


Language of Desire: A Methodological Contribution to Overcoming Gender Violence

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Abstract

Previous research has generally found that providing specific research evidence about concrete improvements in the development of field work promotes the achievement of social impact during the research process itself (Aiello et al., 2021). This result opens as a prospective for further research to specify which scientific evidences can promote this impact in the different research topics, as well as the methodological aspects that will facilitate it. In research on gender violence, some of these evidences have already been identified—for example, the mirage of upward mobility (Oliver, 2010-2012). However, the methodological aspects that will determine, when exposing such evidence, the social impact obtained during the research process have not been analyzed. In this sense, in the FREE TEEN DESIRE project, sharing this evidence with the participants using the language of desire has promoted transformations. This language of desire must be incorporated from its reality, being the result of a construction between the researcher and the participants. Its incorporation is enhanced if it is done in the context of Dialogic Feminist Gatherings (DFG). And, throughout the process, the researcher must adopt a role in which, among other things, she or he makes visible any attitude linked to violence when it becomes unattractive, as well as making visible the language of desire that is being constructed with respect to egalitarian relationships. The social impact of this research methodology was evidenced by the fact that after participating in DFG on the mirage of upward mobility, the girls' intention to have a sporadic relationship with a boy with violent attitudes decreased (Puigvert, 2016).

Keywords

Methods in qualitative inquiry, feminist research, focus groups, qualitative meta-analysis/synthesis, narrative

Introduction

Gender Violence

Current analyses of gender violence present it as the result of socialization, that is, as a learning process acquired through different interactions—family, friends, and media...—throughout life (Gomez, 2014; McCarthy & Casey, 2008). Specifically, socialization has been identified that places the attraction in people who respond to a model of domination and abuse (McDaniel, 2005). This promotes desire toward violent models (Traditional Dominant Masculinity) and, at the same time, encourages them to be chosen to maintain affective-sexual relationships thus running the risk of being victims of gender violence (Diez-Palomar et al., 2014). This fact has already been identified as one of the main causes of the

perpetuation of violence among youth and adolescents (Racionero et al., 2020).

In this sense, the findings on the different types of masculinities that clarify who is reproducing gender violence are particularly relevant (Connell, 2012; Flecha et al., 2013). Traditional Dominant Masculinity is that which responds to patriarchal values and even goes so far as to exercise violence.

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As Oppressed Traditional Masculinity scientific literature find those men who respond to egalitarian values but do not consider themselves desired, nor do they challenge patriarchal values, so in most cases they are subjected to DTM. Third, the Alternative Masculinity is understood as an alternative to other models because they are men who are completely opposed to any behavior of domination and abuse and, therefore, to gender violence, and at the same time are considered attractive.

Another of the explanatory elements of gender violence recently identified is the “mirage of upward mobility” (Oliver, 2010-2012). This phenomenon is understood as the erroneous perception of some people that having a sexual affective relationship with men who respond to DTM will lead to an increase in their status and attractiveness (Rue et al., 2014; Tellado et al., 2014). It is an error in perception because in practice the effect produced by maintaining an affective-sexual relationship with someone who despises, abuses, dominates... diminishes that attractiveness, and, in turn, contributes to socializing in relationships of gender violence.

Language of Ethics versus Language of Desire

Different research studies (Portell & Pulido, 2012; Rodríguez-Navarro et al., 2014) show that in the reproduction of gender violence and, more specifically, in the attraction to models of attraction that can exercise violence, language has great importance in promoting the desire for DTM or the deception of “mirage of upward mobility.” In this sense, the existence of a *coercive discourse* (Puigvert et al., 2019), a discourse which, shaped by an imbalance in power within relationships, influences socialization into linking attractiveness to people with violent attitudes and behaviors, while non-violent people and relationships are—because of this coercive discourse—mostly perceived as convenient but not exciting. That is why it is necessary to incorporate the language of desire in interventions so that they can contribute effectively to the prevention of gender violence (López de Aguilera, et al., 2020). A common mistake when working on gender violence, especially with adolescents, is to talk about the issue from a language of ethics. This language is especially used by education professionals and parents. They use this language to convey the need to build a society free of violence and non-sexist, but when talking about what they consider “good” they leave aside the language of desire and, therefore, it is seen by adolescents as boring (Puigvert et al., 2019). This language of desire is used by young people and the media when talking about sexual-affective relationships. However, in many cases, this language of desire is linking attractiveness to people with violent attitudes and abusive relationships. In this way, young people are placed before the dilemma of what is convenient—good—or what is desired—violent. This causes a distance between the people who try to educate them and their own reality, as is perfectly reflected in this quote by Flecha and Puigvert (2010), which was published in a magazine for

adolescents: “My parents tell me to marry a good boy, and I really listen to them. Until I have to get married, I’m having fun with bad boys”. As long as programs aimed at preventing gender violence among adolescents consist of adults telling young people “this is attractive but not good for you, this is better for you that is good even if it is boring,” they are doomed to failure. The challenge is precisely to break this dissociation.

