Participatory Research, Capabilities and Epistemic Justice

A Transformative Agenda for Higher Education

Edited by
Melanie Walker · Alejandra Boni

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"Alejandra Boni and Melanie Walker's marvellous collection assembles a set of highly insightful essays that blend the capability approach and participatory action research in order to fight epistemic injustices in higher education contexts. Highly congenial to Freirean pedagogy, the collection vividly demonstrates the epistemic and emancipatory power of participatory knowledge production from below."

—Julian Culp, *The American University of Paris*

"This is a splendid book which makes a significant, important and original contribution to the broad field of education and social justice in eight exciting cases of substantial projects which involve participants who have been traditionally silent or silenced in different global contexts. It is a particularly timely book because debates about what it means to decolonise in educational settings is intensifying, and it shows both practically and theoretically how spaces can be created to give groups with traditionally little voice the means and opportunity to speak, to be heard and to become knowledge creators."

—Professor Monica Mclean, *University of Nottingham*

"If our Universities are courageous enough, they will make the pursuit of wellbeing and social justice their primary purpose. To truly do this, however, Universities must acknowledge a plurality of knowledge systems, knowledge-making practices and communities of knowers. This requires a decolonial pathway grounded in accepting unjust histories, questioning and replacing existing unjust epistemic commitments and (as the authors demonstrate) building epistemic functionings and capabilities. This book shows us many of the ways that this can be done by exploring rich cases with communities in Africa, Latin America and Europe. A must-read for anyone interested in transforming higher education for just futures, grounded and engaged community research and furthering our understanding of knowledge and capabilities."

—Krushil Watene, *Massey University*

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Editors

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Acknowledgements

This is now the third book that we have worked on together. Beginning in 2008 when we were brought together for the planning of what became the EDUWEL project led by Bielefeld University and funded by the EU Commission, we have enjoyed a generative academic partnership and a warm friendship. Somehow, both seem important for the work we do together. With Sandra working mostly in Spain and Melanie from 2012 in South Africa, our very different country contexts have been a source of challenge, while our shared commitment to socially just forms of development informed by human development and the capability approach has enabled a rich and continuing exchange of ideas and practices. We recognise the limits of what higher education can do to bring about a more just world. But we also believe that higher education has an important part to play and that it can, and indeed should, be a space of more justice. In this book we particularly address this concern in relation to research processes, which we have discussed at length over the years and written about previously together. In September 2018 we began a discussion about epistemic justice at the Human Development and Capability Association annual conference in Buenos Aires by which time we had both begun reading and thinking about epistemic justice in relation to our own work. We thought it would be timely to work together on an edited book in the light of the very interesting work we were aware of. To this end, we began work on the book in March 2019 in our usual

cross-continental way—first in South Africa, then in London and what would have been in Valencia in April 2020, if Covid-19 had not interrupted all international travel and placed us in 'lockdown'.

We have found editing this book quite fascinating and feel that the book brings together a remarkable group of authors and ideas—we thank all of them for agreeing to contribute. There are many others whom we also wish to thank. Respectively, our colleagues and graduate students in the higher education and human development research group at the University of the Free State, and INGENIO at the Polytechnic University of Valencia, as well as students and teachers on the Master's Degree in Development Cooperation. Other colleagues—in addition to those whose chapters we include in the book and from whom we have learnt so much—whom we would like to acknowledge as a source of ideas and generous conversations include Monica McLean (most especially for drawing our attention to Fricker's epistemic capability), Mikateko Mathebula, Patience Mukwambo, Faith Mkwananzi, Pablo del Monte (for bringing narrative capability to our attention), Monique Kwachou, Fenella Somerville, Bertha Kibona, Stephanie Allais, Lesley Powell, Joan DeJaeghere, Leon Tikly, Moon Hong, Frederick Brossard, Julian Culp, Emily Henderson and the late Brenda Leibowitz. In addition, we have presented our ideas on epistemic justice and higher education in various places: Seoul, Bratislava, Vaxjo, London, Bristol, Pretoria, Lancaster and Paris. We thank the various audiences at these conferences, lectures and seminars for many stimulating conversations.

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isolation of these lockdown days easier to carry. Last of all, our heartfelt love and thanks to our respective partners Ian Phimister and Begoña Arias, whose support and love enable us, always, to be and to do what we have reason to value.

