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*The mother that cannot provide liberation: family atom analysis of women victims of domestic violence*

*Abstract*

The present contribution presents the discussion about the analysis carried out on family atoms that were completed in the first psychodrama group meetings carried out in all the Empower Daphne III program partner countries. The issue of the relationship with the mother is central to the aim of the project, in that we hypothesise that the mothers of victims are incapable of educating their daughters about personal autonomy in relation to men, due to the traditional culture in which they grew up in. The article presents information about the use and processing of the survey tool “Family atom” created by Jacob Moreno and the analysis of the data that emerged in parallel to the reports sent periodically by the psychodramatists to the monitoring and analysis team. From the results three types of maternal relationships emerge (positive, negative and incongruent) that enable us to confirm the initial hypothesis of this action research.

*Keywords:* Empower (Daphne III), gender violence, family atom, domestic violence, Psychodrama, maternal relationship.

*Introduction*

The concept of family atom comes from Morenian sociometric thought based on the concepts of “tele” and social atom (Moreno, 1980). The first concept indicates the “strength” that defines the Gestalt of groups in which individuals are empathetically united through relationships that engage in mutual emotional exchanges learned in primary socialization and advanced in secondary social relationships. Sociometry is the technique that Moreno developed to describe the type of relationships that constitute the relational map of groups. From this comes the concept of the social atom,

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which is considered by Moreno (1985) as the smallest irreducible social unit in which a person participates in order to satisfy their own emotional-affective and relational-cognitive needs. Everyone is part of many social atoms: family, work, study and entertainment ... Similarly to what is discussed by Kurt Lewin (1935), the forces (vectors) that make up these atoms can be positive or negative and can be represented through either the scenic action of sociodramatic theatre or graphically, according to a sociometric technique (Moreno, 1985) that enables to render visible the nature of relationships called into question.

The social atom was therefore selected for the collection of data about family relationships in women victims of domestic violence as part of the European project Empower, which is a European project carried out within the parameters of the Daphne III Program and aimed at supporting women that have been victims of violence. Since these same victims also have a sociatry problem, the victims of domestic violence need psychological help, not because they are mentally ill, but because they have to find new coping strategies to change the course of their lives (Testoni et al., 2012). The design of the research-intervention planned in the assessment used the “family atom” to capture a map even just indicative of the most meaningful relationships of the victims. The instrument was preferred to others because Empower used psychodrama as an elective intervention strategy and although very simple, unlike some other similar graphical tests, it allows us to also capture the emotional closeness and the quality of the relationship with the different figures that appear (mother, father, aggressor).

The Empower project gets its origin from European policies created to fight against gender violence and changing the role of women that are still very much subordinated to the will of men (Antrobus, 2004). The choice of the psychodramatic technique is based on the fact that psychodrama enables individuals to process the roles taken on. According to Moreno (1985) in fact, roles are operative forms that an individual takes on when he relates with another person or with an object. As there are elements that are in a constant dialogue in the internal world of the individual, they can be as much personal as social as both are affected by the cultural context. Empower is committed to promoting the agency of women victims of violence by enabling them through psychodrama to become aware of the personal and social roles of subordination they play, thanks to which it's possible to construct new experiences that dramatize critical events and meaningful situations.

#### *The choice of the Family social atom*

The social atom is the smallest social unit that is not further divisible in which an individual participates in order to satisfy their need for affective expansion. Each person belongs to various social atoms, among these is the family, or the family social atom. Thanks to sociometry, it's possible to visualize, and therefore quantify and qualify, “teliche” (empathetic) relationships of an individual (Boria, 2005). According to Moreno the social atom defines the structure of interpersonal relationships where the personality is developed, and the objective of the psychodramatic intervention is to repair the damage caused by social dysfunctional relationships. (Engelhardt et al.,

1989). This instrument has been used a lot and has undergone various modifications. Jay Edwards standardized and validated the Moreno Social Atom Projective Test (MSAPT) in 1996. The delivery of test results is divided into four steps: think about significant others and indicate with a symbol that is inserted either far or near, use the same pattern for the family; describe the amount of energy that each relationship takes, the degree of positivity/negativity and define the exchange between loss and gain (Edwards, 1996) (see for example Figure 1).

