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Femininity and masculinity from an interdisciplinary perspective

Kobiecość i męskość w perspektywie interdyscyplinarnej

Abstract

The issue of femininity and masculinity is at the centre of interest in many academic disciplines, which confirms its complex and multidimensional nature and, at the same time, justifies the need to analyze it on various levels. It is part of a broader discussion surrounding the concept of cultural gender, especially in the context of the factors that determine it. For femininity and masculinity lie at the intersection of nature and culture, and thus encompass the biological, social, and individual dimensions of the human being, which leaves additional room for individual interpretations. The multitude of views and positions on this issue makes it difficult to define them unambiguously; therefore, this article is devoted to femininity and masculinity from an interdisciplinary perspective. It focuses on highlighting the complexity of this issue; therefore, it will be presented through the lens of those academic disciplines that describe it in the greatest detail. Based on an analysis of the relevant literature – to the extent permitted by the framework of this publication – the anthropological, biological, psychological, and sociological perspectives will be presented in turn.

Keywords: femininity and masculinity, sexuality, corporeality, biological sex, cultural gender, gender identity

Streszczenie

Zagadnienie kobiecości i męskości znajduje się w centrum zainteresowania wielu dyscyplin naukowych, co potwierdza jego złożony i wielowymiarowy charakter, a zarazem uzasadnia potrzebę jego analizy na różnych płaszczyznach. Wpisuje się ono w szerszą dyskusję prowadzoną wokół pojęcia płci kulturowej, zwłaszcza w kontekście czynników, które ją determinują. Kobiecość i męskość sytuuje się bowiem na pograniczu natury i kultury, a więc obejmuje zarówno biologiczny, społeczny, jak i indywidualny wymiar człowieka, co pozostawia dodatkową przestrzeń do własnych interpretacji. Wielość poglądów i stanowisk w tej kwestii utrudnia ich jednoznaczne zdefiniowanie, dlatego niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest kobiecości i męskości w perspektywie interdyscyplinarnej. Koncentruje się na ukazaniu złożoności tego zagadnienia, dlatego zostanie ono przedstawione w optyce tych dyscyplin

naukowych, które opisują je w sposób najbardziej szczegółowy. W oparciu o analizę literatury przedmiotowej – na tyle, na ile pozwolą przyjęte ramy te publikacji – kolejno zaprezentowane zostaną perspektywa antropologiczna, biologiczna, psychologiczna oraz socjologiczna.

Słowa kluczowe: kobiecość i męskość, płciowość, cielesność, płeć biologiczna, płeć kulturowa, tożsamość płciowa

Introduction

The issue of femininity and masculinity is part of the ongoing debate on gender, which is currently taking place not only in academia but also in the broader social sphere. A particularly hotly debated aspect is its social dimension, which is defined using the term *gender* borrowed from English, although in Polish academic discourse it is increasingly referred to as "cultural gender."[1] The social nature of this issue places femininity and masculinity within the scope of many academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology, pedagogy, and other human sciences.[2] This highlights the need to approach the topic from an interdisciplinary perspective, which in turn makes it difficult to provide an unambiguous definition of femininity and masculinity. A distinction commonly used in the social sciences proves helpful in this regard; it distinguishes between: biological sex, which refers to the anatomical and physiological differences between the sexes, and cultural gender (*gender*), which emphasizes the psychological, social, and cultural differences between women and men resulting from the "social process of gender construction." Drawing on this distinction, femininity and masculinity can be defined as models comprising a set of certain traits, behaviours, and roles attributed to women and men in a given society, which they internalize during the process of socialization.[3]

The literature on the subject identifies two cultural models of femininity and masculinity: the traditional and the modern. Until the second half of the 20th century, the traditional model dominated in many societies, in which femininity and masculinity were viewed as two distinct and opposing dimensions of personality.[4] Within this framework, femininity was equated with emotionality, tenderness, gentleness, and nurturing, as well as a focus on motherhood and family. Masculinity, on the other hand, was associated with strength and self-confidence, but also with aggression, selfishness, and a competitive mindset.[5] Today, however, due to numerous social,

[1] Ł. Wawrowski, *Czy jest sens dyskutować z przeciwnikami tzw. ideologii gender?*, "Chorzowskie Studia Polityczne" 2017, No. 14, pp. 13–14.

[2] M. Olczyk, *Prawda (o) płci – odkrywana czy tworzona? Antropologia integralna w konfrontacji z ideologią gender*, "Teologia i Moralność" 2018, No. 2, p. 191.

[3] K. Dzwonkowska-Godula, *Tradycyjnie czy nowocześnie? Wzory macierzyństwa i ojcostwa w Polsce*, Łódź 2015, p. 35.

[4] D. Dobosz, *Kobiecość i męskość w popkulturze z perspektywy młodych dorosłych. Studium jakościowe*, Katowice 2021, s. 24.

