

Communicative Daily Life Stories: Raising Awareness About the Link Between Desire and Violence

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Abstract

Gender violence poses a serious risk for women, girls, and children worldwide. Despite all efforts put forth to curtail it, few successful results have emerged. Narratives have been used to denounce the reality lived by survivors. However, scarcely any literature has explored how they get to question their own reality and, if they do, how these survivors are able to break the circle of gender violence by making room for nonviolent and egalitarian relationships. This article is a step in this direction: It explores how some girls, after participating in an initiative based on the *language of desire*, known as “Dialogic Feminist Gatherings,” encourage one another to question the dominant model of socialization in relationships in which attraction is linked to violent behaviors. The analysis focuses on communicative daily life stories (hereafter CDLS) performed in a Spanish high school with female teens after their participation in the gatherings. Drawing from these stories, the article illustrates how this methodological tool allows one to assess the impact of these gatherings on identifying the existence of this dominant model while also pushing to question it. This article also contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between attraction and violence, a risk factor for gender violence previously noted in the scientific literature. The knowledge obtained through this inquiry reinforces an evidence-based approach to having an effective social impact on the struggle against gender violence.

Keywords

communicative daily live stories, dialogic feminist gatherings, gender violence, language of desire

Introduction

Gender violence among adolescents has been noted as a major concern by international health authorities and by European organisms (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2014; United Nations Children’s Fund, 2014). In its 2014 survey, *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey*, the FRA (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights) reported that one in 10 women has experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 15, and one in 20 women has been raped (FRA, 2014). Although different initiatives are being developed and implemented targeting female and male adolescents, pointing out that gender violence must be approached from a “bystander intervention perspective” to be overcome (Cares et al., 2015), few of these initiatives have focused on what recent studies on gender violence are contributing regarding the importance of the *language of desire*, beyond the “language of ethics,” to question the well-known link between attraction and violent behaviors as a risk factor of gender violence (Puigvert, 2016).

The *language of ethics* refers to the official language used mainly by those parents and schools wanting to

educate children in a nonsexist way. It has been confirmed that in certain dialogues about those who are considered “good,” the language of desire is missing, and when the conversation revolves around the individuals who exert domination and violence upon other people, this type of language is present. This link between violence and the *language of desire* is also used in digital media and favored by teens and young people themselves. The language of ethics focuses only on what is “good” and “ethical” but does not consider the predominant model of socialization of youth in which violence is more present in their lives every day, pervading wider spheres in their social realities and thus shaping many of their desires (Flecha & Puigvert, 2010). This predominant model of

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socialization, familiar to many youths from a very early age, links violence to attraction and considers “good” as unattractive. This issue has been directly addressed by the *Free_Teen_Desire* research project (2015–2016),¹ which drew on previous scientific research on the preventive socialization of gender violence and was aimed at contributing more knowledge for a better understanding of how some adolescents have been socialized into this dominant model of attraction. In addition, the *Free_Teen_Desire* project analyzed new methodological avenues to identify, prevent, and question gender violence among teenagers in four European countries (the UK, Spain, Finland, and Cyprus) in secondary schools and, in the case of Spain, in universities as well.

Although the project was wider in content and methodological approaches, we focus here on only one of the tools used: the “Dialogic Feminist Gatherings” (hereafter DFG), a one-time intervention conducted with female adolescents and young girls who participated in the project.² The gatherings are egalitarian dialogues that draw from the language of desire and aim to create avenues for those female participants wishing to question desires imposed by patriarchal societies by orienting these desires toward nonviolent relationships (Puigvert, 2016). One of the main themes in the DFG is the “mirage of upward mobility” that some girls experience and that leads them to suffer gender violence. This mirage has been defined as the mistaken perception of some girls, due to the dominant discourse, when they link the establishment of a sexual-affective relationship with boys who respond to a hegemonic model of masculinity, in which imposition and disdain prevail to increase their status or attractiveness. Research shows that in these cases, instead of increasing status or attractiveness, this mirage decreases them (Puigvert, 2016).

In the Spanish case reported in this article, once the gatherings occurred in the different educational settings, communicative daily life stories (CDLS) were conducted with a twofold goal. First, the goal is to deepen the understanding of how mass media and all the interactions that shape teens’ socialization have led some of them to socialize in a dominant model of attraction that links attraction to violent behaviors. Second, the goal is to further assess the impact of the intervention empowering participants to identify the existence of this dominant model, understanding and questioning their choice.

