

# Communicative Methodology of Research with Minority Groups: The Roma Women's Movement

Sánchez, M. , Yuste, M. , de Botton, L. and Kostic Cisneros, R.E.

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## Communicative Methodology of Research with Minority Groups

The Roma Women's Movement

Montse Sánchez, Montse Yuste, Lena de Botton, and  
Rosamaria Kostic

**Abstract** Today's society has a dialogic and communicative base. Social sciences and social research have to conform to this base that is marking our society. Roma women are the protagonists of the transformation of their lives and their social circumstances through dialogic spaces. At the same time, a methodology that includes all the agents involved in a social situation can generate a substantial impact on social policies. We found that to overcome barriers to social transformation and work towards a more egalitarian society, we had to use communicative methodology.

*Keywords: communicative methodology of research, dialogic feminism, egalitarian dialogue, social transformation, Roma*

We are witnessing a major change in our societies. In reality we have been embroiled in a dialogic turn that affects all dimensions of our life (R. Flecha, Gómez, & Puigvert, 2003). As a result, social actors must engage in dialogue and argue to a greater extent than they have in the past and in a variety of environments (ranging from school or workplace to private domains of intimacy and sexuality), even resulting in a new way of doing politics (Ganz, 2009) and in particular scientific research.

The scientific world cannot ignore this trend towards dialogue that the different social groups have been claiming. In this dialogic shift, research based on hierarchical budgets and power relations, which consider people as objects to investigate and which are carried out by individuals who do not already belong or represent or take into account the multicultural reality, no longer have a place. This dialogical turn in our societies appeals to argumentation and rationality (Habermas, 1984, 1987). This leads to a demonopolization of expert knowledge (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994) and therefore has a direct impact on the research process. We highlight this new process, the breaking down of the traditional hierarchy among the research team and those people being investigated. A recognition emerges that the scientific knowledge of the

social reality has to be the result of an egalitarian dialogue among a plurality of voices that includes the group being investigated.

Incorporating a plurality of voices is especially needed when studying vulnerable groups such as the Roma because traditionally they have been excluded from scientific interpretation and the design of politics that are directed at them and, as a result, from the transformation of the inequality they endure. As Touraine, Wieviorka, and R. Flecha (2004) argue, when the Roma people are reduced to an object, the investigators are placed in a privileged position that is based on the inferiority of the subjects who have been deprived of their character (p. 36). This latter methodological perspective has reinforced stereotypes and negative images which, in turn, have widened this group's exclusion. If we add other variables on the analysis of the exclusion such as immigrants or women, the invisibility and therefore the exclusion is even greater.

Roma women are suffering a triple discrimination because they belong to an ethnic minority; if they lack education, that increases their limitations. Traditionally, the research in social sciences has reproduced stereotypical images instead of counteracting them. As a result, the Roma people, and in particular Roma women, refuse to participate in investigations that do not incorporate their voices in an egalitarian way (Macías & Redondo, 2012). Thus, dialogic investigations involving their voices to obtain scientific conclusions and actions can lead to overcoming their exclusion (Touraine et al., 2004). This does not mean that the research should only be carried out by members of the Roma community and to meet individual interests, but rather it should be carried out jointly and for the benefit of the whole community or society as a whole.

## **The Dialogical Turn in Social Science: Guidelines for Research with Roma Women**

Starting on the basis of guidance that the dialogic society claims, communicative methodology (CM) carries out the construction of knowledge through the egalitarian dialogue between researchers and those being investigated. As Sordé & Ojala (2010) claim, the critical communicative methodology has earned the recognition of the international scientific community as well as the recognition of the social movements and vulnerable groups traditionally 'used' in research because it combines the scientific background with the interpretation of social actors. But it goes beyond the construction of knowledge and also seeks the transformation of social inequalities (Puigvert, Christou, & Holford, 2012).

Therefore, there will be a shift from investigating 'a' social subject through communicative acts of power to investigating 'for and with' social subjects through dialogic communicative acts. Under the communicative methodology, the Roma have the capacity to universally reflect, interpret, and create awareness of their situation. Consequently, the creation of scientific knowledge is the result of having broken the interpretive difference between someone who investigates and someone who is investigated, where valid interpretations of reality are built between the two sides of an egalitarian dialogue. Therefore, the creation of scientific knowledge is based on one essential premise of communicative methodology: cultural intelligence, or the ability everyone has to reflect and interpret their situation.

