### The Impact of Radical Love on Human Memory

The social impact of reading the book *Radical Love* cannot be grasped by the dominant discourse on the evaluation of social impact. A deep understanding of autobiographical memories must go beyond the quantitative analysis of details and episodes to qualitatively examine the meanings constructed through recollection. Thus, we explored young women's memories of intimate partner violence through memory narratives and the way these memories were reconstructed when the women read *Radical Love*. In addition, we examined the personal meanings given to this reading experience through in-depth interviews and a focus group. The results showed that *Radical Love* made the participants more critical about their memories and made these memories unappealing. This reading led some women to leave violent relationships and transform their prospective thinking. In a time when impact is measured mainly by research articles, this qualitative analysis of the memory transformation promoted by reading *Radical Love* demonstrates that books can also have a social impact.

**Keywords:** Radical Love, autobiographical memory, social impact, violence against women.

Traditionally, the evaluation of social impact has been performed by drawing on quantitative methodologies (European Commission, 2009; ESRC, 2011). This process articulates dominant discourses mainly based on the definition of a set of indicators aimed at quantifying the social changes achieved by different policies, social actions or research projects. For instance, the evaluation strategy performed by the European Commission to assess the impact of economic investment on areas such as social inclusion has been very influential (European Commission, 2009). Within this evaluation system, one of the items that is analyzed is job placement (number of jobs and job areas) after investment. Similarly, research centers, evaluation bodies and agencies worldwide are employing a recently common quantitative method, *text mining*, to acknowledge social impact (Grant, 2014). Text mining consists of deep data analysis based on checking a set of words or sentences in documents or in social networks (Cabré-Olivé et al., 2017).

Although, for some topics, quantifying certain achievements may prove useful for gathering information on social impact, other phenomena of a profound social and psychological nature require a qualitative perspective to grasp the social impact of certain

interventions on them. This is the case with love, attraction, autobiographical memories, and emotions. For these phenomena, quantification cannot identify how individuals develop their most profound feelings (i.e., love, attraction) and how these feelings are included in memory narratives that shape life experiences and imagination. Using qualitative methods, this article delves into this claim by exploring the social impact of reading the book *Radical Love: A Revolution for the 21st Century* (Gómez, 2004, 2015) on human memories of violent sexual-affective relationships. This study is part of the *Free-Teen-Desire* research project (Puigvert, 2015-2016). We pay attention to how reading *Radical Love* impelled changes in the autobiographical memories of young women and how these changes, in turn, influenced their present life and prospective thinking in ways that support developmental trajectories free of gender violence. We demonstrate that this impact can be identified and assessed through the employment of qualitative methods.

## Radical Love: A book motivated by a commitment to improving the life of young people

The book *Radical Love: A Revolution for the 21st century* came after Jesús Gómez's doctoral dissertation defense in 2003 registered a record-breaking audience at the University of Barcelona. Gómez, warmly called *Pato*, was a professor of research methods and a member of the Community of Researchers on Excellence for All (CREA). He and his childhood friend, Ramon Flecha, were the initiators of the theorization of 'Radical Love', which was the origin of the analysis of the social nature of attraction, the definition of New Alternative Masculinities, and the configuration of the research line on the preventive socialization of gender violence (Gómez, 2104; Valls, Puigvert, & Duque, 2008; Flecha, Puigvert & Rios, 2013).

From his childhood until his last days in 2006, Jesús Gómez was involved in the struggle against gender violence. As thoroughly described in the book *Amistad Deseada* [Desired Friendship] (Giner, 2011), in which the impact of his friendship with Ramon Flecha is explained, Jesús Gómez was worried about the persistence of violence against women from generation to generation (Chakraborty, Kumar & Subramaniam, 2017). He demonstrated that despite the improvements achieved by the feminist movement, this problem continues to affect young people in very negative ways. Gómez's earliest life experiences drove him to question the shaping of attraction and love. He asked himself

why aggressive boys were successful in terms of affective and sexual relationships and why, in contrast, egalitarian men were considered *losers* and *nerds*. Therefore, when he became a researcher and professor, he began investigating sexual and affective relationships in teenagers and young people. Professor Gómez (2004; 2015) conducted a large study based on a wide literature review and very rich qualitative fieldwork. In particular, he performed deep content analysis of teen magazines and everyday life stories and held focus groups with adolescents and teenagers. The objective of this empirical work was to explore the influence of socialization processes in the construction of attraction patterns and the establishment of certain sexual and affective relationships.

