

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: PRAGMATISM, CRITICAL THEORY, CONSTRUCTIVISM, FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

This article explores the philosophical foundations of Participatory Action Research (PAR), a dynamic approach in which participants, as key stakeholders, determine research needs, design the research framework, and collect data to achieve social change. By tracing its philosophical origins within pragmatism, critical theory, constructivism, feminist epistemology, and participatory democracy, the paper elucidates the connections between these philosophical pillars and the development of PAR. It emphasises the principles of social justice and highlights how PAR empowers communities by integrating research, education, and action, thereby transforming marginalised groups into active agents of change. The paper begins with an overview of PAR principles and then explores the underlying philosophical underpinnings that support this research approach. By examining the transformative potential of PAR on individuals, research, and society, the article underscores the importance of collaborative knowledge generation and the dismantling of power dynamics in research processes. This exploration reinforces the efficacy of PAR in addressing pressing social issues and influencing policymakers, advocating for a participatory process that prioritises equal and collaborative engagement from all stakeholders. Through this analysis, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of PAR's role in fostering value-based research and social change.

## INTRODUCTION

In this article, I explore some of the underlying philosophical principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), a continuous cycle in which participants as key stakeholders decide what needs to be researched, design the research (what will be investigated and how) and collect the necessary data with the aim of social change. While PAR draws from various philosophical viewpoints, the focus of this paper is on concisely tracing its philosophical "origins", specifically within pragmatism, critical theory, constructivism, feminist epistemology and participatory democracy. This article aims to make connections between PAR and its foundations by exploring some of its main pillars and, by doing so, includes particular attention to issues of social justice as a broad agenda for social research. This paper narrows its scope to focus on these five pillars as some of the key cornerstones on the development of PAR thinking. As the approach becomes more used, this paper does not aim to be an extensive review on the approach but a reflection on the fundamentals of PAR. I begin by examining the principles of PAR and then by exploring the philosophical underpinnings that support this research approach. Considering the approach potential impact of PAR on individuals, research and society (De Oliveira, 2022; Groota & Hodgetts, 2012; Wang et al., 1996; Wang et al., 2000), it becomes important to draw parallels between the philosophy of some of the main principles that form the basis of this approach.

## PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

I have previously discussed that participatory research offers a pathway for individuals to agency, visibility, and significance by prioritising the construction and utilisation of their knowledge (De Oliveira, 2023). As Reason (1998:71) suggested, the aim is to empower people on a deeper level through the collaborative generation of knowledge. According to Reason, participatory action research (PAR) serves as a means for communities to examine their social circumstances, including experiences of marginalisation and disempowerment. It focuses on the importance of research being more than a mere academic exercise, advocating for a participatory process involving equal and collaborative engagement from the studied community. The concept of "action research" was introduced by Kurt Lewin in 1946 to describe research activities aimed at problem-solving. Lewin emphasized the significance of community involvement, particularly in the post-World War II era, viewing participatory action research as a tool for fostering democracy in rebuilding societies (Robson, 1993). From work with marginalised populations in developing regions, participatory research has evolved in various contexts (Brown & Tandon, 1983; Park et al., 1993), drawing contributions from diverse areas worldwide (Hall, 1981). Participatory research integrates research, education, and action, as described by Reason and Bradbury (2001:1), who define PAR as a democratic process focused on developing practical knowledge in pursuit of meaningful human objectives. This systematic approach seeks knowledge to inform social action (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991). PAR has been seen as effective in reaching policymakers and telling them about pressing social issues (De Oliveira, 2022; Groota & Hodgetts, 2012; Wang et al., 1996;

