



Beyond Action Research

The Communicative Methodology of Research

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Abstract In this article we show how the communicative methodology of research (CMR) makes it possible to implement evidence-based policies to improve people's lives. Drawing on theories and methods developed under other paradigms and based on dialogue, the CMR is now a solid body of theory that researchers can put into practice. As researchers engage in egalitarian dialogic interactions with the members of society who are engaged in the research with them, they construct knowledge together. The researchers contribute empirical knowledge to the dialogue, and the social actors contribute by describing, and reflecting on, their life experiences. The final results are oriented toward transforming society through actions based on this jointly developed evidence.

Keywords: communicative methodology of research, egalitarian dialogue, social transformation, intersubjectivity, action research

Introduction

Traditionally, social researchers have not taken into account the voices of those who are participating in their research studies. When those voices belong to the most vulnerable groups in society, the conclusions of the research have often led to those people continuing to be excluded. In recent years, however, more and more approaches have emerged that address this issue. Among them are social justice, autoethnography, performance studies, the critical perspective, democratic methodologies, narrative inquiry, and indigenous pedagogies, to name only a few (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Current methodologies are questioning the classic notion of research as a series of one-way activities developed by researchers or research teams, which analyze data based on their particular vision of reality, using appropriate precautions to avoid bias that might influence or compromise the veracity and reliability of their conclusions. As a result, the dichotomy between objectivism and subjectivism has largely been

resolved. Researchers are coming to accept the crucial importance of research subjects. They understand the problems in a methodology based on power relations in which it is legitimate for researchers to justify and emphasize their point of view and dismiss the interpretations of people who are completely alien to the academy; this approach does not add to our fund of relevant knowledge and may even make it harder to get to the truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

More recent methodological approaches create mechanisms that can include the voices of all the participants in a study during the entire research process, though they are involved in different ways and at different levels. The dialogic turn of society, which is also having an impact on research, incorporates this trend toward including these voices and increasingly making use of dialogue to generate knowledge. However, an intense debate continues to focus on ethics in research. Though some elements of the discussion may be outdated, it is still crucial to ensure that research results accurately reflect the concerns and interests of the participants from a transformative point of view (Flecha & J. Gómez, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Mertens, 2011; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007).

Nowadays, people around the world are preoccupied with inequality because of many current phenomena: globalization, various forms of exclusion, and the fact that communities and their organizations are too often not represented in the most powerful decision-making bodies in our societies. In this context, research methods can play a key role in helping generate knowledge that will lead both to a better understanding of the societies we live in and to social policies based on empirical evidence.

The communicative methodology of research (CMR) is one such method. It brings together valuable elements of earlier methods and offers a possible approach to social change by allowing people to contribute their own arguments and to develop actions in an effort to promote positive social policies. The CMR creates scientific knowledge by validating the discourse of two groups: experts in a particular academic area and nonexpert people, or social actors. In this approach, what makes knowledge valid, and therefore serves to legitimate it, are the arguments supported by validity claims and not by the power position of those who present the arguments. From the perspective of CMR, knowledge is the result of a dialogue that includes all the knowledge and points of view of a given community. In our globalized world, which is so open to multiple forms of communication and which includes great diversity and endless complexities, the only way to increase our fund of knowledge is by working together. It is crucial that we share both our knowledge and our ways of working based on empirical evidence that has been considered and evaluated by

a broad community and not merely based on assumptions. It must also aim to help develop social policies that encourage social transformation.

Individuals as Transformational Social Agents

One of the main ideas of the CMR is the consideration of people as transformational social agents who are able to change their personal circumstances with their actions. The egalitarian dialogue is the main tool to listen to the voices of all the agents involved in the research process (J. Gómez, Latorre, Sánchez, & Flecha, 2006). The incorporation of all the voices in the definition, design, and implementation of the research process is a distinctive feature of the CMR in relation to other methodological approaches. CMR is based on the idea that every single person is able to have language and communication (Habermas, 1984, 1987). Those are universal attributes (Chomsky, 1977). Through the communicative orientation of research, CMR establishes the channels for incorporating all the participants' knowledge in the process. The organization of the dialogue, as defined by J. Gómez et al. (2006), consists of designing communicative tools and strategies, such as advisory committees and expert groups, that work together in the construction of knowledge through dialogue, sharing their different conceptions and personal experiences. Knowledge construction is based on the truthfulness of valid arguments, not in the position of power held by the person expressing the argument, as asserted by Habermas in the methodological application of the communicative rationality principle.

