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Potential of Participatory Action Research Processes to Overcome Epistemic Injustice in Non-ideal University Settings

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Introduction

As we stated in the introductory chapter, the main concern of the book is with epistemic (in)justice (Fricker 2007; Kidd et al. 2017) as foundational to a reflexive, inclusive, and decolonial approach to knowledge and for its importance to democratic life, deliberation, and participation in higher education (Walker 2019).

We make the case, through participatory action research (PAR), for an ecology of knowledge which is contrary to the epistemological exclusions

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that seek to conceal (even destroy) other ways of knowing and which looks to a solidarity reorientation of the relationship between university and society. This is because a key political goal of PAR has to do with the fact that it is typically marginalised people who ‘speak’—as we see in all the book chapters—so that the aspiration is for more democratic and inclusive forms of making knowledge and an epistemological inclusiveness. Moreover, the chapters show the many different ways in which people can be marginalised by institutions and by structural and historical factors, from agency opportunities and from valuable capabilities expansion possibilities. We also see what is possible when spaces are opened for genuine participation and a plurality of voices.

But, as we know, PAR in higher education is happening in non-ideal settings of epistemic justice. Therefore, taking into account these non-ideal settings, where epistemic injustices occurs, this book wants to show *how* and to *what extent* epistemic capabilities and epistemic functionings can be enhanced, as well as where and what the challenges are. This reminds us of the importance of social, historical, and personal conversion factors and how they can constrain or boost the expansion of capabilities and functionings. Also, we are particularly interested in exploring *whose* capabilities and functionings are being augmented. This is critical for talking about epistemic injustice from a decolonial approach. Finally, we are interested to see how the different experiences highlighted in this book could contribute to refining the main theories that underline this book in three directions: (1) epistemic capabilities and functionings and their relations with epistemic injustice, (2) key dimensions of participatory action research, and (3) the decolonial approach.

Reasoning on what is outlined above, the structure of this chapter is as follows: the first section will draw on how the different examples show us which capabilities and functionings are expanded through the use of different participatory methods and how these capabilities and functionings faced different kinds of epistemic injustices (mainly testimonial and hermeneutical according to Fricker (2007)). The second section will take account of social and historical conversion factors that can enable or constrain capability enlargement. The third section will propose a different contribution to theory in an attempt to bring theory and practice together. We are aware that none of the chapters speaks to all these

elements, but their compilation can provide an original and context-situated overview of the possibilities of practising epistemic justice in global South and global North higher education settings.

PAR Methods That Expand Epistemic Capabilities and Functionings

The eight chapters of the book offer a variety of examples of how PAR can expand epistemic capabilities in three different ambits of university performance: policy making, teaching, and research. We consider the eight examples as part of the broad PAR family, although not all of them are strictly research processes as far as these are commonly understood. More importantly, the projects discussed all use an inclusive understanding of participation, involving non-traditional knowledge producers, and have an action purpose related to increased human development and capability expansion, through the production of relevant epistemic materials. In this way we consider all the examples as PAR initiatives.

Policy Making

The chapter by Diana Velasco and Alejandra Boni shows how building a capabilities list for the Colombian University of Ibagué to inspire university policy allowed different pedagogical encounters (Walker 2019). The development of the list involved 124 people in a first phase for constructing a capabilities list and 117 people in a second phase aimed at validating the list. This example shows, as well, an array of different creative participatory methods (such as the gallery of capabilities) that intended to foster the aspiration capability of all people involved.

Unusually for current higher education and the neoliberal trend, this process has expanded the epistemic capability of the participants in different moments, challenging testimonial epistemic injustice in particular. Students, support staff, social organisations, and entrepreneurs are rarely called upon to participate in processes to define an institution's aspirational vision. Moreover, epistemic capabilities are also related with other

capabilities such as practical reason, knowledge, and imagination; social relationships and social networks; as well as respect, dignity, and recognition capabilities. Working together, these expand the episteme (knowledge) and encourage comprehensive participation. It constitutes a remarkable example of what is possible in making higher education more just.