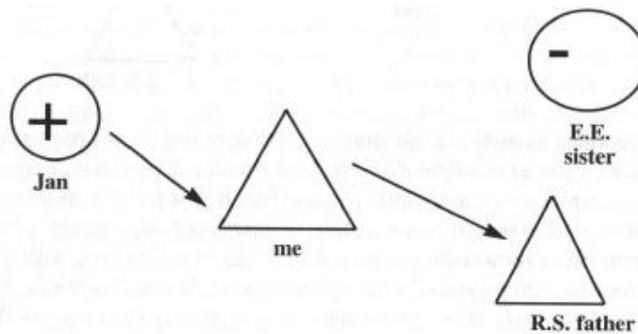


Figure 1. Source: Edwards, 1996.

Empower focused on family relationships, in order to understand the role of the mother in relation to the daughter and to the context. The victims of violence were asked to think about their families and to draw their own family atoms, placing themselves in the center of the page and positioning the individuals indicated either near or far from themselves based on how close they are perceived to be emotionally from them (Boria, 2005). Since there were six countries involved in the project, we only gave participants essential basic instructions, thus leaving a certain margin of freedom in the use of the instrument.

The choice of the MSAPT in its family version (Familial Social Atom: FSA Boria, 2005) was made after a thorough analysis of various similar instruments that could have in part guaranteed a similar data collection.

In the literature there are a number of graphical tests that are able to investigate the relational dynamics of an individual that can be compared to the FSA. Among these we can include the Comfortable Interpersonal Distance (CID) by Duke and Nowicki (1972), that explores interpersonal distance, resulting, according to the authors, from the interaction between the previous history of the subject and the context in which the behaviour takes place. The CID has a similar section to the FSA because it detects levels of closeness/distance of the subject in relation to others. Unfortunately, however the administration is particularly binding. In fact, the individual is given a sheet of paper that has at the center a common point from which eight equally distanced branches, 80 mm in length branch out, at the end of which there is a random number from one to eight, symbolizing various entrances to those that are described as imaginary rooms. The task of the individual is to imagine themselves at the center of the diagram (room) and to imagine that they have to answer to imaginary people (stimulus) who approach them along one of the branches. After having imagined a specific individual for each single branch, the individual has to mark a point on each of the eight lines that indicate the limit beyond which the subject feels that the person-

stimulus are too close and no longer in a zone of optimal distance. In the end, the points from each branch are joined together making it possible to visualize the optimal interpersonal distance. The specificity of the test does not reflect the completeness of the data collection needed at the outset by project Empower in that proximity is only one factor to take into consideration. Among the other tests that were assessed in comparison to the FSA were: Family Life Space by (FLS) (Gozzoli & Tamanza, 1998) that investigates family cohesion and critical events that influenced its evolution. The basic theoretical basis it rests on is the field theory of Lewin (1935), therefore very close to the FSA, according to which the environment in which individuals live is a psychological field featuring internal forces that drive the relationships between the components. The subject or the entire family is given a white sheet of paper where a circle is drawn, and in the circle the subject has to represent all the things that the subject feels that are part of the family, while on the outside of the circle the subject draws all of the things that the subject feels are part of the external environment. To represent themselves, the subject chooses a symbol that will later be utilized to represent other important people, he will then have to choose a second symbol, that is different from the first, to indicate organizations, groups and institutions that have been or are important to them. Lastly, a third symbol will indicate positive and or negative events that are emotionally significant for the subject. Only at the end will the individual draw the type of relationship, in this case understood as meaning the quality of communication, that exists between the self and others (continuous line: good relationship; broken line: so-so relationship; a continuous solid line marked by double transversal lines: poor relationship; continuous line marked by an X conflictual relationship). The mode of administration and the graphical representation of the relationships make the FLS similar to the FSA, but the two tests differ in that the first is focused much more on the quality of communication between individuals than on the strength of the bond itself and requires a large amount of information on the various aspects of the individuals life that perhaps not all people are willing to share.

Another instrument that is often compared to the FSA is the drawing of the family circle (DCF) (Quaglia, 2000), based on the FLS but that deviates from Lewin's theory. It resembles perhaps even more to the FSA, in fact the structure of the DCF was designed to investigate the emotional ties with the family of origin and differentiating these from those with the existing family: the subject in fact is given two sheets of paper that already incorporate a drawing of a circle representing his family, on one sheet the subject is asked to mark the space that the subject himself and the members of his actual family occupy inside it and the same task is repeated on the second sheet of paper thinking back about a past period in time. Likewise the FLS and the DCF lack the graphical representation about the type of bond that the individual has with members of his family (reciprocity, closeness/distance) nor is there a possibility to include significant external references outside the family. This distinction is however the characteristic that makes the FSA more similar to Genograms (McGoldrick et al., 1985) that aim to visualize the internal representations that individuals have of their own family or their entire family system. This technique comes from a perspective that is simultaneously structural, functional and relational (Montàgano & Pazzagli, 1989), in fact, the Genograms show the individual roles that each member plays within the family, fam-

