ACTA UNIVERSITATIS LODZIENSIS
FOLIA SOCIOLOGICA 88, 2024

https://doi.org/10.18778/0208-600X.88.06

Natalia Izydorczyk*
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1838-6145

GENDER SOCIALISATION AND PERCEPTION OF GENDER BY NON-HETERONORMATIVE PEOPLE

Abstract. The submitted report focuses on the results of research carried out for a bachelor's thesis titled "gender socialisation and perception of gender by non-heteronormative people", in which the author focuses on gender socialisation of interviewees of non-heteronormative gender and/or sexual identity, their narrative about gender identity (in general, as well as personal sense) and gender expression, social roles expected of them as a result of their gender assigned at birth and restrictions they face in their daily life due to their gender identity. Social constructivism points out that masculinity and femininity are not constant but able-to-be-modified fluid products of everyday interactions. The process of constructing one's gender connotates strictly with domineering discourse defining norms of masculine and feminine behaviour, which become overwhelmingly restrictive in regards to an individual's thinking and actions. For this research, data was gathered from nine individual in-depth interviews supported by a script. During those interviews, interlocutors shared their personal stories about their gendered upbringing, explained what it means to identify with gender on a spectrum, indicated it through appearance and described their coming-out experiences.

Keywords: gender studies, gender identity, coming-out, queer studies, non-heteronormativity

SOCJALIZACJA PŁCIOWA I POSTRZEGANIE PŁCI PRZEZ OSOBY NIEHETERONORMATYWNE

Abstrakt. Artykuł koncentruje się na wynikach badań przeprowadzonych na potrzeby pracy licencjackiej zatytułowanej: „Socjalizacja płciowa i postrzeganie płci przez osoby nieheteronormatywne", w której autorka koncentruje się na socjalizacji płciowej rozmówców o nieheteronormatywnej tożsamości płciowej i/lub seksualnej, ich narracji na temat tożsamości płciowej (w sensie ogólnym, jak i osobistym) i ekspresji płciowej, oczekiwanych od nich rolach społecznych w wyniku płci przypisanej przy urodzeniu oraz ograniczeniach, z jakimi spotykają się w życiu codziennym

* Bachelor, Master's degree student, University of Lodz, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, e-mail: izydorczyknatalia66@gmail.com

Received: 1.12.2023. Verified: 8.12.2023. Revised: 3.01.2024. Accepted: 24.01.2024.

ze względu na swoją tożsamość płciową. Konstruktywizm społeczny wskazuje, że męskość i kobiecość nie są stałymi, ale zdolnymi do modyfikacji płynnymi wytworami codziennych interakcji. Proces konstruowania własnej płci wiąże się ściśle z dominującym dyskursem definiującym normy męskiego i kobiecego zachowania, które stają się przytłaczająco restrykcyjne w odniesieniu do myślenia i działania jednostki. Na potrzeby omawianego badania zebrano dane z dziewięciu indywidualnych wywiadów pogłębionych wspartych scenariuszem. Podczas tych wywiadów rozmówcy dzielili się swoimi osobistymi historiami na temat wychowania płciowego, wyjaśniali, co oznacza identyfikacja z płciowym spektrum, wskazując na wygląd i opisując swoje doświadczenia związane z coming-outem.

Słowa kluczowe: gender studies, tożsamość płciowa, coming-out, studia queer, nieheteronormatywność

1. Introduction

Gender is a crucial factor in one's perception of self and one's function in society. For a patriarchal society, it is typical to recognise gender in a binary system in which two sexes, women and men, have distinctly different predispositions allegedly stemming from biology. Queer (non-heteronormative) community brings attention to the fact that gender expression and perception is personal to each individual. Today, multidimensionality and versatility of both gender identity and gender expression are a topic of discussion.

