

*Overcoming female subordination.  
An educational experiment changes the levels  
of non-attachment and objectification  
in a group of female undergraduates\**

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**Summary.** *The research investigates the effect of an experimental university course on the level of non-attachment and on the changes in a exercise of sociometric alignment within a group of female students. The course involved a theoretical part, three sociodrama meetings and the realization by the learners of a product of digital storytelling relating to the empowerment of women. The results confirm that the inclusion of empowerment training in a university course is able to significantly increase the psychological well-being of the participants.*

**Key words:** *female subordination, sociodrama, digital storytelling, nonattachment.*

The main focus of this research project is female subordination, which Ortner (1974) defines as existing in every type of society, irrespective of the degree of its complexity and economic organization.

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## Female Subordination

Ortner's multicultural analysis (1974, p. 67) shows that female subordination is present when the cultural ideology devalues women, their roles and what they produce, when it uses symbolic devices such as the violation of women's bodies, and when it excludes women from participating in the reality to which they belong. This subordination is expressed through women's subjugation to the will and desire of males. Three examples of this subjugation include: 1) the use of male violence against women (Heise, 1993), such as in domestic violence (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000); 2) the internalization by women of the perspective of the male observer as the primary vision of their physicality, which results in women constantly monitoring of their bodies in their commitment to live up to men's aesthetic standards (theory of objectification, see Fredrickson, Roberts, 1997); and 3) the absolute relegation of women to subordinate positions in the intimate and family relationships that define their completeness as persons, with the delegation to men of the responsibility for their protection, for the defense of their rights, and for socio-political relationship management (Testoni, 2008). Subordination also presents itself as the conviction that the female personality is the opposite of the masculine one in that it does not involve an autonomous will, but instead is characterized by a yielding to the will of others (Mill, 1997).

As regards the "subjection of women", already in the 19th Century (1869) John Stuart Mill stated that it does not derive from a natural inferiority, but from an act of force that has transformed women's physical weakness into servitude. According to Mill "femininity" is an artificial product, a reaction and an adaptation to male dominance. He holds that the disparity of roles has led women and men to develop only some capacities, at the expense of others. Mill states that the place in which oppression occurs and is passed on is the family, while the principle means of subjection is education. He writes: "All women are raised from their first years with the conviction that their ideal personality is exactly the opposite to that of men: not independent willpower and education, but subjection and servitude to other people's will". The daily relationship with male dominance has induced the woman to mitigate the servitude more than to free herself from it, to assert her own rights through masculine protection, to see herself as a complete person not in her own right, but through her husband and her children. This, according to Mill, hampers progress, because it teaches the regulation of interpersonal relationships on a model of subjection versus strength, and not on reciprocal freedom and equality.

In the 1970s other hypotheses emerged concerning the causes of female subordination. The hypothesis of "aggressiveness", created by Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) proposes that neurological factors offer to the man an advantage that translates into domination within interpersonal relationships

and success inside the social hierarchy. In particular, they argue that the greater aggressiveness of the male is the principal gender difference and therefore the main cause of the male's acquisition of status and positions of social power compared to the woman. Goldberg also attributes universal patriarchy to the production of hormones by the testes, which would determine the changes in the central nervous system of newborn males. \par

According to the hypothesis of "symbolic nature", women are associated with nature because of the procreative capacity of their bodies, while men are associated with culture, because, being deficient in natural creative functions, they express their creativity artificially, through technological and symbolic means. As the objective of culture consists in the transcendence of nature, so the male aim is that of the subordination and oppression of the woman (Ortner, 1974).

The hypothesis of sexual identifications (Chodorow, 1974) proposes that feminine subordination originates within family structures, which are typically characterized by a predominant feminine presence. Within such a context, on one hand, the development of an integrated female identity implies an acceptance of the aspects of the self that are linked to the first attachments and identifications; on the other hand, however, the development of a cohesive masculine identity requires a process of empowerment with regard to the intense relationship with the mother and other women whose presence has dominated the childhood of the male.

Given the substantial absence of the father and of other men, males cannot identify themselves with a real male figure, but with an image, whose virility is constructed in negative terms with respect to femininity. As a consequence males internally reject the mother, denying their attachment and the profound identification with her that has developed over the years. In this way they begin to repress anything that they consider to be female, both inside of themselves and in the outside world (Chodorow, 1974).

In 1975 Gayle Rubin, with the essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" explains the historical and social mechanisms that have led woman to assume a secondary position within interpersonal relationships. Rubin speaks of a sex-gender system, by which he means the social construction of an asymmetrical binary gender system, where the male occupies a privileged position compared to the female.

