CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDER
IN PARTNERSHIP NARRATIVES

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The paper presents the results of a study focusing on the construction of virtual partnerships according to two basic gender stereotype parameters—where the personality traits of the characters in the partnership are given in advance: each partner was made either rational or emotional and either dominant or submissive. Three scenarios were used. The first one, a dominant and rational male in a relationship with a submissive and emotional woman, reflects the classical gender stereotyped beliefs about the psychological characteristics of men and women. In the other two scenarios, we combined the various character types to ensure an equal spread of dominance and submissiveness, always matched with inverse rationality-emotionality versus the traditional gender stereotype, i.e. man as emotional and woman as rational. Each scenario was created by three independent focus groups (N=40, 4-6 participants in each group). The analysis of the discussions indicates that the dimensions of dominance-submissiveness and rationality-emotionality interact in narrative constructions; the dominance dimension is superior to the dimension of rationality in terms of the potential for making decisions about the future of the relationship. The expected functioning of these dimensions is usually independent of their (both female and male) bearers. At the same time, both men and women are easily imagined and described as consistent human beings when they are either dominant and rational or submissive and emotional, while the mixed characteristics (dominance with emotionality or rationality with submissiveness) are difficult to imagine as part of one functioning entity.

The social cognition approach was first introduced into social psychology during the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the shift of general cognitive psychology from information processing to psycholinguistic theory. This differed to the traditional social-learning approach in that it held that people are active, purposeful thinkers who strive to make sense of their social world and bring to this endeavour complex, sophisticated models-of-the-world in order to interpret it. To reduce the world's infinite variety into a cognitively manageable form people categorize information. These categories are believed to exist in cognitive structures called schemas. Schemas are hypothetical-cognitive constructs in our mind which organize our cognition. We have cognitive categories for most social situations (event schemas), for individuals we know (person schemas), and for identifiable social groups based on gender, ethnicity, and occupation

(role schemas) (Fiske, Taylor, 1984). The basic claim of this approach is that social categorization is an inevitable feature of our "social perceptual apparatus"—we see individuals as members of particular groups with particular attributes.

While categorization is the basic process by which the input information is made meaningful, it also has its downsides. In 1954, Gordon Allport proposed the term *stereotypes* for labelling cognitive schemas of particular social groups. Within the categorizing procedure, *stereotyping* is a process of "going beyond the information given" (Bruner 1957, in Stainton Rogers 2003); quite easily and quite often, the "additional" information is wrong. Ashmore et Del Boca (1981, in Leyens et al. 1994) argue that while the term "stereotype" should be used to denote an ensemble of individual beliefs concerning a social group, i.e. an ethnic group, the term "cultural stereotype" should be used to describe the profiles of shared beliefs that are wide-spread in a community.

However, along with these psychological explanations, which seek the mechanisms for stereotyping in cognitive mechanisms and/or traits, there is a large arena of *institutionalized stereotyping and the social construction of stereotypes in discourse*. This consideration draws extensively from French theory, especially the work of Foucault and his concern with the relationship between power and knowledge and the *collective* properties of discourse. It has to do both with the 'textuality' of discourse (i.e. its functions, uses and ability to yield power) and its socio-cultural 'tectonics' (i.e. the ways in which discourse is produced, and how discourses impinge upon one another) (Curt 1994). This approach is concerned with the way discourse operates more generally and more globally as a social and cultural resource to be used in human activities and endeavours, e.g. also in the construction of taxonomies, norms, and stereotypes.

Sex and the construction of gender

While sex (besides its connotation of performing sexual activities) refers to the biological quality of an individual, gender refers to the economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female at a particular point in time (www.who.int). Scientific knowledge has to accept the overcoming of the dual understanding of sex as only-either-male-or-female. As Fausto-Sterling (2000, 468-473) puts it, "sex is a vast, infinitely malleable continuum that defies the constraints of even five categories" (two sexes and three intersexes called hermaphrodites, male pseudohermaphrodites––merms, and female pseudohermaphrodites—ferms, differing in the relative presence of male and female reproductive organs in a particular individual). Similarly, the original bipolar concept of the psychological gender expressed in femininity and masculinity (mutually reversal, exclusive and opposing) has been deconstructed into a flexible set of approaches starting with Sandra Bem's (1974) conceptualisation of androgyny with the common idea that the "best way for a person to be is neither stereotypically male nor female, but having the best qualities of both genders" (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers 2001, 115).