Successful educational actions in the prevention of gender violence work along this line (Flecha et al., 2013). Although previous research has already shown how participatory and/or feminist methodologies can contribute to the development of effective programs for the prevention of gender violence (Flecha, 2012; Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2020), it has not been proven how the incorporation of the language of desire in the design and subsequent development of research—specifically in the field—is also a cornerstone for the results of research on gender violence to achieve social impact and even benefit the people participating in that research.

Methodological Characteristics of Gender Violence Research with Social Impact

It has been demonstrated that the analysis of gender violence requires a quantitative as well as qualitative approach to this reality. While we initially found quantitative research that offered a description of profiles and circumstances and quantified their scope, qualitative research offers an explanation of this reality as it does for other social problems studied (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

The development of qualitative field work is strongly marked by the interactions that are established between the researcher and participant. That is why different research studies have focused on critically analyzing these interactions to know how the subjectivity of the researcher can mark the construction of the results (Sammut et al., 2012). The results of this meta-analysis have allowed us to move forward not only in improving the field work but also have provided us with knowledge about the impact of this process, both in researchers and participants, more specifically how they impact on their beliefs and pre-existing knowledge (Shaw, 2010).

From what has been called feminist research (Bergen, 1996; Campbell et al., 2010; Renzetti et al., 2013), we find three contributions of special interest to address the remains exposed. The first contribution refers to the need to reduce the hierarchy between the interviewer and the interviewee. While this contribution has been especially highlighted in the framework of feminist research, there are other methodological paradigms that also highlight this contribution. This contribution is specified in the establishment of a climate and use of an egalitarian dialog. Second, to make available to the participants information and resources on the subject studied. And third, in the case of addressing issues that require it, offering emotional support to address possible imbalances or

traumas generated by participation in the interview (Campbell et al., 2010), as would be the case of research on gender violence. We see, therefore, that the development of these methodologies involves placing participants in a central position also in the production of knowledge, recognizing them as experts through their lived experiences (de Jager et al., 2017; García-Hernández et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2019).

These strategies have been shown not only to improve research results but also to promote a positive effect on participants. Dialog enables people to understand the social reality in which they live, and this understanding generates meaning and transformation (Freeman, 2011). In the case of research on gender violence, among the benefits identified is a greater understanding of gender violence and inequalities (Chakraborty et al., 2020) or a greater awareness of its healing process (Campbell et al., 2010).

It should be noted that various research studies subordinate the validity of the research to the elements mentioned, specifically to the achievement of democratic participation and the fact that the research itself generates social transformations (Denzin, 2012; Torrance, 2012). But how to ensure that the participation in the research process itself leads to transformations for the people involved is still an unexplored field. To the elements mentioned above such as making available scientific knowledge on the subject or making resources available, Mkandawire-Valhmu and Stevens (2010), in the subject under discussion, highlight the usefulness of conducting discussion groups. In her research, she found that the discussion groups offered women the opportunity to build a space for mutual support and a dialog of reflection and awareness aimed at knowing how to use their own skills to improve their lives and those of other women. For example, they constructed a discourse in which some women dissuaded others from sexual practices that could put them in a situation of greater vulnerability to violence or sexually transmitted diseases. A sensitization that for researchers or professionals is difficult to achieve successfully.

Another of the methodologies highlighted in recent years in research on gender violence that manages to generate transformations in the participants is digital storytelling (Aroussi, 2019; de Jager et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2019). This methodology, following the characteristics mentioned above, manages to directly involve women in the research process, recognizing them as experts through the exposure of their own experience. At the same time, it has the particularity of allowing women to have control over what they want to talk about and when they want to talk about it. It is a very important element in research on gender violence because it gives back control to women whose voices and even their lives had been usurped during their experience of violence. Digital storytelling restores their individual value in the process of rebuilding their life story (Aroussi, 2019; Baines & Stewart, 2011).