Everyone is capable of language and thought; even those most disadvantaged groups may interpret social situations and propose solutions or contributions. In fact, if the research is based on this principle, it demonstrates how this creation of knowledge can provide more effective alternatives to transform inequalities in its own context. As a consequence, the egalitarian dialogue displays both the needs of the people you are working with and the transformation of reality by identifying those actions that lead to success (Valls & Padrós, 2011).

Many of the investigations based on the Roma community and on Roma women have been very far from the dialogic guidance that includes the Roma people and that characterises the communicative methodology. Occasionally, negative and stereotypical portrayals of the most damaging form have reinforced images and have been most harmful to the general population and particularly to the Roma community rather than finding new ways of overcoming these and discovering new paths to success (Munté, Serradell, & Sordé, 2011). One can identify three guidelines that have not only characterised the research but also guided the work, in particular on Roma women: the ethnocentric, the relativist, and the dialogic. The choice of methodological guideline is not minor because it has a direct impact on whether the research can transform social reality or reproduce exclusionary factors. The first two guidelines have had a serious impact on the opportunities for participation and inclusion of Roma women. Broadly speaking, we can point out how communicative investigations give us a more accurate picture of reality than those research methods that are based on superiority or carried out from a distance, which hinders the researchers' comprehension of the community being studied. Under this guideline, inequalities are recognised, and to overcome them, researched people must distance themselves from their own identity. For example, for a young Roma girl to have educational success it is imperative that she deviates from characteristic Roma elements and assimilates the traits of the majority of society, or what they call 'apayarse'.

Relativism ignores any scientific commitment to equality and social utility. It is part of the interpretative position that cultural groups are different and therefore to an uncritical acceptance of the inequalities, going so far as to think of them as proper cultural characteristics of the Roma people or of women's roles. Therefore, as a result of the family roles that are imposed on them from a very young age, it seems that young Roma girls do not have to attend school because school is far from their cultural model and it can 'contaminate' them.

To avoid this type of relativism, to transform the social inequalities of the most vulnerable groups and to be framed in the current dialogic perspective that the society demands, successful investigations introduce a dialogic orientation. For this reason, the communicative methodology exceeds traditional research and allows us to go a step further in the field of research in social sciences. As Munté et al. (2011) note:

An increasing number of Romani representatives ask for a continuous dialogue between their own voices and the established scientific knowledge. When this happens, the researcher brings into the dialogue his or her expertise and knowledge about the developments taking place in the scientific community, which often contrast with what the Roma community members themselves are thinking and experiencing. (p. 258)

The communicative methodology of research includes a range of organisational strategies that make it possible to include the experiences and the knowledge of the Roma women. It should be noted that communicative research organisation is based on the creation of different spaces where women can reflect and talk (either in meetings, seminars, or conferences face-to-face or virtually). To ensure that the dialogic process includes the voices of historically silenced groups, such as Roma women, there are a number of elements and conditions favouring the incorporation of the vulnerable group being investigated within the research team members or the creation of an advisory committee composed of representatives of these groups.

The Roma people are one of the social groups that are most strongly discriminated against in Europe (European Commission, 2007). Throughout history, the Roma community has suffered various forms of discrimination (imprisonment, persecution, segregation, attempt of assimilation, among others) that cause numerous economic barriers compared with non-Roma populations. This situation of exclusion is reflected in the different social areas: work, housing, education, and political participation (Fundació Pere Tarrés, 2005). For example, a Roma person is five times more likely to live in poverty than a non-Roma person (Fundación Foessa, 1998).

This discrimination and construction of a collective imaginary that reproduces the discrimination intensifies for Roma immigrants. This is perceived as a source of social problems for their social inclusion. Even though it is still a small collective, it has a disproportionately large influence on the media (Lungu Drom, 2004–2007). Crowe (2003) argues there are few groups in the history of Europe that have suffered from both the lack of citizenship rights and protection as the Roma have. As a result, the intersection of these two variables (the Roma people and immigration) that raise the risk of exclusion, as well as their specific historical, social, economic, and even political factors, indicate the need to analyse the social reality. And although the existence of Roma migration Although the Roma migration has not been that different than other migrant groups, the economic crisis has had a stronger impact on them because they have faced more discrimination and violence.