[5] A. Gromkowska-Melosik, *Paradoksy emancypacji*, "ACADEMIA" 2013, No. 1, p. 32.

cultural, and economic changes, gender role models have undergone significant transformation.[6] As Krystyna Dzwonkowska-Godula notes, in contemporary society, the traditional gender model clashes with the modern one, leading to changes in how women and men are perceived, as well as in the traits, roles, and spheres of activity attributed to them.[7] Femininity and masculinity are therefore no longer perceived as two contrasting poles, and in society, the intertwining of these two dimensions is increasingly evident, making it difficult to clearly distinguish between what is masculine and what is feminine.[8]

In light of the above, it must be concluded that, in the face of contemporary social changes, the issue of femininity and masculinity takes on particular significance and relevance. The dynamics of these changes and the multitude of contemporary perspectives on this issue point to the need for in-depth reflection; therefore, this article focuses on examining femininity and masculinity from an interdisciplinary perspective. Its aim is to attempt to capture the complexity and multidimensionality of the issue at hand, which simultaneously justifies the need to further explore it in future publications. The article contributes to the current discussion on the significance of gender in human life, and thus to a deeper line of reflection on the concept of the person, their nature, identity, and place in society. It should be emphasized, however, that these reflections are introductory in nature and serve only as a starting point for more in-depth analyses, the full development of which definitely goes beyond the scope of a single study.

The anthropological perspective

Reflection on femininity and masculinity essentially touches upon a much more fundamental issue. Any attempt to define these concepts presupposes – often in a way that is not explicitly stated – a specific vision of humanity. Thus, when we ask questions about the sexuality of women and men, we are in fact asking about the essence of human nature, about who a person is as such, and also about their relationship to nature.[9] Therefore, when reflecting on human sexuality, one should begin by approaching the issue primarily from an anthropological perspective, seeking to discover what vision of humanity lies behind a given concept of sexuality.[10]

[6] B. Harwas-Napierała, *Niektóre uwarunkowania i zagrożenia rozwoju tożsamości płciowej dzieci*, "Forum Psychologiczne" 1998, No. 1, p. 62.

[7] D. Dobosz, *Kobiecość i męskość*…, p. 67.

[8] A. Gromkowska-Melosik, *Rekonstrukcje tożsamości współczesnych kobiet. Paradoksy emancypacji*, "Pedagogika Społeczna" 2017, No. 2, p. 97.

[9] W. Starnawski, *Dwa modele relacji: męskość – ojcostwo. Perspektywa pedagogii personalistycznej*, "Forum Pedagogiczne" 2016, No. 2/2, p. 218.

[10] B. Biela, *"Antropologia genderyzmu" w świetle Listu do biskupów Kościoła katolickiego o współdziałaniu mężczyzny i kobiety w Kościele i świecie*, "Studia Pastoralne" 2015, No. 11, p. 41.

In this sense, the ongoing academic debate on the "truth about gender"[11] appears, in essence, to be an anthropological dispute.

The debate addressing the issue of human sexuality, including interpretations of femininity and masculinity, centres on the concept of *gender*.[12] This word comes from English, where it is used to denote the grammatical gender of nouns, adjectives, and pronouns: masculine, feminine, and neuter (e.g., this wardrobe or this table). As Bogdan Biela points out, in this context, one can observe a significant feature of language, which involves speaking about asexual objects in terms of gender. Thus, a process takes place here of transferring human characteristics to objects, which consequently leads to their "genderization." In other words, language is used to assign a specific gender to objects, even though in reality they are not sexually defined (they do not exhibit any biological differences in their structure, as is the case with humans). The assignment of gender does not, therefore, stem from the nature of things, but takes place within the realm of human language, which is a product of culture. Ultimately, it can be said that it is culture that assigns generic characteristics to things.[13]

As Biela notes, a similar process occurs within *gender* theory, although here it takes the opposite direction, i.e., from language to anthropology. This means that in research on the cultural determinants of gender, a dominant role in the formation of femininity and masculinity is attributed to language and the social narratives derived from it. Ultimately, differences between the sexes are viewed primarily as a matter of gender – that is, a culturally constructed description, shaped by language, of what is masculine and feminine.[14] From this perspective, biological determinants of sex are of no significant importance, since the criteria for femininity and masculinity are defined by culturally embedded narratives about gender and sexual behaviour. Gender thus appears here as a sociocultural construct that is neither a permanent nor a stable category, as it is subject to free creation (the theory of gender performativity).[15] Hence, the concept *of gender* is defined as gender in the sense of the characteristics and roles attributed to women and men in a given culture.[16]

Gender understood in this way entails far-reaching anthropological consequences that affect the way a person functions and fulfils their potential, as well as their interpersonal relationships. The rejection of the concept of biological sex as an innate characteristic of a person undermines the view that the division between women and men is legitimate. According to proponents of *gender* theory,

[11] M. Olczyk, *Prawda (o) płci*…, p. 184.

[12] W. Rogowski, *Ideologia gender w krytyce medialnej środowisk prawicy w Polsce*, "Świat Idei i Polityki" 2013, No. 12, p. 26.

[13] B. Biela, *"Antropologia genderyzmu"*…, pp. 40–41.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 41.

[15] M. Olczyk, *Prawda (o) płci*…, pp. 185–186.

