The contribution of the TIPE (Test di Induzione PsicoErotica: PsychoErotic Induction Test) to the assessment of erotic fantasies in subjects affected by gender dysphoria: a case series

R. Scardigno¹, I. Grattagliano¹, C. Papapicco¹, G. Mininii¹, G. Mercurio¹, R. Catanesi²

¹Dipartimento di scienze della Formazione, Psicologia e Comunicazione, Università degli Studi di Bari, Aldo Moro; ²Sezione di Criminologia Clinica e Psicopatologia Forense, Facoltà Scuola di Medicina, Università degli Studi di Bari, Aldo Moro, Italy

Abstract

Research into sexual aspects poses a fascinating challenge that is highly cogent to clinical profiling disciplines, but also constitutes a more 'narrative and culturally oriented' approach to medicine and psychology. Assessments of subjects affected by gender dysphoria and their internal, relational and sexual world is a more complex task, since these are very distressing and tormented issues for the subjects under study. Psychodiagnostic can be an important element in the various investigative, evaluative and therapeutic pathways. The authors have focused attention on the TIPE (Test di Induzione PsicoErotica: PsychoErotic Induction Test), an Italian projective psychodiagnostic tool that is used to explore the psychoerotic fantasies of subjects affected by gender dysphoria. The TIPE tests protocols of two samples of subjects have been examined. They projected particularly rich narrative aspects of the subjects' psychoerotic imaginary world. The first sample, a clinical series, consisted of a total of eleven subjects, nine men and two women, mean age 43 years, who were undergoing assessment, firstly psychotherapeutic and then medicolegal, for sex rectification purposes; the second sample, the controls, consisted of fourteen subjects, nine men and five women, mean age 28 years, all heterosexual and with a problem-free history of sexual identity. Clin Ter 2020; 171(1):e19-29. doi:10.7417/CT.2020.2184

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Introduction

The study of sexuality has always been a frontier field of research in psychology and psychiatry, requiring constant elaboration of the theory and clinical aspects, including and perhaps also linking the unconscious dimensions of subjects’ sexual life and the influence of collective fantasies and social behaviors. The study of the formation of gender identity has shifted attention from the biological to the psychological aspects, introducing an important differentiation between gender and sex. Gender identity, therefore, is seen as the constitutive element of a subjective world that is organized and defined in the relational context (1-2). It acts as the junction between sex and gender, preceding sexuality in individual development and organizing and modeling its resulting form of expression.

The formation and acquisition of personal identity, of which gender identity is the cornerstone, is a constantly evolving process that demands continual intrapsychic and relational negotiation. In this process, gender is not always a symbolic resource fostering self-integration: sometimes this is sacrificed in favor of subjectivity, acceptance and a sense of psychic and social belonging. Therefore, the discursive universe of sexuality is characterized by a peculiar opacity that stems from the need to draw a sense from the 'body-mind-culture' interweave. The way each person interprets his/her sexuality expresses the force of both biological determinants and historical-social values. The irresistible fascination exerted by all references to sexuality also stems from the mysterious nature of this interweave even nowadays. One aspect of the above-mentioned opacity (and the resulting fascination) is the perturbing dynamics underlying the questioning of the natural divergence-attraction between the 'male being' and the 'female being' activated by some people's orientation toward homosexuality, bisexuality, gender dysphoria, transvestitism. These marginal positions are well known to be exposed to social emargination owing to the strength of rooted prejudice against all forms of deviation from the norm (3-4). In fact, the body of a person affected by gender dysphoria, the wrong receptacle of a more complex, multi-faceted mind, bearing witness to female or male parts to be hidden and minimized, is like - mutatis mutandis - that of an anorexic and becomes, in a sort of personal paranoia, the true persecutor (3-6). The prevalence of gender dysphoria among males seems to be speculative as to that of eating disorders among females, in which the common matrix is the lack of harmony between the biological, sexually differentiated body, and the more complex mind. In this sense, gender dysphoria also has a psychosomatic dimension, being a symptom and an extreme instance of failure to integrate male and female aspects in a harmonious internal relationship. This tends to be easier against a background of good parental relations but difficult or impossible if this has not occurred, as in our subjects af-

Correspondence: Prof. Ignazio Grattagliano, Professore Associato di Criminologia Clinica e Psicopatologia Forense, Dipartimento di scienze della Formazione, Psicologia e Comunicazione, Università degli Studi di Bari, Aldo Moro. E-mail: ignazio.grattagliano@uniba.it

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fected by gender dysphoria. Here we attempt to penetrate the enigmatic depths of subjects affected by gender dysphoria, tracing some dynamics hidden behind their verbal responses to the TIPE Pictures, Psychoerotic induction test (from this moment on TIPE) (9-10). Another aim of the present work is to report a case series, that is not therefore generalizable, comparing with the use of this projective psychodiagnostic tool, the erotic fantasies of a group of subjects affected by gender dysphoria undergoing assessment before a possible sex change, with those of a group of heterosexual subjects with no sexual identity problems.

**Projective tests of psycho-erotic fantasies**

Erotic fantasies constitute the mental images and scenes embodying deep-seated erotic desires. These erotic images are an important stimulus for sexual activity and are constructed on the basis of far-back memories of visual, olfactory, auditory and tactile sexual experiences. Depending on the structural degree of these images, they can be subdivided into fantasies, if they are not very structured and evanescent, or fantasms, if they are more structured, featuring complex scenarios (9-10). Normal erotic fantasies are well integrated with reality and never superimpose it nor deform it.

Projective tests are particularly well suited to revealing these aspects in that, starting from a stimulus, subjects process images on the basis of interior schemes developed through their experiences, employing reconstructive capacities. Analysis of the processes they employ to reconstruct the images and the relations among them can reveal the quality of both their past and present experiences (11-15). This coincides with the capacity of thought that Freud stated can bring back to the foreground in the present time, through representation, something experienced in the past and yet not there (16-18).

More recent theories on personality legitimize such investigations via perception, because every perception activity is an interpretation, in the sense that it demands organization and active processing of sensorial data by the subject (4). In fact, the more vague a stimulus is, the greater the space afforded for personal reconstruction through images, and hence projection. In theme tests, projection can be defined as the correspondence drawn in the protocols with the personality characteristics of the subject. The freedom of responses is oriented by such tests, and this limit is the foundation of their scientific nature.