ily affairs are narrated according to the meaning they have here and now and both canonic family ties (mother, father, siblings ecc.) and parafamiliar ties (e.g., the trainer that was a father figure) are included ), thereby providing emphasis to important relationships irrespective of kinship. What makes the Genograms different from the FSA is its graphical layout, apparently very loose but nonetheless more restrictive: in fact the subject is required to use a circular symbol to represent women, and instead a square for men and the same symbols dotted for the parafamiliar figures; the relationships that are marked are not those of reciprocity and distance/proximity between the subject and significant figures that he has chosen to represent, such as in the atom, but only the parental bonds that bind the individuals are represented (a continuous line connects two married people, a broken line indicates a relationship, a perpendicular mark to the relationship line indicates a break-up between the relationship of two people and a double line means a divorce). The Genograms are also more complex because they must establish a temporal development. (the eldest members of the family are located above and at the bottom the youngest), parafamiliar members are placed on the same timeline of the generation to which they belong.

#### *Project Empower and the use of the FSA*

One of the research objectives of the Empower project was to elaborate on the mother-daughter relationship. Previous studies have highlighted how culture deeply influences relational modes between men and women acting through primary socialization and in particular the maternal generational mandate (Testoni, 2008). Even today the confinement of women to the realm of primary socialization, of the domestic type, implies that the main agency of transmission of emotion and moral values comes through the mother figure. The maternal figure represents a pivotal point in the process of females auto-determination. From this starting point the project sought to explore the importance of the mother-daughter intergenerational relationship, in particular to investigate whether some educational approaches may be responsible in teaching daughters to be “victims” and to intervene to change this situation through the use of psychodrama.

Six countries participated in the Empower project and 70 women were included in psychodrama groups. Table 1 lists the participating countries and the number of women that took part in the psychodrama groups by country.

Table 1. socio-anagraphical description of the women psychodrama participants

Country	Group	PG	Age (years)			Education (years)	
			Range	M	SD	M	SD
Italy	8		26-58	38.6 4	9.37	13.21	3.86
Austria	19		16-68	41.1 5	12.78	12.13	3.26
Bulgaria	9		22-66	39.7 1	12.02	14.33	2.49
Portugal	7		24-68	46.4	12.72	7.9	3.26
Romania	15		19-62	33.1 8	9.15	11.48	3.55
Albania	12		15-24	20	3.38	7.38	3.10
Total	70		15-68	36,6	12,95	11.28	3.98

The protocol developed by Daphne Empower involved the collaboration between specialized anti-violence centers and classical Morenian psychodramatist associations.

The protocol for the qualitative analysis of the project included:

Monthly reports prepared by the psychodramatists including the transcripts of the psychodrama sessions;

- b) FSA executed by female participants;
- c) Cards especially made by the research team and filled out by social workers about personal data and information concerning family life and violent incidents.

During the psychodrama sessions, family atoms were created with the psychodramatists at the beginning of the sessions. In project Empower we used both graphic and action sociometry (that is the representation of the atom in the psychodramatic theatre). The features of distance-closeness and positive-negative reciprocity that the FSA enables to capture offered a lot of important information in order to steer the psychodramatic intervention. The psychodramatists provided the women of the various groups with the same supplies and instructions, namely to draw themselves at the center of a sheet of paper and to place around themselves various family figures with whom they have had or have a meaningful relationship with, both positive and negative and the distance to each (of these) dependent on the importance of this relationship. Some countries provided women with already marked sheets with concentric cir-

cles, others left it up to the women to draw themselves and others still gave the option of inserting within the atom hobbies and favourite activities.

The analysis of the atoms was facilitated by the reports made by the psychodramatists, in which they transcribed the comments and the descriptions of the atoms made by the women while they presented their own atom to the rest of the group. In the analysis that we present herein we used the atoms completed in the initial stages of psychodrama.

The 67 FSA's analyzed were as follows: Albania 12, Austria 19, Bulgaria 12, Italy 5, Portugal 7 and Romania 12. Of those atoms, we describe the major relational figures, their position (near/far) with respect to the center and the quality of the relationship.

