Deconstructing the psychological family
Investigation of gender bias in psychological practice with clients

EMANUELA STEFANI

Supervisor: Prof. NINA LYKKE, Gender Studies, LiU

Master’s Programme
Gender Studies – Intersectionality and Change
Master’s thesis 15 ECTS credits

ISNR: LIU-TEMA G/GSIC1-A—15/001—SE
Index
1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 3
2. Location of myself .............................................................................................................................. 4
3. On Connections between Gender and Feminist Studies, Psychology, Politics .............................. 5
  3.1 Feminism: an updated and pertinent field .................................................................................. 5
  3.2 Intersections between feminism and gender studies, and psychology .................................. 5
  3.3 Politics ........................................................................................................................................... 7
4. Research question ............................................................................................................................ 8
5. Relevant Previous Research ............................................................................................................... 9
  5.1 Psychology and gender stereotypes ............................................................................................ 10
  5.2 Maternal and paternal function used in psychotherapy, and gender ....................................... 10
6. Epistemology ..................................................................................................................................... 12
7. Ethics ............................................................................................................................................... 14
8. Methodology: ................................................................................................................................. 14
9. Method: .............................................................................................................................................. 16
  9.1 Material ......................................................................................................................................... 17
10. Analysis: .......................................................................................................................................... 22
  10.1 Participant and their beliefs ....................................................................................................... 22
  10.2 How is gender considered by participants within their professional practice? ..................... 24
    10.2.1 What is gender? ..................................................................................................................... 25
    10.2.2 Does gender play a role, or, how can gender be a tool in therapy? .................................. 26
    10.2.3 Does gender of the therapist have a role in building emphatic relationships? .............. 28
  10.3 Maternal and paternal function performed by psychotherapists .............................................. 31
    10.3.1 Definition of maternal and paternal codes ......................................................................... 31
    10.3.2 Do interviewees use this practice? ...................................................................................... 32
  10.4 Psychological practice and reducing gender discrimination ..................................................... 35
  10.5 Difficulty with the interview on the whole ............................................................................... 37
11. Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 43
Appendix: Transcription Conventions ................................................................................................. 46
REFERENCES ........................................................................................................................................ 47
1. Introduction

Some time ago I was sitting in my office when a psychotherapist colleague stepped in. We started talking about the clinical session with a client she just had in the office next door: she was commenting her therapeutic choices, as well as sharing with me her strategies for next session in general terms. I was listening, only giving brief feedbacks, since I am not a psychotherapist and I have never treated clients. Nevertheless, I was interested in what she was saying. We, then, talked about a session she was going to conduct together with a male colleague: according to her, a specific client needed a session with a maternal figure and a paternal figure.

In this precise moment my mind stopped: I had several flash backs taking me to past times when I heard this concept. In fact, during my experience in social work in Italy, it is happened many times to hear this kind of definitions from social workers, educators, as well as psychologists: but I did not know what it meant exactly. Suddenly, my mind went back to my office, and I excused myself with my colleague since I’d missed what she had just said. She looked at me silent, and continued to talk about this client who had to face, as daughter, the parental figures. She, then, went on with another topic. I followed her in this new topic, but the attention raised on the “psychological family” she was about to build, triggered in me long reflections from then onwards.

On that day I felt my attitude towards this topic had changed: I saw it with gender awareness and decided to investigate more about it: about what she meant by “maternal and paternal figure”; how she would have put it into practice; as well as about the possibility that this practice could have reinforced gender stereotypes about traditional motherhood and fatherhood in the client. As I have extensively documented in this thesis, discrimination against women, as well as reiteration of a patriarchal society, are still everyday reality. There is an evergreen urgent need to continue reading in between the lines and eliminate any possible discourse that reinforces discrimination.

I searched for previous studies on gender bias in psychology, as well as on the practice of taking on maternal and paternal function. As the reader will see, whereas I found a lot of material on gender bias in psychology, I hardly found any material on maternal and paternal function used in psychological practice. By considering it, then, a possible gap in the knowledge, I am dedicating this thesis work also to it.
2. Location of myself

Haraway’s “politics of location” concept highlights how Feminist Studies, as well as postmodern philosophers of science, critiqued a positivist scientific attitude of producing objective knowledge from a neutral researcher. To avoid “the god-trick”, as Haraway’s calls it (Donna Haraway 1991c: 191-196, in Nina Lykke 2010), it is necessary to be self-reflexive about one’s own work, as well as intellectually transparent to the reader in terms of explaining in details one's own ontology, as well as epistemology and the process of research (Lykke 2010; Alice Eagly & Stephanie Riger 2014).

I am 36 and live in north-east of Italy. I started my university path in 2004 at the age of 25; 6 years later, I obtained my MSc in Social Psychology. When I started this research I did not know where it would have taken me to, in terms of psychological notions. My knowledge about clinical psychology is very limited: in 2005 I took one single exam in clinical psychology, where I learned about different kinds of psychological approaches, including psychoanalysis and its most famous device transference and counter transference. I did not expect to encounter these concepts here, as the reader will see during the thesis, also especially because I did not interview any psychoanalysts.

I have never practiced as clinical psychologist, however I have both observed, as well as, discussed with colleagues about clinical practice. I have been working in a support information centre for women since 2008 doing projects on equal opportunities, work-life balance, and violence against women. Now I am in the Italian professional, as well as academic, process to become a full registered psychologist able to treat clients.

Regarding the topic of this thesis, I feel today very committed to the gender cause: I have developed the idea that there is a strong need to deconstruct stereotypes in order to obviate discrimination against women. Thinking about my colleague talking about maternal and paternal function, I connected this memory with my knowledge about violence against women from Italian antiviolence centres: working with victims of gender violence needs a specific gender approach, also from a psychological point of view. This insight, together with knowledge gained in this Master, triggered in me the decision to become a professional psychologist, as I feel the need of bringing gender approach and feminist contribution into Italian psychology.
3. On Connections between Gender and Feminist Studies, Psychology, Politics

In this thesis I will adopt gender and feminist studies perspectives. Why am I talking about feminism: is it still an updated and pertinent phenomenon? How do gender and feminism intersect with psychology? I will try to reply these questions in next sections.

3.1 Feminism: an updated and pertinent field

About whether feminism is still an updated phenomenon or not, Patricia Amigot Leache (2007) states that “using the term feminist can be adequate [...] because the reproduction of gender domination continues to be persistent and insidious in social practices”. This is the reason why she does not agree with post-feminism statements: “nowadays some positions tend to consider that the objectives of feminism has already been achieved in terms of undeniable equality indicators, therefore the feminist discourse should be already overcome [...] from a feminist perspective it is necessary to counter-argue these new ideological processes”. She explains how, by silencing the above, it all becomes a matter of individual responsibility “if goals have been achieved the wellbeing of women only depends upon individual effort”. She continues her critique “it is not just about looking at what remains of patriarchal structures; it is about going beyond in order to comprehend new and subtle ways of re-creating dominating relationships between genders”. Michelle Lazar agrees with the critique to post-feminism movement, saying that “the discourse is partly a masculinist backlash that defends against the whittling away of the patriarchal dividend”. Finally, I totally concur with her about the fact that a gender order still exists “and that this continues to operate also in those contexts that are considered ‘advanced’ or ‘developed’ ” (2005: 17) as, for example, I consider Psychological science to be.

Giving insights about gendered social existence still relevant nowadays, is the main point of doing feminist research (Caroline Ramazanoglu et al. 2002).

3.2 Intersections between feminism and gender studies, and psychology

Psychology is only a small part of the larger examination on science that Feminist critiques have put forth since the second half of 20th century (Eagly & Riger 2014). I will report here my feelings of astonishment, as well as, helplessness caused by the overwhelming load of material I found in particular about feminist psychology. It was literally like discovering a new planet! I had to work intensely in order to select just a minimal part of it to put in this paper.

---

1 Connell (1995) affirms how “the ideological structure of gender privileges men as a social group, giving them the ‘Patriarchal dividend’, in terms of access to symbolic, social, political and economic capital.” (in Lazar, 2005, p. 7)
One of the first discriminations that psychology conducted towards women was that great majority of the *milestone* researchers in history were men. Another extremely important one, was that past psychology considered only male people as participants in experiments: until some decades ago universities were mainly attended by male students, whom were the privileged participants for experimental psychology. An additional discriminatory tendency was to demonstrate that psychological adherence to personality traits - typically pertaining to the sex of the client - was indicator of his/her wellbeing (Vivien Burr 2000); by doing so, psychology has considered gender on the same level as other traits of personality: an intra-psycho phenomenon. Our experience of gender is surely such a phenomenon, but not quite only, as gender has social, as well as, political aspects that psychology has mainly ignored, creating a prejudice that has permeated great majority of studies conducted in this sector (*ibid*).

Eagly et al. (2012: 3) write how, in 1960s during the second wave of feminist activism, feminist psychologists declared that, by leaving aside the study of women and gender, psychology played an important role in worsening women disadvantage situation. Naomi Weisstein in 1968 was the first to write about it\(^2\), followed by Stephanie Shields (1975) and many others: they also explained how “psychologist’s characterizations of women was as childlike, dependent, unassertive, and interested only in finding husband and bearing children [...] social myths of the maternal instinct that psychologists had promulgated”. Angelique Holly (2012: 78; 87) writes about the link between feminist perspective, power, and community psychology “cultural hegemony is veiled, insidious, and largely unquestioned as it is perpetuated through dominant institutions (e.g. media, universities). The purpose of this article is to expose gender/class power structures that maintain hegemony, and argue for the need to weave feminism and class consciousness into the fabric of community psychology”. Eagly and her collaborators (2012) made an interesting research about the development of women, gender and feminism investigations in scientific journals by searching the PsycINFO database on the PsycNET platform of the American Psychological Association from 1960 to 2009. The article reports the existence of 52 journals that have *sex, gender or feminism* in their title (e.g. Feminism & Psychology, Gender, Work and Organizations; Psychology of Women Quarterly; Sex roles; Women’s Studies International Forum; etc.).

---

\(^2\) “Naomi Weisstein classic dictum ‘Psychology constructs the female’ in which she declares that psychology had neglected and omitted women from its corpus of knowledge” (Worell, 2000, p. 185)
Feminist psychologists embody in first person an intersection between feminism and psychology: just as well as it happened to me, many psychologists, like many other scientists, as well as professionals, became feminist along their life. This is the case of Holly (2012) whom admits in her paper “Feminism came easily to me through my daily life, as I saw and experienced sexism regularly”. Carolyn Wood Sherif, experienced sexual harassment, and, despite her substantial research record and international visibility in social psychology, suffered discrimination of various kinds by university world: one example was her salary, adjusted when her university was worried about being investigated for gender discrimination. (Shields & Signorella 2014). Another most famous feminist, even if not psychologist, was Simone De Beauvoir which wrote The Second Sex (1949), landmark of all subsequent feminist, gender and women studies, but that was explicitly not feminist when she wrote it: the author became openly feminist only later in life (Juliet Mitchell 1976). Eva Magnusson is another useful example: “at the beginning of the 1970s I was a politically left-wing graduate student in psychology. It was personal experiences that led me to feminist thinking: bearing, giving birth to, breastfeeding and caring for my first 2 children in the context of the paternalistic medical expertise and advice on children of those days was catalytic. This advice clashed with my view of myself as a person who was able to learn, judge for myself, draw conclusions – and be taken seriously.” (Alexandra Rutherford 2011: 157)

3.3 Politics
The fact that a whole load of knowledge production emerged from political movements, represents in itself a connection between science and politics. Psychological science has always tended to remain apart from this logic, claiming its independency and its focus on the individual, not recognizing that, since second-wave women movements, psychology has evolved in time: as written in previous section a whole load of research, as well as papers, have started to be created; feminist psychology emerged and, on top of preaching that research should contribute also to social action and justice, it encouraged to actively advocate for underrepresented groups (Judith Worell 2000; Riger 1992; in Eagly et al. 2012; Rutherford 2011). Eagly et al (2012) state how psychology actually has already had a great role against discrimination by citing some important example of how psychological research has contributed in court cases to identify situations of discrimination against women.

