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## **The Other Women in Dialogic Literary Gatherings**

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# The Other Women in Dialogic Literary Gatherings

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## Abstract

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This paper is based on Freire's conception of dialogic action (Freire, 1970). Drawing on this conception, Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLG) were created in 1978 in a working-class neighbourhood in Barcelona. We examine four non-academic women who have participated in DLG for more than 20 years and who have been traditionally excluded from decision-making processes in various personal and social spaces. We demonstrate how these women transform their self-concept as readers and learners by engaging in reading and enjoying classic literature, thus becoming empowered as social agents. The transformative dialogues generated in DLG prompted by individually reading aloud and collectively discussing the morals and social values of the classics mobilise participants.

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**Keywords:** Other Women, empowerment, dialogic literary gathering, classic literature



# Las Otras Mujeres en las Tertulias Literarias Dialógicas

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## Resumen

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Este trabajo se basa en la concepción de Freire de la acción dialógica (Freire, 1970). Partiendo de esta concepción, las Tertulias Literarias Dialógicas (DLG) creadas en 1978 en un barrio obrero de Barcelona. Analizamos cuatro mujeres que participan en DLG hace más de 20 años, las cuales tradicionalmente han sido excluidas de los procesos de desicions de espacios personales y sociales. Demostramos cómo estas mujeres transforman su autoconcepto como lectoras y aprendices al participar en la lectura y el disfrute de la literatura clásica, empoderándose así como agentes sociales. Los diálogos transformadores generados en las TLD, impulsados por la lectura individual en voz alta y la discusión colectiva de los valores morales y sociales de los clásicos, movilizan a las participantes.

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**Palabras clave:** otras mujeres, empoderamiento, tertulia literaria dialógica, literatura clásica



Some of the most recognised theoretical conceptions within the academic field worldwide emphasise the dialogical nature of literacy, understanding and reading. The reading learning process is understood as an act beyond an individual action (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Bakhtin, 1986; Flecha, 2000).

With regard to the education of adults in this investigation, particularly elderly women, the reading learning process is much more than an educational process. Participation in democratic processes in adult education helps women identify and share similar problems in their own lives. Thinking about individual experiences and linking them to critical social analysis constructs a way of understanding their social conditions that leads these women to develop strategies for action and transformation (Campbell & Burnaby, 2001; Freire & Macedo, 1987). In Freire's words, 'Reading the world always precedes the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world' (1987, p. 79).

During the 1970s, Freire (1970) conceived of education as a free and transformative practical process, not only of an individual person but also of the individual's own environment. This view overcomes discourses and reproductionist and edist perspectives that assume that intelligence declines with age and that adults with no academic training have limited learning capacity as adults (Bourdieu, 1979; Shaie, 1983; Wechsler, 1939)

Our investigation begins from the perspective that adult education overcomes edist perspectives that focus on the cultural intelligence that everyone has (Cattel, 1971; Flecha & Tellado, 2012; Scribner, 1997; Sternberg & Wagner, 1986). The people receiving training are considered the protagonists of this process. They contribute with their cultural expressions, but at the same time they claim access to other cultural expressions that have traditionally excluded them (Botton, Puigvert, & Sanchez-Aroca, 2005).

In the case of elderly adults, many stereotypes exist. Some elderly adults are perceived as less capable and intelligent, so they appear to be less attractive (Dougherty, Dorr & Pulice, 2016; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). This negative opinion is perceived not only by the rest of the community but also by other elderly adults (Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994).

To these stereotypes that affect elderly people in general, other ones need to be added that harm women even more, perceiving them as less competent and independent than elderly men, thereby worsening both their self-image as well as their quality of life (Canetto, Kaminski, & Felicio, 1995; Levy, 2009; Dougherty, Dorr & Pulice, 2016; Fernández-Alonso & Jaime-Castillo, 2016). Elderly women are often described as less attractive, with lower intellectual capacity, and offering little added value to society in comparison with other age categories or men (Brown, & Rohlinger, 2016; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Garner, 1999). Brown and Rohlinger (2016) found that most of the elderly women who participated in their research stated that these negative stereotypes affected their personal age identities.

