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Reappropriation and Self-Labeling: the Influence of Sexist Language on Women's Feeling of Personal Power

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Resumo

Este estudo aborda o modo como o uso de termos sexistas afeta a perceção das mulheres acerca do seu poder individual e o valor que as mesmas atribuem a estas etiquetas estigmatizantes. Cento e setenta e cinco participantes mulheres foram aleatoriamente distribuídas por três condições: numa condição as participantes foram convidadas a lembrar uma situação em que se auto-descreveram usando um termo sexista, noutra condição foi pedido às participantes que lembrassem uma situação em que outra mulher usou um termo sexista para as definir e, por fim, na última condição, as participantes foram questionadas sobre uma situação na qual elas usaram termos negativos não sexistas para se autodescrever.

Os sentimentos de poder dos participantes nas situações lembradas foram registados, bem como a valência das etiquetas sexistas especificadas.

Os resultados mostram que a perceção de poder individual das mulheres não varia quando elas mesmas usam as etiquetas em comparação com as situações em que outra mulher as usou. De realçar ainda, que o valor atribuído às etiquetas resultou ser menos negativo quando as participantes usaram os termos para se autodescrever do que quando outra mulher os utilizou.

Palavras chaves: estudos de género, sexismo, auto-rotulagem, reapropriação, percepção de poder individual, valência das etiquetas, conflitos intergrupais.

Abstract

This research investigates how the use of sexist terms affects women's perception of individual power and the valence they attribute to these stigmatizing labels. One hundred and seventy-five participants were randomly assigned to three conditions: in one condition participants were asked to remember a situation in which they self-labeled using a sexist term, in another condition participants were asked to remember a situation in which another woman used a sexist term to refer to them and in the last condition participants were asked about a situation in which they used non-sexist negative terms to self-label.

Participants' feelings of power in the remembered situations were recorded, as well as the valence of the specific sexist labels.

Results show that women's sense of individual power does not vary when they used the terms to describe themselves compared to the situations in which another woman used them, while the value attributed to the labels appears to be less negative when the participants used the terms to describe themselves than when another woman did it.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Sexism, Self-labelling, Reappropriation, Perceived Individual Power, Labels' Valence, Intergroup Conflict.

Index

Introduction

"By changing language we can contribute to change the world"

Rhoda Unger, 2011

During social interactions, different strategies of social categorization are used in order to simplify the information coming from the outside, be able to interpret reality and behave appropriately (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The type of language people use during interpersonal communications is influenced by the cognitive process of social categorization and the stereotypes and prejudice that result from it. Conversely, stereotypes and prejudice influence interpersonal communication and social interactions.

As illustrated by the literature, stereotyping language has an influence on the targets it's referred to; being the target of social stigmatizing words, is linked to lower performances both at school and at work (Schmader & Hall, 2014) and negative emotional consequences (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Carnaghi & Bianchi, 2017). Being the target of sexist terms, in particular, is related to different psychological problems, such as anxiety and depression (McLaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, & Keyes, 2010; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003).

Slurs and stigmatizing labels represent a form of hate speech that has different effects on the targets (Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt, 2017); usually used by members of dominant groups, they reinforce the stereotypes about the characteristics of minority groups' members. Ethnic slurs, for example, are proved to activate negative attitudes toward members of the minority group the labels refer to (Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985), maintaining psychological and physical distance between the two groups (Fasoli et al., 2015).

The Italian context, in particular, appears to be strongly affected by these issues. As portrayed in the final relation of the Hate, Intolerance, Xenophobia and Racism Parliamentary Commission (Jo Cox Commission, 2017), in fact, Italy results to be a country extremely homophobic and Islamophobic and, according to the Global Gender Gap Report (2017), far away for gender equality.

However, minority groups aren't impotent against stereotypes and stigmatization. The process of reappropriation, for instance, "by taking a negatively evaluated label, and

revaluing it positively" is one of the strategy that a minority group can use to " change the value of the label and thus, in at least some important ways, the value of the group." (Galinsky, Hugenberg, Groom & Bodenhausen, 2003).

The model of reappropriation proposed by Galinsky and colleagues (2013), affirms that the use by members of minority groups of stigmatizing labels to define one's self (self-labeling), has an effect on the labels, whose stigmatizing force decreases, and on the feeling of individual power of the person who use the labels.

Given the strongly sexist context of Italy, this study aims, therefore, to shed some light into the influence of the reappropriation of derogatory terms on Italian women's feeling of individual power and on the valence they attribute to the stigmatizing labels.

The first chapter of the thesis is dedicated to an overview of the relation between language and intergroup relations, social categorization, social stereotyping and discriminatory attitudes. A description of the phenomenon and the model of reappropriation proposed by Galinsky and colleagues (2013) concludes the chapter.

In the second and third chapters I've respectively explained the methods implemented in the research and the analysis of the results. The fourth chapter, finally, is dedicated to a critical discussion of the data analysis.

Chapter I - Theoretical Framework

Language and Intergroup Relations

Many social phenomena like stereotypes, prejudice and social representations, originate within people's interactive communication. Interpersonal communication is one of the most important way in which people influence each other: intentions, opinions, beliefs and desires are shared through communication (Krauss and Chiu, 1997).

As explained by Tajfel in his famous "Human Groups and Social Categories" (1981), we can imagine social behavior as a continuum from interpersonal to inter-group behavior. Interpersonal behavior is based on the characteristics of each person involved in the interaction, intergroup behavior is based on their belonging to groups or social categories.

The mental representation of "us", the group members refer to, is called ingroup, while the outgroup can be defined as the ambient external to the ingroup.

Intergroup phenomena cannot be explained only implying individual characteristics or traits of personality, to fully understand them it is necessary to consider group characteristics and the influence that belonging to a group has on group's members (Sherif, 1961).

There is no unanimity in the definition of group, in social psychology literature is possible to find different interpretation. Galimberti (2012) for instance define groups as a collection of individuals that interact, mutually influence each other and share, consciously or unconsciously, interests, objectives, characteristics and behavioral rules.

Kurt Lewin (1948) defined a group as a dynamic totality based on the interdependence of is members instead of similarity. The author made a distinction among aggregate, social category and group, that is especially characterized by the fact that its members shares behavioral rules and explicit and implicit expectations.

Regardless the definitions, the simple categorization into groups is enough to trigger ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation as we know from Tajfel's work on minimal groups (Tajfel, 1971): the tendency to be more favorable towards one's own group even when the belonging to that group is completely aleatory.

