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# Epistemological Breaks for Social Work Training and Practice: Participatory Research Through Photovoice in Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods

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## ABSTRACT



The capabilities approach and participatory research are effective means to promote epistemic justice in higher education. Both have important roles, given the current commoditisation of University knowledge and professional practice, which do not promote inclusive epistemes that take into account the social problems of disadvantaged groups. Facilitating educational experiences that generate epistemological breaks and promote epistemic justice is a necessary task. Contributing to it was one purpose of the teaching innovation project carried out by the University of Jaén (Andalusia, Spain). The project aimed to stimulate collective reflection and dialogic encounters between complementary knowledge fields. It had three focal points: developing capabilities in students; fomenting participation and collective reflection in the community; heightening the visibility of people living in disadvantaged areas and conveying these realities, and people's knowledge and concerns, to policymakers. The results show that co-production of knowledge by universities and local communities favours learning and practical reasoning; increases recognition and respect for diversity; foments participation and the environment necessary for citizens to exercise their political capabilities. This paper presents only the project's first focal point; specifically, it shows how horizontal knowledge production using Photovoice can enhance in students certain capabilities of great relevance in their future profession.

## KEYWORDS

Higher education; capabilities approach; participatory action-research; photovoice; social work; epistemic justice

## Introduction

At its best a university education is an instrument for the personal development and autonomy of students and, through them, it can be an instrument for the betterment of society. Types of research and knowledge production that are horizontal, participatory, democratic and equitable can help develop capabilities in students and instructors, thus expanding their professional horizons

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and improving the practices of social agencies, whilst promoting epistemic justice. To the extent that this occurs, academic knowledge and graduates will be better able to contribute to the autonomy and development of the groups with whom they work, especially the most vulnerable. This is essential in the current context of utilitarianism and commoditisation of university teaching, research and professional practice and, while important for all disciplines, it takes on greater relevance in disciplines closely linked to disadvantaged populations, such as social work.

In this regard, and in the words of Walker and Boni (2020), with this paper we intend to (1) show “the potential to expand people’s multi-dimensional capabilities and functionings in and through participatory processes and projects” from the sphere of higher education; and also to (2) determine the most relevant capabilities and functionings for social work that should therefore be developed by students.

This paper describes a teaching innovation project undertaken by the Universidad de Jaén and some of the lessons learned from it. Most work took place during the academic years 2019–2020 and 2020–2021, coordinated by faculty members who teach in the undergraduate social work programme. The project, based on participatory research and the Photovoice method, combined both methodological-practical learning and theoretical-conceptual reflection. It provided the opportunity to initiate participatory processes in both the classroom and the community and also to reflect on the capabilities reinforced in the participants, namely, social work students and faculty, citizens and -to a lesser degree- social workers and policymakers.

The experience has shown how participatory research and the capabilities approach can, through commonalities in their epistemological underpinnings, assist each other in the sphere of university teaching and research. It has also revealed the potential of these approaches to contribute to improved professional practice, especially regarding the relationship between public agencies, citizens in general and society’s most vulnerable groups.

Below we present a brief review of the recent context of social work training and practice in Spain. It is followed by a synthesis of the epistemological pre-suppositions of participatory methodologies and the primary features of the Photovoice method. Then the teaching innovation project implemented in alignment with these ideas is described. The last two sections focus on results, particularly the capabilities developed by social work students and the main conclusions.

## **Social Work Practice and Training in Spain: A Critical Overview**

In the 1970s the adaptive model of social work became the object of considerable criticism by a number of different ideologies. In Spain, the criticism put forward by the Reconceptualisation Movement, which arose in Latin

America, was particularly important. Much of the criticism shared a transformative and emancipatory framework and sought epistemological ruptures with the paternalistic charity/assistance model prevalent in the final years of the Franco regime. Although these approaches were more a theoretical and political reflection than practical applications, they did have the effect of orienting some social services towards community social work, which – in alliance with working class movements – advocated giving subjects greater protagonism and achieving horizontality in relationships between professionals and communities. Such ideas, which were closely related to the rediscovery of popular knowledge by PAR (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991), the incorporation of “absent agents” (Santos 2018) and the concept of epistemic justice (Fricker 2013), were transferred to the academic world in the adoption, by some social work schools, of this transformative conceptualisation of the field. Despite these interesting antecedents, in Spain, this orientation has not been dominant, in either academic training or professional practice.

