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PARTICIPATING ACTION-RESEARCH AS A BRIDGE FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract: This article aims to analyze the relevance and impact of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in education and social transformation. IAP is a participatory and action-oriented research approach that seeks to achieve social transformation through collaboration between researchers and the community. This approach emerged in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, combining popular education, liberation theology, alternative communication, and liberation philosophy. The phases of the IAP will be discussed, including diagnosis, action planning, implementation, observation and reflection. The importance of observation and participation in PAR will be highlighted, as well as the need for interdisciplinary collaboration and a commitment to social justice. In addition, the concept of awareness will be analyzed, which implies critical awareness and the transformation of social and educational practices towards greater equity and justice. We address the importance of ethnography in the PAR, since it allows understanding the context that needs to be transformed and promotes the active participation of the community in the process of research and social transformation. Examples of PAR projects in different contexts, including rural and urban communities, will be presented, and their impact on education and social transformation will be analysed, and finally, the concept of “Public Interest Ethnography” (PIE) will be discussed. seeks to combine theory, practice, action and change in a globalized world. Finally, examples of EIP projects in different contexts, including marginalized communities and ethnic minorities, will be presented and their impact on education and social transformation will be discussed.

Keywords: participatory action research; Ethnography; Participant observation; social transformation; Education.

Although until the middle of the 20th century, research in social fields was restricted, practically, to quantitative studies (scientific method typical of the natural sciences, or hard sciences), several years later when different possibilities for the advancement of this arise. : the qualitative approach, which is developed in depth in studies on education. Between 1960 and 1970, a current began to be generated in Latin America in which Popular Education, Liberation Theology, Alternative Communication, Liberation Philosophy, and Participatory Action Research [IAP] converge (Ortiz and Borjas, 2008; p.617) in what would be known as the “emancipatory paradigm”. Fals Borda —who, as we will see, proposes himself as the founder of the IAP— defines it as “a necessary experience to progress in democracy, as a complex of attitudes and values, and as a working method that gives meaning to praxis in the terrain” (2008, p.3). For the author, the initials IAP best represent what is intended from Applied Research because “it is preferable [...] to specify the component of the action, since we want to make it understood that it is an action research that is participatory and an investigation that merges with action” (Rahman and Fals Borda, 1992; p.207). In it, theory and practice do not walk separately, but present an “interpretative rhythm”, a common and unique process (Cendales, Torres and Torres, 2004).

It is true that Kurt Lewin appears in many texts mentioned as the father of the PAR, and in a way he is, but it was Fals Borda, between 1925 and 2008, who developed the sociological trend of the PAR in Latin America, whose peak took place in the First World Symposium on Active Research (Cartagena, Colombia) in 1977; moment in history where radical transformations in society were “necessary and urgent” through those who had been “victims” of the dominant systems and of what is known as “development policies” (Rahman

and Fals Borda, 1992). In this symposium, in addition to Marx, Gramsci's work was highlighted as an "important theoretical guide" (p.15) from whom they took the category of 'organic intellectual' (external agents had to establish horizontal relationships with the people if they wanted to join a 'organic' avant-garde). Until that year, in the words of the authors, the work had been constituted from activism, a fact that sought to give importance to innovative research techniques such as 'social intervention' and 'militant research' (p.14). Said activism would be replaced by reflection, without losing momentum in the field work (p.14), supported by the necessary awareness ("conscientização"), as well as the commitment and involvement in the social process, highlighted by Paulo Freire. The researcher, therefore, had to "get involved in the struggles [...] and be willing to modify ideologies" (p.15). Adam Smith, through his definition of 'equity', mentioned "participation in the sense of sharing the product of social work". Translating such ideas became the work of various people around the world, which we can find collected in the bibliographies of Fals Borda (1987 and 1988).

Just five years later, in 1982, the first formal presentation on the IAP would be made at the Tenth World Congress of Sociology (Mexico), where it would establish its "identity" and its progress "from community, peasant and local issues", to "complex urban, economic and regional problems" (Rahman and Fals Borda, 1992; p.15). On the other hand, we can observe that the recognition of this investigative typology would also be recognized by the UN as a "viable alternative", which contradicts its practices of "donations", delivery of resources and "technical experts"; and which would mean a 'global' reach that many disciplines would 'take advantage of'.

