

Role theory in the social work - in the context of gender stereotypes

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Abstract

The article deals with the place of role theory in the theory, research and practice of social work in the context of gender stereotypes. The first part points to the history, development, trends and critique of role theory. The second part of the article shows place of role theory in the social work and points to the close connection of gender roles with gender stereotypes. Further author considers possible deconstruction or even denial of role theory in the context of reflexive social work.

Key words

Role theory. Structural functionalism. Symbolic interactionism. Social constructivism. Social work. Gender stereotypes. Gender roles. Reflexive social work.

Introduction

Social work as interdisciplinary science and practical activity besides its own theories and methods extensively uses knowledge base from various disciplines. One of the related disciplines is sociology, which together with psychology, social politics and law offers the social work the theoretical and methodological saturation. „*Sociological analyses provide theoretical perspectives that can subject policies and the work which practitioners do to systematic analysis, thereby enhancing our understanding of what is done and why. Sociology can be used to illuminate structures, processes and social relationships in social work and contribute to the development of more appropriate forms of*

practice?“ (Dominelli, 1997a: 5). Role theory is one of the frequently used theoretical perspectives. Raewyn Connell¹ (1979: 7) in her critique of the concept of role theory says, that it is one „domesticated concepts“, which attracts attention only rarely, but are omnipresent in social sciences, undisputed and taken for granted. Roles thus can be, as common part of language in social sciences, uncritically taken into the social work theory and practice without reflection of its possible consequences.

Moreover, social sciences and social work in the Slovakia reflects and integrate knowledge from 2nd and 3rd wave of feminisms and gender studies in limited scope only, and therefore – by using role theory and gender roles theory – they can act in oppressive ways. I suppose that more critical approach to the role theory is absent even in the setting of gender studies in the Slovakia.

The place, problems and possibilities of the role theory in social work theory and practice is discussed in the following text. We start with general description of the role theory, its history and trends and then we move to its critique. Our next step is the place of role theory in the social work, with problematising its nonreflective use in theory, research and practice. We try to sketch subversive potential of role theory in deconstruction of gender stereotypes, which is rather reproduced than deconstructed by uncritically applied „role paradigm“, and we consider the possibility of denial of role theory.

I will try to find out possible answers to these questions: a) is role theory suitable concept for social analysis? and b) what is the place of role theory in social work theory, research and practice?

1 Role theory – history, classification trends, critique

The term role theory points to the „expansive and variegated body of analyses examining the linkages between the social organization, culture and performances that humans give while engaged in interaction“

¹ Raewyn Connell (1979) depicts role theory as something like omnipresent „furniture“ of social sciences.

Cited author is transgendered person, which has published as Robert William Connell before. In following text cited as Raewyn, in bibliography according data from used sources.

(Martin – Wilson, 2005: 651). Role theory is sociological modification of initially anthropological concept of institutions – „roles are socially specified institutions. Settled ways of engagement expected from holders of certain positions“ (Keller, 1997: 62). It is possible to run across term role paradigm which is supposed to cover various approaches and partial terms² used in the area of role theory. It is good remind that role theory „normally does not appear by itself as a major concept but rather is likely to surface in chapters on such topics as „the self“, „groups“, „institutions“, „role taking“ (Biddle, 2000: 2418).

The role theory has from its very beginnings the extensive history. Social philosopher George Herbert Mead (*Mind, Self and Society*, 1934), anthropologist Ralph Linton (*Study of Man*, 1936; *Role and Status*, 1947) a psychologist Jacob Moreno (*Who Shall Survive?*, 1934) are considered as the founders of role theory, independently from each other. The significant development of role theory is made by works of Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales (1951), Robert K. Merton (1957), Ralph Dahrendorf (1958), Erving Goffman (1961), he and she theorists as Ralph H. Turner (1956), *Status*, 1947) a psychológ Jacob Moreno (*Who Shall Survive?*, 1934). K významnému rozvoju teórie rolí dochádza prostredníctvom diel Talcotta Parsonsa a Roberta F. Balesa (1951), Roberta K. Mertona (1957), Ralpha Dahrendorfa (1958), Ervinga Goffmana (1961), teoretikov a teoretičiek ako Ralph H. Turner (1956), Mirra Komarovsky (1964), Edwin J. Thomas – Bruce J. Biddle (1966; consecutive criticism from authors like Ralph Dahrendorf (1958), Michel Crozier (1977), Raewyn Connell (1979) and others (Keller, 1997; Biddle, 2000; Martin – Wilson, 2005; Connell, 1979).