Gender differences are considered prominent, so they go unnoticed in day-to-day life. According to social constructivism, gender develops through everyday social interactions with other individuals. The basis of social constructivism in gender/queer studies are Judith Butler's works, especially the theory of gender performativity in which gender is appointed through an act of performance: an individual attains gender at the moment of birth, and since that moment, a person constitutes oneself only through gender; gender roles become sort of a task which has to be fulfilled. Therefore, gender becomes true only when performing it (Kochanowski, Mizielińska 2014: 462).

The presented article results from research for a bachelor's thesis regarding gender socialisation and gender perception of non-heteronormative individuals. It focuses on the narrative of interlocutors regarding gender and its expression, as well as their socialisation and coming-out experiences concerning their gender identity and/or sexual orientation.

2. Socialisation and gender identity

According to social constructivism theory, sex and gender are constructed through social interactions. Not only gender but human bodies as well can be constructed and reconstructed through various actions (i.e. through a restrictive diet or plastic surgery).

The human body and its biology are not undisputed – both can become subjects of human will. Social constructivism theorists establish that cultural differences between genders are a direct result of noticing specific biological differences contributes to upholding those cultural contracts (Giddens 2010: 132–133).

Gender is a primary criterion to be recognised in a social setting. It is one of the essential elements to building one's individuality and can be expressed outwards in many ways – by gestures, behaviour or external appearance (Titkow 2014: 541; Oczko 2014: 71–73). Expression of one's physical appearance is a result of one's gender and sexuality – all of which are often present in *queer performances.* Queer performance is portrayed as a rebellion against binary gender perception (Mazanek, Dellert 2023: ep. 2), during which a person mindfully creates an exaggerated persona in order to deride societal gender roles (Oczko 2014: 73). A language, the main communication channel, represents the current world. Some languages signal gender dissimilarity through various collocations or phrases ("boys will be boys", "manly decision") (Pankowska 2005: 69–71). Even a given name can indicate one's identity (Pankowska 2005: 72–73).

The presented article incorporates language characteristics for gender studies features. Definitions of those terms, such as gender dysphoria, coming-out, transition, transgender, non-binary and queer, are outlined below.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, gender dysphoria is psychological anguish resulting from incongruence between an individual's sex assigned at birth and their gender identity. To overcome gender dysphoria, transgender individuals undertake actions such as social affirmation (i.e. changing one's name or voice training), legal affirmation (i.e. changing gender and name in their official documents), medical affirmation (i.e. hormonal therapy) and/or surgical affirmation (i.e. breast augmentation or masculine chest reconstruction). It is important to underline that it is an individual decision whether a person will undergo any changes based on their gender identity and personal desire for a certain gender expression. The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders describes gender dysphoria in adolescents and adults as incongruence between an individual's expressed gender and gender that was assigned at birth, lasting at least six months and manifested by various components (such as a strong desire to be treated like the other gender) (Turban 2022).

Coming-out is usually an act considered to be conducted by a person of non-heterosexual identity, but it is also a process undertaken by persons of gender non-conforming identity. Coming-out is a decision to share an individual's non-heteronormative gender or sexual identity with chosen people – whether family members, friends or peers. It is a process of accepting oneself, which comes with a spectrum of emotions (Human Rights Campaign Foundation 2022).

Transition or gender transition is a term used to describe a timeframe between discovering one's gender identity and the completion of the gender reassignment process (Bieńkowska 2012: 151). The gender reassignment process can be split

into two stages: the first one being a start of hormonal therapy, and the second being surgical gender reassignment – it is crucial to underline that not all persons of transgender identity will settle to go through with the whole process (Fajkowska-Stanik 2001: 57).

The term "transgender" is used as an umbrella term for people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth – it is opposite to the term of a cisgender person. The term "non-binary" describes a person whose personal identity might not align with any gender, with two at the same time or somewhere in-between (HRCF 2022).

A non-heteronormative individual was defined as a person whose sexuality is different than generally expected heterosexuality or a person whose gender identity does not align with being either a man or a woman or does not align with their gender assigned at birth (Stowarzyszenie Miłość Nie Wyklucza 2016: 5).