"A gender stereotype is a schematised set of beliefs about the psychological traits and characteristics and the behaviour expected of (and seen as appropriate for) men and

women" (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers 2001, 50). Traditional gender roles can be characterized by the following attributes (Bem 1974):

– female/feminine—affectionate, compassionate, warm, gentle, understanding, tender,
– male/masculine—independent, forceful, ambitious, aggressive, competitive, dominant.

There is a consensus about this and similar characteristics of traditional gender stereotypes among other authors as well (Golombok, Fivusch 1994; Burr 1998). Burn (1996) emphasizes the role of creating a domestic atmosphere in the female gender stereotype and Thomson and Pleck (1986, in Burn 1996) highlight normative expectations in the male stereotype that relate to (1) achievement, (2) logical ability and emotional and physical resistance and (3) active avoidance of stereotypically female activities.

Gender stereotypes are consensual throughout society because even while we consciously disavow them, we still enact them and see others enact them in the unequal roles and status of our daily life. Similarly, gender stereotypes are still portrayed in the media and fiction, although we consciously discount them, they nevertheless penetrate our judgments and beliefs as being real. As a result, men and women are seen or are assumed to *possess* stereotypical traits. Even when objective evidence counteracts the consensus, we still see the consensus as true (Beall, Sternberg 1993).

Moreover, because consensus defines the "truth", it also transforms gender stereotypes from assumed facts into *values*. As people tend to cultivate values, *a pressure for "desirable"* behaviour is created (Beall, Sternberg 1993).

There is multiple evidence of the negative influences of traditional gender stereotypes on sexual health—from subtle effects down to sexual assault induced by male attempts to fulfil their "initiator's role" and facilitated by women's obedience in partnerships—both are socially learned (cf. Abbey et al. 2001). In general, this effect may be linked to the power issue included in the traditional male role. According to some studies, more than 80% of sexual assault is identified among dating partners.

On the other hand, the *consensus effect* also explains the impact of the "multiple authority models". When, for example, a number of women are seen as authorities, they create a consensus effect, redefining the "truth"—the stereotypes—of what is characteristic and acceptable for women. The frequency of these occurrences serves as the criterion of their validity.

Method

In order to show the functioning of the above-mentioned gender stereotypes among young people with higher education in Slovakia, i.e. the section of the population whose thinking should be most critical or independent of the prevalent stereotypes, we used the construction of model virtual narratives of the behaviour of the couples on the basis of some psychological characteristics given in advance.

We used the focus group method, where each group contained 4-6 participants—university students from different fields of study. A total of nine focus groups with 40 participants were assembled, each group consisted of both women and men. In each group, participants were asked to make up a story of the relationship between two people, whose characteristics were given in advance: each partner was either rational or emotional;

dominant or submissive. From now on, these characteristics of the actors of the virtual narratives will be denoted as types. Derived from traditional ideas of gender differences by Bem (1974), and then by Crane and Crane-Seeber (2003), the first type represents a dominant rational man and a submissive emotional woman. These two types are consistent with the deep-rooted classical ideas of the characteristics of men and women. We later combined the types of men and women to make them equal, at the level of dominance or at the level of submissiveness, always with inverse rationality-emotionality versus the traditional gender stereotype, i.e. man as emotional and woman as rational.

The participants were given the task of characterizing the types of people given, they then had to describe their particular vision of that person, and create a narrative of the relationship between the two people. Their story should focus on the key episodes of their lives together: how they met, their first date, how they spent their free time together, their first arguments and the reasons for them, the first time they slept together and contraception, the wedding, domestic chores and child rearing, and finally life after the first ten years.

Three scenarios were used: dominant rational (DR) man and submissive emotional (SE) woman, dominant emotional (DE) man and dominant rational (DR) woman, submissive emotional (SE) man and submissive rational (SR) woman[1]. Each scenario was created by three focus groups. The group interview was transcribed and the first stage of the analysis was the reconstruction of the individual stories. We then looked for elements that were common to the three narratives with the same scenario and we then created a virtual metanarrative. This metanarrative transects the key episodes or stages in life as given above, with authentic statements from the different focus groups (denoted by F1—F9 codes) on the basis of thematic analysis. The individual metanarratives were then compared with each other.

