

CHAPTER 2

**THE CRITICAL COMMUNICATIVE METHODOLOGY
AND THE DIALOGIC SOCIETY¹**

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INTRODUCTION

Despite significant limitations such as power groups, traditional barriers such as the unequal distribution of domestic tasks, and systemic barriers such as bureaucracy in the political parties and the media, which still have to be overcome, society is more dialogic. Every day there is more dialogue and, if this does not happen, conflict will occur. In other words, a dialogic society does not mean a society without conflict, since there is conflict, some of which is significant, but it means that dialogue helps to prevent and resolve it.

This can happen in any area of daily life. Human organisations are governed by reason more than they were previously, and less by impositions; without going any further, companies which promote horizontal dialogue thus favouring cooperative groups, obtain better results. In families it is no longer the father who always manages the timetables as he pleases, making the decisions and changing the television channels, since the rest of the family members question this traditional authority and request reasons for it. In couples, it no longer has to be one person (normally this role was restricted to “men”) who has the exclusive right to inequality in order to impose his “authority” and decide for both people, but rather dialogue is now required in order to reach an agreement. In politics, events demonstrate that citizens are no longer willing to accept impositions, nor put up with deceit or manipulation, but rather seek open dialogue and debates in order to make more participatory and democratic decisions. In education, teachers can no longer cling on to traditional authority, they have to provide arguments.

If current society is the result of profound changes which lead to new forms of describing and understanding social phenomena, research methodologies also need to consider the intersubjective relationships which take place in social interaction. These involve carrying out complex analyses which multiple dimensions that are difficult to understand based on traditional research designs, are involved in. In order to understand what goes on around us, we also require the dialogic perspective, which pays attention to processes of argumentation and communication, and the inclusion of the voices of the participants in the research, and we need them to be framed within a critical communicative perspective involving reflection, self-reflection and intersubjectivity. Interrelationship between theory and practice is needed, overcoming the division between researcher-subject and person researched-object. The use of communicative rationality involves an intersubjective dialogue between equals, and demonstrates the reflection and self-reflection of the actors themselves, their motivations and interpretations, stemming from a type of relationship which is as symmetrical as possible. Although researchers and those being researched contribute different knowledge, it involves abandoning positions of power and accepting better arguments, facilitating all of the types of environment which are more favourable to communication and understanding.

We know that there is a significant distance between egalitarian dialogue and the reality of our daily practices. However in a society in which the incorporation of people and groups from different cultures increases at an accelerated pace, and attempts are made to resolve differences and conflicts through dialogue, we should ensure that this tension moves towards an equality of difference which overcomes uncompromising positions that only use the arguments of power.

2.1. Postulates of the critical communicative methodology

The critical communicative methodology positions itself within a theory of action model, in the same way social theorists such as Habermas and Giddens have done. Therefore, it distances itself from some theories (functionalism, structuralism and poststructuralism) which do not take this situation into consideration in their approaches. This methodology conceives of the analysis of reality from a double perspective: that of systems and structures, and that of the lifeworld and human agency. Habermas (1984) distinguishes between system and lifeworld, reformulating the latter concept (which has its roots in Husserl's phenomenological philosophy and which Schütz incorporated into sociology) in order to describe the totality of human experiences. Although it is normal to observe the way in which the lifeworld is colonised by systems, the German sociologist is in favour of its decolonisation. Giddens (1984) also distinguishes between subject and structure, bestowing the category of actor on the subject; according to his *Theory of Structuration*, human agency is capable of influencing structures, in the same way that structures influence human agency. Social actors interpret reality, their own actions and their consequences through practical consciousness².