Teaching

Sergio Belda-Miquel and Leonor Avella present an analysis of a social innovation curriculum in another Colombian University named UNIMINUTO. The analysis of the case shows that students' commitment to and in the communities generated various epistemic capabilities¹ in them. These included those purely on the personal level, with a less direct connection with justice (such as the capability to analyse complex contexts), to others with a strong collective and justice dimension (such as the capability to work together to understand a problem and transform reality). This case study suggests that a variety of key aspects model the expansion of capabilities, for example, the creation of multiple occasions and spaces for dialogue with communities; the formation of trust and good relationships between teachers, students, and communities; the profile, commitment, and experience of teachers; thorough planning; and the reorientation of assessment, aligning it with outputs that are relevant to the communities. Such key aspects might constitute a guidance 'grid' for others wishing to expand capabilities in their own teaching practice towards greater epistemic justice. The authors conclude that these processes have the potential to challenge testimonial injustice, giving greater credibility to perspectives and judgements of communities. The processes further challenge hermeneutic injustice, since the dialogue between local ideas and concepts and those brought in by students can generate new social meanings that allow communities to communicate and receive due attention and understanding. As with the previous chapter, this demonstrates what is possible in higher education and what can be done to bring about changes at the teaching level.

¹ The authors use the term capacities, but in our understanding, they refer to capabilities.

Remaining in the teaching domain, Lori Keleher and Alexandre Frediani present an action learning experience between a Western university (University College of London, United Kingdom) and a Southern institution (the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil), as well as representatives from urban collectives. They argue that the action learning programme allowed for producing knowledge, which was relevant for the participants. However, the context of violence in Bahia did not permit the programme to introduce violence in the discussion, giving that doing so might put community members at high risk. Nevertheless, they argue that action learning can also be understood as contributing an important epistemic resource to the student experience and the knowledge products of the workshop. The performance offers a valuable model of subtle and subversive change, even where a full emancipatory strategy is not viable. Thus, they submit that the community participants acted as virtuous and effective contributors to the learning exchange. A further interesting point in this chapter is the reference to epistemic duties: university staff, including faculty members, have special epistemic duties within the learning exchange. As facilitators they are the primary creators and managers of the epistemological systems that make up the programme. Moreover, programme leaders must make every effort to ensure that the knowledge products generated during the learning exchange provide a robust and critical assessment of community struggles.

The last chapter that addresses a teaching experience is that by Monique Leivas, Álvaro Fernández-Baldor, Marta Maicas-Pérez, and Carola Calabuig-Tormo. They present another case of action learning, located this time in Valencia (Spain). One of the most interesting contributions of this chapter is the idea of capabilities for epistemic liberation based on Paulo Freire's ideas. The authors propose four key dimensions drawing on Freire: (1) the capability to be is the opportunity to recognise yourself as a being with experiences, knowledge, and abilities to do, learn, and transform; (2) the capability to do is the opportunity to participate in knowledge co-production processes and communicate knowledge and experiences; (3) the capability to learn is the opportunity to participate actively in the learning process—it involves the overcoming of power relations between the educator and the educated; and (4) the capability to transform is enhanced by the capability to learn from other people,

both by the capability to do through the co-production of knowledge and by the capability to recognise oneself as a being with knowledge and experiences. The implementation of the capability to transform enables the development of actions and products that reflect the diversity of voices, knowledge, and practices and which propose individual and collective solutions to make visible, confront, and overcome social and environmental problems at local and global levels. The four capabilities for epistemic liberation are enhanced throughout the entire action learning training presented in this chapter, where immersion in the neighbourhood alongside vulnerable communities and social groups that take part in participatory processes facilitated by students plays a key role.

Taken together, these chapters focused on teaching demonstrate the possibilities that emerge when teaching is oriented to forms of justice and that pedagogical change is significant and important in advancing justice in higher education through capabilities-based pedagogical arrangements.

