

GENDER INFORMAL EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN CONTEST

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Abstract

In the pedagogical field, the need for helping young generations in the composition of their gender subjectivity has been highlighted. The main aim is to provide them useful means to deconstruct heteronimity and dependence conditions and to stimulate the identification and development of the various differences gender can take on.

The intentionality of educational projects nevertheless remains far from the educational processes which inform gender learning and lie in educational experiences defined by pedagogical research as informal and widespread.

Within this frame, research meant to collect and examine different gender formation stories of some young women; we investigated the traces and peculiarities of informal educational experiences composing the aforementioned stories and studied the attributions of meaning which these young women refer to their experiences.

The recurrences identified in the collected material allowed us to detect some possible traces of informal and diffuse upbringing by means of the gender disadvantage and to investigate (informal) didactics and contents. Echoes of this disadvantage were also found in the modalities by which the young women thought and shaped their experience and in the way they conceived their gender construct.

The pragmatic orientation which informed the research and motivated the attention for contemporaneity and the young women living it, characterizes the obtained results as a possible functionality which makes this study a contribution to the knowledge and understanding of gender construction stories and a possible preparatory basis for the definition of dedicated educational projects.

Key words: *Agency, Disadvantage, Gender, Gender Biography, Informal education.*

Premises

Nowadays the necessity to accompany new generations to composing their *gender subjectivity* is growing in our country: the aim is to supply them with useful tools for the deconstruction of heteronimity and dependence¹. *Gender education* aims at supporting recognizing and enhancing plural differences that gender can assume². Nevertheless in Italy a gender culture is missing in public discourse³ and only few gender studies have been introduced

¹ Cagnolati, A., Minerva, F. P., & Ulivieri, S. (2013). *Le frontiere del corpo. Mutamenti e metamorfosi*. Pisa: ETS; Ulivieri, S., & Pace, R. (2012). *Il viaggio al femminile come itinerario di formazione identitaria*. Milano: FrancoAngeli; Ulivieri, S., & Biemmi, I. (2011). *Storie di donne. Autobiografie al femminile e narrazione identitaria*. Milano: Guerini; Contini, M. & Ulivieri, S. (2010). *Donne, famiglia famiglie*. Milano: Guerini; Ulivieri, S. (2007). *Educazione al femminile. Una storia da scoprire*. Milano: Guerini; Demetrio, D., Giusti, M., Iori, V., Mapelli, B., Piussi, A. M., & Ulivieri, S. (2001), *Con voce diversa. Pedagogia e differenza sessuale e di genere*. Milano: Guerini.

² Gamberi, C., Maio, M. A., & Selmi, G. (2010). *Educare al genere. Riflessioni e strumenti per articolare la complessità*. Roma: Carocci; Padoan, I., & Sangiuliano, M. (2008), *Educare con differenza. Modelli educativi e pratiche formative*. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier.

³ Volpato, C. (2013). *Psicosociologia del maschilismo*. Roma-Bari: Laterza; Simone, A. (2012). *Sessismo democratico. L'uso strumentale delle donne nel neoliberismo*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis; Soffici, C. (2010). *Ma le donne no. Come si vive nel paese*

in the academic field, particularly in pedagogical faculties⁴. Taking this horizon into account, educational projects promoted by no-profit sector are hardly received at Ministerial level to define the school curriculum, as well as the wider area of educational services is lacking of a gender sensitive approach, except the projects dedicated to it (for example: violence against women, trafficking and exploitation). All these elements contribute to make intentional education (not only at school) so far away from all those processes that compose gender socialization, leaving adolescents alone in the difficult task to becoming themselves⁵.

Aims

The research – involving 12 women (aged 19-23, living in Sesto San Giovanni, heterogeneous in: neighborhood, scholarization, job, extrascholastic activities and free-time) – aims at collecting and exploring young women's *educational gender biography*⁶ investigating, in particular, traces and peculiarities of *informal educational experiences*⁷ that compose them and the personal meaning attributions that women give them. The biographical material has been used also to explore women's *spontaneous theories*⁸ on gender category. In this respect, the research questions are the following: how do young women narrate and attribute meaning to their gender education experiences that they consider relevant about becoming a woman? What contents (subjects, contexts, relationships, experiences) compose their gender education stories? How do young women interpret their gender informal education experiences narrated? Which are educational effects and learning outcomes pointed out by the young women? Which exploration opportunities do young women's educational gender stories offer related to informal gender education (informal contents and didactics)? Which spontaneous theories on gender category have young women expressed during the interview? How are masculinity and femininity considered and defined? Which kinds of relations exist between content of spontaneous gender theories expressed and gender informal education experiences narrated? The research – using *gender sensitive approach*⁹ and applying *qualitative narrative methods*¹⁰ – is used as an auto-educational opportunity that gives the young involved the occasion to re-think – for the first time in all 12 cases – about their life story as a woman. The questions of the interview are: 1) *tell me what made you the person you are today*; 2) *tell me what made you the woman you are today*.