Wang et al., 2000). It enables participants to articulate their narratives, sharing experiences, practices, memories, identities, and histories (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) represents an approach primarily within qualitative research methodology (See Martí, 2016 offers a quantitative perspective on PAR). Qualitative research encompasses a range of methods and techniques for observing, documenting, analysing, and interpreting the characteristics, patterns, attributes, and meanings of human phenomena under investigation (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Leininger, 1985). In contrast to quantitative methods, qualitative methodology is oriented towards narrative and comprehension rather than prediction and control (Streubert and Carpenter, 1995), focusing on the lived experiences of individuals and groups and the meanings they attribute to these experiences, thereby providing a deeper understanding of complex human behaviours (Lincoln, 1992; Mason, 2006). Key to PAR the recognition of power as a fundamental component of the research process (Mertens, 1999). Within the transformative paradigm, as suggested by Mertens, researchers are tasked with acknowledging and addressing power dynamics among the various stakeholders involved in the research process (Mertens, 2007). Mertens (2007) points to the risk of researchers misconstruing social issues if participants are not afforded a more participatory role in the research process. The transformative paradigm underlines the complexity of power dynamics in research. It emphasises the need to critically examine power structures with participants fostering a co-researching place in the research process.

#### PRAGMATISM: REAL-WORLD PROBLEMS

Pragmatism in research draws upon the historical insights of pragmatist philosophy (Maxcy, 2003), advocating for methodological diversity. It posits that researchers should adopt the philosophical and methodological frameworks most suited to addressing the specific research inquiries at hand (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). The classical pragmatic philosophy, rooted in reformist ideals, has gradually transitioned into contemporary pragmatism. This change can be traced from Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead through Schiller, Lewis, Hook, and Quine, culminating in Rorty's literary-political neo-pragmatism (Haack, 2004). Broadly, pragmatism points to knowing the world as inseparable from agency (changing it). This notion argues that experience consists in shaping rather than representing society. Early pragmatists focused significantly on theorising inquiry, meaning and the nature of truth (Pearce, 2020). George Mead contributed to the social sciences, developing pragmatist perspectives on the relations between the self and the community (Mead, 1934). The essence of pragmatism lay in the Pragmatic Maxim, which served as a guideline for elucidating the significance of hypotheses by examining their 'practical consequences'—their effects on real-world experiences within contexts (Peirce, 1958). Peirce proposed a reformed, scientific philosophy guided by the pragmatic maxim, which identifies the meaning of a concept with *“the consequences for deliberate, self-controlled conduct ... of the affirmation or denial of the concept”* (1904, 56). To Peirce, this maxim identifies a concept's meaning and practical consequences for deliberate and self-controlled conduct. The definition of a concept lies in how it affects our

actions and behaviours when we investigate it. This pragmatic approach emphasises the practical implications of ideas and focuses on their usefulness in guiding human conduct and inquiry. Pragmatism centres around value human investigation. It sees inquiry as an ongoing attempt to recognise the qualitative complexity of human experiences as they navigate emergent problematic situations. These situations entail the scepticism inherent in challenging established viewpoints, which is then resolved through analytical reasoning and validated through practical application. This helpful application emphasises evaluating actions based on their real-world outcomes. Embedding the pragmatist research design process with the fundamental research question and aligning design considerations with method selection is key to PAR because this research design serves as a bridge between research questions and chosen methods. Researchers, communities, and practitioners aiming to use PAR are likely to seek to address issues in their research questions using any methodological tool available or "what works." The inquiry is frequently a collaborative effort involving a collective "community of inquirers" rather than solely an individual search - being a solid basis for an approach like PAR. John Dewey (1938, p. 104) defines inquiry as:

*"the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole."*

Transformation is facilitated through two types of operations. The first pertains to manipulating conceptual or ideational content, while the second involves practical activities using observation tools and methods (Dewey, 1938). It highlights the importance of theoretical reflection and practical application in bringing about meaningful change or transformation.

Pragmatism can be understood as the craft of shipbuilding. Just as shipbuilders must constantly innovate and refine their techniques to construct vessels that navigate the seas effectively, pragmatism emphasises practical problem-solving and empirical verification. Shipbuilders rely on precise measurements and calculations to ensure the seaworthiness of their creations, just as pragmatists prioritise empirical evidence and practical applications in their approach to knowledge. To create seaworthy vessels, shipbuilding draws on the interdisciplinary nature of various fields, such as engineering, physics, and materials science. Both pragmatism and shipbuilding strive to produce outcomes that are reliable, effective, and capable of navigating the complexities of their respective domains. That is, social researchers can aim for practical problem-solving through research to address social issues seeking to improve the well-being of communities responsive to real-world needs. Dewey argues that rather than solve traditional philosophical problems, we need to move on.

*Intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume—an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest. We do not solve them: we get over them. Old questions are solved by disappearing, evaporating, while new questions*

*corresponding to the changed attitude of endeavor and preference take their place.*  
(Dewey, 1910/2008, p. 14)

The complexity of designing, conducting and disseminating PAR helps explain the reason it is not more widely used as a workable approach to problem-solving through research. PAR incorporates pragmatism is problem-solving as a key outcome of research. When a problematic situation arises through the dynamic interaction between an individual(s) and their environment, it prompts inquiry. There is recognition of the problem and the search for a solution through action, leading to new insights that inform future experiences. Pragmatism marks a significant departure from longstanding philosophical debates concerning reality and truth. As Hall (2013) suggests, it introduced a novel epistemological framework. Knowledge is derived from justified assertions stemming from engagement and outcomes. Pragmatism is closely aligned with the promotion of social justice (Morgan 2014). It offers PAR a philosophical view of research that can bring transformation through actions and the importance of research for action. However, Thompson (1997) pointed out the contextual, problem-centred nature of pragmatism that, according to her, limits its ability to identify and analyse structural social problems. Critics like Thompson note that several practical challenges arise when identifying and framing a socially situated research problem. For example, individuals belonging to privileged social groups who benefit from existing power imbalances may not perceive hegemonic structures as problematic or deserving of investigation (Thompson, 1997). It offers PAR a possible way to think about how researchers make choices about how they contribute to systemic change and the impact of the entire research process on individuals, communities and society. Pragmatism argues that research is shaped by historical, cultural, and political contexts, which influence our choices and how we interpret the result of those choices (Morgan, 2014).

#### CRITICAL THEORY: CRITIQUE OF KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

Critical theory considers social scientists to be tasked with liberating themselves from unneeded restrictive traditions, ideologies, assumptions, power relations, and identity formation that inhibit or distort opportunities for autonomy (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). It broadens the research agenda by subjugating methodology to epistemic scrutiny. Critical theory allows the scientific community to explore the relationship between methodology, the criteria for what constitutes valid scientific knowledge, and the hierarchy of the scientific community within which research outputs are produced (Steffy and Grimes, 1986). This discussion will focus on the Frankfurt school perspective. Other elements added to the Frankfurt school will be presented later in this paper, such as feminism theory, as there is an overlapping framework for the emancipation of the voiceless (Habermas, 1987; 1987b; 2015). The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory was an assemblage of social scientists focused on applying Marxism to philosophy and society. Critical Theory investigates the effects of monopolies, electronics, technology, and capitalism on human life and culture. It also

explores human freedom and liberation (Corradetti, 2012). The institution urged researchers to focus on the topic. Fromm offered a redefined perspective on Marxism and psychoanalysis, seen as "the absent connection between ideological structure and socio-economic foundation" (Jay 1966, p. 92). The institution's fascination with psychoanalysis was marked by a complete departure from Marxism and a growing curiosity about the interaction between psychoanalysis and societal transformation. It also retained Fromm's understanding of the family's psychological and even pathological influence. Jay (1996) argued that there may have been some confusion stemming from ambiguous terminology. Several observers have stressed the significance of distinguishing between authoritarianism and totalitarianism. For instance, the patterns of obedience in Wilhelminian Germany versus Nazi Germany were fundamentally different. The study conducted by The Authoritarian Personality was primarily focused on the character type prevalent in a totalitarian rather than an authoritarian society (Adorno, 2019). So, it should not have been unexpected to discover that this new syndrome emerged because of a familial crisis where traditional paternal authority was being challenged.