In this paper, we demonstrate that the investigation of elderly women's participation in Dialogic Literary Gatherings (with no academic training) for more than 20 years has contributed to three main results: participants become confident readers who perceive themselves as culturally competent and able to actively participate in scholarly forums; participants become more socially engaged and involved in social movements to support marginalised communities; and the transformative dialogues about gender issues through the books they have read mobilise participants to engage in women's movements, opening the feminist arena to the inclusion of 'other women'.

In this introduction, we briefly describe the concept of other women as defined by the non-academic movement, such as the protagonists in this investigation who are contributing to social transformation. Next, we introduce the situation of elderly women's social and political participation. We then explain the origin of DLG and how DLG are being developed. In the next section, we discuss the methodology used in this investigation, which includes the opinions of four participating women. A section including the presentation of results follows. Finally, we provide a brief conclusion describing the main contributions.

### **Other Women and Social Transformation**

The so-called *other women* are defined by Puigvert (Beck-Gernsheim, Butler & Puigvert, 2003) as adult women who, because they have no university

experience, have traditionally been marginalised in areas of social debate and participation. These are women of different age ranges, with varying cultural, economic or training backgrounds, who may be immigrants or members of ethnic minorities and have suffered from discrimination. They have been subordinated in multiple private and public areas. This exclusion is due to the stereotypes about these non-academic women of different backgrounds as well as to their age. This exclusion has even been present in the feminist movement, in which some academic women have monopolised the feminist debate without considering the opinions of other women who have been pushed aside because they were seen as having little relevance (Beck-Gernsheim, Butler, & Puigvert, 2003; Valls-Carol, 2014).

Investigations have shown the importance of participation by women with different profiles, particularly other women, in transformative social processes. These women contribute decisively to the construction of more egalitarian and violence-free societies (Botton, Puigvert, & Sánchez, 2005; Puigvert, & Muñoz, 2012; Christou & Puigvert, 2011; Valls-Carol, 2014).

Through the concept of dialogic feminism, all opinions from all women are included in dialogue. As stated by Puigvert (Beck-Gernsheim, Butler, & Puigvert, 2003),

The inclusion of every single voice in egalitarian dialogue among all women in the feminist debate will allow us to move towards the theoretical development of what we believe should be the feminism in the twenty-first century: dialogic feminism, aiming to unite the efforts of all women (of different educational levels, ethnicities, and social classes) to overcome the inequalities we are currently facing (p. 51).

### **Social and Political Participation of Elderly Women**

Social and welfare development in any country or society is closely linked to educational access and training for women. Similarly, gender equality is directly connected to the reduction of poverty and economic growth at the macro level. Several investigations have demonstrated the beneficial effects of an increase in training for women for the economic growth and development of countries. These opportunities have a greater impact than education for men does (Sen, 1999; Oztunc et al., 2015). Fostering women's participation in every social and political arena contributes to social

improvement. Therefore, ensuring their presence is vital, not only for reasons of social justice but also for improved social and economic results.

In addition to gender, age is an important factor with a specific impact on social and political participation. It is a central topic in ageing research because data clearly show that as people age, their social and political participation gradually decreases. More than 30% of elderly people over age 90 are socially inactive. At that age, productive political participation becomes rare for several reasons, including declining individual capacity and marital status. This decline in social participation typically differs according to the educational and occupational resources available to individuals. For people with a higher level of training or education, social and political participation is normally prolonged compared to people with a lower educational level (Bukov, Mass, & Lampert, 2002; Ponce, Rosas, & Lorca, 2014).