[16] B. Biela, *"Antropologia genderyzmu"*…, p. 41.

biological sex characteristics are individual physical traits that do not allow for the identification and characterization of a person as belonging to a particular sex. All the more so, they cannot serve as a basis for drawing conclusions about a person's social roles, as is the case in classical sexuality theory. Any form of highlighting differences between women and men is considered a gender stereotype that must be discarded. Gender is, in fact, a matter of convention – a sociocultural construct that is not a permanent reality contributing to a person's identity, but rather a role that someone assumes. In other words, there are no objective criteria for assigning someone to a particular gender category, because no one is born a woman or a man, but simply a human being who assumes a certain social role. However, this role is not a consequence of their genetic code, but of their natural needs and feelings.[17]

The denial of human sexuality, as it occurs within *gender* theory, leads to the belief that it cannot be confined to two dimensions, namely femininity and masculinity. The thesis of gender complementarity – which would imply that each gender is incomplete – is also rejected. According to proponents of the *gender* concept, a person can achieve full self-realization without reference to their supposed femininity or masculinity. Moreover, "entanglement in sexuality" actually limits a person, who is not inherently sexual – it is within the framework of culture that a person is "gendered," that is, assigned a gender. This means that a person's adoption of a particular social role will most likely stem from their relationship with another person. However, this relationship will not be based on complementarity, but on a partnership that emphasizes the equality of the individuals involved. Biela points out that this approach to sexuality has specific consequences for the perception of gender roles associated with women and men, which in turn affects the understanding of the institutions of marriage, family, fatherhood, motherhood, as well as the upbringing, education, and identity formation of children and adolescents.[18]

According to Maciej Olczyk, it is an undeniable fact that culture has a real influence on how the functions and tasks assigned to women and men are perceived, both in the family and in the workplace. The interpretive models present in societies shape people's conceptions of femininity and masculinity, determine different modes of socialization, and sometimes even contribute to the perpetuation of social inequalities. At the same time, however, Olczyk notes that an excessive focus on cultural determinants can lead to downplaying the objective knowledge about sex provided by numerous human sciences, including, among others, sociobiology, neurophysiology, genetics, and psychology. As he emphasizes, all of these disciplines clearly point to the existence of biological determinants of human sex development that precede any human decisions.[19]

[17] *Ibidem*, pp. 45–47.
[18] *Ibidem*, pp. 47–48.
[19] M. Olczyk, *Prawda (o) płci*…, pp. 190–191.

Monika Kacprzak raises similar concerns, stating that accepting the tenets of *gender* theory goes beyond merely acknowledging sociocultural differences. According to the author, it also implies consent to the devaluation of the human body as an insignificant element, which consequently leads to the adoption of an anthropological perspective in which human nature is stripped of the characteristics that are absolutely inherent to it.[20] The denial of a fixed human structure – and thus of a certain essence of human existence – means that humans begin to be perceived almost as an incarnate spirit endowed with unlimited freedom, while their body becomes merely a "thing" attached to them. As a result, the freedom in question manifests itself not so much in the ability to accept or reject objective principles as in the freedom to establish them at will.[21]

John Paul II drew attention to this problem in his encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, where he wrote: "Freedom, when considered absolute, leads to treating the human body as raw material, devoid of meaning and moral value, until it shapes the body according to its own design. Consequently, human nature and the body appear as preliminary data or premises for the choices made by freedom – materially necessary, but external to the person, to the human agent."[22]

A vision of man in which absolute freedom is attributed to him carries serious theological consequences. For such a conception of the human person leaves no room for God. As Pope Benedict XVI observed: "Where the freedom to act becomes the freedom to make oneself, the negation of the Creator himself inevitably follows."[23] Ultimately, then, the human being assumes the role of God Himself, thereby becoming a "god incarnate" (*homo creator*).[24]

According to Danuta Radziszewska-Szczepanik, this contemporary understanding of man has been largely influenced by the Cartesian paradigm, which is expressed in a clear separation of two spheres of existence: the soul and the body (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*). Descartes characterized them as fully autonomous realities – and thus independent of one another – that are governed by their own laws. He identified the soul with consciousness, the self, which by its very nature is responsible for thinking. In his view, it is precisely the soul that constitutes the essence of the human being, whom the philosopher perceived primarily as *res cogitans*, i.e., a thinking thing. He treated the body, on the other hand, as part of the natural world, which made it external not only to the soul but also to the subject

[20] M. Kacprzyk, *Społeczne koszty wdrożenia ideologii gender*, "Collequia Theologica Ottoniana" 2014, No. 2, pp. 68–70.

[21] D. Radziszewska-Szczepaniak, *Redukcjonizm antropologiczny i jego konsekwencje*, "Nurt SVD" 2016, Issue 2, pp. 384–385.

[22] John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, No. 48.

[23] *Przemówienie jego świętobliwości Benedykta XVI z okazji życzeń bożonarodzeniowych dla Kurii Rzymskiej*, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121221_auguri-curia.html (27.03.2026).