In this very particular historical moment, the researchers saw the opportunity to

use the 'comparative method' (Nicaragua, Mexico, or Colombia: Fals Borda, 1988) and discovered the "need to prepare a new type of social activists" that would mean a period of expansion where the IAP would gain "intellectual maturity" (Ibid., p.16). During this stage, the authors that we have been mentioning would criticize that the IAP, as it gained respectability among the academy, became common among the civil service and the research community, who understood their work as an IAP "when in reality they did something else" (page: 16).

Without going so far back in time, today —and specifically in Spain— investigations framed as IAP are emerging that are also, deep down, something else; An example, as we will see detailed during the ethnographies in this work exposed, can be found in the Learning Communities proposed by Ramón Flecha. These, although they are not directly recognized as an IAP, have in themselves the idea of representing a change; but not the transformation of which Paulo Freire (from whom these Learning Communities arise) or Fals Borda speak. Perhaps, in their staging, they have gone from being what they intended to result in a way of creating a space within the Spanish educational paradigm that solves little. As the authors of *The Current Situation and Perspectives of Participatory Action Research in the World* recall, PAR, while it must include a rigorous search for knowledge, "is an open process of life and work, an experience, a progressive evolution towards a total and structural transformation of society and culture with successive and partially coincident objectives". Aspects of these are detailed in more detail in the section on educational models analyzed in the third part of this investigation.

In part —resuming part of the theoretical foundation given to ethnography, and its importance in understanding an environment

that is intended to be transformed— we owe to the efforts of Harry Wolcott (1993) to situate applied ethnography in educational contexts that it tries to maintain its anthropological dimensions, knowing exactly what its proposal is —must be— and what its intention is, despite the multiple ways through which it can be done (Velasco and de Rada, 1993). There are, and for this reason its differentiation, elements that make it particularly special to be applied in educational contexts, as long as the principles that have been extracted from the work carried out for decades are respected. In addition to this, Velasco and Reyes (2011) would point out the close relationship between the teacher and the anthropologist from the daily work, “where the role of ethnography in the development of educational research by the teacher is discussed; clarifying that the reflection is directed towards the teacher in front of the group and not to the teacher researcher. Ethnography and its usefulness in supporting pedagogical work at school is presented, as well as to exercise a holistic vision and address school issues; as a methodological alternative and a theoretical context in the analysis and reflection of daily educational practice”. Ethnography helps us to know and analyze, through listening, observation and participation, the environment that is intended to be transformed; it supposes the base and impulse to begin an IAP.

In the country where the I Symposium was held, in Colombia, an exponential amount of work related to education would be developed with the sum of different authors—from different social fields—and their works: Bernardo Restrepo, María Salazar, José Federman Muñoz Giraldo, Josefina Quintero Corzo, Raúl Munévar, among others (see in Colmenares, 2012; p.104). Many studies would also be concluded in Argentina, highlighting the work of Marta Iovanovich in relation to adult education. In the 1970s, Carr and

Kemmis (cited by Suárez, 2002) find reasons in the claim of teaching as a profession, giving particular interest to deliberate and practical processes. In Europe, the current gains strength especially in Spain through the studies of Pérez Serrano (1998). In Great Britain, John Elliot and Clem Adelman carried out the Ford Teaching project, and, for his part, Lawrence Stenhouse in charge of a Humanities Project, which gave impetus to “resurgence in the research-action methodology in the field of educational sciences” (Colmenares, 2012; p.105). Other schools, such as the ‘school of critical education’ developed by Paulo Freire and Iván Illich, would converge with the IAP.

As examples cited by Rahman and Fals Borda (1992, p.14), we can observe that from anthropology they resorted to a “social anthropology of support” (Colombes, 1982; and Hernández, 1987), from ethnology they would approach the native and local cultures with a “participatory reference scheme” (Stavenhagen, 1986; and Bonfil Batalla, 1981), where, in the words of Rahman and Fals Borda (1992, p.17), it would go beyond Sol Tax, Lévi -Strauss and Lewis. Some of these people, among others, would come to the PAR from the experience of “union activism” and others from a “reform perspective”, without any discipline having a monopoly on its application (Greenwood, 2000).