In the case of elderly women with no academic training, social and political participation is far more limited than it is among other groups in the community (Reed, Clarke, & Macfarlane, 2012). Their lack of participation leads this group of people to feel left out. According to research conducted in the European Union, almost one out of ten (9.9%) people aged 65 felt excluded (Eurostat, 2011).

An end to this decreasing tendency towards social and political participation can be accomplished through various transformative processes and types of social action. Learners who share a transformative learning experience can effect social change in many ways, such as affiliating with likeminded persons who are devoted to change within an organisation, changing interpersonal relationships, or engaging in collective political actions (Mezirrow, 1990, p. 356).

Various investigations have shown that elderly women may feel a sense of power through involvement with politics, community activities or continuous learning. Power may also be experienced through the ability to make decisions congruent with their own desires and to speak freely even in the face of opposition (Lips & Hastings, 2012; Dougherty, Dorr, & Pulice, 2016; Novek, Menec, Tran, & Bell, 2013). This active participation also generates great health benefits and independence, and it eliminates the feeling of being a burden to society (Kim, 2012). Social participation is also

a source of life satisfaction and improves self-esteem and subjective well-being (González-Herero & García-Martín, 2012).

### **Dialogic Literacy Gatherings with Elderly Women**

Freire's theory of dialogic action highlights the role of dialogue for raising awareness and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Drawing on this conception, Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLG) were created in 1978 in a working-class neighbourhood in Barcelona (Aubert, Villarejo, Cabré, & Santos, 2016; Flecha, 2000). Their purpose was not only to contribute to adults' literacy learning but also to support their empowerment to lead themselves towards personal and social transformations. Sánchez (1999) stresses that working in adult education with a community perspective means increasing people's opportunities at all levels, from improving standards of living to stimulating intellectual and political involvement. In the case of DLG, these dialogues acknowledge the participants' universal capacity for language and action (Chomsky, 1988; Habermas, 1981), allowing them to use their funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) to make meaning from classic literature and to recognise other women's contributions to social transformation (Beck-Gernsheim, Butler, & Puigvert, 2003; Flecha, 2015).

One of the significant features of DLG is that participants involved in the first DLG had no academic background when they began to read and discuss classic literature, such as *Ulysses* by Joyce, *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, and *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka, among others. A classic book is always chosen for group discussion, proving that 'reading and understanding classic literature is something that everyone can experience, not only those involved in 'high culture'' (Serrano, Mirceva, & Larena, 2010, p. 197). Thus, this approach provides a means to move away from reproductionist theories such as those of Bourdieu.

In his structuralist conception, Bourdieu (1979) stated that people's habits determine their tastes as well as their capacities to access certain knowledge that is considered characteristic of cultural elites. Likewise, Bourdieu argued that popular classes were not capable of developing an inclination towards these cultural assets, and he even asserted that reading is

a scholarly pursuit that can only be appreciated by special or distinguished people. Furthermore, in the case of women, he believed that they have internalized the masculine domination through social and political institutions (Bourdieu, 1998) not in the hands of human agency the possibility to generate change.

The egalitarian dynamics of DLG undermine this stagnant idea that certain people cannot appreciate high culture or transform society. In a DLG, every participant chooses a paragraph or an idea to share with the group on the day the group meets. A moderator gives every participant an opportunity to speak. There is no correct interpretation of the shared reading; rather, members of the gathering add their views and construct meaning together. The result is a collective interpretation of the classic book that is connected to the everyday life of the people involved in the gathering (Serrano, Mirceva, & Larena, 2010). Thus, through interactive and dialogic interpretation, these adults, despite their lack of academic backgrounds, enjoy quality readings and generate debates. Their perspectives, which are linked to their individual realities, contribute to social transformation (Flecha, 2015; Flecha, 2000; Botton, Girbés, Ruíz, & Tellado, 2014). Drawing on the group's recognition of important skills demonstrated in other areas, which Flecha (2000) has defined as interactive self-confidence, these women feel empowered to be active in other fields in which they have not previously participated.