For the analysis of the stories created by the various groups of participants, we used narrative analysis (Labov 1972, 354-396; 1997), which is the analysis of a chronologically told story, with a focus on how the various elements are sequenced, why some elements are evaluated differently from others, how the past shapes perceptions of the present, how the present shapes perceptions of the past, and how both shape perceptions of the future. The actual procedure consisted of combining the thematic analysis with the structuralist analysis (Jovchelovitch, Bauer 2003, 57-74). Structuralist analysis was decisive chiefly in the phase of creating the virtual metanarratives and in the comparative analysis of these metanarratives.

The aim of our research was to find out to what extent participants are able to imagine and elaborate the "enforced" relationship between two people and what form they would give it. Our goal was to discover (1) the extent to which individual stereotypes are present in the different fictional stories and the way in which they manifest themselves (2) which characteristics are relatively invariable or fixed and

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[1] The original aim was to apply all 16 possible combinations of the particular types in partnership. For technical reasons, it was not possible to realize such a large number of focus discussions. In addition, some combinations were shown to be very unusual for participants and they were not able to make up a virtual narrative of man and woman, e.g. the combination of DE man and SR woman.

which, in contrast, change as a result of the interaction between partners and as a result of the social environment. Our aim was also to find out (3) in which situations the dimension of rationality-emotionality and that of dominance-submissiveness would be present and, where applicable, ascertain what kinds of decisions and hypothetical behaviour and interactions of partners they would influence. We particularly focused (4) on the implications of the given characteristics in the area of risky sexual behaviour.

Results

In the first part of the results, we will present the findings from the metanarratives, created from the narrative analysis and synthesis of the stories made up by the three focus groups.

Metanarrative of a dominant emotional man and a dominant rational woman

In this narrative construction, the **DE man** is empathetic, receptive, vivacious and passionate, but, on the other hand, he is also able to use emotions to assert his opinion and emotionally blackmail his partner ("you never have time for me"). He is driven by emotion. The **DR woman** is ambitious, careerist, determined, unemotional, energetic. She listens to reason.

Their **first meeting** was more or less accidental, not planned in advance. The woman began by weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of a relationship, whereas the man was overwhelmed by emotion and expected romance. We might anticipate that had these people already known each other, they would not have started going out together, because they are both dominant personalities.

> F2: *"It must have been a sort of unexpected encounter... one of those chance encounters... at disco, or somewhere where there was entertainment ... If they had known one another from early childhood..., there is little chance that they would have got together... He must have had a moment of weakness and hasn't realized it yet... when you are infatuated, you behave like a fool, even if you are dominant... She thinks things over and knows what she wants. And he follows his heart... And she weighs up the pros and cons."*

The woman decides on the **first date and time spent together,** since her decisions are bound by rationality. Where they meet is also more important to her. The man is more in love and therefore ready to accept her suggestions.

> F2: *"She insisted on what she wanted or she explained why she wanted it. The point is that she is rational and he is in love. He is the one who succumbs to her, not she (to him)."*

First conflicts appear in the narratives after about 2-3 months, when the infatuation first begins to fade. The source of these conflicts may be a lack of time spent together. It is more difficult for the man, while the woman is more of a careerist. Given that both partners are dominant, conflicts may emerge as a result of their joint inability to make concessions.

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F1: *"He will probably reproach her for her careerism, for spending little time with him, for neglecting his emotional side and devoting more time to her career and work... (She criticises him for being)* "slow, inaccurate, unpunctual...too dependent on her... He can't even be self-sufficient, he is always needing her to do something and it bothers her."

The first sexual intercourse is casual, unplanned, and spontaneous. They have not talked about contraception before, the rational woman, however, always has some contraception, she leaves nothing to chance. The man probably felt desire for sex sooner than the woman.

F1: *"It would have happened by itself... spontaneously... they went out to dinner... they each had half a bottle of wine, and she invited him back for another drink (in her home)... She, as a rational woman, will insist on it (contraception), and she is a careerist, she definitely doesn't want children yet... nor any diseases. She has it (a condom) in a drawer. She won't ask him, she'll take it for granted, basically."* (He might also be prepared for it), *"but the woman will get the condom out."*

Sex may become another source of conflict. The rational woman might "use..." the man's desire, and his emotions... "to achieve her goals" (F2).

They have 1-2 children, it is the man who looks after them more, the rational woman has more or less counted on it. The division of roles is opposite to the classical stereotype, the woman is more career-oriented, the man more family-oriented.