According to Marielsa Ortiz and Beatriz Borjas (2008), in 2004 the Adult Education Council of Latin America (CEAAL) created a network of non-governmental organizations for Popular Education (founded by Paulo Freire in 1982). Orlando Fals Borda, whose opinion had been requested in this regard, expressed that “now Freire’s teachings are better complemented with participatory action research.” The ideas of Fals Borda, regarding the IAP, and Paulo Freire, regarding Popular Education, remain latent in the authors’ work; Observing these that both would prioritize

the “problematization and reflection on the practice for its transformation” so that it “commits to social welfare and equity” (Ibid., p.626). In their work, in addition to the exposed relationships, the authors collect an experience carried out in Venezuela through the Fe y Alegría schools. This research-action, which signifies the true value of their work, includes several processes (Ibid., p.620-625), where —among others— the observation of reality would serve to generate a reflection on educational practice.

Is PAR needed today? Rahaman and Fals Borda wondered more than twenty years ago —and we can continue to question ourselves today. Yes, absolutely, because we can still see that this is the means to reach “new, more satisfactory forms of society and action” as a way to transform realities. This, as we have seen, makes the notion of utopia lose that ‘impossibility’ character that the dominant groups have wanted to emphasize. Still, and with great insistence at a global, national and local level, there are unequal relationships that generate new forms of domination; Therefore, the IAP is a global movement whose destiny is to “stimulate popular knowledge” through an action that causes social change (Ibid., p.19). The IAP, which under these definitions is conferred as a way to achieve a utopia (a community dream), will therefore be a “heuristic” research procedure, and “an altruistic way of life” (Ibid., p.18) where it is it has been working—and is working—for the “working classes” to defend themselves from exploitation. This way, we will be able to achieve “a fairer, more productive society — not in terms of capitalist productivity—, and more democratic” (Boudon, 1988).

Colmenares (2012) exposes in her work part of the investigative experiences carried out by her during the first decade of the new century. These will be exposed as “pedagogical experiences in the classroom” (where she

also includes “pedagogical experiences with teaching peers”), as “research for graduation purposes”, and as “institutional projects”. His work resulting from such experiences shows the possibility of fostering “spaces for the empowerment of research in their daily classroom practices” (p.113); and that even today, and with more reason than ever, there is a need and importance to continue developing participatory action research.

Antonio Latorre (2007, p.28) would see that this differs from others because it requires action as part of the research process, where the focus is on the values of the professional person rather than on their methodological considerations, since we are talking of an investigation about the person (see in Colmenares, 2002; p.106); that is to say, it is intended to transform the practice (be it social or educational), at the same time that it seeks to understand said practice among all those that generate it.

From such contexts, the IAP has three particularities (Eizagirre and Zabala, 2006s, p.1): research as a reflective, systematic, controlled and critical process; action as the primary representative of the source of knowledge; and participation, where everyone in the community is involved together with professionals (quoted by Colmenares, 2002; p.109). Jara (1985), considering it as an integral dimension of the Popular Education process whose characteristics are based on the non-separation of the researching subject from the research object, characterizes it for its participatory imminence, its use for understanding reality as a whole. articulated that allows to discover the causes of social phenomena, values the knowledge of the people and that allows to appropriate the capacity to investigate.

There have been many who have tried to organize the IAP in phases. In part, this is due to one of the first proposals described by Kurt

Lewin and his classic research-action-training triangle where he presents cycles of reflective action (planning, action and evaluation). Such phases imply a diagnosis, an action plan that will later be executed, and the constant reflection of those involved (Colmenares, 2002; p.107). Stephen Kemmis (1988) would add to Lewin's postulate that this is organized along two axes (strategic and organizational), where participatory observation must be highlighted. A decade later, Pérez Serrano (1998) would explain that such steps begin with a "diagnosis", then the construction of the Action Plan, the implementation, the observation that runs through the entire process, and the reflection and interpretation that could give a new replanning in case it was necessary.

