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"Sweet girls and naughty boys" : aggression and gender: differences, interdependence, the consequences

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“SWEET GIRLS AND NAUGHTY BOYS”. AGGRESSION AND GENDER: DIFFERENCES, INTERDEPENDENCE, CONSEQUENCES

Tytuł w języku polskim: „Grzeczne dziewczynki i niezdolne chłopaki”. Agresja a gender – różnice, współzależność i konsekwencje.

Streszczenie: Artykuł dotyczy związku między agresją a płcią, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem różnic płciowych w przejawianiu agresji oraz skłonności do zachowań przemocowych. Od co najmniej kilku lat badacze zajmujący się problematyką płci w społeczeństwie zwracają uwagę, że społeczne funkcjonowanie człowieka (zajmowane pozycje, pełnione role, osiągnięte statusy) jest zdeterminowane przez przynależność do którejś z płci. Różnice płciowe kształtują odmienne modele zachowań, działań oraz interakcji wśród kobiet i mężczyzn. Konsekwencją tych różnic są odmienne potrzeby, interesy, systemy komunikacji i ekspresji, style rozwiązywania problemów czy konfliktów, sposoby radzenia sobie ze stresem. Kobiecość i męskość stanowią binarne, opozycyjne wobec siebie, konstrukcje społeczno-kulturowe, czego odzwierciedleniem są różnice w ujawnianiu lub rozładowaniu agresji.

Słowa kluczowe: płeć społeczno-kulturowa, socjalizacja, agresja.

Aggression – instinct, impulse or effect of socialisation?

Aggression is one's intentional action, directed outwards (at the environment) or inwards (at oneself), the goal of which is to inflict physical, material and spiritual harm. It is an act that causes damage and loss of important values, physical pain and/or moral suffering¹. Aggression usually stems from four main reasons: 1) dysfunctional relationship with one's parents, 2) parents' excessive tolerance of their children's aggressive behaviour, 3) the manifestation of aggression by parents to each other,

¹ *Studia nad psychologicznymi mechanizmami czynności agresywnych*, ed. A. Frączek, PAN, Breslau – Warsaw – Cracow 1979, p. 13.

their children or other people, 4) the approval of aggressive patterns of behaviour². Depending on the theoretical concept adopted to present the problem of aggression, it is diversely classified: as instinct, desire or the result of socialisation³.

In the view of the theory of instinct and impulse, aggression stems from biological (genetic) predisposition of an organism. It is a typical behaviour of the species and has atavistic origin. As noted by Charles Darwin⁴, aggression in the world of animals is the result of natural selection – sexual selection in particular. As put by evolutionists, aggression is a consequence of the struggle for existence and survival of the species (the competition for the access to food, water, territory and females). Observations of aggressively behaving animals have produced theories of reference to the human world, and thus indicate the primary mechanisms of aggressive behaviour. According to the instinct theory of aggression which emerged on this basis, aggression is controlled by the internal impulse and reflects the need to satisfy the instinct to fight. The author of this theory Pierre Bovet, when watching the fights of children and youngsters, said that the fights were not solely caused by external factors (environmental or situational), but were a consequence of psychobiological features, otherwise known as instincts⁵. Bovet perceived aggressive behaviour as a component of human nature – he wrote: “the vast majority of children aged 9 to 12 years look for fights as such for the mere pleasure that they give them – a fight for them is fun. [...] They are conducted for the pleasure always crowning the act of natural unloading one’s physical strength. [...] Self-assertion causes joy, pride and the feeling of strength, [...] we will then try to clarify children’s fighting through the existence of the instinct to fight [...], and being the aggressor is a component of human nature”⁶. The instinctive origin of aggression has also been confirmed by the research of Austrian ethnologist Konrad Lorenz who has shown that aggression is an innate characteristic of living organisms triggered by the instinct that determines survival⁷. Lorenz’s discovery, awarded the Nobel Prize in the 1980’s, shows that aggression is beneficial and is a permanent part of animal (and so is of human) life.

