

*Empower agency. Emotional itineraries in the psychodramatic elaboration of violence: from anger to independence**

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Summary. *The present contribution presents the discussions concerning the textual analysis of the reports on the psychodrama sessions that were carried out as part of Empower, a project that is within the scope of the Daphne III Program, and aimed at improving agency of female victims of domestic violence, in order to change their condition of subordination. Adopting feminist and cultural psychology perspectives, according to which human processes can never be separated from the context in which they occur, the project considers the female victimary situation as a set of cultural, material and symbolic artefacts which can be understood by utilizing qualitative methods of research, that permit the researcher to better explore the experiences of victims.*

Key Words: *empower project, daphne program, agency theory, cultural psychology, psychodrama, qualitative research, domestic violence*

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This contribution discusses one portion of the qualitative part of project Empower, carried out as part of the Daphne III Program (EPDP), aimed at empowering female victims of domestic violence in six European Countries. The theoretical background links the concept of “agency” to the construct of “empower” promoted through the psychodramatic techniques adopted by EPDP.

Agency is the ability for persons to act for themselves. An individual who is not allowed to act for herself/himself is lacking in agency, or is said to have been denied agency. Feminist thought and Gender studies presupposes a theory of women’s agency, inherent to the female capacity for individualized choice and action. It is an important key-concept because women’s identities took shape in settings that were in some respects adverse to their interests. In fact, women's selfhood has been systematically subordinated in every historic period and culture and this subordination has had a grievous impact on women's personal and social development. To be unjustly subordinated means to be diminished in one's selfhood and to have one's agency curtailed (Antrobus, 2004). Therefore, feminist agency theory considers the difficulties of women to act in society and tries to explain how it is possible for women in male-dominated societies to live in ways that reflect their genuine needs and concerns (Brison, 1997; Friedman, 1993; Ruiz, 1998).

In this theoretical horizon, EPDP is aimed at improving women’s social development, changing their existential methods within their relational networks, through the introduction of an important strategy in the field of domestic violence: the use of psychodrama. This technique permits the construction of very new experiences of empowerment where relationships can become self-conscious and produce agentive behavior in the actors. In fact, this kind of practice provides a testimony to women's awareness of their own needs and their capacity to act on them despite a repressive social context. Indeed, by working on their subaltern biographies, EPDP is aimed at inserting women into a temporality of modernity which defines the female agency to conquer equality with men and to impose the right to be respected by all.

As psychological research shows, the treatment of victims of violence requires a multidimensional approach (Rodriguez Basanta, Salarich & Banus, 2009), that the psychodramatic technique surely addresses. The dramatization that occurs within these groups provides a living laboratory in which the traumatized person can witness and experience their previous experiences as a function of future change, becoming acquainted with significant relationships that value emancipation (Koleva, 2011).

If from a cultural point of view we can define the successes of women by the proclamation of Universal Human Rights and by the significant historic steps that have been taken in “reaching” democratic values of equality, EPDP works by utilizing psychodrama as an elective strategy to permit victims to become aware of their a-historical condition and to attain their own agency. In this sense, EPDP is an action research psychodramatic intervention, articulated in three dimensions: the first pertains to the psychosocial conditions of women victims of domestic violence; the second relates to the perspective of Gender Studies in promoting female agency; the third concerns the methodology of qualitative analysis of the results, developed both in feminist studies and cultural/existential psychology.

The Cultural psychology perspective adopted by EPDP

EPDP has utilized a mixture of methodologies (qualitative and quantitative) in order to give greater importance to the individual and placed the main focus on what is effectively salient for the social actors (women victims of violence). In this contribute we present one part of the qualitative section research, whose objective is not to find some generalizations and gain uniformity, but rather to generate hypothesis trying to grasp the variability in the psychological processes and try to provide a concrete response applicable to action-research in real world (Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978). Cultural psychology results really useful in order to pursue these aims and then can contribute to a better understanding not only of the dynamics of intra-family interaction, but also of the cultural context where domestic violence develops.