Daniel D. Martin and Janelle L. Wilson (2005: 651) state that contemporary role theory in the sociology is the „progeny of two dominant theoretical traditions in social psychology“ – 1) *structural role theory* (specified already in Linton's functionalist determination)

² For example social role; ideal role; role performance; sex/gender role; role ambiguity; role disposition; role set; role distance; role overload; role pressure; role crossing; socialisation; prescribed, achieved and main status; role salience; hypothesis of role extension; hypothesis of role strain; role identification; role modeling (Keller, 1997; Filadelfiová – Kobová [cit. 2009-09-09]; Jandourek, 2001, 2009; Giddens, 2009; Goode, 1960 a Sieber, 1974 in: Gudmundsson, 2003; Vander Zanden, 1990; Nakonečný, 1999; Golombok – Fivush, 1994...).

2) *symbolic interactionism* (Mead's approach), in which emphasis is put on the processes of role molding and changing in interaction.

1.1 Critique of structural functionalist role theory

Structural role theory is based on assumption that „shared expectations serve as cultural script or blueprint that ensures conformity because it is either obtrusive in the social context, has been internalized by actors before they enter into it, or both. A decidedly sociological variant of structural role theory was provided by Talcott Parsons in his theory of „informational control.“ Parsons theorized roles as the crucial social mechanism that positioned individuals in social structure but, more important, inculcated culture as individuals were socialized into them (Martin – Wilson, 2005, s. 651 – 652).

The basis of criticism towards structural³ role theory according cited authors is aimed against its inability to adequately explain deviance in terms other than psychologic ones. Other problem is that not all roles may be associated with identified social positions (Biddle, 1986 in: Martin – Wilson, 2005). Moreover, norms may or be shared in within an entire social system, and thus they may or may not lead to conformity or sanctioning (criticism of „overly socialised individuals“) (Martin – Wilson, 2005). Structural role theory thus was and is criticized for emphasis put on conformity, stability and role complementarity, meanwhile most of the roles allow for some degree of improvisation and creativity.

According to Raewyn Connell (2005) problems with role theory multiplied when it was (smoothly) connected with the concept of sex differences (sex difference research), which started to be „... easily explained by sex roles that the two ideas have been persistently blurred since 1940s. Research journals are still publishing papers in which findings of sex differences (usually slight) are simply *called* „sex roles““ (Connell, 2005: 22). I believe that this is the reason of important feminist based criticism against functionalist role theory approach (see for example Holmwood, 2006; Bačová, 2005; Filadelfiová – Kobová, 2005). This

³ Bruce J. Biddle (2000) in contrast to Daniel D. Martin and Janelle L. Wilson (2005) distinguishes *functionalist role theory* and *structural role theory* (see below).

criticism aims also for insufficiencies in Parsons and Bales (1951) definition of „instrumental“ male role of breadwinner and „expressive“ female role in household. *„Most often, sex roles are seen as the cultural elaboration of biological sex differences. ... The sophisticated statement of sex role theory made in the mid-1950s by Talcott Parsons in Family, Socialisation and Interaction Process takes another approach. Here the distinction between male and female sex role is treated as a distinction between „instrumental“ and „expressive“ roles in the family considered as a small group. Thus gender is deduced from general sociological law of the differentiation of functions in social groups“* (Connell, 2005: 22). Claire Marie Renzetti and Daniel J. Curran (2005) highlight the biological determinism of functionalist concept of roles, which lies in the belief that gender roles are based on biological, particularly reproductive differences between men and women. Such a division reportedly developed in the early stages of human development and since it has been functional, it institutionalized over time.

Critical review of functionalist view on a family run as follows (Renzetti – Curran, 2005: 214 – 216; see also Holmwood, 2006: 153):

- 1 there are doubts about the extent of isolation of nuclear family from the rest of the kinship and doubts about more generations families in the past;
- 2 criticism is concerning the strict separation of roles between the sexes, which moreover:
 - a) depoliticises analysis of gender relations
 - b) fallaciously dichotomises public and private sphere,
 - c) implies biological determinism and one and only constancy of male role and female role,
 - d) implies a mistaken belief about the *only* male role and the *only* female role,
 - e) constructs and idealizes single standard family and disregards other family forms, which thus may be regarded as deviant.
- 3 functionalist concept of family overlooks asymmetry between men and women, addiction in the family as a reflection of power relations, conflicts and dysfunctions such as violence and abuse in the family.

In other words, according to feminist criticism functionalism there was an obstacle to the understanding of the family, although some authors (eg. Johnson, 1989 in: Holmwood, 2006) believed that T. Parsons correctly described the nature of family and household and its relationship to employment.