Framed in this context, the current article explores dialogic situations, specifically the use of CDLS. It deepens our understanding of how this communicative technique becomes an appropriate tool to evaluate the impact of the DFG, in which female adolescent participants reflect on the content of the intervention in relation to both their feelings and their environments, thus opening the door to question gender violence in future situations.

Qualitative Techniques to Assess Gender Violence Interventions and Question the Self’s Hegemonic Socialization

It is often difficult to know the impact of programs aimed at reducing gender violence victimization among adolescents and young women. Numerous reasons, many of them common to other types of policy/program evaluations, include the complexity of the process of evaluating outcomes, the (reported) lack of funds needed to do so, and the lack of a culture to evaluate these programs once they are implemented. However, the benefits of implementing qualitative techniques for program assessment can be numerous.

The literature suggests that in cases where qualitative methods have been used to analyze the effectiveness of gender-violence programs, such methods have helped researchers to uncover what works in greater detail, which in turn contributes to a better understanding of how the pieces of the puzzle fit together. However, beyond this, qualitative methods can allow the inclusion of the end users’ voices in their own evaluation processes, which can contribute to improving program effectiveness (Chakraborty et al., 2017; Sullivan, 2011). For instance, in an exploratory study conducted in the city of Bengaluru, India, using informal interviews with stakeholders, researchers found that many services are often implemented in a reactive way instead of being foreseen as a prevention policy. Rather than placing an emphasis on the prevention of violence, agencies prioritized working with survivors, which reflects an international trend of violence-based programs (Chakraborty et al., 2017). In another qualitative evaluation conducted in Kenya of an output-based aid-voucher program, through in-depth interviews and focus groups to a wide range of social actors (from health managers to service providers to users), researchers showed that to increase the efficacy of this type of initiative, one must increase the capacity of health care providers and police officers, strengthen the community strategy component, and widely engage the community in more preventive programs (Njuki et al., 2012). Qualitative methods also allow one to capture in more detail the worldviews of the research participants when exploring topics as delicate as an adolescent’s own perceptions of violence. In this regard, Nair and Osman (2013) emphasized that for gender-violence programs targeted to adolescents, professionals in charge of their implementation must take ethnicity and cultural aspects into account.

When conducting qualitative fieldwork, using dialogue and narratives can have huge transformative potential, as they can in the field of gender violence and overcoming sexual harassment. The communicative methodology of research has been analyzed worldwide and highlighted among other qualitative approaches for its singularity at

the time of analyzing the social reality (Soler-Gallart, 2017). This approach has not only created new knowledge but has also advanced the social transformation of the reality it has studied in diverse fields, from education (Alvarez et al., 2016; García-Espinel et al., 2017), gender (shedding light on new types of masculinities that are challenging violence; Redondo-Sama, 2016), cultural studies (studying actions to overcome racism and achieve the social inclusion of cultural and ethnic minorities; Gómez & Munté, 2015; Ruiz-Eugenio, 2016), and many other disciplines. The communicative approach has provided researchers from different disciplines with not only a methodological tool but also a way of conceiving research that allows for what Norman Denzin (2017) has claimed, in a recently published article in this Journal, is “a way for inquiry that addresses the inequities” (p. 8), in short, looking for ways to open up venues for social justice.

Linked to our topic as an example of communicative research is the study by Ramis et al. (2014), who examined how women victims of gender violence can be active subjects in their personal transformation by being empowered through participating in CDLS, where their life experiences are contrasted with the main scientific contributions from research on violence against women. Using the communicative approach, by means of stories—in Bruner’s words, “narratives” (Bruner, 2004)—researchers can explore those “sites of the mind”; using other techniques, these “sites of the mind” are more difficult to reach than when using dialogue in an intersubjective way to trigger social transformation.

This further exploration is the purpose of this article, which analyzes the narratives of young female adolescents who participated in a DFG in which situations of gender violence were debated, using the researcher—in the DFG and while conducting the CDLS—and the “language of desire” rather than the “language of ethics.”

In the next section, the study design is explained, and the communicative dimension of the qualitative technique is developed.