It is well known that social work praxis is conditioned by the institutional context of the social services agencies. And in Spain, although the ideological constructs vary in intensity depending on the political parties in power in the different autonomous communities, in general, neo-liberal objectives are what shape social policy (García and Rendueles 2017). This has led to a culture of austerity and the managerialism of the New Public Management (NPM) approach, which introduces market techniques and procedures to public administration, orienting it towards outputs, viewing citizens as clients and favouring the outsourcing of services, all with a high level of bureaucracy. The DEC Report on Social Services (2021) indicates that in Spain, far from improving, the bureaucratisation of the system has worsened over the years; “bureaucratic complexity and cumbersome red tape have increased and constitute real barriers that prevent people from effectively using benefits and social services when they most need them” (AEDGSS 2021, 26).

In consequence, social work itself has to a certain degree incorporated neo-liberal objectives, organisational culture and professional praxis. This translates into increased distance between policymakers, front-line workers and citizens. Rather than accompaniment and care, the relationship that this elevated bureaucracy promotes between social workers and their clients is one of control and supervision. Jones, from a very critical stance, puts it this way: “Too often today social workers are often doing little more than supervising the deterioration of people’s lives” (Jones et al., 2004). This state of affairs is not conducive to proximity or empathy and certainly not to the co-construction of knowledge proclaimed in the commentary notes of the Global Definition of Social Work (IFSW 2014).

Additionally, the 2008 economic crisis and Spain’s austerity policies and budgets cuts aggravated exclusion and inequalities, and sparked a new wave of debate about professional practice. The high number of petitions and the

reduction in resources led to widespread discontent. Part of this professional frustration gave rise to social movements and demonstrations known as “Tides of citizen revolt in defence of social welfare” and, among them, the “Orange Tide” which purported to defend the social services system. The impact of these movements was limited but interesting because they questioned the *status quo* of the profession. However, in the end, their critiques did little more than call for a return of the system as it was and, as indicated by García and Rendueles (2017), they rarely examined the role of social intervention in social reproduction and the power relations linked to the role of the expert, individualist methodologies and the control functions of social work. We believe these questions are key in bringing a new focus to academic research, deeper reflection in the classroom and the opportunity for instructors and future professionals to develop their critical capabilities.

But, as mentioned above, this neo-liberal context, although it is not explicit in most of social work’s academic discourse, is certainly reflected in the orientation of university studies. The Bologna Plan, the competency approach and, in short, the adaptation of public university training to match market demands, are the corollary of the neo-liberal shift.

Thus, the managerial orientation is becoming increasingly prevalent in training, which focuses more on functions of control, supervision and resource management, and less on the accompaniment and care of vulnerable people and the development of their autonomy and social participation capabilities. The symbolic professional frame of reference (shown, for example, in widespread use of the business term “client”) makes it difficult to consolidate the social worker’s support role through horizontal relationships, trust and the capability of empathy. And, further, it does not take into account the power asymmetry underlying the “expert” and “supervision” role that predominates in relationships between social workers and members of society who seek out social services.

In short, in Spain, as in other parts of Europe, the late twentieth century saw the entrenchment of professional and knowledge production models that hinder the incorporation of different knowledges, the promotion of epistemic justice and the development of capabilities of fundamental importance in social work.

Along these lines, Boaventura-de-Sousa Santos reminds us that the University is an institution of great relevance for meeting society’s needs but that such needs are not limited to the market’s needs. On the contrary, the University’s goal should be to “form full human beings and full citizens and not just human capital subjected to market fluctuations like any other capital” (Santos 2010, 55). There is thus a need for “epistemology of absent knowledge”, of the incorporation of the “absent agents” of traditional-dominant academic knowledge (Santos 2018) and of a reconstruction of knowledge in which these actors become epistemic suppliers (Walker, Martínez-Vargas, and

Mkwanzani 2019). This would have a decisive impact on the design of academic curricula (Santos 2010), which could lead to a new relationship between teaching and research and reinforce the role of education as a means to strengthen democracy and social participation (Boni, Lozano, and Walker 2010).

In our opinion, orienting higher education towards the capabilities approach would lead to a better response to the changes in how the profession is understood and practiced and also the challenges that social workers face. For Abad and Martín (2015), this requires a paradigm shift based on an exercise in reflection and professional self-conceptualisation. This is why careful consideration must be given to which capabilities need to be strengthened during training, so that in the future social work praxis can contribute to greater epistemic justice and more inclusive social services.