This is a methodology which, when analysing and interpreting reality, relies on a series of postulates. Amongst others these include the contributions of Chomsky (1988) and Searle (1998) to the analysis of linguistic competences, of Mead (1934) to interactionism, and of Habermas (1984) and Beck (1986) to social analysis and the creation of dialogic knowledge. The said postulates are:

The universality of language and action

Every person has the ability to communicate and interact with others, since language and action are inherent abilities and, therefore, universal attributes (Habermas, 1984). Along the same lines, Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) refer to the need to use a type of language which leads to processes of understanding and which eliminates distortions. Amongst the contributions of Vygotsky (1976, 1986) as well as the importance of culture and historical processes, he points out the ascertainment of the great significance of the interaction between people with universal abilities of language and action. He thus demonstrates that there are no superior cultures, but rather different cultures. Transcultural studies, such as the one carried out by Luria (1976) and Cole and Scribner (1974) amongst others, demonstrate that even the most unfavoured people develop cognitive and communicative abilities.

People as transformative social agents

Despite the fact that certain theories (especially systemic ones such as functionalism or structuralism) defend the reproduction of social life as functional action related to

² Practical consciousness is understood as *what actors know (believe) about social conditions, especially including the conditions of their own actions, but which they cannot express discursively, however, no repressive barriers protect practical consciousness, in contrast to what happens in the unconscious. On the other hand, discursive consciousness is understood to be what actors are capable of saying, or that which can be expressed verbally, about social conditions, especially involving the conditions of their own action; a conscience which has a discursive form* (Giddens, 2003/1984:394).

systems and their structures, and other theories (such as poststructuralism) which deny the subject, leave everything in the hands of power relations. Therefore in research, the higher level is thus occupied by the research team, while the people who are the object of the research remain below them, have the ability to reflect and establish intersubjective dialogue processes, which allows social structures to be acted upon. People are not cultural dopes (Garfinkel, 1967), but rather are capable of interpreting social reality, creating knowledge and transforming its structures. In that case, although the notion of the subject is reinforced, the function of being leaders who “raise awareness” for the rest is not attributed to those who exercise the role of researchers. It involves promoting other types of relationships in which validity claims prevail (arguments) and not power claims (imposition). The critical communicative orientation postulates the idea that, through dialogue, everyone can become an agent who can transform their context. The incorporation of women into different areas of society, urban mobilisations in military conflicts, ecological activities or anti-war demonstrations, provide only some of those actions which are not the result of a decision in any system which directs us inexorably, nor are they the result of individual actions framed within power relations. The critical communicative methodology distances itself from theories which are founded on impossibilities and deficits, and instead focuses on those which are based on the development of abilities and potential which recognise people as social agents in their own lives and contexts.

Communicative rationality

In the same way in which the critical communicative methodology believes that all people have the capacity for language and action, it also takes on the assumption that communicative rationality is the universal basis for these competences and for egalitarian dialogue. While instrumental rationality leads to using language as a means to achieve certain aims, communicative rationality uses language as a method for dialogue and for understanding (Habermas, 1984).

Common sense

In order to find out why an action occurs, it is necessary to take people’s common sense into account (Schütz, 1932). Subjective meaning depends on life experience and on people’s conscience, and it is normally formed within one’s own cultural context. This is why there is so much emphasis on the key importance of the context in which the interactions occur and in which knowledge is created.

No interpretative hierarchy

The interpretative assumptions of the people being researched can be just as solid as those of the researchers, in such a way that they have no reason to award themselves the role of the scientific interpreter: individuals and societies have the ability to interpret and understand the social world. For that reason, the detailed comprehension provided by direct contact is essential, as well as listening to and collecting the opinions and stories of participants and interpreting their own contexts along with them.

Equal epistemological level

As a natural continuation of the previous postulate, the critical communicative approach eliminates the epistemological gap in social research (Habermas 1987/1981), since researchers and those being researched (“the objects of study”) are placed on the same level, both in the research process and in the interpretation of action. Although it is very difficult to achieve this equality, it has already been confirmed that if one wants to understand or explain a phenomenon, those who research (apart from incorporating knowledge from the international scientific community into the subject being studied) have to participate in the communicative process on the same level of equality as the people (who contribute their experiences and knowledge to the dialogue, and allow theories and scientific research to be contrasted) who they want to debate a certain aspect with. All of them contribute their interpretations, their experience, and, through dialogue, they manage to reach a consensus on the arguments they provide.