According to Allport (1954), intergroup dynamics and relative prejudice, are based on social categorization. These phenomena are shown by the use of linguistic labels that, more

than other elements, allows the recognition of groups and the differences within them. The point of view of the observer influence significatively on the way things are described and labeled, the cognitive representation of whom hears the labels is strongly influenced by the linguistic choices of who is describing events, situations or people.

Categorical labels associated to stimuli, in fact, communicate additional information to the ones provided by the stimuli themselves. For example, in a study of Rothbar, Davis-Stitt, and Hill, (1997), two groups of participants were asked to watch images of famous actors and describe them. The group that was exposed to pictures with a political label, attributed more similarities to the actors categorized as having the same political belief (labeled with the same term: liberal or conservative), so both group similarities and intergroup differences were accentuated in the presence of semantics labels in comparison to a no-labels control condition.

A study on Linguistic Intergroup Bias by Maass and colleagues (1989), showed how participants' lexical choices, while describing a scene, changed depending on the positive or negative valence of the scene and on the fact that the actor in the scene was a member of participants' ingroup or outgroup. When participant were asked to describe a positive action of an ingroup member, in fact, they showed the tendency to use a more abstract choice of words and a positive connotation (e.g. the use of an adjective, "John is kind"). When asked to describe the same action carried out by a member of the outgroup, participants were more likely to use concrete vocabulary and give an external attribution to the actor of the action, using for example a descriptive verb (e.g. John helped Paul).

These two different modalities of describing the same event have different effects on the listeners (see Semin & Fiedler, 1988). The abstract description, in fact, communicate a dispositional kind of information, such as the description of the whole personality of who is performing the action and its stability over time. This leads to the idea that the agent of an action will probably act in the same way in other situations since the attitude depend on internal (good) characteristics and not on external factors. A concrete description, on the other hand, provides a situational type of information, bringing to the idea that the event described can be one of a kind situation, not likely to be repeated.

The same study by Mass and colleagues (1989) showed that when the action to describe had a negative valence, the choice of using an abstract or concrete vocabulary was inverted for ingroup and outgroup members. When a member of the ingroup carried out a negative action, participants showed a tendency to describe it with concrete terms, when was a

member of the outgroup to realize a negative action, it was more likely to be described with an abstract vocabulary.

The behavior described in Mass and colleagues' experiment can be understood as attempt to protect ourselves. According to Tajfel and Turner (1987), in fact, we tend to attribute less negative characteristics to members of our ingroup to maintain a positive idea of the group to which we belong in order to protect our social identity. Members of the outgroup, instead, can be described as having stable negative characteristics.

The influence of categorization on social perception highlighted in these studies, shows how perception can be influenced by linguistic description, that is the way the event or situation is described. These phenomena are put in place in everyday life, since language is influenced by intergroup relations and, conversely, intergroup relations are influenced by language (Carnaghi & Bianchi, 2017).

From Social Categorization to Discrimination

During social interactions everyone uses unconscious cognitive strategies of categorization, that allow us to simplify the information coming from the world around us (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). These strategies, can be very useful in certain contexts, but sometimes they can lead to excessive simplifications so that members of the outgroups instead of being perceived as unique and distinct individuals, become indistinguishable and interchangeable. Walter Lippmann, for example, defined stereotypes as the photographs of our minds (1922), underlining their stable and rigid nature.

The problem of stereotypes is everyday more important since our society is characterized by strong social and cultural movements; it's important to reflect on the way social interactions are driven by stereotypes, which are elementary and rough simplifications of the reality, in order to be able to approach others seeing them as unique individuals.

Everyday communications are also influenced by stereotypes and prejudice and, very often, they tend to consciously perpetuate and strengthen them. It is clear, then, that stereotypes' diffusion is strongly linked with the language, whose function is to separate and categorize the incredible mass of information we receive every day (Allport, 1954).

Stereotypes can be defined as a "... fixed, over generalized belief about a particular group or class of people" (Cardwell, 1996) and it is possible to conceptualize them as a result of

the mental process of categorization. Social stereotypes are simplified images of social categories, situations or events that are shared by most people in a group or institution. They allow us to simplify and understand complex events or rationalize pursued or planned actions; social stereotypes also help to positively differentiate one's own group of belonging from others.

Gender stereotypes are referred to the mechanisms of categorization on which people rely to interpret, elaborate and unravel the reality linked to sexuality, in other words they are the mental representation of what is feminine and what is masculine (Schnabl, 1994). Gender stereotypes are based on the general idea that women and men own different sets of characteristics not only behavior and physical appearance, but biologically derived (OurWatch, 2018; Barnett & & Rivers, 2004).

It seems clear that that discriminatory characteristics of the genders are defined following a conception that define masculinity with characteristics of action, autonomy, assertiveness, competence, self-orienting, goal-setting, ambition and decision-making, while femininity is defined by what can be confined in the field of interpersonal skills such as emotivity, kindness and warmth, sensibility, need of affiliation, passivity, dependency and submissiveness (Feingold, 1994; Taurino, 2005; Otterbacher, Bates & Clough, 2017).

Following this perspective, agentic features are therefore associated to the masculinity while communal features are related to the femininity, maintaining the strong dichotomic concept of power/dominance for male stereotype and weakness/submission for the female stereotype (Spence, Deaux & Helmreich, 1985).

Neutral labels used to define social categories, such as for example "man" and "women", automatically activated stereotypical content associated to these social categories. For example, in one experiments by Banaji and Hardin's (1996), participants were exposed to a prime of 200ms of neutral labels and asked if the following word presented was a pronoun or not. The results showed that answers were faster when the pronoun had the same gender of the prime term, so if for example the prime was feminine, participants were faster to recognize the pronoun "her" over "him". These effects were interpreted as an instance of automatic stereotyping following gender labels.

Other kind of labels, strong and weak, instead, can communicate a kind of judgment with different consequences due to the type of categorization attributed to the subjects. In a study by Foroni and Rothborth (2011), for example, different types of women's silhouettes were showed to the participants, the silhouettes could be described with weak labels, ("below

average," "average," and "above average") or strong labels ("anorexic," "normal," and "obese"). Participants in the strong labels condition were more likely to perceive less intragroup differences, showing a tendency to generalize when the stimuli are described with strong labels.

According to Carnaghi and Bianchi (2017), a specific class of labels are, the derogatory group labels, that "express discriminatory and negative attitudes toward specific groups and communicate that the targeted individual is deviating from what is normatively expected".