1.2 Critique of interactionist role theory

The central processes in the interactionist role theory are role taking and role making. Role taking according to George Herbert Mead is strategy of coping, which is emerging in interactions with others. Emphasis is put on the ability to role taking and taking mutual perspectives with others, which enables meaningful interacting (Martin – Wilson, 2005; Giddens, 1999, 2009). Interactionist role theory is opposite to the functionalist role theory. „The shift, in recent years, from structural role theory to more interactionist understandings of role dynamics allows for more complete and dynamic conceptions of this crucial sociological concept“ (Martin – Wilson, 2005: 653). According to various authors the problem here is neglecting of constraining effects of the role framework provided by groups (Connell, 1979, 2005; Biddle, 2000; Martin – Wilson, 2005). Little attention is also paid to the structural constraints that affect expectations and roles. Role theory is often depicted as mere extension of symbolic interactionist thought, which was criticized for its tendencies to use fuzzy definitions. Listed shortcomings thus use to be presented also in criticisms of role theory (Biddle, 2000).

Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1999) as founders of *social constructivism*, which gradually replaced dominant paradigm of functionalism, developed insights of G. H. Mead and Alfred Schütz with theorizing that role taking is based on typifications – „*definitions about the „type“, character, or nature of the person we encounter. Knowing the status of a person, we immediately attempt to take the role or perspective of that person. ... While the role playing presupposes the ability of people to take the role of the other, role making entails constructing, changing, adapting, and modifying a role in the course of a role performance*“ (Martin – Wilson, 2005: 652). The importance of role analysis for constructivist *sociology of knowledge* lies in mediating between „...

macroscopic universes of meaning objectivised in society and ways in which these universes are subjectively real for individual actors“ (Jandourek, 2001: 208). In other words, roles present link between objective reality of institutions and subjectively constructed reality of individuals. A central element of social reality here is identity, which is formed by the interaction of biological organism, individual consciousness and social structure. Society and identity are creating each other in dialectic relationship. Social roles are „... typifications of what can be expected from individual actor in given social situation. Roles can't be confused with objective positions“ (Jandourek, 2001: 208). P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann (1999) regard roles from various perspectives – from perspective of 1) acting (types of actors in given context), 2) institutions (institutional order), 3) language (roles represented by their linguistic objectifications), 4) knowledge (roles as representants and providers of institutionally objectivised clusters of knowledge), 5) sectors of knowledge (roles mediating between specific sectors of common knowledge base), 6) multiple roles (each holds socially defined attachment of knowledge) (according to Hubík 1999: 185). P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann (1999) regard primary socialisation as process of role taking, which is quasi finished by taking the role of generalised other. The fact that social roles are socially constructed and taken allows their change. S. Hubík (1999) states that the *sociology of knowledge* is most interested in phenomena and problems associated with perspective of language, knowledge, sectors of knowledge and multiple roles. He argues that here the own object of sociology of knowledge is born, which is „summary of problems created by dialectics between individual (knowledge) and society (role)“ (Hubík, 1999: 185 – 186).

The difference from functionalist role theory lies in focusing on typifications (read stereotypes) and process of social constructing, which allows different approach. It opens potential for identification of stereotypes and their deconstruction, which is not always

1.3 Another perspectives in role theory and postmodern shift

Another important perspectives in role theory according B. J. Biddle (2000) are: 1) *role conflict and organizational analysis*; 2) *structural*

perspective (and network analysis) (S. F. Nadel – Michael Banton), which is concerned with „the logical implications of ways of organizing social systems (conceived as social positions and roles) and eschew any discussion of norms and other expectation concepts. To date much of the work in structural role theory has been expressed in formal, mathematical terms“ (Biddle, 2000: 2417); 3) *cognitive perspective in role theory* – represents work of various he and she authors from different traditions in social psychology. „Some of this work has focused on role playing, some of fit has concerned the impact of group norms, some of fit has studied the effects of anticipatory role expectations, and some of fit has examined role taking“ (Biddle, 2000: 2417).

According to D. D. Martin and J. L. Wilson (2005: 651) „recent theorizing in role theory within postmodern, feminist and critical-dramaturgical perspectives have integrated the insights from both aforementioned traditions, creating a hybrid emphasizing the political, economic, and cultural as well as performative aspects of social roles“. We can distinguish these main areas of study in role theory: 1) gender roles – with emphasis of gender analysis on role specialisation, 2) ethnic roles – research aimed on socialisation of children into „ethnic role“, strategies of coping with ethnic based role stereotypes, 3) class roles – children socialisation into social class role and learning of the class role (Martin – Wilson, 2005).