---

3 Professor of Social Psychology in many Universities in USA, wife of famous social psychologist Muzafer Sherif
Analysis have been conducted about the production of knowledge as being deeply gendered
“In feminist psychology, value neutrality in research was being dispelled as a myth by
showing how disciplinary knowledge about women was predicated on beliefs about their
inherent inferiority to men (See Wilkinson 1986)” (Ann Whetherall 2012: 465). As Foucault’s
states, knowledge, truth, values, are build in discursive practices (see section 6 and 8), and I
believe this as deeply political. Same opinion I have about Mitchell’s (1976: 348) pointing out
that Simone de Beauvoir The second sex remains the main study about the oppression of
women, and that “the most important thing is that the coherent theoretical explanation of the
oppression on women, provided by the author, is essentially psychological”.

Another example of psychology seeking to influence welfare policy is witnessed by Rutherford
(2011: 154) “[...] researchers supported demands on public welfare, especially day care for
children [...] Skard [1974] recommended involving men in daily care of their children [...] using developmental psychology in ways that were contrary to the dominant trends.”. But
psychology is sadly remembered also for other issses: beginning of 20th century Italian
intellectual groups, just as well as other international colleagues, had a proactive role in the
construction of racist ideology. In 1938 a Manifesto of racist scientists appeared, which opened
the way to anti-Semite persecution. Canella mixed a biological and psychological approach,
inferring that world population was divided into superior and inferior human races with
specific somatic characteristics. Jewish people were among the inferior races. (Sadi Marhaba
2005). After this chilling memory, another interesting similar event is told by Rutherford
(2011: 159)

society's needs for women to enter the workforce co-varied with trends in psychological
research about sex differences. When women were urged to fill vacant jobs, rhetoric about such
differences disappeared from the psychological research agenda. In times of work shortage and
unemployment, ‘differences’ and arguments about women’s nature and ‘women's own interest’
returned to the research agenda as well as to the more general psychology rhetoric (Bengtsson
1969).

4. Research question

The problem I am addressing is the possibility that Italian psychotherapy might be missing a
gender approach in its practice. In doing so my concern goes to traditional gender stereotypes
and possibility that psychological practice could be reproducing, as well as, fostering ideas of
masculinity and femininity which are biologically determined4, obsolete and against equal

4 See Section 6 for clarifications
opportunity policies. As we have seen in section 3.1 and 3.2 psychology discipline has received extensive critiques about, i.e., being a *male* science, focusing on individual resources and malaise omitting social, historical, and cultural influences on people. An example of missing a gender approach could consist in pondering with a female client the choice of becoming a mother, but omitting statistics about the social, cultural, as well as, welfare scenario that usually working women face when thinking about motherhood in Italy: having a baby- meaning- losing their job (Chiara Valentini 2012). Another example about reinforcing stereotypes could be about acting *maternal function* with a client, communicating, verbally or non-verbally, that this function is linked especially to women. This latter case constitutes the second focus of this research: does *maternal and paternal function* of the therapist also reinforces stereotypes?

To explore the above topic in a clear way, but at the same time sustainable for the limited load of work of a one year master thesis, I investigated the following questions:

- How does gender (being feminine or masculine) manifests during therapeutic relationship?
- How does gender play a role in psycho-therapeutic relationship or in psychotherapy?
- How is maternal and paternal function framed by participants?
- How do therapists use *maternal and paternal functions*?
- Do empathic or trusty therapeutic relationships build more easily among people of the same sex, or of different sex?
- How does therapeutic work performed by participants, help reducing discrimination towards women?

Above questions are intended only to the four participants I am analyzing: this investigation looks for their mind-set on this topic, hence focusing on their interpretation of discourse, and therefore knowledge, as well as, experience.

5. **Relevant Previous Research**

In this section I will outline some studies conducted on psychology and gender. I will divide the section in 2 parts:

a) connections between psychology, and gender stereotypes

b) connections between maternal and paternal function used in psychotherapy, and gender.
5.1 Psychology and gender stereotypes

Since the second wave of feminism of the 70s, many research started on this topic, investigating whether gender stereotypes influenced psychological practice, hence inducing various consequences at different level, first of all at the individual level of clients. Psychology has been accused of using a masculine point of view: “In the early 1970s feminist psychologists questioned the androcentric bias of psychological knowledge which they believed reflected a male model of reality […] when women were studied they were evaluated according to a male standard, so that women’s personality and behavior were seen as deviant or deficient in comparison” (Worell 2000: 185).

Concerning the academic field and research, there was a global concern on the fact that all science produced so far had, for the great majority, male authors and therefore suffered of “a pervasiveness of androcentric bias in the methods and presentation of research and in the practices of the organizations where psychological science is produced” (Eagly & Riger 2014: 687). Rutherford et al. (2011: 161 and 151), also, comments on this reminding a study of Haavind (1978) that highlights how “women used to be studied mainly as function in the service of others. Realizing this bias led some feminists in Nordic psychology to question psychology’s image of women and how these images were built into the discipline”. Students of the same Nordic Countries “found that psychological theories about women in use in our countries were often prescriptive and supported traditional gender arrangements (Bengtsson 1969; Haavind, 1973). […] Prevailing theory and therapeutic practices contained strong normative pressures on women to be traditionally ‘motherly’ and ‘feminine’ ”.

5.2 Maternal and paternal function used in psychotherapy, and gender

Searching about the maternal and paternal function, used by psychologists, and its interaction with gender I could find hardly any material. In order to ease the process of future studies on this topic I will explain here how I searched about it, allowing future researchers to improve this piece of work:

- Where I searched
  - Linkoping University Library - using the electronic search engine
  - Feminism and Psychology Journal - all issues, research by title of articles
  - Google Scholar
  - Network of libraries in Treviso province (Italy) - using the electronic search engine

5 “Androcentric means ‘centred or focused on men, often to the neglect or exclusion of women’ ” (Eagly, 2014, p. 688)
The choice to search in only one of the 52 journals (Eagly et al. 2012) that could be addressing a similar issue – as they have gender, women and feminism in their title - is because of 3 main reasons: a) the limited timing I have to conduct this research; b) my acceptance of my supervisor’s suggestion of choosing Feminism&Psychology also because it overlapped with my interest in the journal; c) the fact that Feminism & Psychology Journal has been recently awarded for *Distinguished Leadership on Behalf of Women in Psychology* from the Committee on Women in Psychology of the American Psychological Association. (Catriona Macleod, Jeanne Marecek, Rose Capdevila 2014: 3).

- What I searched (single keywords, couple of keywords, phrases of keywords variably aggregated)
  - maternal/paternal function/s
  - fathering/mothering function/code
  - maternal/paternal function/code
  - transference/counter transference
  - holding
  - Winnicot
  - feminism
  - gender biases
  - psychotherapy/ist
  - psychological therapy

I searched for these specific words, because I felt they represented key notions for my investigation. I built on this list as I was reading material, adding keywords as I was learning about the issue: this was the case of *transference* and *counter transference*, which I did not expect it could be a notion useful for this work.

I eventually found some theoretical basis of it: I searched among some psychoanalytic material, where I found a possible theoretical basis for the *tool* I am investigating: Anna Panepucci (1995) cites Fornari’s theory about affective codes: the maternal code includes an attitude more welcoming, nurturing, caring, feeding; the paternal code gives stimulus in facing stress and frustrations in civic and political life, as well as meeting and comparing to others in the *agora*. These codes are used within psychoanalytic concept of transference and counter transference: in the next quote we will find the latter mixed with Fornari’s codes, and with the sex of the analyst.
When a therapist is 'a good father who feeds' [...] But if breastfeeding is a maternal function, then the sentence 'a good father who feeds' is not what is being produced in the transference. Often such interpretation reveals an unresolved conflict of the therapist and this conflict could have something to do, for a man, with the fear of losing their specific manly characteristics, when he takes on a feminine or maternal role. [...] In our case a maternal function becomes paternal just because he is a man who exercises it. [...] As I mentioned, the second case is about an analyst asking patient if he/she prefers to be analyzed by a woman or a man. This type of questions would seem to derive from the same confusion between male and female and feminine and masculine function that we have just stated. (Panepucci 1995: 105).

6. Epistemology

Since the beginning of my research process I felt the urgency to have clear ideas about what epistemology I should refer to. From epistemology I would draw methodology and method: while looking for background research and theories, I was continuously keeping in mind this linear process. Time was passing and I, finally, gave up this search and started planning interviews. Only then I could understand what kind of methodology, as well as epistemology to use: while performing interviews, I was looking at the way I was intimately reacting to participants’ replies and what attitude I had towards them in terms of type of analysis and results I was looking for. My supervisor also confirmed this process. So, I re-read all different kinds of epistemologies, methodologies and methods and felt that they were making sense in different ways in respect to the same topic: I eventually found myself adhering to Postmodern, in particular, post structuralist epistemology.

Lykke (2010: 126) writes about Post modern feminist (anti-)epistemology “in the sense that it challenges the assumption that epistemology is a set of criteria for what objective and value-neutral knowledge production is”. Stating that knowledge cannot be objective, as well as, value-neutral means that it is not possible to have universally valid concepts. Laurel Richardson (2000: 928-929) helped me clearing up ideas about the link between non-universalism and epistemology: “the core of postmodernism is the doubt that any method or theory, discourse or genre tradition or novelty, has a universal and general claim as the ‘right’ or the privilege form of authoritative knowledge”. About Post structuralism she adds “post structuralism links language, subjectivity, social organization, and power. The centerpiece is language. Language does not ‘reflect’ social reality, but produces meaning, creates social reality [...] Post structuralism thus points to the continual cocreation of Self and social science: each is known through the other”.

---

6 as Eagly (2014) explains, postmodern epistemology is considered an “umbrella term” (see section 2.2) including social constructionism (e.g. M. M. Gergen, 2001; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988) – largely used in psychology -, post-structuralism (Gavey, 1989) and hermeneutics (e.g., Pinto, Nogueira, & Oliveira, 2012).
Here, I will draw much inspiration from philosopher Michell Foucault: his work on knowledge production, power and discourse has impacted on me, and found my agreement. Foucault “critical philosophy” declares how positivist sciences aim at providing universal truths by producing knowledge, which is, however, expression of negotiations within a certain society with its ethical, political, as well as social specificities. He coined the word “genealogy” that aims at showing “that a given system of thought [...] was the result of contingent turns of history, not the outcome of rationally inevitable trends” (Aurelia Armstrong 2014: 8). Foucault concentrates most of his work on power effects and influence on society as well as knowledge production, and therefore epistemology: “power is also be said to create knowledge in the sense that institutions of power determine the conditions under which scientific statements come to be counted as true or false”. According to Foucault, then, “truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint” (Armstrong 2014: 3). Knowledge, hence, appears as something not predetermined, and constructed within diverse kinds of influences.

Feminists have been much inspired by Foucault in terms of opening new spaces for meaning making practices, as knowledge and life appear prejudiced by power dynamics, more than biology or other influences: “Foucault’s analysis of the productive dimensions of disciplinary powers, which is exercised outside the narrowly defined political domain, overlap with the feminist project of exploring the micropolitics of personal life and exposing the mechanics of patriarchal power at the most intimate levels of women’s experience” (Armstrong 2014: 5). Power has been, and is, exercised on gender at many levels, one of the most influential refers to the use of an essentialist approach: as (Burr 2000: 24-25) defines it

Essentialism is the idea that human beings have an immutable essence that reflects in behavior. It is essentialist the argument that states that there is a 'human nature' identifiable and more or less identical over time and with variations in culture. [...] Concerning gender, it is reflected in the idea that there is a specific female or male nature that finds expression in the differences of personality, in professional orientation, the desire for parenthood, etc. Often, but not always, this nature is reported to biological roots.

Lykke (2010: 22-23) specifies different ways of performing this approach

Gender-conservative arguments are often founded in biological determinism and/or cultural essentialism. What does it mean? Biological determinism is a thought figure that constructs biology as a determining factor as far as social, cultural and psychological character and position are concerned [...] biologically determinist arguments have been used as powerful political tools. They have been mobilized to legitimize social and cultural inequalities, exclusions, subordination, exploitation, and power differentials not only between women and men, but also between differently racialized groups [...] through 'scientifically sustained' references to 'unalterable nature', biologically determinist arguments have often been used to block social and cultural change toward a more equal, democratic and just society.
I also find interesting to take a look at Reductionism: Burr (2000) explains how social phenomena are usually explored at biological, psychological and social level. Reductionist approaches tend to sum up all these levels into a single one linked one to the other by a causal order: so, for example, women take on domestic work more (social level) because they have specific skills (psychological level) that develop due to hormonal or genetic processes (biological level).

