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DIS-EMPOWERING GENDER STEREOTYPES

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This chapter aims to analyse and discuss the importance of dis-empowering gender stereotypes in Western academic environments through storytelling and critical role-playing to provide professional support for both administrative staff and leaders.[2] Through this methodological approach, stories become the basis for collective discussions on the origins of gender stereotypes, contributing to the co-creation of new knowledge and the empowerment of the persons involved in the process. Storytelling helps to reflect on role-playing and to abandon hardwired and constrained thinking. In other words, in our approach, storytelling contributes to "dis-empowering gender stereotypes" and intends to encourage critical reflections on assigned gender roles (i.e., stereotypes) through a collective and co-created effort. The starting point develops from a story based on a participatory approach where members of the academic community and higher education (HE) institutions in general, both academic and administrative staff, can be involved in reflective activities, workshops, and conversations on their role in decision-making processes. The process of dis-empowering gender stereotypes through role-playing and interactive activities is based on the values of mutual respect, care, and appreciation for each other's contributions and reflections. Ultimately, through storytelling, gender stereotypes are disempowered and the personal role of each community member is empowered and strengthened.

The first section illustrates the importance of connecting theory and practice in the HE context to address gender-based inequalities and contribute to creating gender-equal workplaces by engaging with illustrated storytelling. In our experience, illustrated storytelling is used as a methodology to facilitate role-playing and the dis-empowerment of stereotypes linked to gender. The second section situates, problematises, and assesses how the concepts of empowering/dis-empowering have been theorised by scholars. The third section provides the experiential viewpoint of empowering/dis-empowering, sharing the experience of illustrated storytelling

applied in academic communities. The method can be applied to participants of any age, and with due language adjustments it can be extended to the administrative staff and even small groups beyond the academic environment.[3] The target audience is formed by young researchers in global studies, and undergraduate and postgraduate students in law and economics, who are asked to reflect on a specific research question. A predetermined number of individuals form the groups (ideally 4–5 students or researchers gathered in small groups, comprising around 20 voices per experience). The work is organised in the following steps: (1) setting up the scene, by briefly illustrating the theme of the lesson; (2) reading the story; (3) asking the participants to provide comments on the story in relation to the theme; and (4) re-reading the story. The participants engaged with the research question become part of the same observation process; they are immersed in the setting, hearing, seeing, and experiencing of their reality with the illustrated story. Participants are involved in the practice of telling and re-telling the story, role-playing, and imagining scenarios alternative to the ones narrated in the story. The fourth section briefly summarises the main points of the research, while the fifth and the sixth sections are respectively dedicated to questions for discussion and suggestions for further reading.

The perks of connecting theory and practice in the HE context

The relevance of role-playing is crucial in defining gender stereotypes because gender stereotypes can be studied in their connection to the role assigned to women and men since time immemorial.[4] According to a study conducted by UNESCO in 2002, in HE, psychosocial and organisational factors, as well as gender-imposed roles, prevent women from crashing through the glass ceiling into the top positions.[5] On top of that, women's leadership styles, both within administration and teaching, are presumed to be different from those of men.[6] Women's standpoints are marginalised, excluded, or not listened to because they do not correspond to the norm, represented by the masculine behaviours of competitiveness, measurability, and individuality.[7] As long as women continue to be underrepresented as role models and gender bias reinforces performance reviews, HE institutions risk losing women from the sector, as well as the chance to dismantle a system of oppression that jeopardises freedom and opportunities for all in the workplace. Thus, there is a need to engage in social dialogue to make workplaces gender responsive.

According to an ILO Report,[8] social dialogue between workers and employers enables gender-based inequalities to be addressed and contributes to creating a gender-equal workplace. Social dialogue, facilitated through participatory training based on role-playing, can help eradicate wrongful essentialisation based on gender differences and prompt rich perceptions of leadership styles that go beyond competitiveness, with an inclination to explore multiple solutions and flexible paths to respond to complex challenges.[9] In this vein, a participatory approach applying role-playing techniques offers the chance to leverage a change in the dominant

narrative. Restoring and restorying the dynamics of role-playing is the first step that can trigger the change and intervene to uproot internalised stereotypes in HE (such as, for instance, the stereotypic dimension applied to women positing that "competent" and "friendly" are bipolar opposites on a single trait dimension[10]). This is expressed by Rosemarie Tong in her study on gender roles:

> Eliminating all vestiges of gender identities and roles would require rewriting human history, a formidable task that may prove largely undesirable in the end. Still, the injustices and limitations that have accompanied gender roles and identities in the past can be eliminated now by any society that fully respects all persons' rights to equal freedom and liberty within the constraints of living peaceably with each other.[11]

To overcome the problem of gender stereotypes in academia, we suggest combining empowering/dis-empowering theory and practice through illustrated storytelling. In the following section, we clarify the concepts of empowering/dis-empowering and the link to role-playing, from our situated and privileged position as Western legal researchers.

Dis-empowering gender stereotypes in legal studies: The role of participatory methods

The empowerment/dis-empowerment of gender stereotypes and the link to role-playing has been thematised by many. We hereby report three relevant studies that allow us to advance practical solutions to a permanent problem.