Postmodern theoretical shift from roles to identities⁴ comes with the rise of postindustrial society and posmodern theories. Emphasised is „... fractious and segmented nature of performance demands governing self and the cultural narratives used in constructing and understanding it“ (Martin – Wilson, 2005: 654). Similarly Ivo Možný (2006) states that, after the overcoming of the social structuralism paradigm, rhetorics has changed from roles rather to *identities*. Instead of typifications, without which we can not cope with social reality it is rather about *social*

⁴ According to Ralph Turner's (1962 in: Martin – Wilson, 2005) analysis, in premodern and modern societies the self is expressed in and through a given role performance and affirmed through living up to the role expectations. Increase of possibilities and cultural expectations of higher levels of consumption increased also possibilities of selfexpression through it. „According to Turner – and more recently postmodern theories of the self – greater levels of consumption are accompanied by a cultural shift in the locus of self from institutionally based roles to its expression in impulse“ (Martin – Wilson, 2005: 654; compare with Keller, 1997: 67).

stereotypes, which are binding us (and from which we should be liberated, according to activist approach in gender studies) (Možný, 2006).

John H. Yost and James R. Bailey (2000) claim that role theory has come a full circle and early formulations has recently gained considerable extent and proved its usefulness in description of changes in emerging democracies (functionalism), pedagogy and therapy (Moreno) or in influencing contemporary thinking and research on identity (Goffman). „What this suggests is that role theorists are acutely aware of their theoretical heritage and progenitors, and are willing to mine the past in order to better understand the present“ (Yost – Bailey, 2000: 2425; compare with Biddle, 2000).

1.4 General critique of role theory

Since role theory isn't integrated concept and it was and is used in various disciplines and different paradigms, it is difficult to criticize it as a whole. Therefore, I bring only a brief outline of the general criticism of the role theory, with emphasis on prevailing functionalist approach, which we believe primarily nurtures gender-stereotyped images of men and women⁵.

More extensive criticism of role theory is summarised by J. Keller (1997), who refers to genesis of a critical approach in the field. He notes that the close analogy between the social world world and the world of the theater in role theory is not sustainable. Keller points to possible expansionist understanding of roles (each social activity is manifestation of some role and unexpected acting is announced as the execution of the role of recusant individual). He notes ambiguity of the term role (normative, statistical, individual meaning). Further he refers to strident criticism of the role theory according to M. Crozier⁶, dehumanizing influence of roles according to R. Dahrendorf (exclusion of liability of their actions). J. Keller (1997: 67) criticizes concept of the role also from

⁵ This is achieved through domesticated essentialist terms in conceptual pairs as „female role“ / „male role“, „role of women in the household“ / „breadwinner role“, „mother role“ / „father role“ and „weak role of women“ / „guardian role“.

⁶ He criticised roles through games theory – good role actor is bad player, which is losing his surprise element.

historical perspective, as applicable only in modern societies, „... *that combine a clear definition of the formal requirements (eg. through employment contract) with the possibility of change in quick sequence of not only performed roles, but also onlooker audience. None of this features was typical for traditional societies. Traditional societies rather resemble a situation where each actor through his/her entire life displays only one role, on stage and beyond. Considering a similar man as the actor is absurd*“ (compare with Turner, 1962). Excursion to the criticism of role theory J. Keller (1997) concludes by criticizing the notion of functional institutions (and roles), because of their tendency to speak only about the institutionalized forms of action, which are widespread and publicly approved, and which are crucial for the functioning of the system as a whole. The preferred topic of these considerations are well established methods of production, fighting, making contacts with supernatural forces, and so on. In contrast, the anthropological concept of institutions considers any pattern of action which is widely and universally used as a means to achieving the objectives of the members of given culture or society, to be the institution. „*At the same time, when Parsons elaborated his approach based on the identification of members with their social system, namely the 1930s to 1950s, in the practice was developed social systems that operated in a similar manner, but were unacceptable in terms of values of a democratic culture. In fact, there was hidden suitable alibi in concept of roles for anyone who was called to meet the expectations connected with her/his position in the interest of society*“ (Keller, 1997: 67).

Criticisim of role theory from the perspective of gender roles can be briefly summarized as follows: „The concept of gender role theory is sharing **problems of role theory in general**: gender role is prescriptive, roles are considered as relative stable and unvarying, it further assumes that individuals adopt them voluntarily and „play“ them freely and finally, that gender roles can be resisted by individual change“ (Filadelfiová – Kobová [cit. 2009-09-27], highlighted by M. B.).