A projective test involves the transformation of a mass of qualitative data, allowing them to be processed (19-20). The markers are therefore important, as well as the attempt to uniform the data and markers collection processes themselves.

Ainsworth (21-22) made important reflections on this point, as also the French school (23), recognizing, for the standardization of projective tests, very different procedures from those used to standardize other types of tests.

**Materials/Methods**

The TIPE Test as a psychodiagnostic resource when exploring erotic fantasies of subjects affected by gender dysphoria

The TIPE (Test di Induzione Psico-Erotica: PsychoErotic Induction Test) concentrates the investigation of erotic fantasies, allowing the investigators to assess the subject’s adaptation to reality and capacity to relate the internal reality to the perceptive reality (7-8). The characteristics of the TIPE semi-structured projective test, that stimulate the projection of erotic fantasies, make it one of the tools that can be employed in the context of a wider, more general psychological evaluation where the main role is played by other structural tests (e.g. the Rorschach or M.M.P.I.), (4, 15, 38, 39, 40) together with tools that investigate the intellectual function, as already pointed out by the authors (7-8).

This projective test was designed by Abraham (1979), an Italian psychiatrist and sexologist, with the aim of exploring the dynamics of erotic fantasies triggered by 8 Pictures depicting people in various situations, not necessarily explicitly sexual. Being a projective test, the TIPE fosters the amplified reproduction of invisible structures, allowing internal emotional states to be perceived as external (24-26).

The TIPE is a projective test described as semi-structured because although it has an underlying configuration, it leaves space for a series of conjectures about what is being recounted. The TIPE presents the subject under examination with pictures of people that stimulate the examined subject to attribute types of erotic relations to them (projecting their own erotic impulses), allowing an evaluation of precise aspects of erotic fantasies, namely the subject’s:

1. attitude toward male or female initiative in the love-sex relationship;
2. reaction to competitiveness in love-sex;
3. the influence of a group as an inhibitor or facilitator of the love-sex relationship.

After gaining all this information through the analysis of the stories constructed by the subjects in response to perceptive stimuli (the Pictures), it is intuitively broken down to draw possible analogies between the stories invented by the subjects and their own experiences and problems (24). In fact, the test can cast light on their capacity to process childhood traumas.

As stated above, the TIPE consists of 8 Pictures showing clear, precise scenes; the people are always shown in a well-delineated context, in order to shift the attention toward the background details to avoid any shock aroused by the relational situation depicted, and consequent refusal to consider the Picture. The assumption on which the TIPE is based is that the subject will identify with the agent profile of the human figure in each of the 8 Pictures.

In the first 2 Pictures the subject is expected to be projected into childhood memories by the girl/boy child depicted in each. In Pictures 3 and 4 adolescents are depicted, in which sexual intentions can be attributed to the male in one and the female in the other Picture. In Pictures 5 and 6 three human figures are evident, in scenes that are allusive of a possible male-female competitiveness in situations of interactions between the sexes. Finally, the last two Pictures present a higher grade of complexity because the human figures are portrayed in couple or group relationships. It is assumed that the agent role of several people in the background could in one case foster and in the other hinder the development of a sexual relationship.
In greater detail, the interweave of the senses offered by the 8 TIPE Pictures can be described by plotting the superficial structure of the image meanings axis against the deep structure of the possible evocative meanings axis. The world of the senses depicted in the TIPE is designed as described below.

a) Childhood situations:  
Picture I: a haybarn  
Manifest content: two children, one with female characteristics and one male, are up in a haybarn; another person, also with female characteristics, climbs a ladder to reach them. A hen is crowing.  
Latent content: comparison of the subject’s opinion about sexual education, bringing back memories of childhood sexual games.  

Picture II: a bed  
Manifest content: a double bed, rumpled, two chairs, a bedside table with a lamp and a central lamp. In the background, on the right a curtain can be seen, and an open door in the center of the wall. In the foreground, on the right a child has opened a door and is looking in.  
Latent content: investigation of any traumas and/or fantasies related to the parents’ conjugal (sexual) life.  

b) Initiative in sexual relations:  
Picture III: a rock  
Manifest content: a seaside scene, in the summer, with sailing boats and a rowing boat, at sunset, with two young people sitting on the rock with their feet in the water; he is embracing her.  
Latent content: assessment of the attitude toward male initiative in sexual relations.  

Picture IV: a study  
Manifest content: there is a desk in the study, on which a girl and a boy are seen to be holding hands over an open book. The girl’s attitude is very evidently seductive, and boy’s uncertain.  
Latent content: assessment of the attitude to female initiative in sexual relations.  

c) Competitivity:  
Picture V: bicycles  
Manifest content: a countryside scene, where two boys and a girl (in the center) are cycling toward a group of houses in the background.  
Latent content: assessment of the attitude toward male competitiveness.  

Picture VI: a dance  
Manifest content: a dance scene; among the various people in the background, summarily drawn, three figures stand out: two are a couple; a third woman dancing with a more summarily drawn figure is evidently a rival.  
Latent content: assessment of the attitude toward female rivalry.  

d) Function of the group:  
Picture VII: a party  
Manifest content: there are four couples in a drawing room, three are kissing and cuddling while one couple is talking. There are also two single women and in the foreground, another couple is entering the scene.  
Latent content: consideration of whether a group fosters sexual relations.  

Picture VIII: a balcony  
Manifest content: a room with a door onto a balcony; on the threshold a couple is embracing, about to go out; the moon is visible in the sky. Inside the room there are two groups of people: a woman and two men standing in the background and two women and a man sitting in the foreground.  
Latent content: assessment of whether a group inhibits sexual relations and a preference for the couple alone.  

The test is administered according to a precise method. Firstly, the subject is asked what it is s/he sees, and what is happening. Secondly, the subject is asked to move the scene along, as if s/he were a film director, thus stimulating the invention of relationships. Then, the subject is asked to animate the characters, moving them to show their intentions, in a logical sequence. Thirdly, s/he is asked to predict what will happen to the relationships between the characters over time (this is not done for the first two Pictures).  