One of the most relevant investigations that has been undertaken in this research area is the Workaló project (CREA, 2004). Another article in this special issue, “Communicative Methodology of Research and Recognition of the Roma People,” describes the scientific contributions derived from including the voices of the Roma people through the communicative methodology of research. The Workaló project has had a significant impact both on a scientific and political level because of its methodological guidance for the interpretation of reality. On a scientific level, the incorporation of the voices of the Roma people has led to the identification of successful actions that have been incorporated in various legal texts by those who emphasise the recognition of the Roma people in Europe, Spain, and Catalunya.

As we have seen, social transformation is possible if the voices of the people investigated are included in the analysis. We will see how, in this sense, the communicative methodology allows you to develop this process to deal with both the systems and structures such as the life-world. In this sense, the research has not only included Roma people on the research team, but the project has also formed an advisory committee (Gómez, Latorre, Sánchez, & R. Flecha, 2006) that has contributed to the achievement of results as well as to the identification of policy guidance (Munté et al., 2011).

## **Impact of the Communicative Methodology of Research on the Transformation of Roma Women**

In Europe, there have been significant changes in the fight against discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, religion, or culture. The growing cultural diversity is a result,

largely, of international migration that demands recognition. In this sense, the network of European Roma associations has achieved recognition for their cultural specificity through a wide range of European policies. The Roma people need investigations to be based on scientific evidence and therefore to measure where efficiency is linked to greater equity.

However, Martin (2006) argues there is a gender bias within the legislative field. Adding gender to the study of cultural groups is rather recent. Pessar and Mahler (2003) indicate that the predominance of a male-dominated analysis of migration has silenced some migratory realities. Including gender in the analysis and the development of policies promotes the understanding of the various transnational migrant flows because because gender influences migratory decisions, such as where to migrate, when to migrate, who migrates, and the family reorganisation these decisions cause.

Given these difficulties of connection between the legislation and other elements of the public sphere about the reality of migrant women, scientific literature points out the need to incorporate the voice of vulnerable groups in analysis to break with the interpretative hegemony that prioritises the white heterosexual masculine vision (Loftus, 2008). Loftus argues the analysis of exclusion has focused on social class and ignored ethnicity or gender. Another element that structures societies is education, through which gender and ethnicity are also reflected. Ueno (2009) exposes that pupils are more motivated to learn if a school relies on the presence of members of their own community – both within the peer group and teachers. In this way, Roma families project the future of their community through the opportunities given to their children. They are aware that the possibility of getting out of social exclusion is greater with better educational preparation for their children.

Consequently, Roma, and Roma women in particular, have developed a series of strategies to promote their culture and identity that are recognised in an institutional form and throughout the course of daily life. Thus, the Roma community is calling for the equal participation of women in society but without losing their identity, as the Workaló project has helped to promote transformation in different areas such as education, housing, work, and policy. It has also demonstrated that there are Roma people, both immigrant and indigenous, who act as positive role models for the rest of the community. It is possible to emphasise certain strategies implemented by the Roma community that reduce the risk of social exclusion.

Social networks among relatives and members of the community help and have a great relevance in the process of educational development of the immigrant Roma

people. The creation of social networks between immigrant Roma people, both formal and informal, enables the transmission of information, either in spaces that are created by associations or in a circumstantial fashion, like for example, when school starts. Given that the quality of education is a subject that concerns us and one that generates great interest among the collective, these networks aid dialogue and the exchange of knowledge, not only on an educational level but also on a social and cultural one.

Contrary to the results produced by those exclusionary investigations, access to the market allows us to break with the dependence on social security benefits as well as there being a rejection on behalf of the Roma community to rely on them. It is possible to see from the example set by Roma women that they have developed various strategies to gain access to the formal market and break with the dependency on the economic benefits linked with social welfare. The process of change that the Roma women are carrying out, both within their community and in mainstream society, encourages access to different social spaces. From a perspective of the equality of differences, you can convert it to a more egalitarian social movement that incorporates the cultural diversity that characterises today's societies.