[24] D. Radziszewska-Szczepanik, *Redukcjonizm antropologiczny*…, p. 385.

itself. It was therefore not viewed by Descartes as an element constituting humanity, but rather as something that is in our possession, though in essence it does not belong to the human being. For this reason, the relationship between the soul and the body was, in his view, accidental rather than constitutive.[25]

Drawing on this tradition of thought, Radziszewska-Szczepanik asserts that within *gender* theory, the human person is reduced to *a res cogitans*. As she explains, the error of this approach lies primarily in treating corporeality as an impersonal reality. Meanwhile, in her view, the body is a co-constitutive factor of human personal being; therefore, it cannot be perceived solely as matter subject to the individual's free disposal, since a human being is not merely a spirit but a unity of spirit, psyche, and body.[26]

Witold Starnawski also points to an alternative approach to human nature, proposing that the issue of the human body be considered from a personalist perspective. In seeking an answer to the question of the body's place within the structure of the human person, he draws on Boethius's definition. It follows from this definition that the person is a broader category, extending beyond the aspect of corporeality. Indeed, the concept of the person can be applied not only to human beings but also to incorporeal beings. At the same time, however, he notes that, according to classical tradition, the body constitutes an integral element of human nature and is therefore not something foreign (external) in which the soul (consciousness) merely resides or which it uses. For a person does not so much „possess" a body as simply be corporeal. According to Starnawski, the unity of soul and body is confirmed by the classical principle *operari sequitur esse*, according to which the manner in which a given thing acts follows directly from its nature. If, therefore, a human being acts through their body – that is, through actions – and also as a person, that is, consciously and in a free manner, this means that their action is simultaneously spiritual and corporeal. A corresponding unity must therefore exist at the level of their nature.[27]

In the context of our reflections, a crucial question remains: to what extent is being a woman or a man a constitutive element of human nature?[28] Christian personalism, as represented by John Paul II, provides an answer to this question. This approach indicates that human nature is sexual,[29] whereby the "naturalness" of sex emphasized by the Church is linked not only to the bodily dimension but also to the spiritual one, which means that it concerns the inner essence of the human person as such.[30] Sexuality will therefore not be viewed here solely as a biological fact, but as a way of being as a man or a woman. The Pope defines it as a constitutive property

[25] *Ibidem*, p. 381.

[26] *Ibidem*, p. 386.

[27] W. Starnawski, *Dwa modele*…, p. 220.

[28] *Ibidem*, p. 220.

[29] M. Siemion, *Seksualność w teorii querr oraz filozofii osoby i teologii ciała Karola Wojtyły*, "Warszawskie Studia Pastoralne" 2019, No. 3, p. 114.

[30] A. Szwed, *Kto się boi gender? Kościół rzymskokatolicki w Polsce i kategoria płci*, "Kultura i Edukacja" 2015, No. 3, pp. 281–282.

of humanity, while emphasizing that it should not be equated with physicality. As he points out, the human body always bears the marks of sex; however, the fact that a person "is a body" has a much more fundamental significance for their personal structure than the fact that they are a man or a woman. In other words, the body is a far more fundamental element of being a person than sex, which should be understood as a certain mode of existence of the body – and thus of the person.[31]

The Christian view of sexuality has its roots in the biblical account of the creation of the world, where it is written that God created *adamah*. This is a term of Hebrew origin that means "human being" (not "man").[32] The distinction between man and woman appears in Scripture only later, in the context of „Adam's dream,"[33] which points to sexuality as a secondary, though constitutive, characteristic of human beings. John Paul II interpreted this fact as an expression of the ontological equality of women and men, manifested in their identical nature, which, though essentially one, can be expressed in two different ways, namely, in femininity or masculinity.[34] An analysis of the biblical text on the creation of Adam and Eve also reveals the complementarity of the sexes, indicating that no human being – existing solely as a man or solely as a woman – embodies the fullness of humanity in their body. In other words, man and woman are created "together" and are willed by God as one for the other. Therefore, they can only fully realize themselves through mutual relationship.[35] In this context, gender plays an essential role, allowing a person to transcend their original solitude – it opens them up to a relationship with another person. It is a relationship of love that allows one to discover oneself, as the Pope pointed out when he wrote: "Femininity, as it were, finds itself in the presence of masculinity, while masculinity is affirmed through femininity."[36] This complementarity on the spiritual level also finds expression in the human body, which, thanks to its diversity, reveals the orientation toward unity between woman and man, leading them toward love and personal communion.[37]

The biological perspective

In the field of medical science, the term "sex" is used to refer to a set of biological characteristics that distinguish female individuals from male ones. These characteristics are associated with various reproductive functions, hormones, and anatomy. They are universal in nature, meaning they are biologically determined

[31] *Ibidem*, p. 116.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 116.
[33] S. Kunka, *Szkic do teologii ludzkiej płciowości*, "Polonia Sacra" 2012, No. 31, p. 184.
[34] M. Siemion, *Seksualność w teorii*…, p. 116.
[35] S. Kunka, *Szkic do teologii*…, pp. 182–183.
[36] John Paul II, *Mężczyzną i niewiastą stworzył ich*, after: M. Siemion, *Seksualność w teorii*…, p. 117.
[37] M. Siemion, *Seksualność w teorii*…, pp. 117–118.

and thus remain independent of the influence of social factors.[38] Based on biological determinants, the following are distinguished:

a) chromosomal (gonadal) sex, which depends on the type of sex chromosomes, where male sex is determined by the 46 XY karyotype and female sex by the 46 XX karyotype;
b) gonadal sex, associated with specific sex glands (testes or ovaries);
c) gonadophoric sex, determined by the differentiation of the reproductive tracts that develop from the gonadal ducts;
d) phenotypic sex, determined by a person's external appearance (secondary and tertiary sexual characteristics);
e) hormonal sex, associated with the amount of sex hormones secreted;
f) brain sex, which refers to differences in brain structure that determine psychological sex.[39]