There are no time limits for administration and the answers can also be videorecorded. The transcription must report every word said by the subject and other possible forms of reaction to both the test and the investigation must be highlighted (laughter, mimicking, other behaviors). In fact, at the end of the test, as a complementary test, the subject is asked to choose which Picture s/he would particularly like to be in and which not. The subject can also be asked which situation is likely to end best and which worst. At the end of the investigation, the test serves to make a more in-depth inquiry into some aspects or to validate hypotheses. During the test the subject could be asked to imagine a different evolution of the scene from the one s/he has already proposed.  

Analysis of the form and structure of the protocol indicates characteristics of the subject’s erotic fantasies and provides important information about her/his personality. When assessing the sensitivity of a test like TIPE, variations in some data obtained in the protocols need to be sought, indicating a disorder or particular sexual experience or other particular situation. A first interpretation level emerges from the responses to the questions implicit in the latent content. Starting from how the scene unfolds and is projected to evolve over time, the subject’s attitude to sexual relations in which the male takes the initiative, to competitivity, rivalry and to group situations will be revealed, all aspects that delineate some aspects of erotic fantasies.  

The various different characteristics of the subject’s erotic fantasies can also be perceived through the reactions to the images and the dynamics of the stories, even if in a fragmented manner. Particular attention needs to be paid to the answers to the first question, that are highly significant. Also the themes of death and possible violence are highly projective because they are a divergence from the stimulus, that does not propose them. Since in a normal protocol the scene is not expected to be attributed to a particular historical period, fashions (clothes and makeup) are deliberately little emphasized in the Pictures. Nor are any links among the Pictures in terms of time or space expected to be drawn.  

After noting the details, the subject can sometimes start constructing a significant scene, and in this process project defense mechanisms. In such cases there is perceptive
overload, responding to the stimulus broken up into parts consisting of isolated objects not put together in relation to a significant whole: in short, in such cases there is no projection of experience-based internal reality as would be normal to all interpretations of external reality. This sometimes occurs because there is an inner void but more frequently because the internal realities are conflictual, and the difficulty in living the present time is evident. In other cases formal thought disorders are revealed in the type of perception.

In perceiving a situation, the interpretation of the movements making it possible is implicit, where the characters are linked by a relation of erotic type, or interact for other reasons like play, survival, utility etc. In cases when movement is not perceived it is impossible for the subject to carry out the task, because the refusal to move the scene along involves a refusal to predict what will happen to the characters (construction of the next scene). Difficulties in projecting movement or planning an immediate future are observed in subjects with an emotional or sexual life that is not accepted at a deep level, and so are a very important clinical indication. The movements attributed to the characters are projections of the thought dynamics and so indicate the subject’s capacity to process reality. The types of contact among the characters project the subject’s own relational styles.

As well as the analysis made of the content of the protocols (26), the relational determinants, that can be subdivided into two major categories: erotic and non erotic, are evaluated.

As regards relations determined by the eros, these can be distinguished as:
- E*: typically emotional erotic relation, “romantic”;
- E': erotic relation seen as sexual act;
- E: relation indicating the co-presence of the two eros types, sentimental and sexual; this has some stability over time.

As to relations determined by non eros (NON-E), the actions or relations include:
- F: brotherhood
- L: play
- U: utility or aid
- O: operativity, work
- V: vital actions, like eating or drinking (7; 8; 27, 28; 29; 30).

The discursive angle of TIPE fantasies in the experiences of subjects affected by gender dysphoria

The clinical sample consisted of eleven subjects diagnosed with gender dysphoria, two women and nine men aged between 36 and 53 years. “[mean age (years) = 43.27]”. Six of the subjects (54.54%) had attended mid school, up to the age of 13; four (36.36%) high school and only one just primary school.

Instead, the control sample consisted of fourteen heterosexual subjects, nine men and five women, aged between 23 and 40 years, mean age 28 (27.85 years). Thirteen of the 14 subjects (92.85%) had attended high school, and seven of these (50%) a 3 or 4-year university course.

The aim of our research was to seek possible discourse modules formulating the specific erotic fantasies revealed by people with problems related to their sexual identity. Apart from analyses of the themes that are compatible and envisaged in the evaluation protocol, coherent to the projective nature of the TIPE, the texts produced during the tests were subjected to further analyses corresponding to the various psychological investigation models. The classic distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods led us to combine Analysis of the Content (AC) with Analysis of the Discourse (AD).

Analysis of the themes

A preliminary analysis showed that each of the subjects in the clinical group gave a different interpretation (in some cases actually the opposite) of the same Picture. This variability is due to a number of factors, namely personal involvement, experience, aims to be achieved, previous situations experienced, evaluation criteria and interpersonal relations, clinical history, etc.

One particularly relevant factor is the reflexive orientation of the subject, a sort of Rosenthal effect: distortion of the results due to the expectations the interviewer or subject has about the results. In fact, many subjects affected by gender dysphoria ‘confine’ reality within a pre-established scheme so that all the results produced should lead to the achievement of their desires and ambitions, thus losing some authenticity (23-25).

All the subjects in the clinical group showed a correct perception of the stimuli despite the fact that the protocol presents (or in some cases is thought to present) a coerced expression form biased toward anxiety. Many of these subjects tended to focus only on some details in the Picture, ignoring an overall view. Very commonly, the approach to reality appeared to be defensive, suspicious, negative and highly “controlled”. Very often the erotic fantasy had limited vivacity and poor content, probably due to the discomfort and rigid attitudes noted in many of the subjects, some of whom produced almost entirely unsexed texts characterized by a flat affective nature, avoiding self-referencing and anything that could appear stressful, problematic or distressing, owing to the above-described attitude linked to “reflexiveness”.

Picture 1 (a haybarn) was particularly appreciated and most frequently selected as the favorite Picture. Most of the members of the clinical group saw two children hiding, perhaps because they had been naughty, and the mother was looking for them. The absence of the father was often pointed out, correlated to a significant lack of this parental reference figure: a clear example of transposition, very probably a cause of suffering, and autobiographic.

The presence of the mother was particularly important for most the subjects. In fact, some of them saw her as an authoritative figure, whereas others saw her as a source of serenity and protection. In one case in particular, the desire for maternity (unfortunately biologically impossible) was evoked, seen as a chance to become responsible, helping the children to grow up and protecting them, guiding them away from wrong decisions.
The contribution of the TIPE

The presence of the hen crowing was noted by nearly all the subjects in both groups, while in one subject only it was identified as a cock, an interesting interpretation with the opposite significance to that of the others. In some cases the hen was seen to be in danger, while other subjects would have preferred to eliminate the hen from the scene.