Using CDLS to Assess the Impact of Dialogic Feminist Gatherings in a High School: The Study Design

In the Free_Teen_Desire project, qualitative fieldwork was carried out in the four countries already mentioned. However, the data reported in this article concern two case studies carried out in two Spanish high schools where, to evaluate the impact of the intervention conducted—the DFG—we applied CDLS. In total, 10 CDLS were performed with girls aged between 12 and 13 years.³

As explained in the “Introduction” section, the DFG were run in a communicative way as an inter-subjective dialogue among the researcher and the female adolescents who

participated in the training. This meant that the researcher introduced the topic of gender violence and the “mirage of upward mobility,” and using specific examples, launched the debate about the main findings on what research on preventive socialization of gender violence has identified as the risk factors for gender violence as well as, in a broader way, the other risk factors found in the scientific literature. The gatherings lasted between 1.5 and 2 hr.

Those female students who agreed to conduct a CDLS were randomly selected from the school’s alphabetical list by teacher. At the two high schools, the CDLS were carried out after the celebration of the DFG, in one of the schools the following day, and in the other after recess. This process was important to be able to inquire about the kinds of reflections the participants had during the hours following the gatherings and about the kinds of conversations they had with their friends or other classmates regarding the content that had been shared.

The CDLS were chosen for this study rather than other traditional qualitative techniques such as interviews or focus groups, as the research team wanted to analyze in detail and with each of the participants those issues that have been previously discussed in the DFG. For instance, issues include why some types of boys are considered more attractive than others, and why this might change if we think in terms of stable relationships or in terms of sporadic relationships (hook-ups); the reasons that could lead someone to fall into a situation of sexual harassment; a detailed discussion on the issue of “the mirage of upward mobility”; and the consequences for one’s peer group, as well as for the health of one’s family or one’s own self from choosing boys with violent behaviors either for established or casual relationships.

In this regard, the CDLS were considered an appropriate tool to assess the impact of the DFG on the participants since, following the communicative approach also used in the gatherings, they are oriented to set an interactive dialogue about the subject’s reality. Through the CDLS, the researcher could delve into the girls’ reflections and thoughts, recuperating into the dialogue the topics that had been treated in the DFG and going even deeper, thus establishing an egalitarian process of understanding among both girls and the researcher. This idea is of the utmost importance for any type of qualitative research that aims to empower the researched subjects (Winter, 2017); moreover, when conducted using the communicative approach, the dialogue is constructed and motivated by the trust and confidence that the researcher can create, thus overcoming any type of methodological and interpretative hierarchy (Soler-Gallart, 2017). In addition, due to the communicative orientation of the technique, and specifically, by means of egalitarian dialogue and by elimination of the interpretative hierarchy between both parties involved in the CDLS, the researcher captured how the gathering challenged the

personal beliefs of the girls' protagonists in their narratives and made them question their choices in relation to which type of boy they felt attracted to (a masculinity free from violent attitudes and behaviors or with some of these traits).

Results

Acquiring New Elements for the Reflective Process

Cases of gender violence and situations that occurred within the high-school context were discussed at the gatherings. Through these cases and, at the same time, by contrasting them with what the scientific literature says about why this occurs, the researcher engaged in a dialogue in the CDLS about a social reality that sounded very familiar to female participants. Elaborating on these situations allowed the participants to question their own criteria based on the dominant discourse and to connect certain ideas; for instance, uncovering that those boys with violent behaviors whose stories were explained at the gatherings could also be identified in their contexts. Take Jessica's narrative, for example:

Jessica: What has really impressed me is that the "malotes" (naughty boys) treat people in this way because I know many cases . . . because while you were explaining, I have had time to think about it, so I have looked at you, I have seen how you explained it, and it has impressed me completely . . . because I did not know that it could reach that point: that friends would do this [referring to doing negative things to her own friends, such as betraying them]. So, you have to look at boys and choose well . . . because you see . . . the type of comments they said . . . and how boys talked about girls . . .

Researcher: And when we have talked about the narratives [about boys with violent behaviors] and all this stuff . . . ?

Jessica: I do think that this helps . . . the fact of talking about specific situations helps . . . Things came to my mind . . . ! I would have never thought that these types of things could have occurred to me. And I know several cases . . . It has helped me to remember . . .

In this sense, after participating in the DFG some of the girls re-considered some situations related to their having experienced violence perpetuated by boys, situations that until that moment, were considered usual in an everyday context but which, thanks to the debates enacted in the gatherings, were challenged. This result reveals the impact of the DFG on providing girls with the tools to identify those boys with violent behaviors and, beyond this, due to the debates generated, to remove the attraction of this type of masculinity linked to violence. This very example is found in Cristina's narrative:

Researcher: If you now think of any of the girls you may know, who may be going out . . . or who may be in any of the situations similar to the ones we talked about yesterday [of violence] . . . Do you see them in a different way now?

