

*Empowerment of women victims of physical gender-based violence in family relationships. Austrian experience\**

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**Summary.** *The overall aim is the empowerment of women who have been victims of gender-based violence in family relationships (Wieser, Testoni, Guglielmin, Salvestrin et al., 2011). We use a mixed-methodology design comparing sociodrama groups (N=19) with individual counselling sessions (N=14). The common questions and methods will be described in detail in other articles of these proceedings. The Spontaneity Assessment Inventory (Kipper, 2011) was translated to German and we now face the challenge of validating it and assessing its applicability for women victims of intimate partner violence.*

**Key words:** *Psychodrama, sociodrama, violence, gender, empowerment of women*

\*Received: 19/09/2012 - Revision: 23/09/2012 - Accepted: 27/09/2012

Self-declaration of compliance with ethical standards: 15/01/2012

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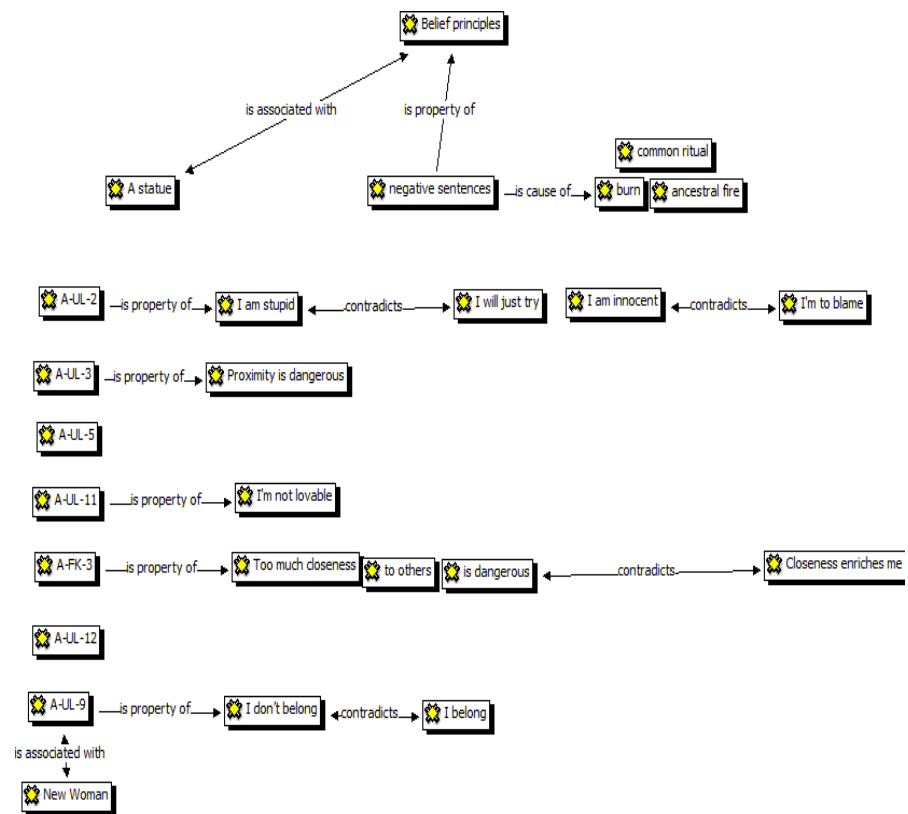
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*Interdisciplinary Journal of Family Studies, XVIII, 2/2012*

## Description of the intervention and the results

The Austrian framework of our EU-DAPHNE III project EMPoWER chaired by Prof. Ines Testoni (University of Padua) was described in Hendel, Luschnig, & Wieser (2012). We will continue here to report of the research.

In session five we continued to work on dominance-influenced relationships in families, using the example of the mother-child relationship. One of the important aims was to discover strong beliefs remembered as restrictive and to transform them into helpful and more encompassing beliefs (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Coding of a group session with Atlas.ti (Muhr, 1991), created by Ingrid Pogliani (EMPoWER-Project; University of Padua, Italy)

We worked with a technique called “dialogue of statues”.

Based on a statue and a representative sentence or statement we saw:

- first a dominant mother and grandmother;
- followed by the child to whom she speaks;
- at last appeared the voice of society or a foreign person who has observed the scene and has reacted in a certain way.

Every time all emerging feelings and thoughts of each role are gathered.

- Then we collected beliefs which may arise in relation to these relationship dynamics within the child.
- Each woman chose a strong belief she held and found a statue or image to represent it. Then we tried to develop a contrasting counter-image.
- Ritual of the ancestral fire: Every woman wrote the beliefs that she identified with on a sheet of paper. After the sentence was rephrased to a positive new one, the old one was thrown into the ancestral fire in a ritual. The woman said to herself to whom she returned the statement and replaced it with a new one.

The reactions of the women were different, some reacted in a powerful manner with strong emotions, and they felt more at ease and well after this intervention. Some others were still in doubt as to whether it will work or if they are allowed to have these new beliefs.

### **Discussion: Strengths of psychodrama/sociodrama and how to extend it**

The main strength of psychodrama/sociodrama is the group experience. It was very important for the women to be with other women, to share in their experiences, to play and to try on new roles. They were surprised by the feelings they experienced in a role like “power” or “confidence”, they could extend their perspective.

The group setting allows the participants to receive and to give feedback immediately and that enables them to recognize every step of personal development. The women can create a more successful kind of healing

encounter; they can have experiences in a positive social interaction. It is possible to build a bridge between themselves and the others by finding differences as well as similarities.

Finally we could see that the women became more active and no longer felt helpless and powerless, they could change their perspective from one of a passive role-taker to one of an active role-giver.

While working with the group and in our reflections we noticed some aspects which had not been taken into account before starting the groups. We would like to discuss them now. One aspect, for example, is the fact that the participants of the group represent different levels in their interpersonal structure at the beginning of the group. Therefore they have different needs which have to be respected: for example, on the psychosomatic level they need a lot of safety, protection, and support for defining their somatic needs. On the psychodramatic level it is important to learn to name and to regulate their own emotions, to find and to know their personal limits, etc. After this is done it is possible to work in a sociodramatic way, namely getting into contact, understanding and reflecting on a situation, recognizing usual patterns, and going into role reversal.

We became aware of an intercultural difference with regard to the concept of "trauma" concerning the care, the treatment, and the necessary caution needed in order to avoid "re-traumatizing" the women. The authors think that taking into consideration the different levels of the participants' interpersonal structure would be helpful in order to start a successful process of personal development. That means we should be more careful with regard to the participants' actual "level-status" before starting the group work. We consider the participants' stabilization as a basic condition for further work in the groups: for example, the ability to define limits, to say no, to feel empathy for others, to practice role reversal, the ability of self-regulation and, affect control and introspection. These abilities should be developed during an individual treatment session before attending group work.

Another aspect we noticed during our work was the fact that the social atom as a method of evaluation became an intensive method of intervention and guided us straight to an individual process far away from the intended sociometric level, and it did not take care of the actual process either. We think that if the social atom is used in a group with traumatized participants, it should be used in an adapted style, as a resource atom, at a suitable time according to the group process and in different ways with possibilities for enlargement.

## Conclusion

As a result of our experience we have agreed to continue the process which we have started in order to save and to appreciate the rich experience of the work in the different groups. This could lead to the creation of a useful manual for best practices and for further work in those groups. The empowerment of women can also start in individual counseling so we will apply for another EU-DAPHNE III program.

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