Many of the subjects described the house as delapidated, poor and in hazardous conditions: a possible sign of fragile family and relational styles. For most of the subjects the house needed to be restored for various reasons, mainly because, being hazardous, it could collapse and hurt the children. Moreover, the children needed to grow up in a house that was not only safe but also serene and comfortable because their future life could depend on the early years (this too seems to be an autobiographical element referring to their own childhood, probably not very serene).

As to the subjects’ predictions for the future, there were two main interpretation tendencies:
1) the mother collects the children, who grow up serene and healthy and go on living in the countryside;  
2) the children grow up and have a satisfactory professional life, becoming lawyers, doctors or engineers, far away from their childhood home (in open contrast with the limited schooling of most of the clinical subjects).

The evaluation indexes often noted in the tests show that for all the subjects the future was a positive point: they all imagined the characters happy and satisfied with their life. The idealization of a flourishing future could be a sort of defence against a distressing past that they intend to leave behind.

For Picture 2 (a bed), almost all the subjects in both groups had a negative evaluation index in which the aspects inherent to their ‘Oedipus complex’ appeared problematic, as also the evolution, where many of the subjects were seen to be somewhat embarrassed, uneasy and nervous. Some of the subjects in the clinical group saw a curious child in the picture, peeking into the parents’ bedroom, ‘spying on them’, while many others saw a needy child looking for someone or something (the parents, in fact), although in most of the following scenarios this need is not satisfied. In fact, the absence of the parents seems evident and the description of the scene is extended to make a generalization. The absence of the parents evokes problem dynamics, because it introduces tensions with the parent figures, irremediably impairing the growing process and the psychoaffective, relational and sexual development. In one case in particular, a cat was added to the scene, and the child played with it, as if to replace the missing parents.

As ‘film directors’, in the sense of subjects intended to run the scene on, many of those in the clinical group focused on the furniture and said they would change the bed stand, the arrangement of the chairs, that they would tidy the rumpled bed, close the door and so on. Concentrating on the furniture could be a way of hiding problems in that particular psychosexual development phase: seeking detachment from the scene to avoid focusing on the feelings it arouses. However, some of the other clinical group members showed exactly the opposite tendency, imagining the parents in a moment of intimacy (in one case the expression ‘having sex’ was explicitly used). This type of answer could be seen as an antidote, a defense mechanism against the feeling of emptiness, abandon, solitude or relational absence, or else again as a reference to personal history, a memory.

As regards the future projections, nearly all the subjects saw it as positive, and the life history featured evident idealized self-references, in which the child grew up healthy, happy and well educated. All these expectations could be seen as a defense against deeper, more distressing feelings. Some other group members saw the unfolding as negative, envisaging the child being scolded because he had been discovered spying on his parents.

Picture 3 (a rock) offers a particularly rich scenario for self-reference aspects and projections, and caused embarrassment in many of the subjects. In fact, the description was conditioned by their own experiences, in which relations within the family nucleus did not foster or allow stable relations. Indeed, in one case in particular the subject felt the characters represented herself with her fiancé.

For most of the subjects in the clinical group, there was a negative aura surrounding the Picture, arousing embarrassment and unease. Most of the texts show very negative assessment indexes, where the couple is described as unbalanced and unhappy, and the relationship is characterized by the girl’s rejection and indifference. More specifically, for nearly all the members of this group the boy and the girl have completely different approaches, in the sense that the boy shows an evident desire for physical contact, courting, affection and even love, which is absolutely unreciprocated by the girl, who appears embarrassed, sad, doubtful or fearful. Her uninterested attitude is often justified by the idea that they probably haven’t known each other long or else because they are in a public place and this tends to ‘block’ or inhibit her.

For many of the subjects in this group the relationship seems to the idea of being torn between the desire to be involved and the fear of abandonment, showing unwillingness to create a deep bond, and removal of the sexual aspects. Only in two cases was the relationship described as close.

A recurrent topic was that of the initiative, considered to be by rights entirely on the male side but in the situation depicted, to be lacking or incorrectly balanced. In fact, for this topic their answers went from one extreme to the other. Some felt there was no sign of initiative nor should there be, whereas others felt it was so intrusive that it aroused unease and fear in the girl.

Many of the clinical group members wanted to change the girl’s attitude in the Picture, making her more willing and at ease, perhaps moving the couple to a more private place. Nearly all wanted the couple to be happy but almost none of them expected their future to be rosy. Indeed, for most of them the girl will leave the boy, the rupture being due to her dissatisfaction with him, his excessive pushiness or lack of discretion. In short, the scene construction seems very well defined and certain. Only one subject imagined the couple getting married and setting up a happy family.

In Picture 4 (a study) one of the fundamental aspects is once more the initiative, again seen as a purely male prerogative. The subjects in the clinical group seemed displeased or annoyed by the male-female role exchange. The picture shows a girl making the first advance and this seemed to arouse discomfort, so the assessment indexes and passive agent markers were frequently negative. In the descriptions
the characters are not seen as agents but as being subjected to actions taken by others.

Nearly all the subjects in both the clinical group and the controls saw two friends or two schoolmates studying together in the Picture, but whose relationship was not confined to friendship but had gone beyond. In fact, many saw tenderness between them. Some described it as a mother-son relationship, and others as brother and sister. In one case they were seen as two girls, thus eliminating any relational or erotic references in both the content and the scene unfolding. The gender inversion (one of the subjects is very clearly a male) can be seen as the sign of a possible problem with sexual identification or with complex situations with sexual overtones. The girl is seen as happy, in love, willing and uninhibited, whereas the boy is generally described as timid and unwilling, and in one case as absolutely indifferent to the girl (“he doesn’t even look at her”).

A clear sign of ‘embrayage’ is that personal digressions are quite common. The subjects in the clinical group often recounted experiences of their own personal life, many of which were extremely intimate. They revealed traces of embarrassment and unease, operating a “defense mechanism” against emotions considered too strong or stressful, and removing sexual content and references. Their accounts had mostly to do with the nature of men and women and the relationships between them. Women were often described as provocative, malicious and aggressive, whereas men were seen as more timid and ingenious. They seemed to wish to imply a certain victimism characterizing the male universe, as opposed to a sense of rivalry characterizing the female universe. A sort of counter-identification is apparent, with hints of problems and conflict with the female gender, especially in the subjects affected by “Male versus Female” gender dysphoria.