In terms of methodology, the theoretical-practical training provided by Participatory Action Research (PAR) also generates ruptures that promote epistemic justice and participatory decision-making, issues that are especially valuable for research and work with disadvantaged groups. The next section offers a synthesis of the epistemological presuppositions of participatory methodologies and the Photovoice method.

### ***Methodological Approach: Participatory Research and the Photovoice Method***

Epistemological inclusivity is grounded in and can be pursued using different approaches. Post-positivist approaches such as the dialectical perspective and the participatory paradigm contribute valuable elements to epistemological inclusivity and epistemic justice. These approaches promote processes that are crucial for the development of critical, reflective and emancipatory knowledge. Such knowledge, when generated through collective reflection, can provide consensus-based solutions to social problems or to research contexts, helping to build more just societies.

The theoretical contributions that nourish the participatory approach are multiple and varied (Fals-Borda, Freire, Habermas, Lewin, Maturana, Villasante, Galtung ...). Moreno and Espadas (2009) point out five basic presuppositions found in the work of these authors and that have become the foundations of this approach: (a) deconstruction of the subject/object relation in research (b) awareness, self-reflection, emancipation (c) participation (d) rediscovery of popular knowledge and (e) scientificity.

With these epistemological underpinnings, Villasante (1994) has pointed out that when participatory research processes begin there is an epistemological break with traditional social research. This early break constitutes the first “leap” away from other methodologies and it happens when the group starting the process engages in “self-reflection” (Caballero, Martín, and Villasante 2019). This reflective stage involves profound thinking about the group’s

ethical positioning and the project's *why* and *for whom*, and it must take place collectively and from the project's very outset. It is a leap towards the construction of a shared framework for research that cannot be reversed, because it represents an advancement and a rupture with other methodologies and because it serves as a guiding line (flexible but clearly defined) for subsequent steps in the process. This exercise in collective reflection also helps establish mutual trust, which enhances and facilitates later work and deepens the involvement of the participants.

In short, the starting point is neither the methodology nor the techniques but rather the paradigm upon which the process is based. Other techniques are used but not with the methodologies and epistemes usually used; instead, it features implicative and participatory positions (Villasante 2002). That is the reason that such a wide range of methodologies and techniques can be implemented when using this paradigm (Red-CIMAS 2015). One of them is Photovoice.

Even though the creator of Photovoice herself has described it at times as a method (Wang 1999, 185), in the subsequent development of her writings it is understood as a Participatory Action Research methodology. According to Wang, Photovoice enables people to identify, represent, and enhance their community through a photographic technique. It has three main goals: “to enable people (1) to record and reflect their personal and community strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through group discussions of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers” (Wang 1999, 185). According to participatory paradigm underpinnings regarding the rediscovery of popular knowledge, Wang highlights that Photovoice must carry out programmes and policies “by and with” the population instead of “on” the population, valuing knowledge grounded in experience and communities’ intelligence. She points out that Photovoice is a methodology that enables communities and disadvantaged groups to express, reflect and communicate their everyday lives and is thus an alternative to positivist ways of knowing, in that it listens to and learns from people’s own portrayal of their lives (Wang 1999). In the project presented herein Photovoice is conceived as a method within the theoretical framework of PAR, which gives knowledge production a transformative intentionality and political influence, in this case, to improve the conditions of two disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Andalusia. Photovoice clearly has a pragmatic orientation. Its validation depends not only on the appropriate use of techniques but also on its usefulness for the people involved and for its ability to solve their problems.

Using the PAR approach makes it possible to promote epistemic justice for vulnerable people and groups involved in processes of co-production of knowledge between University and society (Leivas-Vargas et al. 2020). The knowledge produced is conditioned by “how” it is built, and also by “for whom” and “why”. The techniques used in Photovoice-Jaén were guided by the premises of collective production of knowledge, the horizontality of teams and the recognition of



“daily-life expertise”. Group reflection and participation in public discourse have contributed to the development of capabilities that heighten personal autonomy, recognition and dignity among participants. In this project Photovoice was not used as a mere technique for the extraction of information for subsequent analysis by researchers, but rather as a method with transformative power thanks to the inclusion of “absent” knowledge and its focus on creating emancipatory knowledge (Santos 2018). Likewise, the researcher’s role has been to facilitate processes while the participants had an active voice in the process and the use of information. The following section discusses the details of the project.

