

RAISING CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH TALKING ABOUT MEDIA DISCOURSES ON LOVE. THE CASE OF *EL BANQUETE DE SAFO*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore the potential of the dialogic conversation group about the media discourse on love as a tool for building egalitarian relationships. To this end, we present the results of *El Banquete de Safo (Sappho's Symposium)*, a Participatory Action Research in which lesbian and bisexual women reflect critically on these media messages. We centre our analysis on the discourses arising from the media construct of love and their repercussions in the daily lives of the participants.

KEYWORDS

Sexualities Education; Equality; Empowerment; Participatory Methods.

INTRODUCTION

We believe that the media construct realities and that their discourses on western romantic love play an essential role in maintaining and perpetuating the patriarchal system and the social subordination of women. In addition, these discourses can also be directly and crucially important in providing alternative viewpoints on highly current issues such as violence against women (Esteban, Medina y Távora, 2005; Esteban, 2008; Esteban, 2011). Indeed, romanticism was and remains a tool of social control used by patriarchal power to influence and construct the emotions and feelings of the population (Herrera, 2011a). Despite this, theoretical analysis of the subject is scant. In a gender based system such as ours, the prevailing cultural model of love is fundamental. This model is, moreover, grounded in a system of compulsory heterosexuality. It implies the emergence of a particular performativity of gender and love, of specific "loving bodies" with "natural" appearances, and "natural" heterosexual dispositions (Butler, 2001; 2006).

The model of love offered by western culture, through its fictional stories and film, has certain characteristics: a predilection for misfortune, for unrequited love, the hyper-idealisation of love and the beloved. What western lyricism extols is not the pleasure of the senses, the rewarding tranquillity of coupledness, or respect and recognition of the other, but rather, love as a passion of suffering (De Rougemont, 1993). Herrera (2011b) lists the most important myths embedded in the patriarchal model of love as the myth of the soul mate, of the love marriage, of eternal love, the omnipotence of love, the myth of free will, of coupledness, heterosexuality and monogamy. Sanpedro (2010), referring to some prototypical elements, also returns to similar

issues: sudden beginnings (love at first sight), sacrifice for the other, proof of love, merging with the other, forgetting one's own life, magical expectations such as finding the perfect match (the better half), living in a symbiosis that arises when individuals behave as if they actually needed each other to breathe and move, forming between them an indissoluble whole.

But although the social system shapes human action, it is also crucial to understanding the production and reproduction of the system itself and the processes of change that occur within it. What we are calling for is human, personal and collective agency. To this end, not only do we need methodological alternatives that offer different accesses to analyse human and cultural diversity, the relationships of subject, body and society, the constitution and the fragmentation of the subject in order to unravel the mechanisms of domination; but also to recognise the responses (or resistance), and women's own discourse, beyond the restrictions of expert discourse or, in a broader sense, of domination (Esteban 2004).

In light of the above, we propose that gender – either as representation or self-representation – should be viewed as the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutional discourses, epistemologies, and critical as well as everyday life practices. We could say that gender, like sexuality, is not a property of the body or an original element existing in human beings; rather it is the series of effects produced in the body, in behaviours and social relationships due to the deployment of a complex political technology (De Lauretis, 1987: 35). In our view, a critical reading of these media discourses is therefore essential.

Although not the focus of this article, it should be noted that in the case of *Sappho's Symposium*, in which the research participants were lesbian and bisexual women, these patriarchal and heteronormative media discourses intersected with our experiences as people with a non-normative, invisibilised and stigmatised sexuality (Calvo y Escudero, 2009; González de Garay, 2009; Dhaenens, 2011; González, 2011; Francisco y Moliner, 2011; Platero, 2008).

THE RESEARCH

Our investigation is a way of bringing about our emancipation, of taking control of our own lives, personally and collectively. We investigate to transform ourselves and the environment, to grow and understand. We investigate to reveal structural constraints and act to overcome them. Our study therefore applied Participatory Action Research, PAR (Ander-Egg, 1990; Anisur Rahman, 1991; Fals Borda, 1991 y 1992; Gaventa, 1991; Lewin, 1992; Stavenhagen, 1992).