The term "queer" appearing in this article is used interchangeably with "nonheteronormativity". Most interlocutors define themselves not only based on their gender or sexual identity but also as a queer person, which seems to have become a general label describing affiliation to the LGBT+ community. This term is ambiguous and cannot be used to define one type of gender identity.

3. Research methodology

This research aimed to become acquainted with a process of socialisation of research subjects – to analyse whether their socialisation was stereotypical, if their perception of gender is a direct result of being brought up in a certain environment, and their concepts of gender (in a general, as well as personal sense), social roles assigned due to their gender and restrictions they face in their environment based on their gender identity as well as understanding their gender identity and gender expression. Stereotypical gender socialisation includes statements adults communicate to children, such as the idea of binary gender, dictating that children perform certain activities in gendered groups, designing men and women as separate categories with opposite characteristics, defining activities as typical only for men or only for women (Gawlicz 2009: 95–98). During interviews, the author aimed to gather as much information regarding stereotypical gender socialisation as possible. Gender studies and queer studies literature were the primary sources of information in the process of writing this bachelor's thesis. An empirical source was acquired through nine in-depth interviews with individuals of non-heteronormative identity living in the cities of Łódź and Zgierz in Poland. The group from which data was collected was picked through a non-probability sampling. Interviewees were selected based on their visibility in the non-heteronormative community and contacted directly by the author. Each interview was based on a scenario, although sometimes interviewees steered away from the main topics to add some

more information they deemed important, which turned out to enrich the material gathered during this research – such as a matter of their sexuality. Although the sexuality of interviewees was not the focal point of this research, it is impossible to overlook the relation between gender and sexual identity. Interviewees of cisgender identity but not heterosexual were picked because of their gender non-conforming expression and openness regarding the rights of a non-heteronormative minority, which was a base of assumption of having numerous opinions regarding sex and gender. It is crucial to underline that nonheteronormativity does not solely equal nonheterosexuality but also the gender non-conforming identity of interlocutors. Characteristics of a research sample are presented below.

Table. Characteristics of the research sample

	Year of birth	Educational background	Employment situation	Pronouns	Gender identity
P1	1984	Higher education	Working full-time	He/him	Cisgender man
P2	1996	Secondary education	Working full-time	She/her	Transgender woman
P3	1999	Secondary education	Working part-time, studying	Pl. she/her Eng. They/them	Transgender woman
P4	2000	Secondary education	Working full-time	She/her	Cisgender woman
P5	2001	Secondary education	Working full-time	He/him	Cisgender man
P6	2001	Secondary education	Studying full-time	He/him	Cisgender man
P7	2001	Secondary education	Working full-time	He/him	Agender person
P8	2002	Secondary education	Studying full-time	He/she/they	Non-binary person
P9	2003	Secondary education	Working part-time, studying	Pl. no preference Eng. She/they	Non-binary person

Source: own study

4. Research results

Overall, nine people took part in interviews for this research: four cisgender but non-heterosexual people, two transgender women, two non-binary people and one agender person. The cisgender interlocutor shared his uncertainties, whether it was appropriate for him to identify with his gender assigned at birth due to his non-stereotypical gender expression, such as wearing skirts and make-up, usually

associated with women's wardrobe: "I doubted if it's okay to identify as a man when my expression isn't particularly 'manly'… should I consider myself a man, or maybe a non-binary person? However, I concluded that I shouldn't because being a man defines my whole life" (P5). More interlocutors mentioned that gender could be understood in different ways by different people: "it was a long process for my dad to understand that even if my masculinity is different from his…, even though both of us identify as men, my expression and his expression of that will be way different" (P5). Some commented on how difficult it was for them to categorise themselves in a particular group: "when I ask myself, 'What gender even is?' I find myself in a labyrinth that seems impossible to get out of… and I always come to the same conclusion that gender is different for each person, and if I ever need to redefine it on my own, I will. But not now" (P8). An interviewee of agender identity stated that he cannot put himself in any area of this spectrum because he personally does not experience gender in any way; interviewed transgender women experience it one a spectrum closer to femininity or identify strictly with one side of the spectrum; a non-binary interviewee chooses stereotypical male expression due to comfort of day-to-day life. Interviewees of cisgender identity put themselves in close proximity to their genders assigned at birth, but not precisely at the extreme ending points of the spectrum, allowing themselves for possible changes in self-identification and self-expression. Interlocutors explained their ideas of gender as a spectrum in the following ways:

- Multidimensional spectrum in which neither gender nor individual perception of gender is binary; perception of gender being a direct result of socialisation and one's expression through actions, pronouns or appearance;
- Smooth continuum, with people assigned female at birth on one side and people assigned male at birth on the other side – with non-binary identity in between those.

Interviewees brought up and explained their expectations regarding their expression due to their gender. Some expressed the desire to show unshaved body parts freely: "my mom said that I'm a woman and body hair on a woman is simply disgusting (…), and she said I should expect people to verbally abuse me for having hairy legs" (P4), whereas others stated the need to get rid of any body hair: "(…) that at the beginning I was really worried about my body hair, I hated it, and I remember that it reminded me of millions of little bug legs sticking out from my skin" (P8). Other answers focalised on colourful, non-stereotypical for their gender clothes, jewellery, accessories, piercing and tattoos, specific hairstyles, make-up, using nail polish, hormonal therapy and gender-affirming surgeries.

Interviewees explained that an individual's language indicates affiliation to a specific group. Jargon characteristic for a community of non-heteronormative people is inclusive and comfortable to use for anyone regardless of their identity. It is described as very specific and might not be appropriately understood by people outside of the community – it is supposed to connect members of a given community

and give it a sense of uniqueness: "this jargon is very valuable to us, and I think it's inherent to our community. What's important is that we get it; if someone wants to understand us, they must learn the jargon" (P5).

The language of Polish non-heteronormative people has many foreignisms from the English language. Interviewees often used abbreviations like AMAB (assigned male at birth), AFAB (assigned female at birth), or "topka", derived from the English "top surgery". Some interlocutors stated they prefer to use English rather than Polish because it is less gendered and brought up the usage of neutral pronouns when speaking their native language. Many recognised a phenomenon of *reappropriation,* which is changing the meaning behind a word historically used as derogatory.

Participants of this study split gender into two categories: cisgender (or gender assigned at birth) and transgender. According to interlocutors, gender is a spectrum, and an individual can identify with either one of those binary ends or somewhere in between as a non-binary person. Gender is not constant, and identity can be created individually by each person, regardless of gender assigned at birth. One respondent determined gender as a social construct – "personally, gender is a social construct. A way of understanding yourself, but in a rather superficial way" (P8). When asked about the most common/ familiar ways of gender expression, respondents named distinctive attire and jewellery, specific and colourful hairstyles, body modifications (tattoos, piercings or gender-affirming surgeries), as well as names a person can pick for themselves, pronouns, voice modulation, language used by an individual, gestures and even dancing.

It was essential to isolate the experience of transgender individuals, which is different from the experience of cisgender people. Some interlocutors declared that gender expression was an instrument allowing them to handle gender dysphoria: "it was a way of presenting yourself, which allowed you to hide certain parts of your body you didn't like" (P8). It was also noticed that transgender people are more at risk of being analysed in terms of their social behaviour.

The social environment has a massive impact on who an individual develops into, and having an openly functioning, non-heteronormative person in one's surroundings might positively impact the exploration of one's identity. The political climate was determined as crucial in terms of wanting to explore oneself safely, as well as movies, TV series, music and cartoons respectfully representing non-heteronormative people: "I think this cartoon, 'The Owl House', is the most important to me because it's so relevant to my situation now. If I notice even a background character whose nails are painted in non-binary flag colours, I feel joy and childlike joy. I noticed how important it is for me now, so I can only imagine how important it would be for me as a child" (P8). Respondents agreed that the best way to seek out information about gender or sexual expression is through non-governmental organisations, collectives, scientific publications and social media – which might be dangerous due to misinformation and possibly harmful content: "Watching

openly transgender people online was meaningful in my transition. Their lives don't revolve around their identity, they're showing their regular lives as perfectly functioning people. Those real-life examples are what matters to me, not some transgender supermodel or an actor. Real-life examples might give courage to those who need it" (P2).