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Epistemic Justice, Participatory Research and Valuable Capabilities

Melanie Walker and Alejandra Boni

In this book we take up the challenge of conceptualising and demonstrating in eight empirically based chapters how non-ideal epistemic justice in real-world education settings might be fostered though participatory research. We further make the claim that being able to make epistemic contributions is fundamental to human wellbeing, to a dignified human life and to wide freedoms (Fricker 2007, 2015) and that such contributions and the corresponding capabilities and functionings can be fostered in and through participatory research processes. Although we see Amartya Sen's (2009) capabilities and functionings as the ends of human development (Ul Haq 2003), in the specific space of education, Sen does not talk about epistemic justice although he does emphasise participation in

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public reasoning practices. At the same time, we are aware, and the chapters demonstrate, that participation in itself does not guarantee egalitarian epistemic outcomes. Projects may both reinforce and undermine reproduction in and through higher education, depending on multi-level contextual influences and the depth of participation. Sen has also said little that could address structural injustices flowing specifically (but not only) from the epistemic domain. Thus in the book, we go beyond Sen in taking participation and deliberation to also have the role of advancing epistemic justice, with a distinctive educational focus on epistemic functionings and not just the capability. This concern with functionings enables us to interrogate and expose the external conditions which may place obstacles in the way of realising epistemic capabilities and hence educational development. To this end, we show through the book chapters the potential to expand people's multi-dimensional capabilities and functionings in and through participatory processes and projects.

The Aims of the Book

A key concern in 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). At stake are whose voices are enabled, who gets to tell their stories and who is heard and listened to. The basic challenge posed by a specifically epistemic form of justice is how some persons—and not others—are advantaged in influencing and contributing to public discourse whether at the micro, meso or macro level and hence in contributing epistemically. We understand this to be important for wider justice. Anticipating many of the current debates on epistemic justice, the late South African activist and philosopher Steve Biko (1978, p. 49) wrote of apartheid, 'that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed'. Biko points compellingly to why the epistemic matters—those who hold political and social power, whether in the broader society or in higher education institutions (or both), also wield epistemic power, and such epistemic power holds relations of oppression in place. For example,

under apartheid black South Africans were deliberately prevented from placing their stories in the dominant public sphere; under imperial conditions local and non-Western knowledge was (and is) not legitimate for the colonisers (De Sousa Santos 2014). Epistemic injustice may thus preclude some people from speaking for themselves or formulating their own legitimate knowledge claims. Moreover, such exclusions are not abstractions but active and relational in our lives; our epistemic lives involve being, doing and acting with others (Barker et al. 2018). Our ideas and knowledge matter for participation in inclusive meaning-making (and hence to politics, education, the professions, and so on) so that who has access to these epistemic goods at various layers of society is then a matter of justice.

Take this shocking higher education example where epistemic injustice manifested in physical violence. On December 6, 1989, Marc Lépine entered a mechanical engineering class at the École Polytechnique in Montreal and ordered the women and men to opposite sides of the classroom. He separated nine women, instructing the men to leave. He stated that he was 'fighting feminism' and opened fire. He shot at all nine women in the room, killing six (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/03/montreal-massacre-canadas-feminists-remember). This is a dramatic example and, while higher education does not normally operate in such a life or death way in most countries, access to higher education curricula and participation in pedagogical arrangements is meant to enable worthwhile epistemic goods, including independent, critical, subject-based and interdisciplinary knowledge. Higher education ought to foster a transformational relationship of students to knowledge that potentially changes how they think and understand their worlds. Thus substantive knowledge concerns (the episteme) are needed to give content to epistemic justice in higher education, for example, a decolonised curriculum. Recently Fricker (2016, p. 3) has elaborated on the knowledge elements of epistemic injustice, pointing out that epistemic injustice not only blocks the flow of knowledge but also 'the flow of evidence, doubts, critical ideas and other epistemic inputs'. The resulting epistemic oppression constitutes a 'persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production, an unwarranted infringement on the epistemic agency of knowers' (Dotson 2014, p. 115).

