

*Analysis of a meeting of sociodrama on the representation of the ideal woman**

Marta Codato§, Ines Testoni°, Silvia Ronzani‡

Summary. *This work is part of an experimental study involving some theoretical lessons of gender studies that aim to promote the empowerment of a group of university students and to increase their awareness of the subordination of women and their ability to act effectively to curb it. The students were involved in a meeting of sociodrama (video-recorded) during which they could express their representations of female roles. In order to observe the development of empowerment and to analyze how “the ideal woman” was verbally represented, we used specific software for the management and analysis of audio-video data (Transana Software, v.2.42) (Muhr, 1991).*

Key words: *sociodrama, undergraduates, ideal woman, Transana*

*Received: 10/08/2012 - Revision: 04/09/2012 - Accepted: 01/10/2012

Self-declaration of compliance with ethical standards: 09/01/2013

§Ph.D in Pedagogical, Educational and Training Sciences, Lecturer in Social Psychology; Research Fellow at the Department of Applied Psychology of Padua 8 Venezia street, 35131 Padua, Italy. Tel.: 0498276646. E-mail: marta.codato@unipd.it

°Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education & Applied Psychology (FISPPA), Section of Applied Psychology, University of Padua (Italy). E-mail: ines.testoni@unipd.it

‡Social and Community Psychologist. E-mail: sylvie.ronzani@gmail.com

Interdisciplinary Journal of Family Studies, XVII, 2/2012

According to Higgins (1987) there are three different domains of the self: the *actual self* (what we think we are), the *ideal self* (what we want to be) and the *ought to be self* (what we think we ought to be in connection to social norms). The actual self describes the person we think we are, with all our attributes and traits. The ideal and ought selves are self-guides, in that they drive us to seek new self-states. Whereas the ideal self represents what we would ideally like to be and contains the traits and characteristics of that ideal person, the ought self represents the kind of person we think we have to become to comply with social norms. The ought self therefore contains traits and characteristics that are highly normative and socially constrained.

The literature reports desirable representations of the woman (ideal and ought self) mainly from a physical point of view. In Western societies the ideal woman is thin, petite (Whitehead & Kurz, 2008), and young. There are thin ideals or even "ought" body self-perceptions. Adapting to these social expectations leads to a sense of empowerment of women (Whitehead & Kurz, 2008).

Martinez Lirola & Chovanec argue that women participate voluntarily to the "self-perpetuating ideology" of a male-defined femininity by which they identify with super-ideal and sexualized images in a mixture of fantasy and reality, experiencing a sense of guilt for their imperfect body which needs to be regulated (Martinez Lirola & Chovanec, 2012).

The female body is a frequent subject of diverse discourse and practices that are crucial for constructing the very concept of female identity. Women are thus symbolically defined not only through their awareness of the body ideal and preoccupation with their own bodies, but also through their exposure to and participation in the myriad of physical and symbolic practices associated with bodies (fashion, cosmetics, exercise, diet...). This constitutes them to a hypothetical community – a 'synthetic sisterhood' (Talbot, 1995), whose members share such ideologies as the consumer orientation to their own bodies.

The feminine imperative to "look good" is strong and there are continuous media messages related to the best way to improve appearance and attractiveness (Jeffries, 2007). The dominant ideology emphasizes a body that does not change, young and clean beyond the real life experiences of women (Jeffries, 2007).

The intellectual capacities of women remain in the background in accordance with the androcentric and patriarchal expectations of society.

Research by Taylor and Setters (2011) focuses on an ideal "superwoman" who excels in traditionally female fields (e.g., nutrition, physical beauty) and also in typically male sectors (e.g., assertiveness, professional success) (Hart & Kenny, 1997; Mensinger et al., 2007).

Objectives

The overall aim of the research is the detection of linguistic repertoires with which participants discursively construct the feminine 'ideal self'.

The basis of this work is the belief that language is action that leads to awareness and change (McGowan, 2009).

The desirable representation of the woman includes the various dimensions that combine to create the image of the woman to whom the participants aspire to, both personally and socially: it is the representation of ideal-typical roles, attitudes and relationships of women. This representation includes models in which participants feel important in their process of self-construction and the message that they formulate, during the meeting of sociodrama, for the other students, but also for current and future generations of women and men.