7. Ethics

Researchers are responsible for the knowledge produced, as well as for the “practical and ethical implications of their decisions, as feminist research implies some stance on the possibilities of social transformation” (Ramazanoglu 2002: 149). Although totally agreeing with this statement, it is very confusing to understand the boundaries of ethics, when thinking about the post modern framework of (anti-)ethics stance that Lykke (2010) mentions also recognizing Margrit Shildrick (1997, in Lykke 2010: 157) contribution: “there is no final, universally given truth about ‘the good’, ‘the just’, ‘the morally correct’ and so on. […] lack of ambiguity will result in the exclusion of diversity and a confirmation of the logic of the Same”.

As research was proceeding and the interview was ready, I, anyway, shared the ethical process to follow with my supervisor. Before performing interviews, I collected the consent forms from participants, leaving them a copy of it. The information I gave about the research was as general as possible in order to avoid biases and manipulated answers. In particular, the content of the consent form explained: a) the context of the interview, which was conducted within a thesis work of the Master Course Gender Studies: Intersectionality and change held in Linkoping University, Sweden; b) the fact that the research question of the thesis is about deepening the knowledge and interactions between gender and psychology in psychotherapeutic work with clients in Italian contexts; c) that regarding Ethics code, with the present form I guaranteed participants the following: complete anonymity of responses provided to the semi structured interview; the possibility to review the parts of the interview used in the thesis in order to check that written transcript corresponded to the real answers provided.

8. Methodology:

My methodological pick follows the chosen post structuralist epistemology, hence coherently refusing an universal truth: focus goes on the production of knowledge from discourse,
transforming simple speech in what Butler – building on Foucault’s concept of subject - has defined as “performative” discourse. Foucault is, again, source of inspiration for post modern feminists when it comes to analyse material, searching for power structures and resistance within “decentralized, localized, discursively and institutionally normalizing process, and which also productively generates various and multiple local forms of resistance” (Lykke 2010: 149). Resistance and power will, then, be investigated using deconstructive lenses in order to unroll fixed categories, meanings, binaries. Power will be searched among narratives that aim at normalizing processes, and among ethical foundation and moral principles. Talking specifically about psychology “the linguistic perspective on gender de/constructionism highlights continuity between Lacanian feminism and poststructuralist feminist gender de/constructionism” (Lykke 2010: 99).

But power is not only exercised from the subject of research to the world, but also from researcher to the subject of research. In fact, interpretation of material is also a delicate space for reflection: when listening to data each researcher has intellectual, emotional and political history that guides elaboration of material. What researchers believe about nature of gender, power, relationships and beliefs of what is to be discovered influences necessarily the knowledge that is being produced (Ramazanoglu 2002). Eagly & Riger (2014: 696), among others, remind also how science reflects the social and historical position of those who produce it, yielding multiple realities. Recognizing and accepting this, means adhering to the non-universalistic spirit of post modernism, as well as avoiding what Haraway has called “the god-trick” referring to the “neutral researcher” that produces universal knowledge (Lykke 2010).

How can researchers, and how can I as researcher, avoid the god-trick then? Ramazanoglu (2002: 146 and 161) talks about reflexiveness “Feminist researchers should be reflexive about the exercise of power in the research process. Reflexivity also means making clear the ethics of your research practice and your moral and epistemic accountability”; she, also, adds “At best you can be as aware as possible that interpretation is your exercise of power, that your decisions have consequences, and that you are accountable for your conclusions”. I am about to produce some knowledge which I will be responsible and accountable for.

---

7 “According to the speech act theory, a performative is a word that, when spoken, triggers action.” Lykke, 2010, p. 90
9. Method:

This research uses a qualitative methodology: Post modernist researchers, hence feminist and gender issues concerned postmodernists, find particularly useful conducting research using quality, instead of quantity, as term of analysis. According to Piergiorgio Corbetta (1999), qualitative methodology main characteristics are: a) environment is not manipulated: participants are studied in their own environment, or in everyday traditional environment; b) neutrality of the researcher is considered not possible: researchers are strongly invited to self-reflect upon their own biases, discourse, cultural background, etc. as this is considered to play a role in research; c) participants are active protagonists of research; d) methods of collecting data may be flexible, according to how research evolves; e) generalization of data is not possible: every single participant has a peculiar understanding of reality, which is valuable in itself; f) results are presented in a narrative form. Qualitative research has different criteria than quantitative research to define if a study is good: “situativity that links methods, results and interpretation to the specific topic which it refers to; contingency that situates results of research; reflexivity about the impossibility of a neutral position of researcher in research.” (Taylor 2001, in Giuseppe Mantovani & Anna Spagnolli 2003:31).

Psychology, also, lived the linguistic turn: Weatherall (2012: 463) reports “My experience points to how limited the social psychology of 25 years ago was, and the significance of discursive psychology in expanding the disciplinary boundaries.” She found a deeper sense in this turn when it joined the critical project of feminism “At one point, discourse analysis in psychology was viewed as virtually synonymous with critical or feminist research (Burman&Parker 1993; also Wilkinson&Kitzinger 1995)”.

The method chosen for this work is Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). This kind of analysis looks at “systemic power that typically goes unquestioned because it is firmly based on conventional wisdom” (Lazar 2005: 32). FCDA’s central concern is to pay attention and to deconstruct discourses, where implicit or explicit message supports a patriarchal social order: here dynamics and relations allow a systematic privilege for men, excluding and disempowering women. FCDA follows 5 main principles (Lazar 2005):

1- Feminist analytical resistance: analyses of forms and dynamics of power structure constitutes in itself a first form of resistance (Van Dijk 1991, in Lazar 2005), therefore acting as promoter of ideological, social and political change;
2- Gender as ideological structure: gender inequalities, in terms of one gender prevailing on the other, is considered an ideological institution. Differentials in gender, often based upon sexual differences, promulgate social divisions of labor and human traits variably adapted across history and places. What allows these institutions to go unseen is their taken-for-grantedness characteristic.

3- Complexity of gender and power relations: power has changed overtime. Today’s effectiveness of power is mostly due to its cognitive trait “based on an internalization of gendered norms and acted out routinely in the texts and talk of everyday life. This makes it an invisible power, ‘misrecognized’ as such, and ‘recognized’ instead as quite legitimate and natural” (Bordieu 1991, in Lazar 2005).

4- Discourse in the (de)construction of gender: feminist discourse analysts find significant paying attention to discursive ways of acting, for example talking and writing.

5- Critical reflexivity as praxis: (see section 8)

In my analysis I will proceed also using two other specific techniques: finding hinges in the text and close reading: the first refers to “seeking out and exposing the places where the prevailing logic tends to undercut or dismantle itself. It is a method of revealing contradiction, thereby allowing the apparently firm ‘truth’ to unravel into confusion” (Scot Dantforth and William Rhodes 1997: 360). I mainly used this tool during interviews when I heard hinges, and investigated them with sub questions; and the second to “an analysis that gives priority to a focus on the details of a text (its rhetorical gestures, tropes, imagery, pronouns, proper names, etc.)” (Lykke 2010: 17).

9.1 Material
This section contains a list of elements taken into consideration, choices made and action happened during the development of research:

- Choice of participants: I interviewed 4 different Italian psychologists: 2 psychotherapists, 1 male and 1 female; and 1 male psychotherapist and 1 female psychologist working in centre for the treatment of violent men. This choice followed specific needs:
  a) to balanced the presence of gender, in order to allow elaboration of data also using the additional intersection of participants’ sex. This elaboration, however, cannot be performed in this limited piece of research;
b) to have participants from different background, half of whom treating clients without a specific focus on gender violence, and the other half treating authors of violence. This difference could have represented an interesting element for comparison of approaches and discourses about gender awareness (as I have already stated in section 2, I initially learned about gender awareness in treatment of people, also in psychological terms, during trainings with experts from centers that work with female victims of violence)

c) the choice of interviewing psychologists working in a centre for the treatment of violent men was, on one hand, because they were easily accessible (in that moment I was following a training course on this topic and they were among trainers); on another hand, as we will see from section 10.2, one of them has also experience in centers uniquely working with women victims of violence, which allowed me to have an additional point of reflection;

d) I, also, intentionally selected psychologists who were practicing therapy with clients (not all psychologist, in fact, apply practically the discipline with clients). As my research question was specifically referring to therapeutic practice, I contacted three psychotherapists, and one psychologist who has long experience in working with clients;

e) I chose participants who were as little as possible acquainted with me: in section 1, Politics of Location, I explain how I have become somewhat radical on women’s issues, and how I sometimes openly declare myself as feminist. This declaration nearly always triggers comments or debates with the people I am surrounded by, that mainly try to condemn my position, interpreting the term feminism with the negative accent that still holds in Italy or, at least, where I have happened to interact on this. Therefore, in order not to add an additional bias, to those surely present in any setting of any interview, I decided to search for participants who either did not know me at all, or with whom it never happened to have this kind of debates or conversations.

- Method of collecting data: I used a semi structured interview formed of 2 main sections: a) Analysis of the context (who is the participant and his/her beliefs); b) Investigation of the research question. This choice of method was the one that appealed more to the way I was thinking about conducting the investigation: semi structured interviews, in fact, include an outline of all topic that an interviewer want to ask about. Usually, both order of topics and formulation of questions are freely arranged by interviewer while conducting interviews,
who is, also, free to explain questions, words, ask for clarifications or more information, as well as adopt a personal style of conversation (Corbetta 1999).

➢ Writing the interview: this was an interesting process elaborated with my supervisor that helped me discovering myself with some positivistic sense, and learning the importance of making participants feel comfortable during interview.

On the latter: Gayle Letherby (2003: 110) writes about the importance of appearance and emotional awareness during interview: “is not just about ‘getting the best data’ but about enabling respondents and researcher to feel comfortable”: obtaining this result will allow participants to feel in safety, hence to open up to their inner opinions and knowledge.

The final version of the interview is formed of 5 main questions (which I will call from now on MQ) asked to each participant. Some MQ have sub-questions with the following goals: either to a) clarify MQs; or b) investigate and deepen MQs. Sub-questions are simply a guidance for me as interviewer in order to stay on the theme which I want to focus on and not letting myself drive away by the replies of participants; therefore they may not be asked exactly how they are here formulated, or may not be asked at all, leaving space for more appropriate ones which might appear more adequate to my evaluation on the spot.

Here is the planning of the interview:

1. (MQ) In your experience, how does gender (feminine or masculine) manifests during the therapeutic relationship?
2. (MQ) What do you think is the role that gender plays in the psycho-therapeutic relationship or in psychotherapy?
   a. (clarifying question if Question 2 is not understood) How could gender influence the kind of therapy used with a client?
   b. How gender can be a tool that the therapist uses during therapy?
   c. Can you tell me a specific case where this happened?
3. (MQ) Are you familiar with the technique of taking maternal or paternal functions as therapeutic tool? What do you think about it? Do you use it?
   IF YES
   a. Why is it used? What’s its main goal?
   b. Can you tell me an episode where you used it?
   c. Why did you decide to use it?
   d. How did you use your gender in this technique? What role did you take and why?
   e. How do you assess if the technique is useful in therapy?
   IF NOT
   a. Why did you never use it?
4. (MQ) Do you think it is easier to create an empathic or trusty therapeutic relationship among people of the same gender or of different gender?
a. Why?
5. (MQ) How does your therapeutic work help reducing discrimination towards women?