Derogatory language can be generic or directly used to refer to specific social categories, the first type of derogatory labels includes all of those insults that are used against a single individual because of negative characteristics or lack of abilities, real or not, such as "stupid" or "ugly" are referred to a specific person regardless his/her social belonging.

Derogatory language used against specific social groups is somehow more dangerous because it insults not only the person but also the social group to which he or she belongs, causing emotional consequences that are linked to the group itself (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Carnaghi & Bianchi, 2017), the word "fag", for example, is an insult for the single individual and at the same time for the category of homosexual, as well as "nigger" or "cunt" are terms used to insult a person that at the same time offend the social groups of black people and women.

According to Kaplan (1999), derogatory terms can be: expressive words, when they express an evaluation, or descriptive when are used to describe something or someone, other authors sustain that derogatory labels are strictly expressive. Hedger (2012, 2013) for example, supports the theory that terms can be exclusively expressive or exclusively descriptive, so the world "African-American" is a descriptive label, since it transmit neutral information, while the term "Nigger" is an expressive label because it reveals a specific vision or concept on a specific social group.

Croom (2014) sustains instead that derogatory labels should be seen as somehow in the middle, since they communicate both the expressive and descriptive concepts and according to Jackson (2005), some derogatory labels have the power to transmit positive qualities. The author in fact sustain that some terms, that are perceived as derogatory, in certain circumstances can be perceived as positive, for example the term "bitch" is nowadays associated with the idea of a strong woman, at least in the North American culture.

Derogatory labels can be used by the dominant group to maintain and reinforce the stigma on the minority groups and with that keep social control in a certain way (Galinsky et al.,

2013). The consequences of the use of this kind of language, in comparison to the use of more neutral categorical labels, can be sometimes extreme, leading, among others, to the dehumanization of the members of the minority group (Piccoli, Foroni & Carnaghi, 2013; Volpato, 2011; Hirsch & Smith, 1999;) and unfair distribution of resources (Fasoli, Maass & Carnaghi, 2015), Also, the use of derogatory group labels have negative consequences for the targets of these labels, reinforcing their internalized stigma (Bianchi, Piccoli, Fasoli, Ziotti, Carnaghi, 2017).

Members of a dominant group that use derogatory terms, keep the distance between them and whose part of a minority group, making it difficult to begin or continue the process of integration and the achievement of equality (Fasoli et al., 2015; Fasoli, Paladino & Sulpizio, 2016) .

Literature reveals how being the target of derogatory language has a negative impact on school achievements (Turner et al., 2017) and on health, observing the relation between sexual and ethnic discrimination and the development of different psychiatric disorders, such as depression, anxiety disorders and drug addictions (McLaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, & Keyes, 2010; Swim et al., 2003) and even the likelihood of developing cardiovascular diseases (Hooley, Butcher, Nock, & Mineka, 2017) in the people target of the discrimination.

Reappropriation and Self-Labeling with Derogatory Terms

Individuals belonging to minority groups have different ways to fight back against the use of derogatory terms and overcome stereotypes, Wang, Whitson, Anicich, Kray and Galinsky (2017), for example, analyzed some of these strategies observed in minority groups. Avoid showing one's own belonging to a social group is the first strategy observed, but it is not always healthy and sometimes not even possible, in the case of gender and ethnicity for example, is impossible to hide one's own belonging. As an alternative, member of minority groups can invest in a different category they belong to, that has less stigma, for instance one's own profession. Another strategy is to invest on positive characteristics associated with one's own social group, for example Afro Americans suffer from the stereotype of being not smart, but they are seen as successful in sports; women are stereotyped as lacking of leadership skills, but are considered in general to have great emotional intelligence.

These strategies, however, are often not effective enough to overcome the negative effects of stereotyping, such as for example discrimination, because they don't have an influence on the negative power of derogatory labels.

Other strategies, then, reveal to have a more direct influence on decrease of the stigmatization, according to Galinsky et al. (2003), for instance, the process of Self-Labeling have a direct impact on the stigmatizing strength of derogatory labels. The authors define Self-Labelling as the use by a member of a minority group of a derogatory term, usually used by a dominant group, to define him/herself.

The process of Self-Labeling as reappropriation of a derogatory term is a well-known phenomenon in literature: we have examples of that as a fight against racism in the '60s with the word "Nigger", homophobia in the '80s with the term "Queer" and sexism in 1968 with the word "Bitch".

In 1964 Dick Gregory, an African American comedian and activist for civil rights, published his autobiography with the title "Nigger". In the dedication of the book, the author declared that he chose that term so that the next time his mother would hear it, could think that someone was advertising his book, instead of thinking that she was listening to an insult.

Likewise, in the '80s a gay and lesbian weekly news magazine named *OutWeek Magazine*, started using the term "queer" referring to the LGBT community and in 1968 Jo Freeman, a feminist attorney, wrote "The BITCH manifesto", in which she defined the term as describing a strong and independent woman in contradiction to the stereotype of weak and submissive woman; since then the term *bitch* has been used more and more in music and television, making is appearance in song and TV series such as the title of a magazine.

Even if the use of these terms seems to have been spread, the utility of it is not shared by everyone. Someone claims that it should be illegal to use derogatory term or that should be allowed only when the speaker is talking about him/her-self (Anten, 2006); the use of the word *bitch* is indeed still strongly debated within the feminist community (O'Keefe 2014).

An example of this phenomenon is the fact that the Black community started to use the term "Nigger" in 1964, the year in which, thank to the Civil Right Act, Afro American population perceived an increment of its power (Wang et al., 2017). A similar dynamic was observed in the '80s within the homosexual community, when sodomy law was repealed ad the Queer Nation movement was started and encouraged homosexual to use the term queer (Galinsky et al., 2013).

According to Bianchi (2014) is it possible to consider three different situations in which individuals' use of derogatory terms is perceived as acceptable: autorreferencial use of the label because the term used is derogatory against one's own social group, members of the ingroup using derogatory terms to refer to another ingroup member and labels used towards outgroup members, but only in specific circumstances and to refer to certain persons.

An example of the first situation is the dialogue of three character in the TV serie "13 Reasons Why":

Tyler: "Fucking Ryan Shaver"

[...........]

Cyrus: "Yeah, that Ryan's a f** tool."

Chad: "Worst kind of gay."

Tyler: "I mean, I didn't mean that because he's gay"

Chad: "Oh, I did. He's f** shallow and pretentious, and he f** dressed gay every day. [exales] Classic homo."

