Objectification of Trafficked Women and the General Public: An Ontological Humanization?

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This paper focuses on how objectification of women in prostitution in the context of the discussion of human trafficking with the general public can be counteracted by ontological humanization. Human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation is based on dehumanization that stems from objectification. A subtle form of dehumanization may occur during the process of representing a person in prostitution, not only by pimps and clients, but also by the general public. It constitutes a hot topic in the public sphere, as demonstrated by the recent screenings in Rome of "Nefarious: Merchant of Souls", a full-length documentary that overcomes stereotypical dichotomist views on prostitution in the context of human trafficking. This paper features the possible transformation of social representations that might have taken place among the viewers as a result of watching and discussing the documentary. It proposes the construct of ontological humanization as a semantic-anthropological way to reduce dehumanization. Such humanization may occur as a result of interaction with a documentary that pursues

a strong axiological involvement in the topic, promoting the abolitionist perspective on the relationship of this phenomenon with prostitution, seen as the exploitation of vulnerability.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Dehumanization is an underlying psychological phenomenon behind human trafficking. In other words, perceiving men, women and children as less than human and thus denying their humanness (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014) makes it possible to buy, sell, use and transport persons as if they were objects, placing them in the condition of slavery. The most common form of the trafficking of women is for prostitution, defined here as the occupation of engaging in sexual activity with someone for payment (Peled & Parker, 2013). Sex trafficking has been described as "the best known type of exploitation in Europe" (Van Liemt 2004, p. 20). Indeed, within the dominant frame of discourse on human trafficking discussed by Weitzer (2015), a claim can be found that sex trafficking is much more prevalent and harmful than labor trafficking. Prostitution is among the most common forms of exploitation of trafficked women (Bernat & Zhilina, 2010; Farrel et al, 2016; FitzGerald, 2016; Peled & Parker, 2013). While victims of human trafficking can be exploited through diverse forms of forced labor, prostitution stands out as the most frequently featured setting of contemporary slavery in mass media (Albright & Adamo, 2017; Alvarez & Alessi, 2012; Haynes, 2014; Johnson, Friedman & Shafer, 2012; Sobel, 2014). Therefore, this paper takes into account sex trafficking, while recognizing that it is only one of the forms of modern slavery. Although there are some exceptions, human trafficking is generally framed as a form of gender oppression (Task Force on Trafficking of Women and Girls, 2014) due to overwhelming majority of female victims. Kyckelhahn, Beck, and Cohen (2009) examined 1,229 investigations of suspected human trafficking in the United States, finding that for confirmed cases that provided gender information, roughly 99% of sex-trafficking victims and 61% of labor-trafficking victims were women. According to the APA Task Force Report (2014), human trafficking takes place within the context of widespread commodification and thus

objectification of the female body that turns women and girls into a "product". In this form of exploitation, "there is a power imbalance where the trafficker possesses the economic power to treat another human as a commodity and to keep the profits. There is no element of consent, voluntariness, pleasure or personal desire of the victim in this transaction" (APA, Division 35, Special Committee on Violence Against Women, n.d., p. 14). Exploitation of women in prostitution has been the prime focus of the trafficking debate and research (Della Giusta, 2016). While some authors believe that "voluntary" prostitution may occur in some cases, others see any form of it as exploitation of vulnerability, emphasizing the perils, violence and trauma that accompany it (Farley, 2004, 2006). There is an ongoing debate concerning the impact of legalized prostitution on human trafficking inflows (Cho, Dreher, & Neumayer, 2013). According to the abolitionist perspective, prostitution must not be legalized because it dehumanizes and degrades individuals, reducing them to a commodity to be bought and sold (Smith 2013: 3). This debate engages scientists and the general public, as both sides use various communication strategies.

Communication is a two-way street; there is a dialogical relationship between what people apprehend from the media and what type of information they are interested in. The general public or lay people may indirectly or directly benefit from human trafficking. While buying inexpensive goods produced by contemporary slaves quite likely occurs without the consumers' knowledge, when it comes to the prostitution there is a direct contact with the victim. According to Anderson and O'Connell Davidson (2003, p. 25), culturally and socially constructed demand stems from the fact that people "have to learn to imagine that it would be pleasurable to pay a stranger for sex". Dehumanization of female sexualized victims of human trafficking could thus take place not only in the minds of the perpetrators, but also among the general public.