Cristina: [Assent] Maybe in the past I could overlook it, but now I cannot . . . Now I know that these situations can happen . . . Now I see these things in a different way . . . [In the past,] I considered that some situations were "fights of no importance."

In the CDLS, Cristina expressed how the DFG made her reconsider situations that indeed have components of violence but that she had never stopped to consider. In a sincere way, speaking with the researcher made her reflect that in the past, she sometimes thought she had analyzed some of the tense situations she had experienced with boys with violent attitudes as "fights of no importance," such as assuming that girls simply must tolerate them. However, she concluded her argument by realizing that sometimes girls tolerate these types of behaviors because they think that what they win will exceed what they lose, the misperception of being more popular or a "mirage":

Cristina: Sometimes, they [the girls] pay attention to what the others think, and what is involved in staying with that boy [the one with violent behavior] and not what these girls really want. And I do think that they have to do what they want, not what others want them to do . . .

It is interesting to note here how, through the inter-subjective dialogue established with the researcher in the CDLS, girls expressed and became aware that some of the cases of boy perpetrators of violence explained at the DFG presented characteristics similar to those of boys that could be recognized among the participants' networks of friends or other people they knew from school or other social spaces in their daily lives. In this way, the CDLS become both a space and a moment where girls could reflect on the examples provided at the gathering while they could connect the debates that emerged within their own daily and personal realities. The narratives of Andrea, Mireia, and Cristina reveal this idea:

Researcher: And in which sense do you think that it changed? [Speaking about the impact of having participated in the DFG and the perception they have now about boys with violent attitudes]

Andrea: I think that in being more aware . . . maybe that you could better realize . . . after having the explanation . . .

In a similar way, Mireia explained that participating in the DFG allowed her to finally understand why those boys who treat girls in a bad way and with disdain still have many followers in schools. Participating in the DFG made her understand “the entire picture” of why those boys who behave in a violent way are in many cases seen as the most attractive boys. In addition, afterward, the DFG made her think that she does not want to have a relationship with this type of boy:

Mireia: I have learned how boys really are . . . There are people [referring to some boys] that treat girls in a very bad way, and they treat and take girls for what they are not . . . I have realized this in the past, but today [at the DFG], I have been more aware . . .

Researcher: Do you think that this will help you in the future?

Mireia: Indeed, it will!

Finally, Cristina explained in her CDLS the impact that the gathering would have on those girls who still choose those boys with violent behaviors. Cristina thought about the impact that having participated in the DFG could have on some of her friends who actually have relations with these types of boys. According to Cristina, for these girls, having listened to the cases and participated in the debates about how gender violence occurs in these cases would trigger the girls to question their attraction toward those boys and to end the relationships:

Cristina: . . . because of what we have seen . . . because they might have changed their mind in watching the video [screened in the DFG].

The short extracts of the CDLS quoted above reveal how the gathering supported the girls to consider new elements that they had not critically considered before they began thinking about why some types of boys (those who can be violence perpetrators) are preferred over others.

Exploring the “Mirage of Upward Mobility”

If there is a topic on which female participants agree, it is that the DFG made them reflect on the “mirage of upward mobility.” Girls explained in the CDLS that reflecting on this issue made them remember several situations that they had experienced themselves or that their friends or other girls they know had experienced, in which they were aware that attraction would be linked not to the fact that a boy was known for his good and egalitarian values, but rather because the girls wanted to begin a relationship or stay with him because he was the “most popular boy,” even though they knew that he was one of those boys who would despise girls and treat them in a violent manner.

It is relevant that during CDLS, girls could make explicit the very insights they had into the *mirage of upward mobility*,

put words to their internal thoughts and via inter-subjective dialogue with the researcher, better understand their own worldview by looking at what had been explained in the DFG. By engaging in this dialogical process, girls explained that talking about this issue made them think about the consequences that falling into this trap can have for their lives.

Let us see what Mireia says in the following quotation about a friend of hers who was in a similar situation. In her CDLS, she narrated how the DFG made her remember the specific case of her friend, and in re-analyzing it through the approach of the “mirage of upward mobility,” she became even more aware that her friend was the victim in the situation:

[Speaking about situations surrounding the “mirage of upward mobility”]

Mireia: I have a friend who has experienced the same situation. Now she is recovering herself . . . but she even wanted to leave the city.

Researcher: After having talked about this topic, about how you see this in the past and how you see this in the present, do you think that the DFG has helped you to better understand it . . . Do you see the story differently?