This dialogic approach (Flecha, 2000) puts into operation the idea of "lifeworld" formulated by Schütz (Schütz & Luckmann, 1973). With this concept, the German sociologist referred to all those knowledge categories gained by the individual, based on which he/she interprets the world. This subjective accumulation of knowledge composed of all the previous learning experiences mediates the individual interactions. Current sociological approaches are increasingly based on individual narratives to the extent that they give meaning to the social phenomena as well as the interactions that occur on them (Chase, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). CMR uses personal narratives because of the strong evidence that supports the importance of subjects as transformation and self-transformation agents (Beverly, 2000; McLaughlin & Tierney, 1993; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992).

However, CMR incorporates the voices of everyone involved in the research process. This procedure allows the alternatives for transformation emerging from these traditionally excluded groups to enter the discussion. This process overcomes the epistemological gap as well as the interpretative hierarchies that have dominated

social research in the last decades (Padrós, García, de Mello, & Molina, 2011). According to CMR, both experts and nonexperts are able to interpret social phenomena, contributing with their respective expertise. This is made possible through the building of spaces for dialogue (Díez-Palomar & Molina, 2009; J. Gómez et al., 2006).

From Action Research (AR) to the Communicative Methodology of Research (CMR)

The methodology called action research (AR), situated within the socio-critical paradigm, was developed starting in the 1920s by authors such as Kurt Lewin; that development intensified during the 1940s, especially in the United States. The second stage of development, in the 1970s, was led by authors such as Carr and Kemmis (1986), especially in the United Kingdom, within the area of educational research. One point that set the AR of the 1970s apart from its predecessor was its rejection of a methodology oriented toward positivist (objectivist) research; instead, it promoted interpretive (subjectivist) methods. Thus AR was conceived of as a qualitative form of research based on the opinions of those who play various roles in society (Carr, 2006).

In this context, Kemmis (2010) recently wondered about the role that AR plays nowadays. “The main justification for action research,” in his perspective, “is that it makes a direct contribution to transformative action and to changing history”; in other words, “the first concern of action researchers should be the contribution of their action to history, not so much to theory” (p. 425). Again we see the dichotomy between action and theory, but now the balance shifts. Instead of a focus on advancing theory, the emphasis now is on taking action in a given historical moment—and considering history.

In the 1990s, the communicative methodology (J. Gómez et al., 2006) appeared, drawing from authors such as Garfinkel (1967), Mead (1934), Habermas (1984, 1987), Schütz (1993), and Beck (1999). Both action research and the communicative methodology aim to move beyond traditional methodologies by having social actors participate in the research. Both methodologies aim to lead to meaningful social change. However, these two methodologies differ in four key ways, which we outline here.

The Importance Given to the Theoretical Basis

Action research was developed outside the academy. From the beginning, Lewin’s work provoked resistance and opposition in university departments, where researchers

hesitated to apply or follow his concepts. As a result, its theoretical background has not developed as fully as that of the CMR.

Many studies on AR focus on pragmatic questions and the knowledge obtained through action and intervention, but they focus less on the conceptual bases of the research. Also, every study based on AR develops in a different way, and every study incorporates its participants differently. Moreover, decisions are made using various criteria of validity. As a result, every study based on AR is unique. Bradbury and Reason (2001) argue that AR includes several different approaches (p. 450). Some emphasize the conceptual-propositional integrity, while others are more focused on pragmatic concerns. As a result, some research projects have been constructed so that those affected by the research theme are active participants from the very beginning of the process, such as the Gay and Grey Project (Fenge, 2010).

Because AR does not have a solid theoretical basis, authors such as Martin (2001) and Heron (2001) emphasize the need to expand the boundaries of participation and to consider who is invited to participate and when. Martin suggests that research projects can only be classified as AR if they provide the people affected by the research results with the opportunity to participate in planning the project. This principle is also one of the keys of CMR, but CMR defends it with a solid theoretical basis.