Instruments

The experiment was based on using the method of sociodrama defined by Moreno (1964) as «a method of research, active and profound» (p. 93) about the relationships that are formed between groups and collective ideologies.

This method, unlike psychodrama, which focuses on individual growth in the group, is centered on the values and prejudices of the group (Kellerman, 2007). In this case, we wanted to focus on the promotion of the emergence of the values and prejudices of the students in relation to the "ideal woman". Sociodrama, understood as a plural experience which is an extension of many "egos" does not aim at a personal catharsis, typical of psychodrama, but to a social catharsis, through the awareness of the social patterns that underpin the roles (Kellerman, 2007).

It is based on real life situations developed by the participants themselves, who are in the privileged position to identify current and important problems. The use of theatrical techniques makes it possible to evaluate their performance, to learn ways of relating and acting within a safe environment that allows them to acquire knowledge and to experiment

with new interactional scripts for peaceful and productive coexistence (Telesco, 2006). The development of the sociodramatic scene implies psychodrama techniques, such as role reversal, the double, the mirror, the genodrama, and the dialogue between the actors and the audience provides fertile ground for reflection, identification of the problem and discussions oriented towards its solution.

Methodology

Participants

The class of male and female students who participated in the sociodramatic meeting, was composed of N= 42 students, of which n= 41 females and n= 1 male, enrolled in the second year of the degree program in Social Work at the University of Padua and, specifically, in the course of psychology of inter-group and intra-group relations. The sociodrama meeting, lasting one hour and 45 minutes, was conducted by an expert psychodramatist and videotaped with the consent of the participants.

Procedure

The meeting began with a warm-up and ended with a debriefing, the purpose of which was the sharing of personal emotional experiences related to the topics covered.

The theme was the link between generations of women. Participants were asked to think of true stories, in which the protagonists were women, members of their own generation, that of their mothers, their grandmothers, their great-grandmothers and their ancestors. These women could be their friends, their relatives or their acquaintances. Among the stories evoked, each participant chose the most significant and, in relation to it, found his/her position in generational concentric circles: the innermost circle was dedicated to the people who preferred the story of the ancestor and more

externally had to place those who have chosen a story on the current generation. A participant for each circle who felt that his/her story could be important for the path of growth of the group staged his/her story with the help of actors chosen within the group. The "actors" have been asked to act as if they were the protagonists of the stories, speaking as little as possible and using movements, looks and sounds spontaneously. As a result of these representations, the presenter has built the "generational line" of female protagonists (genodrama), placing the girls who told the stories behind each other. At the last place the ancestor sat down, at the first place the woman of today's generation sat down. In addition, a volunteer took on the role of the woman of the next generation and sat down in front of the other girls. Starting from the ancestor, each gave a message to the woman who represented the next generation and sat down in front of her. Finally, the participant who played the next generation was asked to build a human statue that could represent the image of the desirable woman of the future, using other people as pieces of clay.

At the end of the debriefing, the presenter asked the participants to make a symbolic gesture: they had to wield a bow, put this bow up and shoot an arrow towards their ideal men and women.

Analysis of data

Social research has as its goal the unveiling of invisible architectures of common sense, of implicit assumptions that underlie reality as it is perceived. The language is one of the codes through which meanings and rules are recognized, negotiated, constructed and changed. It has a value of social action that is a tool used by individuals to fulfill specific and situated relational purposes. The observation of the regularity with which certain verbal behaviors occur allows for the analysis of the discursive choices and the mental representations of individuals with regard to the reality that surrounds them, in a given context and with specific purposes. It is therefore useful to remember that the situation in which analyses have been carried out concerns an experimental process in a university course dedicated to empowerment and overcoming female subordination.

The methodology used was the Discourse Analysis (Garry & Pearsall, 1996), which investigates the organization of the meaning and content that constitute the discourse deployed by speakers. The aim is to identify what are the discourses culturally available in relation to the theme of the

desirable representation of women and to identify which strategic choices the speakers made during the meetings of sociodrama.

