space and time) differ between sexes (Mulvaney, 1994, Hofstede *et al.*, 2012).

## Role differences and discrimination

In the following lines, we intent to highlight that role differences should not be associated with discrimination. As there is a *natural normality* that makes differences at biological level, there is also a *cultural normality*, which is linked by what is *naturally* in a certain

culture. That leads to differences in the assumption and assignment of gender roles. Basically, gender discrimination reflects "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on gender [...] which has as purpose or effect the restriction and exclusion of recognition, usage or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms or rights recognized by law, in equality conditions, in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life" (Law no. 324/2006). Role differences between sexes can be seen as manifestations of values and norms of a *social contract*. In fact, researchers have revealed dimensions of cultural specificity that reflects these gender differences stated by culture. For example, *masculinity-femininity* dimension reflects the degree of interchange ability of gender roles in society (this dimension, linked to differences in socialization of children in relation to aggression - children learn to avoid aggression in feminine countries, while they learn how to defend themselves in masculine countries, is also linguistically manifested. Thus, "a society is considered a masculine one if the gender emotional roles differ clearly: men should be authoritarian, harsh and focused on material success, while women should be modest, gentle and concerned with quality of life. A society is considered a feminine one if the gender emotional roles overlap: both men and women must prove modesty, gentleness and concern for quality of life" (Hofstede *et al.*, 2012, p. 141).

Assignment of social roles based on gender is a consequence of cultural-religious interpretations and historical and environmental factors (Hofstede *et al.*, 2012).

### **Ethics of sexual difference**

We ask ourselves, as a natural consequence of the above ideas, if there are cultural premises of discrimination and if masculinity-femininity dimension can provide guidance on this topic. We understand from the definition of this dimension that we find larger differences between the roles of the two sexes in countries characterized by masculinity, leading to the stronger perception of gender discrimination in countries characterized by femininity, in which blurred differences lead to a poor perception of gender inequality (this dimension is presented as an example, particularly to highlight the differences between femininity and feminism; cultural premises of discrimination are related to the whole context reflected by socio-cultural mentalities as well as economic and political ideologies). It would be risky to consider the values involved by this cultural dimension as defining and determining the discrimination. The issues involved by the ethics of sexual difference must be considered in a particular context. Differences in cultural allocation / assumption of

gender roles do not automatically reflect "inequality" or "discrimination". The latter one involves the violation of human rights, and of free will. Cultural assumption of a gender emotional role and its manifestation without the feeling of constraint or limitation (raising children especially by mothers, for example, in some masculinity societies where fathers are more concerned with the procurement of necessary resources) are aspects that can be placed in the category of *discrimination* (this *social contract* should not be considered a "natural" one. Only this perspective can become dangerous because it involves stability and rigidity of gender roles, regardless of the will of the individual and the situation). Moreover, the same situation can be viewed differently by people of different cultures. For example, some westerners classify as discriminatory the Oriental practices relating to behaviour and traditional clothing of women. It often turns out that these women care about preserving their customs and traditions in a much greater extent than we think and that they actually require / impose themselves these "restrictions" (*limitations* for outsiders, *normality* for insiders). It should be taken into consideration the changes that occur (technological, cultural, economic, demographic, political ones, etc.), with direct influence on the content of gender roles and its dynamics. It should not be considered that these changes imply inadaptability because of the traditional roles, but also discrimination, if this situation occurs on the framework of *imposing* what is "established for centuries".

Obviously, we cannot deny the relationship between culture and discrimination, as we cannot diminish the importance of the phenomenon itself. Issues of ethics of sexual difference were closely related to religion and they were subject of interrogations of philosophers from antiquity to present. *Feminism*, as a doctrine that aims women's empowerment, freedom from any subordination or dominant masculine models, enhancement of female identity, of her genuine core, revealed numerous problems, including inequality of power between sexes, the subordinate position of women in family and society, undervaluation of its role in social stratification and employment (Melchiorre *et al.*, 2004). Turning to religion, we must recognize its role in emphasizing gender inequalities (for example, in most Christian religions divinity takes the image of a man, women generally cannot serve as a priest; in the Christian Bible written by men, women use only 1.1% of the total number of words (<http://afirmativ.com/2015/02/12/studiu-inedit-cate-cuvinte-au-rostit-femeile-din-biblie-si-ce-importanta-au-avut/>), which reflects the low representation of women's contributions; in the same context women should obey to men and be quiet in church etc.). We must also recognize the privileges met by women at certain times, but at the

same time we must balance the phenomena breadth. For example, the Vestals in ancient Rome were honoured and involved in affairs of state (it is true that happened only after extremely tough compliance requirements, whose breach was death).