Debates within the Frankfurt School regarding "emancipation" have been central to its political discourse and philosophical deliberations. The German term "Befreiung" encompasses more meanings than "emancipation." Its most common usage in German philosophical literature is "liberation," which suggests a transformative process. To Habermas scientific and social progress of knowledge is guided by three types of "knowledge constitutive interests"—technical, practical, and emancipatory. Habermas provided a model of social action coordination. It became evident how Habermas' explored topics concerning pathologies of society, moral development, and so on was elevated to a functionalistic model of society oriented toward an emancipatory purpose. This normative force can be detected from within language itself, in what he defined as the "*unavoidable pragmatic presuppositions of mutual understanding*". PAR involves participants collectively researching their situations that are thriving for social change. As noted by Kemmis (2008), PAR participants collectively researched their situations, thriving for social change. It emphasises self-reflection in the light of Lawrence Stenhouse's (1975) notion of the teacher as researcher, Donald Schön's (1983, 1987, 1991) views of the reflective practitioner, and Jürgen Habermas's (1972) views about the interests that shaped the generation of knowledge (knowledge-constitutive interests) through different kinds of natural and social sciences—technical, practical, and emancipatory interests. Horkheimer (1972) conceptualised critical theory as a form of theory motivated by a deep concern for overcoming social injustice and establishing more just social conditions. Thus, for PAR, critical theory can contrast with positivistic science, which aims to build scientific knowledge progressively by accumulating an empirical understanding of the world and taking for granted differences between facts and values. The notion of 'critique' in critical theory means exploring 'existing social issues to find how particular perspectives, social structures, or practices may be unjust, alienating or inhumane.

Habermas's (1984; 1987a) analysis of society in late modernity shows that traditional social frameworks, whether in governance or civil society, no longer maintain complete integration as unified "wholes" or "whole systems." Instead, what is observed are organisations, institutions, and groups engaging in interaction and conflict with each other rather than forming cohesive entities. Habermas's fundamental value for PAR is his reframing of discourse theory (Touraine, 1981). He provides the philosophical base to focus on 'public spheres' or 'communicative spaces' in which individuals and groups thematise and explore issues not from the perspective of whole systems, such as governments, but in terms of public discussions aimed at social transformation via meaning, solidarity, and identity for those who partake in them. Other critical theorists, Honneth and Farrell (1997), shifted their investigation to the struggle for recognition and the conflict in society among societal groups. To Honneth and Farrell, conflicts represented historical advancement and humanity's pursuit of emancipation. The "struggle for recognition", like the PAR approach to research, is characterised by the pursuit of emancipation by those most marginalised in a social context who resist a subjective negative experience of domination. To come to terms with such negations of subjective forms of self-realisation means to be able to transform their social context. Participatory action research ought to have an overarching critical component widening consciousness that current social structures or practices are producing inequality and oppression and that these can be contested in the search for emancipation as they exclude, dominate or oppress vulnerable groups. Rather than viewing the self as a singular and independent entity, it is now recognised as being influenced and shaped by social interactions and connections. The Self embodies a sense of plurality, reflecting the various social influences contributing to its formation and identity. Participatory action research sees the self as being shaped and located in context (not *in vitro*, controlled environment or a lab setting), which includes developmental-historical influences, cultural and discursive contexts, and social and material-economic interactions among individuals. The self emerges from a complex interplay of personal development, cultural dynamics, and socioeconomic conditions.

#### CONSTRUCTIVISM: HUMANS CO-CREATE KNOWLEDGE

Constructivism emphasises that knowledge is not a fixed entity but rather a dynamic construct co-created by individuals through interactions with their environment and others (Fosnot, 2013). As an epistemological paradigm, constructivism argues that individuals construct knowledge through social interactions and their lived experiences. It presents knowledge as an active, evolving construct shaped by the fluidity of human interactions. For example, Piaget's theory of cognitive development emphasises that knowledge is constructed through accommodation and assimilation, where learners modify their mental schemas based on new experiences (Piaget, 1973). It suggests that individuals build their understanding through stages of cognitive development. This process is driven by the need to achieve cognitive equilibrium, where learners seek to reconcile new information with their existing knowledge frameworks. In contrast, Vygotsky highlights the social nature of learning,

introducing the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept and the importance of cultural and linguistic tools in knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky emphasised the social context of learning, arguing that cognitive development is fundamentally a social process mediated by language and interaction with more knowledgeable others.