Cyrus: "Chad's also gay, for your information. Hence, he can say s** the rest of us can't."

Regardless these examples there isn't yet an unanimous acceptance of the use of these terms, someone thinks that they should be used only in the case of self-labeling and/or by ingroup members or even prohibited to use.

Feminists' Reappropriation of Gender Stigmatizing Labels

The body used as a weapon of rebellion is one of the distinctive characteristics of the recent feminist movements. The *SlutWalk* movement is an example of reappropriation of a stigmatizing term or, as Judith Butler defined it, an act of resignification (1997).

The movement was born in 2011 in Canada, after a policeman stated, in a class for personal security at campus, that "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order to not be victimized" (Greer, 2011). In the same way of the term *queer,* that passed through a process of reappropriation in the gay community, this movement aim to do the same with sexist slurs.

The *SlutWalk-ers* move in a context where violence against women and victim blaming is

still very strong, its objective is to make people stop focusing on women's way of dressing or behaving and blaming the victims instead of the aggressor. The movement also fights against the dichotomic stereotype that wants women to be *good girls* or *bad girls*, rivendicating women's' right to be sexually free and choose for themselves.

The first *SlutWalk* manifestation took place in Toronto in 2011, in three years the movement became international, it expanded in 40 countries (Carr, 2013). For what concern the Italian context, the first manifestation was organized in Rome in 2013 under the name *"cagne sciolte",* literally "loose bitches" as a reference to "The Bitch Manifesto" (1968).

From an etymological point of view, the term *slut* made its appearance in the written language at the beginning of the 15th century, indicating a dirty or sloppy person, sometime used as a synonymous of low class house servant, it was used to refer to both women and men (Jones, 2015). Only at the end of the 15th century the term changed his connotation, acquiring a new sexual-related meaning to indicate an indecent, inappropriate woman, in the sense of promiscuous and, therefore, dirty (Attwood, 2007).

Another example of terms that have lost their original meaning and are used to insult women because of a sexual reference, are the female version of animals names: the feminine word for dog (bitch in English) *cagna* in Italian as well as *troia* or *maiala* (female for pork), *vacca* (female for bull) and *zoccola* (female for rat) are insults referred to sexual promiscuity or sexual appetite.

The connection between sexual appetite (rats are extremely sexually active), promiscuity (dogs can have puppies from different partner in the same litter) and impurity (literally as animals and morally) is so deeply rooted in western societies that, at least in Italian, those words have completely lost their zoological meaning, shifted to the domain of insults (Tartamella, 2015).

The strong cultural link between female sexuality, impurity, immorality and shame constitutes a powerful barrier for the resignification and reappropriation, and that's why there is no agreement in the feminist community on the legitimacy and usefulness of using these in the attempt of reappropriating them (O'Keefe 2014).

A Model of Reappropriation

The model of reappropriation proposed by Galinsky and colleagues sustains that Self-Labeling has positive effects on the representation of individual power and on the valence attributed to the labels.

In the model proposed in 2003, the authors claim that the process of Self-Labelling produce a direct effect on the stigmatizing strength of the used label, decreasing it. In a second article published in 2013, Galinsky and colleagues presented the results of ten experiments in which the reappropriation model was tested; according to them, self-labeling with derogatory term weakens the stigmatization strength of the label itself.

In the first study participants were asked to list negative labels used to denigrate their own group of belonging, in one condition participants' task was to recall an episode of their life in which they perceived their ingroup as powerful and the participants in the other condition was to recall an opposite situation. Results shown that participants had greater tendency to self-label with derogatory terms in the condition of high group power than low group power condition.

In the second experiment the authors aimed to investigate if individual power makes the self-labeling easier to use. Participants thought about one episode when their ingroup was powerful or about one episode when the perceived individual power. Results showed that only perceived group power and not individual power eases the use of self-labelling.

In the third study the authors investigated if perceived self-power would increase because of the use of self-labeling. Participants were asked to think about an episode in which they referred to themselves or someone else referred to them with a derogatory term. Participants in the Self-labelling Condition showed a greater feeling of self-power in comparison to the group in Other-Labeling Condition.

The fourth experiment investigated the effect on Self-Labeling on external observers. Participants were requested to read a text about two boys walking in the school hall, in one condition one of the boys called himself with a homophobic slur, in the other condition he was called by the other one. Afterwards participants expressed their valuation on individual

power of the first boy in the story: external observers tend to perceive him as more powerful in the Self-Labeling condition than in Other-Labeling Condition.

In the fifth study the investigative question was if the use of Self- Labeling increases observers' perception of group power for the Self-Labeller's group of belonging. One group of participants read an article in which a Rotul individual called himself with a fictitious label referred to Rotuls, a Crimean ethnic minority. The other group read an article someone else pronunciated the insult. Participants expressed their evaluation on the minority group's power. Participants in the Self-Labeling condition attributed more power to minority group compared with the participants in the second condition.

In Experiment 6, the authors tested if perceived self-power has an influence on the impact of self-labelling on the perception of group power. Group power was higher in the self-labeling condition, taking action of any kind increased the perception of self-power and stigmatized group's power was increased only with self-labeling.

With the seventh study authors investigated if the negative value attributed to the derogatory label decreases when perceived self-power increases. Participants in the Self-Labeling condition resulted to feel more powerful and attributed a less negative value to the term they recalled comparing to the other-labeled participants. A further analysis showed a mediation effect of the perceived power on the relation between condition and valence attributed to the stigmatizing label used by the self-labelers.

In Experiment 8, participants experience of witnessing someone labeling him/herself with a derogatory group term induced them to evaluate the target as more powerful in comparison than witnessing hi/her being labeled by another person. The research also showed that participants in the self-labeling condition attributed less negative value to the labels comparing to those in the other-label condition and that the negative value of the label was attenuated by the perception of group's power, whose perception was increased by participants' self-labeling.

The last two studies tested if the attenuating effect of self-labeling on labels' stigma works only with derogatory terms or occurs for any kind of label. In study number 9 the two

condition of labeling didn't show to have effect on the evaluation of the non-stigmatizing label.

The last experiment compared the self-labeling effect on the negative value attributed to stigmatizing and non-stigmatizing labels.

In the stigmatizing condition, self-labeling corresponded to a stronger endorsement of female empowerment comparing to other-labeling and the label was perceived as less negative.