Bourdieu, in 1998 highlights how both men and women take part in the construction and perpetuation of male dominance in a society that is organized according to the androcentric principle. In such a society, the historical structures of the masculine order have been perpetuated in the form of unconscious schemes of perception and evaluation of the surrounding world.

Feminine subordination in Italy, specifically, is notably influenced by the cultural substrate peculiar to the Mediterranean area. This culture is characterized by customary regulatory social codes, such as the code of

honour, which requires that the woman be segregated from the larger society in order to preserve her honour from possible attacks by individuals outside of the family (Fiume, 1989; Testoni, 2008).

## **The Project Daphne**

The present research arose in close connection with the activities performed by the European Project Daphne Empower, which works on raising awareness of co-responsibility on the part of female victims of violence for the unconscious propagation of the subordinate role as it is passed down by mothers. The project has employed a process of empowerment, through Morenian psychodrama, a methodology that permits unconsciously interiorized roles to be redefined through the awareness of one's way of giving respect to significant figures (Boria, 2005).

## **Project Daphne Iprase: Overcoming female subordination**

This project was developed jointly by the Provincial Institute for research and educational experimentation IPRASE (Trentino) and Prof. Ines Testoni, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology at the University of Padua. It was a course of secondary socialization, designed primarily for a group of female university undergraduates. It provided a theoretical and practical reflection on attachment (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan and Shaver, 1987) with the intention of promoting both the understanding of the issues related to the exploitation of the female body and an awareness of the script of subordination. The aim of the course was to effect a transformation of attitude, to promote the achievement of greater autonomy and freedom from the former patterns of relationships that are governed by traditions and external pressure (non-attachment), and to promote an ethic of female solidarity through mutual support for emancipation and the emergence of subjective characteristics.

## **Study 1**

### *Objectives*

In this research, referring to studies conducted by Testoni (2008) and Druetta (2001), it was assumed that the condition of women is characterized by a low level of non-attachment (Sahdra, Shaver, & Brown, 2010), i.e. that women tend to depend on the social context. We aimed at modifying, this situation, at least in part, through the use of active methodologies such as

sociodrama and digital story telling, together with theoretical lessons regarding the causes of 'gender gap'. Several studies, in fact, have demonstrated the educational function of the digital storytelling (Nilsson, 2008). We tested the efficacy of these methodologies using an experimental group of second year female students at the University of Padua and a control group of second year students at the University of Trento. The purpose of this study was to verify the existence of a significant change in the level of the variable considered (non-attachment), between T1 (prior to trial) and T2 (after the trial), only within the experimental group.

#### *The independent variables*

Among the independent variables, there are the following demographic variables: sex, age, university.

#### *The intervening variables*

The 'sociodrama' is a method of exploring inter-group relations and collective ideologies. Unlike the psychodrama, which focuses on individual attitudes and growth, sociodrama is centered on the values and prejudices in the group (Boria, 2005, p. 314). The 'digital storytelling' is a rapidly-developing technique that combines the tradition of storytelling with innovative multimedia communications. Unlike oral histories, it implies permanent narratives that are widely disseminated, and that therefore are available for reflection and criticism by a group (Davis, 2004). In this research we refer to the form of digital storytelling defined by the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California (Lambert, 2010). This definition includes the use of photographs, music, and video, but above all it requires the voice of the narrator in a short piece (two to six minutes), usually with a strong emotional content.

#### *The dependent variable*

With this study we wanted to see if there was an increased level of non-attachment in female students, after they had participated in a specifically-designed course of education. In addition to the known attachment styles (secure, insecure, anxious, insecure avoidant) Sahdra et al. (2010) have identified the psychological construct corresponding to the Buddhist concept of non-attachment. It is characterized by a weakening of an individual's subjective "working models" (about self, others, the reality) based on the responses of the key figures in that individual's relationships to proximity seeking attempts (Bowlby, 1969). For this research we chose this construct in the knowledge that we cannot change, through education, attachment styles developed in childhood relationships with parental figures. Non-

attachment, in fact, can be reached regardless of the type of relationship between an individual and her primary attachment figures.

### *Method*

*Participants.* The total sample (N = 104) is composed of female students enrolled in the second year of University, with a mean age of 21 years (SD 1.45). Among them 53 were studying at the University of Padua, and attended the course in Psychology of Intergroup and intragroup relationships (the experimental group comprising 60 females and 2 males), within the degree program of Social Service; and 51 studied at the University of Trento (the control group).