According to R. Connell (2005) intellectual limits of role theory were repeatedly shown in various criticisms⁷, which are „almost unanimously ignored“ and thus term „male role“ is still widely used. For these reasons aforementioned author tirelessly recite ultimate limits of role theory (Connell, 2005: 26):

- 1) role theory in general is logically vague; the same concept is used to describe an occupation, a political status, a monetary transaction, a life stage and gender;
- 2) changes in the basis on which the „roles“ are defined in role theory leads to main inconsistencies in the analysis of social life;
- 3) role theory exaggerates the degree to which human social behavior is prescribed;
- 4) at the same time it is assumed that the rules are reciprocal and thus role theory underestimates the social inequality and power.

Cited author claim that „for all this reasons „role“ has proved unworkable as general framework for social analysis“ (Connell, 2005: 26).

In the intent of aforementioned critiques B. J. Biddle (2000: 2419) states that role theory „... *is currently weakened by terminological and conceptual confusion, diffuse effort, and the narrow visions of some of its proponents and critics. Nevertheless, role theory concerns central issues for sociology and social psychology, and assumptions about social positions, role behaviors, and expectations for human conduct appear widely in current social thought. Role theory will prosper as ways are found to discuss these issues with clarity, consistency, and breath of vision.*“

2 Role theory in social work

In the social work roles with theory, we can find in 1) in both *undergraduate and postgraduate education and training* – in the sociological and socio-psychological disciplines, theories and methods of

⁷ For the role concept in general see John Urry (1970), Margaret A. Coulson (1972), and R. W. Connell (1979). For the sex role theory see Anne R. Edwards (1983), Judith Stacey a Barrie Thorne (1985). For the critics of sex role theory in masculinity research see Tim Carrigan et al. (1985), Michael S. Kimmel (1987) (Connell, 2005).

social work, in feminist and gender-based disciplines, in the psychosocial and psychotherapeutic training also, 2) in *the social research* – where role theory may constitute the theoretical framework as well as an incentive for exploring gender and role stereotypes in the course of social work and in the analysis of legislation, 3) in *the practice of this profession* – not just in the methods of practicing and playing roles, but also in the form of oppressive gender stereotypes⁸ which are part of personal theories and ideas of social workers and clients.

In *the undergraduate and postgraduate education and training* she and he students get familiar with the parts of the role theory and its various approaches in different disciplines, namely:

- 1 sociology in general (basic definition, socialization theory), sociological theory (the founders of role theory, criticism of role theory), sociology of the family (parental roles and change in these role), sociology and organization and work (organizational analysis and organizational role theory);
- 2 feminism and gender studies in the social work (feminist critique of role theory, gender socialization theory);
- 3 social psychology (role theory and its use), developmental psychology (theory of socialization – the acquisition of roles, the role of mother, the role of father);
- 4 the family as a client of social work, family as a social institution (the parental roles);
- 5 theories and methods of social work (the practical use of role based approaches – training roles socio-drama, socio-psychological model of social work) or
- 6 ethics in social work (issue of power and double morality in the context of professional and gender roles);
- 7 socio-psychological and psychotherapeutic trainings.

It is questionable whether the undergraduate and postgraduate education and training contains also gender sensibilisation and criticism of essentialist concepts (where selected parts of the role theory fits),

⁸ According to Zuzana Kiczková ([cit. 2009-09-09]) *the gender stereotypes* are „simplified, unrealistic images of „masculinity“ and „femininity“, idealized and expected patterns, which accompany us in all areas of life. They create appearance of naturalism and obviousness by its reproduction.“

which can enable and foster she and he students' reflection and critical distance⁹.

In *the sociological or social research in the social work* the role theory can be grasped as not frequently used theoretical framework for research¹⁰. Role theory can also be used in deconstructivist way for the analysis of legislation or as an incentive for exploring gender and role stereotypes in the course of social work, which are very often strengthened and reproduced precisely in terms of roles of women, male, breadwinner, mother, father... (see Janebová, 2008, 2006b; Hudson, 1994, in: Tomešová Bartáková, 2009).

In *the social work practice* we can encounter application of certain parts of the role theory and gender stereotypes¹¹ associated with it in counseling and therapy. For example in a case of social work¹², in individual and group social work (eg. unemployed or drug addicts), also in social work with family, with youth and with men (see Janebová, 2006b, 2007).

