

# Critical emancipatory research for social justice and democratic citizenship

MOLEBATSU MILTON NKOANE

University of the Free State

*This article proposes a research paradigm located within the respectful relationship between participants and researcher(s) towards construction of positive holding, interactions and invitational environments which privilege social justice. I outline power as expressed at the heart of any form of human society through communication. For analysing power relations, issues of social justice and democratic citizenship become central. This article also demonstrates that social justice in research depends on interactions between the participants and researcher(s). I further argue for the need to engage with the methodological expectations of critical emancipatory research (CER), using the power of language and communication. I interrogate and trouble the power of text in the form of spoken or written words or any other means of communication. In addition, the article conceptualises communication as a medium of expression between the researcher(s) and participants; the researcher should not be regarded as aloof from the conditions of the participants. Therefore, the argument developed for social justice and democratic citizenship is that researcher(s) should be sensitive to the plight of all participants, recognising their voices or experiences. The article concludes by acknowledging the fact that human language is a product of human communication and that communication is important for knowledge production.*

**Keywords:** Social justice, democratic citizenship, narratives, critical emancipatory research, power relations, discourse analysis

## Introduction

Socio-political tensions and inequalities in South Africa created by colonialism crystallised in apartheid and, boosted by neo-colonial and neo-liberal modes of governments, seems to perpetuate social injustice. One cannot begin to talk of social integration and democratic citizenship for social justice, if the means or modes of constructing knowledge are not socially just and if the research methodology and interaction with participants is itself anti-democratic in the pursuit of democratic citizenship. This has become apparent on the basis of how the researcher conducts empirical research, and the interactions between researcher and participants do not reflect democratic values and social justice. However, this must not be considered an unchallengeable pedagogic fact; this article conceptualises how research can be emancipatory for democratic citizenship and social justice. Part of the research process is the promotion of active democratic citizenship. The focus of democratic citizenship is on whether and how people participate in the research process; the contributions they make; the respect they receive, and the extent to which they, therefore, feel that they belong to and have a fair say in the research process or knowledge construction. The promotion of democratic citizenship and social justice in critical emancipatory research (CER) is complementary in any research process that investigates the living beings.

The issue of democratic citizenship and social justice has (re)asserted itself over the past years in South Africa. The reasons for this awakening are found in the democratic values and social practices enshrined in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (Act 108 of 1996) which together respect humanity. Conducting research located within CER is to promote social justice and democratic citizenship with the aim of showing respect to the participants; this will enhance humanity, social values and equity.

## Conceptualisation of critical emancipatory research

I wish to start the discussion by being provocative, taking John 1:1 (Good News Bible 1994:1504): “In the beginning there was the word and the word was with God and the word was God”. How do we interpret and make meaning of the text put forward by John? What does it say? Does it mean that God was not always God? Does it mean that the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us? Or should we critique when and where this gospel was written and in what language? Does ‘the word’ mean speech, uttered by a living voice? The text of John 1:1 has a myriad of interpretations; there is no monopoly on or objective interpretation of this text. The interpretation is affected by the original translation of the verse from Greek to English, proper application of grammatical rules, and the philosophical/ideological standpoint or paradigmatic elasticity of the reader.

This article will not respond to all these questions. It will rather tweak the text to provide an overview of how language and communication could be used as a powerful tool in critical emancipatory research. The article seeks to use the lens of critical discourse, because there is a link between language, power and ideology. If texts are analysed, they reveal the kinds of power relations buried beneath words. Discourses refer to evidence of political and ideological investments behind every text. In this article, language and communication are viewed as a means of social construction. A society can be shaped or created through language. For example, human beings and the material world are labelled differently to construct meaning from them. Language is an attempt to give the material world certain meanings, to distribute social goods in a certain way, and to privilege certain symbol systems and ways of knowing over others (e.g. labels such as black or white; rich or poor; able or disabled; first world or developing world; gay or straight) (Alsop, 2006). Through language choices, signification, discourses and power feed everyday identities. Critical emancipatory research (CER) assumes that power relations are discursive. In other words, power relations are exercised or transmitted and practised through language and communication (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In this article, I argue that it is through texts that we construct representations of the world, that we define and describe relationships and identities; no text is neutral; all texts are ideologically shaped by power relations. The term ‘critical’ in CER refers to ‘denaturalising’ language to reveal the kinds of ideas, absences and subtle meaning which are taken for granted in texts.