² D. Wójcik, *Środowisko rodzinne a poziom agresywności młodzieży przestępczej i nieprzestępczej*, PAN, Warsaw 1977, p. 21.

³ See B. Wojciszke, *Relacje interpersonalne*, [in:] *Psychologia. Jednostka w społeczeństwie i elementy psychologii stosowanej*, ed. J. Strelau, GWP, Danzig 2008, pp.148-155.

⁴ K. Darwin, *Dobór płciowy*, trans. L. Masłowski, Lviv 1875, pp. 216-219.

⁵ P. Bovet, *Instynkt walki: psychologia-wychowanie*, trans. M. Górka, “Nasza Księgarnia”, Warsaw 1928, pp. 37-38.

⁶ In this context, Bovet indicates that fighting instinct provides a child with the qualities and skills that allow him/her to cope properly with the environment, “the importance of biological fighting instincts in the child is well known. As well as in the case of animal instincts, they prepare the child for his/her future vocation” (ibid, p. 221).

⁷ Lorenz is considered to be a supporter of the thesis of the ritual and tournament character of aggression. This view is not confirmed by the findings of contemporary research, as aggressive and hostile behavior does not occur in the animal world often enough to be considered as the *status quo*. See J. Strelau, *Psychology*, GWP, Danzig 2007, pp. 194-195.

Theories of instinct and desire seem to be justifiable in explaining the biological bases of aggression. However, in the context of the analysis of aggression in terms of gender, the attention should be paid to the theory of learned aggression which implies that aggressive behaviour is acquired, not innate. Human becomes aggressive by means of watching and imitating his interaction partners. Aggression is thus conditioned by the environment and the social surrounding in which an individual lives. There are three basic mechanisms of learning aggression: classical conditioning, operant conditioning and imitative conditioning⁸.

Classical conditioning assumes that a sufficiently stimulated organism reacts in a predictable way. The founder of this theory, Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov⁹ proved that by stimulating an organism with a specific stimulus, one can cause an unconditional reaction. If the stimulus is accompanied by a sign, signal or sound, there is high likelihood that the mere association with it will cause the conditioned response. According to this mechanism, aggression occurs in the situations that are associated with threat, fear and uncertainty. "In the situation when someone makes me angry – I respond angrily, when something threatens my safety – I attack, if something causes my anxiety – I try to destroy it". Leonard Berkowitz, who advanced the theory of Pavlov, showed that aggression increases if there are accessories connected with violence in vicinity. Berkowitz calls it "aggressive drive"¹⁰. In order to confirm the hypothesis stating the existence of such a "drive", the above-mentioned psychologist conducted an experiment based on making people angry in various situations. The experiment confirmed that a person reacts aggressively more quickly if in the environment there are items commonly associated with violence, fighting, assault (e.g., a gun, balaclava or boxing gloves). On the basis of Berkowitz's research, it can be said that buying children toys that are reminiscent of violent content (soldiers, tanks, guns, handcuffs, violent video games) increases aggressive behaviour.

Another way of learning aggressive behaviour is operant conditioning. The authors of this theory were Edward Thorndike and Baruch Skinner¹¹. They claimed that subjects, by observing the effects of their own and other people's behaviour, evaluate these acts of behaviour as profitable or bringing a loss. An individual behaves in a certain way, because s/he knows that it is viable, it yields profit and/or satisfaction. Similarly – other types of behaviour are undertaken occasionally or not at all, because they are not profitable, or even bring loss. So, if aggressive behaviour is somehow rewarding, it is highly probable it will frequently occur and its intensity will increase. Aggression is reinforced by any reward – "both external (money, victory in compe-

⁸ See J. Konorski, *Integracyjna działalność mózgu*, PWN, Warsaw 1969, pp. 263-469.

⁹ I. Pawłow, *Mózg i jego mechanizm*, trans. J. Konorski, S. Miller, Breslau 1945, pp. 118-123.

¹⁰ L. Berkowitz, *The concept of aggressive drive: Some additional considerations*, "Advances in Experimental Social Psychology", 1967, no. 2, pp. 301-327.