According to the cultural psychology perspective (Cole, 1996a; Cole, 1996b) all research involves selecting meanings, and the researcher needs to realize that the analysis always concerns human situations and social processes (Zucchermaglio, 2002; Bruner, 1992; Firth, 1995; Geertz, 1973). Therefore, the facts are products of social construct of meaning and their descriptions (Wertsch, 1991). In keeping with the cultural orientation, which is hugely adopted by the feminist perspective, EPDP assumes that in such a delicate research scenario it is difficult to identify and control all the variables. An approach of this kind is not meant to generalize the processes that belong to specific situations and that are affected by multiple individual factors, both contextual and of process (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996; Ochs & Jacoby, 1997). As the feminist microsociology and the

situated learning theory (Suchman, 1987) indicate – according to which human processes can never be separated from the context in which they occur – EPDP considers the environment as a set of cultural (Mantovani, 2007), where every course of action depends on the material and social conditions in which they occur.

Qualitative research

The decision to dedicate a qualitative space to EPDP research stems from this theoretical background and from the consequent need to comply with a bottom-up hermeneutics matrix that is able to offer a representation that adheres to the reality of the problem experienced by victims. This type of methodology is particularly appreciated by feminist and Gender Studies approaches which highlight how it is possible to transform the narration into “agency” which is already a first step towards change brought about by a realization or awareness.

To conduct research following a cultural perspective means therefore not to expect and claim to capture the world as it really is in reality, but it means to access reality through the mediating lens of artefacts (Zucchermaglio, 2002).

In this horizon of studies, EPDP is aimed at evidencing one of the most important emotional aspects experienced by victims: unmanaged inner aggression. The guiding idea was to consider how psychodrama helps to manage aggression, considered on the one hand as violence and on the other hand, as the primary subjective emotion. Our hypothesis is that the psychodramatic work allows the victims to deal with violence and to transform internalized aggression into a force for liberating them from oppression.

To detect this possible effect produced by psychodramatic techniques, a qualitative analysis based on a specific assessment was designed, as following: protocols with open-ended questions containing personal data inherent to the family of origin, incidents, episodes of violence, social atom relationships and monthly reports sent by the psychodramatists. The construction of the protocol involved the collaboration between specialized antiviolence centres and Associations of Classical Morenian psychodramatists: in Italy, the Antiviolence centre in the municipality of Rovigo; in Albania, Refleksione; in Austria, Mädchenzentrum Klagenfurt – Caritas Carinthia; in Bulgaria, Bulgarian society psychodrama and group therapy – Nadia Centre Foundation, in Portugal, Sociedade Portuguesa de

Psychodrama SPP – Umar; in Romania, the Romanian Association of Classical Psychodrama – Home of hope¹⁶.

Target group and the textual reports

Subjects were identified from the group of 57 women; and the words coming from the 32 reports formed the core materials for the qualitative analysis. In particular, we examine certain forms of representations that characterize the experience of anger and aggression, emerging from the psychodramatic activities.

The social characteristics of the total group of victim attending the psychodrama sessions are described in Table 1; furthermore: 92.8% of Italian sample have one or more child; Austrian mother-victims are 63.6%; Bulgarian are 90.5%; Portuguese are 88.2%; Romanian and Albanian are 100%. In Italy 42.9% of victims have been divorced/separated; 28.6% have been married and 21.4% single; in Austria 33.3% married and 33.3% single; in Bulgaria 38.1% married and 38.1% divorced; in Portugal 58.8% married and 23.6% divorced; in Romania, 60.6% married and 21.2% divorced; in Albania 83.3% single. In Italy 42.8% are employed; in Austria 54.5%; in Bulgaria 52.4% employed; in Portugal 64.7%; in Romania 60.6% employed; in Albania 77.7%. In the whole group of participants: 30,2% are single, 39.7% married, 4.4% separated, 22.1% divorced, 2.9% widows and 0,7% cohabiting. One participant is missing. 5.1% are student, 59.5% employed, 11.1% are housewife, 6.7% pensioners, 17.6% unemployed.

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Table 1. Socio-demographic data of women victims of violence (Empower Project)

Country	N	Group		Age (years)			Education (years)	
		PG	EG	Range	M	SD	M	SD
Italy	14	8	6	26-58	38.64	9.37	13.21	3.86
Austria	33	19	14	16-68	41.15	12.78	12.13	3.26
Bulgaria	21	9	12	22-66	39.71	12.02	14.33	2.49
Portugal	17	7	10	24-68	46.4	12.72	7.9	3.26
Romania	33	15	18	19-62	33.18	9.15	11.48	3.55
Albania	18	12	6	15-24	20	3.38	7.38	3.10
Total	136	70	66	15-68	36,6	12,95	11.28	3.98

The complete assessment developed for the qualitative analysis has been planned in the following way:

- monthly reports compiled by the psychodramatists containing the transcripts of the psychodrama sessions;
- social and family atoms completed by the women participants;
- forms which had to be filled out by the social workers, to collect personal data of victims as well as information pertaining their family life and episodes of violence.
- In the present contribute it is considered the qualitative analysis, which is inherent to the part of the monthly reports. Each report was a maximum of 250 words and had to be completed during the first psychodrama session, as well as at every first monthly psychodrama session and at the final group session. The report had to have the following descriptions of:
 - women attending the psychodramatic sessions;
 - the meetings held in the month prior;
 - the family figures representations (mother, father, brothers/sisters, partner/husband, children);
 - the topic of the session;

- the most significant moment of the session;
- the most meaningful questions that the psychodramatist posed himself/herself during the session;
- mother-daughter relationship, when possible.

Every report was written by the psychodramatists in English and sent to the qualitative analysis team. Since November 2011 to July 2012, a total of 52 monthly reports were sent by all Countries (see Table 2). Romania and Bulgaria had a second group whose sessions began in February 2012. In Albania the Italian psychodramatists worked with the help of a translator and the meetings took place during two week-ends in psychodramatic marathon sessions.

Table 2. Description of text documentation

Country	N. authors of the reports	N. reports	Words	Range time	When
Italy	2	7	1750	January 2012- July 2012	monthly
				<i>Group 1:</i> December 2011- April 2012	
Austria	3	15	3750	<i>Group 2:</i> December 2011- May 2012	monthly
				<i>Group 3:</i> December 2011- May 2012	
Bulgaria	2	10	2500	<i>Group 1:</i> December 2011- March 2012	monthly
				<i>Group 2:</i> April 2012- July 2012	
Portugal	1	8	2000	December 2012-July 2012	monthly

Country	N. authors of the reports	N. reports	Words	Range time	When
Romania	2	8	2000	<i>Group 1:</i> November 2011-February 2012 <i>Group 2:</i> February 2012-June 2012	monthly
Albania	2	4	1000	November-December 2011	1 every 2 weeks
Total	12	52	13.000		

Each group took part in 25 sessions of psychodrama, every session was two hours long. In Albania, four intensive meetings each lasting three days were organized, as it was impossible to realize standard sittings. In these Albanian sessions, two groups met two times for three hours for three days. In general, in all countries, each session was divided into four parts:

- Greeting women in the group and getting an update on their experiences with respect to the previous week or the period since the last meeting;
- Warming-up through the topics suggested by the group leaders, followed by psychodramatic activities;
- Psychodramatic group or protagonist work;
- Final participation by everyone through sharing emotions, thoughts and memories that were stimulated during the meeting;
- Some of the themes agreed on included: Me and we; Me, we and others; My, our family stories; Working on some specific topics like security, fear, guilt and assertiveness; Cultural analyses; Our power.

Qualitative analysis

EPDP processed the reports using Atlas.ti, which is a powerful software useful for carrying out qualitative analysis of text (Muhr, 1991), offering support to the researcher during the work. The route of process provides a comprehensive overview of the research meanwhile organizes all the primary documents and finds the network-building feature, permitting to visually connect selected texts and codes by means of diagrams in a logical and consistent manner. Data segments or units are then organized into a bottom up system, which means predominantly derived from the data, and the researcher defines categories that recognize conceptual similarities and then discovers the patterns in the text. These categories are flexible and may be modified during the analysis, in order to produce an output that is a type of higher-order synthesis in the form of a descriptive theme related to the substantive theories implied. Data is then broken up in order to classify it and the descriptions form the basis for the analysis, and the analysis forms the basis for further descriptions. In this sense, theories and concepts are created by classifying the data and vice-versa. Descriptions of meaning are the basis for every process of analysis and this process is led by the researchers, that are aware of the latent bias of their operations deriving from their preconceived ideas. The data in the text is processed in the following order: recognition of the Units of Analysis (UA), assignment of the UA to categories or classes, identification of formal connections between them, patterns identified, identification of associations between categories and output consisting of the production of graphs, that describe the logical relationships between concepts and categories identified by the researcher.

EPDP adopted a cyclical and bi-phasic procedure. The first phase is bottom-up and consists in reading the text followed by the construction of categories (words or short sentences) taken from the actual wording of the text, and again reading. The second phase is top down, since it infers the system codes from key concepts of already existent theories. This cycle continues until a system of codes is able of capture the meaning of the texts in a satisfactory manner with respect to the objectives of the research. EPDP classified and encoded all the contingencies and the distinctive features respecting the key-concept of psychodrama and agency/empower theories.

