

Creating communicative spaces in an action research study

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Abstract

Aim To argue that creating communicative spaces in an action research study gave voice to young mothers who may otherwise have remained voiceless.

Background Underpinning the concept of the communicative space in action research is the critical social theory of Jürgen Habermas, in particular, his theory of communicative action and the ideal speech situation. The author argues that in collaborative research, the successful creation of a communicative space is vital in enabling equitable and discursive speech to take place.

Review methods This is a methodological paper.

Discussion This approach provided a discursive space to participants who ordinarily may not have interacted, and led to the sharing of different perceptions and understandings that may not otherwise have been

possible. This research pointed to the possibility of the ideal speech situation, and the value of opening up a communicative space for researchers and participants.

Conclusion Action research for professionals is a sometimes messy and time-consuming process. However, it is a rewarding approach that uncovers layers of interpretations and understanding that have meaning for the participants involved.

Implications for practice/research The creation of communicative spaces has the potential to enrich nursing research because of its participatory nature, making it more likely that solutions reached will have meaning to people.

Keywords Action research, communicative spaces, communicative action, critical social theory

Introduction

ACTION RESEARCH is a method whereby health professionals collaboratively engage with people to promote and guide community interventions. It increases knowledge and often addresses issues of equity (Kelly 2005). The concept of the 'communicative space' espoused in action research is one way to create an equitable forum for people to have their voices heard. In this article, the Habermasian origins and process of establishing communicative spaces for participants to engage in collaborative discourse are explored.

Origins of the communicative space

To enable engagement with and between participants in action research, a 'communicative space' people can enter on equal footings needs to be created. Such a space is created when people come together to discuss a common issue or problem and reach consensus on

an action (Kemmis 2001). In action research, language is seen as intrinsically involved in interpretations of experiences (Sumara and Carson 2001) and group discourse helps to explore those interpretations.

The concept of the communicative space in action research was developed from the critical social theorist Jürgen Habermas (1970, 1971, 1981, 1987). According to Habermas' (1981, 1987) theory of communicative action, communication is always embedded in situations and relations that rely on co-operation in a common framework of interpretation; people relate to each other through co-operative interpretation of their experiences, during which they understand them. By this logic, Habermas legitimised lay knowledge and valued people as capable of acting on that knowledge. In addition, communicative action is open, free communication that is not imposed on by those with power (Godin *et al* 2007).

The acknowledgement of lay knowledge as valid is a major feature of Habermas' theory of communicative action, and speaks to the importance of shared meanings and interpretations, without which there can be no meaningful communication. In other words, communicative action is a social process, aimed at reaching understanding in a way that transforms the lives of those involved (Habermas 1981). It encourages mutual recognition and a sharing of perspectives that are considerate of others' interpretations (Habermas 1998). In this way, participant co-researchers are recognised as equals, empowering them.

According to Habermas (1981), the process of reaching understanding and agreement has a rational basis of common convictions arrived at through argument and reciprocal influencing. Communicative rationality indicates communication based on argument or speech that is reflective and free from coercion. Habermas termed this approach the 'ideal speech situation' and this was the inspiration for the notion of communicative spaces in action research.

The nature of communicative spaces

Communicative spaces are conceptual and physical (Singhal 2003, de Souza 2009). Conceptually, communicative spaces provide a discursive arena in which people's voices can be heard. They develop as issues are opened up for discussion through discourse and debate aimed at reaching mutual understanding and consensus (Kemmis 2001). Physically, a space and time is provided to enable people to come together to engage in discourse. This space needs to be mutually accessible and in a safe environment, to open channels for communication where none previously existed (Singhal 2003).

Such spaces enable people to reinterpret their and others' experiences through discourse. Reflecting on this reinterpretation prepares the space, in which accidents of communication may occur, leading to possible alternative meanings being assigned to those experiences (Newton and Goodman 2009). This collaborative reinterpretation suggests that there is a greater richness and depth to the narratives than would be obtained if this collaboration and group discourse did not occur.