Pavel Navrátil (2007) shows the example of the use of the concept of inter and intra role-conflict and role ambiguity in practical social work, as it allows a reasonable interpretation of the problem situation for the client which is free from personal criticism or moral convictions, and opens the way for intervention and change. To the criticism of the theory of roles

⁹ The inspiration for this question came from my teaching experiences with the occurrence of gender and racial prejudices and stereotypes among both students of social work but also for teachers, and K. Müllerová's (2005) dissertation research findings about low sensitivity to gender stereotypes in psychotherapeutic trainings in the Slovakia.

¹⁰ Eg. in research of role cumulation and role conflict of social workers, or possibly in research of role cumulation and role conflict of their clients.

¹¹ *Structure of gender stereotypes* persist despite the change in their content (which can be also very dramatic). The characteristic signs of *the structure of gender stereotype* according to Z. Kiczková (2002) include especially: 1) sharp bipolarisation, 2) rigid, impassable boundaries between these bipolarities, 3) unequal, asymmetrical and hierarchical relationships between polarities. Z. Kiczková (2009) further distinguishes so called *lived stereotypes* (in the foreground are descriptive components) and so called *symbolic stereotypes* (in the foreground are prescriptive, thus normalising components). Border between these two types of stereotypes is fluid and difficult to see, but this optics brings the enrichment in observing the different consequences of non-compliance to stereotypes: „In the case of „lived“ can be expected surprise as a response, while the crossing of symbolic (strongly normative) usually starts a stronger negative sanction – the rejection, respectively denial (Kiczková, 2009: 215).

¹² See, for example, Olga Havránková (in: Matousek et al. 2008: 67 – 68), see also case studies used by Lena Dominelli (1997).

listed author notes that: 1) advocates psychological approaches in social work theory criticize role theory for overlooking feelings that speed or block change (Ruddock, 1969 in: Navrátil, 2007); 2) it is necessary to supplement explanations provided by the role theory with further interpretations during the work with clients; 3) from the radical social work the role theory is criticized for its conservatism, in which roles are perceived as static 4) role theory offers no practical procedures for resolution of a role conflicts.

We can see that terms such as role, social role or gender role, role conflict and related concepts are often present in social work. Danger for the theory, research and practice of social work lies in not reflected usage of the term and following reproduction of negative stereotypes associated with social and gender roles¹³. Stereotypical thinking in the sex/gender roles framework is becoming „a source of oppression“ (Connell, 2005: 25) and strengthens inter alia heteronormativity and heterocentrism (see Burman, 1994, Golombok - Fivush, 1994 in: Hicks, 2000). Now I will turn to the criticism of conservatism associated with the role theory now.

Important here is the use of the term social roles, which can be found in the definition of social work through the concept of social functioning, introduced by the P. Navrátil: „*The aim of the social work is the promotion of social functioning of client in a situation where there such a need is perceived and expressed by a group or individually. Social work deals with human relations professional in the performance of social roles*“ (Navrátil, 2000 in: Matoušek et al., 2007: 184). P. Navrátil in his definition in contrast to the broader definition of aim of social work skips „improving the social functioning of social systems“ and „changes in social conditions“ (Sheafor, Horejsi and Horejsi, 2000 in: Matoušek et al., 2007). He is thus narrowing the field of social work activity and I believe that by using the concept of roles Navrátil remains at the micro and meso level of social work and turns away from the reform paradigm. This is emphasized by aforementioned loss of accent on improving the social functioning of social systems and changes in social conditions.

¹³ The *gender superstitions* - as the part of gender stereotypes – are defined by Silvia Porubánová ([cit. 2009-09-09]) as „shallowing and biased notions of inequality, unequal capabilities, incomparable mission of both sexes“, which in reality often occur in relation to women and are resulting „from an erroneous conviction about irrefutable, definitive, unchangeable „destiny“ for women and men.“

I think that this example illustrates the above objections against the role theory, which are amplified by a link to the sex or gender roles. „The concept of sex role identity¹⁴ prevents individuals who violate traditional role for their sex from challenging it; instead, they feel personally inadequate and insecure“ (Pleck, 1981: 160 in: Connell, 2005: 25), R. Connell on the same place adds that „normative sex role theory, thus helps dampen social change.“

On the other hand, P. Navrátil (2007) with his brief description of the role theory in social work states, that the role theory represents a useful link between the client's personal problems and their social contexts. I remark, that this connection is a prerequisite for sociological imagination, which is, according to Charles Wright Mills (2008), the ability to understand relationship of personal biography and general history, the ability to differentiate and see connections between „the personal problems given by the environment“ and „the public issues of social structure.“ Based on the available literature, I believe that uncritically applied role theory supports the informal theories and stereotyped images of social workers on gender roles and inhibits the development of their sociological imagination. The consequences of gender stereotypes in social work, which are based on the discourse of „natural“ and gender roles, systematically documented Radka Janebová (2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008) in her studies based on massive use of the available foreign sources. Radical critique of gender injustice in the form of unequal gender division of labor and resource allocation uses also role terminology and role theory may potentially serve for the deconstruction of gender role stereotypes. I believe that if social work has to „professionally deal with human relations in connection with the performance of social roles“, then this must be done rather from the radical-critical¹⁵ than from the conservative position.