¹¹ B.F. Skinner, *Behawioryzm*, trans. P. Skawiński, GWP, Sopot 2013.

tition, recognition by the others), as well as internal, such as self-esteem and a sense of increased control over the course of events”¹². Undertaking aggressive behaviour or continuing it can bring tangible benefits to the offender – for example, stealing can prove profitable, somebody’s domination causes someone else’s submission (control – surrender). Depending on the gratification obtained, the scale of aggression is different.

The third mechanism of learning aggression is modelling – a part of social learning theory. The theory was invented in 1960’s. Its author, Albert Bandura indicated that aggression was the result of socialisation¹³. Human learns aggressive behaviour by observing the external world. Imitation, involving the repetition of the observed reactions and adopting other people’s experience, can already be observed in the animal world. An organism, by means of imitating certain types of behaviour, can effectively deal with situations it has never experienced before. This also applies to people, especially to children, who copy other people’s behaviour faithfully. The theory of learning, as opposed to behaviourism, assumes that if the observation is conscious and remembered, it becomes a permanent element of the social personality. When pointing to the imitative model of aggression, Bandura uses the term “modelling”¹⁴. The mechanism of modelling is based on the assumption that people learn aggression not only by their own experience, but also by observing other people’s behaviour and the consequences thereof¹⁵. Two consequences of modelling can be indicated: first, that on the basis of the observation an individual acquires new patterns of aggressive behaviour, and second, that the observation of the results of other people’s aggression weakens or strengthens the aggression of the observer¹⁶. The theory of habitual aggression has been confirmed by the experiment conducted by Bandura, based on showing children a film in which an adult woman pushed a rubber doll, kicked it, threw it to the floor, and hit it with a hammer – in short, she was reacting very aggressively towards the toy. On seeing the scene the children were asked into the room where the doll was. Those of them who had seen the behaviour of the woman, behaved in the same way – they also reacted aggressively, while those who had not seen the woman pretending aggression did not show any signs of it¹⁷. On the basis of the experiment Bandura concluded that an individual behaves aggressively, because s/he has previously observed other people (models) behave this way. The models are mostly the representatives of primary groups – parents, peers or members of the social circle.

¹² See B. Wojciszke, *Relacje interpersonalne*, op. cit., p. 153.

¹³ See A. Bandura, R.H. Walters, *Agresja w okresie dorastania. Wpływ praktyk wychowawczych i stosunków rodzinnych*, PWN, Warsaw 1968, pp. 90-93.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 175.

¹⁵ A. Bandura, *Teoria społecznego uczenia się*, trans. J. Kowalczevska, J. Radzicki, PWN, Warsaw 2007, p. 17.

¹⁶ See B. Wojciszke, *Relacje interpersonalne*, op. cit., p. 150.

¹⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YclZBhn40hU> [date of access: 1 July 2013]

Gender, culture, society

Research on the problem of aggression in the family, at school or work usually takes into account the differences resulting from the biological sex. For example, a chosen social group is diagnosed in terms of the quantity and quality of the committed criminal deeds, deviant acts or actions violating social order. The aim of such a diagnosis is to determine what proportion of men and women behave aggressively. Much more rarely is the phenomenon of aggression explained from the point of view of gender. Yet, according to Renzetti and Curran, gender is a key factor in the organization of the social world and therefore it must be an important category of analyses in social studies¹⁸.

Nowadays, *gender* is a category that is becoming increasingly popular in the analyses of a number of social phenomena. The term itself has a relatively short history as it began to be used only in the 1970's. Ann Oakley, a British feminist, introduced the concept to sociology¹⁹. Oakley indicated the two dimensions of gender: biological (sex) and cultural (gender). Sex refers to anatomical, hormonal and reproductive differences which affect the appearance and reproductive capabilities, whereas gender includes features ascribed to each of the sexes by the society and regarded as important, desirable or even necessary. Sex involves a simple division of organisms into females and males, whereas gender refers to the typical and desirable properties of men and women, the socially approved patterns of masculinity and femininity²⁰. This approach is based on anthropological assumption concerning multifaceted nature of gender²¹, which means that gender is not only a biological category but also cultural, psychological, linguistic, economic, political and legal.