When asked to act the part of the director, some of the subjects in both the experimental group and the control group concentrated, in a fairly sterile way, on the room furnishings, considering the furniture and its placement. Quite a few others wanted to invert the boy/girl role as regards the advances scheme, getting the boy to make the first step and be more gentle and open toward the girl, because that would make the relational dynamics appear more ‘tidy’ and natural. In any case, the scenarios proposed seemed to all of them to be quite positive for the two characters in the scene.

The view of the future, with a wealth of self-references that were often quite explicit, develops in two main directions, completely opposed. In the first one, that features descriptions with many positive assessment indexes, the young people continue to live together, happy and in love, and in one case they get married and have children. In the other view, instead, the outcome is bad. The young people leave each other, the future is negative, uncertain and sad. In one case in particular, he leaves her for another woman and this distresses the girl. In another case, that is highly emblematic, the boy may die because he looks unhealthy.

Because there was some resistance to projecting them toward the future, it is reasonable to hypothesize a certain difficulty in accepting the concept of sentimental and sexual satisfaction at the deepest level. Feelings of inadequacy and sadness emerged, probably linked to the uncertainty and negativity looming over the future of these subjects.

The scene in Picture 5 (Bicycles) was described by most of the subjects in the clinical group in the following terms: two boys and a girl are going for a ride (some of them also described the landscape in great detail); they could be friends, a couple with a friend, or three siblings, their connections are not very clear. What does seem clear to them all is that the two boys are rivals for the girl, both are chasing after her but she is not interested in either of them.

More than any of the preceding ones, this Picture caused very significant emotional and conflictual issues to emerge, like rivalry, competition, seduction and problem relations. In some cases these had been carefully removed, probably in an attempt to gain reassurance and build a defense against particularly painful and/or stressful memories, or else to please the examiner by showing themselves to be normal, socially presentable people. The group situation seems to reveal more regressive, emotional and personal aspects, together with a sexuality described and represented as perverse and “malignant”. There is a clear representation of conflicts and worries about their differences and difficulties in completely integrating parts of themselves that are less acceptable and/or accepted.

Moreover, in the texts characterized by many expressions showing embrayage it can be seen that self-references and problems appear very frequently. In fact, when commenting this Picture the clinical group subjects seemed particularly open, also as regards more thorny questions like man-woman relationships. One of the crucial nodes in the Picture is affection between man and woman, that was almost always correlated with fear, uncertainty, relational doubts and suspicion. Many of the subjects were wary, suspicious and uncomfortable with this issue, as if a growing relationship represented a threat, dangerous and fearful.

Another very recurrent theme is the gaze, considered the main means of communication and seduction: many subjects described in great detail the very salacious gazes of both boys at the girl, which made them feel intuitively that the boys are rivals for her favor. Yet again, despite the fact that it is the boys who are chasing the girl, she is described as deliberately seductive, even if she knows they will have no success with her and in the end she will not choose either of them. The subjects used expressions like “she gets them to desire her” or even “she makes them crave”, and a tendency to decry women is evident in their attitude.

None of the subjects in either group, experimental or controls, thought they would change much in the scene, and the future projections were almost always very positive, as also evidenced by the many positive assessment indexes. This was in clear contrast with the recurrent themes about the rest of the Picture. In most cases the three young people would remain friends but in other scenarios she falls in love with another boy (because the two boys in the scene had no serious intentions toward her, just a one night fling), but in any case they are all happy and smiling.

Picture 6 (a dance) aroused particularly strong and contrasting emotions, ranging from anger through jealousy to disgust in the clinical group. Many of the subjects tried to defend themselves against the strong emotional waves by adopting strategies like rationalization, emotional closure, silence and rigidity. The description of the scene was unanimous in both groups: stable or less stable couples dancing
in a dive. They felt tension in the air, saw eloquent glances and rather promiscuous chasing after the other sex. This provoked unease and even disgust. The minimum common denominator for all of them was jealousy and rivalry.

It is plausible to consider that the situation presented in the Picture evoked memories of very severe suffering that had still not been completely processed, linked to difficulties with being in a group (generally indicated by very low assessment indexes, being associated with unpleasant memories), rivalry with other women, desire but at the same time a profound fear of sexual and affective involvement, the wish for stability and certainties contrasting with more transgressive aspects of life and relationships. There is an evident need to present a stable, ‘normal’ and reassuring self-image, achieved also thanks to mitigation resources (32).

The descriptions are full of self-references because the proposed scene seemed not only familiar to most of them but also to have been experienced as almost real, not mediated by the test or imaginary. Only in a few cases did the Picture evoke positive emotions because it allows subjects to identify with the characters depicted, arousing the desire to be courted and/or to take part in a jealousy scene.

Once more the gaze theme recurred, the fundamental language in chasing after a person, especially of less chaste and ‘clean’ type, that can create a scene but also make it possible to decipher a person. Quite a few problems emerged in references to women, described as wanton. It is their fault if group dysharmony results, and again the clinical group tales revealed hints of misogyny.

As ‘film directors’, nearly all the subjects wanted to change the scene, replacing the couples with more stable, loyal counterparts, whereas a minority decided not to change the scene so as to ‘enjoy’ the presumed jealousy scene that was about to take place. The projections for the future, instead, were almost always black: in many cases the couples broke up following betrayal, and for most of the clinical group subjects the scene would already end in a quarrel. In one single case the future was seen as positive because all the characters stayed friends and were happy.

Picture 7 (a party), thanks to the group context and deliberately slightly confused spatial arrangements, ambiguous roles, attitudes and relational styles of the subjects, fostered the emergence of more regressive, archaic, primitive and instinctual reactions. The tales regarding sexuality were particularly lively and showed very aggressive, distressed contents. The clinical group subjects appeared nervy and embarrassed and expressed themselves using tones that ranged from disgusted to distressed, as if recording more problematic, painful personal experiences, even if the defenses seemed bland. The fact that the situations showed evidently promiscuous relations aroused intolerance and aggression against women and against stable couple relations, and the previously elicited degraded view of sexual relations was strengthened. Friendship appeared to be the frontier beyond which only pain and disappointment could ensue.

