Special Issue Title 'An Epistemological Break: Redefining participatory research in capabilitarian scholarship'

Editorial

In putting together this special issue of 'Epistemological Break: Redefining participatory research in capabilitarian scholarship' we wanted to push at the (decolonial) boundaries of participatory research. Our intention was not to make claims about a perfect version or understanding but rather to encourage a debate about how participatory research is increasingly included into participatory research projects, and how there is a variety of practices which may be more or less oriented to transformative education processes, relationships and flourishing. Therefore, this special issue builds on the developing literature on participatory research and capabilities (for example, Walker and Boni, 2020; Martinez-Vargas, 2022; Mkwananzi, Cin and Marovah 2021).

As the editors, we argue for an approach to PR which advances human development and takes up the challenges of decoloniality and the production of knowledge about people's lives, people who are too often the objects of development aid research even by well-intentioned researchers and practitioners. We unpack the complexities and tensions of such research projects through reflecting on different understandings of a participatory paradigm and argue for imperfect, decolonial, anti-racist, anti-sexist and transformational research that challenges colonial power hierarchies and relations and takes communities (often historically silenced) as the subjects of their own experiences and epistemes. Such research enables much-needed political engagement that can reconcile and integrate communities' values, agendas and worldviews into PR and mobilise a cooperative ethos essential for epistemic justice.

Thus, this Special Issue places participatory research practices in conversation with human development dimensions and epistemic freedoms conceptually and empirically to consider how (or if, or to what extent) our research practices can enhance the capabilities of those that engage with us in the co-creation of knowledge and can recognise other ways of understanding human development and human flourishing. We understand participatory research interventions as a way of potentially transforming individuals, groups, communities and societies through raising critical consciousness, promoting social change, introducing political and social issues to the public sphere, and even stimulating social movements, but more importantly, contributing to epistemic freedoms and epistemic justice over time to challenge one-dimensional depictions of stories and ways of knowing. In addition, international development researchers may sometimes unknowingly reinforce and reproduce knowledge asymmetries, ignoring the knowledges that communities possess or the limits on their own reflexivity in the absence of epistemic humility (Goetze, 2018; Walker & Martinez-Vargas, 2020). Therefore, democratic conditions for co-creation of knowledge from a bottom-up approach should be the basic principle of epistemic production, with enabling knowledge platforms for connection and the co-creation of knowledge, focusing on those situated on the marginal side of our global and unfair epistemic system. Hence, in this collection of papers, we aim to initiate a conversation to challenge methodological lines and to re-think the boundaries of current practices, but also the possibilities to advance towards more democratic, decolonial and ethical participatory practices.

Some papers reflect more conventional and highly engaging forms of PR, whereas some are more aligned necessarily with a less participatory paradigm given contextual conditions, but nonetheless still grounded in epistemic realities of the everyday lives of participants. This divergence indeed reflects the reality of a participatory paradigm in real life settings and reminds us of the limits of

participatory paradigms in more authoritarian and less democratic spaces. Whilst the aim of the PR is to democratise the research process, we should still question the extent to which it can create collaborative and engaging spaces when one is working in politically fragile and contested contexts.

Overall, the collection of papers engages with the nexus of capabilitarian-epistemic justice and PR research in their multidisciplinary fields of working with diverse communities and actors and initiate a provocative conversation of challenging methodological lines that participatory practices have experienced in our capability research area. The contributions collectively:

(a) Conceptualise participatory research strategies that are capabilities-based and can contribute to epistemic capabilities;

(b) Unpack the opportunities and tensions in participatory practices in context;

(c) Widen the participatory methodological and cosmological scope of the capabilities to consider open-ended epistemological grounds;

(d) Explore the ethical, normative and epistemological tenants of capabilities-informed PR.

In general, the contributors offer their analysis of different ways of doing participatory research to reflect creative, dialectical and dialogical ways of engagement, and confront a one-dimensional depiction of epistemic freedoms.