According to this analysis, Gómez concluded that sexual-affective attraction is not a deterministic human mechanism; in fact, he demonstrated that it is influenced by interactions and dialogues and that, therefore, it is social. These conclusions refuted other studies that had suggested that attraction and love rapidly decay and cannot be changed because they have a biological origin (McDonald, 1998). Moreover, Gómez (2015) demonstrated the existence of an association between attraction and violence given that the type of masculinity that appeared to be most attractive for many young females was dominant and sometimes involved aggressive and violent behavior. Importantly, he showed that this association was learned through agents of socialization, such as movies, TV shows, and peer dialogues. Nonetheless, because Gómez's approach illustrates that attraction patterns and love can be changed through socialization, it opens up the possibility for people to freely transform their sexual-affective choices and preferences and to start sexual and affective relationships that are free of violence. This premise is the basis of CREA's research line on the preventive socialization of gender violence (Valls, Puigvert & Duque, 2008).

Gómez's efforts concerning the analysis of the social nature of attraction and love were the inspiration for further advances in this field. In the last decade, other CREA researchers have continued Gómez's legacy with the development of new concepts (Soler-Gallart, 2017). The concept of the *language of desire* (Flecha & Puigvert, 2010) draws on the theoretical discussion concerning the social influence of communication in the socialization process (Searle & Soler, 2004). Following Gómez's analysis concerning the impact of dialogue (Carrillo et al., 2017; García-Carrión; Molina-Luque, & Roldán, 2017) on learning and attraction patterns, the idea of the language of desire pays attention to a type of language that connects desire with ethical values (Rios & Christou, 2010).

Puigvert (2015-2016) has delved into this concept through the research project called *Free-Teen-Desire*, performed at the Cambridge Institute of Criminology and funded by the European Horizon 2020 program. Puigvert (2016) has shown that when the language of desire is employed in feminist dialogic gatherings, interventions based on dialogue and interaction to examine attraction patterns, these patterns can change, and DTM men start being perceived as less attractive. This result provides strong evidence of the social nature of love and attraction previously stated by Gómez (2015).

Within the context of this research line, concern emerges regarding personal memories of violent sexual-affective relationships in young women given the central psychological functions that autobiographical memories perform and their influence on well-being (Conway & Rubin, 1993). Autobiographical memories, which are personal long-term memories concerning an individual's life, serve *directive* and *social functions*; that is, they influence everyday decision-making and are useful for sharing and negotiating life with others (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Wade-Clarke, 2016). Autobiographical memories also have *adaptive functions* given that they aid facing the future and planning future acts (Klein, Robertson & Delton, 2010). The implication is that memories concerning the personal past (*what* we remember and *how* we remember our past) influence our present and future thinking. Relatedly, autobiographical memories also shape a person's *identity* (Conway & Holmes, 2004). In the words of Nobel Prize winner Eric Kandel (2007), 'We are who we are because of what we learn and what we remember' (p.28).

Given this evidence, research on the preventive socialization of gender violence examines whether memories of violent sexual-affective relationships in young women involve attraction to dominant traditional masculinities (DTM) with violent behaviors to any extent and, more importantly, if they do, whether these memories can be transformed, along the lines of emptying them of attraction to violence (Puigvert, 2015-2016). Given the directive function of autobiographical memories noted above, if a young woman keeps a memory of a violent intimate relationship that involves attraction, then it is likely that this memory influences the woman in ways that are not preventive of violence against women but, rather, that can facilitate it. However, as occurs with patterns of sexual-affective attraction, such memories can be changed. Autobiographical memories are a type of human memory that is malleable (Conway & Rubin, 1993); they can be recoded as a result of involvement in social experiences.

These understandings open up possibilities for improving the development and life of young women by increasing reflection on personal memories of violent relationships. This is the program of research developed through the qualitative study of the impact of reading *Radical Love* (Gómez, 2015) on the reconstruction of young women's memories of violent sexual-affective relationships.