Ana Mercedes Colmenares (2002) presented four phases: 1) discover the theme; 2) construction of the Action Plan; 3) execution of the strategy; and 4) closure of the investigation. From our point of view, it is not so much proposing it as a series of 'mandatory' stages —precisely, Fals Borda spoke about the 'beautiful' aspect of PAR in its characteristic of 'surprising us'—, but knowing that there are several possible steps, some of which are unavoidable, in the run that we are about to trace at the beginning of our investigation so that it is recognized as IAP.

Observation (with reference to this as the research technique already described), which many have exposed but which we will highlight again from the proposals by Kemmis (1988), would be directly related to PAR (Greenwood, 2000) because both concepts (observation and participation) "are conceptualized from collaborative and reciprocal research and from an initiative in favor of social change."

Davydd Greenwood, in his work *From observation to participatory action research...*, clarifies the notion of participant observation, not only through an internal critique of social

anthropology, but also by confronting it with the different ways in which it and social action they are generated in the field of action research (p.29). This observation, which has gained validity through prolonged contact with people in the communities where the research was planned, is a fundamental part of PAR insofar as it is inherent to the process in fieldwork (p. 30). From his own concept of IAP, it appears not as a discipline, nor a faculty, even a method; but as "a group of multidisciplinary practices oriented towards a structure of intellectual and ethical commitments (p.32) through collaboration between the researcher and those who are "owners of the problem" (co-generative research), which from the perspective of the IAP must not be considered as "informants" who give information to the "expert" person (p.35); but as active experts with essential information.

In the words of Anisur Rahman and Orlando Fals Borda (1992), "PARI was not —and has not been— just a research methodology in order to develop symmetrical, subject/subject, and counter-oppressive models of social, economic, and social life. politics, but also an expression of social activism. All of this, together with what was mentioned, turned out to be the praxis of the activists themselves (IAP researchers), to the point of believing that an interdisciplinary orientation known as 'praxiology', or "science of praxis" is necessary (O'Connor, 1987, p.13). These ideas, quoting (Rahman and Fals Borda, 1992) "are nourished by a return to nature in its diversity and are strengthened as a survival reaction to the types and acts of domination that have this half-destroyed world, culturally less rich and threatened by deadly forces [...] If the IAP facilitates this task (of changing what has been) in such a way that we win freedom without fury and achieve an illustration with transparency, it is possible to justify the full permanence of its postulates. It will be its

function to produce a link in practice and theory. [...] A commitment to life”.

After Freire’s work in 1970, Pedagogy of the oppressed, understood as a “discursive event” or “founding text” (Foucault, 1983; pp.199-200; and Gottlieb and La Belle, 1990), work began to develop in around what we will understand as ‘research for social transformation’. This links perfectly with the IAP, which, as we have observed: aims to transform and do it from practice-action together with the ‘owners of the problem’. It is about observing to learn. The idea of the person researching as a passive-objective-subject before what he intends to analyze is dispensed with. Contact and experience in the community with which one is going to work is required, applied research is necessary -even more so, involved- and this is achieved through the development of an action together with the people, in the group, in way to participate in the emancipation process that is intended. This transforms the landscape of research in the United States and Europe, and not only in Educational Anthropology, but also in Social Anthropology and in the fieldwork of other social disciplines.

What used to try to define the discourse of society, now, being deconstructed in order to be reconstructed from a group identity with the society in which and for which it is going to work, is looking for a research figure who empathizes with people, who coexists with them, to integrate into the community, so that they collaborate in the process of emancipation of said population by making available tools generated from their own discourse: the aforementioned ‘awareness’. It is not only necessary to know the social needs of the community, but to adhere to the community in such a way that it groups the efforts required to transform reality based on the particular needs of said group.

Thanks to Freire —among other people—,

the field of Educational Anthropology worldwide takes on a new meaning; the sense of social transformation. Freire (1979) would write in this regard that “dialogue is an existential requirement. And being a meeting that supports the reflection and action of its subjects channeled towards the world that must be transformed and humanized, it cannot be reduced to a mere act of depositing ideas from one subject in the other, nor become a simple change of ideas consummated by their exchangers”.

