

**VII. INTERDISZCIPLINÁRIS DOKTORANDUSZ
KONFERENCIA 2018
ABSZTRAKTKÖTET**

**7th INTERDISCIPLINARY DOCTORAL
CONFERENCE 2018
BOOK OF ABSTRACTS**

2018

Pécs



University of Pécs
Doctoral Student Association
5 years for the doctoral students of Pécs

Felelős kiadó / Publisher

Pécsi Tudományegyetem Doktorandusz Önkormányzat
Doctoral Student Association of the University of Pécs

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Pécs, 2018.

ISBN 978-963-429-210-4

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The relationship between gender representations and identity threats

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How we think about men and women is deeply rooted in our social and ideological context. Roles attributed and identity are obviously the results of the discourse between social processes and of negotiation among the members of a community. The rules, demands, and organization of institutions and communities are strictly related to their change. If somebody encounters values incompatible with the own identity, their identity will become threatened (Duveen, 1993; Duveen, Lloyd, 1992; Moscovici 1988; Breakwell, 1986).

We investigated the construct of gender roles in present day Hungary, how individuals think about their own and the other gender, what kinds of representations exist, and what kind of individual identity states are in connection with the various gender representations.

We assumed that in the case of men there is a traditional image in gender representations, while for women we expected modern elements to appear as well. We assumed genders differ in the extent of the threat posed against their identities, and in their distancing of modern values. Our study included 152 participants; men (N=45) and women (N=107) as well. We used the associative network task for the representations of gender, and measured threat and distancing identity with the MTPQ questionnaire.

Results: According to our results, men think in a more traditional way about gender roles, than women. This is reflected in their higher gender identity threat and gender distancing scores, as well as in their associations. In addition, we have found that in the case of people with higher identity threats (men and women alike) the modern values expected by society appear, or the associations that are confronted with these values.

Conclusions: Based on our results, we can say that men's identity is threatened by modern, traditionally male-related values in gender roles constructed by women. Respectively, in accordance with Breakwell's (1986) theory, the state of identity threat is the product of incompatible values. It seems that nowadays the hardly compatible values of modern and traditional gender roles affect gender identity in a threatening way.

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Keywords: association, social representation, gender, prejudice, distancing, identity threat