Following a public call through face-to-face and virtual social networks, a group of ten lesbian and bisexual women living in the city of Barcelona met with the common interest of studying the media discourse in relation to our experiences of love throughout our lives, how it has influenced our own conception of love and emotional-sexual relationships, our desires, our relationship models and how we interact and relate. Embedded in this process was the search

for transformation, learning and development of knowledge about our capabilities to build egalitarian relationships.

We chose dialogic conversation (Flecha, 1997) as the format for the project and as the research object. We believe this tool has the advantage of seeking to create a space for horizontal interaction among equals, based on the intersubjective construction of knowledge and where argumentation is not based on claims to power. Furthermore, previous experiences have demonstrated that the dialogic conversation group format empowers its participants (Sánchez, 1999; Aguilar y otros, 2005; Sáez Benito, y Traver, 2006; Valls, Soler y Flecha, 2008 o Traver, García y Sauquillo, 2008).

We agreed on a total of eight discussion sessions, and selected eight love-related themes to work on; in each of the sessions we watched fragments of audiovisual fiction to reflect on the media stories around these themes.

From this approach, we formulated two fundamental research questions: can a conversation group around media discourses on love and models of attraction empower us to challenge them? And are they a good tool to acquire skills for building egalitarian relationships?

To answer these questions, we set a research schedule based on the PAR reflection-action-reflection phases; we used observation techniques and communicative interpretation. We devised tools to gather information (essentially observation diaries and transcripts from the eight sessions) and we then analysed and interpreted this information from two levels of analysis. First, we analysed *El Banquete de Safo* process, and second, the knowledge generated in the sessions. In this article we focus in part on the results of this second level of analysis: the discourses of the participants in the sessions and specifically those related to media discourses on love.

KNOWLEDGE GENERATED IN THE CONVERSATION GROUP

The discourse analysis developed by the ten participants in the eight sessions focused on the thematic area of the research: egalitarian relationships in the emotional-sexual context. We divided the knowledge generated into three main areas: the media construct of romantic love, when the media construction intersects with the lesbian experience, and the identification of key points with which to build egalitarian relationships.

The discourses on each of these areas were taken from the analysis of the information produced in the sessions. Key themes emerged inductively from the transcripts of the sessions and we used *Dedoose* software for qualitative and quantitative analysis to classify and analyse the information.

In this article we focus on the knowledge generated in *El Banquete de Safo* on media discourses of love, which covers five key themes:

In search of the ideal

One of the first questions we asked was how media discourses reflect ideal love: the person we fall in love with is perfect, everything we ever wanted.

"The movies sell us an ideal, a dream, and you grow up with that and it's not true. Then, in real life, you realise that this is part of the first phase. It is an idealisation" (Mr, Tm22February)

These media stories have generated a set of expectations and frustrations. They reaffirm the idea that there is only one true love, a soul mate, who you must find in order to become whole yourself.

"We can understand romantic love as the idea that you are incomplete without this other person, and that destiny predetermines that there is only one person for you out there, and when you find her everything will be wonderful" (An, Tm22February)

We also believe that these ideals construct models of attraction that enhance a specific type of attitude and establish a canon of universal beauty.

"There are a socially marked models but I don't think they appeal to you because you have a genetic chip... I think it's more cultural, culturally there are some models ... what you end up seeing as attractive is a model" (Af, Tm7March)

These models are far more limited for women; media discourses assign us the role of passive and dependent object of beauty, as we saw in several excerpts during the conversation group sessions (Snow White, The Little Mermaid, Thumbelina, Candy, etc.). We believe that diversity is given limited space in these models, and as a result many people feel excluded.

The prince and princess: roles and heteronormativity

This ideal of romantic love constructed by media discourses focuses on the myth of the prince and princess.

"I think it's the idealised version of love. Its image is mostly diffused through – I think – fictional products, and it is concentrated in the first stage of the love affair between a man and a woman. I think the content of this image is the myth of the princess saved by the prince, and therefore, the message that is spread is not only heteronormativity but a submissive role and an incomplete concept of women...." (S, Tm22February)

We concluded that romantic love stories based on the prince and princess myth foster traditional gender roles and reproduce inequalities between men and women.