Dialogic knowledge

The positivist paradigm focused on the search for objectivity, defending the idea that reality and knowledge are objective. This type of knowledge, which is based on the object, can be called objective knowledge. The interpretative approach aims to obtain knowledge from the subjects, about the way in which they interpret and provide meaning to reality. This type of knowledge, based on the subject, could be described as subjective knowledge. The critical communicative perspective incorporates the subject/object duality through intersubjectivity and the capacity for reflection and self-reflection (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). The basis for knowledge from this perspective is interaction between people and groups -and the communication which is established in it- based on validity rather than power claims. It must be taken into account that knowledge is constructed through interaction with the environment (Vygotsky, 1986) and that it is not neutral (Freire, 1970), but rather the result of a dialogue between science and society. All of this leads to a greater degree of involvement and the establishment of more egalitarian relationships. These horizontal situations and situations involving equality in research projects -which incorporate the richness of the scientific foundations contributed by the researchers as well as the knowledge of the people being researched- bring about an analysis of reality which is more reflective and egalitarian. We call this type of knowledge which is based on communication and dialogue, dialogic knowledge.

Along the same lines, the principles of dialogic learning, egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, transformation, instrumental dimension, the creation of meaning, solidarity, and the equality of difference (Flecha, 2001) act as role models for the critical communicative methodology. Based on the assumption that dialogue is transformative and, therefore, that it can change unfavourable contexts, key importance is placed on interaction understood as the creation of knowledge and shared competences.

In order to implement the previous postulates, this methodology starts off from a real situation, based on who we are and how we relate to each other, and searches for an ideal situation, who we want to be and how we would like to relate to each other. The critical communicative methodology uses *communicative action*: it guides and constructs dialogue depending on an understanding between subjects capable of

language and action (Habermas, 1984). In this process arguments prevail, in such a way that understanding and the agreements which are reached through dialogue are carried out based on validity claims and not power claims.

When we conduct research, providing that communicative rationality implies understanding, and this is further related to knowledge use than to knowledge acquisition, such understanding must be reached through argumentation between researchers and people researched. These arguments can be refuted, since the aim is to find something which is considered to be good and/or true through a dialogue in which, amongst other things, the arguments of others will help to rectify one's own. This means that communicative action cannot be carried out in research which uses a methodology which allows what is good or true to be imposed through the position of power of those who are part of the research team.

Through communicative action, the critical communicative methodology bestows importance on the communicative abilities and skills acquired by people who belong to excluded social groups, and/or those who do not possess academic skills. It is based on the assumption that facing the said barriers produces learning which is just as valuable or even more valuable than what they learn based on academic criteria. The universal structures of rationality have to be the result of an interaction between all cultures, and claims of truth have to search for universal acceptance taking into account the fact that some of them have to be modified when entering into contact with other cultures.

The critical communicative methodology implements its postulates through communicative action and uses the principles of dialogic learning as a role model. However it is important to clarify once again, in order to avoid potential misunderstandings, that concepts such as "ideal speech situations", "egalitarian dialogue", "consensus", "the creation of meaning", and "solidarity" etc. do not really mean that in reality all people and/or groups have the same positions of power. Nor does it mean that they participate in a dialogue which is completely egalitarian, or that they always agree (as if disagreements did not exist) or that they only develop solidarity, but rather, although there is a great deal of distance between the egalitarian progressive objectives and practical realities, these concepts (egalitarian dialogue, consensus, solidarity etc) and the effort to develop them and put them into practice involves moving closer to them, which is what is aimed for.

2.2. Critical communicative organisation

The postulates which are typical of the critical communicative methodology have been described and analysed. Added to this, in order to carry it out more coherently, it is necessary to have a favourable context which supports its development. Therefore, critical communicative organisation coincides with the aforementioned methodology.

If it is in any way possible to talk of credibility, this is assured (in the research as a whole) depending on how extensive the participation of actors who contribute to universalising dialogue is. Reference is made to the contribution of different points of view and to the evaluation of arguments. It is clear that the knowledge which comes from the academic world has to be recognised and considered to be necessary; but, more and more every day, the Knowledge Society requires knowledge which comes from contexts which are more cooperative and practical. This interrelation between all of

them is what greatly increases knowledge, since it is born of these interactions and the communication which takes place within them.