Most of the clinical group subjects saw it as a brothel: the women present were labeled as prostitutes and it seemed that the characters were preparing for an orgy or in any case for very promiscuous sex. In all cases the assessment indexes were very negative. Nearly all the subjects stressed with particular emphasis that this kind of thing was beyond their ken. The evidence that this kind of situations was very much frowned upon seems to be an attempt at self justification and/or moralization. There was an evident tendency to try to combat stereotypes and labels regarding transvestites, devoted according to common prejudice to sexual activities considered abnormal and not socially acceptable.

Yet again the theme of female rivalry emerged predominant, as if the subjects really could not construct a positive image of woman and femalehood, because women are seen as prostitutes who sell their bodies for money. In these cases extremism was apparent and women were practically “de-monized”. This bitter, rancorous attitude toward the gender the subjects wish to obtain implies that the women seen in the Pictures do not deserve to ‘be a woman’ and in a certain sense are wasting this opportunity.

As regards the changes to be made to the scene, most of the subjects would not change anything. Some concentrated on irrelevant details while others would remove the women, whose presence is linked to the concept of brothel. In the future projections there were almost always scenes depicting sex, intimacy and promiscuity; only in rare cases did the situation remain balanced.

For Picture 8 (a balcony), nearly all the tales seem to have a positive assessment index and the tones adopted suddenly became more relaxed and serene. The descriptions of the subjects seem very similar: a nice place, a pleasant situation where there are couples of friends talking, drinking and having fun. There is also no lack of self-references because it is a scene where many of the clinical group members would like to be. The characters get on well together, they’re comfortable people that like one another, and some of them are in love with their partner. The bonds seem clear and defined, an ideal condition for a get-together.

Only in a few cases does this situation seem to be reversed because, in clear contrast with most of the responses, the Picture arouses negative emotions, some even fairly ‘extreme’ like disgust. In these cases the tension is evident and the subjects defend themselves by manipulating the material, banishing couples from their tale or else describing the people in the picture as all being friends together and emphatically denying that there are any couples (although the bond of affection between one of the couples in particular is very evident), or else declaring that they prefer small groups. Yet again there is an evident fear of being in a couple and being in a group, both themes that have been confronted several times in the previous Pictures. In one particularly significant case this scene is described as preparatory to an orgy, because the characters are in one of ‘those places’ where couple swapping and other outré sexual activities take place. The subject, a member of the clinical group, insisted that he does not approve of these places, does not go to them and although he has often been invited to go, he has always refused. Nevertheless, his descriptions of such places appear very detailed. His approach seems to be defensive, as if he feels he should defend his category and emphasize the distance from promiscuous attitudes of this type. The use of the expression ‘those places’ is a proximity index that indicates physical, time and social distance.

For the first time, none of the members of the clinical group would change anything, but for two opposite reasons. Most of them would not change anything because they like
Table 1. Examples of Sentiment Analysis output produced by the Tone Analyzer software

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Picture Number</th>
<th>Examples of text with emotional output produced by the clinical group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Picture 2</td>
<td>A child is peeking into a bedroom. He is spying because he has opened the door and is leaning against it. He is about to go in. Perhaps he is spying because it isn’t his room but his parents’, there’s a double bed. He wants to understand why the bed is bigger than his. There’s a smaller room, the bathroom. I would change the bedstand, put a more decorative lamp, place the bed facing the front, I would change the scenario. It could also be a girl. Even if it has short hair and is wearing trousers. In the future the child may grow up balanced, healthy, clean. If the environment where the child lives is tidy there may be mental order. <strong>If the child grows up in a healthy environment the future is imagined as positive. (Anger)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture 3</td>
<td>A beach, a couple but she is not interested in her companion. I can see it on her face. He would like to have complete intimacy but her face expresses aggressiveness. It’s a summer affair and must not go on. <strong>He just wants a physical approach, an affair that lasts more than a summer, but he’s the type that doesn’t take the initiative unless the woman is ok with it. I would like to see more people around, like on a summer beach. This story ends badly. (Sadness)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture 3</td>
<td>This is a fine picture, because there’s a couple on the rock. I know they’re a couple because they’re embracing. It looks as though she wants to be less close. He is embracing her, she tries to move away, perhaps he wants more, kisses and embraces but she is hesitant, reluctant because they’re out in the open. She doesn’t agree and her face is unwilling because they’re in view. Her face is doubtful, afraid. Perhaps they haven’t known each other long. I would like to make the girl more willing, it would be more romantic if she was embracing him too. <strong>This story ends badly, the future is black, negative, I can see something of my mother with my father in the photo. (Sadness)</strong> In their photos she is always facing backward and doesn’t want my father’s embraces. They have never got on in all their life. I don’t see a positive future for this couple and perhaps it is better if they separate (I have always said that to my parents too).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture 3</td>
<td>My fiancé and I at the sea. We don’t go often because I like the sea at sunset and he doesn’t so much. The two kids are embracing like we do. I would set the scene at sunset, with the colors of the setting sun, it’s more beautiful. <strong>The two marry and are happy and content like I see us (Joy).</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture 5</td>
<td>The boys are following and courting the girl but she’s clever, showing herself off, flaunting a bit, but not going the whole way. They lust for her but she won’t give it away and doesn’t even deign to look at them. <strong>I really like this picture (Anger).</strong> In the end she’ll leave them drooling after her, the dogs. She’s one that likes to draw men on, she must make them despair, she enjoys seeing them lusting but in the end she’ll leave them unsated, her ideal type is not there among them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture 6</td>
<td>A nice dance, couples, one is courting another one’s woman but she’s understood the trick and frowns him down. She is story ends badly, the future is black, negative, I can see something of my mother with my father in the photo. (Sadness). In their photos she is always facing backward and doesn’t want my father’s embraces. They have never got on in all their life. I don’t see a positive future for this couple and perhaps it is better if they separate (I have always said that to my parents too).</td>
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<td>The fact that the “Tone Analyzer” never assigned the “anger sentiment” to the comments made by members of the clinical group. In all three cases the “joy sentiment” seems to derive from describing a relational experience. Indeed, the fact of having a relationship and being accepted by the partner, despite the desired identity “transformation”, may be a significant “framing” because it makes a more positive view of life possible.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The fact that the “Tone Analyzer” never assigned the “fear sentiment” to the texts of comments on the TIPE Pictures considered in this study could be due to the limits of interpreting them on a lexical rather than a pragmatic or contextual basis. Surprisingly, however, the software seems to be able to draw inferences and even to “understand” a sarcastic intent, as shown in the cases where it attributes the “anger sentiment” to texts alluding to possible parental neglect or to rejecting strategies adopted by the woman toward it like that and the condition of the characters is perfect as it is, harmonious and serene. For others, instead, the reaction is charged with resentment and negativity: they would not change anything because no change could make them change their minds and, strangely, they would not appreciate the picture no matter what was changed. The future projections nearly always seem rosy, hopeful and positive: the couples will stay stable, some will get married and they will all be happy. Only in two cases are the predictions negative and somber.</td>
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</table>