They are even making important contributions to their own feminism, such as respect for the diversity of life choices and the solidarity among women with a commitment to transform the community. This demonstrates how the networks that are created among women give support to any Roma woman through, for example, the offering of advice.

## **Roma Women Participating in the Dialogical Turn in the Social Sciences and the Social Transformation**

The dialogic guidance in the research and the CM directs us to know and study those in-depth practices that help in overcoming social inequalities. This is the case of the Association of Roma Women Drom Kotar Mestipen,<sup>1</sup> which in Romany translates to 'path to freedom'. As its name suggests, this association has taken the road towards freedom and for more than 10 years has been working to overcome inequalities suffered by Roma women.

In October 2010, more than 300 Roma women from different countries joined their voices in the 'First International Congress of Roma Women: The Other Women' in Barcelona, Spain. In this congress, they demonstrated a high capacity to lead proper projects on their own, to work with their family and community, and to contribute to the overcoming of inequalities. This congress materialised the dream



of the organisation's members to organise an all-Roma women's congress. The first dream that the association had envisioned was bringing together women at a 'grass roots' level – women without academic qualifications, studies, or professions – to make their voices heard. Roma women joined in solidarity and equality of differences in leading a feminist project. From a communication perspective, political impact is very important. In the 21st century, it is essential to incorporate the voices of all the people in a possible political intervention. It is impossible, therefore, to exclude Roma women from feminist debate.

The association's work has focused on dialogic feminism (Puigvert, 2001) aimed at making silenced voices heard. Communicative measures and prospects of the current society have allowed them to create spaces for dialogue where each woman offers solutions and ideas that can contribute to the improvement and progress of her people. The creation in the congress of a dialogic space encouraged the women coming to Barcelona to share their previous experiences and the work being carried out in their communities. They debated by means of scripts of work and with the support of educators and volunteers who had worked for women in the past. Those who could not access the information and communication technologies that exist today or those who had not been able to access the educational debate all gained access to it and not only participated but focused on themselves. The most important efforts were ensuring these women could participate in the congress and be its main protagonists. The goal was to include women who would not generally be in a round-table discussion or make a presentation at a congress. These are women whose lives are often interpreted by others and the research methodologies that typically do not take into account their actual participation in research projects.

One of the female organisers said: 'For the first time, Roma women from the street, who are never asked what they think, who go alone, without their husbands and without children, to talk about their situation from different countries of Europe'. They joined their voices to include their perspective and solutions and shared them with society. The combining of research spaces with the dialogue makes it possible for an exchange to take place and generates feedback for the two areas. There is therefore a result that is geared towards the change of both contexts.

### **Conclusions from a Congress as a Basis for Change in the Orientation of Research Carried Out on the Roma Women**

Some investigations have been geared towards the demonstration of a social reality (the poverty of Roma people) or the confirmation of the meaning of some cultural

production in relation with Roma people (sense of unity or the importance of family, amongst others). The 'First International Congress of Roma Women: The Other Women' focused its action on the solutions and the union of all Roma women. The claim of equality of differences makes an important contribution to the sciences in general and social research in particular. The conclusions of the congress and the Declaration of Barcelona created at this congress are a giant step in the line of research to know the contribution of these women. Nobody can say that Roma women do not defend education and nobody can contemplate a Roma feminism that does not contemplate inequality; it will not be possible to speak about them without taking their voices as a starting point (A. Flecha & Oliver, 2004). In the Barcelona Declaration, we find these words:

In this Congress, we have dreamed of the future and we have built the present, in solidarity with all the Roma women of the world. We have the right to be able to live the life we dream of and we have the responsibility of opening this gate of change, of transformation, and hope our girls and all women who have not been able to be here. . . . *Together we can achieve everything.*<sup>2</sup>

## **Impact on Policies That Affect Roma Women**

Since the congress, Drom Kotar Mestipen has worked in the same fashion. One of the political impacts of the congress is that not only have many organisations and institutions taken an interest in the 'grass roots' voices, they have paid particular attention to them.

Throughout 2012, the work lines have been established in each of the member states of the EU in the National Integration Strategies of Gypsies, the first step for the application of the EU framework (European Parliament, 2011). In the aforementioned strategies we found the willingness of the different member states to include the Roma and an eagerness to work in this fashion using the approaches from 2012 to 2020. Women are one of the priorities, and we can find a common line aimed at including the voices of all those affected by the institutional interventions.