➢ Pre-test of interview: before starting interviews, I decided to perform a pretest asking 2 female psychologists friends of mine to help me understand if the interview on the whole was effective. They are also familiar with me enough to know that I am a declared feminist, so could help me understand if the interview would reflect the suggestion given thanks to my supervisor about asking questions that would not feel uncomfortable to the participant, and letting themselves feel free to say their opinion without creating any obstacle feeling. They eventually reacted as follows:

- concerning the content of the MQ they were both agreeing that questions were interesting, intense and that it could have be written a PHD thesis on them, as they felt they themselves had never deepen the gender issue within their work. About this, one of them encouraged me to report on the thesis that I should have underlined the political function that this interview has on participants: as herself had never deepened these concepts, she was feeling more and more curious as we read the questions, and she felt that this very short time spent reflecting on the issue had helped her to open a new window of awareness which was important to report;

- on the other side they disagreed on the structure and wording of questions: while one was giving an overall OK to them, the other one expressed 2 points of improvement: a) the necessity to have a clearer introduction to the interview; and b) a critique to the last MQ saying it was too biased: why discrimination only toward women and not men? My position would be too transparent then.

Thanks to the latter suggestions I made two changes:

1. I prepared a short preamble to the interview that more or less sounded like this: “in this interview I will mention the word gender many times. By gender I mean not only the gender of the psychotherapist and the client, but also as topic in conversation, or as not expressed intersection that anyway influences the therapy, or as abstract concept, or in any other way gender may be.”.

2. I changed the last question in “How does your therapeutic work help reducing gender discrimination” bearing, in the back of my mind, that gender discrimination is a more politically correct word, but at the same time in the Italian context that I have known so far, it usually recalls the same meaning as discrimination towards women.
In the preamble I was not fully explicit on what I meant about *gender*: having kind of *gender lens* as an additional tool in reading clients’ requests and situations. For example: a woman client with strong difficulties in finding job, or in finding a job with a fair salary; couple with children asking for help about their relationship; a depressed woman that finds no space for herself in her life; a man portraying *in between the lines* his females colleagues always as less valuable than him; female politician frustrated because she feels misunderstood in her struggle to balance work, family and political activism; etc. All situations that might follow a different therapeutic process whether using or not using *gender lens* which means, for example, being acquainted with statistic about unequal opportunities to access jobs for women; or discrimination within the family where women often take on most of the domestic, caring and sometimes paid work, leaving nearly no free time or space for relaxing activities; etc.

- Modes of collecting data: I interviewed 3 participants on the phone (PX-w, PY-m, Pz-m) and one live (Pq-w) (see next section for coding explanations). I found a significant difference in these modes in terms of possibility to exercise power and influence between me and participants: interviews on the phone appeared to me much less influenced by power dynamics. They felt much easier as I did not have to pay attention to non verbal messages I could have passed to participants, avoiding this kind of bias. On the other hand, I could not fully realize what my interview was triggering in the others, as I could not read their non verbal reactions, and therefore it is impossible for me in this research to work on *power* that could have possibly entered on different levels than spoken words and silence, on top of paraverbal elements (laughing, tone and volume of voice, etc.).

- Transcription of extracts: after transcribing interviews in Italian, I chose the interesting extracts and translated them into English in order to be inserted in this work. I added them a minimal coding in order to highlight some paraverbal elements I found interesting to analyse:

(5) pause: number in brackets corresponds to the length of the pause expressed in number of seconds

((abc)) non verbal actions of speakers

(reduced version of Gail Jefferson’s Transcription System, in Giuseppe Mantovani, 2008)

I also add a new code:

[...] there are some other sentences or words, between the former and the latter piece of the extract, that are not of interest to the analysis currently performed
10. Analysis:
I interviewed 3 psychotherapists and 1 psychologist, 2 women and 2 men. In order to respect anonymity I will identify them using 2 letters: P as Participant, plus X, Y, Z or Q; I will also use lowercase letters for participants who work with violence against women; and a suffix –w if participant is a woman, and –m if participant is a man. Participant’s coding therefore becomes as follows: Participant X becomes PX-w, participant Y PY-m, participant Z Pz-m, participant Q Pq-w.

10.1 Participant and their beliefs
Participants were asked some information about themselves in order to frame replies to the 5 questions of the interview:

-Participant X is a psychotherapist since 2012. She graduated as clinical psychologist, attended 4 years of School of Systemic-relational Psychotherapy, and she is also trained in Neuropsychology and Scholastic Psychology. In her practice she uses a Systemic-relational approach mixed with Cognitive-behavioral approach. She is a self-employed psychotherapist working with private clients, and she also works in a public service for people with drug or gamble addiction. She chose this profession because “it is a job that fulfills me a lot, the idea of being able to work on one’s own resources, habits and behavior, and the way of seeing oneself and one’s life, self-realizing oneself. It is not only about solution of problems and difficulties, but also about growth, constantly becoming a person.” She thinks of herself as having a constant attitude toward research. She does not have a specific idea on how the ideal psychologist should be.

-Participant Y is a psychotherapist since 1992. He graduated in Doctor of Medicine, specifically in infantile Neuropsychiatric and, then, attended the 4 years School of Systemic-relational Psychotherapy. He also attended various other trainings within these fields. His psychological approach is Systemic-relational with influences from the Psychodynamic approach. He worked as infantile neuropsychiatrist in the public sector for 20 years and now he is a self-employed psychotherapist working also within the School of Systemic-relational psychotherapy he previously attended. He chose this job because “I have always been driven to do something concerning psychiatric / psychological field, and this obviously has to do with the situation of my family which was sensitive to it. I have a sister who is a psychiatrist so
obviously we had to heal deep wounds, but at the same time my mom was a teacher with
disabled people... let’s say that there was a mixture of an attitude toward a social commitment
and sensitivity, also due to personal stories of psychological and relational problems.” He
considers himself “a person not particularly organized, and this is my main limitation, but as a
person I believe to be sufficiently open to new things and also ready to get involved and
experience myself in new situations. And, even though I had my disappointments and
difficulties, I have always gone back into play with a positive sense”. The ideal psychotherapist
for him has to be “deeply human, attentive not only to practice but deeply interested in the
human being and the relationship with people, curious of the relationship with people and
therefore able to receive stimuli from all areas that serve in this profession”.

-Participant Z is a psychotherapist since 2009. He graduated as clinical psychologist, and then
attended the School of Rogerian Psychotherapy: He is shiatzu trainer aiming to get to the top
specialization of this bodily discipline “because between body and psyche there are many
links”. He is a self employed psychotherapist, and founder of a Centre that works with violent
men that abuse their partner. Here he conducts individual and group sessions with men. He is
also a trainer on the topic and writes about it in a blog of a national newspaper website. When
he chose Psychology at university he did not have a specific reason, “I said why not?” He has “a
positive image of myself because I have confidence both in me and in the human being in
general [...] I worked very hard on myself and I continue to do so because results - in my
opinion in my small experience even with all the ifs and buts - are valuable in the sense that I
believe that if I choose to do something else in life I think I would not find myself in trouble
today [...] a lot of awareness also leads to huge responsibilities, major assumptions of
responsibility [...] the curiosity is something that somehow never leaves me and pushes me to
not stop me, being curious brings me to read industrial quantities of books on any subject, to
make experiences and I think this side has brought me to have a culture which I am proud of”.
About his ideal psychotherapist he replies “is the psychologist that you would like to have”
adding “the one that meets the three criteria that were central to Rogers, to his way of doing
therapy, namely (a) the unconditional positive regard, and that is being able to welcome a
person whatever it takes you, (b) in empathy, being able to understand what the other is
trying to emotionally let you know, (c) being in touch with yourself, and from that what is
going on within yourself.”
Participant Q graduated in Philosophy and Psychology, has a PhD in Women Historic Literature, flew to US to attend a Feminist Political Philosophy Advanced Course, had some training with associations and centers on violence against women, and an international training on Narrative Therapy, “etc”, as she closed her reply. She is a psychologist seeing clients since 1995; she uses the narrative approach among others. She worked in a centre on violence against women, and then she became self-employed and founded the Centre - of which she is currently president – for the treatment of violent men who abuse their partner. Here she conducts group sessions with men, and contacts partners of them. About her professional choices she says “I was actually interested in gender issues in academic and political world, but I wanted to complete my knowledge working on the field, summing up theory and practice, personal and political, etc., then I became passionate about violence and psychology offered me the tools” and “the main interest was violence against women, and it seemed to me that gender studies were declined in the most profitable way in this type of work”. She thinks of herself as “a meticulous person, very interested in the learning stages, very engaged to social change and also wanting to intervene, work and live within projects that broaden the freedom of women”. Pq-w recons very important that the “ideal psychologist - in addition to the academic experience - has life experience [...] I know, as being client of psychologists myself before becoming a psychologist, that the maturity and experience of the person’s life is something that reassured me, that I would have never gone to a young psychologist, that life experiences should inform the practice because when you have a difficulties you want to feel the thickness of the person who is helping you, not only the technical tools, but personal tools because of direct lived experiences [...] certainly empathy and non-judgmental attitude”.

10.2 How is gender considered by participants within their professional practice?
To reply this question I will use a mix of 3 questions from the interview: question 1-2-4. The fact of asking participants to explore gender concept in 3 different questions allows now an analysis which has the possibility to deeply investigate the term, verify possible discrepancies, verify understanding of the concept, level of personal integration of concept within their professional practice, etc.
First of all it is important to highlight how PX-w, PY-m and Pz-m interpreted gender as sex of the person, meaning they all talked mainly about a level where gender intervenes in their interactions with clients in terms of them being female or male, and the client being female or
male. This happened despite the preamble to the interview about the diversity of dimensions I was referring to when talking about gender (see section 9.1).

10.2.1 What is gender?

PX-w and PY-m had some difficulties in understanding the first question, both asking me to reply it, pausing and soliciting for clarifications. PX-w started talking about gender from the appearance of people: their habits, objects they have, dresses they wear – which identify a person as being more feminine or masculine. She opened her statement with the adverb “trivially” clearly stating that what she was about to say are commonsense and banal notions. Therefore PX-w told about characteristics she identifies in clients according to their sex: men are more concrete; women are less concrete, more emotional, reflexive and abstract. When I clarified her I meant a more general definition of gender, she briefly said she does work on gender by talking to clients about their relationships with the other sex - and with the feminine and masculine part in oneself, not adding much else to this reply.

PY-m made his début briefly referring to transference and counter transference psychodynamic concept, explaining about sexual feelings that may arise in the therapeutic relationship. He, then, shifted focus on cultural symbols, explaining he must pay attention to the interpretation that clients may have about male culture which he represents. Nevertheless he, also implicitly, referred to psychodynamic approach by saying he has learned to use his gender in a neutral way, therefore being able to connect to male and female aspects in himself and in clients. At this stage he asked me if he was missing the point of the question, and I used this pause to try to dissect an hinge, asking him what he meant about female and male aspects of a person. His reply contains 8 pauses for a total of 27 seconds, and 3 expressions of doubts about what he was saying. He told about women having traits of sensitivity, affective closeness; and men more pragmatic, direct - in relationships also – less prone to deep understanding.

Pz-m did not define gender nearly at all: it is possible to have a clue on what he believes thanks to a sentence on self-consciousness groups that women created over time, whereas men did not as they are, according to his view, less reflexive and are used to hide feelings and reflection behind “football or sex”.

Pq-w’s definition of gender is on a different dimension, she opened her interview with the following:

EXTRACT 1

8 see section 10.5 for an overview on difficulties during interviews
Pq-w: I think an estimate of 90% of the psychological problems of women is gender problems. I think it is a bit lower in men, not casual since there is a patriarchal model for which also gender problems on men are a fair slice, but I think around 30-40%, so in my opinion, there cannot be... a work with a person in difficulty regardless (laughing) gender... for the load that gender has in life but also for the impact that this has on individual problems.

I: What do you mean by gender problems?

Pq-w: Problems related to the fact that women have an overload of caring work... psychological problems of women are largely due to social injustice.

Pq-w here does not refer to the sex of the therapist, but to the construct of it, to its multifaceted aspects. She talks about “gender problems” in terms of “an overload of caring work” (line 8); she briefly refers to a “gender approach” in therapy (line 5) with a small laughing - that sounded to me as something she considers obvious; and her talking about “the load that gender has in life” (line 5-6) opens space for a great amount of elements forming this load.

10.2.2 Does gender play a role, or, how can gender be a tool in therapy?

The second question investigated the role that gender may play in therapy, with a more specific sub question to be asked if problems arose in understanding or replying the main question.

Both Pz-m and PX-w declared gender surely plays a role in therapy relationship and also in therapeutic techniques, both interpreting gender as sex of the person, or, as feminine or masculine parts of the person.