Representing Human Trafficking in the Media

Since dehumanization concerns representation, it is necessary to take into account the main sources of information that shape the vision of the phenomenon of human trafficking. In his cross-national research project dedicated to understanding public knowledge and attitudes towards trafficking in human beings in Europe, Sharapov (2014) identifies television as the most frequently mentioned source of information. In particular, TV news programs followed by

documentaries and films seem to shape public opinion to a higher degree than newspaper articles and Internet.

So far, no studies have been conducted on how TV news programs or documentaries influence public opinion when it comes to human sex trafficking and prostitution. Movies have received a considerable attention from researchers. For example, a Swedish melodrama *Lilya 4-ever* by Lukas Moodysson has been critically assessed by Arthurs (2012) and Suchland (2013) who point out the anti-human-trafficking campaigns that objectify young and innocent victims of malevolent traffickers, presenting them as weak, naked and disempowered. Many movies seem to reinforce objectification of women in prostitution via a dichotomy of popular images that transmit the "Pretty Woman" myth opposed to the "images of women walking busy thoroughfares late at night, wearing high heels and black fishnet stockings, working for abusive pimps" (Dalla, 2000: 344). In short, analyzing how victims of human trafficking are portrayed in movies reveals the need for a sound quantitative and qualitative research that moves beyond featuring "one-dimensional figures whose stories are condensed and simplified" (Gozdziak & Collett, 2005, p. 122).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE PLASTICITY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

While tackling the theoretical issue of transformation of social representations, this paper reflects whether and how a documentary can serve to reduce dehumanization in the context of objectification in human sex trafficking. In order to understand the change of representation (necessary to reduce dehumanization), it uses the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1984, 1988). They constitute "a network of concepts and images tied together in various ways according to the interconnections between the persons and media that serve to establish communication" (Moscovici, 1988: 222). According to Mana, Orr and Mana (2009), social representations are means by which members of groups communicate and construct their reality. They may be described as ways of thinking about a particular phenomenon; they include cognitive dimension as well as opinions, judgments, images and emotions. They are social because they are transmitted, diffused and transformed by society and shared by groups, enabling them to attribute meaning to concepts (Wagner, 2012). According to Howarth and colleagues (2015), the theory emphasizes the potentially transformative, ongoing, unsettled or incomplete

nature of social relations, focusing on the ability of social actors to debate their ideas. Social representations can be studied as both product and process (Jodelet, 2008). The plasticity of the social representations and thus their dynamic character becomes evident as they circulate in society, enabling transformation of meaning (Purkhardt, 2015). This paper concentrates on processes, including functioning and social efficacy in communication orientation. One of the ways in which social representations change entails interactions with alterity (other people, groups and representations), in which their transformation occurs by shifting from being the medium of thought and action to becoming their object (Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015). Social representations exist in the triadic setting where ego-alter-object (Moscovici, 1972/2000) are in a dynamic dialogical relationship, as opposed to the taxonomic psychology of ego-object, enabling the epistemological link between culture, language and knowledge in and through social representations (Valsiner, 2012). According to Zadeh (2017), adopting dialogical epistemology is essential to undertaking ethical social research. The theory of social representations has a long tradition of concentrating on stigmatizing groups, while assuming an ethical perspective relevant to and grounded in the context of research. Some recent empirical works include focus on prejudice at schools (Howarth & Andreouli, 2015), discrimination in the context of citizenship (Lopez, Andreouli & Howarth, 2015), racism (Howarth, 2006; Augoustinos et al, 2015) and migration (Andreouli & Chryssochoou, 2015).

This paper advances two main conceptual points. First, it argues that dehumanization may occur during the process of representing a person in prostitution, not only by pimps and clients, but also by the general public. Second, it explores from a theoretical point of view the possible effects of watching a documentary on human sex trafficking on the perception of this phenomenon.

Dehumanizing Social Representations

Haslam (2006) notes that the concept of dehumanization has been employed in many scholarly domains, including feminist writings that feature sexual objectification of women, which extends to the culture at large (MacKinnon, 2006). Specifically in the context of human trafficking, there may be some dehumanizing social representations of a person in prostitution.