There are various types of Discourse Analysis, and the one used in this research was the analysis of speech based on the content of the text. To achieve this discourse analysis the linguistic repertoires have been identified, namely systems of signification, the "building blocks" used to linguistically construct versions of actions of self and social structures. These repertoires are identified by establishing interpretive connections between elements or parts of the whole text, with the aim of identifying the cultural assumptions that the speaker unfolds in the text. Under investigation are the kinds of social relationships implied by the words, the prospects that the terms form and the activities that they legitimize.

This kind of discourse analysis can be inscribed in a socio-constructivist epistemology that in the study of social phenomena, favors an emic perspective rather than an ethical perspective.

The analysis was performed with the use of the software Transana 2.42. Transana is an Open Source program that allows one to transcribe and analyze large amounts of audio and video files (Muhr, 1991). It provides tools for registration, annotation, assigning keywords, and for querying the database, allowing the researcher to use a single tool for all stages of research and to maintain a close bond between text transcripts, categories used and audio and video phrases.

Through Transana, you can create phrases called clips, to which you can assign keywords. These keywords can be explored within the database and placed. In addition, the clip may be contained in collections that allow you to assemble pieces of text in categories chosen by the researcher and can reproduce the terms in a sequential manner. In the present work we used the single-user version, but there is a multi-user version, which allows multiple researchers to work on the same database remotely through the Internet. The Jeffersonian code (Jefferson, 1984), commonly used in conversational analysis (Rush, 2012), in the present work is still present in the transcripts, for future analyzes focusing on modes of interaction (Table 1).

Table 1. Jeffersonian code (Jefferson, 1984)

!	° ° abc
Words, spoken in an animated tone	Expression pronounced in a lower volume than the surrounding
ABC	> abc < / < abc >
Expression pronounced in a higher volume than the surrounding	Expression produced at faster or slower rate than the surrounding
h	(h)
Expiration	Suction produced within a word
(.)	.
Short pause	Falling tone, final
,	?
Pitch slightly upward, which produces an effect of suspension	Rising intonation
↑ ↓	a
Marked rises or drops in tone	Prolongation of sound that precedes "colon"
a-	[]
Truncation of the word	Expressions overlapping
=	abc
Connection between two expressions	Marked emphasis
(abc)	(())
Expression of uncertain understanding	Descriptions of nonverbal phenomena

Results

Table 2. Transana's categories and key extracts

Self-determination	«you can choose to be who you want to be» (Extract 10, line 1968)
Capacity to ask for help	«always react but when you need someone ask» (Extract 11, lines 1066-1067)
Capability to reconcile family and personal fulfillment	«I was able to combine all these things (.) in a little time» (Extract 14, line 964)
Self-centering	remember that the most important person to be appreciated by <is you> (.) (Extract 17, lines 1356-1357)
Reflection on mistakes for personal improvement	«do not expect to erase your past your mistakes but keep them as experience and take cues from those to build:(principles)» (Extract 11, lines 1352-1354)
Strong determination	«a woman who never gave up(.) Who despite: <all the problems> of that period (.)From the war to all the concerns, the alcohol issues <however, any problem (.)» (Extract 13, lines 1276-1279)
Ability to say no	«If you believe in something, bring it forward and:> learn to say no<» (Extract 17, lines 1347-1349)
Fair collaboration with men	«with someone who I can appreciate:> attribute different meanings <at least to what: surrounds me» (Extract 19, lines 562-564)

The desirable representation of women is composed, on the one hand, by the messages that the students made for the other participants and for women of future generations, on the other hand, is made up of the features of the woman, obtained from the narratives that have characterized the second meeting. The analysis shows that the results are very different from those reported in the international literature. Students who participated in the theoretical course on women's issues and who, on the occasion of the sociodramatic meeting were invited to speak about the "desirable representation" of the woman, did not speak of physical characteristics.