In this narrative, the participants see **life after ten years** developing in two possible directions: either, each of them pursues his/her career or extramarital activities or they adapt to one another. The woman becomes less dominant and less rational, more sensitive and she will start to behave more as the man expects, i.e. she will come closer to the classical stereotype. In spite of this, extramarital sex is likely to occur from time to time, probably on both sides. Sex between them is less frequent and it is still the rational woman that is more active in taking control of protection.

Metanarrative of a dominant rational man and a submissive emotional woman

DR man in this narrative construction is rather pragmatic and ambitious, he knows how to assert himself, is not emotionally involved or at least he does not show his emotions. He is also calculating in the relationship in the sense that he plans how he is going to achieve something in advance. **SE woman** is oversensitive even hysterical or a hypochondriac, but she also shows positive emotions and is more romantic. Their **first meeting** was not (in contrast to the preceding story) accidental. They either met through friends, at parties, or they have already known each other, perhaps from university. The man was first to address the woman and he had been considering it carefully beforehand.

F5: *"He observed her and judged her rationally, coolly... And he saw that she was a good student... She has a lot of female friends, so she will probably be friendly and so on. And she swallowed the bait."*

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First dates and spending leisure time together are usually decided by the woman at the beginning. The man intentionally lets the woman decide, so he can win her over, but he soon takes the initiative and later controls their free time spent together.

> F6: *"The more dominant one would try to find a way of attracting their partner more... Her word holds greater weight at the beginning."*

The first conflicts emerge in this narrative construction after the phase of the strongest feelings of love, after about three months. The conflicts spring from the differences between the partners and from the man's dominance. The woman adjusts and yet at the same time she is discontented, she loses her world (her friends), she agrees to be dragged into his world but her position there is not equal. Moreover, the woman feels that the man does not have as much time to spend with her as he did before, it bothers her.

An example of the difference in rationality-emotionality as a cause of conflict:

> F5: *"He is rational, she is emotionally involved and thus each of them needs something else: that means, if one of them doesn't get what s/he needs, it can lead to conflict.* This conflict is difficult to resolve because of the differences. *"She started from a different place than he did."... "She is unable to defend her position by his* (rational) *means... she is not able to give reasonable arguments."*

Although the man is interested in sex from the very beginning and because of his carnal instincts, he can also exert pressure, yet, if he wants a lasting relationship, he will not push her and will wait for **the first sex.** The woman does not usually rush into the sexual act but, on the other hand, because she is an emotional being, she succumbs and does not think about it.

> F6: *"He is not a fool, a man who would like to use somebody immediately, but he rationally sees what such a relationship can give him."*

As for **contraception**, either they discuss it beforehand, and it is the man who initiates the discussion and he verifies everything or he at least thinks about it in advance. He always has a condom prepared for use, or he asks his partner whether she uses other contraception. If they do not talk about contraception before the first intercourse takes place, they will certainly discuss it afterwards.

> F4: *"He asked her whether she used contraception... but he must have been prepared ... (in case the woman didn't have contraception), so that if the situation arises, he doesn't have to run to the shop."*

The couple in this narrative construction **have 1-2 children**, the woman looks after them more, she fulfils her gender role of mother, the responsibility for the domestic sphere (ironing, washing, shopping, cooking) and resolving everyday matters lies with her, her relationship with the children is closer; the man is more committed to his

professional career, to managing the family in "more important" affairs, he may be more special to the children and they may look on him with greater pride, as having higher status.

> F5: *"If they are ill, she stays at home with them...she is closer to them, because she is emotional, but the father lets them get away with more... The mother attends parents' meetings at school, he has no time...if there was a problem with the kid's behaviour, he would go... she takes care of the minor things and he the exceptional or more important... The mother is the one who is always around, the children don't discuss whether or not their mum loves them, it is the dad you have to fight for... he is more precious to them because he doesn't spend so much time with them."*

After ten years, their relationship is more ordinary, but they also understand each other better, because they know each other better. Sex is less intensive, it is probably the woman who suffers more, because, in contrast to the man, she also needs emotional support, and that is why she might also have a lover. On the other hand, the higher the status of the man, the more lovers he can have, although they are probably short- rather than long-term sexual relationships, because he can rely on his wife at home, who provides the home comforts.

Metanarrative of a submissive emotional man and a submissive rational woman

Submissive emotional man is in this narrative construction an inferior, adaptable, malleable, introvert, who can be quick-tempered, but also sensitive. **Submissive rational woman** is cooler, harder, and more practical. Their **first meeting** took place when they had already known each other for some time through work, or a third person. Their relationship would never have developed otherwise.