On the theoretical level, there is an interesting two-fold meaning of objectification that needs to be clarified; although the term is not a homonym in its strict sense, it has been employed

differently in feminist scholarship and in the theory of social representations. In the former realm, the objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) serves as a partial framework to organize and understand uniquely female experiences, placing women's bodies in a socio-cultural context. Objectification appears primarily as a way to single out female body or its parts as physical objects of male sexual desire (Bartky, 1990). According to more recent analyses of the advances of this theory, it can be extended to understand immersed forms of sexual objectification in specific environments (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011). Seminal works of Dworkin (1974, 1981) emphasize the phenomenon of treating women as objects, especially in realms of sexuality. Nussbaum (1995) has pointed out that objectification from a philosophical point of view, turning back to Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin, was always morally problematic.

In the theory of social representations, objectification is a process of symbolically coping with/familiarizing the world through representations (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990). Objectification is defined as "a mechanism by which socially represented knowledge attains its specific form" of an "icon, metaphor or trope which comes to stand for the new phenomenon or idea" (Wagner et al., 1999, p. 99). Objectification consists of three phases: a) selective construction (selection of information suitable for the public that can recognize it as known, thus dominating it), b) structuring schematization (delineating the figurative core of the representation by reproducing of a visible structure composed of elements with a strong existential resonance, and c) naturalization (a projection of representational constructs as concrete entities in the world). One cannot speak of objectification in the realm of social representations theory without mentioning anchoring, the sister process that also consists of three continuous phases. According to Jodelet (2008, p. 425), "anchoring explains how sense is given to unfamiliar objects through their 'insertion in an existing conceptual frame' together with their 'interpretation in function of a principle of signification', the product of which is used, via 'instrumentalization', for naming, classifying and interpreting social objects." She emphasizes that the three stages of both objectification and anchoring have a similar structure: the first two relate to their internal constitution under social control, while the third one concerns their use in coping with the external world (Jodelet, 2008).

As opposed to the sexual objectification, the process of objectification in the theory of social representations strives to collectively figure an object by giving it a sense. It seems that both theories use the term objectification, but they do so on a different level. While the theory of social representations uses objectification regarding all social objects (and not only women as such),

feminist theory specifically focuses on objectification as materializing the patriarchy and associated power relations in women. However, in spite of the differences between the two conceptualizations of objectification, it is possible that when dehumanization of women in prostitution occurs, a very narrow form of objectification (as in the theory of social representations) takes place, which corresponds to the sexual objectification (as in the objectification theory). Unless a specific effort is made to reduce dehumanization, specifically in the case of social representations of a person in prostitution featured by mass media, in the general public's common sense her very essence and readily available image comes to equal a sexual object that satisfies men's desires.

How is objectification related to dehumanization? Two possible forms of dehumanization have been identified by Haslam, Loughnan, Reynolds and Wilson (2007): denying persons in prostitution uniquely human attributes and likening them to animals, as well as denying essentially human attributes and likening them to machines. It is worth mentioning here that there have been other theoretical developments on objectification, such as the four forms identified by Nussbaum (1995) –instrumentalization, fungibility, violability and ownership – or Holland and Haslam's (2013) conceptualization of treating another person as a thing and denying their personhood. These have been recently reviewed by LaCroix and Pratto (2015) in terms of treating others as instrumental tools to achieve one's own ends, and denying others at least one aspect of personhood. In a cross-national study, a group of scholars who took into account seven nationalities emphasized that the role of culture also matters when it comes to sexual objectification (Loughnan et al, 2015). In particular, it has been found that women dehumanize their sexually objectified female counterparts because they usually perceive them as promoters of an objectifying culture (Puva & Vaes, 2015).