Making literacy useful for citizenship must involve the knowledge needed to transform gender relations in society and must provide the terrain on which the exercise of new forms of citizenship can take place. Literacy must be of service for gender-transformative purposes. Content developed under methodologies that foster reflection and dialogue, as in DLG, offers possibilities for social change and fosters cultural diversity, economic equity, and political enfranchisement (Flecha, 2000; Stromquist, 2003). Through DLG, women become political or social activists as they make connections between their own lives and the lives of others (Ackelsberg, 1998).

## **Method**

This project was conducted from a communicative perspective that provides, through joint reflection between researchers and subjects at an egalitarian level, a critical interpretation of the latter's reality through their own autobiographical stories in combination with scientific evidence on the topic. All participants in the investigation were aware of the study's objectives and participated actively in the aforementioned process and the interpretation of results. This participation and the analysis of the communicative acts that emerged between the researcher and research subjects are the fundamental premises of the communicative approach (Gómez, Puigvert, & Flecha, 2011). This approach contributes to greater social impact of the outcomes of the research (Flecha, Soler, & Sordé, 2015).

Two communication orientation techniques were employed to collect information:

- 1) Fieldwork notes and registration of some observations on DLG development over two years;
- 2) The communicative daily life stories of four women who have participated in DLG groups for more than twenty years.

## **Participants**

Data collection involved weekly communicative observations in a DLG in an adult education school during two years of implementation. In addition, four women reported their life experiences in the DLG as participants in a communicative daily life story with a researcher. These women were selected due to their participation in the gatherings for more than 20 years.

A DLG includes 15 to 20 people, depending on the day in question, and takes place at the adult school in Verneda Santa Martí (Barcelona). Most participants are women, and the majority of them are over 60. The group convenes for a weekly meeting that usually lasts approximately two hours. The group is open to anyone who wishes to participate as long as they adhere to the organisational structure established by the DLG.

In the following table, we provide a brief description of the four women who were the focus of the communicative daily life story. Fictional names are used to protect their identities.

Table 1.

*Participants in the communicative daily life stories*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years in DLG</b>	<b>Background</b>
Consuelo	80	32	Adult migrant from Andalusia with her husband. She was a widow at the age of 38 with two young daughters. She worked as a domestic employee.
Isabel	68	25	Migrant from Andalusia when she was a child. She only attended school for 3 years as a child. She worked in the textile sector (now retired) and took care of her parents until two years ago.
Teresa	76	24	Migrant from Andalusia when she was 25. In Andalusia, she worked in a small shop. She gave up work to be a housekeeper.
Angelina	75	29	Initially, she worked as a cleaner in a hospital; later, she worked as a nurse assistant.

The books that were read and debated over more than 20 years by the participants in the DLG included the following: Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Tagore's *The Gardener*, *La Regenta* by Leopoldo Alas 'Clarín', *Nana* by Emile Zola, Cervantes' *Novelas Ejemplares*, *Fuenteovejuna* by Lope de Vega, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Anton Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard*, Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde, Zola's *Germinal*, *The Kingdom of This World* by Alejo Carpentier, George Orwell's *1984*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, and *Mother* by Maxim Gorki.

## Data Analysis

To conduct a data analysis of the fieldwork, a table was compiled that shows six issues linked to the three topics under investigation. In the following table, we present these three topics for analysis based upon whether they were capable of generating transformative elements (to overcome difficulties) or discriminatory ones (those impeding transformation):

Table 2.

*Topics for analysis*

Participation patterns in the gatherings	Exclusionary elements
Social content of debates	
Women-related content of debates	
Self-concept as readers / evolution	Transformative elements
Social participation / evolution	
Women – issues of participation / evolution	

The results section was compiled using selected quotes in each section.