The first paper by Carmen Martinez-Vargas, Melanie Walker, Sandra Boni and Melis Cin, drawing on their own experiences in South and North contexts, offers a critical but friendly review of approaches to participatory research that appear in this Journal. Their basic claim is that the cosmological (that is the onto-epistemological, a term coined first by Karen Barad) is still

unexplored in participatory research and that epistemic silences and ontological silences remain to be addressed. They propose a three-tier structure of Method, Methodology and Cosmological level in order to develop their own original capabilitarian participatory paradigm (CPP). Readers are invited to themselves consider how these levels play out in the papers in this Special Issue. They further align this approach with the open-endedness of Sen's own capability approach and his conceptualisation of justice as non-ideal, messy and contextual, and hence able to accommodate other world views. Martinez-Vargas and her co-authors advocate for attention to the cosmological dimension in taking forward participatory approaches in 'genuinely collaborative research', even though they concede that in practice this may not be possible and as other papers in the Issue suggest. Rather, they suggest that we then ask which practices are more rather than less just. In the CPP, co-creation of knowledge is thick and deep; it goes all the way down in the research process; communities act as responsible epistemic agents and develop their own contextual knowledge-based solutions to development challenges. The CPP is 'against ignorance and for community cosmovisions' (which may differ from those of the researcher-facilitators), for 'decolonial praxis', and for 'pluri-epistemic conversations' which respect and value cosmovisions and an ecology of knowledges.

Following this, Perez Pinan working in Canada, presents a case study of research undertaken in partnership with the government of the Toquaht Nation as part of a larger research project 'Towards Sustainable Development in the Toquaht Nation'. The participatory research recounted here aimed to develop a gender-sensitive consultation process to support economic development and a process which they call 'Making Connections' was developed to facilitate discussions about economic development with Toquaht women's circles. James Tully's actions 'of and for freedom' – staying within the rules, confrontation, acting otherwise, negotiation, and building communities

of practice – for civic and anti-oppressive actions provided a framework for cooperative discussions with communities in ways which acknowledged histories and disconnections, while honouring people's agency. The perspective on economic development which emerged from the women demonstrates place-based, people-centred wellbeing in an expansive holistic concern for wellbeing of people, land, animals and cultures, while acknowledging historical injustices. Making Connections is offered as a participatory action research tool integrating method, methodology and cosmovision for working with First Nations communities in Canada.

Leivas Vargas's paper outlines a participatory photovoice process to foster capabilities for epistemic liberation of young people. The project took place over a two-week period involving a group of university students from the Master's Degree in Development Cooperation at the Universitat Politècnica de València (Spain) working alongside secondary school students from the Jordi de Sant Jordi high school. From the analysis carried out, Leivas et al argue that each stage in the photovoice process strengthened one of the capabilities she identifies for epistemic liberation and confronting epistemic oppressions of high school students. These four capabilities are: the *capability to be* is understood as the opportunity to recognise oneself as a being with experiences, knowledge and capabilities to do, learn and transform; the *capability to do* is defined as the opportunity to participate in processes of co-production of knowledge and communicate knowledge and experiences; the *capability to learn* from other people and contexts is understood as the opportunity to actively participate in the learning process; finally, the *capability to transform* is boosted by the implementation of the previous capabilities. The first stage of the photovoice process enhanced the students' capability to be and confronted the ontological oppression suffered by the students as a consequence of entrenched practices of the banking education system that oppresses young people's subjectivities and diversities and renders them invisible. In the second

stage, the students recognised themselves and others who live in the territory as producers of valid knowledge, strengthening their capability to make and co-produce knowledge. The expansion of this capability helped to confront the expressive oppression they suffer in the communicative interactions between teachers and students. The third stage strengthened the capability to learn and confronted the interpretative oppression of students in educational practices. Finally, the fourth stage boosted the students' capability to transform and contributed to confronting epistemological oppression, offering an opportunity for the high school students to express themselves and share their subjectivities and desires for transformation through collective action and intergenerational dialogue with different stakeholders in the neighbourhood and the city of Valencia.

In Ayhan Kaya and Ayşenur Benevento'spaper they recount a project which worked working across Belgium, France, Netherlands and Germany to advance knowledge production among different project team members. The team worked with self-identified, marginalised Muslim youth and native youth labelled as far-right. Their research reflects how a PR process of among the research team worked at two levels. The first took place at the epistemic production level. They showcase how the dialogical and participatory nature of collaboration among the research team (local researchers, desk researchers, intermediaries of the field and PI) were crucial in bringing the realities of the communities where their research were conducted into the epistemic production spaces to diversify knowledge and initiate a locally-rooted research process. The second level was engagement with hard to reach marginalised youth in these communities and enhancing the political capability of the youth through challenging the hegemonic structures epistemically silencing them and therefore causing political poverty. The carefully integrated participatory process engrained into the different aspects of the project shows the dynamic relationalities of research team and youth in communities and their social environments. This reflects a PR process

that takes place in the larger and longitudinal European Research Council project over five years with multiple researchers.