# Investigating the impact of *Radical Love* on memories of violent sexual-affective relationships

The intervention study was conducted with 32 college women from a public university located in northern Spain who were between 17 and 30 years of age and who selfidentified as victims of intimate partner violence in a sporadic or stable relationship and presented no memory deficit. The participants wrote their memories of a violent sexualaffective relationship in an electronic document, taking a maximum of 20 minutes. After the memory reports were completed, the researchers sent the participants some chapters from the book Radical Love via e-mail. The book has two central characteristics that must be taken into account to understand the impact of the intervention on the participants. On one hand, Radical Love develops the claim that love and attraction are social, meaning that attraction patterns (whom one likes more and why) are learned through socialization. Therefore, these patterns can be changed based on free decision and action. On the other hand, the book employs the language of desire to empty violence of attractiveness; that is, Gómez (2015) uses the language of like, desire, emotions, and feelings to talk about different types of masculinities and the relationships with each. Thus, instead of analyzing attraction to violent masculinities using only the language of ethics, that is, saying that such relationships and men are not 'convenient' or 'good for you', Gómez dismantles such attractions by using words from adolescents and magazines for teenagers to show that these masculinities are far from feeling, behaving, thinking, and desiring in the way most women think.

Ten days after receiving the chapters, the participants were contacted by e-mail and asked to write the memory report again, narrating the same sexual-affective relationship. The first (before the reading) and the second (after the reading) versions of the memory reports were contrasted with an emphasis on semantic and emotional qualitative changes in the content of the memories. A communicative focus group with seven participants and eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with a communicative

orientation were conducted after the intervention. Of the eight interviewees, six were involved in the communicative focus group.

Regarding the communicative focus group, it was held upon request from some participants who, after the intervention, expressed to the researchers that they needed to share what the experience had meant to them personally. In line with the communicative methodology, the researchers addressed the women's petition and organized the communicative focus group. Both the communicative focus group and the semistructured in-depth interviews focused on the impact that the experience of reading Radical Love had on the participants. The semi-structured in-depth interviews occurred sixteen months after the focus group and implied a deepening of the impact of the reading experience in the participants' lives, attending to their perceptions of how the book aided their memory reconstruction. In developing the protocols for the interviews, we considered the meanings that were dialogically constructed in the focus group and built upon them, but we did so with enough openness to include new themes and questions resulting from the ongoing egalitarian dialogue with the participants during the interview. This process contributed to the communicative character of the interviews. All participants in the intervention study were invited to semi-structured interviews with a communicative orientation. Everyone who responded with interest was involved in the interviews. Most responses involved the participants saying that they had felt a personal change due to the reading and that they were willing to share this experience.

## Qualitative methods shed light on how reading Radical Love transforms memories and lives for a better future

Using qualitative methods, we examined the perceptions of the participating women concerning what the reading of *Radical Love* meant to them in terms of memory reconstruction and personal sexual-affective thinking and decisions. The results of this analysis found that reading *Radical Love* produced five main impacts on the young women.

First, the participants perceived that reading *Radical Love* impelled the recollection of details in the own relationship that were in line with issues and details discussed in the book when describing behavior of violent dominant traditional masculinities and common phenomena in relationships with them, such as lying, humiliation, disdain, tension, and coercion, among others. In one of the in-depth interviews, Eva, a participant,

explained that during and after the reading, she started recalling details in the relationship along these lines that were unpleasant to remember; however, their recollection clarified to her that the relationship was not ideal. Eva shared that during episodes of tension, she used to tell the man that what he was doing was not right, but he would strongly dismantle Eva's analysis. Reading *Radical Love* made Eva feel confident in her view of these episodes as wrong and violent to her:

Researcher (R): So, after reading you remembered more details ...

Eva: Yes, more things, like things that he told me [referring to violent episodes] like telling me, 'no, that is not... no, no, no, it's not that!' [referring to his dismantling of her analysis of the episode], or whatever, and you say [after the reading], 'it was clear that what I said about the situation was right!' (...)

R: So, you recalled details that were not pleasant to remember.

Eva: ... you like to stay more with the good things, but then [after the reading] you say... 'but no, because he did this and did that'... so it becomes clear what it was all about.

Along the same lines, María, another participant, shared that the reading made her recall episodes of the relationship that she had completely forgotten. Thus, the second version of the memory report was much longer, and this increase implied the inclusion of negative details about the partner's behavior toward her:

Yes, because there were things that no longer existed for me, which had not occurred because... what I said before, like, 'He made a mistake; I'm not going to take that into account, so I will forget about it'. However, then you read the book, and you start saying, 'Okay, so, that time when that occurred...', and I was remembering many more things than what I remembered the first time. Therefore, when I had to write the second report, I was, like, 'OMG, I'm not going to be able to advance with all this writing because if I wrote everything that I was remembering, then it would not be possible to finish'.