> F12: *"Such two people would only get together if they had already known each other for some time, but with no commitments, and then one of them starts it ... Maybe they work in a similar field and they have been assigned a task where they have to work together as a team. It is actually a coincidence but it is an opportunity to come closer together, to get to know each other better by being in closer contact."*

They spend their **leisure time** mostly in the countryside, or talking. Often, the situation arises, where they stay at home, since neither of them suggests where to go.

> F11: *"Both are adaptable..."* and that leads to the following scenario *"Where are we going?" "You say, I don't know", "I don't know either, you say."* And this goes on for twenty minutes and they say *"let's stay at home".*

Conflicts are minimal in this narrative construction, because they don't even say what they are thinking. Their life is boring. What is problematic in their relationship is the decision-making, the last, decisive word is lacking. Conflicts may arise only when their values are different, or when the woman as the more rational realizes how passive their life is and she nags him into changing the situation.

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F10: *"If the woman is rational, then she is aware of everything ('that neither of them is able to take command')... that neither of them is able to make a decision and maybe she picks quarrels and starts conflicts deliberately by nagging him."*

They did not actually plan **the first sex** in advance. They did not talk about protection beforehand, since the use of protection is commonplace nowadays. The woman probably initiated the sex, she also took control of contraception (the condom). Later they used the pill.

F12: *"...well, maybe it was she ('the rational woman') who started it ... because he, as the more emotional, was probably afraid of rushing into something or spoiling it... They certainly used protection. If the woman is rational, then definitely."*

Later they plan the wedding, they have **romantic ideas of married life,** they anticipate a happy life together, sharing the good and bad, and sticking to traditions. They look forward to having a child.

F10: *"She will plan almost everything: what the wedding will be like, he will suffer, poor man... she will be in the dominant position... the rationality (will play a decisive role there)."*

Child care: They share their parental duties, both look after the children, the woman devotes a little more time to them, she nurtures them, and the man plays with them more.

F11: *"The mother is probably responsible for organizing matters, the practical ones and he plays with them and brings them up differently... he allows them to do whatever they like and the mother, who is rational, will one day say, 'enough is enough'."*

Life after ten years. In this narrative construction the partners do not build their careers, they prefer peaceful family life.

F12: *"By accepting the role of mother and motherhood, the woman's life changes in some ways..., she gives some things up – her career, she starts to be committed to the role of mother more... on the other hand, the man accepts the role of father and thus also some responsibility and starts to think more rationally ...a sort of balancing occurs (between the partners' rationality and emotionality)."*

It is the woman who is promoted in her career or she changes job. They are contented with their monotonous sex life and they do not seek out any extramarital relationships. The woman may use extramarital relations for career promotion.

Comparative analysis of interactions of dominance-submissiveness and rationality-emotionality

The next step in the analysis of the three metanarratives was their comparative analysis aimed at generalizing the means of interaction between dominance-

submissiveness and rationality-emotionality on the basis of their occurrence in different combinations. They are constructed in individual key episodes or life stages as follows:

Leisure time. The dominant partner decides how free time should be spent. If both partners are dominant or both are submissive, the initiative is taken by the rational partner, who thus becomes more dominant. Rationality is associated with dominance and emotionality is connected with submissiveness.

Conflicts. Conflicts appear after the phase of the strongest feelings of love, about 2 to 3 months, regardless of the types that create the couple. However, the sources of conflict are different. Given that rationality is linked to careerism, the rational partner has less time for the relationship and this upsets the emotional partner regardless of the dimension of dominance and submissiveness. If both partners are submissive, there are significantly fewer conflicts. If both are dominant, the conflicts are symmetrical: each partner tries to assert him/herself; if one partner is dominant and the other submissive, the conflicts are complementary, where the dominant partner requires the submissive one to conform. Although the submissive partner conforms on the outside, internally (and after some time), this starts to bother her/him. Moreover, the difference in types also leads to different methods of problem solving and that can be another source of conflict. At the same time, they solve mutual conflicts differently, which leads to problems in achieving consensus.