According to World Health Organization, gender refers to the roles, patterns of behaviour, activities, and attributes created by the society, "which a given society considers appropriate for men and women"²². Thus understood gender is a system of practices and schemes by means of which the society shapes the place for women and men in it. Gender refers not only to the identity of an individual but also to one's

¹⁸ C.M. Renzetti, D.J. Curran, *Kobiety, mężczyźni i społeczeństwo*, trans. A. Gromkowska-Melosik, PWN, Warsaw 2008, p. 15.

¹⁹ See A. Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society*, London 1972, pp. 11-34.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 52.

²¹ In this context, particular attention should be paid to Margaret Mead's anthropological studies of gender differences and the division of labour resulting from them. According to that research, there are three models of the operation of gender in different communities: first, in which gender is a key determinant of work and responsibilities, second, in which a set of tasks assigned to gender is constant, unchanging and perceived as natural and obvious (women raise children, men work outside their home) and third, featuring large differences in the understanding of masculinity and femininity, depending on the culture – what is regarded as masculine in the culture of one society, can be seen as very feminine in another (see M. Mead, *Płeć i charakter w trzech społecznościach pierwotnych*, trans. E. Życieńska, PIW Publ., Warsaw 1986).

²² <http://www.who.int/gender/whatisgender/en/> [date of access: 1 July 2013]

beliefs, points of view, symbols, myths, stereotypes, norms, values, roles, positions, practices and habits. This is “the kind of information on the basis of which people make judgements and behave in social interactions. [...] The notice of *gender* refers to an active process created through the interaction among people. [They are] the people who construct the reality, basing on their past experience, so the so-called objective reality does not exist”²³. According to Shulamith Firestone, gender affects every aspect of social life, as it is an unquestionable system of categories through which the public evaluates women and men²⁴. In this sense, femininity and masculinity are plastic projects (produced in the course of socialisation and acculturation) that affect the undertaken activities, the division of labour, the concept of gender equality and equity, the participation of both sexes in the private and public sectors.

Taking the above assumptions into account, we can conclude that gender also affects the type and frequency of aggressive behaviour among men and women. Undoubtedly, the impact of gender differences on the phenomenon of violence is culturally based and results from the fact that both sexes operate according to different cultural patterns and adapt to different requirements within the same system.

Gender determinants of aggression

Aggression in humans has biological bases, associated with the operation of the nervous system, and socio-cultural, resulting from the fact that an individual belongs to a specific culture and social structure. Therefore, aggression must be considered not only behaviourally, but also cognitively, with special regard to environmental factors. The intensity of aggression – as a feature of the organism – is correlated with the rate at which one achieves its objectives, style of coping with crises and model of one’s reaction to people and events. Aggressive behaviour can also be examined as a result of the processes of socialisation²⁵, by means of which an individual acquires certain habits or tendencies and internalises the norms and values necessary for the proper functioning in the society.

When analysing the relationship between aggression and gender, the process of socialisation should be taken into account, because “general socialisation orientations expressed in favouring certain values are connected with the formation of children’s regulatory mechanisms of aggression”²⁶. Aggression stems not only from the internal need for aggressive reactions, but also from the beliefs and values which cause co-

²³ E. Mandal, *W kręgu gender*, University of Silesia Press, Katowice 2007, p. 8.

²⁴ Cf. *Płeć kulturowa*, [in:] M. Humm, *Słownik feminizmu*, Sempter, Warsaw 1993, p. 165.

²⁵ The concept of “socialisation” is used in accordance with the distinction made by Piotr Sztompka to refer to a long-term process of “shaping the people’s mentality, attitudes and actions by the society”. P. Sztompka, *Socjologia. Analiza społeczeństwa*, Znak Publ., Cracow 2005, p. 224.