The communicative orientation of the interaction between the researcher and the participants in the semi-structured memory interviews reflected the responsiveness of the researchers by adjusting the questions to what the participants were sharing with emphasis and adding new questions depending on emerging meanings. The researchers had in mind

key themes and studies in the fields of the preventive socialization of gender violence and memory research. This helped some participants to establish connections between remembering these violent episodes and the emergence of feelings of disappointment. For instance, María reflected on the impact of the reading on her feelings, noting that *Radical Love* made her feel disappointed about the relationship. She made a very strong connection during the interview between this frustration and the fact that it drove her to recall for the first time details of the relationship that were negative and disappointing. This connection is an example of the second impact of *Radical Love* and is in line with the literature on memory and emotion, which notes that emotional states influence *what* is remembered (Kensinger, 2009); under negative emotions, negative episodes are more likely to be recalled. In addition, María added that recalling these feelings was accompanied by acknowledging for the first time that such violent episodes were not 'normal' but 'wrong':

Yes, because in the beginning, the first day, I remember that I had nothing to tell, and then I started to think, and I went from having nothing to explain to having many things to tell just because I was angry and because I remembered many bad things. So, of course, because when you are well, you do not remember...Why should you think about the bad things when you are fine? Then you think about what is good, you think you are very well, that everything is great, and then when I realized that, no, I started to get angry, I started to remember many things that I said, 'This is not right. This does not have to be normalized. This is not normal. This is wrong', and I started to remember many things that I did not remember before.

Regarding the third impact, the in-depth interviews with the young women made clear that the reading of *Radical Love* raised the participants' awareness of having experienced a violent sexual-affective relationship. Before the reading, many of the participating young women did not self-identify as victims of gender violence. After the reading, they came to identify themselves in the type of violent sexual-affective relationships analyzed in the book. Nerea explained how the reading made her realize for the first time that her relationship was like those presented in the book:

When I was reading, it was, like, 'But, wait a minute, this has occurred to me!', and I did not know it was what the book said. Then I started to have realizations

about more things that had occurred to me and that I did not even know that I had experienced. So... (...) I believe that there are things that seem so normal to us that we do not become conscious of what they actually are. When you are reading *Radical Love*, it is a personal moment (...) and it makes you think about things that you have experienced, so you start remembering things, always because of what you are reading.

This consciousness grounded in memory evidence is essential as a first step in taking liberating action (Puigvert, 2015-2016). Moreover, some participants shared in the interviews and in the focus group that by reading *Radical Love*, they could see that they had been victims of maltreatment by dominant traditional masculinities in other relationships, not only in the relationship recalled and reported. For instance, Elsa, another participant, explained that her negative feelings concerning the relationship increased considerably after reading *Radical Love* and that this feeling facilitated her realization that she had experienced similar violence in other relationships as well:

R: Okay. Then, taking this into account, do you believe that after the reading, the feelings you had about that relationship have changed?

N: Yes, I already had bad feelings about that relationship because I was aware that I had been humiliated and that he had done whatever he wanted to me, but now, it's, like, 'WOW!' Now, I know that it is much more than what I thought before and that it [occurred] not only in that one but in other relationships as well.

This quote shows that the feelings of disappointment previously noted and developed through the reading facilitated not only the recall of violent details in the relationships shared in the memory reports but also access to details from memories concerning other relationships.

Fourth, centrally, this critical consciousness made some participating women lose motivation toward the relationship. Nerea was very clear about this aspect in the interview, making the connection between 'seeing new things' after reading the book and experiencing a decrease in motivation toward the relationship, which, in turn, helped her recall more details about the relationship that were in line with gender violence:

I believe that in the beginning, when you made us remember that relationship... I do not know about calling it a weird or a little negative relationship, but I observed it with illusion maybe, like thinking, 'There were good things, too'. However, after the reading and coming to realize certain things, it is, like, this illusion disappears a little, and then you come to see more things.

All of the aforementioned impacts influenced the fifth and most important impact of reading *Radical Love*: inspiring decision-making for relationships that are free of violence. Through the interviews and the focus group, we could identify that after experiencing the aforementioned effects of the reading, some participants freely decided to leave the violent relationship if it was ongoing at the time of the intervention, and others decided not to engage in violent relationships in the future and not to allow anyone to maltreat them anymore.

Nerea was one of the participants for whom *Radical Love* became a tool for freely choosing to leave a relationship based on violence; the reading brought clarity to Nerea and impelled her to take action. The egalitarian dialogue with the researcher that characterizes in-depth interviews with a communicative orientation proved central to shedding light on the connections between the reading and the participants' change in prospective thinking and current and future sexual-affective life:

N: I decided to clarify my ideas and to say that I didn't want to continue with that.