The focus of Nussey, Frediani, Lagi, Mazutti and Nyerere's paper is on how PAR could play a significant role to support climate justice. The authors investigate three PAR case studies in Fiji, Kenya and Brazil to emphasise the role of participatory research in prompting institutional and structural change. They conceptualise university capabilities towards climate justice as 'the resources, systems, relationships, values and organisational culture that shape the capabilities of universities to promote social and environmental outcomes'. Further, they not only bring our attention to climate justice but also use their large scale participatory project to develop a framework to help create the conditions to advance climate justice and transform institutions through participatory research. Their institutional focus highlights the importance of using the capability approach and PAR to deal with collective agency and structural transformation. Drawing on empirical data from the three projects, the paper concludes with a heuristic device of an institutional capabilities framework in which PAR might bring about structural and systemic change through three main requirements: (1) PAR needs to support a shift in focus beyond individual behaviours and practices to encompass institutional norms, practices and procedures. (2) PAR must continue to recognise and partner with marginalised groups whose voice and experience are at the periphery of climate debates. (3) PAR needs to foster 'relationships of equivalence' to influence institutional governance and wider climate-related policy-making processes. The point of this critical framework is not to ask what knowledge we are generating, but rather how knowledge is collaboratively generated if we want to prompt institutional and structural social change.

Mahmoud Soliman, Laura Sulin and Ecem Karlıdağ-Dennisdiscuss how participatory video research coupled with oral life histories of Palestinian youth has played a key role in addressing the structural inequalities and the oppression by creating a space for political engagement. The videos of the youth touch upon a number of issues around the cultural heritage of the community in South Hebron Hills and thus provides an opportunity for epistemic freedom and political capability. The process of participatory video and the public screenings, both national but mostly at international level, enabled the political social network and alliance the youth had formed and reshaped their political network, whilst ensuring their access to wider audiences to protect and disseminate the core cultural legacy of their communities. The authors highlight the critical role of the participatory processes of video production in enabling youth to envision how their cultural heritage is key to the idea of building their future, sharing their stories of being exposed to epistemic silencing and atrocities, and thus cultivating the political capabilities of coming together, strategising and building a collective for public advocacy. The paper analyses the transformational change that such participatory research can bring about when genuinely designed and delivered by youth. It further shows how creating an epistemically inclusive research process can equip young people as epistemic agents to counter the dominant Israeli narrative.

In the final paper for this Special Issue, Kosko, Dastin, Merrill and Sheth explore marginalised youth activism as it relates to epistemic injustice. Based on qualitative data sets from 10 countries, the authors canvas the capabilities needed for epistemic justice in activism. They too emphasize Leivas's four capabilities to be, to do, to advocate, and to transform. They identify six vital capabilities to approach peer-engaged research with an open mind and heart: 1) to articulate ideas, support statements, and deliberate across differences; 2) to reflect critically on others' and one's own ideas; 3) to be willing to approach others as equals; to recognise elements of oneself in another

and vice-versa; 4) to affiliate and empathize with others; 5) to recognize the dignity in every human life; and 6) to observe and recognise power dynamics between researchers and "research subjects" and between student and faculty researchers. Whereas the capabilities to be, do, advocate, and transform are especially important for youth activists, these capabilities apply primarily to peer researchers. Finally, the two sets of capabilities (for youth activists and for peer researchers) are synthesised in a common set of capabilities that together help to enable the dialogue necessary for transformative interactions between university-based researchers and community activists. These are the capabilities to be self-aware and confident as knowers, to participate, and to grow. Kosko et al argue that these interactions have important consequences for the epistemic valuing of both peer researchers and marginalised political actors.

The articles collected here, as seen, focus on the central issues of global social justice such as climate change, radicalisation, heritage and activism through the lens of capabilities based participatory research to engage with locally attuned policy and practice in an attempt to progress towards an imperfect account of justice. The diverse research conducted both in Global North and South in this SI show that decolonial and cosmological interventions of PR require epistemological reconstitution and confronting power matrix of coloniality and hegemony for perpetual progress, peace, development and growth. **References**

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