A Documentary as a Transforming Agent

Assuming that dehumanization by the general public indeed occurs in case of human trafficking victims exploited in prostitution, one may wonder if and how watching a documentary can reduce it. As opposed to information campaigns aimed at potential victims that display ethical and political ambiguities (Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007), a lengthy documentary that includes first-hand experiences conveyed in narratives may have the power to overcome prototypical stories of trafficking, criticized as third-person accounts crafted for a journalistic context that reinforces the

existing views of the audience regarding poverty, national security, and women's agency (Johnson, 2013). It has been verified that engaging in high quality contact with dehumanized individuals constitutes a way to decrease dehumanization (Vasiljevic & Viki, 2013). Watching a documentary may provide such contact, which includes the victims' unedited accounts of their experience, not limited to verbal expression but accompanied by expressions of emotions. Furthermore, the documentary includes experts' (psychologists, policy makers and social scientists) interpretations and explanations that help the viewer to make sense of the narratives and protagonists' emotional and behavioral responses, thus increasing the quality and depth of contact.

It has been demonstrated that media play a significant role in promoting dehumanization of various groups, for example immigrants and refugees (Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013), the "enemy" fought by the War on Terror (Steuter & Wills, 2010), and blacks (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008). If the media have the power to advance dehumanization, it is plausible to assume that at least some of them can ameliorate it. In particular, a documentary may be able to modify the perception of relatively unknown phenomena, such as human trafficking. Since some authors argue that documentaries dedicated to this topic narrow down the scope of modern slavery to women and children while promoting anti-prostitution campaigns (Alvarez & Alessi, 2012), they in fact assume that such documentaries are powerful tools of influencing perception of the phenomenon. Moreover, documentaries about human trafficking have been enlisted among various techniques to educate policymakers about the problem (Stolz, 2005). Education involves transmission of new social representations and/or transformation of the existing ones, hopefully with the aim of reducing dehumanization of women exploited in prostitution through increasing knowledge and thus demonstrating complexity of studied phenomenon. While certain media, such as television news broadcasts or sensational newspaper articles may tend to simplify and objectify (in the sense of the theory of social representations), documentaries are usually aimed at broadening the horizons and exploring multiple meanings of a concept. Nevertheless, knowledge does have a political dimension, and so even in documentaries there are often some versions of social objects that are preferred over others. More complex picture of how media shape public opinion through raising awareness on human trafficking appears as a result of analyzing newspaper articles. Using the community structure approach, a cross-national study confirmed a series of hypotheses (Alexandre et al., 2014)

concerning press coverage and demographic characteristics of the populations. The "buffer" hypothesis expects that communities with a high level of privilege are being "buffered" from economic and occupational uncertainty, and therefore more likely to display sympathy for those who are not as privileged. As a result, media coverage of human rights issues should be more favorable in press that caters to such communities. According to the vulnerability hypothesis, in more "vulnerable" areas newspapers should devote more attention to "vulnerable" populations such as the unemployed, poor, minorities, etc. Finally, the stakeholder hypothesis predicts that the larger the presence of citizens with a stake in an issue, the more favorable the coverage of claims affecting those stakeholders. For example, if empowerment of women is relevant in a certain community, the press may give more attention to human trafficking featured in the light of this concern. In fact, how media communicate human trafficking reflects if and what types of readers look for the information (Brennan, 2010), which in turn impacts the media's influence as they exaggerate or minimize the problem (Farrell & Fahy, 2009).

The theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1961/1973) has always been interested in communication, including mass communication (Rouquette, 1996). According to Moscovici (1988), the numerous forms of knowledge and beliefs are the outgrowth of a long chain of transformations; for the mass media, messages that are transmitted need to be altered to reach a large audience. The available media "shape content, structure, form, and speed with which social representations spread" (Wagner, 1998, p. 305). Indeed, when proposing a paradigm for research on social representations, Bauer and Gaskell (1999) emphasize the role of media outputs in relation to public perceptions of a specific phenomenon, in their case biotechnology. Through this illustration, they discuss the ideal type procedure: a broad paradigm addressing concepts, key distinctions and methodological choices, rather than privileging a particular data type or statistical procedures. Such broad paradigm requires paying attention to the context Gaskell & Bauer, 2001). As Jovchelovitch (1997) points out, the way of employing representations within the wider power structures of society should characterize any representational study. This premise lays ground for the reflection on the role that a documentary, featured in a specific context of a public discussion, may have in the transformation of social representations.