The origins of sex differences can be traced back to the prenatal period, when, alongside genetic sex (XX vs. XY), gonadal sex (testes vs. ovaries), and somatic sex (internal and external genitalia), neuronal sex begins to develop, which refers to the manner in which specific brain structures function – characteristic of either women or men: "During this period, through neurotransmitters, a specific type of feedback loop is established between the secretion of sex hormones and gonadotropins, a type of sexual behaviour (homosexuality or heterosexuality), and a type of behaviour associated with the biological sex role (aggressive or maternal behaviors)."[40]

Interestingly, from a biomedical perspective, psychological sex (including gender identity) is ultimately determined at the moment when a male fetus begins to secrete sufficient amounts of testosterone for its further biological, psychological, and sexual development. In the case of a female fetus, the basic brain structure does not undergo fundamental changes; thus, generally speaking, the natural brain model appears to be female.[41]

However, there are situations in which a male embryo does not have sufficient hormones necessary to develop a brain sex that is appropriate for its genetic sex, as a result of which it "remains" female. Similarly, a female fetus exposed to a male hormone (or one with a similar effect on the sex development of the fetus) may be born with a male brain. These disorders are permanent and irreversible, and may lead in the future to difficulties identifying with one's own genetic or anatomical sex, or even to sexual orientation disorders.[42]

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[38] D. Dobosz, *Kobiecość i męskość*…, p. 17.

[39] *Ibidem*, p. 18.

[40] A. Herman-Jeglińska, *Różnice między kobietami a mężczyznami w zdolnościach poznawczych i organizacji funkcjonalnej mózgu: wpływ płci psychicznej*, "Przegląd Pedagogiczny" 1999, No. 1–2, p. 74.

[41] E. Lichtenberg-Kokoszka, *Rodzina wobec kształtowania tożsamości płciowej dziecka w okresie prenatalnym*, "Family Forum" 2014, No. 4, p. 281.

[42] *Ibidem*, p. 282.

Furthermore, studies of the human brain have shown that there is a direct link between hormones, brain structure, and behaviour, which influences differences in cognitive development between women and men.[43] It has been observed that the male brain pattern is characterized by superior mathematical and visuospatial abilities, distinct lateralization of verbal and nonverbal functions, and a greater tendency toward left-handedness. The female brain pattern, on the other hand, is characterized by better-developed linguistic abilities, less functional asymmetry of the cerebral hemispheres in the processing of both verbal and visuospatial stimuli, as well as stronger right-handed dominance and possibly higher manual abilities.[44]

These gender differences manifest themselves in the distinct behavioural patterns of women and men, which can be observed at nearly every stage of human development. As early as the neonatal period, it is observed that boys exhibit greater motor activity than girls. Girls, in turn, are able to maintain eye contact for longer and learn to speak and read much faster. It is also observed that, over time, boys demonstrate greater mathematical abilities – particularly in reasoning – and possess better spatial orientation. They also show a greater tendency to use physical force and threats, whereas girls tend to rely on verbal persuasion. Additionally, they are characterized by an altruistic attitude, a willingness to help and cooperate, and greater resilience to stress. More often than boys, they form close bonds and enjoy spending time in the company of adults. Significant differences have also been noted in the types of play they choose. Specifically, it has been found that boys prefer activities that involve a larger number of people and require significant physical effort, with distinct elements of competition. Girls, on the other hand, prefer smaller groups characterized by an atmosphere of intimacy and friendship.[45]

According to Katarzyna A. Knopp, a growing body of scientific research shows that men and women also differ in certain emotional characteristics. The greatest gender differences are observed in the perception and recognition of emotions. Women are more sensitive to nonverbal cues (especially facial expressions), which allows them to recognize other people's emotions more easily and accurately. These differences become apparent around the age of 3 and, importantly, are common across different cultures. However, some studies indicate that women's advantage applies only to the recognition of positive emotions, while negative emotions (e.g., anger) tend to be better recognized by men.[46]

Empirical data also quite consistently confirm women's greater capacity for empathy. Its importance was emphasized, among others, by Simon Baron-Cohen, who stated that the ability to empathize – as well as the brain structures underlying it – is the most significant difference between the sexes. He believed that women's

[43] *Ibidem*.

[44] A. Herman-Jeglińska, *Różnice między kobietami*…, p. 78.

[45] T. Bajkowski, *Kobiecość i męskość w percepcji młodzieży akademickiej*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 19–20.

[46] K. Knopp, *Czy kobiety są bardziej inteligentne emocjonalnie niż mężczyźni? O różnicach międzypłciowych w zakresie zdolności emocjonalnych*, "Fides et Ratio" 2012, No. 12, p. 100.

better-developed linguistic abilities may result from their greater propensity for empathy, while men's superior spatial abilities stem from a greater capacity for systematization. Therefore, according to Baron-Cohen, the female brain is structured for empathy, whereas the male brain is structured for reasoning and building systems.[47] The neurobiological basis of empathy in women has been indicated by research findings obtained using EEG and MEG, and more recently, VBM. These studies revealed that women exhibit higher activity in mirror neurons, which likely underlie affective empathy. Greater changes in the frequency of these neurons were recorded in women observing situations involving pain than in men, which may indicate that, in terms of neuroanatomical features and neurophysiological mechanisms, women are better adapted to empathizing with others.[48]