Table 2. FSA in the partner countries

Country	# Analyzed atoms	Pre-sence Mother	Pre-sence Father	Pre-sence Brothers/Sisters	Husband/ Partner/ Ex	Sons/ Daughters	Grandparents	Uncles	cousins
Albania	12	12	11	9	3	2	7	5	4
Austria	19	16	14	15	14	10	0	0	0
Bulgaria	12	6	6	2	6	12	4		
Italy	5	5	5	4	3	5			
Portugal	7	4	3	4	3	7			3
Romania	12	12	11	9	5	8			

#### *Description of Family Atoms*

From the analysis of the atoms you will note that the method of creating the atoms was different from country to country, but they maintained a similar basic structure. The Albanian atoms were colored, to draw them we used colored pencils, grey pencils and colored crayons. These were shaped like the traditional atom, at the center of the page was a mark that symbolized the woman and from this center there are rays that represented the various bonds. Arrows of various shapes are used to describe the relationship. We did not use circular or square symbols in order to distinguish males from females and we did not use plus or minus symbol to establish if the relationship was a positive or conflictual one. The atoms of the three Austrian groups differ from one another by various features. Women in group 1 were given a sheet of paper that already had a circle at the center. The atoms of this group were grouped together by the use of triangles to depict men and circles to depict women, in some cases inside them we found names, in others initials and in others still some interpretable numbers. Another distinguishing feature is the lack of arrows present to describe the type of relationship between the woman and other individuals. All the atoms were drawn holding the sheet of paper horizontally and the individuals depicted outnumber those in the atoms of the other countries. The atoms of the second group were drawn with brightly colored fine tipped pencils. There was a central core around which concentric circles were drawn

that were useful for evaluating the distance and closeness of relationships. The names of the various individuals that are represented are written inside the circles. In regards to the third group, the common element among the atoms is that the women were represented by a circle and the men with a triangle. For all the atoms, except for one, where the ties are not marked, the center is connected to the people within the atom via a straight line (Figure 2).

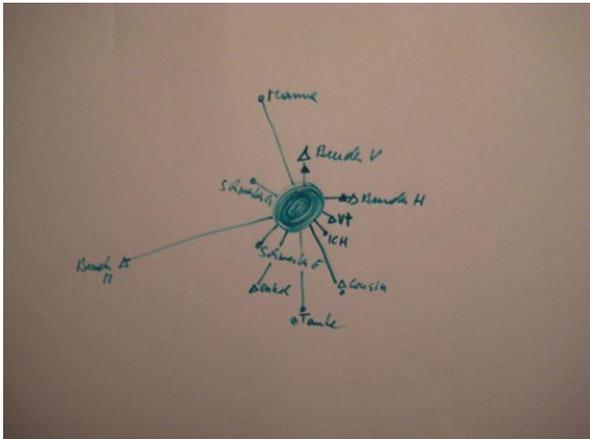


Figure 2. Austria

In Bulgaria the women were asked to draw themselves at the center of the sheet of paper and to draw the individuals with whom they have or have had any type of relationship with, placing them at a distance from themselves that symbolizes their degree of importance. The drawings were very different from one another, only one person used a more traditional atom structure even using letters to identify individuals and activities that they chose to represent, while the other women complied with their own personal criteria.

In Italy the atoms were drawn with colored pencils (Figure 3), the names of the men were placed inside the triangles, while those of the women in circles. The woman is in the center of the page. The bonds were represented by two arrows, one going out and another one entering that were of different shapes to identify the relationship.

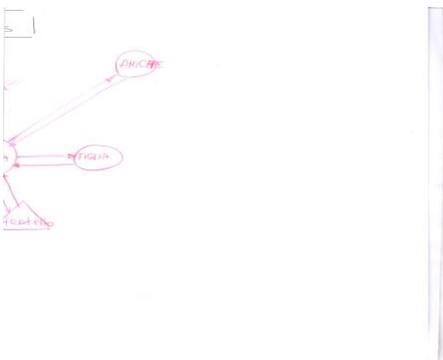


Figure 3. Italy

In the Portuguese atoms (Figure 4) the woman's name is inserted at the center of the nucleus and around the nucleus a number of concentric circles made up by broken



“positive relationship” includes all relationships that have been illustrated (through graphic signs) or verbally explained as positive ones. This type of relationship is described as a close one where mothers are perceived as close and loving. The mother is described as a person that is able to support her daughter, and who takes care of the difficulties and concerns of the family. A mother that has taught what is right and what is wrong in life: “my parents were very supportive and loving. I miss my mom and I feel lonely since she passed away. As a mother I tried to be like her, but I have failed”.