They portrayed the ideal woman as courageous, able to decide autonomously; able to ask for help and to join other women; a woman who knows she can positively influence the future; determined to go ahead, despite the difficulties; able to combine family and subjective realization; a woman who knows how to enjoy herself and say no; a woman who does not feel guilty for her mistakes, but who sees them as an opportunity to think about how to improve herself; a woman who does not avoid the public domain, thinking it belongs to man, but with him “creates the reality”. At the end of the meeting, a participant was asked to build a human statue that could represent the image of the desirable woman of the future, using the people in the group as pieces of clay. This girl chose to involve all the people in the group and told them to think of a positive feature that they wanted to keep and bring in the future generations of women. The contents emerged are as follows: the importance to be oneself, of facing difficulties with courage, the determination and positivity to achieve one's goals and aspirations, to share, reflect and join with others to grow, to open oneself to others, both in the sense of giving as well as receiving support.

Self-determination

The participants stated that "a desirable woman" is a person who decides her own future, by implementing tough choices that involve a lot of courage. From the words of the participants (Extract 10) we get the idea of the need to fight for self-determination, to understand the subjective identity and will.

Table 3. The category “self determination” and participants’ words

Extract 10	
19 66	PP1: believe in yourself, in what you want to do, to be-even
1967	alone-because you,this decision,the decision of your life,
1968	you can take it,you can choose to be who you want to be. as
1969	long as you have confidence in yourself and the courage to act.

Capacity to ask for help

From Extract 11, we deduce that the female participants sometimes feel alone with respect to certain important issues related to their choice of life path, but they realized that the union between human beings is a strategy for finding the strength to overcome these difficulties. It is not possible to address all individually. Being aware of the subjective limitations and being able to ask for help when you need it are part of the force that the representation of the desirable woman implies.

Table 4. The category “capacity to ask for help” and participants’ words

Extract 11	
1064	PP10: ↑ also be weak that is when you need
1065	someone ask. (2.0) ↑ "be strong" absolutely yes always
1066	↓, ↑ always react but when you need someone ask.

Profundity

We see the awareness that the actions, if not characterized by superficiality, may affect positively and profoundly the present life and the

lives of future generations (Extract 12). In this way you can get to “eternity”.

Table 5. The category “profundity” and participants’ words

Extract 12	
2222	P9: Following on the message that they have built (.) And the
2223	concept of eternity ↑ I: I would like to say to the woman
2224	<which you see in TV, that eternity is not won with the
2225	superficiality o:> with all that is external <but: the
2226	Concrete and: deep track that you can leave
2227	in your life, and that surely will reach: °future°lives

Strong determination

The protagonists of the stories have all experienced great hardships, such as poverty, war, the death of loved ones, natural disasters, troubled childhoods and unplanned pregnancies. But they do not let themselves be overwhelmed by them, but face and overcome them. The determination to keep going despite everything and the positivity understood as the joy of living are the strengths on which the woman builds in order to overcome obstacles. The following extract refers to the description of the grandmother by a participant:

Table 6. The category “strong determination” and participants’ words

Extract 13	
1276	GP: who:>at the end<is a woman who never gave up(.
1277	who: desp:ite: <all the problems> of that period (.)
1278	From the war to all the concerns, the
1279	alcohol issues <however, any problem (.) she is a

1280	woman who did <not give up> and that has always been
1281	committed <who even if she fell give up then she raised (.)
1282	up to the woman who is now who anyway: should not:
1283	give up this: this determination which started from:
1284	our: ancestors
1285	M: therefore you feel that there is a common thread
1286	G:[yes]
1287	M:[among] all these women that is the force that
1288	is[their strength]
1289	G:
1290	that even if I don't] know them anyway they sent me them.