The first study on these terms is related to their notoriety as worn-out buzzwords, as critically observed by Anne H. Toomey in her study on community development practice.[12] While agreeing with the author's sentiment that there has been an over-exaggeration of the meaning and overuse of the terms, we appreciate the approach that she adopts by associating them to specific roles in the community development practice rather than with an empty rhetorical formula. In particular, Toomey identifies four traditional and four alternative roles where empowering/dis-empowering exerts an effect. One can be a rescuer, a provider, a moderniser, and a liberator in the former classification, in addition to a catalyst, a facilitator, an ally, and an advocate of gender stereotypes in the latter one. This way, the (dis)empowerment is related to specific human actions and reactions and produces certain effects.

Such an understanding of the concept as related to certain characteristics of a given role is carried out in the narrative of empowering/dis-empowering related to interpersonal and gender-based violence and stereotyping.

In the second study conducted by Delker,[13] empowering/dis-empowering passes through role-playing and the relevant qualities of the story characters. The authors observe how through empowering/dis-empowering violence victims can shift from survivors to advocates.

Here again, the focus of the empowering is placed on the role played by the parties involved in a story, and on the transformation that such a role can go through. For example, the authors show how, through public self-identification as trauma survivors, persons can heal and empower themselves and others.

In the third study on transformative social innovation, which echoes philosopher Mary Parker Follett's principle of "integration" in power-sharing,[14] empowering/dis-empowering is related to a multi-actor, dialectical-continual-cyclical process.[15] This is related to the fact that the perspective and contribution of the organisational members of a relational circle are at the same time (1) a bridge between the dis-empowered party and each situation, and thus (2) may prompt a change in both the situation and the party, which translates into empowering.

The combined analysis of these three studies shows how empowering/dis-empowering seems to form an oxymoron (one being the opposite or the negation of the other), and at the same time develop into a binomial dialectic, characterised by a continuum of dynamic and transformative role-playing along the lines of re-shifting power relations. Thus, an ally and supporter of action can simultaneously empower a community or act as constituent power that dis-empowers a con-stituted power or institution. Such dynamics reflect and unveil the complex and multifaceted dimension of power that enhances and corrupts, has a bright and a dark side, and an almost imperceptible tipping point.

We learn from Rosemarie Tong that eliminating stereotypes is a process that entails respect for all persons' rights and freedoms.[16] In a law dimension, such respect has a theoretical and a practical component.

The theoretical component lies in the strength of a positivistic approach to law, where such protection is affirmed and where the consequences of the violation are clearly stated in an authoritative act.[17] Depending on the legal order we are refer-ring to, such a protection can be shaped as a formal binding act or agreement (respectively, a law passed by the legislature, or an international declaration signed by parties) or as a written or oral legal tradition (a story told by elders). These approaches, stemming respectively but not exclusively from Western-based and indigenous legal orders,[18] are just two examples of the numerous possibilities where law plays a key role in the elimination of stereotypes.

The practical component of the dis-empowering process through law develops from the interpretation of the legal principles expressed in the law. In the Wes-tern setting, such interpretation is in the hands of the legal operators, notably judges, practitioners, and scholars. In a non-necessarily Western setting, for instance an indigenous one, the interpretation comes from the narrators of the story and from the community at large that participates in that narrative. Looking for interpretations within stories allows one to freely engage in collective reflec-tions that take into account diversity in viewpoints, plural imaginaries, ontologies, and opinions.

Theory and practice in law play a pivotal role in the eradication, and ultimately the dis-empowerment, of the stereotypes, hence the key importance of affirming, writing, consolidating, and interpreting laws and stories.

The theoretical framework needs to be tested through participatory sessions (training, seminars, and workshops) that expose characters and the interpretation of plots to constantly changing audiences, and therefore to a constantly fluid scenario where the gender stereotype is eradicated because its grounding soil is never the same.

Examples of dis-empowering gender stereotypes: The experience of restorying through storytelling

Since mid-2020 we have been applying an action method in law and global studies, through a series of seminars and academic lectures in HE, based on different activities that encompass illustrated storytelling, listening, re-telling, role-playing, and self-reflection. This work investigates and gains insights into a given topic, through the analysis of the group reactions and the elaboration of collaboratively constructed solutions. Our teaching materials are generally constituted by a story and a few reflection activities developed around it. The learning toolkit developed by the Indigenous Law Research Unit[19] and our handbook[20] constitute two examples of the story sources.

Together with our audience, we look into stories, often drawn from indigenous legal traditions. We search for old and new meanings, aware that this is an interactive, situated, and yet delocalised thought-provoking process. We empathise with participants and searchers, and put ourselves into the roles of the characters, participating in the experience of role-changing, creating, re-creating, and ultimately questioning common places, clichés, and stereotypes. We tend to initiate our sessions by following a protocol that has care and gratitude at its core. We thank the audience, the territory that embraces us (especially in cases of occupied lands), and the virtual space that hosts our meeting. At times, we initiate the conversation by reading the story out loud, respecting breaks and silences in the text to slowly accompany readers into the new setting. Reading a story aloud is a fully engaging exercise where all the energy of the reader-narrator is put into the task without any distraction. It is a multisensory activity (engaging voice, hearing, sight) that builds a strong connection between the mind and voice of the reader, and between the voice and mind of the listeners. The spoken word helps strengthen our minds and take ownership of our ideas. It fills the room with sound and meaning. It builds bridges and connects listeners. Some other times, due to time constraints or different settings (for example in the case of audiences of more than 100 listeners), we summarise the story's main points, indulging in the observations of the physical and psychological characteristics of the animals and their role in the story.

