Participatory Action Research

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Definition

The three basic concepts that constitute participatory action research refer to the direct and active interaction (participation) required for the construction of knowledge (research) and collective practices (action). The adjective *participatory* comes from Latin *participationem* and means "sharing, having a share or part in common with others". The noun *action* derives from Latin *actionem*: "a putting in motion; a performing, a doing; lawsuit, legal action", from the past-participle stem of *agere* "to do". And *research* comes from French *recerche* (1530s), meaning "act of searching closely" for a specific person or thing (Harper 2023). As a research approach, participatory action research focuses on the co-construction of knowledge and action by integrating multiple perspectives to strengthen the social transformation of unjust structures. It is a political-epistemic research paradigm that originated in Latin America, based on the work of Orlando Fals Borda (1970) and Paulo Freire (1970). Participatory action research can be characterized by three main principles: (1) it is geared towards transforming injustices; (2) as they are directly involved in sociopolitical processes, researchers become activists, intertwining a constant dynamic of reflection and action; and (3) social actors become co-researchers, identifying needs and potential problems of study, information-gathering, analysis, and decision-making.

The methodology of participatory action research is cyclical, recursive, transdisciplinary, and transformative. It assumes critical reflection and dialogue in practice as the basis for research and action. This implies that people are not considered objects to be studied, but subjects, co-actors, and co-constructors of knowledge and actions from their diverse perspectives. This also includes co-constructing the different elements of the process (analysis of the problem, definition of objectives, agenda, planning, organization, etc.) that open spaces for collective analysis and interpretation as the research develops. Participatory action research offers powerful methods for collaborative research with a focus on power relations and transforming unjust and unsustainable circumstances.

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Background

Kurt Tsadek Lewin (1946) was the first person to use the term "action research" to refer to a type of research that seeks both to understand the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and to lead to transformative collective action. Lewin's epistemological proposal already contained some of the principles of what would later become participatory action research, such as the direct involvement of researchers in the processes that are studied and the use of multiple methods to promote democratic interactions.

Almost unrelated to Lewin's approach, in the early 1970s, several experiences around the world linked academic work and social action aimed at transforming oppressive and unjust circumstances (Rahman and Fals Borda 1992). Such was the case of the *Bhoomi Sena* (English: Earth Army) in Maharashtra, India, where social scientist Kaluram Dhodade, who formulated the principles of participatory action research (Rahman 1984), was involved in peaceful land seizures. In the village of Bunju, Tanzania, anthropologist Marja-Liisa Swantz's (1975) participatory immersion became a referent for alternative research in Africa and beyond. In Latin America, research for social transformation had important educational and cultural movements as allies. Paulo Freire's (1970) popular education, based on horizontal and emancipatory forms of learning, was key to the political-epistemological turn of the emerging participatory action research. Similarly, the work of Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1987) and Pablo González Casanova (2004) reoriented the directions of social sciences by critiquing academia's colonialist practices (Fals Borda 1999).

In order to go beyond Lewin's social psychology and liberal theories of participation, Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1970, 1990) focused on the development of participatory action research as a process capable of bringing together, on the one hand, the systematicity of science and, on the other, the knowledge and actions of marginalized populations. To this end, Fals Borda (1999) mentions three key features of participatory action research.

1. *Relations between science and ethics*: Participatory action research is based on the convergence of popular, traditional, and scientific thinking to support just causes. For ethical reasons, priority is given to working with the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. Fals Borda (1999, 77–78) warns that the claim of neutrality and absolute objectivity coincides, often unintentionally, with a position that supports the status quo or hegemonic social order.
2. *Dialectics between theory and practice*: One of the basic principles of participatory action research is that knowledge is validated by the improvement of practice. However, for Fals Borda (1999, 78–80), the focus on praxis, which is the reflection on practice, does not imply that other methods and relevant validity

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criteria are not necessary to ensure that the knowledge generated is both rigorous and relevant.

3. *Encounter between subject and subject*: Fals Borda (1999, 80–81) argues that the subject–subject bond as *sentipensantes* (English: feeling-thinking beings), whose diverse knowledge and points of view are considered together, is what makes it possible to define authentic participation as different from manipulative and instrumental forms. This principle of horizontality is reflected in the agreements generated around the questions to be answered and acted upon; in the co-construction of instruments and methods; in the systematic feedback by diverse and accessible means; and in shared action (Fals Borda 1987). In Latin America and Spain, Oscar Jara (2012) and Tomás Rodríguez Villasante (2006) formulated some of the principles most in line with Fals Borda's. Jara put forward a systematization of experiences, an approach for critical analysis and reproduction of experiences from social movements. Rodríguez Villasante and the International Observatory for Citizenship and Sustainable Environment (Observatorio Internacional de Ciudadanía y Medio Ambiente Sostenible, CIMAS) put forward *sociopraxis*, an approach based on participatory methodologies and contributions from network theory, popular environmentalism, and the paradigms of complexity.