### **Voicing Individual and Collective Experiences (Voice) in our Neighbourhoods: Objectives and Procedure**

This section describes the process undertaken and some of the lessons learned in the project called “The participatory approach and the Photovoice tool as a technique for research and intervention in vulnerable contexts and disadvantaged areas”.

It was a teaching innovation project with research objectives in three categories: (a) developing student capabilities; (b) fomenting participation and collective reflection in the community, offering vulnerable segments of the population the opportunity to take part in decision-making processes; (c) increasing the visibility of conditions in the city’s more disadvantaged neighbourhoods and conveying this information to the authorities responsible for public policies.

The project involved two neighbourhoods in Jaén that are considered disadvantaged areas. It was innovative in both its theoretical–conceptual learning and its practical dimension and provided the opportunity to engage in participatory methodologies in the classroom and the community.

In each neighbourhood a team was organised, consisting of students, faculty members, adult residents and children aged 11 or 12 and, in some activities, social service workers and policymakers. Information was produced and analysed using the Photovoice method (Wang and Burris 1997). A series of training workshops were held, with sessions devoted to taking photos, selecting topics and analysing images. The photographs taken by the citizens themselves were the visual-narrative resource (Martinez-Vargas, Walker and Mkwanzani 2020) used to promote collective reflection and self-analysis about the themes selected by the participants. These narratives became “specifically epistemic forms of justice” (Walker and Mathebula 2020, 193) that led to the creation of action proposals that were later conveyed to policymakers. Students took part in the preliminary processing and analysis, the return of information to community members and also the transfer of results.

Although the project achieved significant results in terms of community activation, this paper presents only the results related to the training of social work



students. All together, 320 people participated in different ways, with varying levels of involvement. Fifty-five work sessions took place, both in and out of the academic schedule (Table 1).

The logic of PAR was followed, although the methodological design had different phases: self-reflection; recruitment of participants; training of trainers; field work; diffusion and wrap-up. In practice, however, project design is a spiral process that undergoes continual adjustment (Ander-Egg 1999).

### ***Phase One. Reflection, Ethical Positioning and Configuration of Driving Group***

This phase was devoted to collectively building a shared framework for research and mutual confidence, based on the premises of epistemic justice, the social utility of the University and the participatory approach. It was a period of epistemological rupture, involving joint reflection by community members and the faculty members organising the project. Numerous meetings took place between the project organisers and a variety of neighbourhood actors to talk about the *why* and *for whom* of this kind of project, and also to promote the use of participatory strategies in local community planning (Espadas-Alcázar 2017). All of this contributed to the project's final design.

### ***Phase Two. Recruiting and Training the Trainers***

According to Boni and Walker (2013), capabilities are the real opportunities that students have to acquire the functionings they value. Therefore, the teachers decided that the first student selection criterion would be whether the candidate valued the opportunity to develop capabilities that would promote the acquisition of functionings related to the facilitation of community processes using participatory methodologies. Non-probabilistic sampling was performed with the following criteria (1) being a fourth year student of social work; (2) having a positive view of the implementation of participatory methodologies in community research; (3) being willing and able to commit to the project. Gender inclusion criteria was not used but because of the strong professional and academic feminisation of the field of social work<sup>1</sup> the team ended up being composed entirely of women. To recruit participants from the community, informative sessions were held with neighbourhood residents and directors of a primary school. Then there was a public presentation of the project to all the social agents involved.

Next, we focused on training the research team so that its members could subsequently assume a role of facilitators in the target communities. The activities in this phase were intended to promote in students the group of individual capabilities related to knowledge in the framework of PAR. Training workshops about PAR, the Photovoice method and basic photography were held. In