Capability to conciliate family and personal fulfillment

One of the most important values that emerged from the women's stories is the family, in which, on the one hand, women strive immensely for and, on the other hand, find support in. In any case, the protagonists are also aiming at self-determination. In particular, the story of women belonging to the generations closer to that of the students (the stories of the generation of mothers and the stories of their generation) involve a subjective energetic activation to achieve goals related to personal fulfillment. The following extracts tell the story of a girl of the same generation of students:

Table 7. The category “capability to reconcile family and personal fulfillment” and participants’ words

Extract 14	
957	GP: I am angelica (.) I :: enrolled: in physical education
958	(.) E: m: The first year I partied a lot (.) Until
959	I met a boy, who is very different
960	by me (.) with time I got pregnant but:: I did not concluded
961	my studies. Now my son is six months, m::I
962	got married (.) the same day I baptized
963	my son (.) and in a week: I will graduate (.) and
964	I was able to combine all these things (.) in a little time,
965	in: four or five years, making a very extreme life
966	before and now completely different
967	and still I feel realized

Ability to say no

The participants stressed how important it is to learn to say no, to make choices for themselves and not for others' approval, to focus on listening to and caring of ourselves, not on the effort to please others. This can be observed, for example, in the two following extracts:

Table 8. The category “ability to say no” and participants’ words

Extract 16	
1347	CP: If you believe in something, bring it forward and:> learn
1348	to say no< and learn to love more yourself and not
1349	To love always others

Extract 17	
1356	EP: remember that the most important person to be appreciated
1357	from <is you> (.) And not the others therefore whatever you
1358	decide,
1359	you should do it for you, you must be nice for you and °not for others°

Reflection on the mistakes for personal improvement

From the messages we get the need to get out of the dynamics of guilt with respect to past mistakes, turning towards the construction of the future, a serene look that has treasured them as a source of improvement (Extract 18):

Table 9. The category “reflection on the mistakes for personal improvement” in the participants’ words

Extract 18	
1352	DP: do not expect to erase your past your mistakes
1353	but keep:them: as:: experience and take cue from those to
1354	build:(principles)

Fair collaboration with men

It is interesting to dwell on the message that a student has given to the woman, subject to man, who agrees to submit, expressing her anger away from the public instead of asserting her individuality.

Table 10. The category “fair collaboration with men” and participants’ words

Extract 19	
555	UU: the view before I call it beautiful but the view is
556	impoverished if I see others fall (1.0) so
557	probably if:> they are aware of the fact that <↑ if
558	someone falls> which I give <for granted, is that I do not
559	watch, I do not see (0.5) the beauty and: and:> the ease with

560	which I have the top <that allows me to see far,
561	becomes (1.0)> probably looking from <↑ a little
562	closer, but: with someone beside with whom I can
563	appreciate:> attribute different meanings <at least to
564	what: surrounds me

In this extract we see that to be able to appreciate the beauty of the outside world, a sense of shared responsibility and creation is necessary. The scenario does not become more beautiful, even deteriorates when someone leaves to someone else the primacy of this vision. On the other hand, the vision is enriched and enhanced when different points of view and perspectives contribute to it. The personal contribution, although divergent from the dominant culture, contributes to the creation of new meanings. As stated by Moreno (Marineau, 1989) «we are all related to each other by the responsibility for all the things. There is not limited, partial responsibility. And our responsibility makes us automatically co-creators of the world» (pp. 58-65).

The following post was made by some participants joining the adjectives that others had used in connection with the letters (written in role reversal) that they had been affected by the most:

Table 11. Posts made by participants

Extract 20	
2159	As our life can be unpredictable,
2160	as far as we can feel stubborn and stateless persons, the
2161	real wealth is that you can still dream, and you can
2162	count on the real family, live your life and
2163	remembering to personalize it, to bring it
2164	in the eternity.

This message can be divided into three part: pars destruens, pars construens and final exhortation. In the first part there is a reflection on the unpredictability of life, within which often one feels not recognized, without nationality, without the external legitimization to exist, to be as he/she is, at the same time it is underlined the stubbornness which

frequently characterizes us, interpreted as dull stubbornness, obstinacy as always in the same direction, wrong. The second part represents the emergence of hope from a seemingly hopeless situation. It indicates the way forward, one that gives meaning to existence, characterized by the challenge to fly, given by dreams and warm support offered by loved ones. Finally the message that urges us to perpetuate our lives by living actively and creatively, not subjected to it.