When it comes to the socialisation of interviewees, the main focus was set on how they were addressed, what kind of clothes they wore, what type of toys they played, house chores assigned to them, after-school activities and interests. It was crucial to focus on individual changes in appearance – not only those changes they applied themselves but also those happening due to puberty: "at first, when I started going through puberty, my build started changing… bust, menstrual period, etc… at that point, I knew I'm not too comfortable with those changes" (P7). All individuals who participated in this research stated that – during childhood – family, teachers, and peers regarded them in linguistic forms appropriate for the gender assigned to them at birth. Two interviewees of the male gender assigned at birth remarked that they have often been mistaken for girls when young. All interlocutors agreed they were dressed in stereotypically girly (skirts or dresses) or boyish ways (jeans, T-shirts) during childhood. Some mentioned experimenting with their mother's clothes and/or make-up. There was no significant distinction between "toys for boys" or "toys for girls", meaning interlocutors were allowed to play with any toys they chose. The same applies to house chores – interviewees were expected to keep their rooms clean and the general cleanliness of shared areas. Only one respondent stated that after his father's death, it was expected of him to take over his responsibilities: "I had to become a man, somewhat the head of the house, because suddenly, at thirteen, I acquired so many responsibilities I wasn't ready for" (P6). Regarding after-school activities, creative endeavours (such as painting and photography) and reading were the most praised by interviewees' parents. Two interlocutors' dream activities were deemed unnecessary, and two more mentioned that their fathers were more encouraging towards them if they invested in stereotypically girly or boyish activities.

When asked about their external appearance, one respondent mentioned being unable to express freely due to partaking in a catholic organisation: "in middle school, I became a scout in a catholic organisation. They had certain expectations of me. Growing up in that organisation, I stumbled over many obstacles regarding my expression – I wanted to paint my nails or dye my hair, but I couldn't because I was too afraid it would become a discussion topic amongst members, and they would dismiss me" (P5). Some of them battled with anxiety when considering sudden changes in appearance at a young age (such as cutting their hair short as a person assigned female at birth: "I asked my mom (…) whether she thinks it's okay for me to cut my hair short… that I would like to cut them short. And she said, 'Of course!' and she couldn't understand why am I crying about it" [P9]) or purposely selected clothes considered "more feminine" (which could be regarded

as more appropriate for the gender assigned at birth) due to gender dysphoria: "My mom was really helpful with educating me on the menstrual cycle. I talked with her about it and that I feel uncomfortable with this happening…, and she said it's normal, that I'm changing and change is uncomfortable. And I thought I would start being comfortable with those changes if I became more stereotypically feminine. So, when I was twelve, I started wearing miniskirts, over-knee socks, push-up bras… everything of sorts" (P7). Four respondents agreed that changing their environment from conservative to unorthodox helped them express themselves more freely: "after leaving this organisation, I realised how many things regarding my outer appearance I held back on because I was so afraid of being dismissed. Only then did I start experimenting and pursuing the person I am now – a person who dresses however they want" (P5).

Most interviewees at the time of interviewing had already gone through the coming-out experience. This particular section has been isolated due to how emotional this process was for interviewees. Most of the interlocutor's first coming-outs happened in front of peers and family members other than parents and regarded gender identity or sexual orientation. Some explained the case of re-coming out, which is repeated coming out respecting a shift in one's identity: "at the beginning, I thought I was bisexual (…), so I had to come out two times – first as a bisexual man, then as a gay man" (P6). *Outing,* which is an action of revealing someone's identity without their permission, was also mentioned as harmful and abusive behaviour. Collocutors brought up that functioning openly as a non-heteronormative person requires constant coming-outs, which does not have to have the form of a solemn conversation – it can be expressed through actions, gestures, appearance or being public about their own experience: "as a matter of fact, my existence is a bit of a coming-out… I create social media content where I function openly as a transgender woman… so each post in which I'm not directly stating that but explaining my experience is somewhat a coming-out as well" (P2). Interlocutors explained that coming-out to their parents required preparation due to fear of not being respected: "I didn't really want to come out at first because what if I wasn't sure at all? What if I tell them about something that might change in a short while, and then it will be even harder for them to understand" (P8).