CER has an agenda to critique and challenge, to transform and empower; it is geared towards social justice and enhances the principles of democracy. As Patton (2002) argues, critical research seeks not merely to study and understand society, but rather to critique and transform society. CER has its philosophical roots in several traditions, among which Marx’s analysis of socio-economic conditions and class structures; Habermas’ notion of emancipatory knowledge, and Freire’s transformative and emancipatory pedagogy. CER’s purpose is to analyse the power relations or relations of dominance, discrimination and control – and all these can be manifested in language (Wodak, 1995). Fairclough (1992, 1995) theorises the importance of language in research and sketches. The words surrounding the faces are text on many levels. Words are sections from what we read in literature and what people say in real dialogue. Words in discourses present themselves as near abstractions, and words are manipulated into shapes of meaning and coded by interpretations. In CER, both the researcher and the participants are immersed in a quality of conversations and intersections as interpreted from their informed position.

How do we dilute the issue of power relations in research? CER requires total immersion of both the researcher and the participants as equal partners in the research process, so that all senses of perception and understanding are simultaneously involved to be able to make as much sense of the myriad of signals and symbols coming from diverse perspectives as possible (Mahlomaholo, 2010). It is through this kind of research approach that values such as democracy, social justice, sustainable livelihood and empowerment of relegated or marginalised people could be realised. It is about making sense of other people’s interpretations and understanding their world informed by their experiences. In CER, the researcher is not coding and calculating the number of words spoken by participants as a basis for drawing research conclusions or meaning-making. The researcher and the participants are interested in transforming their social stations to foster and advance democracy, liberation, equity and social justice in a manner that meets the methodological expectations of both the researcher and the participants. Research in this fashion is

sensitive to the plight of human beings, in particular those who were located in the periphery of society, excluded, relegated, marginalised and oppressed. This kind of research wants to liberate or transform and change the subaltern status of the participants. This mode of research encourages the researcher to become an empathetic listener, who is courageous, compassionate about the plight of the marginalised, and who should become closer to the participants to the extent of becoming one of them. The researcher should view the world through the eyes of the participants (Mahlomaholo & Nkoane, 2002).

## **Power of language and communication in critical emancipatory research**

In this article, language and communication are regarded as powerful research tools that shape our interpretations of the world around us and how others view us as individuals. Broader discourses and widely shared social meanings are played out in the language of politics, the news media, literature, institutions of learning, entertainment media and even in mundane contexts (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Research that respects and makes use of texts in the form of spoken or written words or any other means of communication presents an appreciation of the participants as human beings. I argue that it is through language and communication that the world carves in different ways. As a result, when a researcher analyses data, language is not perceived as an underlying layer of given facts; language itself is what initiates such articulations and develops them in meaning-making (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2012)

I further argue that language and communication become a medium of expressing experiences between the researcher and the participants. Acts of meaning-making are at the mercy of social constructions called words or texts, and people in various communities, to a large extent, see and hear or experience the habits of their communities through language. There are many ways to define discourse; numerous theorists, researchers, and philosophers have expounded at length on the concept (Foucault, 1978; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Miller, 1984; Bourdieu; 1991; Gee, 1999). Discourse takes into account the holistic nature of human expression and encompasses the material world and individual lives. Discourse is not only limited to spoken words or written language, however; it manifests in various forms and shapes in which human beings integrate language with non-language ‘stuff’. Foucault (1979) asserts that discourses constrain the terrain in which certain writing, speaking, and thinking can be done.

My position in this article is that language and communication are important in CER for the researcher and the participants to make meaning of the world around them. However, language and communication, while important, may also be used to distort reality through dominant discourses. The role of CER is to unmask such potential distortions of reality. Our understanding or meaning-making of the world around us is, to a large extent, unconsciously or consciously built up from the language habits of our communities. Worldwide, people have attached labels to the material world in an attempt to make meaning or to get a sense of the world around them. This implies that the same physical evidence does not lead different people to the same view of the universe. My stance is that discourses seem to play a pivotal role based on people’s experiences, informed by their social, political and cultural background. No individual seems to be free to describe the world with absolute impartiality or neutrality; everyone is informed consciously or unconsciously by certain modes of interpretation, even while that individual believes that s/he is neutral.

When conducting research located within CER, a researcher must take into account subjectivities that participants bring into the discursive act, while recognising that the discourse affects the individual engaging in it. A discursive act could result in multiple subjectivities, and the individual owning them could decide which one s/he will enact within the discourse (Alsup, 2006). In CER, texts in various forms, as spoken, written or any other mode of communication, are marked by various discourses and are directed by their grammar or interpretations towards different types of analysis or observations.