It should be noted, however, that although women's overall level of emotional intelligence is generally slightly higher than that of men, this does not always imply an advantage in the context of specific emotional abilities. Research findings indicate that their emotional expression is more intense and more easily discernible to those around them, and that they demonstrate a greater ability to recognize, understand, and regulate the emotions of others.[49] It is also easier for them to talk about their inner experiences, which may result from less functional asymmetry in their brain hemispheres ("If the left hemisphere handles speech and the right hemisphere handles emotions, it is easier for women to verbalize their emotions, to 'combine one with the other,' whereas in men these functions are separate").[50] Men, in turn, demonstrate greater skills in managing their own emotions, better understanding of their emotional states, and exercising cognitive control over them. At the same time, it is worth emphasizing that empirical data do not distinguish between women and men in terms of the frequency of emotions experienced. Differences in this regard relate rather to the intensity, experience, understanding, and manner of expressing and regulating emotions. This contradicts common stereotypes about men having an underdeveloped emotional side. Emotions are, in fact, inherent in every human being, regardless of gender.[51]

The psychological perspective

The main focus of analysis from a psychological perspective is gender identity (also known as gender identification), which refers to the individual dimension of gender – that is, how an individual experiences their own gender.[52] It is defined

[47] R. Ziemińska, *Mózgi kobiet i mężczyzn. Nowsze dane i ich znaczenie dla gender studies* [in:] *Feministyczne konteksty. Multidyscyplinarnie*, ed. E. Hyży, Toruń 2017, pp. 17–18.

[48] K. Jankowiak-Siuda, K. Siemieniuk, A. Grabowska, *Neurobiologiczne podstawy empatii*, "Neuropsychiatria i Neuropsychologia" 2009, No. 2, p. 56.

[49] K. Knopp, *Czy kobiety są*…, pp. 105–106.

[50] A. Puć, *Różnice pomiędzy kobietami i mężczyznami*, "Fides et Ratio" 2013, No. 13, p. 18.

[51] K. Knopp, *Czy kobiety są*…, pp. 105–106.

[52] K. Dzwonkowska-Godula, *Tradycyjnie czy nowocześnie*…, p. 48.

as the psychological sense of belonging to a particular gender group, which is expressed outwardly through behaviour that falls within the scope of gender roles. The term "role" refers to everything a person says and does to demonstrate, both to themselves and to others, the extent to which they are a woman or a man. In other words, it is the aspect of identity that a person adopts to present their "gender image." Another indicator of a properly formed gender identity is a specific sexual orientation. Typically, all three of these elements are closely related, together forming a harmonious personality.[53]

In light of the relevant literature, the norm is therefore defined as: „the mutual internal correspondence between an individual's gender identity, gender role, sexual orientation, and psychological capacities, as well as their conformity to a specific female or male gender model." If any of these elements is missing, this is referred to as gender transposition, i.e., a shift of at least one component of the definition toward the opposite gender.[54]

Psychological gender identity is determined by biological sex as well as the process of upbringing and an individual's interaction with their social environment. It develops based on a growing awareness of what it means to be female or male, followed by the recognition of oneself as a sexual being belonging to one of these categories. It becomes clearly defined by the end of the second year of life, and from around the age of 4, it no longer undergoes significant changes. It is ultimately shaped during adolescence.[55] From a psychological perspective, gender identity is part of the process of separation–individuation, which involves a growing sense of one's own distinctiveness from the environment. From a Freudian perspective, the precursor to gender identity is the child's discovery of their own corporeality (*the* so-called "bodily *ego*"), which occurs as a result of the ongoing process of individuation. Gender identity emerges through the development, elaboration, and integration of all its precursors into a masculine or feminine representation *of the self* (i.e., the "I," the "self"). It encompasses the ability to distinguish between male and female, identification with one's own gender, and awareness of the reproductive functions of women and men. The physical changes that occur during a child's development take place in parallel with psychological changes and the assumption of social roles.[56]

However, when using the concept of gender identity in the Polish context, we often refer more to its sociocultural dimension (gender) than to its biological one.

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[53] S. Dulko, *ABC… płci*, "Kosmos" 2003, No. 1, pp. 6–8.

[54] E. Łyczba, *"Ubrani w płeć" – nowe podejście do płci w psychologii?* [in:] *Młoda Psychologia*, Vol. 1, eds. E. Drop, M. Mackiewicz, 2012, p. 549.

[55] M. Nowak, A. Gawęda, M. Janas-Kozik, *Fizjologiczny rozwój psychoseksualny dzieci i młodzieży*, "Seksuologia Polska" 2010, No. 2, p. 67.

[56] M. Kunicka, *Równość i tożsamość. W trosce o (nie)harmonijny rozwój dziecka*, "Kultura – Media – Teologia" 2014, No. 18, pp. 121–122.