With this in mind, we aim to bring together three areas of interest to us—epistemic justice (incorporating discursive knowledge; see Walker 2019), participatory research and capabilities formation—and place them in conversation with each other in global South and global North settings in order to challenge the oppressions generated through the exclusion of the less powerful from processes of knowledge-making (see, e.g. Soldatenko 2015 on philosophy) and to work towards a decolonial praxis relevant for both North and South. The point is, as Andrea Pitts (2018, p. 150) makes clear, that knowledge practices 'have never existed merely as forms of abstract argumentation about belief, truth, justification, or cognition'. Rather, knowledge production itself—in and through universities—'is a materially embedded set of social and historical phenomena' embedded in a political economy of knowledge-making. Even in participatory research, we need to be vigilant about how power relations work. We thus work towards De Sousa Santos (2014) inclusive 'ecology of knowledges' which admits excluded voices, subjugated knowledges and disqualified knowledges into knowledge decisions and knowledge production, against colonial productions in which the 'subaltern' cannot speak (Spivak 1994). This should not be confused with the global North (or indeed any researcher with more power) 'allowing' the oppressed to speak for themselves or 'giving' them voice, within unchanged local or global knowledge relations. Thus if we truly value participation and participatory research, it must be located also in reflexive decolonial practices and commitments to epistemological decolonisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

Such an approach does not assume that Western knowledge is either universal or better; it can and does draw productively on Western knowledge and ideas—as we do in this book. It is not about closing the door to European or other traditions. It is about defining clearly what and where the centre lies (Mbembe 2016, p. 35). Thus De Sousa Santos (2014) proposes a contextualised 'pluri-universitary knowledge', a plurality of ways of knowing. The possibilities and limits of understanding and action of each way of knowing can only be grasped to the extent that each offers a comparison with other ways of knowing. Nonetheless, the comparison is difficult because the relations among ways of knowing are asymmetrical, because of history, politics and epistemology. 'Sacred' scientific

knowledge is considered to be of greater epistemic worth and credibility than that of other non-esoteric knowledges (such as community-based knowledge or student knowledge). Some academic disciplines may ignore or distort particular intellectual traditions (e.g. treating non-Western philosophy as ethno-philosophy). An ecology of knowledge is contrary to the epistemological exclusions that seek to conceal (even destroy) other ways of knowing, and looks to a reorientation of the relationship between university and society towards solidarity.

Similarly, post-colonial theorists such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012, p. 2) argue that research (the space of knowledge production) is a site of significant (epistemic) struggle 'between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of knowing of the other'. While we can generally claim that research aims to add value to and benefit society (and we have many good examples of this in health, engineering and other fields), research also 'exists within a system of power' (Smith 2012, p. 226) and, in contemporary times, within globalisation flows and neo-liberal higher education policies. This requires that knowledge-making through research 'talk back to and talk up to power' in order to get the story right and tell the story well (Smith 2012, p. 226). Epistemic injustice need not be a given, it can be contested so that epistemic failure (Fricker 2007) is seldom complete and structural possibility seldom entirely open—both have implications for more expansive and generous ways of seeing, thinking and knowing in universities—for the potential of participatory research.

Forms of Epistemic Injustice

Drawing substantially on Miranda Fricker (2007), we outline two forms of epistemic injustice, both of which reveal how epistemic oppression is realised through domination and marginalisation practices, suggesting how epistemic justice can be frustrated. Testimonial injustice occurs when a hearer gives a reduced level of credibility to what someone says due to prejudice against the speaker (e.g. of status inequality, race, class, gender). They may regard them as incompetent, stupid or dishonest or all three. For example, a deficit of credibility because of race-based prejudice

on the part of white South African students might generate everyday 'pinpricks' of testimonial injustice (if white students insist on checking the work of black students in group projects; e.g. see Kessi and Cornell 2015) or more dramatic race-based conflicts in which racial remarks end up being a substitute for reasoned discussion. Testimonial injustice can occur when knowledge produced through experiential pedagogies is seen as second-class knowledge—and hence speakers or producers are second-class too—where a more codified form that follows the academic formal structure for its construction is predominant and seen as valid when compared with other types of knowledge (see Boni and Velasco 2020). In this epistemically narrow approach, what counts as legitimate knowledge is decided only by an inner community of scientists who claim that only they can contribute legitimately and rationally to a knowledge consensus. This is not to claim that one way of knowledge-making is better than another, rather it is to argue for a more inclusive and democratic approach that is more epistemically just in its processes and impact.

