

## *Analysis of the family atoms of groups of violence from EMPoWER Project\**

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**Summary.** *This paper presents a discussion of the analysis performed on the family atoms in the first meetings of the psychodrama groups conducted in all the partner countries of the project Daphne Empower. The issue of the relationship with the mother is central and fundamental to the target of the project. Atoms and reports highlight three types of relationships that we have defined: positive, negative and uncorrelated which will be described below.*

**Key words:** *Daphne Empower, relationship with the mother, psychodrama, family atom, violence*

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## **Graphic sociometry: the family atom**

The family atom construct is part of the psychodrama theory and it is linked to some basic concepts of the Morenian thought such as tele, social atom and sociometry (Moreno, 1980).

Tele is a term coined by Moreno that indicates the “force” that keeps the groups together and it is the foundation of healthy human relationships. Tele indicates the natural human tendency to place themselves in an emotional relationship with other beings. The purpose of Sociometry is to make the members of a group aware of the positive or negative tele relationships and to encourage the development of the positive elements that already exist in these relationships. According to Moreno, the social atom corresponds to the social unit that can't be further divided and to which a person takes part to satisfy his/her emotional expansion's need. This is a useful reference framework because it helps to precisely define the social context of a person. Everyone takes part to an indefinite number of social atoms such as the family, the work's group and the friends' groups. Thanks to the sociometric instruments it is possible to quantify and qualify the emotional relationships with a positive or negative (repulsion) tele valence in a specific social atom.

Sociometry is mostly made with maps that look like an atom with its electrons or planets revolving around the sun. The chance to represent the social atom with a graph can help the person to understand aspects of his/her relationships with others that would otherwise remain unconscious, invisible, indiscernible and therefore not able to be processed.

The social atoms have been an integral part of the assessment of the Daphne Empower research project. The EMPoWER Project, part of the European program Daphne 2010, is designed to work on the roles of women victims of domestic violence so that they can increase their empowerment and agency. During every historical and cultural time women have been subordinated (Antrobus, 2004) and this has had a serious impact on the development of personal and social roles related to empowerment and to the ability to act for themselves. The EMPoWER Project has sought to verify whether the psychodramatic methodology leads to a change in crystallized roles, behaviors and ways of relating that women act within their relational networks. The main strength of psychodrama is that it works both with personal and social roles at the same time. Psychodrama allows women to become aware of their needs and their ability to act, it develops in them agency and the right to be respected.

Six countries took part to the Project and 70 women have been included into psychodrama groups. The protocol developed by Daphne Empower involved the collaboration between anti-violence centers and associations of classic Morenian psychodramatists. In Italy there has been a collaboration among the Municipality of Rovigo, the Anti-violence Centre, Refleksione in Albania, Klagenfurt Mädchenzentrum, the Caritas Carinthia in Austria, the Bulgarian Society for Psychodrama & Group Therapy, the Nadia Centre Foundation in Bulgaria, the Portuguesa de Sociedade Psicodrama SPP, Umar in Portugal, the Romanian Association of Classical Psychodrama, the Home of Hope in Romania.

The family atoms have been drawn during the psychodrama sessions, at the beginning of the path done with the psychodramatists. Both graphic and action sociometry were used in the EMPoWER Project. The conductors of psychodrama groups gave to all groups the same instructions, that were to draw themselves on a white and empty sheet of paper and to place around them all the people with whom they have/have had meaningful positive or negative relationships and to base the distance between them on the relationship importance. The analysis of the atoms has been supported by the reports made by the psychodramatists of all the six countries where they have transcribed comments and descriptions of atoms made by every woman while presenting her atom to the rest of the group.

For the following analysis we have used the atoms that were made by the women at the beginning of their treatment. This choice was made because we are primarily interested in exploring the relationship between women and their mothers, their fathers and other significant family figures. Our aim is to observe how such significant people, especially the mother, have been interiorised by these women, how they have been placed in their own inner world and with what kind of emotional power. According to Boria (2005), within the mental representations there are the role representations of significant others which each person has in his/her inner world, basing on that his/her affective power (love-attraction or hate-repulsion) and the development of a "sense of self" which stands between the emotional pole of stability-security-integration (which is the expression of an adequate experience of the auxiliary world) and the pole of disintegration-instability and distress. The 67 analyzed atoms are divided in: 12 from Albania, 19 from Austria, 12 from Bulgaria, 5 from Italy, 7 from Portugal and 12 from Romania.

We can discern three different descriptions of the relationship with the mother that we named as:

- positive relationship with the mother;
- negative relationship with the mother;

- inconsistent relationship with the mother;

As “positive relationship” we refer to all those relationships that have been drawn (using graphic symbols) or verbally described as positive. These relationships are described as close and imply a perception of the mother as intimate and caring. The mother is described as a person who is able to support her daughter, who takes care of difficulties and concerns of the family. A mother who taught what is right and what is wrong in life.

When the relationship is “negative” the mother is represented as unable to support her daughter and not caring of her. It’s a judging, disapproving, devaluating and sometimes violent mother, that fails to protect her daughter from the abuses of her father or step-father and who takes more his side than her daughter’s. A mother who has been abused herself and can’t face her husband and her sons. A mother that taught her daughter to be a victim.

The “inconsistent relationship” with the mother can be described as good and difficult at the same time or is graphically represented as a good relationship but verbally described as difficult. In the first case, women are aware of the contradiction while in the second one there is no awareness at all.

The relationship with the mother is often represented and reported as good at first, but later described as difficult, the mother is pictured as unable to understand her daughter’s difficulties, she is not encouraging and she is against any change, more worried about others than her daughter's wellness. A fragile and weak mother, who failed to teach something to her daughter. In this kind of relationship, the mother can be violent.

The representation of this relationship in the family atoms has allowed women to see, explore and be aware of it. Agency is the ability to make things happen and to intervene on reality through the achievement of awareness of what does not allow us to activate our human agency.

From the analysis of the family atoms and from the reports connected to them, we can see that most of the women victims of violence have a negative or inconsistent relationship with the mother and that this relationship made them feel a sense of ineffectiveness and insecurity. Moreover, they don’t have the chance to see themselves reflected in a safe and effective mother.

Aware of the complexity of the mother/daughter relationship, this study wants to focus on the chance that the participants of the EMPoWER Project have had, by completing and describing their own social and family atoms, to analyze what is “unrecognized” and to be able to see by themselves their main emotional relationships. They were able to “meet” directly the problems that these dynamics have brought in their life and at the same time, they had the chance to develop empathy and awareness. This has

allowed women to start thinking about activating different roles than those previously seen and played. These new roles are related to agency and, therefore, to empowerment.

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