It is about practicing a critical awareness among the community, to learn literacy or to achieve another type of ability, all from the real and concrete experience that is discovered through families, students, education, work and problems. social, among many other aspects. From his notion of ‘cultural diversity’, the concept of ‘crossing borders’ in education appears (Torres, 2007) based on the “imperative ethical need” to cross them if we try to educate for empowerment and not for oppression. This ‘crossing the lines’ of the ‘difference’ would be, in the words of Carlos Alberto Torres (2007, p.2), a central theme of the ‘transformative learning for social justice that will manage to place us far from ‘banking education as an act’ of depositing in which the students are the depositaries and the educator who deposits” (Freire, 1970; p.75).

‘Popular education’, which seemed to be replacing ‘liberation education’ in the late 1970s, proposed itself from the association with ‘conscientization’ (La Belle, 1987; p.205-208). Although others would associate ‘popular education’ with a “move away from awakening”, if we look at the programs produced from this practice we can appreciate many elements that derive from Freire’s pedagogy (Gottlieb and La Belle, 1990; p.14). The practice of popular education begins, on many occasions, from a community investigation where the situation is analyzed

and the derived action known as participatory research (Ibid., p.14) and that has a lot to do with the PAR.

The transformative learning that will lead to greater social justice will be achieved when people, who represent their communities, have a better understanding of their cultural and social richness, of themselves as individuals and as a group, and of the world (Torres, 2007). For Freire, a model of such learning must analyze the conditions of alienation and exploitation of society, so as to create the necessary bases for ‘understanding and comprehension’; which links to the theoretical contributions of Pierre Bourdieu (1977). *Conscientização*, from what has been mentioned, is a proposal for social change, for [self]transformation towards a fairer education, which challenges the powers that are exercised from capitalism, from hegemony, from social hierarchies, which cause relationships that are nothing equitable. By rethinking our past we can get to know ourselves better, so we must analyze the bases of our present condition and develop a plan where the possibilities (and also the limitations) of our “being in the world” are clear (Torres, 2007); so that we reach the ‘viable unprecedented’: utopia as something new that can be carried out. This awareness will have to be understood as necessary, and praised, by those who are going to carry out their research, by practitioners and activists (Ibid., p.4).

Peggy Reeves Sanday (2013) would speak from the concept of “public interest ethnography” (PIE) to achieve “combining theory, practice, action and change” while in a globalized world. In this sense, the EIP would be the union between interpretation and change in the public domain (p.199). Jean Schensul (1985; p.153) would present three specific cases in a Hispanic community in Hatford (USA) where ethnography as research was used as a source of changes in

the services that education provided for such a community. A sample of social change through education, of the relationships between the educational system and the social community, as a way of understanding that it must serve the community from the ‘training of the community’ to be converted into researchers for action.

Guajardo, Gujardo and Casaperalta (2008) helped us to situate ourselves specifically in what is intended when we talk about social transformation through education. The story places us before a non-profit educational organization called Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, in South Texas, through the story of Carmen, one of its students. Using ethnography, the audiovisual, and storytelling, we are presented with a work that invites us to reflect on what role we have, what we can contribute and how to do it, in a way that generates change at work, in school, and in the community where we do our homework. It guides us through answers around the topic of what activist research must look like, what theories and methods are emerging for community change through education, and what impact concepts like “self, place, and community” will have when to be the central theme of the educational process. In her story, the importance falls on the personal transformation that Carmen goes through—a high school girl in an immigrant community who through a project emancipates herself as a defender of freedom to empower her community— until she becomes an activist researcher.

For all these reasons, the IAP is positioned as a bridge towards social transformation, ergo educational, where activism is presented as research that is nourished by the commitment to work that must position us as witnesses of change in people, in their families. and in institutions.

“I have been involved in this work for half of my life. I love my family, and I love the idea of knowing my community, and the idea of being able to change it through research”.

Excerpt from a conversation with Carmen in the work of Guajardo (2008; p.8).

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