It is possible that opening up a discussion concerning agency in human trafficking may reduce dehumanization among the general public. Agency is also linked with objectification: the general public perceives self-sexualized women as more vulnerable to sexual aggression because

they assumed those women are highly sexually open and lack agency (Blake, Bastian, & Denson, 2016). Feminist scholarship has made strong claims to move beyond the victim-criminal dualism in the context of sex trafficking (Majic, 2014; McCarthy, 2014; Wheaton, Schauer, & Galli, 2010). According to Haslam (2006), refusing to someone his or her agency and thus emphasizing their passivity and automatic reactions constitutes one of the characteristics of mechanistic dehumanization that denies their human nature. In the context of human trafficking, agency refers to the ability of personal decision-making that becomes extremely limited through physical and emotional violence, diverse expressions of exploitation of vulnerability (Farley, 2006). If a documentary raises questions that allow examining agency and actions while taking into account the role of unconscious, habit and habitus, it enables "broader spectrum to understand the subtle ways in which structure interacts with agency and how agency helps to reproduce structure" (Akram, 2012, p. 62). Posing a dialectical question, "Is prostitution a free choice?" may be the first step in reducing dehumanization, if it prompts the viewers to reflect upon the complexity of human nature and its relationship with the social environment.

Challenging Dehumanization as a Discursive Practice

Dehumanization – together with delegitimization and depersonalization - can also be considered as a discursive practice, related to "ontologization" proposed within the theory of social representations (Tileaga, 2007). This process, usually concealed or neglected, deprives minorities of their due humanity and limits their field of existence (Perez, Moscovici & Chulvi, 2007). According to Moscovici and Perez (1997), people are incapable of judging without prejudging; in other words, it is necessary to share a representation that precedes experience and reflection, deriving its authority from tradition, thus making communication possible. Linking the discursive and social representations approach, Tileaga (2006, p. 22) emphasizes that "particular ways of speaking might delegitimize and dehumanize the 'other' through an examination of the language of stereotyping as used in conversational interaction."

Such complexity touches many different spheres of life that a lengthy documentary may introduce, as opposed to short news broadcasts or brief articles. Pointing out the legal, safety, health, psychological, relational and spiritual aspects of human trafficking demonstrates that the victims have similar needs to viewers. Therefore, it may become more difficult to dehumanize them. Whether the spectators agree or not with the choices and justifications given by the

protagonists, the sole fact of engaging in a mental discussion places them on the same level from the point of view of uniquely human capacities and needs. In particular, promoting a common or superordinate identity appears as a well-established way to reduce dehumanization (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Being exposed to different layers of identity of the victims increases a possibility of meeting on common ground.

Finally, a documentary that takes into account diverse aspects of human trafficking should also demonstrate the involvement of distinct groups with advocacy and activism. Any type of intervention of such large groups as policy-makers, economists, feminists or Christians is surely marked by a considerable internal variation and appears as far from monolithic (Zimmerman, 2011). Irrespective of one's position in such debates, the sole awareness of their existence according to some authors can hinder dehumanizing perceptions that are unconscious and automatic (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014), rooted in stereotypes that lose their power in front of a complex analysis. The hypothesis that increasing knowledge about, and in-depth contact with, say, a stigmatized/objectified group will reduce the "otherization" process at play has been informed by a significant amount of evidences, also by some studies grounded in social representations approach. For example, the seminal ethnographic research by Jodelet (1991) on social representations of madness shows that the imperative to maintain a separation between villagers and lodgers from the asylum perpetuates dynamics of exclusion in spite of seemingly "living together". In order to explain why certain majorities discriminate against Gypsies and symbolically prohibit contact with them, Perez, Moscovici and Chulvi (2007) have hypothesized already mentioned ontologization that substitutes a shared representation into the feeling of a shared reality. It occurs by attributing animal features to the Gypsies and distinguishing the majority from them as a human group against the non-human, an animal group. In view of the above, watching and discussing a documentary may lead to an ontological humanization – questioning and refusal of dehumanizing perceptions, counteracting the subtle prejudice evident in a dualistic view (Berti, Pivetti, & Di Battista, 2013).