Communicative methodology takes into account elements from objectivist and subjectivist conceptions. From the objectivist one, it considers the importance of researchers mastering the scientific knowledge that has been accumulated over time. (A. Gómez, Racionero, & Sordé, 2010, p. 20)

Fals Borda (2001), Kemmis (2001), and Lincoln (2001) have all argued that having members of the affected social groups participate and collaborate with researchers is key in AR, but they do not explain in detail how this collaboration should be conducted beyond stating that it should be based on egalitarian relationships. CMR, however, specifies the principles of collaboration. One of these is that the people being studied should participate during the entire research process, helping to supervise, follow, and orient the methodology, the interpretation of data, and the results that are obtained. In this way, CMR shares the entire research process with those who are affected by it; this process promotes the growth of different perspectives on the situation and also different interpretations and reflections about the theory that could be applied to the situation being examined. Thus, the research becomes even richer at both the theoretical and the practical levels (A. Gómez, Puigvert, & Flecha, 2011).

Reason (2006) argues that researchers need to explain as clearly as possible the decisions they make to assure that these decisions actually correspond with the

values that they propose about democratic participation. However, we still see that AR lacks a theoretical basis because it does not explain exactly what researchers must do to comply with these requirements. In contrast, CMR combines theory and practice in a dialogic way. The theoretical contribution of the researchers is seen as an ethical question, a commitment. Those of us working in universities or research centers receive a salary for our research, and we expand and deepen the fund of social science knowledge. We invest hours and hours of work in it. On the other hand, the social actors who participate with us have no time to engage in research, so they do not have the scientific knowledge that we have. Consequently, the CMR perspective holds that this knowledge must be given to all the people, that it is a question of ethical responsibility.

CMR constructs knowledge in a dialogical way. This is not a process of action and reflection in which researchers encourage the participation of social actors and try to be one more during the research process. AR constructs knowledge in a dialectical way, emphasizing the collection of data through mainly qualitative techniques. The researchers then analyze these data through a process of reflection and action, which becomes a spiral of change. The process is dialectical, distinguishing between practical and theoretical reflection (Chaiklin, 2011). Reason (2006), when he writes about AR, argues that the first purpose of research should never be the development of theory. Research must unite intellectual knowledge with personal and social actions, with research contributing directly to the people and their communities.

CMR constructs knowledge through an egalitarian and intersubjective dialogue between researchers and social actors. Unlike researchers using AR, those engaged in CMR feel an ethical commitment to provide all the scientific accumulated knowledge to the social actors as they engage in dialogue with them. Social actors provide their sensations, experiences, and visions; in addition, they have the benefit of this theoretical background that researchers provide for them during all their interactions (A. Gómez, Siles, & Tejedor, 2012).

In research, it is through intersubjective dialogue that the researchers and the researched reach agreements on what is objective, both acting as subjects in the search for answers to scientific and practical questions. In this sense, they reach objectivity as intersubjectivity. (A. Gómez et al., 2010, p. 22)

This kind of analysis of reality, which simultaneously uses what Habermas (1984, 1987) calls the system and the lifeworld, keeps researchers from misinterpreting the data; thus they are able to make valuable contributions to social science knowledge.

Both the theoretical basis underlying CMR and the communicative orientation of the research are universally applicable. Studies based on CMR allow people not only to explain and overcome a problem in a specific context but also to apply those findings in a wide range of contexts.

Transferability of Results

In contrast to the universal applicability of CMR, Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire (2003) argue that it is hard to transfer findings from AR-based studies to different geographic or social contexts because the actions they study are based on local features.

One of the weaknesses of action research is its localism and the difficulty we find in intervening in large-scale social change efforts. The bulk of action research takes place on a case by case basis, often doing great good in a local situation but then failing to extend beyond that local context. (p. 25)

Like CMR, AR also analyzes situations and develops proposals to transform them, but those projects are focused on local contexts and do not aim to have results that can be extrapolated, so the actions are often not transferable. But researchers need a solid theoretical basis for analysis that makes it possible to transfer the praxis they are analyzing. In the integrated project INCLUD-ED (CREA, 2006–2011), we, and many of our colleagues, developed successful educational actions using CMR. To move toward those actions, the teams conducted in-depth analyses of scientific literature, identifying all the elements that make it possible to define a successful action (Valls & Padrós, 2011).

Because these educational actions have succeeded in a range of geographic and social contexts, they have also been applied in other areas (health, housing, and employment), as in the specific case of Albacete (Padrós et al., 2011). Thus, the strategies identified as successful in one project can be later used by policy makers, educators, and family members in their daily lives, helping to overcome inequalities in several different contexts (A. Gómez et al., 2010).