The ten studies realized by Galinsky and colleagues did not take into account the possible influence of other-labeling made by a member of the ingroup or a member of the outgroup, in terms of difference they could bring on perceived self-power and valence attributed to the labels. The authors, in fact, only assess when a member of the outgroup used the labels towards targets, therefore is not possible to infer whether there are differences in these circumstances and what they are.

A recent study conducted in Italy by Petronio, Carnaghi and Bianchi (2017), investigated the psychological process of reappropriation of stigmatizing labels comparing the effects of self-labeling and intragroup-labeling in gay men.

The study relied on a similar procedure and measures (i.e., feelings of individual power and perceived negativity of homophobic labels) used by Galinsky and colleagues (2013) and compared two groups of participants, randomly assigned to a self-labeling condition, in which they were asked to recall the use of a homophobic label to talk about themselves, or to a ingroup-labeling condition, in which they were requested to think about a situation when a member of the ingroup (i.e,. a gay man) used a stigmatizing label referring to them.

Participants that used stigmatizing labels to define themselves, showed a higher level of perceived individual power comparing to participants who were labeled by a member of the ingroup. A negative correlation between the condition and the valence attributed to the labels was also found, indicating that participants in the self-labeling condition perceived the labels as less negative comparing to the participants in the ingroup condition.

The authors therefore sustain that, in the case of gay men, only self-labeling increase the feeling of personal power and decrease the negativity attributed to the labels.

The following study intends to continue the investigations on this matter, focusing of the social group of women.

Chapter II - The Research

Hypothesis

The aim of this research is to investigate the psychological effects of the use of derogatory labels on women in the Italian context. Specifically, this study aims to compare self-labeling, that is, a situation in which a woman uses a sexist label to define herself, to a situation in which another woman (i.e., member of the ingroup) uses it.

We define the first condition as Self-Labelling/*derogatory* (SL-D) and the second condition as Ingroup-Labelling/*derogatory* (IGL-D).

Also, in order to investigate possible differences in self-labelling between the use of sexist insult and non-sexist insults, this study included a condition defined Self-Labelling/*pejorative* (SL-P), that is, a situation in which a woman use a non-sexist insult to define herself.

The feeling of personal power in the situation and the valence attributed to the labels are considered as dependent variables.

Regarding conditions in which derogatory terms are involved, based on study of Petrionio et al. (2017), participants' feeling of individual power is expected to be significantly higher in the Self-Labeling in comparison to the Ingroup-Labeling condition (**H1**).

In addition, according to the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), any term referred to one's own social group has the tendency of being evaluated as more positive; following this perspective, the same attributed valence should be found in both condition. However, based on the findings of Petronio et al.(2017), a less negative attribution of valence to the label is expected in Self-Labeling conditions in comparison to the Ingroup-Labeling condition (**H2**).

Moreover, based on Galinsky and colleagues' model (2013) and on Petronio et al.'s study (2017), it is expected that participants' feelings of power would mediate the relationship between conditions and valence, that is, Self-Labeling conditions should decrease the negativity attributed to the valence, comparing to Ingroup-Labeling condition, because of participants' increased perceived individual power (**H3**).

For exploratory reasons participants were also asked about how often they used the same

labels they listed before, to refer to other women in her presence and absence. Following the perspective of the model of reappropriation (Galinsky et al., 2013), it is expectable to find no significant difference in the frequency of use in presence and absence of the target. If, as expected, women's revaluation of the labels prompts them to evaluate the term as less negative, participants in the Self-Labeling conditions should be willing to use them in the same amount in both circumstances and attribute the same value to them (**H4**).

Finally, an exploratory Self-Labelling/*pejorative* condition was included in order to add further information, useful to the comprehension of the phenomena of reappropriation. The comparison between Self-Labelling/*derogatory* and *pejorative* conditions aims to verify whether the effects on participants' perceived individual power and attributed valence depend or not on the type of the labels (i.e., sexist or non-sexist) they used.

Design

The study uses a between-subject design with three different condition.

Participants

Individuals who participated in study were $N = 175$. The responses of $N = 11$ participants, considered to be inadequate for lack of comprehension or inconsistent answers, were excluded, as well as $N = 1$ man and $N = 1$ underage woman. The responses of $N = 8$ participants who didn't reply to the question about their sex were included, since from a qualitative analysis of their answers, it was possible to assume they are women.

The final sample counted with $N = 162$ Italian female participants, Italian-speakers, with ages ranging from 18 to 73 years-old (M = 35.56, SD = 13.42). Participants' age, level of education (high school diploma 31,5, master degree 24,7%, bachelor degree 19,1%) and sexual orientation (75,9% heterosexual, the rest distributed among bisexual, homosexual, not specified or other) did not differ in the three conditions.

Procedures and Materials

The study was conducted through an individual questionnaire designed using the qualtrics software (https://www.qualtrics.com) and distributed through an anonymous link provided by the site. Participant were recruited on social media, through several groups involving different topics in order to increase the heterogeneity of the sample by inquiring persons of different ages and cultural backgrounds.

The anonymous link was posted only on Italian groups and was preceded by a brief explanation of the topic of the research and credits. Individuals who decided to participate in the research by clicking on the link, were redirected to the questionnaire which included an informed consent with a brief explanation about the research, insurance of anonymity and data confidentiality and contacts of the researchers for further information.

Participants that chose to continue with the study were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions of Self-labelling Derogatory (SL-D), Ingroup-Labelling Derogatory (IG-D) and Self-labelling Pejorative (SL-P). .

First, in the SL-D and IG-D conditions participants were presented with an open question and asked to list negative terms usually used to insult women in their society: "*Think about the group of women in general and about negative labels and insults that are usually used against this group*". Participants were indeed primed by asking them to think about the social group of women and about the insults that are typically used against it.

In the SL-P condition, instead, participants were asked to list negative labels and insults typically used against individual in general, without reference of gender: "*Think about the negative labels and insults that are usually used against people*".

Second, participant in SL-D e SL-P were asked to think about a situation in which they used one of the terms they listed before to define themselves: "*Recall and describe a situation in which you describe yourself with one of the terms you thought*".

Participant in the IG-D condition, instead, were asked to think about a situation in which another woman (i.e., a member of the ingroup) used one of the terms listed before, referring to them: "*Recall and describe a situation in which a woman has referred to you using one of these labels or terms*".