It is true that changes are being witnessed in some media discourses, and such extreme stereotypical representations no longer appear, as in the case of Pixar productions. In our reflection on this issue we discussed the reasons for these changes and the extent to which they are liberating women from their role as caregiver or the extra burdens of a double working day.

"Mt: Representations have evolved with the changing role of women in society; before grandmothers stayed at home, now women have to be workers, mothers, superwomen ... so I think this is reflected in the characters, now they are Fionas or Mulans, they are warrior women, they can do everything, their evolution has taken a parallel path.

Mb: That worries me, it worries me a lot because those of us who have been fighting for a position for all women in society, what we reject is a position as slaves, and that is what we're coming to ... it's what you said, my grandmother looked after her home, but now superwoman has to go out to work, struggle to get a job where she has to demonstrate that she is as valuable as any man, and on top of everything, get home and do the housework.... how many hours does a woman work today? "
(Tm29February)

Indeed, media discourses continue to assign women other traditional roles such as the ability to sacrifice for others.

"I believe that the education we have portrays women as being there to put up with things and moreover, without feelings (...) you end up negating the emotions you have and doing things just because you think you have to do them but not because you have any feeling for them ... and it is a problem of education, because we haven't been taught to live with our emotions" (Ma, Tm29February)

These gender roles are also deeply rooted and any change to them also involves a number of risks that sometimes we may not want or be able to assume.

"To tie it in with the theme of romantic love ... what happens is that we start calculating the risks. Who wouldn't do this when you know that it can lead to an argument or a possible breakup with your husband? ... What happens is that it's understood that this is the kind of relationship it has to be ... that the attractive man has to be like this and the woman like that ... I think it's closely linked to the images we've seen of happy couples, because how many times have we seen the princesses that – before they became princesses – spent a lifetime cleaning, or the men going off on adventures and such like? ... but you never see the prince cleaning ... I think the problem is that often when we, as women, do not demand our rights it's because we risk losing the people we love (...) I think these ideas of the couple are what we have absorbed from Disney, which weren't made by women, but by men who wanted to preserve the system that they do so well out of" (S, Tm29February)

In addition to the risk of losing your partner, you also have to break with a role you are used to and that gives you security.

"I think the thing is, linking it a little to the romantic love theme, when we're in a couple it is very hard not to play a role because in the end, the romantic love issue is reminiscent of something really strong. So we want to keep it at all costs and reproduce what has always helped us (...) If we have always known how to play the role of saviour or victim, then we do that ... rethinking to do something else scares us because it means breaking with history, with what you're used to" (C, Tm29February)

The problem with these media discourses is that they present little diversity, and the gender roles they portray are still sharply defined. Moreover, the attributes the characters are given are often related to behaviours based on inequality, and reinforce patriarchal models of attraction.

"That's where the problem lies. How do we define what is a man and what is a woman? And especially how do we define what is an attractive man and what is not?" (S, Tm29February)

Passionate love versus stability

During the sessions we noted how many of the media discourses we explored presented a predominant idea of the model of attraction as tumultuous and futile; with the "bad guy" that makes you suffer but is the one you are most passionate about.

"It seems that the bad guy is always the sexiest and the one we should be attracted to and the good guy is the one we have to marry ... but that also happens with girls; there's also the typical girl who leads the guys on and then the wholesome girl next door to marry. I get the feeling that the distance between these two things is huge, that the person who we should find attractive must be really troubled but at the same time passionate, sexual (...) I don't think we have any models where being passionate does not come into conflict with being a good person, with treating people well and making a commitment. You can be adventurous and experience things with your partner and still treat her well. It seems to me that we don't have a model, not for men or for girls or for anyone" (Mb, Tm7March)

"It's not so much a type of person, but a type of society that pushes the idea that everything stormy, passionate and impossible is attractive, and that's the person I'd have a fling with. But then I'd marry the person who is just the opposite, is really constant and reliable, but that I have no feelings for" (R, Tm7March)

Happily Ever After

We also concluded that media discourses on romantic love strengthened the idea that once you have found the "love of your life", you will live happily ever after. In fact, this comes nowhere near the participants' life experiences.