A “negative relationship” is one in which graphically and in the verbal feedback reports the relationship is described as difficult. The mother is seen as a person that is unable to support her daughter and that does not take care of her. She is a judgemental mother, critical, degrading and at times violent, a mother that is unable to protect the daughter from her father’s or step fathers abuse. and takes their side more often. A mother who in turn has been abused and that is unable to deal with her husband and sons. A mother that teaches her daughter to be a victim. Following are some significant phrases provided by the victims and referred in the reports: “I missed her love, she is ashamed of me and she has never kept her promises”, “she does not want to communicate with me, I don’t speak to her because I feel judged by her. She judges me because she has never wanted me, even as a child”; “I do not have a bad relationship with my mom, but what do you expect one person to do against three ( she is referring to her father and two brothers)”; “my mother always told me that I was incapable of doing anything, that I was stupid, ugly and worthless”, “my mother died a few years ago, she was depressed, she was unable to be a mother, and she taught me to be a victim, she was unable to recognize my needs”.

An “inconsistent relationship” is defined as a relationship with the mother that is both a good relationship and a difficult one at the same time or it’s represented graphically as a good relationship, but described verbally as a difficult one. In the first example, the women are aware of the inconsistency in the relationship but in the second example they are unaware. At the beginning of the interventions the relationship with the mother is often depicted and verbalized as a positive one, but is subsequently described as difficult, the mother is described as someone that is unable to grasp her daughters difficulties, that does not encourage, is contrary to any change, worries more about others opinion than the welfare of her daughter. A mother that is fragile and weak, that has not managed to teach or convey anything to her daughter. Even in this type of relationship the mother can be violent. Below are some sentences taken from the reports: “I have a very good relationship with my mother, I talk about everything, I have only lied to her once about one thing. I was married, my husband was aggressive and we divorced. Then I began living with a man, but my mother did not approve because according to her it was a disgrace and according to her I should have stayed home to take care of my two children”. The psychodramatists point out: “her parents were always opposed to any change, expecting everything to remain immobile”; “the mother gave too much importance to others opinion. During the discussion a mother as cold as ice comes to light, one that sides with the step- father”; “the relationship with the parents is defined as a positive one. Afterwards the woman says that “she did not learn anything from her mother, both parents drank and beat each other

up. Her mother has epilepsy and is mentally retarded due to trauma resulting from the blows of her husband”.

In Table 3 we illustrate how the women in the psychodrama groups from the various countries are distributed across the three possible types of relationships with the mother.

Table 3. Description of the mother-daughter relationship

Country and number of atoms	Atoms containing the mother	Negative relationship	Positive Relationship	Inconsistent Relationship	Death or abandoned in childhood
Albania 12	12	4	1	5	2
Austria 19	16	16			
Bulgaria 12	6	1	3	2	
Italy 5	5	2		2	1
Portugal 6	4	2	2		
Romania 12	12	2	4	6	
Total	55	27	10	15	3

From table number 3 we can see that 27 women define their relationship with their mother as negative, 10 as positive and 15 as inconsistent.

### Conclusion

The representation of their relationship with their mother through the use of FSA enabled the women to become aware of their condition, fostering in this manner their agency, that is, the power to give importance to events according to their own subjective reality in order to change their situation and distance themselves from maternal models. While recognizing the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship, this psychodramatic action research wanted to enable victims to see the principles that they have internalized that make them unable to free themselves from domestic violence. Beginning from the FSA, the psychodramatic action has enabled them to “face” the issues that have arisen as a consequence of adopting the maternal model. Related to this is the experience of using and learning a new language in order to provide room for the possibility of developing empathy and awareness, on which to set the course for new personal and social roles.

At the end of project Empower, we can state that the FSA can be useful to help women victims of violence become aware of family relationships and dynamics in order to process them later and modify them and break generational scripts. (Boria, 2005). Nevertheless, we note that no country used the FSA in a standard manner. For the next project implementation, we believe it could be useful to follow the four steps of the MSAPT and ask participants to only mark members of their own family, while adding some variations utilized in some countries that appeared interesting. For example, while the MSAP allows the subject to represent himself on the sheet of paper

wherever they want, Boria (2005) recommends the FSA to begin from the center. In this respect, the graph that already contains concentric circles that was provided by the Portuguese group was exceedingly useful as it enabled to define the distance between the woman and the other individuals in a more schematic and measurable manner. Therefore, over the next few interventions we will use this scheme of reference integrated by the four steps of the MSAPT.

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THE TOPIC

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