## **Meaning-making: Texts of cohorts of participants**

As many authors and researchers have pointed out, if the chorus of voices of the marginalised participants does not say who they are, other people will say it badly for or about them (Fairclough, 2003; Henry, 1998; Spivak, 1990). The voices or texts of cohorts of participants in CER need to be heard, read, interpreted and analysed from a myriad of angles. Then they will have significant implications in challenging the

dominant discourses and disrupting the narrative of the powerful *vis-à-vis* powerless dichotomy (Fox, 2008). Texts need to be analysed in order to create meaning from the history or social standing of the participants. It is through these texts that the 'being' of participants will be revealed and understood. The researcher will then be able to write the dramas of critical incidents that could change the world of the marginalised by valorising the participants' voices (Freeman, 2004). However, the researcher using CER should be regarded not as a super being, having extreme powers to empower the marginalised, but as magnifying the contexts in order to provide a lens, or mirror, for greater understanding of broad social structural issues under investigation.

To gain understanding and meaning-making in CER, one needs to listen to words. Texts should be used as a basis for understanding discourses and creating new meanings. However, this relies on interpretations that are often contradictory, not so obvious or subtle, and the researcher should be able to illuminate even the wildest or stormiest texts with serenity. In this article, I argue that a research located within CER must be able to tolerate these ambivalences. The research is based on how a society is organised around language, communication, interaction, excesses and surplus of power, producing oppression and exclusion. In these conditions, CER becomes relevant to transform and advance democracy and social justice (Mahlomaholo & Nkoane, 2002). Voices of participants in CER are a starting point, inviting interactions. The researcher(s) and the participants focus on the salient points of discussions and arrive at a joint construction of meaning in the context of discursive practices grounded on social structures.

Understanding how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed will inform the understanding of how a researcher works to ensure particular interpretations of text, the analysis of discourse practices and the social arrangements of which participants form a part (Fairclough, 2003). Fairclough suggests that social arrangements can be thought of as ways of controlling certain structural possibilities and excluding others. Analysing the voices or texts of participants offers a promising means of a better understanding of the link between discourses, discursive practices and social arrangements and those who have first-hand experience, thus providing a lens for social transformation.

## **Narratives as powerful insights into the participants' world**

Texts or words of participants provide an insight into their experience of the world. It is through the words of participants that a researcher creates a 'space of authoring' (see Holland, Lanchiotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998; Lopez-Bonilla, 2011) and leaves traces of discourses, positioning and identities. When participants share their personal experiences, they make themselves:

*... an object for another and for oneself ... But it is also possible to reflect our attitudes toward ourselves as objects ... In this case, our own discourse becomes an object and acquires a second – its own voice. (Bakhtin, 1986:110).*

Through narratives, people make sense of their existence, create and recreate, adopt and adapt, and engage in a full range of human interactions. At the centre of research located within CER, the language of texts is important and the communication between the participants and the researcher is crucial as they interact with each other. Narratives become a means whereby the research occurs. The researcher conducts the study through narratives, and the study produces narratives as a way of knowing. A critical researcher needs to consider the discursive practice, social context and textual analysis in which the narrative occurs (Lopez-Bonilla, 2011). It is important to note that narratives do not exist in isolation. Skinner, Valsiner and Holland (2001) take this assertion a little further and point out the role of other voices (i.e. participants) in the construction of narratives. The researcher takes a position from which meaning is made and dialogue is entered into in addressing or answering the participants and the world around them. Meaning is contextualised in social structural issues such as the history of marginalisation, poverty, exclusion, xenophobia, homophobia, and so on.

Assisted by texts in any form of communication, people are able to construct themselves through their relationships with others and through the eyes of others who imprint on their own gaze and positioning. This is a self that seeks the collaboration of others with similar experiences and expresses solidarity through collective action. Critical and emancipatory research is sensitive to the plight of human beings;

the researcher and the participants should become more human and more involved. The researcher should raise the participants to the status of equals, and examine the research problem through their eyes (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Creswell, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Mahlomaholo & Nkoane, 2002; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

In CER, the interactions of the researcher and the participants are not complex; the researcher and the participants ultimately become one by diluting the power relations. The researcher is and acts like a human being – the researcher should not portray the image of super being in the telephone booth. People integrate language and create new meanings through such interactions. Spoken or written text or any form of communication creates a new social order. Meaning-making or analysis takes place in the context of discursive practices in the textual and social context of participants. Meaning is contextualised in the process of creating and recreating the world by deconstructing the social order that perpetuated inequality or social injustices (Nkoane, 2010).