Researching

The chapter by Melis Cin and Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm explains how participatory video research conducted at one university in Turkey contributed to enhancing political capabilities and reducing the ‘political poverty’ of conservative women. Analytically, they employ Miranda Fricker’s account of epistemic justice and conceptualise it as a political capability (Cin 2017), drawing also on Bohman’s (1996) argument about political poverty. The project enabled the women participants to contribute to epistemic justice by making their diverse and multiple experiences of gender inequality heard and discussed in a friendly and democratic environment of co-production and screenings of the videos. Findings from the analysis illustrate that providing an epistemic, friendly, and democratic space allows the expansion of the political and feminist capabilities of marginalised women. They identify several functionings that students acquired during this five-month research process and that contributed to epistemic justice. These functionings (and the capabilities they extrapolated) played a significant role in redressing testimonial justice by recognising the voices of these women and inserting their voices

into gender equality claims and hermeneutical injustice, as they were able to talk about their experiences and make their stories and values known.

The chapter by Melanie Walker and Mikateko Mathebula explores the possibilities for fostering narrative capabilities (Watts 2008) as foundational to greater epistemic justice, focusing on how students experienced and reflected on their knowledge of exclusions and inclusions. Their project, based in South Africa, combined photo-stories with critical and shared reflections by participants, aimed at the expansion of epistemic capability through narrative and storytelling capabilities. Components of this narrative capability formation can be found in four capabilities and their corresponding functionings: (1) an intersecting narrative capability, (2) self-recognition, (3) mutual recognition and relationships, and (4) creative and critical skills and knowledge of inclusion and exclusion. Photovoice enabled greater testimonial justice by going beyond prejudice and silencing of black, largely rural low-income students and hermeneutic justice—to some extent—in challenging structures which ‘invisibilise’ these students in the university. As with the accounts of teaching, they argue that micro-level change through being heard and telling one’s own story matters greatly, even if there are real limits to change at the meso and macro levels.

Remaining in South Africa, Carmen Martínez-Vargas discusses the importance of overcoming what she conceptualises as ‘colonial conversion factors’ in PAR (see next section). She presents a set of five principles, which she names Democratic Capability Research (DRC), to remind practitioners of the critical points when using participatory research processes with communities or groups, especially in the global South. These principles are:

1. Injustice as an initial issue. Injustice(s) should be the foundational issue(s), which means that ‘injustice’ is not framed by the ‘facilitator’ but embraces a multiplicity of understandings of injustices according to the members involved.
2. Internal and/or external epistemic diversity (ecology of knowledges)—promotion of different knowledges throughout the research process.
3. The voiceless as knowledge creators. The participants involved represent collectives excluded from validated knowledge production pro-

- cesses, which does not mean that they do not create knowledge in their own frames or use validated sources of knowledge.
4. Uncertain horizon. This involves flexibility; it is desirable to promote and conserve an uncertain horizon able to transform what comes next through the constant democratic dialogue and decision-making of the research group.
 5. Lastly, DCR as a platform to expand participants' capabilities. These principles were articulated in a DCR project at the University of the Free State involving 12 students of different backgrounds.

Finally, the chapter by Tendayi Marovah and Faith Mkwanzani presents an innovative and creative technique of graffiti on board to enhance inclusion and enable marginalised Tonga youth in northern Zimbabwe to participate in a PAR project. The use of art created an opportunity for youth to express their feelings, experiences, and aspirations for them as individuals, as well as their aspirations as part of a community. Most importantly, it emerged that the youth wanted to be recognised and be seen as part of broader society, with capabilities and aspirations. The authors remark how PAR enhances collective capabilities in the preservation of cultural heritage and collective engagement. Moreover, they argue that, through the project, three ways in which graffiti and other art methods may be used to express social concerns were identified: (1) knowledge creation and sharing, (2) information dissemination, and (3) that it can act as an advocacy tool.

Table 10.1 consolidates the rich insights from the contributions of the eight chapters.

Structural and Historical Conversion Factors That Affect the Expansion of Epistemic Capabilities

However, these cases also show the limitations of participatory initiatives to overcome structural and historical imbalances that are intertwined in societies.