While testimonial injustices take individual form, they can become systemic (e.g. in accepted knowledge practices) and embedded in the social structure, rather than only transactional. Indeed, it is hard to see how everyday exclusionary patterns do not become structural if secured by multiple repetitions over time. Essed's (1991) concept of 'everyday racism' is helpful in explicating the everydayness of this kind of testimonial injustice. It is the everyday that can reinforce bad epistemic behaviour. Everyday racism (and other exclusionary practices), according to Essed (1991), has pervasive effects on daily experiences shaped both by the macrostructural and by micro-experiences. As she explains it, 'the integration of racism [and other exclusions] into everyday practices becomes part of the expected, of the unquestionable, and of what is seen as normal by the dominant group…racist notions and action infiltrate everyday life' (p. 50). We could advance similar claims for gendered power relations, or South-North exclusionary epistemic governance relations (Walker and Martinez-Vargas 2020). Indeed, Fricker (2016, p. 4) has recently agreed that testimonial injustice 'where it is persistent and socially patterned' will increase hermeneutical marginalisation (discussed below) and hence be structural and not only transactional.

The second form is hermeneutical injustice. This, according to Fricker (2007), is evident in attempts to make an experience intelligible to oneself or to someone else. It turns on legitimacy and on how structural power influences some understandings as legitimate and excludes others if one belongs to a group which does not have access to equal participation in the generation of social meanings (here Boni and Velasco's case study might sit at the boundary of the testimonial and the hermeneutic). As Fricker (2007, p. 152) explains, 'we try hardest to understand those things it serves us to understand'. Moreover, a social group might be hermeneutically marginalised without individual members necessarily being aware or being able to name the exclusion they experience. It can take another form too where hermeneutical injustice arises because the injustice is understood (e.g. historically by activists in South Africa) but is not communicable to those with power (the apartheid state) because experiences that are outside of what has been marked out as the norm are not heard or acknowledged. This unequal participation in generating social meanings generates hermeneutic marginalisation of a person or group (e.g. black university students in South Africa) in the absence of non-distorted discursive resources among the dominant. This would be the case even where those subject to the oppression are strongly aware of the injustice. In both cases of hermeneutic injustice, some would be denied wide epistemic capacities. Moreover, in some cases it may be that people are prevented even from developing and exercising a voice (Medina 2017; Spivak 1994). Take, for example, the inhabitants of slums in Lagos, Nigeria, who have been systematically denied their hermeneutical power and equal access to participation in the generation of social meaning. There is an intentional act of the government and other official stances to label the slums inhabitants terrorists, criminals and kidnappers in order to legitimise and therefore proceed with eviction plans against them (see Boni and Velasco 2020).

Yet, as Barker et al. (2018, p. 13) point out, ignorance (intentional or not) 'is not merely a passive lack of knowledge but an active and persistent impediment to true belief' such that 'social injustice and ignorance walk in stride, enabling and reinforcing one another'. It adds something to hermeneutic injustice when a society, or a part of that society, refuses to embrace the conceptual resources that would allow full understanding

of domination and epistemic inequalities. This applies as much in the space of higher education where well-off students, for example, may resist or be unconscious of their own familial privilege and their social advantages, rather than framing their success as being down to individual talent and 'merit'. Privilege is then elided with ability. Such ignorance sustains unequal education relations. The counter position is that privileged students would be 'epistemically culpable' (Fricker 2016, p. 13) if the 'shared hermeneutical repertoire [of social inequalities] was quite rich enough' (p. 16). Quite simply, if one could have known better, then one should have known better (Fricker 2016).

We can find examples of what Fricker (2007) calls 'failure first', that is, by attending to where we fail, we are alerted to what we need to change but also to the counter pressures that we face. Failure first exposes dependence on external conditions so that 'While some people are enabled by evenly spread social uptake to make their epistemic contributions across the board, others find their capability thins or vanishes altogether in some contexts' (Fricker 2015, p. 83). In a research development process, epistemic injustice, and especially prejudice-based testimonial injustice, unfairly increases labour for those whose epistemic contributions are filtered when participants come together pedagogically, such that this can be identified as 'an epistemic agential injustice' (Pohlhaus 2017, p. 21), that 'divert[s] epistemic attention in the service of dominance'.