¹⁴ The concept of „sex role identity“ is term used by J. H. Pleck (1981) in his criticism of functionalist sex role theory (Connell, 2005).

¹⁵ Meta-analysis of interventions in social work, elaborated by Kevin M. Gorey et al. (2002) shows as more effective interventions that are based on radical feminism approach.

Conclusions

Our answer to the question *whether the role theory is appropriate concept for social analysis* is as follows: given the long tradition, extensive scope and variety of role theory, it is difficult to criticize it as a whole and problematic to deny. But I agree with R. Connell (2005), that the role theory (particularly in relation to gender roles) is inappropriate for social analysis¹⁶.

The two dominant traditions in the role theory that underpin its current and most widespread form, act now as follows:

1. *structural functionalist role theory* related to gender roles supports stereotypes, essentialism¹⁷, naturalism and conservative sentimentalism for the past in the form of traditional family myth and biologically determined roles of men and women. This tradition became „folklore“ and serves as a quasi-scientific legitimation of socially constructed differences and inequalities between men and women. It refers to the „natural“ differences between sexes which cannot be overcome – in terms of different genetic, hormonal and genital apparatus, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, physical strength, aggressiveness, care and so on.

The biological differences¹⁸ between the sexes are consciously or unconsciously overstated, when it comes to the efforts to change status quo, which I believe that it obscures the unequal access to the resources, respectively to the various forms of capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (2000)¹⁹.

¹⁶ Joseph H. Pleck (1983) was aware of the shortcomings of the role theory and, instead of the functionalist theory of sex roles, proposed a non-normative theory of sex roles, which detached the role from term „self“. „*He wanted a model of the male sex role which allowed that sex role conformity might be psychologically dysfunctional; that the role norms might change, and at times ought to; and that many people did violate norms, and might suffer retribution, so many people also overconformed. This would make the theory of the male role more internally consistent, shaking the bits of biological determinism and identity theory that clung to it; but it would not break out of the intellectual limits of the role perspective*“ (Connell, 2005: 25-26; highlighted by M. B.).

¹⁷ For the essentialism and constructivism in constructing gender see Šárka Gjuríčová (1999), for the changes of the roles of men and women in the Czech family, see Hana Maříková (1999), for the public opinion on the roles of women and men in Slovakia see Zora Bútorová et al. (2008).

¹⁸ Research on biological differences between women and men does not show a significant difference, it shows rather that there are major biological differences between women as a group and among men as a group (see, for example Renzetti – Curran, 2005, Connell, 2005).

¹⁹ See also Catherine Hakim's „*Erotic Capital*“ (2010).

The notion of „male role“ is linked to the myth of hunters and gatherers, myth of breadwinner, protector and aggressor. The notion of „female role“ is linked to „natural“ women's self-sacrifice and care for others, the myth of motherhood and the myth of beauty. These myths, dragged by mass media, conservative politicians and institutions with the assistance of historical amnesia in my view produce image of traditional femininity and image of traditional masculinity, which is „... due to women's emancipation, becoming a *virtual reality* that... is damaging real men“ (Janebová, 2007) as well as real women. Social analysis based on structural-functionalist tradition therefore tends to be gender blind²⁰.

2. *interactionist role theory*, which found its continuation in *social constructivism* has, in my opinion a subversive potential which consists in the assertion that the social roles and hence the gender roles are socially constructed and institutionalized. This potential remains untapped for three reasons: 1) weak emphasis on the fact that the roles as typification are basically always stereotypes²¹, 2) focus on gender socialization as a relatively linear and passive process of gender role taking, and 3) the persistence of latent biological essentialism, based on beliefs about the biological basis of social constructs, which can thus be regarded only as a cultural superstructure over the biological base.

If we accept the argument that in the gender-polarized world, the status quo is maintained through various discursive power practices regarding „nature“, then we must ask the question whether the actual use of the terms social role, female role / male role, etc. does not reproduce gender stereotypes not only in theory, research and practice of social work, but also in everyday life²².