Table 10.1 Key insights

| Means | Epistemic capabilities |
|---|--|
| Capability list (Colombia) | Epistemic capabilities and practical reason, knowledge, and imagination; social relationships and social networks; and respect, dignity, and recognition capabilities |
| Social innovation curriculum (Colombia) | Epistemic capabilities on the personal level and with a collective and justice dimension |
| Action learning (UK-Brazil) | Epistemic capability (with limitations) and epistemic duties |
| Action learning (Spain) | Four epistemic capabilities for liberation: capability to be, to do, to learn, and to transform |
| Participatory video (Turkey) | Epistemic capabilities as a way to expand political capabilities and contribute to the episteme |
| Photovoice (South Africa) | Intersecting narrative capability functioning: self-recognition, mutual recognition and relationships, and creative and critical skills and knowledge of inclusion and exclusion |
| DRC (South Africa) | Seven principles to expand epistemic capabilities |
| Graffiti (Zimbabwe) | Collective epistemic capabilities: preservation of cultural heritage and collective engagement |

Firstly, Melis Cin and Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm (Turkish case study) argue that although PAR proved to be critical in the formation of an alternative counter public space as a response to anti-egalitarian spaces that favour dominant voices, two groups were sceptical about displaying their LGBT video publicly. They were hesitant about the reactions they would receive in a patriarchal society. Their display was limited to the other groups in a closed environment, and they refused to go public. The second issue is related to controlled and monitored public and political spaces. Students noted that they felt slightly more comfortable in showing their videos to other groups in a closed environment. Due to the recent shrinkage of public space in civil society in Turkey, many women self-censored some of the issues that they had wanted to raise in public discussion forums, although they found the discussion very fruitful and enjoyed the experience of speaking up for the first time in front of the public. This situation is directly related to the current political climate in Turkey and severe limits imposed on freedom of expression.

In line with the previous argument, Lori Keleher and Alexander Frediani (case study in Brazil) conclude that although community participants are well-qualified knowers with both the internal and basic capabilities to speak on the theme of drug trafficking violence, such discussions were largely absent because community members chose not to discuss the issues. Doing so would put them at high risk for retribution. However, the authors also present the case more positively. They underline how, through discussing enhancing education, employment, and other empowering opportunities and avoiding explicit conversations about drug trafficking, participants have strategically created, or at least protected, a space with the epistemic resources available for fruitful discussions that can result in (some) emancipatory change. This strategy can expand capability sets and ultimately undermines the greater oppression generated by drug trafficking and related violence and, in turn, the reducible epistemic oppression experienced within and beyond the programme.

The chapter that unpacked extensively the issue of social conversion factors is that by Carmen Martínez-Vargas. She argues that there are pervasive colonial conversion factors that have been formed by historical processes. These factors disproportionately deprive targeted groups and impact their freedoms negatively while giving huge privileges to other groups and affecting their freedoms in a positive way (Dussel 2007). The significant point here is that while in the global North, we can talk about social and environmental arrangements that limit a category of groups from the enjoyment of their freedoms, they are nonetheless part of a privileged global group, even where they may face inequalities in their own countries. However, for many—not all—populations in the global South, colonial conversion factors have significant effects on their freedoms. An example of these are the epistemic conditions that constrain indigenous communities in Africa from becoming contributors to the social pool of knowledge. Two main points arose out of her analysis of the students' campus experiences from an epistemic perspective. First, oppression through the lack of valuable freedoms is a major part of their lived experiences as students. This was visible through intersecting contextual colonial conversion factors in systems of meaning (cosmovisions), racialised relations, and colonial language, among others, that affected them in negative ways, constraining their freedoms but mainly their

epistemic freedoms. Secondly, due to these unfreedoms, there were many negotiations and adaptations in their campus lives and future projects in order to fit in and survive in this new system. Therefore, when referring to the university space, many colonial conversion factors jeopardised their epistemic freedoms and functionings mainly related to one central aspect, the new (academic) epistemic system shared among individuals in the university space that generated meanings and structures of power, conceptualising the students as mere receivers of epistemic material.