For example, in South Africa, Pedro Mzileni (2017) reported on his experiences of attending a conference on inequality at a leading South African university, one at which he and his colleague were the only black participants. Echoing Biko—some 40 years later—he writes (2017, p. 26) that 'White students [at the conference] seemed to be an intellectual elite: highly educated, very bright and, for the most part, very liberal people'. Yet no one raised the issue of the connections between race and inequality, and when his colleague did raise it, 'the white students felt accused of being racists…[they] failed to include the reality of others in their plans'. One of the white students argued that it was unnecessary to bring race into the inequality problem. 'In other words, the debate was "subconsciously silenced"' (2017, p. 26). Mzileni and his colleague were not recognised as credible knowers or as persons who could raise legitimate questions. Nor could they make their experiences understood to the

dominant group at the conference. In Kessi and Cornell's (2015) account of black students' experiences at the elite University of Cape Town in South Africa, students struggled to make their own distinctive university experiences of 'feeling black' intelligible to themselves and to others. They said they had been made to feel as if they were taking the places of white students; they experienced isolation, not feeling as if they belonged; and they suffered from diminished confidence exacerbated by race-based encounters in learning and social spaces such that they were not fully included in the epistemic community at university. Take also the case of a network of communitarian researchers in Medellín in Colombia that struggled to be recognised as researchers because they do not have the necessary academic requirements (a high school degree or similar) to be considered members of a research group. Ironically, the theme of the research is how inhabitants of popular neighbourhoods (like the communitarian researchers) in Medellín are conceptualising the different dimensions of human security. A question of (socio-economic) status intersecting with academic power structure is preventing the communitarian researchers from being part of an 'official' research project. However, despite these epistemic barriers, the network of communitarian researchers are producing (collectively) epistemic outputs[1] in an exercise of capability and functioning expansion in a non-ideal context of epistemic contribution.

Expanding Capabilities and Feasible Functionings

To be marginalised or excluded as a knower affects dignity, a shared way of life and a person's humanity and is contrary to fostering the critical knowledge and reasoning capabilities or freedoms to be and to do in ways that we value (Sen 2009), which ought to be available to all higher education students as participants and agents. Thus, realising epistemic justice

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[1] See this publication as an example of outputs produced by the network https://www.repensandolaseguridad.org/publicacioness/cartillas/item/hacia-una-agenda-de-seguridad-para-medellin-desde-la-perspectiva-de-sus-comunidades.html?category_id=26.

requires that we foster the morally relevant appropriate capabilities and functionings as a development goal in higher education. To explain, the capability approach (Sen 1999, 2009; also see Nussbaum 2000) is a broad normative framework rooted in a philosophical tradition that values individual freedoms and is used for the evaluation and assessment of individual wellbeing, social arrangements and the design of policies and proposals about social change. The approach conceptualises 'good' development as extensive freedoms constituted by human capabilities, rather than only as national income or people's subjective preferences. Income does not tell us who has the money or what it is used for, while preferences may be subject to adaptations in the light of poor living, such that one comes to accommodate limited opportunities and reduced aspirations for the future. Rather, the core focus of the approach is on the effective opportunities people have to be and to do what they have reason to value. It highlights substantive freedoms ('capabilities') and outcomes or what is actually achieved ('functionings'). Importantly, with capability also comes responsibility for what we do and the obligations we owe to others (Sen 2009). The capability approach further takes into account intersecting 'conversion factors', that is, the personal, social and environmental factors that shape our ability as active agents to transform our means (resources) to achieve into capabilities and then into functionings. This includes, in our view, structures of inequality such as race, class, gender and so on. Active agents make choices, albeit under specific contextual conversion circumstances, which may enable or constrain both at the point of converting resources into capabilities and then in choosing which capabilities to operationalise as functionings.

The approach can be used as a normative framework to tell us what information we should consider—in this case, capabilities and who has them—if we are to evaluate how well a person's life is going, their wellbeing. What matters in arriving at these assessments, for Sen (2009), is the lives that people can actually live—what they are able to do and to be (such as having access to quality education and being treated fairly).