Debate and criticism

Nowadays, there are numerous streams that practice and theorize about participatory action research (Bradbury 2015; Dick 2011; Kindon et al. 2007). Some are developed in rural and urban community contexts, close to the roots of participatory action research, while others focus on organizations, educational institutions, and even companies. As it fundamentally conducts research together with people, participatory action research is highly contextual – it is influenced, reconfigured, conditioned, and reinvented within its specific context. Methodology plays a central role, as it determines the forms of participation, the co-construction of knowledge and transformation through praxis. Even though a participatory action research process starts with a methodological proposal and objective, it is redefined and reconfigured during the process, in constant deliberation with the actors and considering the conditions to be transformed.

Current streams are distinguished by a different distribution of weight between the triad research–action–participation. While some focus more on doing participatory research with less practice and shared advocacy (generally driven and sustained by academia), others focus more on reflexive activism from the social base (mostly driven by social movements and civil society organizations).

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Another distinguishing element between different streams and practices of participatory action research is participation, due to the central role it plays in the co-construction of knowledge and actions through praxis. In this way, it opposes the dominant forms in which the coloniality of knowledge persists (Lander 2000) and only researchers have the power to determine the problem, agenda, subjects, or objects of research, and the forms of relationship, interpretation, and use of information. In contrast, participation in which all dimensions of a process – from defining the objectives to the implementation of the research process – are decided collectively has the potential to be co-emancipatory, as it changes the power relations between civil society and academia, as well as stimulating transformative learning and knowledge situated in a concrete context, relevant to the people involved. In Freire's words: "The more women and men take an active stance in thematic research, the more they deepen their awareness of reality and make it their own" (1970, 90, own translation).

Participation is a concept that embraces highly diverse practices, which have been categorized by some authors as a ladder (Arnstein 1996) or a wheel (Davidson 1998) of participation. This elasticity in the notion of participation implies that there are participatory action research processes that have lost their emancipatory and transformative nature; some authors even speak of a colonization of participatory action research (Cascante Fernández 2013) as it becomes instrumental within the current system without a critical stance towards the structures and aspirations for its transformation. To distinguish it from approaches with a more instrumental participation, some researchers prefer to change the word participatory for adjectives that highlight the emancipatory aspect of this type of action research. Collaborative Action Research (CARE) seeks collaboration in all aspects of the research process (Casals et al. 2008; García Eiroá and Trigo 2000; Hensler 2023). Collaborative action research brings together diverse people based on the dialogue between different knowledges and practices that generates collective and solidary actions towards a shared goal (Hensler 2023). Critical or transformative action research emphasizes its political character and the need for critical analysis of history and structures in order to transform them (Cascante Fernández 2013).

Participatory action research as a theoretical-practical and epistemological approach has been the target of criticism from more conventional research strands. The following four appear particularly relevant.

1. *Imperative of transformation:* One of the pillars of participatory action research is its focus on transformation, which involves a partnership with marginalized groups and a constant politicization of research. This imperative of transformation has been criticized as saviorism, as well as for the irrelevance of continuing to think of the world in terms of oppressors and oppressed. Today, participatory action research does not focus exclusively on working with mar-

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ginalized groups, and it searches to form links with other sectors in a transdisciplinary participatory action research.

2. *Lack of rigor and objectivity*: Because of how engaged researchers are with organizations and processes, there is a highly contextualized and involved vision of the processes that allows them to see certain elements from the inside, but possibly prevents them seeing others that are visible at a distance. Furthermore, the experience-based approach limits the scope to a local or regional level, which cannot be generalized. In addition to this, the methodologies used by participatory action research have been criticized for not meeting scientific, rigorous standards, as they are not experiments that can be replicated but unique experiences and processes under construction, with changing objectives and emergent social learning. Working in a participatory or collaborative manner does not imply that it cannot be orderly and disciplined in keeping records and analyzing. Moreover, tools have been established to balance high subjectivity in the processes, such as methodological, theoretical, and observant triangulation (Arias 2007).
3. *Slowness of participatory action research processes*: Another criticism focuses on the time involved in these processes, as they are medium- to long-term collaborations that, at their foundation, require trust, common languages, and shared goals, among other things. The time required is often in tension with the time marked by conventional academia, which is why participatory action research is criticized as a utopian approach that is unsuitable in current structures.
4. *Forcing participatory methodologies*: From the perspective of decolonial and critical approaches, participatory action research is at risk of imposing methods and forms in certain cultural contexts, insensitive to the different sociocultural realities (Merçon 2018). Cooke and Kothari (2001) titled their book *Participation: The New Tyranny?* as a criticism of the concept and practice that imposes forms of interaction in order to legitimize or fulfill institutional requirements, without recognizing Indigenous and peasant communities' own forms of reflection and action.

Current forms of implementation in higher education

Participatory action research is showing its epistemic and political potential in various higher education experiences. Clear examples of this are three graduate programs at Latin American universities: the Master of Arts in Education for Interculturality and Sustainability at Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico (Maestría en Educación para la Interculturalidad y la Sustentabilidad, MEIS 2019); the Professional Masters in Sustainability together with Peoples and Traditional Lands at the University of Brasilia, Brazil (Mestrado Profissional em Sustentabilidade

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Junto a Povos e Terras Tradicionais, MESPT 2019); and the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Development Studies at the Universidad del Cauca, Colombia (Maestría en Estudios Interdisciplinarios del Desarrollo; Universidad del Cauca 2022).

