Democratising Participatory Research

Pathways to Social Justice from the South

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9. Redrawing Our Epistemic Horizon

9.1 Introduction

The main purpose of this final chapter is to clarify and summarise the major elements of this book, reflecting on the different contributions, and future directions of this research project. Therefore, this chapter reflects on the findings presented in this book and highlights how the project contributes new ways of knowing to the field of higher education and development research. Thus, the first section explores the key findings and conceptual, empirical and methodological contributions of this book, and concludes with the final contributions to pedagogical practices and education policies in higher education.

9.2 Conceptual and Empirical Contributions

The major contributions of this book are its conceptual and empirical contributions, based on the combination of three fields of study to conceptualise, develop and implement a capabilities-based participatory research. The central point was the conceptualisation of the practice, as well as a review of its application following a South African project. Furthermore, the use of the Capabilities Approach in this study has intentionally focused on a particular Southern perspective in order to better understand its potential to acknowledge its Southern application. The Capabilities Approach claims to focus on actual lives. However, this focus seems at times to be secondary, particularly when using aggregations of individuals and the quantification of human development indices. However, as Sen and Muellbauer claim:

> The passion for aggregation makes good sense in many contexts, but it can be futile or pointless in others. Indeed the primary view of the living standard, as argued earlier, is in terms of a collection of functionings and capabilities, with the overall ranking being a secondary view. The secondary view does have its uses, but it has no monopoly of usefulness. When we hear of variety, we need not invariably reach for our aggregator. (1988, 33)

This book brings back the centrality of individuals and local groups in the process of choosing valuable capabilities and the question of how to assess practices such as DCR in terms of these valued capabilities at a local level.

Nevertheless, various claims can be made about this book's contributions to several aspects in the three fields—the Capabilities Approach, participatory approaches and decoloniality. First, in terms of its conceptual contributions—which are interwoven with its empirical contributions—three major points can be highlighted. The first of these concerns the exploration of the limitations of Western participatory approaches and the limitations of participation under this critical view. Second, this book has proposed an innovative type of participatory research—Democratic Capabilities Research (DCR)—and has thus managed to link these three research areas to present a participatory capabilities-based research, an undertaking which had thus far not been achieved in the literature. Third, as a result of this conversation between the three research areas, the book has presented the conceptualisation of DCR as an incomplete and open-ended tool, following the decolonial and Southern influences of the Capabilities Approach. Thus, it assumes that our theoretical frameworks need to be incomplete in order to adapt to the dynamism that characterises societies, and in order to allow other Southern cosmovisions and knowledge systems to enter our research practices and theorisations.

Additionally, in terms of conceptual contributions—which are equally interwoven with empirical contributions—three main points are important. The first of these concerns the understanding of contextual valued capabilities as dynamic and the visual placement of them as a continuum, stretching from active to latent capabilities. This representation supports the argument of dynamism and also challenges the use of a universal list. Second, the use of contextual valued capabilities

is advocated as a means of generating recommendations and assessing DCR in order to expand current evaluative spaces within participatory approaches. In this view, the participatory process is not only guided by the things that the participants have reason to value but, ultimately, the process is also assessed in terms of the things that matter to them (Sen 1999). And finally, the identification of the insurgent character of some of these identified capabilities is highly relevant for the well-being of these students due to the oppressive structures that surround them.
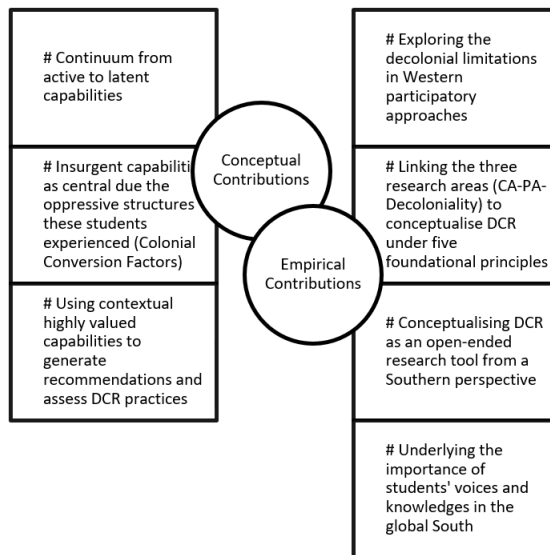
Figure 9: Conceptual-empirical contributions of this study (image by the author, 2021).