PX-w showed difficulties when it comes to explaining it further:

EXTRACT 2

PX-w: in therapeutic relationship, definitely, and I think they have a strong component even in therapeutic techniques... in the sense that for some situations being, woman, for example and having... I feel that maybe, either it is more difficult for me, or it is more difficult for the client... to get to touch certain topics, something that maybe instead it is easier because I am woman... I mean, because I said at the beginning gender difference or gender equality influences the relationship, I’m absolutely sure, also in... structural aspects (1) at the level of relational experiences that the man or woman, the client in front of me (2) isn’t it? the other piece? these are difficult questions I cannot drive!

I: I am sorry.. try to go slowly..

PX-w: I am going very slowly there is a queue behind me! (laughing))

It overall appears to me she had great difficulties providing a logic and understandable reply, it looks as it took her a big effort to organize ideas coherently on the spot and provide content throughout her sobbing sentences. This interpretation appears confirmed also from line 9-10
where she kind of protests “these are difficult questions” she could not drive! PX-w goes from thinking that sex does not matter, as it depends on the easiness of relating to masculine or feminine for each person, to saying that, probably being a woman and embodying the caregiving profile –by social stereotypes or by history of person – could make it easier for somebody to disclose to a woman rather than to a man. But PX-w did not seems satisfied with this reply and kept reflecting that male clients might not feel comfortable asking for help to women, as this means putting themselves in a lower position. In fact, this could not feel comfortable for men: she explains in this way why a specific male client could not rely on her. Still clear ideas are far from arriving: continuing the elaboration, she declared “I do not think it is because men must have male therapists and women female therapists” and eventually, after minutes of loud self reflection, she came to the conclusion that the fact of gender having or not a role in therapeutic relationship depends upon the individual experience of the client. I, then, asked about an episode and PX-w told about a male client that talked to her about his sexual experiences and his condemning women to be all the same. Her therapy, in this case, included avoiding stereotypes by bringing examples of different kinds of women.

PY-m asked for clarifications and after a 5 seconds pause explained he was reflecting on the fact that he usually does not question himself about it. At this point he mentioned again psychoanalytic concept of transference / counter transference which he has to consider in the relationship, and which awareness allows him to build an empathic connection with the female or male client by contacting his own masculine or feminine parts. When asked about an example of this practice he, as PX-w, told about an episode containing a sexual aspect, but in this case about an erotic counter transference event.

Pq-w provided a different dimension of gender thinking about it as a tool in therapy:

EXTRACT 3

1 Pq-w: Gender role in general has a very important meaning, because I think it has a very important load on the psychological problems of people, I mean social injustice, and, role prescriptions, most of all role prescriptions! increase difficulties and malaise of people [...] moreover sometimes (1) it sums up to (1) transgenerational gender injustice so mums that have been inadequate because they had overload situations

She talked about social injustice, role prescriptions, even transgenerational gender injustice that has not allowed mothers to perform an optimum parental caregiving due to the burden they were to carry. Pq-w mentioned “deconstruction” when thinking about how to use gender in therapy:
Pq-w: absolutely! Because in the deconstruction of social cultural patterns arise lots of ways in which people construct their identities and the relationship these have with their problems.

She told how, during her work with men, often it arises the issue of their inability to read their own emotions, how they have been socialized in adolescence in reaction to specific masculine behaviour: what it means to take responsibility, controlling finance, organizational aspects; or being caregivers, protective, and how this is contradictory in respect to their violent actions.

Pq-w shared with PX-w the idea that cultural model of the female caregiving profile - which clients may refer to (in Pq-w’s case clients are abusive men) – may easy the process of emotionally disclosing to a woman than a man, simply because of personal habits.

Although working in the same service for abusive men as Pq-w, Pz-m had a different opinion: he says violent men usually have problems with the feminine, and feel more comfortable with male therapists so they can try to build complicity and reinforce stereotyped male dynamics instead of questioning themselves. Issues that therapists are there to deconstruct (see also section 10.4). He tells about episodes where men clearly said that if there had been a woman as therapist they would have perceived discourses differently.

10.2.3 Does gender of the therapist have a role in building empathic relationships?

This question, in my imagination, was particularly referring to the biological dimension of gender: sex of the therapist and client. As it will be discussed in the conclusion, it might have sounded very redundant for PX-w, PY-m and somehow Pz-m who replied to the earlier questions referring mainly to this same dimension of the word gender.

PX-w confirmed her conclusion reached in previous replies, elaborated some more about it recalling sensations of working more easily with women, but then remembering opposite episodes, and finally upholding that, according to her, gender does not influence empathy with clients. PY-m agreed with PX-w conclusion.

PY-m: in my experience I think it is not a gender issue \((laughing)\) [...]

I: why?

PY-m: because I think personally that other aspects of the relationship can be an obstacles to the relationship [...]

I: hence, when having clients with similar attitudes, gender in itself does not influences
relationship
PY-m: I think it may influence it but in my case (laughing) talking about me, are others, aspects that are independent from gender

He also added that, being the therapist, he is in a position that allows him to use both female and male part in order to empathize with clients.

Pz-m gave a fairly quick reply specifically referring to the sexual and attractive aspects that can develop between therapist and client in heterosexual or homosexual situations.

Whereas for the other participants this question appears fairly easy to reply, Pq-w, instead, slowed down the speed of her interviews, pausing 8 times (see also section 10.5) and saying immediately it is a little complicate question. She started a long process of thoughts where she recalled episodes, feelings, sensations and ended up affirming that she believes gender has a role in building an emphatic relationship, concluding that it depends on the level of comfortless a person has with the same or other gender, and that she personally feels she can build more easily a relationship with a woman rather than a man. This may be partially in contrast with a sentence she pronounced right ad the beginning of the interview:

EXTRACT 6

1 Pq-w: It has an importance also the gender of therapist and client but, it is more important the gender awareness rather than the gender of the therapist, I mean, I’d rather have a male therapist with gender awareness, than a female therapist without gender awareness

Here she said that gender has a role in the therapeutic relationship, but having gender awareness is much more important than the sex of the therapist or the client.

I tried to have more information and asked why she feels more comfortable with women. She paused 6 seconds and replied:

EXTRACT 7

1 Pq-w: (6) bah because I mean if I speak to a woman of a similar age to mine that has children that works, immediately, we have so many more things in common than with a man of same age maybe with children.. it is anyway the fact and this, let’s say is one thing to which I have reacted very much also with battered women right? I mean the welcoming methodology here in Italy at least is based in working with women on the recognition of similarities among women and therefore that you have in front of you a woman that is in a difficult moment and with whom you have so many other things in common, yes I feel this thing much more with women than with men, men live without realizing all the privileges that put them in a situation.. they are even funny!

But I mean.. understanding certain things it is something else, it is something else, it is rare rare rare, that a man understands really.. is capable of.. an empathic listening
Pq-w told about her experience with battered women and hint about a method used in centers that work with female victim of violence. That contemplates more empathy among women than men. She explained further why different genders are not likely to build empathy: men do not recognize privileges they have, hence being “rare, rare, rare” that they can really understand a woman.

**Conclusion**

The first aim of this section is to investigate how *gender* is perceived and conceptualized by participants in relation to their therapeutic practice.

As we have just seen, gender has been mainly interpreted as *sex of the person*, therefore replies to questions have been focused on only this aspect and, if on one side it can be said that not all dimensions have been fully investigated, on the other side this has given the opportunity to deeply investigate the biological aspect of *gender*.

PX-w, PY-m and Pz-m demonstrate to have a fairly similar concept of *gender traits* about how women and men are, which meets traditional stereotypes, summed up in the following definitions: “less pragmatic, reflexive, emotional, abstract, sensitive, affective closeness” for women; “pragmatic, concrete, direct, less reflexive, hiding feelings” for men.

PY-m refers to Freudian concept of transference and counter transference when talking about dynamics that come into play between therapist and client - sometimes according to their sex. He specifies that he adopts, also, Freudian teaching of the neutral therapist who can create connections with the client, whether male or female, by contacting his/her own female or male parts.

Moving towards a more specific and deep explanation of how gender interplays with therapy, PX-w, PY-m and, in some ways, Pz-m showed sometimes great difficulties in explaining why their -mainly biological- concept of gender had connections with therapy. PY-m, in particular, puzzled me somehow because of his (*laughing*) during the interview: I had the impression that my questions were some kind of obvious, or banal; but at the same time they could have been redundant, as the only dimension they were talking about was the biological one. Therefore, there may be 2 different conclusions: either that a) as the initial aim of investigating different dimensions of gender have become investigating only one dimension

---

9 Extract 5, line 1 and 7 among others during the interview
over and over again, this has created confusion or boredom among at least PX-w and PY-m and maybe Pz-m (Pq-w is excluded from this option, because she touched a much more broader definition of gender); b) all participants showed some kind of elaboration process during interview about considering the influence of biological gender in therapy, which may mean they have never totally, at least, investigated this issue by themselves.

10.3 Maternal and paternal function performed by psychotherapists

The second part of the interview investigates an issue on which I am particularly interested in: the use of this tool, function, code by therapists.

As highlighted in the previous research section (3.2), I have not been successful in finding much material on this topic, even if I could find a theory on this. Nevertheless, it will be clear the familiarity of all participants with the topic of my question. Two participants out of four, PX-w and Pq-w both females, understood right away what I was asking about. PY-m and Pz-m, both males, asked clarifications if I was referring to a specific technique or a specific psychological orientation, which I denied. Pz-m, when asking clarifications, explicitly linked this praxis to the psychoanalytic transference/counter transference notion, but abandoning it right away.

10.3.1 Definition of maternal and paternal codes

By saying maternal and paternal function/code participants demonstrated to have a fairly similar concept of it, which I briefly sum up underneath. PX-w, Pz-m and Pq-w accepted my definition of function, whereas PY-m specified that he calls it code:

EXTRACT 8

1 PY-m: ((laughing)) […] I do not mean it as a specific technique […] yes yes maternal and paternal code which is part of life

The “maternal function/code” is defined as: welcoming, cozy womb, let grow, settle, with some emotional aspects and thoughts, affective emotional closeness, nurturing, more feminine. The “paternal function/code” is about: recognition of one’s own resources, thrusting outward and action, recharging, having trust, support more evolutionary aspects, landmark, reassurance, strength.

Some of them (Pz-m, PX-w and Pq-w) mentioned that this function/code is socially connected:

EXTRACT 9

1 Pz-m: (2) then comes into play the masculine and the feminine, right? How it is experienced the feminine and masculine.. So.. more social level
EXTRACT 10

1 PX-w: sometimes you need a maternal function, that I identify more as being welcoming... that maybe a bit also a stereotype [...]

10.3.2 Do interviewees use this practice?

The next question connected to the current investigation, asked if participants use this function/code, and to tell an episode where they used it.

About whether it is a usual tool PX-w said that it is a priority and one of the most requested things, and PY-m added that it is part of life, and that surely is also exercised in therapy. They declared to use it often, whereas Pz-m and Pq-w (both working for the centre for violent men) never used it.

Since only PX-w and PY-m use it, I will report here their replies: telling about an episode where they used this function/code.

PX-w, after 17 seconds of pausing, told about a woman who was very obedient to indications coming from her mum. When PX-w understood this mechanism told her that maybe the fact of her as therapist being a woman was not easing the therapy process and maybe a man would help emerging her side that was silent. At this point I asked clarifications about the maternal/paternal functions. Here’s PX-w reply:

EXTRACT 11

1 PX-w: I think I have expressed my maternal function by verbalizing that I spoke with her not with a maternal mode as she is used to, that is, if you talk to an adult woman she tends to apply the same model that has always applied, “I obey you because you’re a woman, you’re an adult I must do as I always have with my mom” I have tried to use a different maternal mode in saying it is true that I am a woman and being a woman makes it more difficult for you to be different and so I tried to use a different maternal mode, more adult

8 I: ..ok

9 PX-w: no, are you saying no?

10 I: no no no, I am not saying anything!

I have difficulties in interpreting this extract; nevertheless it appears to me she is saying her therapeutic intervention using a maternal function has been to substitute the maternal code that the client had, with a different one. Since she showed insecurity, maybe hearing the tone of my “ok” (a bit puzzled10), I dissected this hinge and asked to explain me how she had used maternal function. She seems to contradict herself by saying “being maternal does not necessarily mean being welcoming” and adding the following:

---

10 Extract 11, line 8-9-10
EXTRACT 12
1 PX-w: the therapeutic aspect is to say maybe things can work in a different way, so I do not tell you “it might be useful to do this thing” because she comes the next time and tells me I did the task. Then we have to work on the fact that her growth, and it is a maternal aspect to feed a growth, that is different from the dysfunctional relationship patterns that she used so far. Do you think it is clear what I am saying?