"Basically, if you say romantic love, what comes to mind are all the TV comedies where the storyline is boy falls for girl and generally everything is wonderful and they will be happy until they die ... and well I don't think that does anything to help build a true picture of the couple" (S, Tm22February)

Likewise, few narratives in commercial cinema explore how to build long-term egalitarian relationships.

"Whenever we speak of romantic love it always ends when they get married, and their life together begins. So we're talking more about the process of falling in love than the process of love. This first wonderful stage does not give you the tools to carry on where the story ends" (An, Tm29February)

The search for a partner as pivotal to women's lives

These romantic love stories continue to fuel the notion of finding a partner and motherhood as the mainspring of women's lives. On critical reflection, as participants we realised that we ourselves help to reproduce this belief with our behaviour and interactions with our friends.

"About women and our role, it has also been drummed into us that we are nothing without a partner, and that's really pitiful, you have to be with someone or to like someone or to be on the way to something (...) A guy is single and even his friends are saying how cool that is, and besides being single he'll have his work, his projects, he'll travel ... but a single woman (...) if she's on her own its because there's something wrong with her, if no one is with her it is because she's not worthy of being loved!" (Af, Tm29February)

"It is also common with friends you don't see for a long time, one of the first things they ask is are you with somebody yet? As if between relationships you are just waiting for the next one to happen" (Mr, Tm29February)

Conclusions: Theorising and raising consciousness through talking about our lives

The dialogic conversations empowered us to confront media discourses of love. They generated knowledge about emotional-sexual relationships through critical reflection of our own experiences, which were the crux of our discussions. And, although it was not a formal space of

"experts", critical discourses were generated that are in line with those produced by "academics" on the matter.

Participants agreed that the idea of romantic love is a social construct and that the media have influenced this construction and our own perceptions of love and emotional-sexual relationships. This approach coincides with theoretical contributions on the role of the media as constructors of reality (Acaso, 2006; Aparici y García Mantilla, 2008; Masterman, 1993 o Morduchowicz y Minzi, 2003).

Based on our life experiences and previous knowledge, in the dialogic conversations we reflected critically on media myths of love. We recognised that we were following the line of authors who have explored these questions (Esteban, 2008 y 2011; Herrera, 2011a y 2011c; Sanpedro, 2010 o Varela, 1997). Regarding the myth of the search for perfect love, we talked in the sessions about how these ideals and expectations lead us away from earthly life into the world of ideas, of the "ought to be". This reflection is related to the criticism that various authors, especially from feminist movements (Butler, 2002; Gil, 2011; Onfray, 2002 y 2008; Platero, 2008; Torras, 2007; Trujillo, 2008), are making of western hegemonic thinking whose discourse revolves around idealistic abstractions with universal pretensions, while the specific, the singular, the body has been silenced or dismissed .

Also related to this idealisation, in the dialogic conversations we criticised the way a universal ideal of beauty is imposed by media discourse. This ideal conditions men and women in different ways. Interpreted from a gender perspective, all women suffer the imposition of this limited and restricted ideal. Following this line, the sessions addressed the myth of the prince and princess and the gender roles it promotes. Women are relegated to the role of object of desire, of passivity, of natural caregivers, and focused on the pursuit of romantic love as the *leitmotiv* of their lives. In the sessions we considered these gender roles as fictional constructs that perpetuate unequal relationships, a line of thought that various authors have also highlighted (Acaso, 2006; Butler, 2001; Correa, Guzmán y Aguaded, 2000; Gámez, 2007; Jorge, 2004; Martínez, 2009; Plaza, 2005). And when the female character does change, she becomes a *superwoman* (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011) who has to do a double or triple working day.

In sum, these discussions led us to conclude that media discourses strengthen relations of inequality based on universal, established gender roles, on idealisations that shun the diversity of the earthly, and on the idea of a stability that does not take into account the constant change that life entails. This awareness empowers us to challenge these messages and look for other models of attraction and more egalitarian and inclusive relationships.

Therefore, we consider that dialogic conversation around the media discourse on love is an optimum teaching tool for building egalitarian relationships and questioning the power relations that affect all of us, regardless of our sexual orientation.

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