Further, a major and general contribution of this book is the underlying importance given to students' voices and knowledges throughout the process. An implicit aim of this study was to challenge and interrogate arbitrary liminalities in the process of knowledge production. Moreover, the aim was to amplify the voices of those students who are often considered recipients of knowledge rather than architects and actors in higher-education institutions. This research project questioned the limited epistemic space in scientific knowledge generation, highlighting the relevance of other knowledge systems. Thus, the book defended

the introduction of these knowledges into our academic participatory practices, as a way to democratise participatory research from a Southern perspective.

9.3 From a 'They Are All Stupid' to a 'We Are All Stupid' Paradigm

The DCR collaborative research process calls for epistemic and methodological considerations that go beyond conventional scientific standards (Chilisa 2013). It questions the structures of knowledge production and the knowledge gap between different epistemic systems, urging the need to build bridges between them (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Furthermore, the case study highlights that qualitative research is still of value and necessary to advance this epistemic diversity, not by removing traditional processes, but by combining them and acknowledging knowledge asymmetries. The methodology—the case study—was validated as a way to continue creating relevant knowledge and politically involved research in ways that have been historically dominant. This combination of both processes (the collaborative DCR process and the case study exploration) required both inquiry paths of knowledge creation. Despite their imbalances, they were both necessary and substantial for challenging the epistemic barriers present in some of the most traditional schools of thought within the sciences. Citing an instructive argument highlighted by Nanay (2018), the idea is to switch from a 'they are all stupid paradigm' to a 'we are all stupid paradigm' in which we, as scholars and scientists, can acknowledge our own limitations regarding rationality and truth. As much as we want to believe that we know more, we still need the knowledge and perspectives of others to embrace the multiplicity of ways in which knowledge can be created.

In summary, the major methodological contribution of this study was the implementation of these theoretical principles (DCR), through a case study. This study made all of these ideas tangible, showing how something works in practice and what its limitations might be in such cases. It provided an alternative path to a known challenge and demonstrated a feasible application—although not necessarily a unique, better or perfect application.

9.4 Education Policies and Pedagogical Possibilities: DCR for What?

Another important point to consider as a contribution of this book concerns the possible applications of DCR in university classrooms, pedagogies and educational policies. Firstly, the current debates on decolonising universities in South Africa, as well as in other countries in the South, forces us to re-think our institutions. In this transformation, the representation of diverse kinds of knowledge in classrooms is a question of social justice, and practices such as DCR can introduce this diversity. There are many ways of introducing DCR into classrooms, and one of them is using DCR as a pedagogical tool with a project-based approach[1]. DCR can contribute its collective nature—such as working in small groups—to these project-based pedagogies, as well as emphasising the central need to introduce knowledges that are not necessarily scientific into higher-education learning programmes. The point is to combine knowledge systems, especially in contexts such as the Global South, where an oppressive history has meant that traditional epistemologies have been marginalised and ignored (De Sousa Santos 2014). On the other hand, this is also crucially important for higher education in the North, as possible collaborations with Southern institutions can be a way of bringing an ecology of knowledges into their classrooms as well, for instance, by promoting cross-cultural research projects that will expand Northern students' understandings of their own ontologies and other cosmovisions around the world.

Another relevant rationale for the use of DCR within the classroom is to introduce valued capabilities as central for the design of curricula, programmes or courses, and the pedagogical process as a whole. In this case, lecturers can use students' valued capabilities to guide the content and relationship with them, as shown by the role of the facilitator presented in this book. This is an interesting point for a Southern context, such as that found in South Africa, as it leads to questions like: How can our classroom promote a valued capability such as Ubuntu? In this

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1   Project-based pedagogies are based on the acquisition of skills throughout the development of activities/projects by the students. Normally, students are assigned an open project, in which they choose a theme and decide how to go about it, with just a few guidelines given by the lecturer.

case, perhaps exams will not be important anymore, and collaborative learning and support between students and the larger society will be central to the pedagogical process. What about Global North institutions using Southern cosmovisions in their educational institutions? If not a complete change, small introductions could be made, for instance in what a classroom would look like under an Ubuntu cosmovision. What about a classroom under a 'Buen vivir' cosmovision?