However, as the chapter by Melanie Walker and Mikateko Mathebula suggests, these colonial conversion factors can be challenged—to some extent at least—by using PAR processes. They saw the possibility in participatory photovoice to contribute to an aspirational decolonial ethics which might enable previously invisible voices and stories in a global South context to be heard and valued. They regard this as aspirational because they recognise that, while knowledge and university conditions are not yet propitious, following Sen (2009), they try for imperfect justice rather than not acting at all. In their view, advancing an ecology of knowledges requires not only the inclusion of many voices but, as importantly, inclusive, agential, and empowering research methodologies and processes to enable narrative capability. In the same line of argument, Melis Cin and Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm also highlight that the value of using PAR as a feminist practice provided an opportunity to those with less power to speak by means of the research. PAR may not always lead to greater change at a social, political, or institutional level, but, even so, the use of PAR can develop aspirations for more democratic and inclusive avenues for knowledge-making (Walker et al. 2019).

And, finally, moving to another case in the global South, the experience of the Universidad de Ibagué in Colombia illustrates the importance of social conversion factors to enable the development of a participatory process throughout an entire university. The ethos of this university, characterised by a commitment to the region and an understanding of higher education from a humanistic view, made it possible to propose and execute such a process. Another key issue was the strong support of the university executive leadership that led the process from the outset and gave it legitimacy.

Revisiting Theory from Practice

As we have shown in the previous two sections, the eight chapters provide theoretical insights arising from empirical research. One important contribution of the book can be seen in enlarging the conceptualisation of the epistemic justice capability proposed by Fricker (2007). Through the book, the understanding of this capability has been enlarged with the inspirational writings of Paulo Freire (1970) bringing a new conceptualisation of capabilities for epistemic liberation (the chapter of Leivas et al.). Moreover, the chapter by Walker and Mathebula has been precise in identifying the *narrative capability* as the core capability of the epistemic capability. Cin and Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm have conceptualised the epistemic capability as a political capability, while Keleher and Frediani have proposed the idea of epistemic duties.

Additionally, Belda-Miquel and Avella Bernal have shown a promising area of application of epistemic justice in the field of social innovation. They argue that the enlargement of the epistemic capability among students and communities has provided a new language and terms such as ‘visions’, ‘social innovations’, or ‘prototypes’. Communities provide their ideas, such as those related to local knowledge and with terms such as ‘food sovereignty’. In these processes, local ideas and terms may connect with those of academia and may be reframed and made more visible for other people to understand the social experience of communities.

Another relevant contribution is for decolonial studies. As Martínez-Vargas points out, although this debate is theoretically clear, we have limited empirical research investigating how we can advance towards epistemic justice through participatory research. She discusses the importance of colonial conversion factors that can limit epistemic justice in the global South, while other authors (see previous section) present their cases as examples of overcoming these specific conversion factors through higher education initiatives. In that sense, these cases showed how a critical and emancipatory understanding of PAR is aligned with a decolonial approach that considers action as a key component (Boni and Frediani 2020).

This critical and emancipatory vision of PAR is in line with the tradition of Latin American thinkers like Fals Borda and Freire. The examples in the book illustrate how PAR facilitates the investigation of ‘generative themes’ for the participants. As Freire states, ‘to investigate the generative theme is to investigate people’s thinking about reality and people’s action upon reality, which is their praxis’ (1970, p. 106). The collective aspirations of Zimbabwean youth, or women in Turkey, or marginalised students in South Africa, are powerful examples of issues that really matter for people and which have to be changed.

Moreover, all chapters make the case for the relevance of experiential and presentational knowledge (Heron and Reason 2006). The first one is gained through direct encounters, face to face, with persons, places, or things; the former orders experiential knowledge into spatial-temporal patterns of imagery, which then symbolise our sense of their meaning in movement, sound, colour, shape, line, and poetry. The development of presentational knowledge is an important and often neglected bridge between experiential knowledge and propositional knowledge (knowledge of facts) (Heron and Reason 2006).

Finally, all the chapters make a relevant contribution to the capabilities that can be enlarged in PAR processes. In the introductory chapters, we presented the idea of participatory capabilities (Frediani 2015) that can be fostered using participatory methods. This book provides a detailed account of one of the key capabilities for emancipatory action research, which is the epistemic capability.