Constructivism underscores the importance of prior knowledge in the learning process. For example, the research context connects new information to participants' cognitive structures, facilitating more profound understanding and recreating knowledge. PAR is inquiry-based, project-based, and experiential research - emphasising participants' active engagement and real-world application. Knowledge is seen as a collective enterprise emerging from interactions within communities of practice where individuals engage in shared activities, contribute to knowledge, and negotiate meaning through social participation (Wenger,2011). For example, we see within PAR communities of practice in a research setting. Communities of practice consist of individuals who come together to collectively learn within a common area of interest: a tribe mastering survival, a group of artists experimenting with new expressions, engineers tackling similar challenges, students shaping their identities, surgeons discovering innovative techniques, and new managers supporting each other. These communities are groups of people who share a concern or passion for an activity and improve their skills through regular interaction (Wenger,2011). It challenges the objectivist view that knowledge exists independently of the knower, proposing that knowledge is a construct shaped by human experiences and social contexts. This aligns with the relativist stance that different individuals or cultures may construct valid interpretations of reality.

Knowledge is not passively received but actively built by the individual's cognitive processes (Von Glasersfeld, 1984; 2012; 2013). Therefore, knowledge is viable if it fits within the individual's experiential world, rejecting the notion of an objective truth. This aligns with the pragmatic view (previously explored) of truth as what works or is useful within a given context. The researcher emerges with an understanding that they have attained pertinent knowledge. Inquiry-based research encourages participants to engage in scientific practices, formulate questions, co-design projects, and construct explanations based on evidence. Constructivism asserts that knowledge is co-created through interactions between people and their environment (Uskoković, 2011). In PAR, this translates to a collaborative approach where researchers and participants (co-researchers) work together to identify problems, collect data, and develop solutions. The constructivist emphasis on social interaction and shared experiences aligns with PAR's commitment to involving community members in the research process, ensuring that their perspectives and knowledge inform the inquiry. PAR projects often start with community meetings where participants discuss issues of concern and decide on research questions. Researchers facilitate these discussions, helping to create an environment where everyone's voice is heard and valued. This collaborative approach enriches the research process and empowers participants, giving them a sense of ownership and agency.

Constructivism emphasises the importance of reflection in the learning process. Similarly, reflection is a cornerstone of PAR, where iterative planning cycles, action, observation, and reflection drive the research process. Constructivist theories support the idea that participants can critically examine their experiences, challenge assumptions, and develop a deeper understanding of the issues at hand through reflective practice. Like PAR, reflection sessions are integral to the research process. After each action cycle, researchers and participants discuss what worked, what did not, and why. These reflections inform the next action cycle, creating a dynamic and responsive research process. By engaging in reflective practice, participants become more aware of their learning processes and more capable of contributing to collective knowledge creation. For example, oppression persists as long as oppressive social conditions (like prejudice and inequality) exist (Sumerau and Denise, 2018). Recognising the macro-cultural and historical factors that contribute to oppression makes it challenging to avoid assigning blame to oppressors or victims. However, individuals rarely belong strictly to one category, as different contexts can place us in either role. Furthermore, oppression is most accurately understood as originating from external societal structures rather than individual personalities, thereby dehumanising everyone, as it hinders social equality, justice, and well-being (Freire, 1972; Romero and Afuape, 2015).

Constructivist thinking is guided by the importance of macro-cultural and historical context in shaping knowledge. PAR emphasises the need to understand research issues within their specific social, cultural, and historical contexts (De Oliveira, 2023). Constructivist theories support the view that knowledge cannot be separated from the environment in which it is developed, and PAR practitioners aim to situate research within participants' lived experiences. For example, a project addressing health disparities in a marginalised community would not just focus on collecting quantitative data on cuts to welfare support (De Oliveira, 2018). Instead, it would involve community members in discussions about their lived experiences and the historical and cultural factors influencing their livelihoods. This contextual understanding is needed to develop meaningful and valuable liberation (Moane, 2008; Hernández-Plaza, García-Ramírez, Camacho and Paloma, 2010).