As if being maternal means “feeding the growth” (line 4), according to PX-w, I am not quite sure about, since it could be also a paternal function, as we saw on the above definition. I might not be on the wrong track since she was so insecure in respect to her sentences (Extract 11 line 8-10, Extract 12 line 5-6).

PY-m, during narration of his episode, appeared reflecting, pausing 11 times, self-expressing doubts on the adequacy of the episode he just chose, and eventually telling about a woman who talked about her abortion. Here he “offered proximity, silence, emotion”, then stopped and asked me:

EXTRACT 13
1 PY-m: am I clear?
2 I: Here you adopted a maternal code right?
3 PY-m: well yes of course!

He was telling about a specific code, taking for granted I was understanding which code he was talking about. My clarifying question – a little provocative I must admit – triggered in him a reaction on the obviousness of what code he was using. He, then, went on explaining further and ended the explanation asking me if I wanted also to know an episode about the paternal code:

EXTRACT 14
1 PY-m: paternal you want to know? ((laughing))

In this moment I had a clear perception that Extract 13 and 14, including the ((laughing)), were linked in a subtle attitude were I felt I was posing banal and quite ridiculous questions. PY-m, then, told about the episode where he applied the code coherently with the above stereotyped definition and ended again asking me if he had been clear, hence reinforcing my perceptions.
As both PX-w and PY-m affirmed to use this tool often, but at the same time did not express it as a proper technique, I asked them where they learned this tool and if other colleagues are also familiar to it. PX-w replied:

EXTRACT 15
1 PX-w: for me is a way to give a name to what I do, I use it because probably my training, in my life this labelling or calling in this way these techniques is useful to simplify them, simplifying them in mind, as if it were a structure, a therapeutic process, so I can say here serves a more maternal aspect, and I understand myself, rather than repeating features, or more paternal, but also seems to me that it is not something that only I use, but it is pretty shared, when I talk to other colleagues using these terms seems to me that convey messages that are understood, it is a convention that simplifies, then [...] since you're asking me questions that activate the rational conceptual aspect then I realize that like so many other things since I started working as a psychologist that probably were very rational and less [...] forgetting a little the conceptual theoretical aspect because it becomes a habit does not it? On the other hand if you do a job for so many years is not that you do as if it was the first time, after a while it becomes a habit, there is less awareness of it, isn't it?

PX-w here clearly stated how this tool is not a technique, it is a heuristic mode, a simplification (line 3), and a convention (lines 6-8). While she was talking she realized why she might not be able to be more specific about it: when you get used to a job you work more mechanically, with less awareness (line 15). PY-m, also, agreed about sharing the meaning of this tool with other colleagues.

About why Pz-m and Pq-w do not use the maternal and paternal function/code there are various reasons: Pz-m said he never thought about a therapist with a maternal or paternal function; he feels being welcoming it is very important according to the approach he uses (Rogers), but he never used it as therapeutic tool. He, then, talked about the necessity of paying attention to the involvement that this function/code causes in therapist because of, for example, the development of a load of strong emotions in him/her, which could be a problem leading, eventually, to the need for a supervision by a more expert therapist.

Pq-w does not use this tool:

EXTRACT 16
1 Pq-w: [...] I think that parents assume alternately.. I find extremely sexist.. reports that I see related to maternal and paternal function are chilling! I think because are based on exasperated gender stereotypes.. to which real people should somehow get inspiration.. however.. models definitely dated! it is not clear why
they should be positive [...] to me it seems chilling! why for my children I
shouldn't be a bridge to the world as a mother, as a maternal function, it is true
that those who say this would tell you “the maternal/paternal does not mean
hooked to the father or the mother, is more in terms of function”, however,
according to me, it is somewhat masked because behind the idea of
maternal/paternal function there is still the idea that there is a need linked to
certain types of passages transitions and evolution.. it seems difficult to me that
they do not engage in gender stereotypes..

Pq-w's declarations are severe, she uses strong adjectives here talking about this tool:
“extremely sexist” (line 1), “chilling” (line 2 and 5), “exasperated gender stereotypes” (line 3),
“models definitely dated!” (line 4). She replied by herself to the possible critique she might
receive about taking for granted that maternal and paternal function are linked to mothers
and fathers role: even if people who use it would say the opposite, she doubts that this tool
would not overlap with their inner ideas of mother and father’s role.

Conclusion

Maternal and paternal function or code is a tool known by all therapists interviewed: despite
explaining that it is not an official technique, it emerges how it actually consists of a
“commonly used convention”, with an obvious character that also drives people to low
awareness and simplification, and abdicating a critical standpoint because it is commonsense,
natural, probably not interesting replying questions about it (see Extract 13 and 14). And it
really appears as common sense as all of them have similar definition of it, except from Pz-m,
whom partially links it with the Freudian transference/counter transference process. PX-w
and PY-m use this tool regularly, whereas Pz-m and Pq-w do not.

Pz-m does not have a specific reason why he does not use it, he appears generally not well
acquainted with this tool, this is also confirmed thanks to the fact that his interviewe slowed
significantly in this part; whereas Pq-w has strong critiques towards this tool, thinking it is
very stereotyping and outdated.

10.4 Psychological practice and reducing gender discrimination

After exploring how gender is considered by participants I decided to end the interview by
asking a direct question about how their practice helps reducing gender discrimination.

PX-w said that, even if having this issue in mind, she reckons she does not have much impact
because she does not work on a large scale.
PY-m started by saying that his work is mainly focused on psychologically reinforcing clients so that eventually they are able to defend themselves:

**EXTRACT 17**

1. PY-m: well I think if you work with the person and your work also has to do with the development of personal identity and then with the personal evolution towards a process of differentiation and identification, that is the basis of health,
2. evidently you work because the person develops a stronger identity which then affects, I’m talking about an individual work, affects on the capacity that this person has to defend her/himself more from gender discrimination that may suffer or live

When it comes to psychotherapy with families and couples he explained that, within a framework of respect for their culture and traditions, he adds some element of reflection if there are situations where roles are not respectful of the identity and independency of the person. Despite this, he specified that

**EXTRACT 18**

1. PY-m: […] because they do not come to us because we tell them what is right and what is wrong, isn’t it?

maybe clarifying that he does not believe he should be doing politics in his work.

Pz-m said he feels he helps reducing discrimination more when working with groups of violent men, where everything has a greater impact than during individual session. He talked about breaking complicity among men all aimed at deconstructing stereotypes, about “radically changing some concepts that are just not ok”, and he admitted how deep these stereotypes are in culture, saying that deconstructing is an infinite path because it is also a path made of steps back: for example he realizes he is immersed in this society and sometimes himself is a promoter of stereotype unwittingly.

At last, Pq-w said her political and lobby work (writing books, speaking at conferences, etc.) has the greater impact in reducing gender stereotypes, but also working with men plays a role in it. When solicited to reply whether she has impact on gender stereotypes with her therapeutic work, her reply is an “Absolutely yes!”.

**Conclusion**

With hindsight, I should have posed an additional question to participants before this one: since nearly everybody talked about gender only referring to its biological aspect, it is not clear what they think about gender discrimination, as it does nearly not appear at all in other
replies. Because of this, this question might have appeared as not linked to the interview in general. Anyway, from the replies it emerges that, within the right context, all participants take action against discrimination at different levels. PX-w and PY-m do not engage much on it, PY-m also specifying that clients do not come to him to know what is right and what is wrong (Extract 18); Pz-m and Pq-w, instead, provide a strong position on this, position which, especially in Pq-w's case, emerges all throughout her interview.

10.5 Difficulty with the interview on the whole

Nearly as soon as I started the interviews I realized that I was partially failing my aim of making the interviewees comfortable (see section 9.1): the second person I interviewed, PX-w, at one point exclaimed questions were very difficult she could not drive (Extract 2, lines 9-12). Always PX-w in another point of the interview said

EXTRACT 19

1 PX-w: am I the first you interview or
2 I: no, the second
3 PX-w: and was the first very easy?
4 I: actually the first also was a bit reflexive..
5 PX-w: these are difficult questions!

Again, exclaiming that those that I was posing were difficult questions. After this event I started monitoring how often this would happen. During interviews I counted the following events and how often they would repeat:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: events that might express difficulties during interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking to repeat a question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking to clarify a question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrasing question to clear the meaning of it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking to slow down the speed of the interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing self-doubts on the adequateness of their reply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking confirmation about replies provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long pauses (from 2 sec to 14 sec)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it can be seen from data, PX-w and PY-m experienced difficulties much more than Pz-m and Pq-w during the interview. In particular PY-m paused often, expressed self-doubts on the adequateness of his reply, and asked confirmation about replies provided. The person who
seems more confident is Pz-m with nearly no difficult events at all, followed by Pq-w which shows a lot of long pauses. PX-w also pauses a lot, but also expresses other kinds of events that can be considered significantly confirming her difficulty during the interview.

In addition, in order to have a clearer idea on how difficult this interview was, I started asking participants to give me a feedback on this.

PY-m said that interview was not very easy, a little complex: he gave a 3-3.5 vote in a Likert scale from 1 (non difficult) to 5 (very difficult).
Because I started to explicitly ask this question after the second interview, I had to send a subsequent email to Pz-m, the first person I interviewed. He replied saying questions were not difficult, rather particular, in the sense of the originality and in need of some reflection. At last, Pq-w expressed no difficulty at all “because these are all issues on which I have reflected upon and I reflect continuously”. This partly contrasts what emerges from the table: she actually concentrate the great majority of pauses within the section on building empathy with client according to the gender of therapist and client, the only reply where she specifically focused on gender as sex of the person. When referring to the overall interview she might have had a global impression of easiness anyway.

Conclusion

It, overall, appears clear how this interview has been mostly difficult for PX-w and PY-m, whereas less difficult for Pq-w and nearly not difficult at all for Pz-m.
Probably Pz-m and Pq-w did not experience much difficulty during their interview, because they have both reflected long in life on gender as they work on violence against women, a topic very gender-close. Pq-w, also, has widely studied on gender-related issues and feminisms. Reflection, though, might not be enough by itself: PX-w said she continuously thinks about this topic, but she is among those who experienced the most distress during the interview.

Conclusion of Analysis Section

This section aims at sketching an overall outline on my interpretation about data in relation to what FCDA analyzes (see Section 9), and to additional elements. Concerning FCDA’s power dimensions and their performance towards gender stereotype and discrimination I am referring to: a) power as taken-for-grantedness attitude; b) power as conventional wisdom; c) power as biological determinism and reductionism; d) power as cognitive dimension within a
reflection on neutrality of therapist. Concerning additional elements I am referring to: a) sex of therapist in maternal and paternal role; b) sex of therapist in building empathy with client; c) gender awareness and background of participants.