²⁶ *Studia nad psychologicznymi mechanizmami czynności agresywnych*, ed. A. Frączek, PAN, Białystok – Warsaw – Cracow 1979, p. 17.

gnitive assessment of the situation in which aggression appears to be an acceptable, permissible and even necessary behaviour²⁷. In the view of the theory of socialisation, aggressive behaviour is caused by unfavourable environmental factors (poverty, inequality, discrimination, contacts with criminal groups or membership of a deviant group), as well as by improper upbringing of children, which differs according to their sex. Claire M. Renzetti and Daniel J. Curran suggest that in the course of primary socialisation the reactions to the aggressiveness of boys and girls are different, which means that – depending on the biological sex of the offspring – his or her sexual identity is shaped in a different way²⁸. As a consequence, there are the following structures of gender accepted in the community and considered as natural: boys' aggressive behaviour is encouraged (and even gratified), while girls are rewarded for their passivity, delicacy and subtlety. Child's biological sex determines the method of socialisation training, especially when it comes to the implementation of the gender roles in everyday life contact and interaction. Gender differences are apparent in terms of expressing emotions (mothers are more sensitive and gentle when dealing with daughters than with sons) and in broadly understood process of human communication (boys can get attention more quickly and effectively by crying, screaming and fighting; girls are, in turn, quieter and more restrained, which means that in the future boys will fight aggressively for their right to speak and bravely express their views, while girls are willing to make concessions or compromise). A big difference in the subjects chosen in conversations between parents and their children can also be observed: "In conversations with their daughters they [parents – J.T.] use greater number of more diverse words of emotional charge than when they are talking to their sons. They discuss with their daughters more topics that could be considered sad, whereas with their sons they talk about topics that are saturated with the air of anger"²⁹. The kinds of games played with children also affect the occurrence of aggression as a model of action and reaction. Research shows that parents are more likely to choose physical plays with their sons than with their daughters. In this case, the parent's sex is also important: fathers in contact with their sons choose more interactive plays (visual, physically stimulating), whereas when dealing with their daughters they tend to choose verbal activities requiring narration (inventing and telling stories). As it is stated by Burns and Snow, both mothers and fathers believe that girls need more care, affection and assistance than boys, and thus they raise their female descendants with

²⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁸ The concept of gender identity is understood as the social, cultural and psychological identification which an individual adopts in the process of defining their place in the world, in terms of behavior and activities ascribed to a given gender (see E. Badinter, *XY Tożsamość mężczyzny*, trans. G. Przewłocki, W.A.B. Publ., Warsaw 1993).

²⁹ C.M. Renzetti, D.J. Curran, *Kobiety, mężczyźni...*, op. cit., p. 124.

the sense of dependence and uncertainty, while they shape their male descendants to be independent, self-confident and brave³⁰.

The diversity of social learning processes in terms of gender leads to differences between the styles of children's functioning in their age group. Thus they become aware that belonging to a particular biological sex determines the adoption of certain social roles and the possession of a particular social status. It affects the types of toys, clothes, the way in which a child's room is arranged. Girls are usually given dolls, cuddly toys, toy kitchen and household appliances, mini hairdresser or beautician kits, whereas boys are given cars, racing tracks, building blocks, plastic figures of soldiers, heroes, etc. This strategy has become a standard way of "introducing a child to a particular gender" to such an extent that children almost organically reject toys intended for their peers of the opposite biological sex. According to John Rogge³¹, there are several reasons for that. Firstly, girls are annoyed by the way their male colleagues use their toys as they believe that boys play too aggressively, dynamically and noisily, and that their activities are based on competition rather than cooperation. Secondly, girls are excluded from the ritual and symbolic scenarios of boys' plays, or if they take part in them, their role is limited to passive participation (they are extras or supporters). The activities suggested by girls are not done and the rules of the games they are trying to introduce are ignored, which makes girls consider boys' plays to be depreciating and boring³². Girls definitely prefer to play in the company of females – this fact is confirmed by, inter alia, Eleanor Maccoby's research study³³. The American psychologist says, "in a game played by boys outdoor activities dominate, it is often harsh and brutal competition aimed at achieving dominance. While girls try to influence the course of play by submitting various suggestions, boys prefer the style of direct orders. Boys seem to command, interrupt each other in mid-sentence. Girls avoid playing with boys because they have no chance to express their ideas. This is the reason why they reject a play with figures of monsters"³⁴.