The process of 'liberation,' known as 'conscientização' or 'conscientización,' involves a transformative, dialectical, dialogical, relational, and co-created journey in which individuals are liberated and liberate others emerging from constructivism foundations (Freire, 1972). However, liberation is not achieved by individualism but through collectivism, an essential foundation of PAR. Developing critical consciousness is liberatory because it creates the space for reflection, allowing people to be influenced by and influence the world, redesigning their communities as active creators rather than passive subjects of their experiences. This process is considered 'humanising' and promotes well-being. Humanisation requires:

*"an opening against all closure, flexibility against everything fixed, elasticity against rigidity, and a readiness to act against all stagnation"* (Martín-Baró, 1994, p.183).

Liberation via PAR is not a destination but a starting point—a lens for critically examining and transforming our actions in the world.

## FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY: REFLECTION ON FEMINIST INQUIRY

Feminist epistemology interrogates how knowledge is constructed, questioning whose voices are heard and marginalised (Nencel, 2014). It critiques traditional epistemologies that often privilege detached, objective viewpoints, advocating for recognising subjective, situated knowledge instead. PAR emphasises collaboration, action, and reflection and aligns closely with feminist epistemology (Kiguwa, 2019). For example, it highlights the importance of power relations in knowledge production (Chadderton, 2011). It critiques the dominance of privileged perspectives and advocates for including marginalised voices. In PAR, recognising power dynamics is crucial for ensuring all participants have an equal opportunity to contribute to the research process. Addressing power imbalances can create more inclusive and equitable research environments. In questioning "is the sex of the knower epistemologically significant" (Code, 1981), Code began to outline a feminist epistemological approach that differs from traditional or Anglo-American mainstream epistemology (Code, 1991). Code was one of many feminists in the 1970s who started addressing issues of masculinity, power, and authority in creating knowledge (Gilligan, 1977; Miller, 1976; Smith, 1974). These challenges emerged across various disciplines. In the natural, physical, and behavioural sciences, the focus was on uncovering masculine bias in science, which was often highlighted by the valorisation of traditional masculine traits (e.g., reason, rationality, autonomy, disconnection) (Gilligan, 1982; Keller, 1985; Lloyd, 1983).

Code (1987) argued that knowledge production should be examined regarding ethical and social dimensions. Knowing is a deeply social activity involving the responsibilities and obligations of knowledge and other knowers. Code (1987) critiqued traditional epistemologies that emphasise objective, detached knowledge, advocating for a more nuanced understanding that recognises the roles of context, perspective, and social interaction - epistemic responsibility. To Code, being accountable for the beliefs one holds, and the methods used to acquire knowledge must be a crucial part of the research. It requires critical self-awareness and a commitment to ensuring the researcher's views are well-founded and justifiable because knowledge is not produced in isolation but within social contexts and communities. Our understanding is influenced by interactions with others, and specific social and historical contexts shape our socio-cultural environments and perspectives. This situatedness impacts what and how we know, challenging the idea of a universal, context-independent knower. Also, power dynamics influence who is considered a legitimate knower and what is accepted as knowledge. The marginalisation of certain groups at the privilege of dominant perspectives can be detrimental to the research process and knowledge.

For instance, in a PAR project on healthcare access, feminist principles would require researchers to actively include women's perspectives, particularly those from marginalised communities (Fine and Torre, 2019; Novotny and Opel, 2019; Tolhurst et al., 2012). This involves gathering their input and ensuring their voices shape the research questions, methodologies, and outcomes. Feminist epistemology argues for the legitimacy of subjective and experiential knowledge (Etowa, Bernard, Oyinsan, and Clow, 2007; Michelson, 1996), challenging the notion that objective, detached knowledge is "superior" (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006). PAR similarly values participants' lived experiences, recognising that they offer critical insights into the studied issues. This alignment allows PAR to produce richer, more nuanced understandings of social phenomena. Reflexivity involves critically examining the researcher's positionality and impact on the research process. Feminist epistemology emphasises the need for researchers to be aware of their biases, assumptions, and power relations. In PAR, reflexivity is essential for maintaining ethical and equitable research practices. Researchers must continuously reflect on their role, the dynamics within the research team, and the implications of their actions.