PX-w expresses security in stating that gender influences therapy but, when asked to represent this influence, she can hardly provide clear explanations of why and how it works. Her security about it, paired with her difficulty in explaining it, makes me think she is taking for granted some assumptions, probably very cognitively hidden and unaware. PX-w, actually, represents also other participants, who were somehow less confident about it in the first place, but, also, had great difficulties in providing clear explanations of this specific influence. Another example of taken for grantedness attitude is brought by PY-m when he talks about an episode where he embodied a parental function, without explicitly telling me if maternal or paternal: when I ask confirmation about my guess of him taking on a maternal function, he exclaims “well, yes of course!” (Extract 13, line 3). Always PY-m appeared to me as I was asking obvious issues which made him laugh slightly often (Extract 2, line 12; extract 5, line 8; extract 8, line 1, extract 14, line 1). A third element pertaining to this dimension of power, could be the difficulty of providing episodes that coherently represent what participants clearly expressed about definitions of taking on paternal and maternal function/code: here, again, recalling lived examples does not appear a smooth process, often confused and contradictory in respect to easiness of definitions previously provided. One last issue I would like to put attention on, is PY-m’s reply about his contribution in reducing stereotypes: he works with the client in order to reinforce identity and personal evolution towards differentiation and identification as a way, also, to defend oneself from discriminations. I will report here Pq-w’s beliefs about this therapeutic offer to clients in order to help understanding what kind of feminist critique can be forwarded to PY-m’s statement:

EXTRACT 20

1  Pq-w: [...] for example, a woman who says I have low self-esteem, and then when you
2  deconstruct her model of self-esteem, you discover which is the model that
3  prevails.. always safe, that never questioned anything, and, in reflecting on
4  this model of self-esteem, she realizes that these aren’t her values and then
5  the problem is not so much her self-esteem, but the social and cultural
6  patterns that are imposed beyond one’s preferences, and.. this goes beyond
7  speeches like that [...] it is hard to imagine conversations with clients that
8  eschews completely.. not from their sex but from social and cultural
9  constructs in which their sex defines in the interaction with the world
PY-m's concept of self-esteem is considered the same for both men and women, as a taken-for-granted notion. This could represent an exercise of power in terms of conveying and working actively to homologate people to a specific (possibly patriarchal?) self-esteem. This concept leads me to the great question that I have in mind since quite long: does psychological practice implicitly works to adapt people to the society we are living in – where latent oppression of women is still present? This question has been, also, partly replied – again - by Pq-w’s opinion (Extract 1), and in literature mentioned in sections 3 and 5, to which I can add Rutherford’s (2011: 164) contribution “Feminists also asked whether women’s psychological problems were just indicators of individual deficiencies, or whether they were instead caused by society and could be seen as implicit forms of protest against oppression (Viestad 1977; Willadsen 1983)”. The other question that is living in my mind lately is: is today’s self-esteem a neo-liberal individualistic concept? To sum up, taken-for-grantedness attitude, as exemplified in this paragraph, can be a problem in terms of fostering stereotypes because: a) it is very peculiar to the culture it belongs to, in this case Italian which is quite conservative about gender stereotypes; and b) it takes with it an uncritical character that does not promote awareness on who is taking for granted specific issues.

A slightly different dimension is power as conventional wisdom. A striking example of this is represented by the maternal and paternal function/code: all participants know about it, but do not recognize it as technique, rather a convention among colleagues. As it clearly appeared from data, participants attribute a similar definition to it, sometimes exactly the same, which it is very stereotypical of traditional gender roles in family. Looking at these stereotypes we can see how they appear disempowering for the figure of the mother: definition of maternal function is a stiller one, emotional, patient, all characteristics that are particularly not appreciated by the current society which is rapid, rational and dynamic. Paternal function, instead, is described as much more adequate to society. Power, here, is clearly and intentionally exercised from participants to clients by adopting parent’s functions that turn clients into sons and daughters (forming a psychological family): this power, thought, which is meant to be therapeutic for clients, is soaked with gender stereotypes disempowering for women.

Power is also exercised at a level of reductionism and biological determinism: PX-w, in particular, when defining maternal role, mentions the “cozy womb” linked to a more welcoming attitude of females caregivers, that allows female psychologists to be the
privileged figures for disclosing life experiences: here she links a biological level (the organ womb) to a psychological one (welcoming), to a cultural one (caregiver), and eventually to a social one (psychologist). This means delivering a complex reality to the client, built on a very simple and causal relation that is, eventually, very likely to pass on traditional stereotypes which have so gravely discriminated women in history. Panepucci (1995: 154) gives another example of this reductionist approach “[…] the ability to contain children is typically feminine, as so connected to female organs and functions: vagina, uterus, womb”.

When analyzing impact of therapist’s and client’s sex on therapeutic relationship, PY-m, in particular, recalls the neutrality of the therapist from his psychodynamic knowledge: sex does not have a role in his experience, as he – the therapist - has the possibility to consciously retrieve his feminine or masculine parts and enter in contact with clients' parts. Panepucci talks about this Freudian “neutrality” concept, but forwarding clear critiques to it, which sometimes came from the same Freud

[…] neutrality supported by Freudian theory was contradicted by Freud himself both in clinical practice and in theory. In 1920, in fact, in *Psychogenesis of homosexuality in a woman* Freud interrupted therapy with a young woman and advised parents 'to continue the therapeutic trial' with a female psychologist […] perhaps she […] as woman, could reach with the young patient that level of analysis, emotional and non verbal experience related to the primary relationship with the mother Freud himself wasn’t able to touch. (1995: 68)

This sentence, while confirming Freud’s stereotype of *maternal relationship*, also breaks the static of *neutrality* notion that PY-m affirms, as well as Freud did in much knowledge he produced along his life. I feel this operation more on a cognitive power level: claiming the ability to get in touch with female parts in a masculine gendered body means contacting one’s own interpretation of female parts. As it is possible to see from analysis of female and maternal definitions, this consists of a sequence of cognitive notions: taking on a feminine part appears neglecting social, cultural, political, economic, moral, religious, and so on, experiences that a feminine gendered body experience in everyday life. This kind of conceptualization can turn into an essentialist point of view that can more easily convey traditional gender stereotypes.

When looking specifically at relationship between sex of therapist and the possibility to neutrally take on the opposite gender function in a parental way (i.e. a male therapist taking on maternal functions) Panepucci (1995) cites a 1955 study by Glover that investigates the relationship between gender and type of maternal or paternal transference that takes place with client. Data collected are not univocal: some male analysts admit that therapist can
experience maternal or paternal transference in contrast to their own sex, but, like Freud, declare their embarrassment and their inadequacy to immerse themselves in a female role. It is interesting to note how PY-m, who explicitly mentioned transference and counter transference during his interview, did not talk about it when referring to the parental function tool. Comments about power and stereotypes here can be paralleled to previous ones. An additional discrimination that can be added as consequence of the Freudian neutrality, is explained by Panepucci “in the profession of psychoanalysis there was and there is a high presence of women, although little has been written at least until few years ago on the experience of women in psychoanalysis in the name of the analyst's proclaimed neutrality and supported by Freudian psychoanalysis” (1995: 68). So neutrality, in a patriarchal system, is likely to produce discrimination towards women.

Another issue to analyze in feminist terms is the possibility to build empathy between therapist and client according to their sex. This elaboration resulted particularly complex for participants: all of them had troubles answering this question, apart from PY-m sustaining thanks to his belief on neutrality of the therapist, to which at times PX-w and Pq-w partly adhered, but from which they departed at some other times by saying that same sex eases the building of empathy. About this Panepucci states “many women turn to women psychotherapists saying that they feel more understood on a level that goes beyond words, at a more emotional and deep level”. She, also, helps me finding the link between this issue and discrimination.

I should mention that a correct psychoanalytic treatment, to be such, should stand on a bisexual psychological disposition well integrated in the analyst, which favours the possibility to establish with patients of both sexes a sincerely empathetic communication. Minetti and Molfino 156 (1994) disagree with this statement by saying that continuing to link the concept of transference and counter transference to neutrality and bisexuality, denying the sexual identity of analyst and patient, means that the gendered figures emerging in the therapeutic relationship reflect and reproduce those socially recognized: the man-seducer and the woman-mother. (1995: 76; 188)

As last conclusion of this section I will reflect on two reasons why I specifically chose participants: in section 9.1 I explained that I chose participants: a) also according to their sex (I wanted to have the chance to analyze responses also about this intersection); and b) to their experience with working or not with violent man and violent women, recalling about my training experiences with experts of centers for the support to victims of violence where I learned about gender awareness approach to use with victims, also on a psychological level. Whether it is not possible to draw conclusion on point a) intersection between kinds of
responses and sex of participants, I may forward the following conclusion concerning point b): the only participants who appears fully gender aware is Pq-w, which is also the only one to have followed feminist studies and was trained and also worked in centers for the support to female victims of violence. It is interesting to note how Pz-m, although working with violent man, but not having followed a similar path to Pq-w, demonstrates ideas more gender aware, but still not as clear as Pq-w’s one.

11. Conclusion

I dedicated this thesis to the research of how gender and psychological practice are interconnected, focusing specifically, also, on the maternal and paternal function often used by psychotherapists and psychologists with their clients. It seems, from elaboration of data and conclusions of section 10, that research questions are likely to be legitimized regarding the specific participants to this research:

a) In their therapeutic discourse gender is mainly considered for its biological aspect. By keeping focus mostly about this, their discourses seem to create space for interpretations of gender which appears deterministic, reductive, and essentialist;

b) By De-constructing the psychological family (the title of this thesis work) I mean that this thesis aims, also, at deconstructing gender in 2 main aspects: 1) the maternal and paternal function/code as psychological concept; 2) dynamics that happen when psychotherapists take on this function/code with their clients turning them into sons and daughters in psychological terms. When looking at replies provided by participants of this research it can be stated that this tool is used in an uncritical way.

About point a) level of gender awareness appears extremely low: 3 participants out of 4 nearly never referred to gender alternatively from its biological aspect. It was interesting to hear PX-w saying how she was feeling these questions were useful to her to raise awareness about her lack of elaboration on gender influence in therapy and on her concept of maternal and paternal function

EXTRACT 21

1 PX-w: actually now you’re asking me all these questions, and I’m beginning to question myself… that maybe it is not well defined in my mind, I mean in a clear and comprehensive ways the maternal and paternal function

[Later in the interview]

4 These are tough questions you do not have to be sorry indeed! You’ve enriched
Political role of interviews is the purpose of feminist research, as mentioned in earlier sections, and is the fulfilment of the first principle of FCDA: Feminist analytical resistance (section 9). The only participant who seems well familiar about gender awareness is Pq-w, whom I felt was sometimes bored from my questions, and whom declared she had no difficulties at all during interview.

About point b) maternal and paternal function definitions, provided by participants, actually overlap with standard female motherhood and male fatherhood stereotypes. Pq-w’s worries (Extract 16, lines 7-12), as well as my own ones’, appear confirmed. Panepucci (1995: 106) adds that “for centuries function, sex and gender, in many cultures including our own, were experienced as a single thing [...] Now we know that a woman and a man can, to some extent, exercise all the functions, except some moments connected to conception, pregnancy and childbirth”.

If material of this research has rightly been interpreted, I feel there is the possibility that psychological practice of participants PX-w, PY-m and Pz-m is scarcely gender aware.

This research has surely weak points, as well as concepts that can be further investigated. About the latter I can forward some proposals here: 1) in order to verify the other dimensions of gender that have been largely omitted by participants, questions could be formulated differently; 2) difference in data according to sex of participant could be searched; 3) a more detailed and wide research on definition and use of maternal and paternal function/code could be performed: verify its clarity, whether it is usually hooked to traditional and outdated gender stereotypes; the positivity of the latter for nowadays parent situation (why should they be positive models to refer to today?).

According to results of this research, I am proposing here a work of critical resignification of these terms (Lykke 2010), or, better, a total change of them, as I agree with Panepucci statement referring to psychoanalysis: “as the psychoanalytic theory of femininity corresponds to the ancient patriarchal idea of women being devoid of something, hence it is also obviously modeled on the projections of male fantasies, psychoanalysts in the relationship with their patients cannot be not cautious and critical, taking into account the gender dimension of their world of values [...] my appeal to psychoanalysts is therefore to free
from ideologies that set so far what was masculine and what feminine” (Panepucci 1995: 101). To me, in order to completely free this terminology from ideologies, I would propose a total change of wording: instead of maternal and paternal function, using emotional, cozy etc. function.