The capability approach also provides a framework for an examination and understanding of the purposes of universities and hence of research methodologies and knowledge production, because it encourages us to consider individual opportunities for wellbeing achievement and agency

in and through higher education. Through a capabilities lens, higher education is not solely a means for individuals to achieve economic gains through acquiring knowledge and skills for employment or for academics to research ignorant of the wider society. Instead, the approach asks us how higher education is contributing to human development (Ul Haq 2003), by expanding the capabilities and functionings that people have reason to value. Thus various higher education studies have explored the approach's theoretical richness in conceptualising and articulating the changes that need to take place in universities if they are to contribute to human development and social justice (see, e.g. Boni and Walker 2016).

We understand the capability approach as enabling an analysis that takes into account both persons and the structures that can get in the way of capabilities expansion, although the approach has less to say about structural change and how it works out in practice. Still, this takes us beyond a notion of individual empowerment (important though that is) because participants are located in social structures and power relations that shape what they can do and that create obstacles or opportunities for their full participation. Another way of thinking about the nexus of the person and general conversion factors is captured by Nussbaum's (2000) notion of 'combined capabilities', that is, 'internal capabilities' (such as having the aspiration to go to university), together with the external (social) uptake conditions that effectively enable that person to exercise the capability as an achieved aspiration. However, even here, there needs to be a clear focus on the importance of the realisable functionings for evaluating justice in practice. Put another way Frediani et al. (2019, p. 107) describe the capability approach as having the potential 'to engage with internal dynamics of deliberation processes as well as external relations shaping outcomes'. The strength of the capability approach is thus that it combines both internal capabilities, one's skills, attitudes, knowledge and information, with the options one has to act on them within a social context with its particular enablements and constraints.

In her later work, Fricker (2015) considers how to address epistemic injustices by drawing on the language of capability, with specific reference to Nussbaum's (2000) list. She argues that being able to contribute epistemic materials to the shared common resource (e.g. in a research process) is fundamental to human wellbeing. All citizens should be able

to make epistemic contributions and to have their contributions taken up fairly in social and educational contexts, rather than having some contributions rejected or undervalued by other contributors. Fricker (2015) proposes that one of our most basic human needs is being able to think about and make meaningful sense of our shared lives. To this end, she proposes the concept of 'epistemic contribution capability' (specifically using the notion of capability), which requires a comprehensive notion of the person as both a receiver and a giver in epistemically hospitable situations of mutual esteem and friendly trust. In the case of higher education, all participants ought to be able to contribute to the common cognitive resources in this everyday way, giving and receiving informational and interpretive materials. To be fully involved in the university's knowledge project, students would need opportunities to develop their epistemic contribution capability of being able both to receive information and make interpretive contributions to the pool of knowledge, understanding and practical deliberation. Moreover, we do not learn to do this on our own. The epistemic contributor functioning is fundamentally relational and requires—in our experience—community and caring connections (Boni and Velasco 2020; Walker et al. 2019). We propose that this functioning can be advanced through participatory research and that it should be a core capability and functioning. Fricker does not herself discuss the corresponding function, that of actually being an epistemic contributor, which we take to be as significant as the capability in education contexts. It is not enough to have the capability if the freedoms to exercise it are not also in place, in our case in a research project and participatory processes.

Relevant both to participatory research and to capabilities formation, Medina (2017) stresses that hermeneutical injustice is interactive and performative, it is made in communicative spaces. A plurality of voices offers possibility for epistemic dissidence by means of a diversity of interpretative resources and practices and the inclusion and consideration of as many positional objectivities as possible. What is also clear, given the fundamentally social nature of learning, is that relationships enable (and equally can thwart) the development of the epistemic capability in education and may even be intrinsically good beyond being instrumental for the capability, valued for their own sake and worth pursuing for their

own sake (Hoffmann and Metz 2017). It is to emphasise that we do not develop alone but in relationships with others. In the education case, developing the capability—understood in a relational way—only in some students or some researchers at the expense of others would mean that for all of us the capability would be reduced and not fully developed. Thus, my own epistemic wellbeing ought to be understood as interwoven with the epistemic capability of others if we are to advance a rich non-ideal epistemic justice. Curren and Metzger (2017, p. 80) put it this way, that institutions (in this case, universities) 'exist to enable all of its members to live well and should provide opportunities sufficient to enable all to do so and thereby provide each other such opportunities'.