Finally, the use of the language of desire as a methodological variable in qualitative research on overcoming gender

violence has not been explored. On the contrary, the need to unite the language of desire and the language of ethics has been analyzed in depth in the framework of educational actions (López de Aguilera et al., 2020; Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2020). Taking these results into account, we can establish the hypothesis that the incorporation of the language of desire in the research process contributes to the achievement of social impact during the development of the research itself and, subsequently, through the results obtained.

“Free Teen Desire” Research

Methodology

The project FREE TEEN DESIRE was funded by Marie Curie program (Puigvert, 2015–2016). It was carried out through a quasi-experimental study and qualitative research in the United Kingdom, Spain, Cyprus, and Finland. The sample of participants was composed of 240 girls aged 12–13 years, considering diversity in terms of culture, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status. It should be noted that our analyses focused on heterosexual relationships.

The quasi-experimental study was carried out through a previous measurement, followed by an intervention—Dialogic Feminist Gatherings (DFG) (Puigvert, 2016)—based on the preventive socialization of gender violence—the rise in the number of women—and, subsequently, a second measurement that evaluated the changes generated as a result of the intervention. This second measurement was carried out in a quantitative and qualitative manner.

The instrument used for the quantitative measurements was the vignette test, which measured the influence of attractiveness and social status when choosing a boy for a short-term relationship. Specifically, each young man was provided with four photographs of young men accompanied by a description of their attractiveness and their treatment of women. The descriptions were based on real cases. Two of the vignettes were related to violence against women, and the other two were related to non-violent and non-sexist behavior. Violent behaviors were categorized as such based on what the scientific literature considers violent, for example: manipulative, controlling, or disdains.

The instrument was piloted by contrasting the images and stories with young people and adolescents.

Once the intervention—DFG—was made, the photographs with initially non-violent descriptions were changed to violent profile descriptions and vice versa. This was done to corroborate the hypothesis that behavior is more influential than the physical image in adding or subtracting sexual attraction, depending on the language used about them.

These measurements, both the first and the second, were aimed at knowing whether the participants or their friends would be interested in having some kind of sexual-affective relationship with one of them. To collect this information, the participants had to answer, following a Likert scale (1 to 3

means “no”; 4 to 6 means “yes”), whether the participants and their friends would be interested in having a relationship or hook up with the boys in the vignettes.

In the case of qualitative information collection, we conducted 30 life stories with girls who had responded to the questionnaires and participated in the DFG. Through them, we were able to deepen the reflections that had emerged during the development of the GFP, what changes had taken place with respect to their models of attractiveness and what had led to those changes.

Throughout the research, that is, from its design to the different phases and subsequent interpretation of the results, an advisory council was formed by a secondary school teacher, two adults related to education and the media and 3 students between 12 and 18 years old. The main function of this advisory council was to ensure that the language used was close to the reality of the group studied, with special emphasis on leaving aside the language of ethics.

Ethics Approval

This study was carried out in accordance with the recommendations of the ethical guidelines of Marie Curie Actions under EU Horizon 2020. The protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee involved in the evaluation of Marie Curie Actions, EU H2020 Rules for Participation, Art. 14. ([Official Journal of the EU, 2013](#)). The project is being also carried out on the basis of the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011) and it has the approval of the University Data Protection officer at the University of Cambridge and the Institute of Criminology’s Research Ethics Committee.

Results

The results published in previous articles on the FREE TEEN DESIRE research show the social impact achieved. Specifically, they show that after participating in DFG’s mirage of upward mobility, there was a decline in girls’ intention to have a sporadic relationship with a boy with violent attitudes. In the pre-test, 78.4% of those surveyed stated that their friends and 38.5% of themselves would like to make out with a violent guy at a party. After the DFG, 49.8% of the respondents stated that their friends would like to make out with a boy with violent attitudes at a party, and regarding their own intentions the percentage was 14.9%. These figures, therefore, evidence that impact ([Puigvert, 2016](#)).

Considering these results, our contribution in this article focuses on the analysis of the methodology followed in the research FREE TEEN DESIRE with the aim of identifying what aspects have led to this impact.

As various studies on gender violence highlight, understanding the phenomenon and being aware of this reality is necessary to transform it ([Aiello et al., 2021](#); [Rue et al., 2014](#)). But our research has led us to identify that in gender violence,

if that understanding is developed by incorporating the language of desire toward violence-free relationships and models, the social impact is facilitated.

Through the example of the research FREE TEEN DESIRE, in these results we expose what we have worked on the methodology to achieve that incorporation. Specifically, our analysis has led us to identify three characteristics of our research methodology that facilitated it.