Validity Criteria

Reason (2006) argues that those using AR are inclined to examine and reconsider validity criteria, especially those concerning quantitative research. Similarly, the theory behind CMR holds that it is essential to have validity criteria and to meet them. It

establishes mechanisms to ensure that the research is valid. One mechanism is triangulation: collecting data through various techniques, including communicative daily life stories, communicative discussion groups, and communicative observations. It allows researchers to obtain contrasting data about the same phenomena. Another is the advisory committee, made up of representatives of the vulnerable groups who are participating in the research. The advisory committee closely observes the research process, and members contribute commentary from their own perspectives throughout the study. Furthermore, it is expected that the people being studied will participate in defining any strategy or data collection techniques and also in interpreting the data and the conclusions of the research; this helps avoid biases in the analysis of social situations (J. Gómez et al., 2006).

Data Collection and Analysis

Chandler and Torbert (2003) explain that those using AR consider three spheres, each divided into three possible dimensions, making for a 3-by-3-by-3 scheme. To carry out a study using AR, researchers apply methods that combine these different dimensions and spheres. The first sphere is the time being considered: past, present, or future. The second sphere is the voices included in the research, and the third is the praxis.

In AR, data can be collected and analyzed using a great range of techniques, especially qualitative techniques. Data are obtained in practical, everyday situations, and the participation of diverse social actors is a priority. But the interpretation of the data does not rely on the academic knowledge of the researchers; the reflection occurs without theory. The focus is on the quotidian practice of the people who have participated during the fieldwork. It is a dialectical analysis of their reality.

CMR bases its interpretation of data on an intersubjective dialogue. In CMR, knowledge is constructed through the dialogue between the researchers and the people being studied and other social actors involved in the project. During this dialogue, the everyday experience that people have with a specific issue, normally one that is important in the present, converges with the scientific knowledge of the researcher. Theory and practice interact at the same time; the reflection is produced as everyone works together to understand the issue. Thus, all the reflections are more enriched than they would be in an AR analysis, which would use only an intersubjective analysis of actions without contemplating theory.

CMR uses communicative data collection techniques and other techniques applied with a communicative orientation. The communicative techniques are

communicative daily life stories, communicative discussion groups, and communicative observations. What these techniques have in common is that researchers always maintain their role as a researcher; they will never become a participant during a dialogue with other participants because they have made the commitment to contribute to the project with their theoretical and academic knowledge. When they are using noncommunicative data collection techniques, the researchers can count on having the support of the people they are studying through the advisory committee and the multicultural research teams (A. Gómez et al., 2010).

From beginning to end, from the consideration of theories and empirical contributions to the interpretation of results, CMR data analysis is oriented toward identifying two dimensions: exclusionary and transformative. The exclusionary dimension includes the barriers that make people suffer, and the transformative dimension is elements that can help people overcome these barriers. Because of this focus, the final results of any research using CMR are oriented toward social transformation (A. Gómez et al., 2011).

The Impact of CMR on Evidence-Based Policies

As we have pointed out, researchers using CMR create knowledge through an egalitarian and intersubjective dialogue between all the actors, combining theory and praxis at the same time. In this process the figure of an independent expert simply makes no sense. Researchers contribute their arguments to the dialogue without taking a position as an expert (Beck, 1994). The result is the opportunity for all those involved to contrast existing academic knowledge with the experience of the participants. This makes it possible to gain evidence-based results that help to develop policies in a range of research areas.

The objectivity that CMR provides for researchers lies in its intersubjectivity: There are no hierarchical differences between experts and nonexperts, and all interactions are horizontal. The researchers, who are seeking to understand or explain a phenomenon, participate in a communicative process at the same level as the people who are being studied. They do not consider their knowledge to be superior, and they cannot claim scientific rigor on their own. A key aspect of CMR is the idea that arguments must be based on validity claims and not on power claims. Decisions are made based on the arguments each person provides.

The ultimate goal of CMR is to transform reality. Thus it describes, explains, comprehends, and interprets reality in ways that can lead to transformation. Therefore, the object of the research can only be constructed through careful attention to

the interpretations, reflections, and theories of the very participants in the social reality that the researchers aim to transform (J. Gómez et al., 2006). This perspective is located within those theories where subjects and systems are important and need each other to carry out a dialogical study (Flecha, J. Gómez, & Puigvert, 2003). Such research includes both “descriptive” and “normative” realities; describing them lets the participants clarify which efforts are achieving more of the project’s objectives and which are achieving less. At the same time, CMR holds that context is very important; this is why it is based on interactionist theories.