For each one of the three conditions if someone never experienced the situation, or was unable to recall it, a "imaginative option" was given. Choosing *"I have never been in this*

situation", a new input box would open and participants were asked to imagine and describe a situation in which they would use the term to define themselves (SL-D, SL-P) or a circumstance in which another woman would use it referring to them (IG-D).

Afterwards, participants rated their feeling of individual power and the value they attributed to the labels in the situation. Also, participants were asked questions regarding their use of those labels and the valence they attribute to them. Participants who never used the term in these circumstances could choose the option "*I have never been in this situation*" and were automatically sent to the last part of the survey.

Finally, demographic data of the participants was recorded with six questions about gender (*female, male, other*s), age (free answer limited to numbers), sexual orientation (*heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, others*), mother language (free answer limited to alphabetic characters), nationality (free answer limited to alphabetic characters) and level of education (seven option from *elementary school* to *PhD.*).

The questionnaire ended with a small debriefing explaining the essence of the research, the contacts of the researchers in case of further questions and thanking participants for their cooperation.

Measures

Participants' **feeling of individual power in the situation** was assessed on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), through their agreement on three items about the situation experienced or imagined: "*How powerful did you feel in this situation?*", "*How much control did you feet to have in this situation?*" and "*How much influence did you feel you had in this situation?*".

The **valence attributed to the label** was evaluated asking the participants to express their agreement on two items: "*How negative did you perceive the term used in this situation to be?*" and "*How positive did you perceive the term used in this situation to be?*". The responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

The **frequency of use of the labels** was investigated through the questions "*Have you used the term you thought about before referring to another woman, in her presence?*" and "*Have*

you used the term you thought about before referring to another woman, NOT in her presence?". Answers were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale in which the value 1 corresponded to "*never*" and the value 7 to "*always*". The valence attributed to the terms in these two circumstances was assessed using the same items and scales that were used to assess participants' evaluation of the labels in the previous part of the questionnaire.

Chapter III - Results

A qualitative analysis of the recorded responses indicated that thirty-three (65%) of the participants in the Self-Labeling/*pejorative* condition actually listed sexist terms and described situations in which they labeled themselves with them. Due to this, SL-P condition was left with a small number of participants (n = 18) not allowing for a correct test of the hypotheses that compare this condition with SL-D condition. Consequently, the analysis performed in this chapter compared only SL-D with IG-D comparison.

Since preliminary data analysis has showed a similar pattern of results when participants in the SL-P condition were included or excluded SL-D condition, these participants' responses were moved to the first condition (Self-Labelling Derogatory). The final sample for the analysis consisted of $N = 86$ participants for the Self-Labeling/*derogatory* condition and $N = 58$ participants for the Ingroup-Labeling/*derogatory* condition .

Perceived Individual Power

The scoring of the three items related to the concept of power shows a good internal consistency (α = .81). The three item were averaged creating an index of perceived individual power in the situation that participants remembered or imagined. Higher values indicate higher self-perceived power.
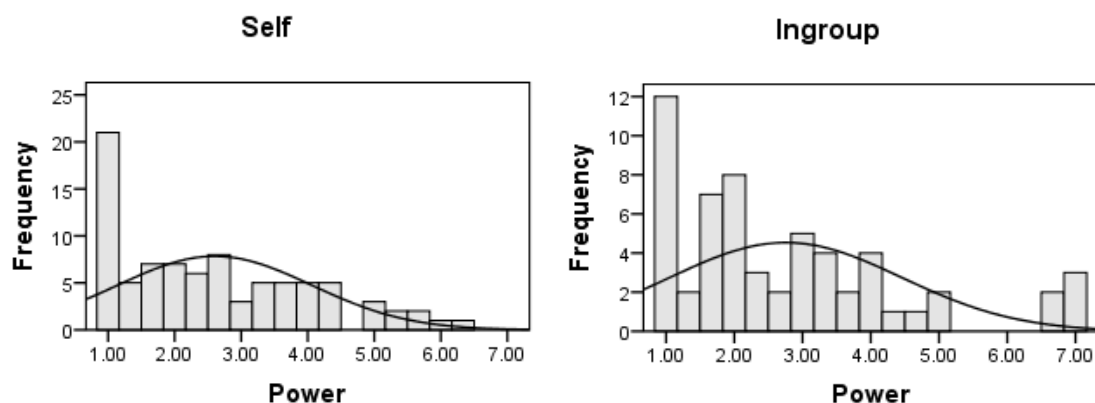

Fig. *n .1* Scoring distribution of perceived self-power by condition

Participants' level of perceived individual power was analyzed by means of a 2 (Condition: Self-Labeling vs. Ingroup-Labeling) x 2 (Type of situation: Real vs. Imagined) ANOVA with the two factors varying between participants.

The analysis did not reveal any significant effect (Fs < .80, ps > .372).

Regardless of the condition, participants' perceived self-power was significantly lower than the middle point of the scale (Self-Labeling: M = 2.6, SD = 1.46, t (85) = -8.89, p < .001; Ingroup-Labeling: M= 2.75, SD = 1.70, t (57) = -5.59, p < .001), showing that participants felt a low level of individual power in both conditions.

Valence Attributed to the Labels

After reversing the scoring of the second item associated to the positive valence attributed to the derogatory term, the two items related to the concept of valence were analyzed showing a significant and positive correlation (r = .448, p < .001).

The two items related to the concept of valence show a good internal consistency (α = .89). The two items were averaged creating an index of negative valence attributed to the labels used by participants. Higher scores correspond to higher perception of negativity of the labels.
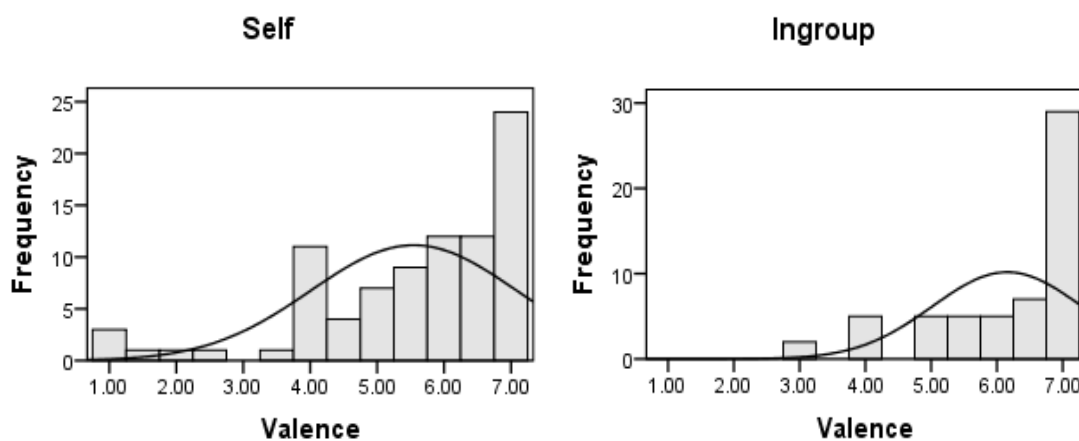

Fig. n.2 Scoring distribution of valence by condition

The valence attributed to labels was analyzed by means of a 2 (Condition: Self-Labeling vs. Ingroup-Labeling) x 2 (Type of situation: Real vs. Imagined) ANOVA with the two

factors varying between participants.