Co-Construction of the Language of Desire: Starting from Its Reality

As we have seen in the review of the literature in research with adolescents, when we speak of the language of desire that positively influences the transformation of models of attraction, we refer to a language that is not imposed by adults. Therefore, it is a language that starts from their reality, is elaborated by them and themselves, and is oriented to link desire in attitudes and relationships that are passionate and free of violence.

The first instrument that we developed at FREE TEEN DESIRE to start the reflection with the participants were vignettes. The narratives that accompanied the vignettes were constructed from descriptions about boys considered popular in previous research, youth magazines (e.g., in dating advice sections), and those offered by other media about popular young men. In them, we identified how they talk about those they like, desire... Later, in conversations with boys and girls from different countries, we contrasted if the proposed descriptions corresponded with the usual language they use when they talk about the desired boys. In turn, this information was also contrasted with education professionals who are in contact with young people and therefore know their most common language.

As a result, we obtained descriptions where attraction was linked to dominating or abusive behavior and others where egalitarian behavior was unattractive. But, despite being exclusionary descriptions, they were not modified. If we had done so, we would have presented idyllic descriptions, but they would not have corresponded to their reality. A reality that, although not shared by all adolescents, has been identified in previous research ([McDaniel, 2005](#); [Racionero et al., 2020](#)).

This first step in the research process can only be implemented by giving continuity to the above. Therefore, these exclusive descriptions can only be offered if we subsequently carry out other research techniques in which we ensure critical reflection on the subject. Otherwise, we would remain at a descriptive level of a part of reality and we could be promoting relationships of violence among adolescent girls.

Below are two examples of narratives.

A.

Rogue and fun. He’s clear that he doesn’t want to commit himself to girls and that doing so is a no-brainer. After being with them, he

doesn't even remember his name. He laughs at his friends who do. Some of them want to hook up with him again, and he systematically belittles them. He may not be as good a person as his friends, but his strong character makes him interesting to discover. Many have tried. He's the perfect guy to rescue. His personality is difficult.

B.

On the contrary, to his friend. This is a very good person. Friendly, studious, respectful. Of course, he is incapable of standing up when there is a fight. We can't imagine him shouting at anyone. A little more character would help him get more attention. His look is penetrating but too innocent... A very good boy, who likes to take care of children and is concerned about his friends and acquaintances.

If we analyze narrative A, we see that he clearly identifies with a person who despises the girls he has relationships with ("after being with them, he does not even remember their name"; "he systematically despises them"), but, as we said, it is common for them to be presented in an ambivalent way. That is, to include other components that present him as attractive. For example, "he is a scoundrel and fun" or "his strong character makes him interesting to discover."

Narrative B describes a boy with non-violent and kind-hearted ("good person"; "respectful") behavior. We also identify the ambivalence mentioned above, but, in this case, the characteristics linked to good treatment are emptied of attraction: "a little more character would help him attract more attention"; "his look is penetrating but too innocent."

Promoting Reflection in the Context of Dialogic Feminist Gatherings

The first space of intervention by the participants was opened in the framework of DFG (Puigvert, 2016), where the theme of analysis was the mirage of upward mobility. The researcher exposed the topic in a gradual way, for it was begun sharing real histories in which the serious consequences for the victim had their origin in this mirage of upward mobility. These were stories that were alien to them, that did not speak of their life or immediate environment, but that they recognized as familiar. This made it possible to overcome the resistance that the exposure of this subject can generate in young people (Rue et al., 2014).

Conducting them within the framework of the DFG means giving the researcher a specific role, as explained in the following section, and that the sessions are conducted as a discussion group. In this way, the examples presented could be multiplied and they could be close to their reality. The participants presented stories that they identified with this phenomenon and, based on the leading role they had been given from the beginning, they themselves deepened their understanding, sometimes even adopting the role of researchers. For example, they asked their own colleagues for clarification of the

stories presented. This strategy also served to empower participants, as is recommended when researching gender violence (de Jager et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2019; Mkandawire-Valhmu & Stevens, 2010).

This procedure was highlighted by most of the girls interviewed later. Ana, a 13-year-old girl, valued the DFG very positively, considering that for her the key was that the stories were initiated through examples that were not their own, but, in her words, "very realistic." These stories led them to begin telling similar stories they knew and, once empowered, they moved on to tell cases they had experienced up close and to collectively deepen their understanding of them. They all agreed that they had continued on their own once the DFG was over.

Rose, a 13-year-old girl, who went out with another boy from the institute, Marc, explained the reflections that the DFG had provoked in her group of friends and the subsequent conversations that had ensued.