ANTI-TRAFFICKING DOCUMENTARY SCREENINGS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

To illustrate the theoretical issue of transformation of social representations this paper features an example of the screening of an anti-slavery documentary in Rome, Italy, thus providing a specific context in the public sphere. Free of charge and open to everyone, the documentary in English

(with Italian subtitles) entitled "Nefarious: Merchant of Souls"[i], was presented as a lengthy, detailed account on human sex trafficking worldwide. The events related to the three documentary screenings, promoted via publically displayed posters, social networks and available institutional communication channels, have also been advertised immediately prior to the screening using a flash-mob technique to attract passers-by. These events were organized by local activists who promote abolitionist perspective that argues that prostitution "should be entirely eliminated because of its objectification and oppressive treatment of women, considered to be inherent in sex for sale" (Weitzer, 2007, p. 430). Each screening was scheduled on a weekend afternoon in order to ensure maximum participation on a voluntary basis. The settings varied from a cinema, through university to a church, reflecting diverse typologies of organizing entities, from municipality through private association to religious community. None of them belonged to the anti-trafficking activist groups; on the contrary, the goal was to raise awareness concerning human sex trafficking among the general public not limited to individuals directly linked with each organization.

Human Trafficking: Its Image and Its Public

Since exact information about human trafficking in the world is still scarce, and most of the efforts aimed at combating it are fairly recent, experts find it challenging to assess how they work in crime prevention and what practices of countering are the best and the most effective (Lehti & Aromaa, 2007). Therefore, the issue of perception appears especially significant. In an industrial nation such as Italy, the link with prostitution, clearly stated in the documentary, cannot be taken for granted, since "citizens may be completely unaware of the use of enslaved women in prostitution, stripping, and pornography in their own countries" (Lusk & Lucas, 2009, p. 54).

Who was interested in attending these screenings? What was the face of the "general public" in this specific case? It is worth mentioning that the audience included representatives from 16 different countries (predominantly Italy, but also the USA, UK, Greece, Iran, Philippines, Romania, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, France, Holland, Honduras, Ireland, Madagascar, Peru, and South Africa). As migrants themselves, expatriates living in Italy seemed particularly interested in the topic of human trafficking; in line with the findings that proximity to immigrants affects the degree of concern (Bishop, Morgan, & Erickson, 2013). Since the documentary featured the issue of prostitution across the world, one may wonder if dehumanization occurs

during the process of representing a person in prostitution by the general public. Historically, dehumanization concerns victims (Kelman, 1976), denying them identity and community belonging. In fact, perceiving persons in prostitution as poor, exploited and slaves makes no room for their personal stories and networks of relationships. They become abstract, taken out of context and represented as a "deindividuated mass" (Haslam & Loughnan, p. 401). Social representations of a person may include awareness of dehumanization through sexual objectification, yet cannot be reduced to the linear relationship between the subject and the object. A triadic relationship of ego-alter-object in a dynamic relationship demonstrates familiarity with the position of others who reduce a person in prostitution to an object. Such approach, not necessarily shared, could come into the representational field that consists of a dialogical relationship with another aspect, the unspoken presence of the predator and taking into account his or her view. Social representations serve to define one's own identity and group belonging (Mana, Orr and Mana, 2009), at the same time enabling communication with the other. Thinking of a person in prostitution is likely to have an iconic component of singling out the female body as an object of sexual desire (Bartky, 1990), which hints on objectification rooted in the social representations of a person in prostitution. A more subtle form of dehumanization could be related to the lack of agency. Haslam (2006) states that refusing to someone their agency prompts mechanistic dehumanization and the denial of human nature. Victims are likely to be perceived as instrumental to their exploiters' goals, inert objects not capable of taking a stand or making a choice.