## Results

Our results show that adult participants in DLG, primarily non-academic women who have traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes in various personal and social spaces, transform their self-concept as readers and learners, engage in reading and enjoying classic literature, and become empowered as social agents. This empowerment occurs through the following pathways for engagement.

**DLG Allows Participants to Become Confident Readers who Perceive themselves as Culturally Competent and Able to Actively Participate in Scholarly Forums.**

Our investigation rejects current stereotypes about elderly non-academic women derived from formulated structuralist theories or existing negative prejudices (Bourdieu, 1998, 1979; Dougherty, Dorr, & Pulice, 2016; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) to show that, based on the opinions of the women interviewed, participating in DLG altered their feelings about their lack of an academic background.

Consuelo, who has participated in DLG for more than 30 years, is a clear example. The difference in her feelings now compared to her arrival in Catalonia is evident in the following statement:

I came from a little town, from Almeria (South of Spain). My father was always sick; he worked the land, so every olive season I had to give up school to help him. I didn't learn anything at all. Then I came here with my husband, who had relatives with studies. I always felt so small.

The transformation generated through participation in DLG gave her confidence and an eagerness to actively participate in public spaces (Flecha 2000; Racionero, 2015):

I have participated in the gatherings for 30 years. I have read all, all the books! When my daughter was 15, she was proud that I was reading these books. And now I have a grandson, and whenever we call each other he asks me, "Grandma, what are you reading now"? And I told him, "That one. Try to read it some day!" [...]  
For instance, we go to the cinema, and I go with people who, you know, have studied, and they say, "Uhm, I don't know what the film meant". And I said, "Of course, that is because you don't go to the gatherings!" Besides what you read in the books, you understand so many things, like films or many other things that are happening right here, right now.

Another participant shared her feelings, which also demonstrate how self-confidence has made her more active in several areas:

Of course, you feel more confident to speak aloud. You get to know more things; you understand what the rest of the people are talking about, and you know what to say. There is not any more to fear about... "What will they say... what they will think about me".

At the time the fieldwork was conducted, this participant was the moderator of one of the DLG groups in the adults' school.

Through observations over two years, several moments clearly showed the transformation in the self-confidence of the elderly participant women. One example is the way the gatherings flow. One of the key factors that contributes to this self-confidence is an environment of respect and mutual support among the women that typically cannot be found in other spaces, and their participation generates greater self-esteem and well-being (Beck-Gernheim, Butler, & Puigvert, 2003; González-Herero & García-Martín, 2012). In the observations, we noted, for example, 'A participating woman read the paragraph with difficulties. Neither the moderator nor the rest of participants corrected her or made any sign of impatience. Once she finished, she made her personal comment on the text'.

What Flecha (2000) has described as interactive self-confidence can be clearly seen in some of the collected observations. For example, a participant in the gathering commented about another elderly participating woman, 'There is a very funny woman; she watches TV show contests, and when she arrives, she says, "So, they have asked about this, this and that and they couldn't answer, and I knew the answers!"'.

### **Participants Become more Socially Engaged and Involved in Social Movements to Support Marginalised Communities.**

As shown by several investigations, social implication decreases with age, primarily when elderly women are involved (Reed, Clarke, & Macfarlane, 2012). Moreover, educational level has been identified as a relevant factor that, despite the influence of age, leads to active participation for a longer period of time (Bukov, Mass, & Lampert, 2002; Ponce, Rosas, & Lorca, 2014).

Returning to these data, we see that participation in DLG not only generates greater self-confidence in the elderly women but also leads them to become more involved in social movements (Flecha, 2015), particularly in cases focused on supporting marginalised communities.

Teresa, age 76, who has participated for 24 years in the DLG in La Verneda, highlights her participation in learning experiences as one of the main factors that has fostered changes so that she no longer feels guilty or like a burden on society (Mezirrow, 1990; Kim, 2012):

It comes naturally. You feel yourself more confident to speak aloud, you are willing to, you feel you have the right to say what you think, and you dare to do so. And in the debates, there are so many issues....from all human history... just like today ... and then, of course, you are more willing to do things.