The answer to the question *what is the place of the role theory in the social work theory, research and practice* remains somewhat open. Role theory is a broad intellectual tool with different uses and adequately described and documented limitations, which are not always taken into

²⁰ See for example Z. Kiczková (2001, [cit. 2009-09-09]).

²¹ I was warn about this mostly overlooked relation by Monika Bosá.

²² Can we liberate roles of both genders while we talk about them and distinguish them? Aren't we just preparing the place for the operation of gender stereotypes based on the dichotomy, impermeability and the subsequent hierarchization? Isn't „definition by the gender“ (Hanmer – Statham, 1988 in: Payne, 1997) based on the terms of the female role and male role?

account. This tool is used in the social work within undergraduate training as one of the sociological concepts intermediating understanding of social reality (Dominelli, 1997). This understanding, when based on the context of essentialist discourse regarding „nature“, can be misleading and promote existing stereotypes about gender roles, about the „natural destiny“ for men and women, for she and he students, for she and he social workers. The role theory may be problematic as a tool in social work theory, research and practice – because of the possible petrification of gender stereotypes and their impact on social work and its clients, which can not be doubted (see Janebová, 2005...). The image of social reality rendered by role theory and its concepts is based on reduction and categorialism. It can not capture the dynamics of change, structural constraints and power relations.

Dramaturgical role metaphor is, according to R. Connell (2005) applicable and suitable in understanding social situations, where: 1) there are well-defined scenarios for the exercise, 2) are clear audiences to be played for, and 3) it is feasible, that certain kind of playing is a major ongoing social activity. The crucial finding here is considered that „none of these conditions, as a rule, applies to gender relations“ and that „sex role“ is basically an inappropriate metaphor for gender interactions“ (Connell, 2005: 26).

In the ideal case, it is possible to use the role theory as illustration of the shift and controversy between the positivistic, hermeneutic and post-modern approach to social reality and social work. By emphasizing the reflexive model of social work (Payne, 1997), deconstructing the structural functionalist role theory – by highlighting the social construction of roles – it is possible to view a variety of various forms of discourse and power that is hidden behind the dominant discourses.

The question is, not just the fact whether the role theory shares responsibility for the reproduction of gender stereotypes and their negative effects in education, thinking and practice, but also whether the social constructivism, which incorporates socialisation into to the roles, is sufficiently available in case of elimination, respectively deconstruction of gender stereotypes, and whether it is possible to reject the role theory

and theory of gender socialization associated with it as outdated and useless²³.

Is therefore the role theory in the social work relevant and reflected? It is possible to answer this question according to what we consider the social work and its purpose to be.

When we view social work through medical („catalytic“) model (Payne, 1997), role theory can seem like relevant theoretical and methodological concept. In contrast, reflexive model of social work, as defined by Malcolm Stuart Payne (1997), demands reflexive relationship between social workers, clients and their context. *„A modern social work „theory“ must therefore respond to the modern social construction of reality both by clients and by workers and their social environments; if it fails to do so, it will be unsuccessful²⁴. The recognition of the need for „theory“ to be reflexive like this is a feature of more modern social work „theories“ such as ecological systems approaches, where the interaction with the environment is strongly recognized, and Marxist, radical²⁵ and empowerment approaches“* (Payne, 1997: 24).

Social responsibility of educators in social work should commit them to elimination of (gender) stereotypes and their oppressive impact through reflexive and critical reconstruction of the education contents, research and practice. It is a challenge for improving the quality of social work as a reflexive (Payne, 2007; Chytil et al., 2004 in: Lorenz, 2007) practical and scientific discipline.

²³ For critical comment on gender socialisation see R. Connell (2009: 94-97).

²⁴ M. S. Payne (1997: 22) is pointing to slow reactions in „... recognise(ing) failures in providing services to ethnic minorities in Western countries, because of endemic racism in training, management, policy and practice“.

²⁵ K. M. Gorey et al. (2002) summarizes the general attributes of feminist practice that can serve „to distinguish it from other models of practice as follows: (a) the importance of gender is explicitly grasped in accordance with related issues such as inegalitarian distribution of resources and oppression, (b) the efforts are developed to eliminate the false dichotomy and artificial separation, (c) the power is reconceptualised, and (d) the strengths perspective is emphasized (Bricker-Jenkins, Hooyman, & Gottlieb, 1991, Burt & Code, 1995, Rusell, 1989; Tavis, 1992, Van den Bergh, 1995)“ (Gorey et al., 2002: 40).

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