Assuming that dehumanizing perceptions, in particular objectification and denial of agency, are present in the social representations of a person in prostitution, the transformation of social representations constitutes a challenge. From the theoretical point of view, the goal of the screening of "Nefarious: Merchant of Souls" might have been to overcome the dichotomy in the portrayal of persons in prostitution (Dalla, 2000). It featured complex and diverse stories, illustrating different geo-cultural contexts and motives behind human sex trafficking, from being kidnapped through deception to the "glamour of prostitution". Indirectly, it thus introduced agency and articulate personal accounts that contradicted the anonymous, massive "victim" label, highlighting uniqueness of each woman involved, as well as her social ties, economic situation and network of significant relationships. On the theoretical level, one may interpret such transformation of social representations as ontological humanization, a semantic-anthropological

way to reduce dehumanization in a specific context. The documentary hinted on the perspective taking, stimulating the viewers to consider how women exploited in prostitution see others. Building on the objectification theory, some authors suggest that the sexual objectification experiences not only alter how women see themselves, but also change how they perceive other people through the process of self-objectification (Petersen & Hyde, 2013; Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005). The viewers could assess both the self-reported experiences of human trafficking (including the perspective of a former trafficker) and the experts' (psychologists, lawyers, activists, policy makers) insight presented in the documentary. In line with the theoretical premise, the documentary screenings in Rome might have provided a mediated way to engage in high quality contact with dehumanized individuals, which according to some research results in the change of their perception and decreasing dehumanization (Vasiljevic & Viki, 2013). During the discussion that followed the screening at a cinema, in particular women repeatedly emphasized the importance of becoming familiar with different aspects and "terrifying diversity" of forms of human sex trafficking. Unsurprisingly, in particular in the church setting the holistic approach to the person and inclusion of the spirituality (the role of the relationship with God of one of the women interviewed in the documentary) has been appreciated by the viewers, reducing the distance between "them" and "us". On the contrary, members of a private, non-religious association expressed irritation with the references to spirituality in the documentary. Since such references did not come from the filmmakers or narrators but were introduced by the interviewees, some audience members who engaged in the discussion criticizing and opposing the former person in prostitution's convictions actually became involved in a form of an indirect dialogue with her. Objectification is a form of dehumanization (Ramsey & Hoyt, 2014); acknowledging someone's spiritual needs, also by criticizing her worldview, may decrease dehumanization by assuming the premise that such person presents more than her utilitarian value.

Challenging Dehumanization by Restituting Agency

It has been demonstrated that objectification may have significant consequences on agency in situations where women have been mistreated, such as rape (Loughnan, Afroditi, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013). Applying this finding to human sex trafficking points to refusing capacity for agency as a form of dehumanization. A documentary that provides a prolonged contact (more

than two hours), subsequently reinforced by active participation in a discussion, encourages the audience to think in terms of a continuum from a passive victim to a self-motivated individual instead of a dehumanizing dichotomy of the two extremes. According to the feminist interpretation, the objectifying "occupations" are the only ones that allow women to earn more money than men (Sidun, 2009). The documentary includes interviews with persons previously prostituted who represent different phases of the continuum instead of stereotyped views. While a brief victim narrative is more likely to communicate the lack of agency (Kamler, 2013), a prolonged high-quality contact with different aspects of human sex trafficking introduced women with diverse degrees of agency in various stages of the process. The main value of having an open exchange of opinions prompted by the documentary after watching it, consisted of reinforcing the emerging perception of a degree of agency not by directly focusing on it but by assuming it (often without realizing) as a premise for further discussion. Once the audience have begun reasoning with the women, critically judging their decisions, the ground was laid for decreasing the dehumanization and opening up to a dialogue. In the representational process the viewers might have moved beyond objectification in the sense of the theory of social representations. While providing an iconic or metaphorical dimension to human trafficking (Wagner, 1999) is necessary at the initial stage, social representations as processes transform and become much more articulate through appropriate communication and reflection. Instead of simplifying the issue and providing ready-made, stereotypical outlooks, the documentary has influenced the perception of human sex trafficking by opening a discussion. The triadic dialogical relationship of ego-alter-object introduces the position of an "other", restituting agency and competence to the women who have been stripped of it as a result of objectification (Calogero & Tylka, 2014). The discussions that took place in Rome might have hinted on the fact that while objectification leads to depersonalization (Loughnan et al., 2010), a reverse process can be possible through assimilation of elaborate social representations of human sex trafficking conveyed in a documentary. Instead of denying personhood and reducing them to a passive victim status, the audience engaged in a discussion on diverse aspects of the protagonists' lives, such as the religious and spiritual aspects.