Mireia: In the past I saw it clearly, but now I see it much more clearly. Now I understand my friend. And now she is better because all of us are helping her, so she is better . . .

She was going out with a guy, and this guy started to go out with another girl, so he started to cheat on her. And he stopped talking to my friend, and he blocked my friend on the [mobile phone]. And he did not give her any explanation . . . And my friend tried to talk to him, but he refused, and he shouted at her, even in front of all her friends . . . He kind of humiliated her a bit . . .

Researcher: Well, no doubt he humiliated her!

Mireia: There was a moment that we went to explain what was going on to their parents because she was saying that she wanted to die . . . So, they reacted and talked to her.

Researcher: If we could go back to that moment now, do you think that there would be something that you would do differently?

Mireia: Now, I would put myself in her place and understand her. I understand my friend; I could help her.

Another of the girl participants in the study, Victoria, also explains the importance of being aware of the consequences of this “mirage.” She says,

Victoria: When you [the researcher] explained the consequences that can happen . . . well, that caught my attention. Because you do not know the consequences that can happen from not doing or doing something. But if you know them, you know how to react.

As observed above, the CDLS generates a context for participants to understand in more detail their own process of self-reflection, while they explain their own stories and the role that the “mirage of upward mobility” phenomenon plays in their lives. Moreover, in the CDLS, because of the feedback from the researcher, who provides evidence of what the scientific literature has already revealed on issues such as the influence of friendships and peers on the socialization of affective and sexual relationships (Collins et al., 2009; O’Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003), and how peer groups, in the case of boys, can encourage boys to despise girls (Giordano et al., 2006), girls acquire more tools to question and transform their realities.

Conclusion

This article has shown how the CDLS became a space where female adolescents could reinforce the ideas that emerged in the DFG and raise their internal insights while asking new questions to the researcher, who helped them tie together the many loose ends they had. This allows for an understanding of how girls eventually reflect in the CDLS: “Some of the aspects [of the boys] that we thought were nice and good, after the DFG, we realized that they [the boys] were not like that.” This brief narrative is further evidence of how participants’ preferences are questioned after the DFG, and our analysis shows how the gatherings serve to unwrap the chain of thoughts that girls have for them to begin questioning those preferences.

If qualitative techniques have proven effective in assessing gender-based violence programs, recognizing their pros and cons and what is more relevant, allowing researchers to give a voice to the end users of these initiatives (Molnar et al., 2005; Nair & Osman, 2013; Njuki et al., 2012), using the communicative approach in these analyses enhances the capturing of a wider reality. Performing CDLS as a methodological tool to assess the impact of these programs gives a voice to the subjects themselves (García-Yeste, 2014; Ramis et al., 2014), while it becomes an extra space for reflection on their own worldviews, as explained in the intervention. As seen in the dialogical process between researcher and participants, the CDLS made it possible to put words to the disordered thoughts derived from the DFG, contrasting the very different lives of participants with what scientific research has evidenced in relation to what can lead to gender violence. For instance, many of the girls revealed that they knew about situations of gender violence that some of their friends had experienced. In addition, when the researcher spoke about the “mirage of the upward mobility,” all of them began to look at examples from a new perspective, analyzing the very elements on which the researcher wanted them to focus: How it is that sometimes the most popular boy with violent

behaviors is considered more attractive by girls, and how many girls think that if they stay with these types of boys, their status will increase. However, when the narratives of how these boys talked about the girls with whom they had relationships with were disclosed and because any kind of moral sanction (associated with the “language of ethics”) was done by the researcher, the participants in the gatherings were able to observe the mirror effect. This type of egalitarian conversation was achieved in both settings, at the gatherings and at the time of assessing their impact while conducting the CDLS with the girls.

Overall, this study, framed in the larger Free_Teen_Desire project, has shown how the communicative daily life stories, using words and multiple interactions, provide evidence that there has already been a social impact; in addition, by being performed by researchers committed to empowering all those who experience any situation of oppression, our findings evidence a profound capacity for removing the barriers that prevent adolescents from living romantic relationships free from violence.

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2. The following terms are used in the article: “Dialogic Feminist Gatherings,” “gathering,” and “Intervention.” This intervention is explained in detail in the publication “Female University Students Respond to Gender Violence through Dialogic Feminist Gatherings” (Puigvert, 2016).
3. It should be mentioned that all study participants followed an international ethical standard in research that ensures that their anonymity would be maintained throughout the research process and afterward.

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