In such cases, we speak of gender identity, which can be understood as the development of a gender role.[57] "An individual, in becoming aware of being a woman or a man, must simultaneously relate to the sociocultural connotations associated with the concept of sex. In this way, they construct their gender identity. This means «filling» with content the framework that is the sense of belonging to a biological sex. By defining their gender identity, a person simultaneously shapes their own conception of gender roles."[58] In this sense, it can be said that gender identity is a result of sex identity and that it refers to the sociocultural superstructure of sex. The fact of being a woman or a man is thus viewed here as an individual and subjective experience of the person, which is based on interpretation.[59]

The most frequently cited concept of gender identity is Sandra Bem's *gender schema theory*, which explains the development of gender-related psychological traits in accordance with social definitions of masculinity and femininity.[60] It posits that a child, growing up in a specific environment, learns the definitions of gender that are approved and accepted within that environment, and subsequently processes and encodes information about themselves using *the* resulting gender *schema*. This schema is understood as a cognitive structure that organizes and filters an individual's perceptions, allowing them to select, from among all possible dimensions of human personality, only those that correspond to their gender. The internalized schema not only influences a child's behaviour and the type of information they process but also serves as a specific indicator of masculinity and femininity.[61]

In the course of her research, Bem identified four types of individuals with a specific pattern of gender-related psychological traits:

a) sexually defined individuals, whose psychological traits correspond to their biological sex (so-called "feminine women" and "masculine men");
b) androgynous individuals, who possess male and female traits in equal measure;
c) sexually undetermined individuals, who have only slightly developed masculine and feminine traits;
d) cross-gender individuals, whose psychological traits correspond to the gender opposite to their biological sex (feminine men and masculine women).[62]

According to this theory, gender-typical and cross-gender individuals demonstrate a greater ability to use gender schemas than androgynous and gender-ambiguous individuals. Individuals characterized by this schema (so-called "gender

[57] D. Dobosz, *Kobiecość i męskość*…, p. 56.

[58] J. Miluska, *Tożsamość kobiety i mężczyzny w cyklu życia*, Poznań 1996, p. 17.

[59] M. Dzwonek*, Socjalizacja ról płciowych w rodzinach monoparentalnych* [in:] *Z szerszej perspektywy. Gender*, eds. A.A. Wycisk, Ż. Krawczyk-Antońska, Warszawa 2013, p. 50.

[60] D. Strzelczyk-Muszyńska, *Role grupowe a płeć psychologiczna i kompetencje społeczne*, "Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Psychologica" 2007, No. 11, p. 23.

[61] M. Chuchra, P. Wójtowicz, *Samoakceptacja u studentów o określonej płci psychologicznej*, "Roczniki Teologiczne" 2006, Issue 10, pp. 113–114.

[62] *Ibidem*, p. 114.

schemists") behave in accordance with gender stereotypes, which, according to the author, limits their possibilities by confining them within the framework of socially defined masculinity and femininity. She further believes that freedom of action is ensured only by psychological androgyny, which, by combining elements of femininity and masculinity, broadens the repertoire of behaviours and ensures their flexibility – freeing the individual from the prison of gender represented by social stereotypes. According to the author, the concept of androgyny should form the basis of mental health, as it helps people become independent of social pressure.[63]

The sociological perspective

Reflection on femininity and masculinity was initially on the margins of sociological research. It was addressed mainly in the context of analyses of the social system – especially the family – or, alternatively, in the context of discussions on the causes of social inequalities. The limited interest in this topic was undoubtedly linked to the essentialist and naturalistic view of human sexuality that dominated psychology and medicine at the time and had also permeated the field of sociology.[64]

Classical sociologists (including Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, and Talcott Parsons) viewed gender exclusively as the result of biological determinants – and thus as immutable and universal. Consequently, in their view, the individual had no influence whatsoever on the patterns of femininity and masculinity – they could only conform to them. Consequently, femininity and masculinity were viewed solely through the lens of naturally determined differences between the sexes, which encompassed not only the emotional realm but also the intellectual and cognitive spheres. These differences thus became the basis for drawing conclusions about their distinct needs, predispositions, social roles, and value hierarchies. The differences between femininity and masculinity were therefore considered in terms of oppositions: physicality vs. mental faculties, irrationality and emotionality vs. rationality, and a focus on collective values vs. individualism.[65]

Beliefs about the biological potential of women and men justified the need for male dominance, which was supposed to guarantee the proper development of civilization and the balance of the social system.[66] At the same time, the view of women's inferiority was propagated, citing their physiology and brain structure,

[63] S. Bem, *Androgynia psychiczna a tożsamość płciowa* [in:] *Psychologia i życie*, eds. Ph. Zimbardo, R. Gerrig, Warszawa 1988, pp. 114–115.

[64] K. Leszczyńska, A. Dziuban, *Pomiędzy esencjalizmem a konstruktywizmem. Płeć (kulturowa) w refleksji teoretycznej socjologii – przegląd koncepcji*, "Studia Humanistyczne AGH" 2012, Issue 2, pp. 15–16.

[65] *Ibidem*, p. 16.