R: So, being in this study helped you end the relationship with that person or, at least, the way the relationship was?

N: Yes, that's it, that's it. Just that. Just what you said. It's like,... I'm not going to continue to have a relationship like this. It was after that [the reading] when I stood up and told him very clearly that I couldn't see that he did me any good and therefore I did not want to continue in that manner.

R: So you broke off the relationship.

N: That's right, I talked to him, and that's what I said.

R: And do you think that reading the book and your participation in this research were what drove you to take that determination?

N: Yes, I think so. No doubt about it.

In the interviews and the focus group, the participants acknowledged that reading *Radical Love* helped them learn fundamental lessons about their sexual-affective experiences that could facilitate making better decisions for their present and future intimate life and escaping violence. Although the first moments of consciousness were not easy to manage, the participants shared that they quickly felt empowered; through the reading, they were better able to identify and differentiate between violent and egalitarian relationships. They connected the transformation of memories produced by reading *Radical Love* with moving from suffering to agency, as Eva shared in detail in her interview:

Yes... yes, it changed my whole way of seeing it [the relationship]... And at the beginning, this consciousness was disappointing, but now, it's, like, 'Okay', 'I don't know about him, but I finally was aware of it, and this is not going to happen to me anymore'. Now, I know how to identify this... So I changed my mind, and came to tell to myself, 'I have learned and... okay... I'm even grateful for all this because now, this is not going to occur to me again'. (...)

Now, the memories are different, and they are not about producing harm to me in the present anymore, nothing like that, they are more, like, 'This has happened, okay'. I hope this does not happen to me anymore. I have learned.

Now, I know to identify better; my way of looking at relationships has changed.

Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1917), the father of neuroscience, argued that it is only with the emotion of what is new and with noble and elevated curiosities that the forest of sleeping brain neurons can be shaken and inspired. This is what *Radical Love* did for María, Nerea, Elsa, Eva, Idoia, and the others. It inspired memory shaking, the revision of one's past in service of a better future. The book fostered the recollection of new details in the participants' memories that spoke to the violent character of the relationship and increased negative feelings concerning the relationship, which, in turn, fostered the recollection of more details about gender violence in the relationship. The reading also led some participants to be aware for the first time that the relationship that they had was violent, or they became more aware of the degree of disdain that they suffered in the narrated relationship. Importantly, for some, not only did this occur for the relationship reported in their memory narratives, but they also became aware of the violent character of other relationships that they had had. Additionally, the memory reconstructions resulting from reading *Radical Love* motivated the participants' decision-making and

prospective thinking about their sexual-affective life in a positive direction, with some women leaving their relationship, committing to avoiding violent relationships in the future, and advancing toward more egalitarian intimate relationships from that moment. These changes, which occurred in a context of free egalitarian dialogue between the researchers and the participants, meant liberation from their past for some women and, from there, drawing a new horizon. In the words of Nerea,

I had many things inside me, there, stored. And when I wrote it, and being in a position in which no one was going to tell me anything because of what I was sharing, then I felt liberated. I had many things inside that I had to free.

### Beyond research articles: Books can also have an impact

In a time when research articles have become the academic product for measuring scientific impact (through the *impact factor*, the *h-index*, the *g-index*, etc.), the results we have shared here indicate that other types of scholarly productions, such as books grounded in scientific evidence, can also have an important impact (in this case, a 'social impact') given that their reading promotes social transformation and justice. How else can the impact of reading Radical Love on the lives of the participants in this intervention study be understood? Although the book is frequently cited in research articles on the preventive socialization of gender violence, love, and attraction because of the solid theoretical foundation and novel scientific knowledge that it implies, seeing it only in this way would render invisible the most important contribution of Radical Love: its social impact (Flecha, Soler-Gallart & Sorde, 2015) in regard to overcoming and preventing violence against women. This aspect was the motivation that drove Jesús Gómez, Pato, to write Radical Love. Using communicative methods, our qualitative study provides evidence that *Pato*'s dream is being realized. Simultaneously, our study adds to the debate on academic research (Denzin, Lincoln & Giardina, 2011) and impact in the scientific community by showing that books can have a social impact and, importantly, that often it is only through qualitative methods that we are able to reveal the social impact of research on topics that are of the utmost human relevance. The adoption of the communicative approach to research proves central in this qualitative methodological endeavor.

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