**Table 1.** Phases of project-data.

PHASES	Date	Session (n) Task	S*	V*	M*	T*	P*	C*	F*
Reflection	2019	Reflection and recap of previous ideas		2		1		1	2
Recruitment of participants	May 2019	1 Informative session	128						2
	Sept. 2019	1 Presentation of the project	16	8		6	2	3	2
Training the trainers	September-October 2019	1 Workshop on participatory photograph method	12	8		3	2	3	2
		3 Workshop on Photovoice technique	12	11	11	1		3	2
		3 Workshop on introductory photography	8					1	1
Fieldwork	October 2019	2 Transect-technique, walks through neighbourhoods	12	3	7		3	1	2
		3 Group outings for picture-taking	8		7	3		1	2
		3 Organisation and planning	12						1
		2 Design and definition of themes	8	11		2		2	2
	November 2019	5 Workshop for analysis and discussion of photographs	6	8	10	4		2	2
		5 Data analysis and processing	12						1
		2 Workshop for the selection of photos	6	12				1	2
		1 Day of team-building activities	7		9	3		1	2
	December 2019	2 Workshop on community self-diagnosis	6		10	2		2	2
		2 Workshop for analysis and discussion of photographs	6		10	2		1	2
	January 2020	1 Preparation of report on results	11						2
Dissemination	September 2020- February 2021	5 Organisation of the photo exhibition	14		4	1			2
		1 Inauguration of the photo exhibition	5	6		12	3	2	5
		6 Dissemination in media	1	1	-	-	-	1	1
		2 Dissemination at scientific conferences	1	-	-	-	-	-	2
Close	March-April 2021	3 Creation of proposals	2	3	-	-	-	-	2
		3 Evaluation of results	6	7	-	-	-	-	2

Note. S\* students; V\* neighbours of El Valle; M\* children of La Magdalena; T\* professionals in the community (teachers, social workers, etc.); P\* politicians; C\* Collaborator staff; F\* Faculty.

addition, *transectos*<sup>2</sup> took place in the neighbourhoods and a cognitive mapping technique was used (Francés et al. 2015). These techniques allowed for a rupture with testimonial injustice (Fricker 2013) by promoting in students the capability of establishing “horizontal social relationships” and that of “respect, dignity and recognition” of vulnerable groups.

### ***Phase Three. Fieldwork. Analytical and Proposal Dimension: Contact with the Community, Analysis, Idée-force and Prioritisation of Proposals***

The taking of photographs followed different strategies in each neighbourhood. The students acted as facilitators and accompanied the participants during the process, helping or advising, in a horizontal relational plane. The photo-sessions were followed by analysis and group discussion in order to discover the principal issues of concern in each neighbourhood. The research team used the SHOWeD question method (Hergenrather et al. 2009) to facilitate content analysis, debate and discussion of the photos. Finally, consensus was reached regarding the most relevant topics and the most representative photos were selected to create a community narrative. These techniques promoted the development of hermeneutical capabilities (Fricker 2013) such as “critical thinking” and “co-production of knowledge”. The students then took charge of gathering, processing the images and narratives in order to systematise it all and prepare it for an information return workshop with participants in subsequent sessions. Performing these roles helped students to develop the capabilities of “knowledge”, “co-production of knowledge” and “autonomy” which are extremely valuable in social work practice.

A second round of dialogic workshops delved deeper into the narratives of the participants. The participants discussed and tried to reach consensus regarding the main community problems and how to tackle them, in a process that sought to ensure that community members made the decisions, thus promoting proposal-making capabilities. With these techniques students strengthened the capabilities of “critical thinking”, “co-production of knowledge” and “autonomy”. The proposals were included in a report presented later to policymakers.

### ***Phase Four. Sharing Visions from Within the Neighbourhoods***

For a participatory process to have any political impact, it is vital that society in general receive information about the results. To heighten the visibility of these disadvantaged areas, an exhibition was organised in the *Museo Íbero*. Students designed a communications plan. They also georeferenced the places appearing in the photos of Photovoice-Jaén. These activities promoted the capabilities of “autonomy”, “knowledge” and “horizontal social relations” in students and at

the same time facilitated the development of the “voice” and “aspiration” capabilities in the participating communities.