An example of how DLG generate this type of social involvement that, regrettably, is closely linked with the current situations of refugees in Europe is the debate generated by the book *The Grapes of Wrath*. Isabel highlighted the connection between the book and the refugee situation and the attempts to consider this issue in depth:

This book.... It reminded us so much about the current situation of the refugees... (...) We have organised a meeting in the school, and invited a specialised person to explain us the situation. And we are talking about what to do so that we can welcome refugees at the school and help them in every possible way.

As 73-year-old Angelina explained, she participated in promoting the DLG in a prison as well as a mental health centre. Her participation stemmed from a desire to support an activity that could improve women's lives. At the same time, she was an active member in her neighbourhood association and, since 2010, had been an active member of the Advocacy Network for the Settlements.

### **Participants Become Engaged in Women's Movements, Including their Voices as the 'Other Women' in Feminism.**

The transformative dialogues prompted by reading aloud individually and collectively and discussing morals and social values from the classics (i.e., gender issues) mobilise the participants to engage in women's movements, opening the feminist arena to the inclusion of 'other women' (Beck-

Gernsheim, Butler, & Puigvert, 2003; Botton, Puigvert, & Sánchez, 2005; Valls-Carol, 2014).

A clear example is active participation during the DLG as gender issues are raised through various readings. For example, in one of her observations, she wrote the following:

A man states that not only during the period of time covered in the book, but also in the 50s in Spain, women were easier to manipulate than men. A participating woman quickly raised her hand up to speak aloud. In her turn, she responded that her experience was not like that. She said how her mother was (despite of obvious inequalities) in a better position and did not depend so much on her father.

During her narrative, Teresa mentioned two readings that generated debates of special interest regarding gender issues, and then she spoke about her ideas:

A book that really touched me was *A Doll's House* written by Ibsen. We read it about 7 or 8 years ago, but I remember very well all the discussions we had at the time.

When we read Sophocles' *Antigone*, this book made us reflect about women and everybody's rights and about the value of loyalty, dignity... and it was written 2,500 years ago! We had great discussions about the costs of her decisions and her reference as an emancipated woman (or not).

Consuelo spoke about another debate in which she participated on *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico García Lorca. Rather than simply criticising men, through a personal story, she explained how women sometimes do not act in a caring manner:

Well, I have always defended men (the good ones) at our gatherings. They (other participant women) always say that I defend men. But I don't think good men are responsible for what other men do.

I lost my husband when I was 38. It wasn't a normal death; it was something very hard. In Barcelona, I didn't dress up for mourning. But when I went to my town [in rural Andalusia], I was criticised for this.

Those nasty comments did not come from men, but from other women! So, this is why I always stress it, because sometimes we help each other (among women) less than good persons, whatever they are men or women. *The House of Bernarda Alba* is about this kind of thing.

Both Consuelo and the other elderly women in the DLG participate in demonstrations against gender violence on a monthly basis. Thus, they show their active commitment against gender violence. It is clear that neither age nor academic level dictate involvement or investment in issues and areas in which women were previously invisible or even excluded.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows that DLG not only make sophisticated readings accessible for women with no academic background but also that the dialogic dynamics transform their self-concept as both readers and learners. Through reading and discussion, women develop what Flecha (2000) called ‘interactive self-confidence’, which mobilises and empowers them to engage in socio-cultural and political actions. This challenges the social images often applied to non-academic adults as less capable or politically engaged. DLG is thus a reading activity that is capable of maintaining and increasing non-academic adult women’s interest for more than twenty years by empowering them and by making them more self-confident and more intellectual socially engaged and committed to women’s movements. DLG’s unique dialogic approach to reading classic works of literature empowers and engages the women who participate as active citizens.

The voices of the four women in this study demonstrate how powerful the personal and social transformation is for elderly women.

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