A main effect of Condition was found (F (1.143) = 4.19, p = .044, partial eta-squared = .029) indicating that the valence attributed to the labels in the Ingroup-Labeling Condition was more negative (M = 6.15, SD = 1.14) than in the Self-Labeling Condition (M = 5.55, SD = 1.54). The analysis didn't reveal any other significant effects (Fs < .40, ps > .530).

Regardless of the condition, negative valence attributed to the labels by participants was significantly higher than the middle point of the scale (Self-Labeling: t (85) = 9.32, p < .001; Ingroup-Labeling: t (57) = 14.44, p < .001), showing that participants attributed a negative valence to the labels in both conditions.

Mediation Analysis

Two mediation analyses were computed using the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013). The first mediation analysis considered the Condition as an independent variable (0 = Self-Labeling, 1 = Ingroup-Labeling), participants' perceived Individual Power as an outcome variable and the Valence attributed to the labels as a mediator. The second mediation analysis considered the Condition as an independent variable (0 = Self-Labeling, 1 = Ingroup-Labeling), the Valence attributed to the labels as an outcome variable and participants' perceived Individual Power as a mediator.

Perceived Personal Power as an Outcome Variable

The analysis (95% bias-corrected confidence interval; 5000 bootstrap samples) revealed a significant effect of Condition on Valence (coeff = .609, CI = [0.14, 1.08]), again confirming the results of the ANOVA, and once more indicating a less negative attributed valence in Self-Labeling Condition rather than Ingroup-Labeling Condition. Also, a significant effect of Valence on Individual Power (coeff = - .242, CI = [- 0.42, - 0.06]) was found, indicating the more negative the value attributed to the labels in the situation, the lower participants felt with self-power in the same situation. A non significant direct effect of Condition on Individual Power (coeff = .300, CI = [- 0.23, 0.82]) was found, confirming the results of the

26

ANOVA once more. The indirect effect of Condition on Individual Power via Valence was significant (coeff = - .148, CI = [- 0 .39, - 0.02]), indicating that the effect of Condition on Individual Power were mediated by Valence, that is, Ingroup-Labeling Condition (in comparison with Self-Labeling Condition) increases the negativity attributed to the labels in the situation, which then decreases participants' sense of individual power in the same situation.

Valence Attributed to the Labels as an Outcome Variable

The analysis (95% bias-corrected confidence interval; 5000 bootstrap samples) revealed no significant effect of Condition on Individual Power (coeff = .152, CI = [-0.37, 0.68]), corroborating the results of the ANOVA, and a significant effect of Individual Power on the Valence (coeff = - .193, CI = [- 0.34, - 0.05]), indicating that the higher participants felt with individual power in the situation, the lower the negativity attributed to the labels in the same situation. A significant direct effect of Condition on Valence (coeff = .638, CI = [0.18, 1.10]) was found, confirming the results of the ANOVA, and indicating a less negative attributed valence in Self-Labeling Condition rather than Ingroup-Labeling Condition. The indirect effect of Condition on Valence via Individual Power was not significant (coeff = - .030, CI = [- 0 .19, 0.06]), indicating that the effect of Condition on Valence were not mediated by Individual Power.

Participants' Use of Derogatory Terms to Labels Members of the Ingroup

Frequency of Use of Derogatory Labels

The frequency of use of the labels declared by participants was analyzed by means of a 2 (Condition: Self-Labeling vs. Ingroup-Labeling) x 2 (Circumstance of Use: in the presence vs. absence of the target of the label) ANOVA with the first factors varying between participants, and the second factor varying within-participants.

A main effect of Circumstance of Use was found (F (1.131) = 67.91, $p < .001$, partial eta-squared = .341) indicating that participants used the label more frequently to refer to

another woman (i.e., a member of the ingroup) in the absence (M= 3.37, SD= 1.59) of the target than in the presence (M= 2.18, SD = 1.35). The analysis didn't reveal any other significant effects (Fs < .92, ps > .340).

Valence Attributed to the Labels

Participants' attribution of valence to the labels was analyzed by means of a 2 (Condition: Self-Labeling vs. Ingroup-Labeling) x 2 (Circumstance of Use: in the presence vs. absence of the target of the label) ANOVA with the first factors varying between participants, and the second factors varying within-participants.

An interaction between Condition and Circumstance of Use was found (F (1.104) = 3.84, *p = .053* , partial eta-squared = .036). Post-hoc comparisons (Bonferroni adjusted) revealed no significant difference between the valence attributed to the labels in the Self-Labeling Condition between presence and absence of the target (M=5.43, SD = 1.39; M= 5.53, SD = 1.39, respectively), while in the Ingroup-Labeling Condition a more negative valence was recorded in the absence than in presence of the target, indicating that participants perceived the labels as more negative when they used them in the absence of the target (M= 5.8, SD = 1.22), than in the presence (M = 5.3, SD= 1.59). The analysis didn't reveal any other significant effects (Fs < .92, ps > .340).

Discussion

Following a study by Petronio, Carnaghi and Bianchi (2017), this research investigated the process of reappropriation as proposed in the model of Galinsky et al. (2013) comparing the effect of self-labeling with ingroup-labeling.

Participants' perception of personal power showed no significant difference in the Self-Labeling condition in comparison to the Ingroup-Labeling condition. Therefore, the first hypothesis (**H1**) isn't supported by results. Regardless the condition, in fact, the perceived individual power rated significantly low, showing that participants did not feel powerful using stigmatizing labels.

As expected (**H2**), the valence attributed to the labels by participants in the Self-Labeling condition was less negative than in the Ingroup-Labeling condition. However, regardless the condition, participants perceived the labels as strongly negative. Sexist labels appear indeed to hold a strong stigmatizing force that could explain participant's evaluation of the labels and the fact that no difference in the perceived individual power was found.