Finally, certainly the documentary stimulated emotions as evidenced by tears and anger demonstrated by numerous viewers following the screening. Balanced with intellectual assessment and informed opinions of experts, such emotional component could be interpreted as

a consequence of the reduction of dehumanization. Not merely objects, but persons with their own history, identity and network of relationships, the women featured in the documentary also demonstrated emotions which set them apart from the mechanistic form of dehumanization (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Crying in sympathy with another person's sorrow constitutes one of the contexts of crying in general (Vingerhoets et al, 1997) and demonstrates the underlying emotion of compassion. Often genuine sympathy requires putting oneself in someone else's shoes, taking her perspective that may elicit emotions of sadness, fear, etc. Some of the audience admitted going through such emotions while watching the documentary. In fact, the discussion was appreciated by numerous viewers, since it helped them to "get back to reality" by overcoming emotional reactions thanks to focusing on other aspects or through sharing such emotions with others.

The transformation of social representations may include the realization that human trafficking and prostitution appear as diversified and complex phenomena, rooted in different geo-cultural contexts. Instead of seeing a passive victim, at least some of the viewers who shared their opinions during the public discussion went through the effort of assuming a holistic perspective, a premise of personhood opposed to the denial of personal characteristics typical in dehumanization. Such process was often accompanied by an emotional involvement and expressed need to deal with strong emotions through a group discussion.

CONCLUSION

In line with the research on perception of human trafficking among the general public (Sharapov, 2014), a documentary seems to be a powerful way to transform social representations. The subtle form of dehumanization through objectification and emphasis on the lack of agency may be challenged. In particular, mediated communication paired with a group discussion could decrease some dehumanizing perceptions and dichotomist views of a prostitute often represented as a passive victim. Applying the theory of social representations to the scenario of communication concerning human trafficking for sexual exploitation proposed a paradigmatic contribution to the objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Such objectification in the light of objectification process, fundamental for the genesis of social representations, was conceptually defined as a narrow way to capture the essence of an issue, instead of reducing a person to an object. In a triadic view proposed by the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1972/2000),

the documentary may constitute a transforming agent, a way to reduce dehumanization by interiorizing the perspective of an alter belonging to different cultures (Valsiner, 2012). Therefore, the ontological humanization is in position to counteract objectification of women in prostitution in the context of the discussion of human trafficking with the general public, prompted by true stories and insight from experts in the field, as featured in the "Nefarious: Merchant of Souls" documentary.

However, there is a limitation of discussing a documentary that features an abolitionist perspective on prostitution in relation to human trafficking. It could be interesting to see if a different framing of the issue, such as proposing a de-stigmatizing representation of women in prostitution as respectable people (Cornish, 2006) can bring about effective change. The challenge for the future is to devise an empirical study that effectively measures the transformation of social representations, taking into account dehumanizing perceptions. Lunt and Livingstone (1996) have argued that social representations are an ideal field for the application of focus group techniques, since the four conditions of the emergence of social representations - as defined by Moscovici (1984) - parallel their features. In line with the valorization of common sense and lay understandings, the focus groups constitute a way to ask people what they think (Flick, Foster, & Caillaud, 2015), to freely share, discuss and elaborate questions, emotions and/or comments that the documentary might have prompted. An interesting empirical development of the theoretical reflections presented in this paper could thus consist of implementing a study involving focus group discussions both before and after the screenings.

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[i] Below follows the original description of the documentary as reported on its website (http://nefariousdocumentary.com/):

Nefarious: Merchant of Souls is a hard-hitting documentary that exposes the disturbing trends of modernday sex slavery. From the first scene, Nefarious gives an in-depth look at the human trafficking industry, showing where slaves are sold (often in developed, affluent countries), where they work, and where they are confined. With footage shot in over nineteen different countries, Nefarious exposes the nightmare of sex slavery as experienced by hundreds of thousands daily, through the eyes of both the enslaved and their traffickers. Nefarious features expert analysis from international humanitarian leaders, and captures the gripping and triumphant testimonies of survivors in order to galvanize hope and vision. From initial recruitment to victim liberation—and everything in between—the previously veiled underworld of sex slavery is uncovered in the groundbreaking, tell-all Nefarious: Merchant of Souls.