From this perspective, when a project is being planned (starting from the approach it will take, its objectives and/or hypothesis and design), as well as forming different working groups according to the requirements at that time, it is important to reach a consensus on this -while the research is being carried out- with people, groups and/or organisations which form part of and/or are related to the collectives the research is aimed at. In order to develop this organisational process the following actions were suggested (amongst others):

-The creation of an advisory council

The advisory council would be made up of people representing the collectives, groups and/or communities from the population participating in the research, gathering together the richness of their various contributions and ways of understanding and transforming reality. Amongst the functions of this of this advisory body the following can be pointed out: the contribution of their knowledge, their critical revision of documents, and their guidance for the development and process of the project, ensuring that this is communicative. They also carry out an evaluation of the whole research process including its conclusions, and especially look at whether the results obtained contribute towards improving the reality of the collectives which the study is aimed at.

-The creation of a multicultural research group

The monitoring of the project and participation in the advisory council is facilitated if the daily tasks including the literature review, the state of the art, the search for information, the use of different data collection and data analysis techniques, and writing documents etc, always include all of the voices. The research groups have to respond to and be a reflection of today's heterogeneous and multicultural society by being representatives of it. This can be better guaranteed through the participation in the study of people who belong to the various collectives who the project is aimed at, as well as through them being members of the research team.

-Creating the efficient working groups

In order for the organisation to be more efficient, it is advisable to create specific and flexible working groups with specific tasks such as for example, elaboration of theoretical bases, designing the methodology, preparing the table for information analysis, etc. These groups, which are set up according to the specific needs of the project, have the objective of contributing knowledge in specific areas, organising the work and creating proposals in order to be subsequently debated in the plenary team meetings as well as in the advisory council.

-Plenary meetings

It is important for the research team to meet on various occasions throughout the study process in order to analyse, debate and reach consensus on all of the documents and proposals created and written by the different working groups. In that way, once their tasks have been fulfilled, they take the results to the advisory council.

Certainly, apart from the activities described, other new activities will also be added which will be the result of the development of the communicative organisation itself. Those presented here are an example of what is already being carried out in various projects which are being carried using the critical communicative methodology.

2.3. Critical communicative research

Various theoretical concepts in social research have been analysed, from the perspective of their three dimensions, ontological (what is the nature of social reality?), epistemological (how do you become aware of social reality?), and methodological (what methodologies are used in social research?). According to these dimensions, the critical communicative perspective is ontologically communicative, since it conceives of social reality as a human construction in which meaning is created communicatively through interaction with people, and epistemologically dialogic, since it takes scientific statements to be the product of dialogue. For that reason, it is a type of critical communicative methodology which must promote the idea that people being researched should be able to participate on an equal level to the researchers in research, and facilitate the construction of meaning based on interaction. For that reason, it has to be focused on processes in which egalitarian dialogue and the transformation of contexts is prioritised, thus encouraging dialogic relationships which are based on (critical) reflection and self-reflection and on (communicative) intersubjectivity. Therefore the various learning concepts (i.e. traditional, meaningful, cooperative, dialogic) are on equal terms with dialogue and its principles, and can develop data collection techniques which are both quantitative and qualitative, because the key to this lies in the fact that they have a communicative orientation. The critical communicative orientation, based on this perspective, takes on certain postulates which have already been analysed and these are the ones which guide the research carried out according to this methodology, this is the research we call critical communicative.

Egalitarian dialogue between researchers and the people being researched means that it has to be based on validity claims or on dialogic interaction (Searle and Soler, 2004) and not on claims or interactions based on power. If a person is right this will be because he or she provides arguments which demonstrate that they are the most valid in a dialogic process in which there is a plurality of voices, not because people have a specific academic or professional status. Researchers are responsible for incorporating the knowledge which is available at that time in the international scientific community into this dialogue. However, this knowledge can be refuted, transformed, extended or complemented by the arguments used by the people being researched, not only when they provide information in response to-for example, questionnaires or interviews, but also when they cooperate in their scientific interpretation. This is the way in which to construct a dialogue between science and society which responds to dual current social theories which take both the system and the lifeworld, both structures and agents, and both the scientific community and subjects into account. The dialogic interaction between science and society should be present throughout the research process. For example, in a communicative life story, the arguments of the subjects being researched will be confronted with the arguments which the scientific community previously had with regards to this issue.