**Results**

**Sentiment Analysis**

Content Analysis was performed using softwares that gauge the values of some recurrent factors in terms of word frequencies and their associations. In particular, the “Tone Analyzer”, IBM software for *Sentiment Analysis*, was used to obtain a general impression of the underlying disposition attributable to a subject undergoing a test. The lexical test points out recurrent words that can be keys to “basic emotions”. In the light of the “Tone Analyzer” results, the texts produced when interpreting the TIPE Pictures reveal a clear difference between the emotions in the clinical group, that are highly defined, and in the controls, whose reactions are much more variegated.

The subjects undergoing testing preparatory to a sex change prevalently showed a very negative underlying mood, oriented toward sadness or anger (see Table 1). But the most remarkable result obtained with the “Tone Analyzer” when scanning their texts is not so much the rarity of “joy”, that was reasonably to be expected, as the complete absence of “fear”.

Table 1 reports two of the three cases in which the “Tone Analyzer” attributes “joy” to the comments made by members of the clinical group. In all three cases the “joy sentiment” seems to derive from describing a relational experience. Indeed, the fact of having a relationship and being accepted by the partner, despite the desired identity “transformation”, may be a significant “framing” because it makes a more positive view of life possible.

The fact that the “Tone Analyzer” never assigned the “fear sentiment” to the texts of comments on the TIPE Pictures considered in this study could be due to the limits of interpreting them on a lexical rather than a pragmatic or contextual basis. Surprisingly, however, the software seems to be able to draw inferences and even to “understand” a sarcastic intent, as shown in the cases where it attributes the “anger sentiment” to texts alluding to possible parental neglect or to rejecting strategies adopted by the woman toward
unwelcome attentions (Pictures 2 and 5 in Table 1).

In the control group texts, instead, the “Tone Analyzer”
found more negatively oriented sentiments both because
a significant presence of fear was recorded and because
situations were evoked that revealed anger as a response
to failed relations with parents, in particular the mother.
Sadness and anger emerged during descriptions of unre-
ciprocated relations, as in the following example: “She’s
scared, she didn’t go there of her own accord” (Picture 3,
anger, 2F1994C).

In this extract, even if there is a clear reference to fear, the
prevalent emotion seems to be anger as a probable response
to a morally unjust situation. In fact, the “Tone Analyzer”
found a greater sense of rebellion against moral prevarication
situations in the control group, whereas the experimental
group seemed more inclined to feel sadness, leading them to
accept certain conditions of moral abuse rather passively, as
in the following example: “He just wants a physical appro-
ach, an affair that lasts more than a summer, although he’s
the type that doesn’t take the initiative unless the woman’s
ok with it.” (Picture 3, sadness, 5M1992S).

The greater emotional focus found in the control group
descriptions and tales is demonstrated not only by the em-
phasis on morally unjust situations but also by their feelings
of anger evoked by references to homosexuality (that are
completely absent in the experimental group), as in the
example: “looking at them better, they could also be two
women, in fact I really think they are two women, one is a
bit more detached, the one that’s smoking; they’re lesbians”
(Picture 4, anger, 9M1994C).

Diatextual Analysis

Diatextual Analysis (34; 35; 36) is a qualitative approach
to Discourse Analysis that is aimed at pinpointing the “ma-
king sense effects” emerging from the dynamic and dialogic
relations between text and context. Generally speaking,
these “effects” can be traced along the axes of Subjectivity,
Argumentation and Mode (the SAM Model) (34). This
interpretation apparatus was applied to the comments pro-
based by those interpreting the TIPE Pictures. Briefly, in
this approach the meaning of a discourse is drawn from how
the interlocutors identify with what they say (Subjectivity),
the position they adopt toward the reference world they describe
(Assertation) and how they process the whole discourse
(Mode). Examples of subjectivity markers are the lexical and
phrasing options chosen, that denote emotional involvement
or detachment, examples of argumentation markers are the
“Framing” choices, that reveal the position they adopt
toward a certain issue, and those of mode markers are the
tones adopted (modulation by intensification or mitigation,
rhetorical figures, stylesme, etc.).

The influence of the context on the discourse enunciation
the subjects produced about what they felt when looking at
the Pictures was mostly already implicit in the indications
given by the operator administering the TIPE test: “What
does this make you think of? What would you put into or
take out of the Picture? How do you imagine the scene may
evolve?” Therefore, the first “making sense effect” emer-
ging from the Diatextual Analysis was the intersubjective
‘reflexive’ orientation underlying the production of the inter-
pretations of the TIPE Pictures by both the controls and the
experimental subjects in their discourse enunciation.

The discourse projections proposed by the control group
subjects when making sense of the 8 TIPE Pictures were
entirely in harmony with the expected criteria establishing
its validity, first of all its internal coherence. In fact, as the
subjects proceed through the various situations delineated
in the 8 Pictures, they become aware of the test aims – to
explore the fantasies that are the unconsciously removed
background to their interpretation of the sexual act – in
their tendency to express a positive or negative assessment,
connecting it to most often to cultural stereotypes but som-
times also to their own life experiences. For example,
(12, F, 1986C) starts the description of Picture 5 as follows:
“This is me, happy when at last I have what love is for me”,
whereas (10M1992C) justifies the preference for Picture
8, that shows only “some people talking quietly together”,
because “in the others there’s negative energy, hidden sexual
attachment…”

In fact, the intrinsic aims of the various Pictures were
nearly always achieved, even if the subjects adopted various
different positions in their relations with the erotic fanta-
sies sphere, as evinced by the ample range of expressions
used about sexual encounters, reported as follows in order of
frequency: “take her to bed”/“going to bed together”,
“have sex”, “have it off with her”/“they want to make out
with her together”, “he fucks her”/“they fuck”, “play dirty
games”?“they do dirty things”, “oral sex”, “they’re trying it
on”, “they’re rubbing against one another”/“they’re feeling
each other up”, “a menage à trois”/“a threesome”, “they go
in for couple swapping”, “they have an orgy”, “they have it
off all night”, “a fine mixup”, “they’re petting”, “they had a
past affair”, “intimate attitudes”, “sucking it off”, “they went
there to make out”, “she streetwalks”, “there’s chemistry
between them”, “the children are playing with themselves”,
“perhaps he’s going too fast but she’s right out of it”.