Feminism, in its positive form (we must admit there are exaggerations, too) seeks equality and draws attention to socio-cultural perception that women are wrongly included in the category of "the Other One", "the Object" and characterized in relation to the man, who is "the Subject," "the Absolute". Although most primitive societies found duality of "the Same One" and "the Other One" (day-night, sun-moon, good-evil, yin-yang etc.), there is no connection regarding the origin and the gender division (Melchiorre *et al.*, 2004 Beauvoir, 1949/2006). In fact, it should be seen as a complementarity, and this is also emphasized by Irigaray (2010) in a deconstructivist discourse, who drew attention to the need of re-settle the culture by closing "the Other One" to "the Other One", "without ever reduce one to the other one". Basically, specific characteristics should be considered, such as: the ability to give birth, the relationship with the nature, diffuse sexuality and pacifism (Melchiorre *et al.*, 2004).

Studies point out that there is a contradiction and a violation of what is acknowledged as common sense, in the context of otherness, based on gender difference criterion: "woman is the Other in the core of a totality, whose two terms are needed one to the other one" (Beauvoir, 1949/2006). Complementarity is mutilated by a binary logic thinking that held the place of the dialectical manner. "One" (considered as an aiming point, a reference) is more important than "the Other". The mentality is perpetuated by studies and masculine ideologies. Therefore, the field of *feminist studies* (*women's studies*) has developed. They aim to answer to the mechanisms of women's minimization, perceived in the androcentric scientific studies (Mathieu, in Bonte, Izard, 2007).

Differences between men and women at genetic or cultural level highlight natural specific aspects (men are competitive, assertive, daring, make visual and auditory associations, while women have superior emotional intelligence, networking capacity and abstract thinking) or cultural specific aspects (for women it's more important *what they are*, while for men it's more important *what they do*) which do not justify at all the value differences (Stănculescu, 2009, Hofstede *et al.*, 2012). Being physically or mentality different does not mean to be superior or inferior; that's exactly what feminism is trying to explain. We may notice a difference in the moral development of women and men, in the sense that values as fairness and equality matter more for

man; in this case we may talk about a "morality of justice". Women value more the protection from pain, which rather characterizes a "moral responsibility" (Gilligan, *apud* Melchiorre *et al.*, 2004). The notice is valid for the observed cultures; we cannot generalize because there are differences between cultures as masculinity-femininity dimension reveals.

Issues of ethics of sexual difference could be solved by guaranteeing the identity of people in their singularity, through legislative measures that provide equivalent rights for both genders, based on respect for their differences (Irigaray, 2010).

Another aspect of the presented subject refers to the *feminine* approach in the context of *feminist* ideology. Equality does not mean assigning masculine features to woman, but recognition of specific features, feminine ones, as attributes considered as they are, without undervaluing comparisons. Feminism is not inconsistent with femininity, but this highlights it, valorises it and explains its profound significance, stressing the need of its development in a framework that does not limit women's freedoms and rights.

### **Gender stereotypes**

Differentiation leads also to inequality by provided stereotypes. In general, gender stereotypes (provided mostly by the representatives of the opposite sex) devalue woman, who is regarded as being inferior to man, without capacity to reason, as it appears in Aristotle or Jacque Rousseau works. They associate her with passivity, renunciation, structural weakness / fragility or lack of virtues, as opposed to masculine traits seen as positive ones (*apud* Melchiorre *et al.*, 2004). While man says and does "meaningful" things, woman is "fluid, ambiguous and open" (Pârnu, 2005). Both religious sources and ancient philosophy, and especially the mentality of the Middle Ages (mirrored in many papers), were the basis for creating social representations and gender stereotypes. What it's interesting, these aspects were even internalized by the fair sex, as Bordieu noted: *man / woman distinction is not so much a biological fact, as a social construct, women themselves helping unconsciously-bodily-postural to the dominance of men. Women internalized it no more, no less than adopting even the thinking categories of those who dominate them* (Ghiu, in Bordieu, 2003). Basically, woman appears as a reflection of the man, being unable to decide her own destiny (Lung, 2007). Old mentalities, we may say, but with reverberations in present. In order to overcome them, an "alive and detached thinking, a quitting, a non-ecologic, nor a possessive one" is needed. (Irigaray, 2010).

## Conclusions

Human behaviour is subject to a double determinism, a biological and a cultural one. This is particularly visible when looking at the comparisons that are made between sexes / genders. These differences are communicated and reflected through communication. Cultural dimensions reflect specific aspects of the two genders. Although differences should be seen in terms of complementarity, we notice that binary thinking, modelled along social evolution, accommodates positive and negative perception, leading to an unequal relationship between the compared terms, in the detriment of women. Culture, through the generated representations and stereotypes, perpetuates this damaging way of thinking and further shares this unbalanced vision, to which feminism responds with solutions demonstrating the need of dialectical thinking. She should not be *accepted*, but *respected* for its uniqueness. *To accept* has its note of inferiority. "She" is very valuable by herself, not in comparison with "Him".

Issues of ethics of sexual difference can be solved by creating and strengthening an adequate legal framework with the condition of mentality change. The possibility of achieving these aspects depends on the socio-political context, in which cultural features have an important role, which may / may not favour this approach.

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