The void provided by the communicative space has no time limit on incursions and all participants enter as equals with equally valid voices; there are no power or other differences. Being in the presence of others (Long *et al* 2000) in the space means being willing to acknowledge their experiences, to be affected and to be open to one's own emotional response – to be 'there' for others is to also be surprised by one's responses (Newton and Goodman 2009). This participatory self-reflection reveals previously held assumptions, which can be discussed in the group dynamic (Senge 1990).

Being in the presence of others

In a study involving mothers of preschool children (Bevan and Reilly 2011), communicative spaces were created. The research that this paper is based on came about because participants said they felt there was no space in which they could discuss their common experiences and concerns in a focused way.

A physical communicative space

Participants need to feel comfortable entering the meeting space. In this study, a space was chosen at a community college in a suburban locality not only because it was central to all participants and allowed easy car and bus access, but also because it was perceived as neutral (Singhal 2003). In addition, it was a space participants were familiar with and comfortable in, as most had either taken classes there or attended functions in the college theatre.

The room where meetings took place had a large boardroom-style table. Although having a table in the middle of the room could have detracted from the openness of communication, it appeared to act as a repository for emerging utterances and debates. Field notes were completed on it, drinks and snacks were deposited on it, babies were sat on it, and transcripts from previous focus group meetings were read and discussed collaboratively on it. It appeared to act as a communicative space itself, and seemingly provided an anchor for participants to rest and lean against. So, although at first it was a temptation to find a room that could have chairs arranged in an open circle, it soon became evident that this would have been a mistake.

Babysitting was provided for those who wished to have it, although a couple of mothers brought their babies to the meetings. This added a poignancy and spontaneity to the discussions because it was clear when listening to the tapes that a number of relevant discussions were started due to the attention on the 'intruders'. Rather than detract from the data, the presence of baby noises and mothers' responses seemed to add something to the family atmosphere of the discussions, even though it made transcribing the audiotapes more challenging.

A conceptual communicative space

To discuss creating a conceptual communicative space in this research, it is helpful to use interpersonal theory (Schutz 1958). This describes three stages that groups progress through to develop and function effectively: 'inclusion', 'control' and 'intimacy'.

Inclusion phase During the inclusion phase, participants are finding their places in the group, questioning its purpose, and asking what commitment

will be required. This can take time to establish so that participants can collaborate and enter exploratory dialogues (Treleaven 1994). During this research, time was taken in the first meeting to explore participants' expectations of a collaborative inquiry. The action research method was also explored so participants were cognisant of the reflective spiral processes of action research (Lewin 1997) and the part they would play in analysing their utterances.

Participants shared concerns about their children's nutritional health and levels of physical activity. This opened up a common space into which they could venture to communicate meaningfully with each other. The task for the group discussions was to reveal individual beliefs and practices about the subject studied. This meant encouraging participants to tell stories, share experiences, air frustrations and feel comfortable enough to react spontaneously and without fear of censorship (Newton and Goodman 2009). This 'reciprocal perspective taking' (Habermas 1998) helped each to consider others' perspectives on mutual concerns and perspectives.

Control phase Once the inclusion phase has been negotiated, the group enters the control phase, in which members are sufficiently confident to challenge others (Schutz 1958). The reaching of a consensus results in an effective group (Srivastva *et al* 1977). In this study, participants seemed to feel comfortable in voicing concerns about the challenges they faced, and affirmed the legitimacy of each other's concerns by entering into a communicative space that held a common meaning. They also did not always agree with each other on the best course of action and this generated discussion or 'argumentation' as Habermas (1998) called it.

Although 'argumentation' can be premature or unhelpful, in this study it initiated an exploration of participants' different approaches to parenting and practices. This generated additional data that may otherwise not have occurred. According to Habermas (1998), the ideal is that discussion reaches a 'truth', but this does not mean participants have to accept the same conclusion. It is not that consensus is a measure of truth, but rather that it can be reached through dialogue and will be grounded in reasoned argument (McCarthy 1978). Discussion and 'argumentation' are sometimes needed in a communicative space to reach a decision.

Mothers in this study did not always agree on the best way to provide a healthy lifestyle for their children. However, they acknowledged others' views, in turn leading to reflection on their own practices. As Sumara and Carson (2001) iterated, group discourse can be seen as the sometimes messy sharing and interpretation of people's experiences.