The Potential of Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Having outlined the challenge of epistemic injustice and how higher education ought to foster the relevant capabilities and functionings, noting the relevance for participatory research, we now elaborate our interest in the potential of participatory processes and research. Following Reason and Bradbury (2008), we understand participatory research processes as developing knowledge (experiential, practical, propositional) through iterative actions and conceptual-empirical reflections in the pursuit of human wellbeing. Such projects start from a vision of social transformation and aspirations for greater social justice; they are not value neutral. Collaboration, community, trust, solidarity and reciprocity are central to the process. PAR seeks deliberately 'to include the investigated in the process of investigation itself' (Korala-Azad and Fuentes 2009–2010, p. 1) and to strive for methods that are ethical, open, respectful and alert to power dynamics. Thus, we understand participatory approaches to aim at doing research with and alongside people, rather than on them, and to have a shared concern with bringing about personal and social change. Participants (who would normally be considered objects of the research) act as co-investigators gathering evidence, analysing data and disseminating the knowledge acquired in different ways. They become

questioners, critics, theorists, knowers and communicators. A key political goal for PAR has to do with the fact that it is typically marginalised people who 'speak' so that the aspiration is for more democratic and inclusive forms of making knowledge and an epistemological inclusiveness. Put another way, it is a contribution (of course not the only one) to an ecology of knowledges. Conceived in this way, this capacity can challenge academic complicity in both the North and the South that prioritises only forms of scientific knowledge that insist on the continued exclusion of knowledges that take different forms from the 'sacred' scientific paradigm.

Nonetheless, putting PAR into practice in a university environment represents a challenge. Some academics question the validity of action research as scientific inquiry. Yet, as Lincoln et al. (2011) explain, PAR elements are different from positivistic, constructivist and critical approaches to inquiry but equally valid nonetheless. To illustrate the particular rationale of PAR, we list key features: (1) the way of understanding reality (the *ontology* issue) as a participative reality, a subjective and objective reality, co-created by participants; (2) *epistemology* (the way of understanding knowledge) includes experiential, propositional (knowledge of facts) and practical knowing and co-created findings; (3) *methodology* is understood as participation in collaborative action inquiry; (4) validity criteria include *congruence* between the different ways of knowing, shared agreements and reasoning among actors and knowledge that catalyses action, among others.

First in Boni and Walker (2016) and then in an expanded version in Boni and Frediani (2020), we outline further key dimensions of PAR. Firstly, PAR involves *action*. PAR aims to alter the initial situation of the group, organisation or community in the direction of a more self-managing, liberated and sustainable state (Greenwood and Levin 2007). What is defined as a liberated state varies from one practitioner to another. For example, Reason and Bradbury (2008, p. 4) propose the pursuit of 'practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities' as a goal of PAR. For others, PAR could be aligned with radical praxis. Secondly, PAR involves *research* (building knowledge, theories, models, methods, analysis). What this research tradition provides is a shared

commitment to disrupt conventional hierarchies of knowledge production: who decides on the questions to ask, how to ask them and how to theorise the world. Thirdly, PAR means *participation*, placing a strong value on democracy and control over one's own life situation. PAR often involves trained researchers who serve as facilitators and teachers of members of local communities or organisations. Because these people work together to establish the PAR agenda, generate the knowledge necessary to transform the situation and put the results to work, PAR is a participatory process in which everyone involved takes some responsibility (Greenwood and Levin 2007). Thus, the fourth dimension of PAR is this *cyclical component* (iterative cycles of analysis-reflection-action) which can generate powerful learning for participants. Gaventa and Cornwall (2008) name this learning component *awareness building*, which is fostered among the participants through self-critical investigation and analysis of their own reality. They argue that the combination of the co-production of different areas of knowledge through cycles of reflection and action, with processes of critical reflection and learning, can make PAR an empowering methodology (Fig. 1.1), also taking into account the features of the ontology, epistemology, methodology and validity criteria noted above.