*Materials and Procedure.* Participants completed the instruments anonymously, through an online questionnaire. They had access to the questionnaire through a code invented, but not recognizable, by the researchers. The demographic variables such as sex, age, home university were detected by simple open questions and multiple choice questions.

Non-attachment: we used the “Nonattachment Scale” (NAS; Sahdra, Shaver & Brown, 2010) to measure the subjective level of non-attachment. It is composed of 30 items, from which we quote several examples:

“I can accept the flow of events in my life without hanging onto them or pushing them away”;

“I can enjoy pleasant experiences without needing them to last forever”;

“If things aren’t turning out the way I want, I get upset”;

“I find I can be happy almost regardless of what is going on in my life”.

The participants must choose a number from 1 to 6 on the scale in relation to each item in order to express the extent to which they are in agreement with it. The students of Padua have been involved in a series of experiments (for the total duration of 40 hours), involving:

- A theoretical course, which introduced themes like the relationships among gender differences, male and female psychology and interactions of gender, cultural codes that affect the self, and hetero-representation of women as "things" for production and reproduction;
- Three meetings involving the use of sociodrama and centered on the representation of women. These meetings, conducted by a psychodramatist, have been filmed, with permission of the students.
- The creation (by students) of a product of digital storytelling, characterized by the presence of the following: a significant event (problem) in a woman's life that marks the beginning of a journey (physical-emotional-intellectual or spiritual); the solution of the initial problem; the personal transformation of the protagonist (e. g. the acquisition of skills, maturation, learning, self-discovery); and the closure of the history.

Analyses were performed using the SPSS statistical software. Several measures were calculated. To describe the sample, the data were entered into contingency tables to represent the relationship between some of the variables considered significant (province, housing situation, emotional situation). We calculated the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  to evaluate the reliability of the "Nonattachment scale".

## *Results*

*Description of the Sample.* The average age for the experimental and the control groups is statistically equivalent: 20,92 years in Padua, with standard deviation of 1.83, and 20,45 at Trento, with a standard deviation of 0.88.

At the first administration the scale NAS has 30 items for which the average score is 3.83 with a standard deviation of 0.66; the test scores show a normal distribution with a Cronbach's Alpha equal to 0.88, indicating a fairly high level of reliability. For the second administration, the scale NAS has an average value of 3.76 with a standard deviation of 0.66 and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91.

*Comparison of ex ante and ex post.* Anova Province of origin x Time of administration: Between the first and second administrations, the NAS values for the Padua group are stable, whereas they are lowered for the Trento group ( $mt1 = 3.89 \pm 0.61$ ,  $mt2 = 3.73 \pm 0.65$ ,  $dm = .16$ ). This means that among the students in the control group, the level of independence from the social context (non-attachment) is decreased, probably in correspondence with the increase of stress as a result of examinations. In the Padua group, however, despite the approach of exams, the students have maintained the same degree of autonomy, as well as the same capacity for joy, and the same capacity to take care of others different aspects of nonattachment.

These results can be attributed to the experimental work carried out in Padua, including lectures on the attachment and the gender issue, sociodrama meetings, and finally the cooperative creation of a product of digital storytelling, that concerns the process of emancipation of a woman. The promotion, (with active techniques) of different modes of thinking about everyday problems and how to confront them, may have contributed to maintain a stable level of non-attachment of the students in the experimental group.

## **Study 2**

### *Objectives*

The overall aim of the research is to lead the participants to reduce their level of objectification, giving more importance to their own evaluation of themselves, rather than to the judgment of others. Moreover we aimed at a

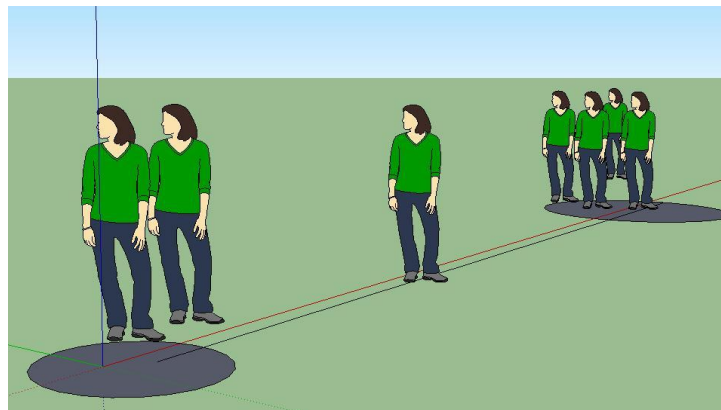
validation of the socio-dramatic method, by detecting a change between the first and the last sociometric alignment exercise.