più maschilista d'Europa. Milano: Feltrinelli; Marzano, M. (2010). Sii bella e stai zitta. Perché l'Italia di oggi offende le donne. Milano: Mondadori.

⁴ Antonelli, F., Sarra, G., & Sorrentino, R. (18/07/2013). La formazione universitaria e post-universitaria Gender sensitive in Italia. Anno Accademico 2011/2012. Retrived from http://www.ingenere.it/articoli/il_maggio-sesso-mancante-nelluniversit-italiana.

⁵ Albanesi, C., & Lorenzini, S. (2011). Femmine e maschi nei discorsi tra compagni di classe. Il focus group nella ricerca sul genere in adolescenza. Bologna: Clueb; De Luigi, N. & Gobbi, L. (2010). Giovani e genere. L'immaginario degli studenti sammarinesi. Roma: Carocci; Mapelli, B. (2010). Sette vite come i gatti. Generazioni, pensieri e storie di donne nel contemporaneo. Rho: Stripes; Burgio, G. (2008). Mezzi maschi. Gli adolescenti gay dell'Italia meridionale. Una ricerca etnopedagogica. Milano-Udine: Mimesis; Weber, C. (2004). Inventare se stesse. Adolescenti sulla soglia della civiltà planetaria. Roma: Meltemi.

⁶ Merrill, B. & West, L. (2009). Using biographical methods in social research. London: SAGE; Mortari, L. (2007). Cultura della ricerca e pedagogia. Prospettive epistemologiche. Roma: Carocci.

⁷ Tramma, S. (2009). Che cos'è l'educazione informale. Roma: Carocci.

⁸ Fabbri, D. & Formenti, L. (1991). Carte di identità. Verso una psicologia culturale dell'individuo. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 82-96; Bourdieu, P. (2003). Per una teoria della pratica con Tre studi di etnologia cabila. (I. Maffi, Trans.). Milano: Raffaello Cortina.

⁹ Decataldo, A., & Ruspini, E. (2014). La ricerca di genere. Roma: Carocci.

¹⁰ Mapelli, B. (2008). Soggetti di storie. Donne, uomini e scritture di sé. Milano: Guerini; Mantovani, S. (1998). La ricerca sul campo in educazione. I metodi qualitativi. Milano: Bruno Mondadori.

Drawing from *The Second Sex* of Simone de Beauvoir¹¹ and a novel of Bianca Pitzorno¹², the third and last question is: *imagine you have to tell an alien (that has just come to earth) what it means to be a man and a woman and if you've become or you were born it.*

Results

The comparison between the answers to the first and the second questions – separated by the introduction of a gender's frame – underline interesting variations. Some contents, for example, appear alternately only in a part of the interview (first *or* second answers), identified by the young in some cases as significant for their educational autobiography but not for their gender autobiography; in others they are considered peculiar only by the latter and – without a stimulus for a narration – they would probably not have been mentioned. Even if replicated (first *and* second answers), the contents follow a different treatment which produce two different kind of narrations: one relating to the educational biography and one relating to the gender educational biography; each one organized around different pins and priorities. School (intended as a studying and learning opportunity) and professor (man in particular) are mentioned as most important element in the first part of the interview but they disappear when young women narrate our gender biography. The same happens to the majority of the non-formal educational experiences (cultural, sports, job). Even the fathers – very present in the educational biographies (mostly positive) – are subsequently cited *en passant*. The transition to the second question directs the narrative to new subjects and contents. In response to “what made you the woman you are”, school is replaced by book, film, documentary, TV and other cultural opportunity that speak about women, woman's condition or they propose to represent it. Parents remain central, offering particular models of gender education that are usually considered positive by their daughters. For the first time, female subjects acquire greater attention and visibility, and an educational role is recognized to them, which was completely absent before. Sentimental relationships – already present in many answer to the first questions – become central in gender formation stories. In general, male attendance (boyfriends and friends) are often considered a training opportunities through which young women learned new gender roles (such as being a mother, wife, girlfriend) and new behaviours (for example, how to deal with our body to be considered a woman in a satisfactorily manner). Sexual experiences are cited here for the first time: some episodes of violence are narrated along with the discovery of sexuality, considered a meaningful part of gender's growing (for female) although their educational consequences not always were declared. The sentimental relationships remain important also when they include experience of separation which represent for some young woman a (suffering) way to autonomy and independence and an opportunity of reflection and re-planning our life. Considering gender «something that one does; and does recurrently, in interaction with others»¹³, the 12 answers to the second questions allow also an exploration of some relational daily contexts where young women live; these contexts are approachable through the views, the words and the meanings offered by the protagonist, committed to reflecting around their path to becoming a woman.