Intimacy phase In the intimacy phase, the group develops patterns of interdependence in which individuals' identities are confirmed and group members complement each other (Srivastva *et al* 1977). These identities are located in people's social situations or lives, and lay knowledge is shared and understood and can be articulated by each group member (Wicks and Reason 2009). Participants encourage each other and contribute to conversations in sympathetic ways, while also sharing a commonality in the problem being discussed.

For a communicative space to be fully functional, group discourse needs to develop in a way that complements each member and confirms people's identities (Srivastva *et al* 1977). In this way, the experiences and perceptions of each member and the group identity are articulated and confirmed (Wicks and Reason 2009). Groups in the later stages of this phase may express a sense of shared identity by arranging to meet outside the groups (Baker Collins 2005). Many participants arranged to meet for coffee or exchange emails after the group meetings ended. Some seemed to make friends during the process, and wanted to continue to receive and provide the support this afforded.

At the end of the research, participants felt that the discussions enabled their voices to be heard. As one stated: 'I like the way this was done, you know, the groups and all that, and wanting to know what I think. I feel listened to and also learned from the others [mothers]. I have done research, wow.' Others agreed: 'I feel a part of this whole process' and 'I know that the results from this have been decided by us.'

Discussion

The creation of a communicative space in action research is vital to the success of the collaboration with participant co-researchers, which is the remit of any action research project. In this study, the creation of the communicative space into which the mothers ventured to share their viewpoints and experiences appeared to provide the platform they needed for their utterances to be valued.

The idea of being a co-researcher is alien to most people (Wicks and Reason 2009), with most participants in research studies providing information and having no say in the direction of the research or in how data are interpreted. Participants in this study needed time to learn their role of co-researcher, and to feel confident enough to be able to critique recorded dialogue and challenge the interpretations tentatively assigned by the researcher. However, with gentle encouragement, they became adept at exploring the dialogue of each group and assigning a collective meaning to it, which speaks to the success of the communicative space that was created.

This research pointed to the possibility of the ideal dialogue; one reflective and free from coercion (Habermas 1981). Occasionally, participants disagreed on what was best for their children. However, all said they felt comfortable speaking up and did not feel pressured to agree with each other. The freedom to express themselves during group discussions speaks to the communicative space opened up by action research (Kemmis 2001, Reason 2004). The communicative space evident in this research demonstrated the interactive nature of action research. Moreover, it led to the sharing of different perceptions and understandings that may not otherwise have been possible.

The opening-up of a communicative space in action research is made possible by the interpretations and understandings shared by participants. Mothers in this study had common 'situation definitions' (Habermas 1981) in that they were all mothers of young children living in similar situations. These situations shifted depending on the theme. In this case, the theme was that they were all concerned about the subject being discussed. People may belong to more than one theme, depending on their circumstances and interests, and these may change over time and in different places.

Shared understandings and interpretations are not always easy to achieve, particularly when different cultures and age ranges are involved. Historicity plays a part in defining shared meanings and situations, and for immigrant populations these may be different from the pre-existing cultures. Opening up a communicative space for people from different cultural backgrounds necessitates developing a common ground into

which they can venture to explore shared experiences (Fast *et al* 2009).

Similarly, when involving children in action research projects, opening up communicative spaces for them allows their voices to be heard and encourages the view that children are 'collaborative change agents in the setting and contexts of their lives' (Langhout and Thomas 2010). Future research with people from different cultures and with children may add to our understanding of the value of communicative spaces in action research.

Conclusion

The communicative spaces that were opened up in this action research required the researcher to engage mothers of preschool children collaboratively. According to Habermas (1974), 'in a process of enlightenment, there can be only participants'. This attests to the importance of participation in enlightening participants and the professional community, which also benefits from the knowledge and insights obtained.

Action research is not necessarily a comfortable place for health professionals to be, as it is sometimes messy and time consuming. It requires researchers to establish a communicative space and largely hand over control of the research to participants. However, it is a rewarding approach that uncovers layers of interpretations and understanding that may not be possible with other research approaches.

It is a participatory approach that is beneficial to researchers and participants, and one that holds exciting possibilities for future nurse researchers.

Online archive

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Conflict of interest
None declared

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