After the first phase of encoding, the creation of networks and graphs follows in order to produce the map and the organization of the principal topics and their logical relationships, via a graphic apparatus able to organize the data and to view it spatially. The networks are thus configured

as graphic representations. These relationships reciprocally connect the nodes according to a hierarchical or symmetrical order and are displayed through certain specific symbols (see Figure 1)

Relationship	Symbols	Formal Attributes
It is related to/with	= =	Symmetrical
It is part of	[]	Transitive
It is cause of	=>	Transitive
Contradicts	<>	Symmetrical
It is a...	Isa	Transitive
It is owned by	*}	Asymmetric

Figure 1. Description of symbols used in Atlas.ti graphs

Discussion

The analysis of the texts of the sessions demonstrated an encoding that accurately reflects the progress of the sessions themselves. The data shows, in the majority of cases, the objectives of the sessions, the materials utilized, and the specific conditions of the situations. In the texts, some circumstances assumed a particular importance: Christmas festivities, holidays, close relationships, mother-daughter relationship, persecutor/aggressor, body representations, spontaneity and creativity.

In this contribution, we focus on certain types of representations which characterize the experience of anger and aggression, analyzing in particular the results from Albania, Austria and Portugal, since they have been the most clear. In fact, they allow us to hypothesize that the psychodramatic techniques can teach the victim to handle violence and repressed aggressiveness. The following paragraphs describe the different ways in which the problem was addressed and what results the victims achieved.

The two groups of psychodrama conducted in Bulgaria centered their work especially on the developmental aspects of relationships and only marginally touched on anger. Later in the paper we discuss the reports from Albania, Austria, Italy, Portugal and Romania.

Analysis of the Albanian texts

In Albania there were two separate groups of women. The psychodramatists that led the sessions were from Italy and they worked with a translator. For logistical reasons therefore, in Albania we held four “intensive” psychodramatic sessions during two weekends. We received four reports from Albania. Both groups were made-up of six women. The participants in the group were all residents of a protected community for women who have been victims of violence, while the participants in the second group had turned to an anti-violence centre called Refleksione, but they did not reside in the community. In Albania (see Figure 2), the psychodramatists requested to pick an image to represent them. The figure chosen was that of the mother and in addition, an image of a pregnant woman. The common element shared by all the group members was the recollection of their own mother, unable to recognize their real needs. The needs that emerged during the psychodrama sessions were the need to feel supported – and to start their lives afresh. The tool that they felt was immediately available to free themselves from their own condition was anger, until now endured and re-activated with psychodrama. Through psychodrama, an awareness is acquired that expressing anger can serve to achieve their goals; anger is not necessarily negative and it can give you the strength to fight for what you want.

Analysis of the Austrian texts

Austria had three groups of psychodrama and a total of 19 participants. Austria submitted a total of 15 monthly reports describing the psychodrama sessions of the three groups.

The Austrian psychodramatists gave particular importance to the topic of aggression (see Figure 3) and the participants were encouraged to experiment and to acknowledge all the facets of this emotion. The aggression as inflicted upon them and internalized without the possibility to

process, is seen as devastating. Psychodrama enabled them to redefine anger as a personal form of power that can offer a possibility to change if managed properly. From this pivot point, we differentiated between feminine and masculine aggression, of the victim and the executioner. Psychodrama enabled the participants to experiment in a safe and secure environment an emotion that for them is “dangerous” and this had the effect of giving them back the power of control.

Analysis of Portuguese texts

In Portugal there were 7 women that attended the psychodrama group. The Portuguese psychodramatists submitted a total of 8 monthly reports. In the Portuguese group it became clear how much aggression and anger are fundamental ingredients of violence, which turned out to be highly pervasive in all the biographies of the women. The psychodramatists asked the women to draw a timeline of violence (see Figure 2) and to represent it with some statues. This task enabled the women to become aware of the violence which was internalized, enough to enable them to process the resulting anger towards an empowerment. The words that were brought up included: «autonomy», «living without oppression», «liberty» and «freedom», validated in the final sharing «I feel strong» and «sense of freedom» (see Figure 4). The process of awareness has thus led to a new vision, relative to the understanding of what it means to be a victim and put in place new behaviours that are able to change this role “using” anger.