¹¹ De Beauvoir, S. (2008). *Il secondo sesso*. (R. Cantini & M. Andreose, Trans.). Milano: Il Saggiatore. Original work published 1949).

¹² Pitzorno, B. (1990). *Extraterrestre alla pari*. Torino: Emme Edizioni.

¹³ West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). *Doing Gender*. *Gender and Society*, 1, 2, 140.

The analysis permits to observe some *social practices, discourses* and *symbolic dimensions*¹⁴ that contributes to relational and contextual gender's production and evolution, and to explore, at the same time, «means and procedures, intentional or not, that promote changes concerning values, knowledge, behavior»¹⁵ of/around gender. In this way, the occurrences founded show some *informal education "traces"* to/through gender disadvantage and their *informal didactics and contents*. What many interviews seem to confirm is the persistence of a *gender order*¹⁶ where widespread daily experiences – made of female's duty of care, sexualization, subordination, objectification – re-promote for girls and women a traditional education to oblation, misogyny, forgetting oneself (necessities, desires, projects, priorities ect.) expressing a form of *back-lash*¹⁷. Although they are less marked than in the past, these experiences seem to transform the gender informal education in an "apprenticeships" which accompany young women to assimilate – unconsciously and progressively – that becoming a woman means learning (from others) what is considered necessary, appropriate for being considered a woman or, using the suggestion of Carla Weber, that what you can be is what other allowing you to be¹⁸. This kinds of experience can be considered part of the pedagogy that Simonetta Ulivieri called *of ignorance*¹⁹; definition through which the Italian pedagogist described the historical presence of a female education allowed to girls only where considered functional or useful for their prescript social roles. This is an education that contributes to a most general historical denial of the female identity, subjectivity and knowledge²⁰. This kind of contents are carried by various informal didactic (as routines, rituals, duties, norms, prescriptions, customs, expectations, examples, prohibitions) that pass in different ways (explicitly or implicitly), and that involve different contexts and subject (media, parents, friends and boyfriends, jobs, teachers etc.) in a recurrences and consistency way, modelling an informal gender education or a «Bildung» as Bourdieu defined.²¹ The power of this education is linked to different form of punishment, stimulating feelings of guilt, but also to the opportunities of social recognition, personal pleasure that can be considered very important opportunities for young people and, in general, in this *liquid* contemporary context.

School and non-formal education take part in this problematic socialization. As recent literature have confirmed²², the intentional education has been unable to assume gender studies and the relevance of their contents. Value of equal opportunities – promoted in education and training programmes, as the young involved in the research remind – is systematic contradicted by the evidence of what young experiment in their daily life within the formal and non formal educational contexts.²³ The *difference* – which is really experimented or which is pedagogically considered as a growing opportunity – remains far away from school, where it could be an object of young's critical observation (supported by teachers) and, at the same time, object of

¹⁴ Leccardi C. (2009). Prefazione. In E. Ruspini (ed.), *Donne e uomini che cambiano. Relazioni di genere, identità sessuali e mutamento sociale* (p. 8). Guerini, Milano, 2009, p. 8.

¹⁵ Tramma, S. (2009). Che cos'è l'educazione informale. Roma: Carocci, p. 75.

¹⁶ Connell, R. (2006). *Questioni di genere*. (R. Ghigi, Trans.). Bologna: Il Mulino.

¹⁷ Faludi, S. (1991). *Backlash: the underclared war against American women*. New York: Crown.

¹⁸ Weber, C. (2004). *Inventare se stesse. Adolescenti sulla soglia della civiltà planetaria*. Roma: Meltemi, p.131.