When I arrived at the institute Alice told me "don't go out with Marc because he's a dick. He's been going out with me and he's been getting into it with everyone.

(...)

This kid has done the same thing with me as he did with Alice. But I knew that I was still fooling around (...)

Now I see that he is a boy who passes me by, who laughs in my face...

(...) After the discussion my friends told me: "all they explained was "Marc" and they reminded me when they told me to stay away from him because you will see. And I told them: "no, with me it's going to be different".

Rose's friends had unsuccessfully tried to warn her of the damage a relationship with Marc could do. Their warnings remained in the language of ethics—"it does not suit you"—but in Rose's words, she felt "hooked on him." The interviewer in her intervention did not deny this attachment or force her to forget about him. On the contrary, after sharing evidence about the different aspects that in this type of relationship are a mirage, a deception, she proposed to remember, but filtering those memories with the new knowledge they had shared.

Rose: Maybe I must forget.

Interviewer: Sometimes, instead of forgetting it is trying to remember. To tell you "being honest with myself, I'm going to think about what I really like about it". See what you like, because you may not find anything. Like when you start pulling out the layers of a gift looking for where the gift is, and you realize there is no gift.

(...)

Rose: Now I want to think of him as just a classmate, I don't want to go after him or be on the lookout for him. I'm not going to crawl after him!

Role of the Researcher

The characteristics mentioned above would not have made a difference with respect to other investigations without a specific role for the researcher. This role had four functions: to ensure egalitarian dialog, to promote the empowerment of participants so that they could later present their experiences, to avoid deviating from the subject of analysis, and to use a language of desire that would help to empty violent behavior of its attractiveness and, on the contrary, to provide egalitarian behavior and relationships with attractiveness. It is precisely this last point that makes the difference regarding other research. In this sense, the role of the researcher was to ensure that the examples presented were clearly classified among the different types of masculinity, placing special emphasis on the characteristics of the treatment of girls, how they are spoken of badly or belittled. In turn, the researcher's role was also to highlight and enhance those examples that described passion in egalitarian relationships.

In this regard, Marta, 13, highlighted how the researcher's speech had been very clarifying for her. It had helped her and her friends to show and recognize that certain attitudes and behaviors are linked to poor treatment. "It has made me change what you have put in the comments they made, how they talked about the girls. (...) It has helped me realize that I know quite a few cases. It has helped me to see that these girls have been treated badly and they have not noticed.

Conclusions

Research on gender violence, as with other social problems, has mainly sought to understand this problem, as well as the social impact of its results. In the case of gender violence, this impact is translated into achieving a reduction in women's deaths, improving their recovery processes, and preventing it from occurring in future generations, among others. In recent years, some research in this field has raised methodological issues that can contribute to the achievement of this impact. At the same time, there is also some that raises what benefits the research process itself can bring to the participants.

FREE TEEN DESIRE research also aimed to make its results have a social impact. Specifically, to contribute to the change of attraction models that link attraction to violent behavior. The analysis of the results showed the achievement of this objective (Puigvert, 2016; Puigvert et al., 2019). In the following article, we add a methodological contribution to these results. We identify that to achieve this impact, it is necessary to incorporate the language of desire into the research process. To do this, we started from the reality of the research methodology, so that the language of desire was a shared co-construction between researchers and participants. In turn, this incorporation was enhanced by the fact that we promoted reflection within the framework of DFG. Finally, it is worth noting the performance of a specific role by the researcher. With respect to this role, to aspects already

highlighted in previous research, our results added the role of promoting the language of desire.

It should be noted that, although gender violence presents a series of common characteristics regardless of age, the population studied in the FREE TEEN DESIRE project was adolescent. Therefore, it would be interesting in future research to analyze the language of desire as a methodological variable in qualitative research with other populations, especially adult women. This is a limitation that we also identified in the educational interventions mentioned above. These have also focused on young and adolescent populations (Aubert et al., 2011; López de Aguilera et al., 2020), although recently we found some research that analyzes the role played by the presence of communicative acts that unify both languages in achieving the involvement of adults in the fight against gender violence (Duque et al., 2021).

The presence of these characteristics in the research methodology not only means that its results can contribute to overcoming gender violence but also that it has generated changes in this sense in the people who participated in the field work.

This finding opens up new possibilities for analysis, in research on other topics, on other elements that also facilitate the impact on the participants. In research on gender violence, the challenge is to determine whether the change initiated by participants in the models of attractiveness continues over time, and to identify the processes that can increase or reduce this effect over time.

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