In May 2012, an important event occurred. The Open Society Roma Initiatives prepared national meetings with Roma women in Europe – the 'Strategy on Roma Women's Empowerment'. They called on activists to discuss the proceedings that needed to be accomplished and discussed how future strategies and methods of working together should be carried out for social interventions. It invited Drom Kotar Mestipen to lead the meeting in the northern Spain. The objective of the

international organisation was clear: to be able to hear the voices of all the women and include those women without academic qualifications or liberal professions who historically have not had access to such forums.

The work limits itself to the OSI umbrella where Roma women come from the Basque Country and Catalunya to debate what actions should be implemented in the coming years. This meeting brought together women of different ages, backgrounds, and levels of study. We heard first-person accounts of examples of social analysis, such as an older Roma woman from the Basque country who said 'we want to focus on education, which is our future . . . education helps people to be free. Fight sisters! This is the future of our children'.

From the communicative perspective, the main political actors in EU strategies arise from incorporating the voices of Roma women. Without the existence of the First International Conference of Roma Women, inclusion would not be possible. The conference showed that inclusion is made possible through the principles of communicative methodology.

## Conclusions

The dialogical turn of our societies affects all areas of our lives, and it also needs the scientific community to make a similar change to carry out future analysis. The Roma woman collective, which has historically suffered social exclusion and discrimination across different levels of society such as housing, health, education, work, and participation, calls on the scientific research community to include the voices of all Roma women. For this reason, it is essential to have a communicative framework where the scientific community, the Roma women, and the different social actors can construct scientific knowledge and re-create it in their specific contexts.

Roma women are currently starring in a major transformation of their lives and their social circumstances through dialogic spaces. As a result of this participation, they are directly influencing social policies. Research projects like *Workaló* have shown us that research based on a critical methodology of research, where there is a more rigorous analysis of the reality and needs of the group analysed, can contribute to social transformation and favour the construction of a more egalitarian society. An example of a dialogic space was the First International Congress of Roma Women held in Barcelona in 2010. The Barcelona Declaration and the conclusions of the different spaces should serve as a basis for the work about Roma women. You cannot investigate and propose actions for Roma women without taking into consideration their voices.

## Notes

1. More information on the Association of Roma Women Drom Kotar Mestipen is available at <http://www.dromkotar.org/>
2. See the 'Roma Declaration of Barcelona' at [http://dromkotar.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/DECLARACIO\\_ANG.pdf](http://dromkotar.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/DECLARACIO_ANG.pdf).

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## About the Authors

Montse Sanchez-Aroca is a professor in the Department of Research Methods in Education at the University of Barcelona. Her main research interests are cultural studies, the Romà, Romani feminism, and education. Fac. Pedagogy. Edifici Llevant Despatx 260. Campus Mundet. Pg. de la Vall d'Hebron, 171. 08035 Barcelona. E-mail: montsesanchezar@ub.edu

Montserrat Yuste is a PhD Fellowship at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, and holds a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Barcelona and master's degree in didactics of social science from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. She is a researcher in the department of Didactics of the Language, Literature and Social Sciences of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Her main areas of research are didactics of social science and learning sciences. Department de Didàctica de la Llengua i la Literatura, i de les Ciències Socials, Edifici G-5, despatx G5-105. 08193 - Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès). E-mail: montserrat.yuste@uab.cat

Lena de Botton holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales- Paris and is a professor in the Department of Theory of Sociology of the Faculty of Economics at the University of Barcelona. Her main areas of research are gender, cultural

studies, and migration. Universitat de Barcelona. Pg. Vall d'Hebron 171, campus Mundet, edifici llewant, dptx 12-13, E-mail: lenadebotton@ub.edu

Rosamaria Kostic Cisneros holds a bachelor's degree in dance and education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a master's degree in dance history and criticism from The University of New Mexico. Her main areas of research are gender, Roma, and social inclusion within the arts and the school systems. "Rosa is currently working for the Education Service for Travellers and Roma NATT consortium in the UK." E-mail: gitanadeamerica@gmail.com