¹⁹ Ulivieri, S. (1992). *Donne a scuola. Per una storia dell'istruzione femminile in Italia*. In E. Beseghi, & V. Telmon (ed.), *Educazione al femminile: dalla parità alla differenza* (p. 31). Firenze: La Nuova Italia.

²⁰ Seveso, G. (2000). *Per una storia dei saperi femminili*. Milano: Unicopli.

²¹ Bourdieu, P. (2009). *Il dominio maschile*. (A. Serra, Trans.). Milano: Feltrinelli, p. 33 (Original work published 1998).

²² Crivellaro, F., Gallerani, M., Guerzoni, G., Lorenzini, S., Nardone, R., Tarabusi, F., ..., Zanetti, F. (2013). *Generi in relazione: scuole, servizi educativi 0/6 e famiglie in Emilia Romagna*. Napoli: Loffredo.

²³ As in the cases of *gender segregation* or *gender stereotypes* linked to *hidden curriculum*.

educational valorization. What the interviews seem to suggest is a dangerous implicit invite to confine all belongs to our gender subjectivity within the frame of intimate things, suggesting implicitly a new caesura between public and private, personal and political. Without educational (intentional) opportunity for taking the complexity of gender dimension in to account, for young women exploring and querying their daily lives is very difficult; it is difficult to understand it but also to change it, as well as finding suggestions to compose their biography. For all these reasons it's important to explore how young women interpret (by themselves) the gender informal education experiences, their educational effects and learning outcomes that they pointed out, and their gender's spontaneous theories. Echoes of the disadvantage, coming from the informal gender education mentioned before, are pointed out in the same ways used by women for meaning attribution to their experiences, in their spontaneous theories on gender and their definition of

“masculinity” and “femininity”. The interviews show young's competences and difficulties in exploring and identifying gender educational dimensions of their life experiences. That *useful category of analysis*²⁴ – that gender represents – does not seems to be part of a shared epistemological heritage; indeed it appears entirely absent in some cases while in other cases it appears only in single moments of reflection. However it never becomes a critical tool to improve the observation and analysis of our own biography. In spite of an awareness about the presence of a less traditional and more complex gender order than in the past, the young women's interviews collected do not seem to problematize the dominant conceptualization about femininity and masculinity, their relationships and their oppressive effects. Nevertheless their gender's definitions and their narratives about gender experiences contain frequently implicit confirms about naturalization of the differences between men and women;

differences that are frequently considered in a frame of an «absolute dimorphism»²⁵ and «imperfect binarism»²⁶. Indeed in many definitions collected, the occurrences of experiences and examples of female's subordination constitute – in the eyes of young involved in the research – a ratification of his presumed natural origin that prevent from the possibility to consider these conditions the outcome of a social construction. It is what Bourdieu considered a «circular causality»²⁷ that stimulate a reflective approach similar to a circuit closed on itself that contribute to reproduce stereotypes, inequality, discrimination and that becomes an occasion of normalization. The naturalizing of gender inequality produces what Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman called «naive biological determinism».²⁸ In this way young women describe their daily lives as unchangeable. Less attention is given to the culture's role. Trying to construct for the first time a gender's definition, young women come to consider culture's dimension when, for example, they take into account roles of personal experience, episodes of discrimination or violence, gender and sexual orientation's heterogeneity or religious convictions and cultural characteristics. In defiance of Queer philosophy's²⁹ wishes, the recognitions of this complexity does not seem to have automatically any influence on the personal way to consider and doing gender. At school, as in social, relational, cultural contexts in which they are growing, young people learn early that the difference is not conceived as a value. A number of obstacles limit the possibility to transform the difference into a possible educational tool useful to challenge the

²⁴ Scott, J. W. (1986). Gender: A useful category of historical analysis. *The American Historical Review*, 91, 5.

²⁵ Connell, R. (2006). *Questioni di genere*. (R. Ghigi, Trans.). Bologna: Il Mulino, p. 117.

²⁶ Nadotti, M. (1996). *Sesso & Genere. Un manuale per capire. Un saggio per riflettere*. Milano: Il Saggiatore, p.19.

²⁷ Bourdieu, P. (2009). *Il dominio maschile*. (A. Serra, Trans.). Milano: Feltrinelli, p. 20. (Original work published 1998).

²⁸ West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). *Doing Gender*. *Gender and Society*, 1, 2, 129.