Certainly, we still have a long way to go until we can talk about real plurality, but somehow DCR can help to create educational paths that until now have not been available options. DCR assists us to create alternative pathways that have not yet been placed on the table. This is important, especially for Global North institutions expanding their educational practices and cosmovisions beyond the dominant Eurocentric ones. In this view, participatory research is not only a knowledge generation tool, but also a pedagogical tool that can transcend research spaces for classrooms and other higher-education spaces. Knowledge is not detached from our lives, and nor should our educational experiences be; we are, indeed, living knowledges.

Regarding educational policies, DCR can offer an alternative to conventional policy generation, as some participatory monitoring and budgeting practices have done. In using the DCR perspective, what educational policies are aiming for is not a unique universal/global trend—replicating policies from the North and implementing them in the South—but the development of policies using local aspirations and interests, in order to connect the local with the global. Therefore, one way of using DCR for policy generation could be to explore local capabilities, as this study does, in order to contextualise policies to the local space and cultural specificities of where they are used, as done by Velasco and Boni (2020) in the context of Colombian Higher Education. Alternatively, DCR can also be used as a collective research process— including those collectives that are currently excluded—in order to investigate, design and implement policies, bringing diverse sectors of society together in one space. What DCR really questions about educational policies is the top-down, Eurocentric approach in which they are traditionally designed and applied. DCR provides a bottom-up process that can be combined and can generate more relevant Southern policies that align with students and local collectives' aspirations and ways of living, rather than the Eurocentric system. Research is no longer

an end but a constant democratic means needed to enhance our plural and contextual knowledge to resolve complex and intricate global and ecological challenges.

9.5 DCR beyond this Book

The future directions for this DCR practice are the most exciting part of this project and book. To a certain extent, DCR represents the beginning of a conceptual connection between different research fields and this gives us, as scholars, endless opportunities to inquire and achieve a better understanding within this frame. The DCR principles might be applied to rethink and explore different practices or DCR as a research process. This may be done, for example, by implementing the internal knowledge diversity (internal ecology of knowledges) and comparing this practice with the external processes used in this research. Alternatively, DCR could be applied in other higher-education contexts—for instance, in the Global North—in addition to other contexts beyond higher education.

To conclude, networks will be substantial for the future of DCR, and for bringing this work to other scholars interested in participatory practices and capabilities as a way to contribute to further practice and theorisation. Currently, there are a variety of intersecting networks required to initiate this expansion of DCR, such as some of the thematic groups of the HDCA association, or other networks within participatory approaches, such as ARNA, CARN or PRIA. Thus, the future of DCR will depend on its use and expansion following this book, and our capacity, as scholars, to understand the power of other contexts and their knowledge systems to democratise our participatory research practices.

9.6 Conclusion

This final chapter has endeavoured to conclude a long and diligent thinking process by discussing the main contribution of this research project to different fields, as well as clarifying the main arguments maintained throughout the book. The conceptual/empirical contributions section has highlighted that, even though the conceptualisation of this capabilities-based research process (DCR) is a main element, the book contributes on a variety of levels and in other terms to the expansion of knowledge and innovation within the study's different

fields. Furthermore, this chapter highlights other contributions, such as epistemic or pedagogical contributions, and identifies the possibilities of using DCR in higher-education classrooms or for the planning and implementation of educational policies.

This chapter has also examined future directions for research and highlighted the importance and relevance of taking this DCR frame forward on different levels, for instance by using this DCR proposal as the starting point of a particular participatory framework, as has happened with other participatory practices such as CPAR or PALAR. Although we do not know the extent to which this proposal can cross the frontiers between fields and become a widespread approach, the idea is to continue developing the tool at different levels. In order to do so, this study will require networks and deep public engagement on different levels. The future development of DCR will depend on the joint work of scholars and practitioner networks who are interested in developing and shifting the use of a participatory capabilities-based orientation to research towards a more grassroots, decolonial and Southern use of the Capabilities Approach.

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