Discussion

During the meeting of sociodrama, an ideal image of the woman emerged, who is very different from the one described in the international literature. This latter image highlights how the ideal woman is thin, young and fully adapted to culturally defined canons. Instead, in the words of the research students, the desirable woman is autonomous, trusts herself and has the courage to act to make her own unique path, which leads to the "decision" ("of her life") and then to the elimination of a number of options that may include many moments of solitude. Among the features of the ideal woman, according to the students, are also the acceptance of and the revelation of her fragility, involving the request for help in difficult times. The research participants highlight that weakness is not in conflict with strength and how the two dimensions may exist in a person, not mutually excluded. Students point out that the ideal woman is not superficial, but strives to leave a lasting impression in her life and in the lives of others; influencing the next generation.

They speak of a strong woman who resists, never gives up, despite the difficulties. A woman who knows how to get up again with greater determination.

Among the features of the ideal woman, there is also the ability to reconcile the construction of a family with personal fulfillment through education in particular. The woman portrayed by the participants does not choose shortcuts and easier ways to accomplish her goals, but commits herself with all her strength to obtain the results that she fully believes in.

A key feature is about knowing how to say no and self-importance, instead of giving more importance to others at the expense of the self.

Students underline the importance of the woman, first of all, to like herself, instead of trying to adapt to the desire and pleasure of others. This point is linked to the literature on this subject, in which, of course women constantly worry about adapting their bodies to other people's expectations." The ideal woman creates reality, observes the beauty with the man. She is not below or opposed to him, but she joins the man in the attribution of meaning to reality.

Finally, the ideal woman that the female participants want to strive to become is a woman who is able to dream and can give direction to her life, making a deep mark on life that will live forever because of the energy that comes from real emotional ties.

References

- Garry, A., & Pearsall, M. (Eds.) (1996). *Women, knowledge and reality* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Hart, K., & Kenny, M. E. (1997). Adherence to the Super Woman ideal and eating disorder symptoms among college women. *Sex Roles*, 36, 461–478. doi:10.1007/BF02766684.
- Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy; A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94(3), 319-340
- Jefferson, G. (1984). Transcript notation. In J. Heritage (Eds), *Structures of Social Interaction* (pp. IX-XVI). New York: Cambridge University Press
- Jeffries, L. (2007). *Textual construction of the female body: A critical discourse approach*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kellermann, P. F. (2007). *Sociodrama and Collective Trauma*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Martinez Lirola, M., Chovanec, J. (2012). The dream of a perfect body come true: Multimodality in cosmetic surgery advertising. *Discourse & Society*, 23, 5, 487-507.
- Marineau, R. (1989). *J. L. Moreno 1889-1974: father of psychodrama, sociometry, and group psychotherapy*. London: Tavistock.
- McGowan, M.K., (2009), "Oppressive Speech". *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 87 (3), 389–407.

- Mensingher, J. L., Bonifazi, D., & LaRosa, J. (2007). Perceived gender role prescriptions in schools, the superwoman ideal, and disordered eating among adolescent girls. *Sex Roles, 57*, 557– 568. doi:10.1007/s11199-007-9281-6.
- Moreno, J. L. (1964). *Psychodrama. Vol. 1*. New York: Beacon House.
- Muhr, T. (1991). Atlas/ti – a prototype for the support of text interpretation. *Qualitative sociology, 14*(4), 349–371.
- Rush, C. (2012). Transana Video Analysis Software as a Tool for Consultation: Applications to Improving PTA Meeting Leadership. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 22*, 4, 300-313.
- Whitehead, K., & Kurz, T. (2008). Saints, Sinners and Standards of Femininity: Discursive Constructions of Anorexia Nervosa and Obesity in Women's Magazines. *Journal of Gender Studies, 17* (4). 345-359.
- Talbot, M. (1995). A synthetic sisterhood: False friends in a teenage magazine. In: Hall K and Bucholtz M (Eds) *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 143–165.
- Taylor, L. D. & Setters, T. (2011). Watching Aggressive, Attractive, Female Protagonists Shapes Gender Roles for Women Among Male and Female Undergraduate Viewers. *Sex Roles, 65*, 35–46.
- Telesco, G. A. (2006). Using sociodrama for radical pedagogy: methodology for education and change. *Radical Pedagogy, 8*(2), 1