The first sex and protection. Sex and contraception are approached in a similar way as spending leisure time together. The assumption is that if one partner is more dominant, s/he automatically takes the initiative in managing the relationship as a whole, irrespective of whether that person is male or female. If, however, both partners are dominant or both are submissive, the initiator is the rational partner, who is made more dominant in the relationship through his/her rationality. We might infer from these behavioural patterns that it is the submissive and emotional partner that is most vulnerable and at risk, followed by the submissive and rational, the least vulnerable being the dominant and rational person regardless of sex. If the couple rely on the more dominant and/or more rational partner to take control of contraception, he or she will automatically be expected to be more responsible. Such people are exposed to higher risk if the partner in question does not meet these expectations. This risk is still greater because partners do not usually talk about sex and protection before the first sexual intercourse takes place. They take the use of protection for granted and assume that it is not something that requires discussion these days; moreover, the first sex is usually spontaneous and unplanned.

Living together after ten years and child rearing. The different types mentioned above are also evident in childcare and in the division of roles at home, at least at the beginning or in planning family life. The most traditionally functioning relationship appears to be that where the man is dominant and rational and the woman submissive and emotional, which is consistent with the expected stereotype. If both partners are submissive and the man is emotional and the woman rational, then childcare is divided relatively equally. However, it is the rational parent who tends to bring the child up, while the emotional parent plays with it. Although it is assumed that the woman, as the more rational partner, will pursue her career more, it is expected that she will eventually

adapt to the motherhood and begin to devote more attention to the child and family. This is also valid in the case of the dominant and rational woman except that she usually accepts the role of motherhood after she has established her career. In this type of relationship, it is the father who takes care of the child and home at the beginning. Only later, do their roles start balancing out or the man begins to build his career as well.

Gender differences, which had lain in the background throughout the scenarios of the different relationships to the detriment of personality types, become fully evident in child rearing and homemaking. It is open to discussion whether it is really the biological differences that lead to the re-orientation of the relationship in the sense that the woman adjusts to her maternal feelings and becomes more submissive and emotional or whether it is the influence of culture which prescribes the maternal role to her.

Regardless of partner types, extramarital relationships, which are mostly short-term, are expected to occur later on in almost all relationships.

Summarizing the analyses

The investigation into the construction and representation of gender stereotypes on the basis of creating fictitious stories showed that the construction and representation of stereotypes of dominance-submissiveness and rationality-emotionality are equally important. It seems that there is nothing exceptional in this, because these categories were "prescribed" before the stories were created. It is, however, surprising that the construction of dominance was shown to be determining in managing a relationship consistently in all crucial episodes and phases of life. If the measure of dominance (or submissiveness) is equal in both partners, then rationality becomes the "deciding factor" in terms of influencing the development of the story of a couple: that is, the more rational partner (regardless of sex) has a more decisive influence in crucial episodes and stages of life. The most conflictual story constructed by the participants was the narrative where both partners were dominant. At the same time, this was the narrative that most engaged their attention; the discussion was vivid and resourceful. The story of the two submissive partners was the least conflictual, and where conflicts did exist, they were latent and not discussed, the relationship was monotonous and boring. The participants found this story difficult and since such a relationship was almost unimaginable at the beginning, the participants were not able to enact the role-play spontaneously because they found it boring, dry and "dead". Another cause of disagreement in the construction of a relationship was the level of rationality-emotionality. The rational partner was constructed in such a way that s/he was (constantly) incapable of any emotional involvement or empathy, and interest in his/her partner so low as to be detrimental to professional self-realization—it was almost as if rationality and emotionality were mutually exclusive aspects of personality in a partnership. On the other hand, the emotional partner was constructed as being not very capable, dependent on the partner, and critical of the other for their lack of interest in their partner and their emotional life, which is a significant source of conflict in this set up.

On the whole, we can state that in narrative constructions, the dimensions of dominance-submissiveness and rationality-emotionality interact together, where the

dominance dimension is superior to the dimension of rationality in terms of the potential for making decisions about the future of the relationship. The anticipated functioning of these dimensions is usually independent of their (female and male) bearers. The gender stereotypes are thus actually replaced to a considerable degree by the stereotypes of dominance-submissiveness and rationality-emotionality, which are understood to be at the outer edge of their limits. They are logically consistent and all determining throughout the narrative construction a couple's life.