Social policies based on this kind of research are far more likely to benefit members of the communities being studied because the research is based on a process of comparing empirical evidence with the experiences of those community members who have been involved with the entire study. Because this research approach is so socially relevant, researchers who use it are generally aiming to overcome some kind of inequality, be it social, educational, political, cultural, or economic.

Communicative Methodology of Research in European Research Projects

In this special issue we aim to show how CMR has contributed to creating policies based on empirical evidence—and continues to contribute in this way. The articles within this monograph present specific data on how to use the communicative methodology of research in research and development projects developed in the European context. Among those highlighted is INCLUD-ED because of its European dimension and the impact it has had on policies and guidelines both in Spain and in Europe.

The INCLUD-ED project “Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education” was the largest research project and with greatest amount of resources aimed at school education in the Sixth Framework Program of the European Union. It was an integrated project, which are the most important research instruments funded by the European Commission. The INCLUD-ED project was developed by 55 researchers from 14 European countries. Its general objective was to identify and analyze educational strategies that help overcome inequalities and promote social cohesion as well as the educational strategies that generate social exclusion, specifically on vulnerable and marginalized groups such as women, youth, migrants, cultural groups, and people with disabilities. The strategies identified as successful were later analyzed by policy makers, education managers, teachers,

students, and families on their daily practices. Given its wide range, INCLUD-ED was divided into six subprojects, each of them with specific objectives contributing to the general project. The sixth of those subprojects was a longitudinal case study, with qualitative and quantitative data gathered and studied under the communicative methodology of research. The evidences of success provided in the educational sphere were transferred to other areas such as housing and health, affecting positively the people in the neighborhoods where it was applied. This issue's article by Díez, Santos, and Álvarez best depicts this process in the specific case of Spain.

Díez, Santos, and Álvarez explain the process that transformed La Paz School in Albacete, which serves two poor neighborhoods: La Estrella and La Milagrosa. Over five years, this ghetto school experienced a spectacular change; it applied evidence-based policies and has become a magnet school. The case study shows how, through CMR, the voices of the participants combined with the work of the research community as they used educational policies to take actions that reversed the children's failure in school and the community's exclusion from society.

Petreñas, Puigdemívol, and Campdepadrós describe the situation of schools that group students based on ability. Based on their communicative fieldwork, they contrast this situation with centers that use different educational practices and with the educational research on ability grouping. They conclude that the multiple forms of student grouping have direct effects on students' academic results and highlight the improvements in learning that students experience when their schools institute inclusive practices. They link their evidence from this study using CMR to policy recommendations that could allow other students to have better academic experiences.

In the next article, Sánchez, Yuste, de Botton, and Kostic point out how people from socially excluded groups can transform their social situation, using various types of action and measures developed to address economic, political, or cultural issues. Here we see how the use of CMR leads to empirical findings that help overcome the ethnic discrimination that Roma people and other vulnerable groups suffer. Then, Ríos, Herrero, and Rodríguez explain the changes that the INCLUD-ED project, which used CMR, produced in European educational policies. They analyze the effect that the Cluster on Access and Social Inclusion, implemented in Bilbao in 2008, had on the educational policy of the Basque Country. Changes were produced through the dialogue that included representatives of national and international educational and political groups and students and teachers in learning communities and schools that do not apply the CMR-inspired model of learning communities.

In the next article, Aiello, Mondejar, and Pulido demonstrate how the Workaló project (CREA, 2004), also based on CMR, encouraged its research subjects, all Roma people, to participate during the entire study. This participation led to excellent results: New and better policies relating to the Roma were defined, and several resolutions recognized the Roma community in Europe and Spain.

Ramis, Alonso, and Siles analyze the contributions that CMR has made to overcoming gender violence through preventive socialization measures. They explore the barriers that researchers encounter when they explore that topic with young people. They also emphasize the elements of this method that allow for specific actions to prevent gender violence. Duque, Vidu, and Schubert present an analysis of how CMR has been used to collect data on gender violence in Spanish universities. Using this methodology has made it possible to better resist gender violence at the university. Tellado, Serrano, and Portell explain the process that improved the living conditions in a neighborhood of Barcelona through work in a school for adults based on the theory and practice of the CMR. Finally, Rodríguez, Rué, and López analyze how CMR is helping to construct scientific knowledge and thus bring science closer to society. The authors explain the characteristics this methodology has in common with other participative methodologies, but they emphasize the specific features that relate to the development of academic knowledge, always an aim of CMR.

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