Concluding Thoughts on Change

What all chapters have in common is presenting the university as a (non-perfect) site of possibilities to expand the epistemic capabilities of students, teachers, community members, and so on. From the collective involvement of a considerable part of a university community (the case of the Universidad de Ibagué) to small-scale experiences of PAR in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Turkey, through action learning experiences that involve students, teachers, and social organisations (Colombia, Brazil, Spain), all show the potential of higher education institutions to

challenge, generally, the wide and geographical spread of injustices that our societies are facing. In particular, they show how epistemic injustice can be addressed and reformed—in some way—for another university than the neoliberal version that still dominates in current times.

Through the PAR projects recounted in this book, we can reflect on change and how it happens. A ‘virtuous’ account would be able to bring about change in the context, the institutions, and the agents, all working together mobilising through key events and moments (like PAR) which might be triggers for change (Green 2008). But change processes are not uniform given the complexity of contexts and human interactions so that context, institutions, agents, and events will combine dynamically to produce diverse change pathways, as we see in these chapters. As Green (2008) notes, pathways might be cumulative and sequential, and close-up change may appear slow and even inconsequential in the moment but over the longer term may have significant effects (e.g. a different kind of university). We locate most PAR projects somewhere along this pathway.

Assuming the different patterns that change can adopt, we can also argue that PAR projects which enlarge epistemic capabilities can be triggers for emergent change: an adaptive and uneven process of unconscious and conscious learning from experience and the change that results from that. It consists in adjusting to shifting realities, of trying to improve and enhance what we know and do, of building on what is there, step-by-step, uncertainly, but still learning and adapting, however well or badly (Reeler 2007, p. 9). Imperfect examples of PAR can also be sources of an adaptive and emergent change so relevant for what our societies are facing nowadays.

Moreover, human relationships—so central in PAR—are a potential locus of change, so that developing mutual and reciprocal understanding and expanding people’s individual capabilities can contribute to change at many levels. In working to expand capabilities, we also confront and must understand social conversion factors, how they might present as obstacles, and how this in turn informs our development of projects and relationships in specific contexts of higher education.

Inspirational leadership and ideas can also be a driver for change (Green 2008)—we see both of these at work, too, across all the PAR projects in this book. As Green (2008) notes, there can be ‘demonstration

effects', whereby people's behaviour is influenced by their points of reference so that change, even at a very local level (a new way of doing research, empowering individuals, and so on), can be a source of inspiration. Such thinking and actions for and about development and human development is certainly reformist rather than revolutionary in so far as we are obliged to work within existing institutions and higher education systems rather than overturning them completely. On the other hand, we do not envisage PAR as subscribing to a limited reformist agenda of change with no change. Rather, we see PAR as sitting between reform and revolution in its transformational actions and aspirations, imperfectly realised but realised nonetheless.

We also know that neoliberal approaches in higher education are not taking us towards human development for all and, indeed, appear to be exacerbating existing inequalities. On the other hand, in this book we find human development ideas at work in inclusive and aspirational university practices, research processes, and policies. We need to try out new actions towards decent university and social cultures, even though they may be imperfect. Without trying we cannot know what can be done. Without neglecting macro systems, we align with Lori Keleher (2019, p. 42) who explicates a domain of 'personal or integral ethics'. Keleher understands a personal ethics as recognising 'that each of us [as university-based researchers] must deliberately consider our own particular actions and how we integrate our choices made in various spheres into the personal context of our individual lives' (2019, p. 43), as focusing on 'the ethical practice of whole persons' (p. 43) and as attempting to bring theory and practices together. Finally, then, Martha Nussbaum (2008, p. 1) reminds us that working for justice and human development demands of us a 'patient and persistent effort of imagination, analysis, and, ultimately, action'. We extend this demand to our research efforts inside universities, arguing for the legitimacy and credibility of PAR to contribute to knowledge and action towards change and, on the same continuum, action learning for evidence-based development.

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