### *Method*

*Participants.* The sample is composed of 53 female students enrolled in the second year at the University of Padua, with a mean age of 21 years (SD 1.45) and attending the course in Psychology of Intergroup and intragroup relationships (composed of 60 females and 2 males) within the degree program of Social Service.

*Material and Procedure.* Sociometry, which was for Moreno (Moreno, 1964) a scientific discipline, focused on the psychological properties of groups, as determined by the administration of sociometric tests, i.e. questionnaires involving one or more questions in response to which the students express their preference. The term "test" in this case is not used in a psychometric sense; in fact it is not a pre-established instrument, but it must be constructed from time to time on the basis of specific requirements. The sociometry (Boria, 2005, p.42) "rather than paper, pencil, graphic symbols, numbers, segments" uses as means of detection and representation the members of a group and the space of the psycho-socio-dramatic stage on which they move. In particular, the sociometric alignment detects the attitudes of individuals based on how they position themselves along a continuum.

The two sociometric alignments (Boria, 2005, p. 41) implied that the participants had to place themselves along a symbolic line, going from one side to the other side of the gym, depending on the degree of importance they attributed to the following variables: "physical beauty", the need to "please others", "the development of skills". The line represents a continuum whose opposite ends were "very important" and "not important" (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Graphic example of sociometric alignment.**



The participants had to position themselves along an imaginary continuum, the opposite ends of which were “very important” and “unimportant”

During the first and last encounter of sociodrama, three sociometric alignments were repeated, related to the following questions:

- How important is physical beauty for you?
- How important is it for you to please others?
- How important is it for you to develop skills?

The variables identified by the above questions are crucial in relation to the objectives of this research, which seeks to promote the empowerment of women and a relative overcoming of objectification and subordination:

- *Physical Beauty*. Regarding the variable “physical beauty”, during the first administration the majority of subjects were at the center of the continuum. One participant was located close to the pole “very important”, while some people were close to the pole “unimportant” (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Physical Beauty – first meeting**

### *Results*

The girl closest to pin “very important”, explains her decision this way:

21st extract

1673 P1: I admit I also have a different consciousness: the fact  
1674 remains, however a different idea (.)that however I can have  
1675 a different consciousness (.)but the rest of society  
1676 continue to have: the same mentality then (.) physical  
1677 beauty <very often> is the first canon for which a person is  
1678 evaluate (.) and as the society continues to be important  
1679 (.)I am a social being and therefore: I am stopped here  
1670

During the second sociometric alignment the situation remains unchanged and only one person has changed position, considering physical beauty less relevant than at the beginning of the course (Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Sociometric aligning T2, “importance of physical beauty.”** The six frames represent the entire process of moving towards the poles. The frame 4 corresponds to the pole “very important” and the left frame corresponds to the pole “unimportant”.

A female student who has positioned herself in both “arrays sociometric” at the pole “unimportant,” says:

25 extract

1686 P2: if it is true that maybe the first contact you have is  
 1687 based on '"appearance" people who are interested in going  
 1688 deep, are interested in what lies behind and below  
 1689

The participant who has changed her position, says:

26 extract

1698 P3: as Claudia said the society sees much against it and then  
 1699 maybe we are being influenced, and still are involved even  
 1670 if you would not want and then makes you think that is  
 1671 important but I think with this course, as Martina said, is  
 1672 not, that is, that intelligent people to look beyond  
 1673 physical beauty and inner beauty I think is a great beauty  
 1674 in short  
 1675

- *Pleasing others*

During the first meeting, the majority of participants were placed evenly along the continuum, while four girls were located near the end point “very important” and no one was close to the pole “unimportant”. During the third sociodrama meeting, a general homogeneity remained among the majority of participants, but with a shift toward the pole “unimportant”. For one person “pleasing others” has remained a key issue (Figure 4).



**Figure 4. Sociometric alignment T1 and T2, "how important it is to please others?". The six frames on the left represent the process of moving and positioning with respect to the two poles at T1. The four frames on the right represent the process of moving and positioning at T2**