²⁹ Butler, J. (2013). *Questioni di genere. Il femminismo e la sovversione dell'identità*. (S. Adamo, Trans.). Milano: Feltrinelli.

symbolic gender order. First the narrations collected confirm the importance to consider the burden of *Gender regime*³⁰ of the young women's family, school, neighbourhood; regimes in which the exception to the roles maybe are too limited or less visible and therefore insignificant, unintelligible or impracticable even if they are considered advantageous. Where (rarely) gender is conceived only a social construction the weight recognized to the cultural influence - in the absence or in the impracticability of alternative (material or symbolic) - seems to undermine a self-legitimation of personal desires, opportunity, choice and also experience perceived incompatible with social destiny. By the way, the idiographic perspective of the research permit to identify some experiences in which the young women's agency is supported and enhanced. However, these opportunities fluctuate in the broad symbolic insignificance of a positive representation of woman, alternative to the one that is reified and reproduced by shared culture. This absence puts young at a crossroads that asks them to choose between what is socially and widely accepted, reinforced and enhanced and the uncertainty linked to the possibility of desire and have a proper and peculiar subjectivity. In this regard, most serious absences are the lack of intentional educational support and collective politic dimensions in which gender can be considered, thematised and problematized; where it can be possible to step back to the common sense³¹, to find a place where gender biographies are enhanced, and to learn from experience. The sharing of gender formation biography constitutes indeed an opportunity to learn to recognize and name what it is unknown and often it is hard to perceive. As Luigina Mortari suggests, young «must be invited to reflect on their experiences, but also on their ideas, those affecting the construction of meaning of experience»³². This practice of reflexive and critical thinking allows subject to doubt the alleged naturalness of everyday life and the supposed inevitability of its forms, learning to read with a gender lens constraints, duties, abuse but also pleasures, desires, needs. This practice, as self-consciousness had shown in '70³³, also be considered as a way to stimulate in the young (female and male) a *sociological imagination* that helps to recognize the link between individual's biography and the larger context of the society in which the individual lives; to pass from private to politic, from natural or social destiny to agency through which we can build our own existence and subjectivity. For girls the valorization of their gender biographies should go hand-in-hand with a valorization of the broadest female symbolic horizon. What in the interviews seems to be missing is a *shared female genealogy that however is not decisive nor determined*³⁴ which young women can freely draw from. In this regard, the educational designs should go beyond the (necessary) deconstruction of the social stereotypes and offer to girls opportunities and tools to become themselves as a subjectivity – individual, social, symbolic, politic – always partial but not complementary, always developing but present to itself.

³⁰ Connell, R. (2006). *Questioni di genere*. (R. Ghigi, Trans.). Bologna: Il Mulino, p. 136.

³¹ Jedlowski, P. (2013). *Il sapere dell'esperienza. Fra l'abitudine e il dubbio*. Roma: Carocci; Moscovici, J. S. (2005). *Le rappresentazioni sociali*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

³² Mortari, L. (2000). Educating for Thinking about "A Good Quality of Life" and Qualitative Research Outcomes. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 5, 1, p. 6.

³³ Sandrucci, B. (2005). *Aufklärung al femminile. L'autocoscienza come pratica politica e formativa*. Pisa: ETS.

³⁴ Bella, A. (2012). Prefazione a *L'umano come donna*. In L. A. Salomé, *L'umano come donna. L'eroticismo* (Eds). Milano: IPOC, Milano.

Development chances

With a pragmatic view, mutated from *social pedagogy's approach*³⁵, the research considers the results a contribute and an opportunity for awareness and understanding life and education gender's stories and a possible basis for dedicated educative project. Narrating one's own life story and education gender's story is an opportunity of self-education that permits to recognize and be aware of the experiences that shape personal gendered embodiment creating a space for reflection, deconstruction and signification that aims to explicit and problematize the relationships between self representation, personal desires and social imaginary. As a tool for exploring the gender educational needs of youth and territory, these narrative spaces are a possible way to orient educational design for young people. This opportunity must deal with the worrying mystification of gender studies reinterpreted into the Italian contemporary context in the so-called "gender ideology" that weakens the already fragile gender education, fragmented and extemporaneous.

³⁵ Catarci, M. (2013). *Le forme sociali dell'educazione. Servizi, territori, società*. Milano: FrancoAngeli; Tramma, S. (2010). *Pedagogia sociale*. Milano: Guerini; Sarracino, V., & Striano, M. (2002). *La pedagogia sociale. Prospettive di indagine*. Pisa: ETS.

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