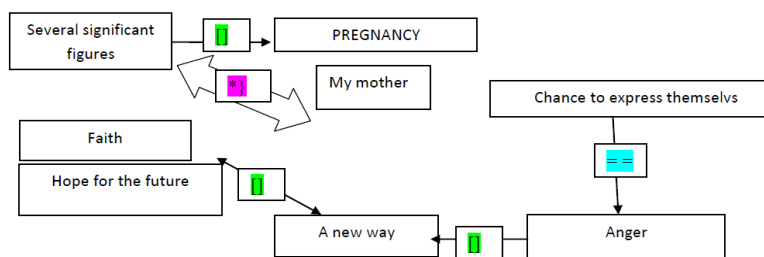


Figure 2. Anger for emancipation

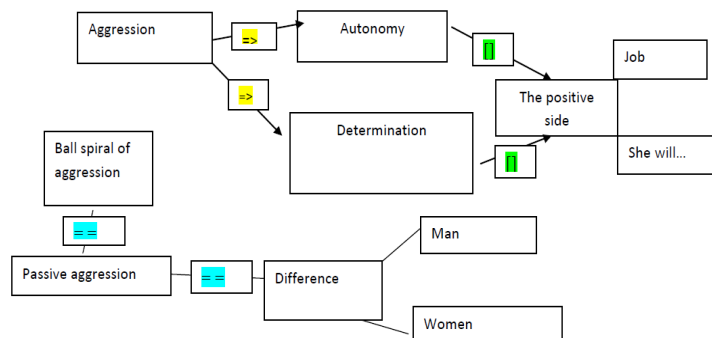


Figure 3: Positive anger

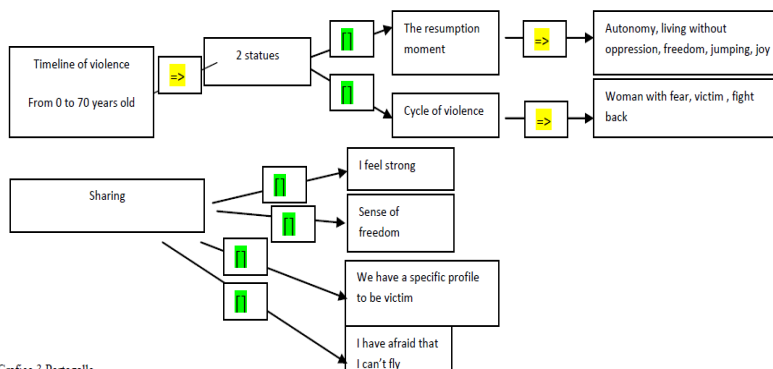


Figure 4: Transformation of anger

Conclusion

A Canadian study (Berman, Mc Kenna et al. 2000) evidences that violence is increasingly pervasive in the lives of women, beginning in childhood and describes how the concept of violence has become “normalized”. This aspect emerges in fact in all of the countries involved in EPDP and can therefore be considered a critical transcultural element. As

we discussed, the greatest effort for victims of family violence is to evolve from the necessity to hold back and hide very intense anger which is not given any possibility of expression, to using it as a vehicle for change in order to reach autonomy. Psychodrama and sociodrama were designed not only to change people's lives, but to heal the traumas of the world. On this basis, during the meetings the psychodramatists investigated various issues and themes, developing work more akin with sociodrama than psychodrama, but when they deemed it was necessary, the work could easily be transformed and become psychodramatic by focusing on a protagonist and their specific issues.

Psychodrama enabled participants to experiment with their feelings of anger and aggression linked to internalized violence in a safe place, and allowed them to uncover the multitude of facets involved, in order to recognize that aggression can be of positive value to break free from subordination (Koleva, 2011). Psychodrama allowed us in fact to work out the emotional coercion tied to the internalization of the experience of the violence endured, so that it could unlock the potential for change towards autonomy and individuation (van der Kolk, 1989). The second major area in which the women's experience of aggression was perceived as internalized violence concerns the mother. The psychodramatic method made it possible to address the scripts that have been passed on from the family of origin, to the daughter who is now a victim of violence, in order to imagine a possible emancipation. The psychodramatic work has thus led the women to consider their anger as also arising from not having found in their family of origin adequate room for learning about their own individuality as a new way to reach independence. After the psychodramatic intervention, the women were able to think about the possibility of transforming the destructive power of aggression, into a constructive force, breaking the generational transmission that always portrays the woman as having to be subjected to male anger.

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