Discussion and conclusion

The question we posed was whether young people aspiring to study at university were influenced by gender stereotypes, which determine that a man should be active to the extent of being aggressive, rational, career-focused, assertive and responsible for safeguarding the family, while the woman tends to be passive to the point of being completely dependent, emotional, lacking in significant ambition and someone whose meaning in life is determined by childrearing and homemaking. We were interested not only in whether such stereotypes exist but also how they are manifested. The analysis of the narrative constructions of the life stories of different couples showed that such stereotypes were confirmed in the example scenario of a dominant rational man and submissive emotional woman. This situation was easily imagined and developed by the participants. However, they found it very difficult to picture a dominant emotional man and also the combination of a submissive emotional man and a submissive rational woman. This confirms the idea that something that is regarded as masculine is more rigid and difficult to change in comparison with something that is regarded as feminine (Kusá 2002). On the other hand, it was easy for the participants to imagine a dominant rational woman pursuing career whose image is consistent with that offered by the media; the media do not, however, present images of a submissive emotional man. This is in accordance with, for example, Wilkinson's description of "new women" as career women, who are not afraid of taking risks and who want excitement, they are hedonistically oriented and follow an androgynous role model (Wilkinson 1995). However, in contrast to the above-mentioned assumption that the "masculine" is more difficult to change than the "feminine", it was shown in the stories construed by participants that there was little difficulty in creating the kind of man able to create an emotional atmosphere at home and look after the children, despite the fact that it had been difficult for them to imagine such a type at the beginning. This may also be related to the fact that (as Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers 2003 report) the new economic climate and new professions have brought changes in gender definition. In Western Europe, models of "new men" have emerged. The new role model is more ready to help around the house or look after the children. He is civilized, but his strength is still an advantage. His strength is not held in his muscles or fists but in his patience and emotional warmth (Moir and Moir 1998). The reason for the success the participants had in constructing a new man in the narratives was largely thanks to the fact that they themselves were young people, university students aspiring to find their place in the labour (and life) market, who are not interested in a blanket acceptance of men's traditional attributes.

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B. Crane and J. Crane Seeber (2003) offer another outlook on gender models with their good girl/bad girl, tough guy/sweet guy. According to this model, a good girl is rather (dependent) submissive and feminine (emotional) and a bad girl is independent (dominant) and has her own view on matters (she is rational). A tough guy is successful (dominant) and unemotional (rational) and a sweet guy listens to others (is submissive) and sensitive (emotional). The characteristics of a tough guy and a good girl are significantly consistent with the construction of the metanarrative of the dominant rational man and the submissive emotional woman. It is remarkable that although the dominant rational man in the created narratives is on the one hand identical to the description of the tough guy whose duty is to be breadwinner, compete for a position in the professional hierarchy, select an (attractive) woman, show no emotions and be dominant in relationships; yet, in contrast to the traditional tough guy, he does not abuse or restrict his wife and children, nor is he a bully tyrannizing his family. Our findings show that although the dominance and rationality of men is still relatively desirable, the characteristics of dominance that manifested themselves in the past as domestic violence and tyranny of the family are socially unacceptable today.

The image of a submissive and emotional woman (good girl) is also changing. In the past, it was expected that a girl would enter marriage as a virgin. She had to be faithful to her husband, she was entirely financially dependent on her husband and she should not be too clever, educated, assertive and purposeful. These characteristics are not required today. It remains the case, however, that she should not be too assertive or purposeful or take the initiative in bed. She is still expected to subordinate her career to her husband's or even give it up completely so that she can look after the children, her husband and the household. Our findings, however, point to another fact, namely the extent to which this position of woman is perceived to be natural. The imaginary submissive emotional woman in the virtual metanarrative is not satisfied with the given situation. She suffers from internal conflict and frustration, she doesn't want to be inferior and rebels against this (trying to find a lover different from her husband). This does not imply, however, that she wants to be the same as a man or to become equal to him in dominance and rationality. Rather, it is evidence of the lack of feedback appreciating her female qualities and her need to be sure that her qualities will not be abused by a man. In order to achieve the optimum functioning of the relationship and its development, the woman expects that the man will learn how to express his emotions, while the woman will learn to be more rational, particularly in arguments between the married couple.

The characteristics of a bad girl can also be compared with the dominant rational woman from the metanarratives produced by our participants. The imaginary dominant rational woman is consistent with the description of a bad girl in that she is financially and socially independent, educated, she has her own opinion, pursues her career, she has sex and is able to initiate it, and is not necessarily monogamous. The differences between this and the traditional image of a bad girl are that she does not have to come from the lower class and she is not forced into career building to survive.

If current ideas of dominant rational man and woman are compared, we see that many ideas concerning gender differences have become blurred. For instance, both

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compete for a position in the professional hierarchy and they do not show emotion. Some gender differences persist, however: a dominant man chooses an (attractive) woman and he is expected to support his wife and family materially. By contrast, it is expected that the maternal feelings of the woman will kick in at some point and that she will give up her career to focus on family life instead.