Our next step after the story reading or telling consists of reporting back preliminary impressions (potential common themes, summaries of previous experiences with the same story) before initiating a deeper conversation around the subject matter. Before, during, and after the sessions, participants are encouraged to provide written answers, as well as engage with creativity (by doodling, drawing, colouring, or concept-mapping). Multisensory experiences are part of the learning

process and a proactive way to respond to the sequence of questions designed specifically for each story. The work contributes to spurring new conversations and allows for a discussion on the key issues in greater depth, elevating the richness and complexity of mutual understanding. Through these continued conversations, the key underlying principles forming a common conceptual framework of gender-sensitive thematic are re-identified and re-scrutinised.

One example of an awareness-raising activity was organised as a virtual roundtable and 30 days of reflection in November and December 2020, on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, at the UiT The Arctic University of Norway.[21] An indigenous story from the West Coast of Canada[22] guided our meditation on violence against women (VAW) with a group of students and researchers. The activity aimed to develop a reflection on VAW in academia through story-retelling and restoration, in that process that indigenous scholars refer to as *restorying*.[23] Our activity steps followed the protocol earlier described. After the scene-setting (step 1) followed the story-reading (step 2), then the sharing session (step 3), and finally the re-reading (step 4).[24]

This multi-step collective activity led to the reflection of the systemic instrumentalisation of VAW. The *restorying* lens revealed the dimension of VAW as a misleading narrative that empowers gender stereotypes rather than focuses on responsibilities and power imbalances. In this framework, storytelling represented an exceptional force for change, by disentangling women's role from the stereotype of being unvoiced and passive receivers of violence.

Summary

Our experience illustrates how dis-empowering a gender stereotype can be developed through a relational knowledge co-creation practice, where the parties involved engage in a continuous dialogue, and through the analysis of the role-playing of stories characters come to an understanding of how gendered power dynamics shape the interpretation of a story. The result of this practice of relational knowledge co-creation is that the parties challenge some of their biased ideas and revisit gendered assumptions. Workshops and training based on storytelling and role-playing are of key relevance to enhancing the dialogue between academic and non-academic staff in HE institutions.

Questions for discussion

The collective process of *restorying* expands beyond our theoretical and practical approaches and suggests that the dis-empowering of gender stereotypes is a collective and restorative activity relevant for HE (including both academic and administrative staff) and society at large. Further research (both theoretical and participative) could focus on the exploration of the following questions, starting from the collection of the most common stereotypes in a HE institution.

- What are the short- and long-term impacts of *restorying* in society, and specifically in HE?
- How does the dynamic aspect of *restorying* relate to the rigidity of stereotypes?
- How can we apply the narrative of dis-empowerment to the relationship between different roles in HE (for example, between academic and administrative staff)?

Suggestions for further reading

- On gender stereotypes: A suggested reading along the lines of gender stereotypes in managerial positions is the article of Tabassum, Naznin, and Nayak, Bhabani S. 2021. Gender Stereotypes and Their Impact on Women's Career Progressions from a Managerial Perspective. *IIM Kozhikode Society & Management Review*, 10(2): 192–208. doi:10.1177/2277975220975513.
- For a complete overview of gender stereotypes and hierarchies from the perspective of social psychology see: Faniko, Klea, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Fabio, Sarrasin, Oriane, and Mayor, Eric (eds.). 2015. *Gender and Social Hierarchies: Perspectives from Social Psychology*. Routledge.
- On participatory research: For a comparative reflection on the adoption of participatory methods to address inequalities (applied to health but transferrable to education) see Wallerstein, Nina B., and Duran, Bonnie. 2006. Using Community-Based Participatory Research to Address Health Disparities. *Health Promotion Practice*, 7(3): 312–323.

Notes

1 Arianna Porrone wrote the first section, Margherita Paola Poto the second section; both authors equally contributed to write the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth sections, as well as the abstract.
2 See Finholt, this volume
3 Porrone and Poto 2021; Poto and Porrone 2021b
4 Tong 2011
5 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2002
6 Peterson 2016
7 Peterson 2016
8 ILO, UN Women 2020
9 Airini et al. 2010
10 Madden 2011
11 Tong 2011
12 Toomey 2011
13 Delker et al. 2020
14 Follett 1919
15 Eylon 1998
16 Tong 2011
17 See Duarte, this volume
18 Napoleon 2013
19 ILRU, University of Victoria, Canada
20 Porrone and Poto 2021; Poto and Porrone 2022

21 Losleben et al. 2021
22 "Story of porcupine", from ILRU 2016
23 See for instance Voyageur et al. 2014
24 Porrone and Poto 2021a

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