For example, in a PAR project focused on community development, researchers regularly engage in reflexive practices, such as journaling or group discussions, to examine how their backgrounds and perspectives influence the research process (Gardner, 2018). This ongoing reflection helps mitigate biases and ensures the research remains responsive to the community's needs and perspectives. Both feminist epistemology and PAR are deeply committed to social justice. They aim to produce knowledge that can lead to meaningful social change and challenge oppressive structures. This commitment is reflected in the goals and outcomes of PAR projects, which seek to empower participants and address issues of inequality and injustice.

#### PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY: CITIZENS' CONCERNS ARE THE BASIS FOR CHANGE

Participatory democracy is an ever-changing political philosophy and practice emphasising the direct involvement of citizens in decision-making processes (Pateman, 1970; 2012). It challenges traditional representative democracy by promoting greater citizen engagement and ensuring that public policies reflect the real concerns and needs of the population (Barber, 2003; Vitale, 2006). At the core of participatory democracy is the idea that citizens should have a direct role in shaping policies. This involvement goes beyond voting to include active participation in public deliberations, policy formulation, and decision-making. Direct participation ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, leading to more comprehensive and legitimate outcomes. Deliberation is a critical component of participatory democracy (Elstub, 2018). It involves reasoned discussion and debate among citizens, allowing them to share their views, challenge assumptions, and develop informed opinions. Deliberative processes foster mutual understanding and consensus-building, essential for making decisions that reflect the collective will. Deliberation is a cornerstone of both, involving reasoned discussions among citizens to reach a consensus. PAR has a similar deliberative process where participants engage in reflective dialogue about research goals,

methodologies, and findings. This reflexivity ensures the research process is transparent and adaptive to the participants' evolving understanding and needs. Participatory democracy and PAR emphasise active involvement and empowerment of individuals in processes that impact their lives. Participatory Democracy focuses on enhancing democratic engagement by involving citizens in decision-making. Meanwhile, PAR emphasises collaborative research methodologies, in which community members actively participate as co-researchers.

Participatory democracy strives to include all segments of society, particularly marginalised and underrepresented groups (Lupien, 2018). Inclusivity ensures that the concerns of all citizens are heard and addressed, leading to more equitable and just outcomes. It recognises the value of diverse perspectives and the importance of giving voice to those historically excluded from decision-making processes. By involving citizens directly in governance, it seeks to empower individuals and communities, enhancing their capacity to influence decisions and effect change (De Freitas and Martin, 2015). As in participatory democracy, PAR can help address social inequalities and injustices by ensuring that marginalised groups have a say in decisions that impact them. Empowerment is achieved through education, capacity-building, and creating opportunities for meaningful engagement to solve social issues.

Through active participation, research participants can share experiences about governance, develop collective critical thinking skills, and become more empowered to change their communities, places of work and organisations. For example, participatory budgeting is a process in which citizens directly decide how to allocate a portion of public funds (Shah, 2007). It originated in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in the late 1980s, and cities have adopted it since. Through public meetings and deliberations, citizens propose and vote on projects, ensuring that budgetary decisions reflect their priorities and needs. Citizens' assemblies unite diverse citizens to deliberate on specific issues and make recommendations (Chwalisz, 2019). By involving ordinary citizens in the deliberative process, citizens' assemblies enhance democratic legitimacy and promote informed decision-making. PAR democratises the process of knowledge production. In traditional research paradigms, knowledge is often produced by experts and imposed on communities. However, PAR involves community members as co-researchers who contribute to defining research questions, collecting data, and analysing results. This democratisation ensures that research addresses the real concerns and needs of the community. When community members are actively involved in the research process, they are more likely to trust the findings and support the implementation of recommendations.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I explored the importance to understanding the underlying philosophical principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR). In this continuous cycle, participants, as key stakeholders, determined what needed to be researched, designed the research, and collected the necessary data to achieve social change. While PAR drew from various

philosophical viewpoints, this paper traced its philosophical "origins," specifically within pragmatism, critical theory, constructivism, feminist epistemology, and participatory democracy. The aim is to encourage researcher and practitioners an insight to context for using the PAR approach. This article connected PAR to its foundations by exploring some of its thinking, with particular attention to social justice issues as a broad agenda for social research.

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