Guest Editors’ Introduction: Special Collection on The Challenge of Social Impact for Research Methodologies

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Scientific research all over the world is currently experiencing a major revolution due to the prioritization of social impact. The dialogue turn in society is making the Human Right to science and scientific participation an increasing reality, with more and more citizens demanding that research be directed at improving their lives. Today, social impact is not only a priority for many researchers, but it is a requirement in many research funding programmes (Sordé Martí et al., 2020). The European Commission’s Framework Programme of Research, for instance, demands that all projects financed by it show the expected or achieved impacts resulting from the research, and to achieve such impacts co-creation with citizens is necessary (van den Besselaar et al., 2018). This shift towards prioritising society and the improvement of all citizens’ lives demands that researchers change the focus of their research, mainly within social sciences and humanities (Aiello et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2020).

Prioritizing social impact poses a series of methodological challenges that the scientific literature has not addressed until now. Researchers have become aware that the methodological contributions from the past, while having provided important advancements in scientific knowledge and evidence, are not enough to promote social impact and, therefore, need to be modified and refocused towards achieving social improvements. The current shift in research methodologies advances a more democratic science, increasing citizens’ and organizations’ importance and engagement in science, improving and increasing the quality of scientific contributions. Nevertheless, this move towards relevance will be undermined if we do not make the corresponding methodological changes required to enable the demanded social improvements. The priority today, therefore, is to develop and implement methods which allow researchers to grasp and promote social impact.

This is precisely the task that this special collection has undertaken. The extraordinary articles that comprise this special collection make highly relevant contributions to the ways in which research methods in the social sciences are being modified when researchers prioritize achieving results that will improve all citizens’ lives, especially those of the most vulnerable communities. In all, this special collection is formed by 15 articles characterized by diversity while having one element in common: how searching for social impact is transforming research methodologies. The authors of these 15 articles work in different universities from a variety of countries (Spain, USA, Mexico, UK, Finland, Canada), disciplines (sociology, education, social work, gender studies, economy, social media studies, geography) and academic levels (from PhD students to tenured or full professors). Six of those articles present empirical research, using qualitative and mixed methods. Three articles conduct literature reviews, and those articles present empirical research, using qualitative and mixed methods. Three articles conduct literature reviews, and five present the methodological designs of different Research and Development projects. One article presents a theoretical contribution.

As these 15 articles show, introducing social impact in the scientific research modifies the methodology itself. The articles that make up this special collection make extraordinary contributions on how prioritizing social impact in research has promoted a series of modifications in different research methodologies and techniques, showing the ways in which such methodologies are serving humanity and improving citizens’ lives.

The bulk of the articles present research with vulnerable communities. In the article Transformative Research Methods to Increase Social Impact for Vulnerable Groups and Cultural Minorities, Mertens argues for the need for researchers to apply a transformative lens in order to increase social impact by supporting actions that promote social, economic and...
environmental justice. Such a lens is applied throughout the whole research process, from its design and implementation to the dissemination and use of the research results. In this approach, engaging in dialogues with members of vulnerable communities becomes crucial, viewing researchers’ role as agents of social change, learning from social activism, and using specific strategies for culturally responsive inclusion of vulnerable communities. The author highlights the importance of researchers to explicitly address power differences, form community-based coalitions, and plan for sustainability.

In the article Social Impact Indicators in the Context of the Roma Community: Contributions to the Debate on Methodological Implications, Munte-Pascual, Khalfaoui, Valero, and Redondo-Sama discuss three methodological modifications that result from developing social impact indicators defined and established in dialogue with research participants, in this case members of the Roma community. First, the authors underscore the relevance of engaging in dialogues with the community to achieve a deeper understanding of the problem being studied, thus increasing the possibilities of achieving social impact. Second, the co-creation of the indicators implies including participants from the very beginning of the research project to select those most relevant to the community. Last, these dialogues enable researchers to better understand and analyze the indicators within the broader context of the problem.

Focusing more specifically in education, in the article Qualitative methodology innovation that promotes educational success of children of immigrant families in disadvantaged contexts, Valls, Serradell, Campdepadrós and de Botton make a methodological contribution to the body of research on the educational achievements of children of immigrant families, a scientific literature that has primarily focused on analyzing and describing their barriers to succeeding at school. Instead, the authors provide a methodological meta-analysis of three research projects that have promoted and studied the social impact of the educational actions that foster the academic success of children of immigrant families. As the authors detail, researchers from such projects included from the very beginning a category of analysis related to the improvement of academic achievements in three innovative ways: identifying the elements and actions of the whole community that foster or hinder academic success; analyzing how the grouping of students through the inclusion model improves academic performance; and focusing on family education and participation for the improvement of children’s academic achievements.