Coming-out experiences of this research participants positively influenced their relationship with their closest environment and brought much relief, understanding of self, and a feeling of "having your own back" (P5). When asked about what their experience lacked, interlocutors expressed a need for more amount of honest talks with their family members, who often suspected their children's identity; tools allowing non-heteronormative students to function openly and freely in institutions such as universities or schools and materials full of information about non-heteronormative identities available not only for kids but also for their parents: "when I was younger, there were no materials, no information showing elderly transgender people" (P7).

5. Conclusion

The presented article outlined different aspects of socialisation and described a phenomenon of gender expression and gender identity as well as various coming-out experiences. The results of this research acknowledge the theory in which an individual constructs gender through taken-up actions. This article might expand the reader's knowledge of the contemporary outlook of young, non-heteronormative individuals regarding subjects in this study (such as their perception of reality). Collected material confirms that gender is a fundamental parameter of one's identity, which might be extremely difficult to define, especially living in a society created upon patriarchal norms.

References

Bieńkowska M. (2012), *Transseksualizm w Polsce. Wymiar indywidualny i społeczny przekraczania binarnego systemu płci*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, Białystok.

Fajkowska-Stanik M. (2001), *Transseksualizm i rodzina. Przekaz pokoleniowy wzorów relacyjnych w rodzinach transseksualnych kobiet*, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Psychologii PAN, Warszawa.

Gawlicz K. (2009), *Negocjowanie znaczenia kategorii płci. Pomiędzy różnicowaniem płciowym a przekraczaniem granic*, [in:] Kopciewicz L., Zierkiewicz E., *Koniec mitu niewinności? Płeć i seksualność w socjalizacji i edukacji*, Wydawnictwo Psychologii i Kultury, Warszawa.

Giddens A. (2010), *Socjologia*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa.

Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2022) *Coming Out: Living Authentically as Transgender or Non-Binary*. https://reports.hrc.org/coming-out-living-authentically-as-transgender-non-binary (accessed: 13.01.2023).

Kochanowski J., Mizielińska J. (2014), *Queer studies*, [in:] Rudaś-Grodzka M., Nadana-Sokołowska K., Mrozik A., Szczuka K., Czeczot K., Smoleń B., Nasiłowska A., Serafin E., Wróbel A., *Encyklopedia gender. Płeć w kulturze*, Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, Warszawa.

Mazanek A., Dellert D. (2023), *Nago. Głośno. Dumnie,* HBO Max, prod. Polska.

Oczko P. (2014), *Camp*, [in:] Rudaś-Grodzka M., Nadana-Sokołowska K., Mrozik A., Szczuka K., Czeczot K., Smoleń B., Nasiłowska A., Serafin E., Wróbel A., *Encyklopedia gender. Płeć w kulturze*, Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, Warszawa.

Pankowska D. (2005), *Wychowanie a role płciowe,* Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk.

Stowarzyszenie Miłość Nie Wyklucza (2016), *Polska Społeczność Nieheteronormatywna*. https://mnw.org.pl/app/uploads/2017/08/MNW_Polska_Spolecznosc_Nieheteronormatywna.pdf (accessed 13.01.2023).

Titkow A. (2014), *Tożsamość społeczna*, [in:] Rudaś-Grodzka M., Nadana-Sokołowska K., Mrozik A., Szczuka K., Czeczot K., Smoleń B., Nasiłowska A., Serafin E., Wróbel A. *Encyklopedia gender. Płeć w kulturze*, Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, Warszawa.

Turban J. (2022), *What is Gender Dysphoria?*, American Psychiatric Association. https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria#section_4 (accessed 14.01.2023).