According to Lopez-Bonilla (2011), people use language and other means of communication to create new meanings and social relationships, and to find the means to recreate their existence. Narratives should not be taken for granted, homogenised under broad generalisation, or collapsed into deterministic processes, without considering the textual context, discursive practices and social praxis. Narratives are not an easy and transparent vehicle for the communication of discourses; a critical researcher reads and responds to cues in the text in order to find meaning. Reading narratives or texts is also a social process because it involves social relationships among people: between the readership and the author(s) and between the researcher and the participants. This process involves ways of interacting with others and gaining, respecting, valuing and understanding the feelings of others.

## **Defusing or diluting communicative power**

This article argues that listening to the voices of the participants is central to the methodological expectation of a research seeking or propagating, among other things, social justice, freedom and equity. Griffiths (2003:84) asserts that “giving the voice to the participants is just a kind of ventriloquism; or that hearing the voices of relatively powerless people gives relatively more powerful ones a management tool ...”, given the fact that there is more than one understanding of communicative power. Nkoane (2010) asserts that listening to the voices of the participants entails playing a role in the process of emancipation and social justice. Inevitably, this means creating an enabling platform for participants to own or share the air spaces and makes their voices heard. However, this should not be conflated with power residing in the researcher’s hands, because it could be misconstrued as if the empowerment is a gift of the powerful. Empowerment, in this article, is understood as something that the participants in any given research setting could collectively provide for themselves. The logical methodological expectations of CER are to counter the dominant discourse and create a space that will enable the participants to tell their stories. CER is firmly located in the Foucault theoretical positioning, because he challenges the hegemony or power wielded by the strong unto the weak (Mahlomaholo & Nkoane, 2002).

One concept that has been addressed by Habermas (1986, 1996) is communicative power. The concept of power relations in a research study that is critical and emancipatory is crucial, because undertaking a research located within the CER could be understood as playing a role in the process of assisting the participants to emancipate themselves. Excessive power residing in the researcher(s) will be to the detriment of participants. The theoretical foundations of CER require that power should be defused or diluted as a starting point to negotiate equal status with participants. Power is the mode of organising society. It is in this context of the exercise of power emerging from dominance over others that excesses and surplus power ultimately produce oppression and exclusion. I argue that research located within CER becomes relevant in these conditions to balance the skewed pendulum, raising the researcher(s) and the participants to the status of equals.

According to O’Mahony (2010), communicative power from the theoretical standpoint of CER that is striving for social justice and transformation seeks or calls for some kind of new mediation or consensus between the researcher(s) and the participants. Habermas (1996) argues for a communicative power that has

an idealised equal status, pointing toward future democratic arrangements in research practices that would be fully transparent, inclusive and reciprocal. In CER, communicative power is central to the normative requirements of social justice, democracy and equality; hence, it should be based on justificatory power. These should be the arrangements between the researcher(s) and the participants. Forst (2007) asserts that equal distribution of power is the most important methodological expectation in CER studies that seek social justice and transformation, for the methodological expectation allows equal relations of justice to be set in the first instance.

## Conclusion

I conclude this article by arguing that we should think of all communication, whether through language, images or sounds, as a means of social construction that shapes our communities. Everyday identities are constructed and power relations exercised and transmitted through language choices and communication, signification, discourses and power relations. Human language is a product of human communication, and communication is important for knowledge production. People acquire the capacity to have a relationship with the world by virtue of their ability to establish a linguistic relation to the world. Therefore, people's reflective competence cannot be divorced from their communicative competence (Susen, 2010). People's ability to speak about the world is interrelated with their capacity to reflect upon the world. Our critical capacity is embedded in our communicative capacity. Communication as a social construct is important because texts, as spoken or written words or visual communication of participants in research, provide an insight into the world experience of the participants. People use language and other means of communication to create new meanings, social relationships, and possibilities to recreate their existence.

The climate of dialogue is important in a research striving for social justice; communication and discourse play an important part in informing how participants in research can contribute in democratic citizenship. In general terms, the role of the researcher and the structures of authority during the research relationship speak volumes. This article proposes an emancipatory approach to research which promotes social justice, changes the social pattern of democratic participation, and treats participants in research as human beings.

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