After conducting this research I agree with Barbera (2006: 8 - in Rutherford 2011: 100) when saying “Psychological research still has a long way to go in its attempts to understand how and why human beings turn into women and males and what this psychosocial construction means for our lives”. Luckily Eagly et al. (2012: 5), talking about the Journal Feminism & Psychology, assures that “In 2014, 23 years after the launch of the journal, feminists face challenges that are different and yet similar to those of 1991 […] We intend to incorporate a full range of feminisms and psychologies in the journal, and to call attention to the ways in which feminisms have grown and shifted”. I reckon feminism as an effective tool to fill in gender awareness lack in psychology: this idea comes also from Pq-w interview, where she shows the highest level of gender awareness and, while chatting at the end of the interview, she declares clearly herself as being a feminist psychologist. Worell confirms this need talking about feminist therapists work, and also explains it further

Freudian psychoanalysis and other more traditional therapies [...] at the base of these theories were practices that assumed that lives and experiences of men (the dominant male culture) and of middle-class heterosexual white women provided the standards for normal and desirable human behavior. Feminist therapy grew from the earlier consciousness-raising groups [...] Discussions in consciousness-raising groups led to the theme that the personal is political. This theme implies that women's personal distress is embedded in inequalities in the political, economic, legal, and social structures of society that disempowered all women. Feminist therapists typically view women's symptoms as their best attempts at coping with pathological situations, rather than as reflecting pathology within the woman. Feminist therapists explore women's distress from the following perspectives: 1) attention is directed to the external source of women's problems as well as women's internal conflicts. This position locates women's pathology in social and political context. 2) Power imbalances are acknowledged and egalitarian relationships are encouraged within and outside therapy; 3) personal and social identities [...] are honored and explored. (2000: 190-191)

Worell’s indications and Pq-w’s awareness can really represent a good starting point for my path towards becoming a feminist psychologist. I feel an increasing curiosity towards this feminist psychological approach to practice, that will lead me to enrich my knowledge, enlarge my overview of previous research, and look for current debates and studies on this field. I can, also, clearly see my political commitment in it, which reinforces me even more in what I consider a not easy.. enterprise!
Appendix: Transcription Conventions

As transcription code I will use a reduced version of Gail Jefferson’s Transcription System (Mantovani, 2008):

(5) pause: number in brackets corresponds to the length of the pause expressed in number of seconds

((abc)) non verbal actions of speakers

I also add a new code:

[...] there are some other sentences or words, between the former and the latter piece of the extract, that are not of interest to the analysis currently performed
REFERENCES


EXTRACT 1
Pq-w: secondo me (1) per una stima il 90% dei problemi psicologici delle donne sono problemi di genere (1) secondo me è un po’ più basso negli uomini, non a caso c’è un modello patriarcale per cui anche sugli uomini i problemi di genere sono una discreta fetta, però secondo me più intorno al 30-40%, quindi secondo me... non ci può essere.. un lavoro con una persona che è in difficoltà a prescindere ((risolini)) dal genere.. per il peso che il genere ha nella sua vita ma anche dall’influenza che questo ha poi sulle problematiche individuali
I: cosa intendi per problemi di genere?
Pq-w: cioè sono problemi legati al fatto che le donne hanno un sovraccarico nel lavoro di cura, i problemi psicologici delle donne sono legati in larga misura alle ingiustizie sociali

EXTRACT 2
PX-w: nella relazione terapeutica, sicuramente, e credo che abbiano anche una forte componente anche nelle tecniche terapeutiche.. nel senso che per alcune situazioni il fatto di essere, donna, per esempio, e dover.. cioè sento ch e magari, o io faccio più fatica, o c’è più fatica da parte del cliente.. ad arrivare a toccare certi argomenti, cosa che magari invece è più facile perché io sono donna.. Nel senso, perché avevo detto all'inizio la differenza o l’uguaglianza di genere influenzano la relazione, ne sono sicurissima, anche negli aspetti... strutturali (1) a livello delle esperienze relazionali che ha l’uomo o la donna, il cliente in generale che ho di fronte(2) no? l’altro pezzo? Son o domande difficilissime non riesco a guidare!
I: Mi dispiace cerca di andare un po piano
PX-w: Sto andando pianissimo c’è una coda dietro ((risate))

EXTRACT 3
Pq-w: Il ruolo del genere in generale ha un peso molto importante, perché secondo me ha un peso molto importante sul malessere psicologico delle persone, cioè l’ingiustizia sociale, e le prescrizioni di ruolo, soprattutto le prescrizioni di ruolo! accentuano le difficoltà ed i malesseri delle persone [...] in più laddove (1) a volte si somma a.. le (1) ingiustizie di genere trans generazionali per cui madri che sono state inadeguate perché comunque anche loro erano messe in situazioni di sovraccarico

EXTRACT 4
Pq-w: assolutamente! Perché nella decostruzione dei modelli sociali culturali emergono tantissime dei modi in cui le persone costruiscono le proprie identità e il rapporto che hanno con le loro problematiche

EXTRACT 5
PY-m: nella mia esperienza credo che non sia questione di genere ((risolini)) [...] 
I: Perché?
PY-m: perché credo che per me personalmente sono più altri aspetti legati alla relazione che possono diventare un ostacolo nel costruire una relazione [...]  
I: quindi, ad esempio, a parità di atteggiamento il genere non è un elemento che influenza la relazione?  
PY-m: penso che possa anche influenzarlo ma nel mio caso ((risolini)). parlo di me.. sono più altri aspetti che sono indipendenti dal genere  

EXTRACT 6  
Pq-w: Ha un peso anche il genere del terapeuta e cliente ma, lì è più importante la consapevolezza del genere che il genere del terapeuta, cioè preferirei avere un terapeuta maschio con consapevolezza di genere piuttosto che un terapeuta donna senza consapevolezza di genere  

EXTRACT 7  
Pq-w: (6) boh perché cioè se io parlo con una donna di un’età simile alla mia che ha dei figli che lavora, immediatamente, abbiamo talmente tante più cose in comune di quanto ho con un uomo della stessa età che magari ha anche figli.. è il fatto comunemente e questo, diciamo è una cosa a cui ho risposto molto anche nel lavoro con le donne maltrattate no? Ciò è la metodologia dell’accoglienza si basa in Italia per lo meno nel lavoro con le donne sul riconoscimento della similarità fra le donne e quindi che tu hai davanti una donna che è in momento di difficoltà e da cui sei accomunata da un miliardo di altre cose, ecco no questa cosa la sento molto di più con le donne che con gli uomini, gli uomini vivono senza sapere tutta una serie di privilegi che li mettono in una situazione.. sono pure simpatici! però cioè.. Il capire certe cose è un’altra cosa, è un’altra cosa, è raro è raro è raro, che un uomo capisca davvero.. sia capace di.. un ascolto empatico profondo  

EXTRACT 8  
PY-m: ((risolini)) [...] non lo intendo come una tecnica specifica [...] si si > codice materno e paterno che fa parte della vita  

EXTRACT 9  
Pz-m: (2) poi lì entra in gioco il maschile e il femminile, no? come è vissuto il maschile e il.. femminile.. quindi a livello.. più sociale  

EXTRACT 10  
PX-w: a volte serve una funzione materna che quindi io identifico come un’accoglienza.. quello che un po per forse anche per stereotipo [...]  

EXTRACT 11  
PX-w: la mia funzione materna penso di averla esplicitata verbalizzando il fatto che ho parlato con lei non con la modalità materna come lei è abituata, cioè se parli con una donna adulta lei tende ad applicare lo stesso modello che ha sempre applicato, “ubbidisco perché tu sei una donna, sei adulta devo fare come ho sempre fatto con la mia mamma” io ho cercato di
utilizzare una modalità materna diversa nel dire è vero che sono una donna e essere donna ti rende più difficile il fatto di essere diversa e quindi ho provato ad usare una modalità materna diversa di confronto più adulto
I: ...ok
PX-w: no, dici di no?
I: no no no, figurati, non dico niente!

EXTRACT 12
PX-w: l’aspetto terapeutico sta nel dire guarda che le cose forse possono funzionare in maniera diversa, quindi io non ti dico “potrebbe essere utile fare questa cosa” perché lei arriva la volta dopo si presenta e mi dice ho fatto il compito. Allora dobbiamo lavorare sul fatto che la sua crescita, ed è un aspetto materno secondo me nutrire una crescita che è diverso dai modelli relazionali disfunzionali che ha usato finora. Pensi che sia chiaro quello che dico?

EXTRACT 13
PY-m: mi spiego?
SubMQ: qui ha assunto un codice materno giusto?
I: beh si, certamente!

EXTRACT 14
PY-w: paterno vuole sapere? ([risolini])

EXTRACT 15
PX-w: per me è una modalità di dare un nome a ciò che faccio, la uso perché probabilmente nella mia formazione nella mia vita questo etichettare o chiamare in questo modo queste tecniche mi serve per semplificarle, averle in mente semplificandole, come se fosse una struttura, un processo terapeutico per cui mi dico ecco qua serve più un aspetto materno e io mi capisco, anziché ripetere le caratteristiche, o più paterno, ma mi sembra anche che non è che sia una cosa che uso io ma che sia abbastanza condivisa, quando parlo con altri colleghi usare questi termini mi sembra che faccia passare dei messaggi che vengono compresi, è una convenzione che semplifica [...] siccome tu mi stai facendo delle domande che mi attivano l’aspetto razionale quindi concettuale mi rendo conto che come tante altre cose da quando ho iniziato a lavorare come psicologa che probabilmente erano molto razionali e molto meno. [...] dimenticando un po l’aspetto concettuale teorico perché diventa un’abitudine no? D’altra parte non è che se fai un lavoro da tanti anni non è che lo fai come se lo facesse per la prima volta, dopo un po ti diventa un’abitudine, c’è meno consapevolezza no?

EXTRACT 16
Pq-w: [...] ritengo che i genitori assumano alternativamente... trovo estremamente sessista... le letture che vedo legate alla funzione materna e paterna sono agghiaccianti! a mio avviso perché si basano su degli stereotipi di genere esasperati!... a cui persone reali dovrebbero in
qualche modo ispirarsi, peraltro modelli assolutamente datati! non si sa bene perché dovrebbero essere positivi [...] mi sembra una cosa agghiacciante! perché per i miei figli non dovrei essere un ponte verso il mondo come madre, come funzione materna, è vero che chi sostiene questo ti direbbe “la funzione materna/paterna non significa agganciato al padre o alla madre, è più pensato in termini di funzione” però secondo me è un po mascherato sta cosa perché dietro l’idea di funzione materna/paterna c’è comunque l’idea che c’è un bisogno legato a certi tipi di passaggio transizioni nell’evoluzione. mi sembra difficile sostenere che non si aggancino a degli stereotipi di genere

EXTRACT 17
PY-m: beh io credo che se tu lavori con la persona e il tuo lavoro anche ha a che fare con lo sviluppo dell’identità personale e quindi con l’evoluzione personale verso un processo di differenziazione e individuazione, che è la base della salute, evidentemente lavori anche perché la persona acquisì un’identità più forte che poi va a incidere, sto parlando di un lavoro individuale, va a incidere sulle possibilità che questa persona ha di difendersi maggiormente rispetto a quelle che sono le discriminazioni di genere che può subire o incontrare nella sua esperienza

EXTRACT 18
PY-m: […] perché non è che vengono da noi >perché noi gli diciamo che cosa è giusto e cosa è sbagliato, no?

EXTRACT 19
PX-w: sono la prima a cui hai fatto questa intervista o ..
I: No la seconda
PX-w: e la prima invece è stata una passeggiata?
I: Effettivamente anche il primo è stato un po in riflessione..
PX: sono domande toste!

EXTRACT 20
Pq-w: [...] per esempio, una donna che dice ho una scarsa autostima, e poi quando vai a decostruire il suo modello di autostima, scopri che è il modello di quello che prevale, che è sempre sicuro, che non mette mai in discussione niente, e nel riflettere su questo modello di autostima lei stessa si rende conto che non sono i suoi valori e quindi il problema non è tanto la sua autostima quanto i modelli sociali e culturali che sono imposti al di là delle sue preferenze, e... questo va al di là dei discorsi del genere [...] mi è difficile immaginare le conversazioni con i clienti che prescindesse completamente.. non dal loro sesso ma dalle costruzioni sociali e culturali che il loro sesso diventa all’interno della loro interazione con il mondo

EXTRACT 21
PX-w: effettivamente adesso tu mi stai facendo tutte queste domande e io mi sto cominciando a chiedere ma.. che forse non è ben definita nella mai testa cioè proprio in maniera chiara e completa così la funzione materna e paterna

52
I: Sono domande toste non devi dispiacerti anzi! mi hai arricchito mi hai fatto vedere quante lacune ci sono in me, mi sembra di avere delle cose chiare e poi dico ma poi forse non sono poi così chiare.