Socialisation strategies introducing a child into the gender determine the occurrence and intensity of aggressive behaviour in children. The results of that are as follows:

- "boys' aggression is directed more outwards, especially in the stories and acted scenes; girls show more sensitivity, they react with uncertainty and fear, they sympathise with the victims more, they empathise with the roles of people affected by a tragedy, they are interested in the effects of the acts of destruction
- in boys' plays, physicality and strength dominates, girls' plays are calmer, restrained; girls engage more mentally than physically in the roles they play

³⁰ Quote after: C.M. Renzetti, D.J. Curran, *Kobiety, mężczyźni...*, op. cit., p. 125.

³¹ J.U. Rogge, *Agresja a wychowanie*, trans. E. Brudnik, Kielce 2007.

³² f. ibid., p. 78.

³³ <http://webs.wofford.edu/nowatkacm/Abnormal%20Child/Maccoby1990.pdf>
[date of access: 1 July 2013]

³⁴ Quote after: J.U. Rogge, *Agresja a wychowanie*, op. cit., pp. 78-79.

- boys' uncertainty is expressed by hyperactivity or rationalisation of events; it is meant to be a sign of indifference, easiness, authority and competence"³⁵.

In conclusion, gender is the major factor that affects personality. Choosing toys and games for children, as well as approach to the young corresponds with the social roles and functions of emotions. Gender is a set of norms, rights, expectations and behaviours that a person has to accept and acknowledge.

This interpretation of aggressive behaviour is also confirmed by the psychoanalytic theory of identification that was initiated by Freud and further developed by post-Freudian theorists (Karen Horney, Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, and Nancy Chodorow)³⁶. The foundation of this approach is the assumption that children learn cultural gender (including stereotypes and autostereotypes connected with gender) by identification with the parent of the same sex. According to Chodorow, the learning how to be a man or woman starts in the early childhood and is based on the identification with the mother or the denial of maternal influence, "girls remain in closer proximity to their mother, for example, they may continue hugging and kissing her and imitate her behaviour. [...] Male identity is shaped by separation, that is why men constantly feel that it is endangered when they engage emotionally in relationships with others"³⁷. Internalised gender patterns shape the mechanisms for building social identity and thus determine the relationship of an individual with him/herself and the others. Due to the lack of adequate male and female models, in other words due to incomplete or improper gender socialisation, an individual tends to show deviations and patterns of behaviour inconsistent with the accepted ones, including: externalising problems (aggression, ADHD) and internalising disorders (depression, anxiety, self-destruction).

Children learn some adaptation mechanisms in a given society, interpreter as aggressive or nonaggressive, by imitating external patterns or identifying with members of the same gender (girls with their mothers, boys with their fathers). The use of the cognitive patterns that are created in the course of observation of the social and physical world allows the dichotomy between male and female areas. A specific repertoire of appropriate behaviour is ascribed to each gender, accompanied with activities, interactions and additional elements such as roles and social attitudes, axionormative system and language. This way, aggressiveness – depending on gender identity formed in the course of socialisation – becomes a normative or nonnormative style of being.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

³⁶ *Psychoanaliza*, [in:] *Encyklopedia psychologii*, ed. W. Szewczuk, pp. 507-513.

³⁷ A. Giddens, *Socjologia*, trans. O. Siara, PWN, Warsaw 2012, p. 131.

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Abstract: The article deals with the relationship between aggression and gender, with particular emphasis on gender differences referring to the way in which aggression is shown and to the propensity for violent behaviour it affects. For at least several years, researchers examining gender in society have indicated that human social functioning (i.e. positions occupied, roles performed, status achieved) is determined

by the gender to which one belongs. Gender differences generate different types of behaviour, actions and interactions between men and women. As a consequence of these differences, there are different needs, interests, systems of communication and expression, problem-solving and conflict-solving styles, ways of coping with stress. Femininity and masculinity are sociocultural structures in binary opposition to each other, reflected by differences between the ways aggression is released or unloaded.

Keywords: gender, socialisation, aggression

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