Often, in research projects that aim at promoting and capturing social impact, researchers encounter methodological challenges, especially when it involves the most vulnerable communities. Some of the articles of this special collection address a few of those challenges. Aiello and Sorde-Marti discuss in their article Capturing the Impact of Public Narrative: Methodological Challenges Encountered and Opportunities Opened reflect on the two methodological strategies adopted in a research project aimed at capturing the social impact of public narrative beyond its usage and transference. On the one hand, framing the research within the communicative approach, researchers included research participants throughout the entire design and implementation of the project, which allowed them to frame the research questions and the social impacts as well as the challenges expected. On the other hand, in order to grasp the social impact of public narrative, researchers used the social impact analysis criteria from the Social Impact Open Repository (SIOR) framework as a guiding outline on how to identify such impact related to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

In the article Overcoming Limitations for Research During the COVID-19 Pandemic via the Communicative Methodology: The Case of Homelessness During the Spanish Home Confinement, Racionero-Plaza, Vidu, Diez-Palomar and Gutierrez Fernandez addressed a different set of methodological challenges, in this case related to the specific COVID-19 pandemic context. The research is set during the first month of the pandemic lockdown in Spain, in March 2020, a moment in which most research was paralyzed due to the limited in-person activity allowed at that time. Putting their research at the service of social impact to study the needs of the homeless and the help they were receiving in that specific moment, researchers overcame the limitations the lockdown posed to the methodological resources by conducting online communicative interviews with individuals who were helping homeless people.

Last, Vieites Casado, Flecha, Catalin Mara and Girbés-Peco focus their research on citizen engagement in educational research, especially with vulnerable communities. The article Dialogic Methods for Scalability of Successful Educational Actions in Portugal specifies the methodological strategies that researchers have undertaken in order to involve citizens during the scalability process of Successful Educational Actions (SEA), that is, when implementing them in new and more contexts. The authors have identified such methodological strategy as a multidirectional dialogue involving not only researchers and schools, but also schools already implementing SEA and schools in the process to do so, as well as policymakers, trainers, and other members of the community. Such dialogue has three main characteristics: interactions are based on scientific evidence, they are based on an egalitarian position among all actors involved, and they are focused towards the improvements of academic achievements and wellbeing of all students.

Along this line of citizen involvement, even though all articles from this collection relied on or emphasized citizen engagement, being a key component to achieving social impact, two articles particularly focused on citizens’ engagement in science and in evaluating social impact. On the one hand, in the article Capturing Emerging Realities in Citizen Engagement in Science in Social Media: A Social Media Analytics Protocol for the Allinteract Study Pulido Rodriguez, Ovseiko, Font Palomar, Kumpulainen and Ramis...
present the novel protocol for Social Media Analytics (SMA) designed by the ALLINTERACT research project – funded by the European Commission’s Horizon 2020 Framework Programme – in order to capture citizens’ voices and engagement in science. Whereas most research conducting content analysis of social media leaves no room for a dialogic analysis and coding of the data, SMA requires that researchers engage in a constant egalitarian dialogue when retrieving and analyzing the data, allowing them to capture the most relevant topics in citizens’ online interactions as well as emerging topics that have not been explored yet.

On the other hand, Soler and Flecha present the first meta-analysis on the dialogic citizen evaluation of the social impact of research. The article *Researchers’ Perceptions About Methodological Innovations in Research Oriented to Social Impact: Citizen Evaluation of Social Impact* shows the methodological innovation of engaging citizens in the co-creation of the assessment of social impact, as it is them who can best tell whether and how research is improving their lives. The authors detail the three characteristics of this methodological innovation. First, in order to engage citizens in the evaluation of the social impact of research, it is necessary for such research to be based on scientific evidence that has been co-created with research participants. Second, the evaluation needs to be grounded on an egalitarian dialogue in which anyone can participate based on evidence and argumentation, rejecting any power interactions and impositions. Third, the dialogic evaluation of social impact in itself contributes to greater social impact among citizens, as well as to changes in the ways in which researchers approach interviews, among other methods, due to the new role of participants not only as participants, but also as evaluators.

A few articles focus on the methodological changes that allow researchers to promote social impact among participants in the very interviews. Two articles of this special collection focus on methodological changes in research on sexual-affective relationships and the prevention of gender violence. López de Aguileta, Torras-Gómez, Padrós and Oliver present a methodological contribution, the Dialogic Reconstruction of Memory (DRM), in communicative interviews as a result of studying individuals’ potential to transform their memories of violent sexual-affective relationships and desires in future ones through dialogue. As explained in the article *Dialogic Reconstruction of Memory: A Methodological Contribution Aimed at Social Impact on Youth's Sexual-Affective Relationships*, the dialogues that researchers and participants engage in within the communicative methodology contribute to participants’ reconstruction of their memory, which in turn provokes researchers’ modification of the interviews in order to analyze such reconstruction as it is taking place in the interview. Engaging in such dialogues opens possibilities for participants to transform themselves and their relationships.