According to the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1987), every concept referred to one's own social group is perceived as less negative, therefore no difference should have been found between the two conditions. Following the perspective suggested by Petronio, Carnaghi and Bianchi (2017), however, we can affirm that not only for the homosexual sample, but also for female participants, only one's use of a stigmatizing label, has the effect to decrease his negative perception.

The mediation effect of Perceived Personal Power, expected on the relationship between the Self-Labeling and valence attributed to the labels, was also not revealed (**H3**). On the contrary, the analysis showed an effect of Condition on participants' perceived individual power mediated by the valence, such as a more negative value attributed to the labels in the Ingroup-Labeling Condition, in comparison with Self-Labeling Condition, which decreases the sense of individual power in the same situation.

The results therefore indicate that is not the participants' perceived personal power to decrease the negativity of the labels, but is the valence attributed to the labels to increase the perception of individual power.

Unlike gay men (Petronio, Carnaghi & Bianchi, 2017), then, Italian women of this sample felt a stronger sense of personal power when, referring to themselves (i.e., self-labeling),

used stigmatizing labels that they perceive as less negative. In other words, the perception of a label as less negative, seems to foster the increase of women's sense of individual power. Galinsky and colleagues (2013) intended reappropriation as the increase of individual power that decreases the negativity of the label. Following their assumptions, though, is it possible to say that the reappropriation of sexist terms in the Italian context is moving its first steps, so that only women who resignified the terms (Butler, 1997) perceive them as less negative and, therefore, feel more powerful when using them referring to themselves.

Regarding the exploratory assessment of participants frequency of use of the labels, in the presence and absence of the target (**H4**), an effect of the Circumstance of Use was found, indicating that participants used more frequently the label in the absence than in the presence of the target in both condition.

Participants in the Self-labeling condition also expressed a strong negative attribution on the labels' valence, showing no significant difference in the attribution in the presence and absence of the target. Participants' in the ingroup-labeling condition, instead, referred a more negative valence in the absence than in presence of the target, indicating that women perceived sexist labels as more negative when they used them in the absence of the target than in the presence.

This study, therefore, does not offer enough evidence to say that, for this sample, gender stigmatizing labels have been reappropriated (Galinsky et al., 2003). At least for the Italian context, it looks like sexist labels still hold a strong stigmatizing power, and they haven't been recontextualized and resignificated (Butler, 1997). Women who use them on themselves, still refer a weak sense of personal power and still evaluate the labels negatively when using them referring to another woman.

In other words, if we think about reappropriation as a gradual process, is it possible to speculate that, unlike in the American context, in Italy sexist terms started only recently to lose their stigmatizing power. Initiatives such as the "cagne sciolte" march (Carr, 2013) are example of women's effort to the resignification (Butler, 1997) of sexist terms, that are yet far away to lose their stigmatizing power.

Sexism, in fact, performs a strong role in the Italian culture (Sabatini, 1987; Jo Cox Commission, 2017), such that in 2017 the Global Gender Gap Report, for example, classified Italy at the 82nd place over 144 countries for gender inequality.

Sexism of course strongly influences both men and women. An evidence of that is the fact

that 65% of the participants in the Self-Labeling/*pejorative* condition, when asked to list general insults, thought about sexist terms. It seems that thinking of women means thinking is sexist terms. A great number of the remaining participants, that actually listed non-sexist words, wrote them (and thought them) in their masculine version: *scemo* - stupid, *stronzo* - asshole, *bastardo* - bastard, *coglione* - dumb-ass, etc.

It seems like, then, that Italian women are unable to think of insults for women that are nonsexist and if they think a gender-free insult, they tend to conjugate it as it is referred to a man.

The research displays some limitations, first of all the request of recall and describing an event of participants' past could have been influenced by the fact that no temporal range was defined, therefore there is no way to know if participants recalled recent or past events, leading to possibly distorted memories or difficulties in describing emotions experienced far away in the past.

Given the delicate subject discussed, some participants could have found difficult to reply and because of that some could have answered not sincerely; others could have felt uncomfortable or ashamed to reply. This aspect could for example explain why so many dropouts were recorded during the data collection.

Moreover, the need of self-protection, for example the attempt of avoiding to think about one's self as victim of an insult, could have influenced participants' responses, especially those in the ingroup-labeling condition. As shown by the literature, in fact, women have the tendency to underestimate their own experience with sexism and gender discrimination, even if they rationally recognize other women's victimization and acknowledging it as a problem in the society (Dodd, Giuliano, Boutell & Moran, 2001).

Another aspect that can have influenced (the sincerity of) participants' responses is the so called social desirability factor: the propensity to give not fully sincere answers, in order to present itself under a good light or preserve a good self-image (Roccato, 2003). This bias, even if the questionnaire was anonymous, can have influenced the participants, for example in the last part, where they were asked to recall situations when they used stigmatizing terms to label other women, the frequency could be underestimated, especially by those participants that consider them negatively.

Future studies could be designed in order to reduce these effects, for example, by using implicit procedures to measure participants' attitudes or by testing real life situations.

Also, the sample of the study was gathered online on social media so, despite the attempts to distribute the questionnaire on disparate pages and groups, only persons with an internet connection had the possibility to participate. It would be interesting, for future studies, to include in the data gathering also those women who have no internet connection and/or the skills to use it.

For a greater understanding of the psychological process of reappropriation, it would be useful to repeat these studies on different social groups. The Study of Petronio, Carnaghi and Bianchi (2017) investigated the influence of the level of coming out on the feeling of individual power and valence attributed to the labels; with other social groups a measure of sense of belonging to one's ingroup (for example high vs low ingroup identification) could be assessed.

Another interesting aspect to investigate, in the case of female samples for example, is participants' internalized sexism. Since this psychological aspect is connected for example to psychological distress (Szymanski, Gupta, Carr & Stewart, 2009) and women's endorsement of hostile and benevolent sexism (Becker, 2010), it would be interesting to take it into account as a possible mediator of women's perception of individual power and attribution of value to stigmatizing labels.

Finally, in order to have the most comprehensive understanding of the process of reappropriation, future studies should take into account all the possible condition of labeling, designing investigations that compare three situations in which stigmatizing labels are used: by the members of a minority group to define themselves (self-labeling), by other members of the minority group (ingroup-labeling) and by members of dominant groups (outgroup-labeling).

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