

# **PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH, CAPABILITIES AND EPISTEMIC JUSTICE: A TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

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Melanie Walker and Alejandra Boni (eds.) (2020) *Participatory Research, Capabilities and Epistemic Justice: A Transformative Agenda for Higher Education*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

This book connects contemporary philosophical, theoretical and political concerns to address decolonisation and (in)justice with the capabilities approach in development and participatory research practice. It makes important bridges between knowledges and experiences, covering philosophical and theoretical questions about knowledge injustice, education, and collaborative and creative research using community-engaged participatory approaches. The book converges different constituencies, going beyond assumptions that they should remain separate in addressing the three main concerns of: 1) the problem of epistemic injustice in real-world educational contexts; 2) what we can learn from participatory research methods; and 3) the relevance of the capabilities approach, using examples mainly from the global South. Fricker's theory of 'epistemic injustice' (2009) and 'epistemic contribution capability' (2015) concern citizens' abilities to contribute to knowledge have their contributions taken up fairly, becoming both receivers and givers of knowledge in hospitable situations of mutual esteem and trust (Walker and Boni, 2020: 12). Epistemic injustice is at the centre of struggles for liberatory and transformative knowledge, to 'decolonise' development and education by challenging and transforming how knowledge is made.

Critical development educationists tend to question economy and market-oriented approaches to citizenship, learning and action. Rooted in

largely non-formal, social justice-oriented education, development education engages diverse educators and learners towards broad objectives of transformation, while critically challenging social injustice. However, development education only sparsely engages with development theory's paradigm shift towards the human development and capabilities perspective (ul Haq, 2003). Development education's engagement with higher education tends to be limited to specific areas of teacher education and nonformal student co-curriculum, ignoring higher education's other major activities of research, professional education in disciplines other than teaching and the 'engagement' and 'impact' agendas. From the perspective of academic research, educational research and research about disciplinary and professional pedagogies remains a bit of a Cinderella. Questions of how research contributes to knowledge creation and social change, research practice and connections to social struggles and policies are central to the original motivation and mission of this journal. This book offers useful ideas and examples to bridge education, research and practice.

The human development and capabilities paradigm is concerned with how knowledge works to oppress or liberate, since it is centrally concerned with people's real freedom to consider and effect choices in a non-abstract 'real' world. Education for human development differs from education for neoliberal development (Jolly, 2003). Human development values education as an intrinsic good and desirable end in itself, but also as a means to overcome disadvantage and oppression and move beyond. Participatory research is a potentially transgressive and transformative approach to research that seeks to create less oppressive, more socially engaged and just ways of knowing and being.

Melanie Walker and Sandra Boni are important contributors to current debates about social justice, higher education, capability theory and human development. Their introductory and concluding essays offer an excellent primer to the book's three central concerns, while the individual chapters offer rich and expansive examples across different regions. The subtitle: 'A Transformative Agenda for Higher Education', recognises that

higher education is a far from ideal context for realising epistemic and social justice. There are serious limitations on what higher education can do to bring about a more just world, but the same might be said about all forms of education, or even all social movements for justice. As Sen argues in *The Idea of Justice* (2009), the world is full of manifest injustice. The non-ideal nature of higher education should not prevent efforts to reduce and prevent further injustice. Addressing higher education's specific role in producing, codifying and validating knowledge is a first step towards redressing epistemic injustice and bringing about more just arrangements. Demands for more reflexive, inclusive and decolonial knowledge are central to making higher education more responsive to, and responsible, for democratic and just social transformations.

Chapter 2 by Velasco and Boni offers an example from a higher education institution committed to a transformative human development programme focused on co-production and ethical citizenship. Colombia presents a challenging context in the wake of the 2016 peace agreements, with continuing problems of armed violence, economic inequality, poverty and basic needs deprivation. Agriculture and mining affect biodiversity and are entangled in continuing complexities of illegality and conflict. University stakeholders, enterprise and social partners came together to identify valued dimensions for human and sustainable development and assess relevant processes and conditions of possibility, enablement or limitation. The hope is that education can act as a capability multiplier to expand epistemic capability, practical reason, knowledge and imagination, social relationships and networks with respect, dignity and recognition. Participatory design enables typically excluded actors such as students, support staff, social organisations and entrepreneurs to have a voice in the process. Not all capabilities expanded in the same way for different participant groups and the authors offer a power analysis of these differences (51-53).

Chapter 3 by Belda-Miquel and Avella-Bernal considers the elusive topic of social innovation, a concept that originated in business schools, but is considered a new academic 'must' (60). The authors wonder about the means

and ends of education, turning to Sen's capability approach to align undergraduate social innovation teaching with community engagement, social justice and wellbeing expansion. Fricker's critique of epistemic injustice enters their discussion of pilot courses for a large, geographically distributed private university in Colombia, bearing in mind a mission to train 'comprehensive professionals capable of leading social change' (71). Bringing academia and communities together can create new meanings and connections, but academia's logics also bring risks and ambiguities. Instead of creating empowering social meanings, they may be introducing new forms of alienation, extractivism and epistemic injustice that distort communities' own terms, meanings and aspirations (83).

