When a “she” becomes an “it”

What happens in the human brain when a woman is put on a par with an object? A research answering this question was conducted at the Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science and the Center for Mind/Brain Sciences (CiMEC) of the University of Trento and was published today in “Scientific Reports”. The results could provide new instruments and insights in the study of gender and racial violence.

Rovereto, 30 April 2019 – When a “she” becomes an “it”. The most basic definition of sexual objectification, a risk that mostly targets women when they are reduced to their bodies or body parts. A view that represents a powerful and potentially damaging way in which we can see and treat women. The theme has been analyzed experimentally in a study conducted at the University of Trento, Italy. Its results are published today in the journal “Scientific Reports” and represent an important contribution to the literature on sexual objectification.

The discussion on why women are more exposed than men to the risk of being considered an object involves both evolutionary and socio-cultural theories and interests various scientific disciplines. The research team of the Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science and the Center for Mind/Brain Sciences (CiMEC) has analyzed what happens in the human brain when an object appears in two different contexts: among a group of women or a group of men. The brain activity, measured with an electroencephalogram (EEG), shows that the object is noticed less when shown among a group of scarcely dressed women.

Jeroen Vaes, professor of the Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science and first author of the current article, states: "Studies conducted in the past decades on the impact of sexual objectification revealed that growing up in a society in which women are mainly judged on their looks makes women doubt their physical appearance. In the long run, this might even lead to eating disorders and sexual dysfunctions. Little, however, is known about the way our perception changes when a woman is objectified. We have shown that a woman in bikini or underwear is perceived more similar to an object compared to a man, both in the brain of male and female participants. For the first time, we managed to show that the perception of women, when objectified, changes in essence beyond the metaphor becoming more similar to a real object”.

How was this result obtained? In the experiments, both male and female participants were exposed to images of male and female, scarcely or fully-dressed models together with their doll-like avatars that were created on the basis of the same models. Brain activity was measured with an electroencephalogram (EEG).
On a scale from fully human to object, Vaes explains that the brain of both men and women tends to perceive a lower degree of humanity or a stronger resemblance with an object in women rather than in men when they are dressed in a swimsuit or underwear.

The implications of the result that the human brain associates “women” and “objects”, are numerous. First of all, such perceptions might trigger treatments that are typically observed in our interactions with objects (like ownership and violation) and result in gender violence. Secondly, the recurrent sexualization of women in the media and in video games might have stronger effects in real life given that female doll-like avatars are less clearly differentiated from real women. Finally, the current paradigm might be adopted in other contexts. Vaes highlights: “Adopting a paradigm that measures whether human and non-human entities are perceived similarly, allows us to show processes of dehumanization beyond the metaphor in racial contexts as well”. The current results could, therefore, provide new instruments to gauge racial prejudice and stereotypes and increase our understanding of gender and racial violence.

The article

The research work for the article, entitled “Assessing neural responses towards objectified human targets and objects to identify processes of sexual objectification that go beyond the metaphor”, was conducted by Jeroen Vaes, Daniela Ruzzante and Carlotta Cogoni (of the Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science, UniTrento) and by Giulia Cristoforetti and Veronica Mazza (of CIMeC, UniTrento).

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