[66] *Ibidem*.

which differed from those of men.[67] Furthermore, due to their reproductive capabilities, women were perceived as closer to nature, which led to their being assigned the status of domestic beings. This meant that their activities were restricted primarily to the domestic sphere, where they fulfilled the roles of mothers, wives, and homemakers.[68] This limitation of their potential soon led to a "mass uprising against oppression", which contributed to significant changes in the understanding of gender, gender roles, and the very concepts of femininity and masculinity.[69]

A new approach to the issue of gender has been discussed since the 1960s and 1970s, a development linked primarily to the activities of the so-called second-wave feminist movements. The novelty in this field lay in the introduction of a distinction between *sex* as a biological category and *gender* as a social category. The works of psychologist Robert Stoller – *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (1968) – and Ann Oakley – *Sex, Gender, and Society* (1972) – are considered significant in this context. Thanks to their work, femininity and masculinity ceased to be viewed exclusively through the lens of biological differences and came to be seen as social constructs – cultural phenomena. The validity of this approach was also supported by research conducted by Margaret Mead, which examined differences among societies in the perception of femininity and masculinity, as well as changes in the definition of these concepts within a single culture over time. Her observations provided new insights into the significance of sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., ethnic, social, and geographic background, class, education, sexual orientation, and age) for the social expectations directed toward an individual of a specific gender – and, consequently, for the way that individual experiences their "gender." Consequently, it was proposed that we should not speak of a single "femininity" or "masculinity," but rather of multiple "femininities" and "masculinities" within a given culture. Attention was also drawn to the relational nature of gender, which manifests itself in the definition of femininity and masculinity through mutual reference and comparison. Finally, their situational nature was highlighted – that is, their variability depending on context – which prevents cultural gender from being treated as an „attribute" of the individual, but rather as a feature of the situation.[70]

The activities of feminist movements have contributed to a new perspective on the issue of gender, emphasizing not only its biological dimension but also its sociocultural one. Thus, the category *of gender* has become an important area of interest for sociologists, who have taken it as a starting point for developing various

[67] E. Szymczak, *Kobiety na politechnikach – trajektorie codzienności w kontekście współczesnych przemian społeczno-ekonomicznych* [in:] *Codzienność jako wyzwanie edukacyjne*, eds. M. Humeniuk, I. Paszenda, Wrocław 2017, p. 246.

[68] K. Pasternak, *Współczesne wzorce kobiecości w kulturze rosyjskiej (na przykładzie serialu Мамочки)*, "Studia Interkulturowe Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2018, No. 11, p. 310.

[69] J. Spychalska-Stasiak, *Konstruowanie wiedzy naukowej o fenomenie ludzkiej płci*, "Przegląd Pedagogiczny" 2009, No. 2, p. 45.

[70] K. Dzwonkowska-Godula, *Tradycyjnie czy nowocześnie*…, pp. 39–40.

theoretical concepts. The literature on the subject highlights in particular: theories of gender roles and socialization into gender roles and identities, theories relating to the category of power, and theories *of doing gender*.[71]

In social role theories, cultural gender is defined as "a culturally and historically conditioned social role associated with women or men and used to describe a person's identity in terms of femininity and masculinity." It is therefore assumed here that cultural gender is acquired through a process of socialization based on interpretation. This is a very complex process, but its elements can be identified, such as: gender labelling (through language, clothing, or toys), gender universalization (i.e., the internalization of gender as a fundamental category for dividing the social world), and the belief in the immutability of gender. Social role theories are based on gender polarization and the perception of femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive categories.[72]

Theories relating to the category of power stem from the demands put forward by feminist movements. Various strands can be distinguished among them (essentialist, materialist, or deconstructionist), but it seems that what unites them all above all is a critical stance toward role and socialization theories. While the former focus on microsocial processes and the individual formation of an individual's gender identity, theories of power interpret the process of becoming a gendered being as a consequence of the patriarchal power structure, which exerts coercion at various levels of life (economic, political, or religious). In this framework, therefore, gender is not viewed as an individual experience but as a structural one, which is framed in terms of oppression.[73]

The final group of theories is the concept *of doing gender*, which is based on the assumption that gender is not something fixed that a person possesses, but rather something that is produced in everyday interactions. Consequently, the importance of social context is emphasized here, since every situation is, in a sense, *gendered*. This means that nearly all interactions involve expectations regarding how a given person, as a man or a woman, should behave. This theory is developed by Judith Butler, who proposes that gender be treated as a form of performance – that is, the "act of playing the part" of being a woman or a man. As the author argues, through the constant repetition of specific behaviours, we reinforce patterns of femininity and masculinity, and thus come to perceive them as natural and self-evident. Consequently, what we take to be the inner essence of gender is in fact the result of an uninterrupted series of acts – something that is created and perpetuated through everyday social practices. Therefore, in her view, any attempt to separate the biological and cultural aspects of gender is pointless, since both are closely intertwined and created in the "gender show" that is performed every day.[74]

[71] K. Leszczyńska, A. Dziuban, *Pomiędzy esencjalizmem*…, pp. 18–19.
[72] *Ibidem*, p. 19.
[73] *Ibidem*, p. 20.
[74] K. Dzwonkowska-Godula, *Tradycyjnie czy nowocześnie*…, p. 37.

Conclusion

The issue of femininity and masculinity emerged in the social sciences alongside the beginning of a broader reflection on the question of gender. Social and cultural changes over the last century have led to significant shifts in the way human sexuality is perceived, including gender roles, as well as femininity and masculinity themselves. The traditional gender model, which has dominated until now, is currently being gradually supplanted and replaced by a newer approach that blurs the boundaries between what is feminine and what is masculine. The dynamics of contemporary changes and the associated new ways of interpreting femininity and masculinity make it difficult to define these concepts unambiguously. They thus highlight the relevance of the issue at hand and the need for further analysis. The discussions presented here are therefore merely introductory in nature, aimed at capturing the complexity of the subject matter, which clearly extends beyond the scope of a single study. Consequently, this article should be viewed as a starting point for future research and analysis.

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