Along this line, Melgar Alcantud, Puigvert, Ríos and Duque also focus on interactions between researchers and participants oriented towards the transformation of sexual-affective desires and relationships. In the article *Language of Desire: A Methodological Contribution to Overcoming Gender Violence introducing the language of desire in the methodology in co-creation with participants*, the authors show that to make such transformation a possibility for teenage participants, it is necessary that researchers’ interactions with them be based on the language of desire towards rejecting violent relationships and describing egalitarian ones as attractive. In particular, researchers identify that using the language of desire from participants’ reality rather than imposing it from researchers’ view, providing a space for participants to reflect on their own experiences and relationships, and the researcher’s role in facilitating these two elements, contributes to social impact among teenagers.

Nardon, Hari and Aarma discuss the role of the interview as an interventional tool to promote social justice and transformation. In the article *Reflective Interviewing—Increasing Social Impact through Research*, the authors review cross-disciplinary literature on the ways in which researchers may modify qualitative interviews to propel reflections on how they think, behave and perform and open doors for change. As a result of this analysis of interdisciplinary research studies, four main principles arise researchers can take into account in the design of their interviews: providing participants with time to critically think before, during and after the interview; establishing a relationship of trust with participants, showing attentive listening and active empathy; inviting participants to make reflections, questioning and challenging assumptions; and supporting and empowering participants in finding solutions to their challenges.

Last, in their article *Sensemaking Through Metaphors: The Role of Imaginative Metaphor Elicitation in Constructing New Understandings*, Nardon and Hari describe the Imaginative Metaphor Elicitation (IME) as an interviewing technique that offers participants an opportunity for sensemaking and finding solutions to cope with challenging situations and times, in this case, during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the interviews, after participants expressed a desire or goal to overcome the challenges experienced, researchers first elicited current way metaphors on their current challenges and then elicited alternative way metaphors, opening doors to new understandings and actions. In this co-creation process, researchers underscore participants’ role and agency in crafting these metaphors rather than being provided to them by researchers.

The three remaining articles offer a variety of topics explored in different research with social impact. Morlá-Folch, Aubert Simon, Burgués de Freitas and Hernández-Lara focus on research on Mondragon Cooperative (MC), one of the most outstanding worker cooperative examples. In the article *The Mondragon Case: Companies Addressing Social Impact and Dialogic Methodologies*, researchers detail the methodological innovation that qualitative methodologies undergo when research focuses on the transferability of the social impact of (MC) to different contexts. Such innovation is summarized in
selecting appropriate research cases that have already achieved recognized social impact; selecting diverse participants in order to get a broad understanding of MC’s success from different perspectives; and shifting the research focus to the identification and transferibility of Successful Cooperative Actions.

In the article Egalitarian Dialogue Enriches Both Social Impact and Research Methodologies, Roca, Merodio, Gomez and Rodriguez-Oramas discuss the role of egalitarian dialogue in research methodologies not only to promote social impact, but also to enrich the methodologies themselves. In particular, the methodologies following the communicative approach through the communicative organization, data collection techniques and communicative data analysis contributed to achieving social impact in different contexts. As the authors explain, engaging in an egalitarian dialogue in qualitative or mixed-methods methodologies includes creating an atmosphere of active listening and empathetic understanding, creating a non-coercive and respectful environment, addressing and reducing power interactions, reaching consensus with participants based on argumentation, and providing the space for researchers to contribute scientific knowledge and participants to provide knowledge from their own experiences and reflections on the issue being studied.

Finally, Viana-Lora and Nel-lo-Andreu present a literature review on research with social impact shedding light on key aspects researchers take into account when their research is oriented towards achieving social impact. As the article Approaching the Social Impact of Research Through a Literature Review explains, key issues when taking into account social impact throughout the entire research process involve incorporating criteria of social impact, for instance from funding programmes, to identify the social impact searched for; defining societal goals in collaboration with stakeholders to find solutions; focusing on science with society, not only for society, following the approach of the communicative methodology; and evaluating social impact at all stages of the research process.

Whereas making social impact a priority of our research remains a challenge to date, the articles that make up this special collection shed light on the ways in which methodologies are being transformed and modified to meet the needs of today’s societies through science. It is our hope with this special collection that researchers all over the world will find the extraordinary methodological contributions presented here useful in their own research to fulfill all citizens’ Human Right to participate in and benefit from scientific progress.

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