Nonetheless, we acknowledge that participation (dialogue, action, learning) has a range of meanings which may be more or less fully inclusive. Sen (2009) shares similar concerns with what he understands as public reasoning. As he explains, 'the requirements for a theory of justice include bringing reason to play in the diagnosis of justice and injustice'
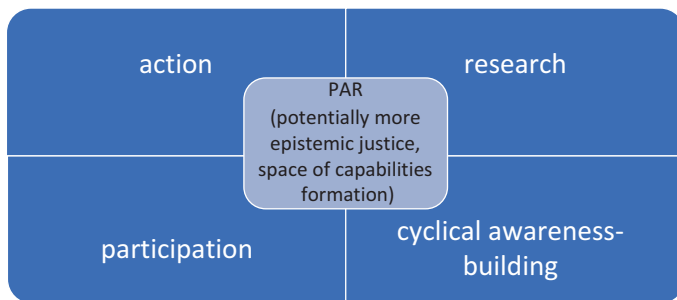

Fig. 1.1 PAR intersecting dimensions

(2009, p. 5). To compare and sort more justice against less justice requires public reasoning, which in turn requires human agents able to think and reason critically and pedagogies which form justice-facing values. Ethical (research) principles also require the use of reason, that is, they should emerge from informed scrutiny of different perspectives so that we can transcend our own 'positionally limited visions' (2009, p. 162) because people are 'able to reason and scrutinise their own decisions and those of others' (2009, p. 178). Good public reasoning requires that we develop learning and knowledge by participating in dialogue and public discussion and 'interactively forming reasoned values' (Sen 2009, p. 336). Sen puts great emphasis on the importance of knowledge from multiple perspectives (including that of the 'stranger') in the process of reasoning and choosing what we value being and doing, in being able to act as agents and in valuing freedoms.

Frediani (2015) proposes conceptualising participation in Freirean terms, focusing on how research and knowledge-making enable people to 'rupture their existing attitudes of silence, accommodation and passivity, and gain confidence and abilities to alter unjust conditions and structures' and eradicate a 'passive awaiting of fate' (p. 6). Participation in this approach would be thick not thin, enabling the voices of invisible actors in the university, challenging status inequalities and fostering the epistemic contributions associated with knowledge-making. As Hookway (2010) notes, actual participation in a wide variety of epistemic practices is necessary for developing one's agency capacities as an epistemic contributor. For example, to exclude students because of prejudice—that students can only be receivers of knowledge or because of the status inequalities noted earlier—would be to limit their epistemic development; it would constitute epistemic failure. By contrast, to include students in a participatory way would potentially enable them to be epistemic contributors.

Based on our experience of participatory projects, we think there are at least two interwoven spaces for epistemic justice arising from interventions that take account of wider inequalities. Firstly, what Anderson (2012, p. 172) calls 'epistemic democracy', in its most fully realised form this would entail 'universal participation on terms of equality for all inquirers'—in a participatory research project. This would be the ideal,

but in a real world of messy contexts and sometimes intractable social issues, we are more likely to need Sen's (2009) comparative assessments of justice so that we rather ask: did this research project advance more or less epistemic democracy, develop capabilities and offer enabling conditions for functionings, and enhance justice?

For thick inclusion in knowledge-making, for example, we might foster practices that challenge the 'scientific' view that only some forms of knowledge-making are credible and legitimate in the academy, thereby neglecting epistemic resources that may be available when students are put in a position to craft accounts of their own worlds through participatory approaches. The change means including diverse voices in the knowledge dialogue and broadening the informational basis on which we make judgements about students' lives based on capabilities and functionings. Sen calls this 'the territory of justice' and explains that '[t]he informational basis of judgment identifies the information on which the judgment is directly dependent…[it] determines the factual territory over which considerations of justice would directly apply' (1990, p. 111). The point is to attend to relations of power and 'prepare people to take part appropriately, fairly and justly in knowledge exchange' (Kotzee 2017, p. 329).

Towards a Decolonial-Inflected Ethical Research Praxis

With regard to decoloniality (Mignolo 2007), we do not think it too much of a stretch to locate participatory research projects as a constituent element of an aspirational decolonial praxis. This is more than an academic exercise but one of human concern (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Being understood, to express oneself, and being able to contribute to meaning-making are basic human capacities and constitutive of a dignified life (Fricker 2007). Indeed, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that the challenge of the twenty-first century is that of the 'epistemic line' which denies the full humanity and voices of some—this demands, he argues, a restorative epistemic agenda and the advance of epistemic freedoms (what