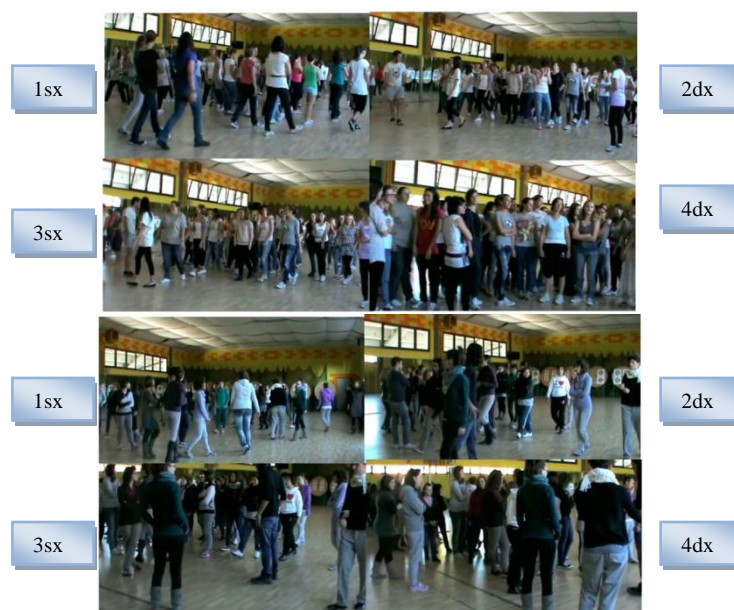
Five people said they had changed their position. One of them says:

Extract 27

1715 P4: at the end the important thing is to please yourself,  
1716 then others, because if a person is not comfortable with  
1717 her/himself he/she is obviously not well with others and  
1718 then other people's opinion is more important than his/her  
1719 opinion, but if a person is comfortable with him/herself,  
1720 he/she is fine with others regardless of the fact that  
1721 others appreciate that person

- Developing skills

With respect to the variable “skill development” most of the participants were positioned near the center “very important”, especially in the third meeting of sociodrama (Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Sociometric alignment T1 and T2, "the importance of developing skills". The four frames on the left represent the process of moving and positioning with respect to the two poles at T1. The four frames on the right represent the process of moving and positioning at T2**

28 extract

1729 P5 paduring the course each of us had his/her own culture  
1730 from which he/she started but I obtained a new knowledge

1731 that is making me grow  
1732

### **Validation of the socio-dramatic method**

The changes observed between the first and second sociometric alignment helped to validate the effectiveness of the sociodramatic instrument. They showed a change in the subjective assessment of the importance of external appearance vs. internal characteristics as well as a change in the importance of the judgment of others, thereby indicating success in the objective of promoting a reduction of the objectification of women.

### **Discussion of the results of two studies**

Very encouraging results emerge from the analysis. The subjects took part in the experimental program "Overcoming the female subordination", which consisted of a theoretical course, three sociodrama meetings, and the creation of a product of digital storytelling. In general, the subjects showed a positive change in the variable under investigation, namely the level of non-attachment. With regard to the level of non-attachment: in the experimental group we have found equivalent values before and after the activity, whereas in the control group the values were reduced. Referring to the literature these results can be interpreted taking into account two environmental variables, such as "the approach of exams" and its increased levels of stress, which is a factor that leads to "regression to a strong attachment" (McCarthy, Moller and Fouladi, 2001). The absence of change in these circumstances can therefore be attributed to experimental neutralization of the negative effect of this variable.

Regarding the qualitative results, a comparison between the first and second sociometric alignment shows that, in the group of students from Padua, there have been changes in attitude in relation to all three variables investigated ("Beauty", "Pleasing others" and "Developing skills ") at least for some people. In particular, the change is most pronounced in the importance of pleasing others. It shows that there has been a reduction in the level of objectification of women, as shown by a reduction in the importance of the judgment of others relative to that of the individual herself and her own internal states (Fredrickson, Roberts, 1997). The development of skills is found to be a value for all stakeholders, further remarked at the end of the trail built.

As regards the variable "beauty", the students have different opinions: some said that aesthetics has a preponderant role in society and that one should

follow the prevailing values. Others mentioned the importance of another kind of beauty, not tied to appearance. For this variable, only one person has changed sociometric position along the continuum, giving less importance to the beauty than during the first meeting. Even this small change shows that the course has had some impact in decreasing female objectification.

In summary, the students who participated in the experimental activities of the project "Overcoming the female subordination", have had the opportunity to raise their awareness of their self-representation and of women's subordination. They have been able to begin a journey of self-determination and dis-objectification, which leads to a increased levels of non-attachment.

These results are also a test of the validity of sociodrama and digital storytelling as a means of producing changes in the female attitudes toward empowerment and the prevention of gender violence.

In relation to these positive results, we propose the activation, at the University of Padua, of a "gender desk" and "teaching paths of gender", that would involve digital storytelling workshops and theoretical reflection of sociodrama. The goal would be to promote critical reflection on gender stereotypes and to change the patterns of thought and behavior that otherwise would be uncritically assumed.

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