Critical communicative research is differentiated from other types of research which are focused on action and participation based on subjective theories which existed prior to current dual theories. The rejection of hierarchy -embodied by both the scientific community and the researcher's status- frequently led to a researcher wanting to be just another one of the subjects participating in the action and in the study itself. In that way the lifeworld was taken into account rather than the system, agents rather than structures, and subjects rather than the scientific community. However, for example, a White university professor researching Roma families who are socially and academically excluded will never be able to be one of them. This professor, however, can create an egalitarian dialogue with these Roma in order to study their situation, taking into account the fact that in such dialogue he/she is responsible for contributing the knowledge accumulated by the scientific community on the topic.

There is a connecting line which runs between perspective, the concept of reality, how to become aware of it, methodology and research modes. The positivist perspective has an objectivist concept of reality, in which scientific statements are based on objective realities, using a quantitative methodology (with quantitative data collection techniques which are reflected by test related tools, objective tests, scales to measure, systematic observation, and closed questionnaires etc). These are specifically carried out through experimental research methods, quasi-experimental methods and non-experimental methods. The interpretative or comprehensive perspective has a constructivist concept of reality, using scientific statements which are a social construction, based on a qualitative methodology (with qualitative data collection techniques which are manifested in strategies like interviews, focus groups, and participatory or non-participatory observations etc). It is embodied by research methods such as narrative-biographic, ethnographic, grounded theory, phenomenology and/or phenomenography, ethnomethodology and, to a large extent, to case studies. The socio-critical perspective has a critical concept of reality (historical structures) in which scientific statements are the product of dialectics, using a socio-critical methodology (with quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques) which are materialised through research methods such as some evaluative-participatory research and research action in its diverse forms. The critical communicative perspective has a communicative concept of reality in which scientific statements are the product of dialogue. It uses a critical communicative methodology, with data collection and analysis techniques which have a communicative orientation; in that way, the research method is specifically carried out through critical communicative research. This type of research is one which, to a greater or a lesser extent, is organised communicatively and based on the postulates of the critical communicative methodology (see table 2).

All of this does not mean that critical communicative research has to comply with all of the postulates and forms of organisation presented here at all times. The issue is not about to be or not to be. Research can be defined as critical-communicative if it uses the critical communicative orientation, and it will be classified as such more so when the postulates and forms of organisation which characterise it are further implemented. However it has to be looked at in the same way as egalitarian dialogue, as something to aspire to, something viable, although it cannot be fully achieved yet. One can see egalitarian dialogue emerging when researchers change their theoretical assumptions with the arguments of the participants. In the same way, research acquires a critical communicative orientation when, for example, the use of communicative techniques break away from the gap between researchers and researched, and/or when, for

example, social actors in advisory bodies supervise the fulfilment of research goals or the social utility of research results.

Table 2. Postulates and organisation of the critical communicative methodology

Postulates	Organisation
<p>Everyone has the ability to communicate and interact with others, since language and action are inherent abilities, universal attributes. People are transformative social agents who reflect on, discuss and can modify structures. Communicative rationality has to be used, taking language as a means of dialogue and understanding. The common sense of the people participating has to be taken into account. The assumption of the interpretative hierarchy by the research team cannot be accepted. The arguments of the international scientific community should be provided, and they should participate on an equal level to the participants, in order to generate dialogic knowledge which contributes to the development of new scientific knowledge.</p>	<p>Communicative organisation through various actions, such as the creation of advisory councils, multicultural research groups, efficient working groups and holding plenary meetings for the research groups, generates a context which is favourable to the development of the critical communicative methodology.</p>