In particular, the clinical group subjects know that what
they are doing will necessarily be a part of the assessment
procedure for their application to have a sex change. For
that reason, they make references as often as possible to
“sex things”. These “things” do not only evoke the common
scenarios of sexual encounters but also the close interweave
of stereotypes about sexual relations and gender aspects.

As a second “making sense effect”, the great variability
both among the people commenting the pictures and among
the pictures was highlighted. In fact, the sense attributed
to the various pictures differed widely, also depending on
the degree of personal involvement in what was seen to be
happening. In fact, the TIPE does not invariably attract fan-
tasies in the same way: some see the pictures as “allusions”
to their own experience, and so feel justified in confirming or
not confirming them; others, instead, reduce to a minimum
their interpretation of what they see. Since the details of
the pictures are sometimes intentionally ambiguous, oppo-

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1The initials identify the writer according to the following code: pro-
gressive group number (2), gender (Female), year of birth (1994) and
group, controls © or experimental (S).
singing interpretations are of particular interest. For example, subjects 8 and 9 attributed to Picture 4 a completely opposite sense: “He is looking at her affectionately…” vs “he doesn’t even bother to look at her”.

The construction of the male gaze (affectionate vs absent) is responsible for the completely different outcome projection for the tale: “they will live together happily” vs “he will leave her for another”. Also, seeing “a cock” or “a hen” can trigger different narrative and argumentation models, that are generally accredited according to one’s own experience or assessment and orientation criteria. In short, the projections of psychoerotic fantasies triggered by the TIPE are configured according to a different degree of relevance of the different Pictures presented. While some interpreters allow their personal experiences to emerge in their discourse enunciation of the childhood scenes, others hint at their experience of the group dynamics and relations between couples.

The third “making sense effect” revealed by the diatextual approach was that it makes it possible to identify four enunciation models of psychoerotic fantasies. These are, in fact, strongly rooted in the cultural transmission of gender identity profiles: the “angel woman”, the “prostitute woman”, the “seducer male” and the “deceitful male”. The positive view of the female identity expressed by the transgender subjects can be summarized in the opposite enunciations, according to which “she’s in love” and “he has a lover”.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the premise it must be stated that the relatively small sample is one of the limits of this work.

The subjects in both groups confirmed that the TIPE Pictures induced them to adopt descriptive and narrative strategies that could evoke their erotic fantasies, although these were sometimes anchored to common sense interpretation modules. For example, Picture 2 (11F1992C) suggests that “the child could have problems with sex because he saw his parents having sex”. Therefore, a validity index of the TIPE can be discerned in the ample productivity of comments in both the control group and the experimental group, even if they are sometimes envisaged as extraneous to their life experience: “a ‘40s context” (9M1994C) or “a scene from the ‘60-’70s” (1M1988C).

However, the projections elicited in the TIPE discourse texts show both convergence and disparities between the control group and the clinical group. In fact, in the comments to the first (1 and 2) and last Pictures (7 and 8), fairly similar enunciation programs emerge both as regards the way they see early exploration games and early sexual fantasies in children, and their tendency to recognize, in the multiple characters operating in the group scenes, the power to excite and at the same time inhibit sexual desire. Instead, the central Pictures allow major differences to be observed between the controls and experimental subjects, in the way they feel about male and female initiative when starting a love affair and how to deal with the rivalry situations that always loom over such relations.

The TIPE also highlights the great strength of stereotypes in corroborating gender identity. In fact, the expectation that men will tend to separate erotic fantasies from the emotional sphere was confirmed, whereas women were more prone to imagine a reciprocal emotional involvement. This has a significant diagnostic value because it is further validated by the orientations of the clinical group subjects, who tend to organize their erotic fantasies according to the enunciation models of the gender they aspire to.

A very significant interpretation index was obtained from the degree of preference when the subjects were asked which Picture they would rather be in, and the reasons why. Picture 4 was appreciated because the scene depicts a stable relationship, that they so ardently desire. Instead, Picture 6 was chosen because more than the others it aroused feelings of hopefulness, and the characters seem to be headed for a positive future. Finally, Picture 8 was chosen, despite marked traces of ambivalence, because it seems to have a good ending and the bonds seem to be clear, defined and loyal.

Many of the clinical group subjects labeled Picture n.7 as the worst, or at any rate the most problematic. None of the subjects wished to be in that scene because heterosexual stimuli and male-female promiscuity were more marked and evident. In this Picture the subjects’ emotional reactions emerged very clearly, and the issues of conflict and female rivalry were highlighted.

The texts produced by the clinical group subjects revealed highly problematic orientations in the process of the construction of a sexual identity and role defined through the resolution of the Oedipus complex. Removal of the more sexualized aspects in the scenes shown was very common in the clinical group, especially in contexts suggesting a heterosexual relationship; they seemed to prefer to focus on relational aspects ‘purged’ of their erotic and/or sexual characteristics.

In the clinical group again, attitudes to relationships with women showed strong ambivalences and evident feelings of conflict and rivalry: the female world evoked a complex and contradictory spectrum of feelings and experiences ranging from fear to envy, from indifference to true anguish, from rejection to excessive idealization. Indeed, not only did man/woman relations appear deviant, but problems, complexes and conflicts emerged also as regards the whole area of sexuality in general and in group contexts in particular. The concepts of close relationships and insertion in a social group seemed to be a source of discomfort and unease.

In short, the comments on the TIPE Pictures made by the members of the clinical group often appeared flat, implying an affective void, as if when producing their texts they were afraid of letting themselves go and needed to defend themselves against emotions they considered to be painful and difficult to handle.

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