A similar comparison of a submissive emotional man and a submissive emotional woman shows that neither is expected to be assertive or ambitious. The differences are as follows: the man is not expected to subordinate his career to his wife's nor is he expected to give it up (possibly, he does not even want a career since he is passive). He is not expected to take the initiative in bed. The submissive emotional man, in contrast to the woman of similar type, does not experience inner conflict or frustration; he does not rebel. It is more the case that society "rebels" against this type of man, as if people were embarrassed that he lacks the characteristics that a man who is capable of looking after himself should possess. The submissive emotional woman is not perceived as deficient by society. In other words, society sees this type of woman as natural, whereas this type of man as unnatural. This is, to a great extent, consistent with the model of B. Crane and J. Crane Seeber (2003) where the traditional nice guy who makes no claim to be always right, who participates in child rearing and homemaking, in some cases more than the woman, and yet, is perceived by society to be inferior.

In the last few decades, we have been witnessing a series of transformations in the family in the Western world—from traditional stereotypical gender roles to individualized deliberation of partner roles. Relationships are less and less based on duties, obligations and external social pressures and are increasingly founded on the joint active building of the relationship, emotional ties, norms and intimacy, even if some traditional roles are preserved. Giddens (1992) calls the ideal result of this transformation "pure relationships", in which the partners are bound by two basic relationship styles—the first is characterized by the mutual dependence of the couple and the second by intimacy and reflective autonomy.

The virtual relationships constructed by our participants in the individual metanarratives express in principle the application of the mode of co-dependence, which is manifested at several levels: the active use of the inequality of power, but power games and manipulation were also a common part of all the virtual relationships. In the relationship between a dominant emotional man and a dominant rational woman, the imbalance of power can be manifested as follows: the woman tries to achieve her goals by using the man's emotional dependence on her. The man uses emotional blackmail to manipulate the woman. Both are trying at the same time to change their partner to meet his or her needs and visions. The woman wants the man to be more self-reliant whereas the man expects her to show more interest in him and devote more time to him. In the relationship of a submissive emotional man and a submissive rational woman, the "rule" of mutual non-communication appears if matters do not work out as they should. However, within the power games and manipulation, the woman strives to provoke the man into expressing himself, she tries to change his passivity. The imbalance of power, the power games and manipulation are also significant in the relationship of the dominant rational man and submissive emotional woman. At the

beginning, the man calculatingly leaves the initiative to the woman so as to make an impression on her, but he gradually takes over the decision-making and he "pulls" the woman over to his friends and towards his interests. The woman is not satisfied, but the man uses to his advantage her inability to rationally argue her case. The woman is usually not able to make decisions herself. She is financially and emotionally dependent on the man. Since she does not have the courage to talk about problems, she is silent and manipulates the man through emotional blackmail.

Intimacy, as the ideal means of developing and maintaining the relationship manifests itself in the relationship of the dominant emotional man and the dominant rational woman after some time, when the relationship has changed and the partners have adapted to one other. When the child has grown up, they are able to develop their own personalities within the professional sphere. In the relationship of the submissive emotional man and submissive rational woman, the intimacy atrophies as a result of the passivity on both sides. Intimacy between the dominant rational man and the submissive emotional woman was characterized by a desire for long-term satisfaction, the gradual coming closer together of the couple and building up of the relationship.

The process of transformation in gender stereotypes amongst young educated people indicates that there have been some marked shifts regarding traditional gender stereotypes and that some of the more traditional elements still persist. The roles of "new men" and "new women" have become evident in the narratives of our participants. "New men", for example, are ready to help around the house and look after the children, although their strength is still to their advantage, not in terms of muscle power, but in terms of patience and emotional depth. Their toleration of violence is almost non-existent. "New women" may be economically independent, educated and assertive; but in the end, they are still expected to subordinate their career to their partner's, or even give it up completely in order to take care of the home and family. However, an integral feature of this woman is her dynamism that arises from the fact that she is not content with her situation, she experiences inner conflict and frustration and does not want to be regarded as inferior, she rebels and requires, at the very least, feedback appreciating her feminine qualities and the certainty that these qualities will not be abused by man. It seems that scepticism regarding the perseverance of traditional gender stereotypes is not entirely justified and that Jamieson's (1998) statement that equal relationships in families are not real or realizable, or even imaginable is no longer valid, at least on the level of reflection and desirable reality.

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