Chapter 4 by Leivas-Vargas and others offers a response to this quandary by discussing capabilities for epistemic liberation, employing Freirean 'action learning' as a problem-solving approach for a neighbourhood in Valencia, Spain. The project brought together different stakeholders using creative and participatory visual methods, engaging them in co-design, collective reflection and 'conscientisation' for change (fig 3, 102). Secondary school students used photovoice, intergenerational university students used participatory video, and immigrant mothers of youth used social diagnosis and social mapping.

Chapter 7 by Cin and Süleymanoglu-Kürüm also discusses the use of video in feminist participatory action research that fosters students' skills, values and knowledge to advance gender justice. Videography offers a safe environment to discuss gender issues, develop students' political capabilities, voice gender issues and bring them to public attention. Gender equality has been de-prioritised in the current Turkish conservative political conjuncture. Influenced by Islamic conservatism, the Turkish Council of Higher Education cancelled the higher education gender equality programme in 2019, claiming incompatibility with national cultural values. When higher education institutions fail to provide equal and participatory spaces, arts-based participatory projects retain opportunities for inclusion, democratic space and development of capabilities for political participation. Higher education's

potential to advance epistemic injustice is less straightforward in socially divided contexts and where the education system operates to reproduce state ideology and deter critique. The authors emphasise ‘one’s freedom to express political ideas and to engage in politics; to protest and to be free from state repression’. The absence of such freedom is ‘political poverty’ (171-2; Cin, 2017: 44).

In Chapter 5, Keleher and Frediani consider the problem of epistemic oppression in an exchange programme involving community residents, academic planners and architects in conversations about the right to the city in Salvador, Brazil, where violence and homicide are problematically prevalent. The programme built and nurtured solidarity, enabled community representatives to take on roles, and offered opportunities to interact and learn across different collectives and countries. There were hopes to challenge power asymmetries and open up possibilities to imagine alternative, more socially just forms of city-making (126). However, the authors noted silences, skirting around risky and sensitive issues entangled in violence and drug trafficking. Participants’ silence is related to epistemic oppression, yet Keleher and Frediani also explain such silences as contextual, subversive and potentially ultimately working towards changing unjust structures. Epistemic oppression constrains abilities to contribute to knowledge and redress unjust and violent conditions. However, a better understanding of this oppression can point to how such conditions can be mitigated by collective action, solidarity and thoughtful and ethical approaches to epistemic responsibility.

Chapter 6 by Carmen Martinez-Vargas reflects on global South contexts permeated by colonial pasts and neo-colonial continuities in her research with a small group of South African undergraduates (Martinez-Vargas, 2018). The capabilities approach to epistemic justice seems relevant to the task of confronting the legacy of colonial-racial hierarchies. The capability to contribute epistemically is fundamental to epistemic freedom, defined by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018: 3) as ‘fundamentally about the right to think, theorise, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located, unencumbered by Eurocentrism’. Inclusive research

processes can contribute to unlocking ‘colonial conversion factors’, thereby expanding epistemic freedom and working towards more epistemically just institutions.

The examples discussed are striking their use of creative and alternative media in participatory research. In Chapter 8, Walker and Mathebula discuss photovoice, combining photographic stories with critical and shared reflection with student researchers in South Africa. They explore storytelling and the development of ‘narrative capability’ as the capacity to speak and construct personal identities. Participatory photovoice is an accessible, inclusive method for low-income participants. Photovoice fosters narrative capabilities of self-recognition, mutual recognition and relationships, and can help to build creative and critical skills and knowledge of inclusion and exclusion (208). However, advancing individual capabilities may be insufficient in the face of untransformed structural conditions and Walker and Mathebula are somewhat despondent about this. While their project succeeded in developing students’ narrative capabilities, it was less successful at shifting university structures and power (211).

In chapter 9 Marovah and Mkwanzani discuss the use of participatory graffiti with rural Tonga youth, a hard-to-reach disadvantaged minority in Zimbabwe. Graffiti enables participants to creatively and freely illustrate, interpret, explain and present their experiences. Graffiti is both an art method and a research tool that provides space and voice to those who have been silenced. Through creativity, the project surfaced needs for recognition, concerns with cultural heritage, the impact that collective capabilities can have, and the importance of creative methods of expression to strengthen epistemic inclusion and foster social cohesion.

The focus on epistemic capabilities and functionings aligns the human development and capabilities paradigm, participatory action research methods and concerns with epistemic injustice and knowledge decolonisation. Covering policy making, community action, institutional change, teaching and researching, these studies point towards the importance of structural and

historical ‘conversion factors’ underlying epistemic injustice and frustrating transformative change. This volume is an exemplary exercise in theorising and praxis, revisiting theory from a variety of experiences and locations and rendering the capabilities perspective more accessible to non-specialist educators, practitioners and researchers. This volume was a gift to review, sparking deeper reflection around pressurised teaching and research under COVID-19 pandemic conditions. These reflections surfaced deeper critical questions about the sustainability and survivability of higher education, its institutional structures, practices and values, and questions of how to keep doing engaged, transgressive and transformative teaching and research in the longer term.

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