The three programs assume the ethical-political and methodological approach of participatory action research. They take the students' knowledge and practices as a starting point and provide tools to deepen critical and self-critical reflection on these practices. In the projects developed by students, research has the function of generating knowledge from and for collective action. The point of departure and arrival is collaboration with communities and collectives mobilized for a fairer, more sustainable world that is open to cultural diversity. Through these links, students learn to dynamize dialogues of knowledge and to establish a constant back-and-forth between transformative action and analytical reflection, in order to enhance the scope of organizations, in terms both of knowledge and of social change and strengthening of collective subjects.

The aim of these graduate courses is not to generate neutral or universal knowledge; students make their positioning explicit and produce situated knowledge with their projects, which acquire meaning for the collective actions that are developed in a given area. Participatory action research thus appears as a strategy for constructing shared meanings in the understanding and practical approach to the processes and problems being experienced, nurturing community and citizen self-management processes, and contributing to the construction of "a world where all worlds fit", to use the expression created by Zapatista communities in southeast Mexico.

The master's program in Sustainability with Traditional Peoples and Territories focuses especially on working with Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and other traditional communities, but it also includes other actors, as do the other two master's degrees (Nogueira and da Silva 2019). The three programs are located in territories characterized by a rich biodiversity and cultural diversity (Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia), and this same richness exists among the students and the processes and people they are linked with – Indigenous, peasants, and Afro-descendants, as well as urban communities and collectives of very different kinds.

These master's degrees share an interest in the flourishing of ontological pluralism, epistemic justice, and transdisciplinarity. They recover ancestral practices and knowledge, and attach great importance to original cosmovision and communalities and to approaches of complexity as indispensable orientations within the challenges of the current civilizational crisis, where the ecosystems that sustain life are deteriorating rapidly and violence and social asymmetries are increasing. The aim is to transform power relations by favoring dialogues and collaboration between actors from different cultural backgrounds, cultivating, as the website of the master's degree in Interdisciplinary Development Studies points out, "new imaginaries that dignify the economy, justice, health and life in general" (Univer-

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sidad del Cauca 2022, own translation). In the case of the Education for Interculturality and Sustainability program, the objective is to "move towards a perspective of sustainability that implies the conservation and maintenance of the vital cycles of ecosystems, as well as the understanding and appreciation of the close interrelationship that many communities and peoples maintain with nature in all its cultural expressions" (Merçon and Alatorre 2019, 147).

In addition to the decolonial and anti-capitalist approach, there is an anti-patriarchal positioning, which not only implies building gender equity but also strengthening relational ontologies. Diverse types of knowledge come into play, including those that come from sensitivity, sensoriality, emotions, and bodies. The defense of territories begins with caring for bodies; the common goods that we need to protect are both natural goods and the networks of care that we weave on a daily basis.

At the pedagogical and didactic levels, these study programs share many elements, such as how mandatory theoretical subjects, elective courses, and professional internships complement one another. However, each program has specific features. For example, in the Master in Interdisciplinary Development Studies, students and teachers participate together in the so-called "Tramas y Mingas para el Buen Vivir" (Weavings and Mingas for Good Living), where they recover knowledge and practices (traditional or not) that contribute to the cultivation of more harmonious relations among human beings, and between human beings and the rest of nature. The Master in Sustainability together with Peoples and Traditional Lands works with what it calls the Pedagogy of Alternation, "a teaching–learning methodology that combines different formative experiences distributed over different times and places: University Time, which involves carrying out place-based activities in an academic environment, and Community Time, which is carried out (preferably) in a community environment or in the environment where the student works professionally" (MESPT 2019, 16, own translation).

The Education for Interculturality and Sustainability program works with people who are already collaborating in collectives and organizations involved in socio-environmental transformation processes in rural or urban communities (Universidad Veracruzana 2019). The Motor Group, a key element of any participatory action research process, is formed by colleagues from these organizations who are interested in contributing to the reflection–action process. In this way, each student works by linking at least two epistemic communities: the organization with which they are linked and the master's degree.

In general, these graduate programs not only train individual professionals, but also strengthen analytical and political capacities in the collectives and organizations with which they are linked. The impact of student projects is based on the work of the organizations they collaborate with, but is projected as broadly as possible, extending networks through which knowledge and solidarity circulate.

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There are also experiences in other parts of the world that have been inspired by participatory action research. For example, in Spain, the International Observatory for Citizenship and Sustainable Environment (Red CIMAS 2022) promotes participatory democracy processes through teaching and the facilitation of participatory processes that integrate different types of knowledge coming from local communities, government, and academia.

In an era marked by overlapping crises and where it can be difficult to visualize solutions, these initiatives cultivate hope, emphasizing the real possibility of changing the world, planting seeds for the future in the daily life of groups, communities, organizations, and institutions. Experiences such as those presented here allow us to see, in a tangible way, the contributions of participatory action research in the 21st century.

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