### ***Phase Six. Close***

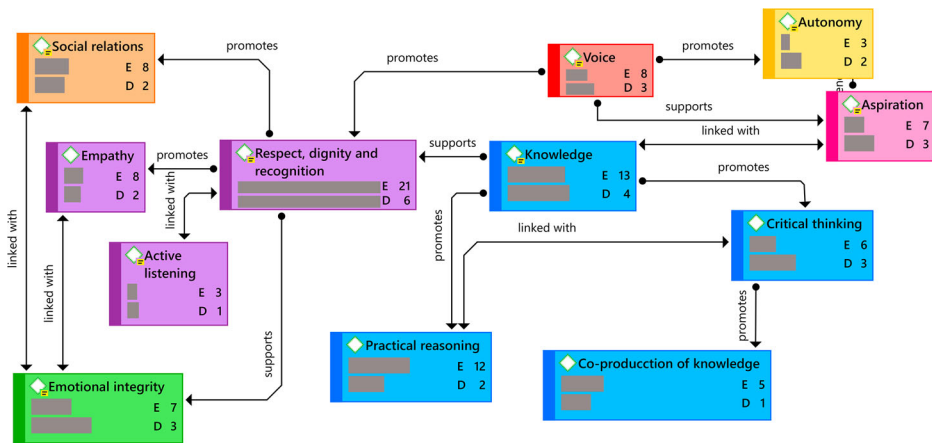
In PAR methodology, due to the circularity of the action, there must be space for the ongoing evaluation of the process, which facilitates the review, fine-tuning and reconsideration of strategies. The research team decided that a triangulation of different techniques would be used for evaluation, because this would give a broader field of analysis, the chance to contrast and verify results and also the opportunity to develop new ideas if different results were obtained (Creswell et al. 2007). Both main researchers conducted a continuous assessment by recording observations through the field diary tool. For the final evaluation two strategies were used. To promote the students’ self-evaluation of their attitudes and participation, we used the Visual Thinking learning model (Moss and Brookhart 2016) in which participants use a target, or dartboard, to measure their learning. To further explore subjective experiences, Focus Group (FG) sessions were held to collect student perceptions of the impact that the PAR methodology had on their teaching-learning process and of PAR as a means to develop the capabilities that higher education supposedly promotes. These techniques reinforced the capabilities of “critical thinking” and “co-production of knowledge”.

## **The Development of Capabilities Through the Participatory Action Research Conducted as Part of the Photovoice-Jaén Project**

In this section the main results are discussed. The data was organised into two blocks: (i) capabilities developed by students; (ii) capabilities promoted in the community. As already mentioned, this paper discusses only the results related to students.

In this regard, and in line with the work published by Walker and Boni (2020), this paper seeks to: (1) show the potential of PAR and participatory processes implemented by universities to develop student capabilities and functionings; and (2) describe the capabilities and functionings that this project promotes in students and will be most relevant in their chosen profession.

To create categories for the analysis and evaluation of the promotion of valuable functionings, we took as reference some of the capabilities described by Walker (2006, 179–180) that we considered especially relevant in the framework of social work: autonomy; knowledge; social relations; respect and dignity; aspiration; voice; and emotional integrity (Figure 1). Also, during the research, new categories of analysis emerged in relation to capabilities that had been promoted through previous categories. This was how the capability of “empathy” was identified in relation to the development of “respect and



**Figure 1.** Conceptual network of capabilities developed by students in the Photovoice-Jaén.<sup>3</sup>

dignity” and “social relations”. Likewise, the capability of “knowledge” promoted the development of associated capabilities such as “co-production of knowledge”, “critical analysis” and “practical reasoning”. Following Maxwell (1992), the analysis criteria looked at: (1) *descriptive validity* “frequency with which the concept is cited”; (2) *theoretical validity* “consistency of the data with the theoretical contributions of epistemic justice and the capabilities approach”; (3) *interpretative validity* “consistency in the attribution of meanings to the concepts associated with capabilities, functionings and epistemic justice”. Following Guba and Lincoln (1990) the validity criteria used were: (i) credibility, (ii) transferability, (iii) confirmability; (iv) dependency.

The results show that learning based on the capabilities approach and PAR promotes functionings such as “collection of valued capabilities” for the future career of social work students (Frediani 2015). Learning based on horizontal paradigms promotes epistemic justice because it allows for the participation of other actors in the creation of knowledge. In this regard, the project has promoted research and intervention practices that incorporate the popular knowledge of ordinary citizens in the design of public policies and professional activities, fomenting a deliberative democracy and empowering vulnerable people.

In connection with the capabilities promoted, the data collected through observation and recorded in the field diary also showed a progressive increase in valuable functionings for social work practice.

The data collected with the dartboard evaluation technique was encouraging. It showed that students had a very positive perception of how participating in the project had influenced their achievement of academic and personal goals, and also community goals, especially regarding different aspects related to the promotion of self-development, emancipation, autonomy and critical thinking in the teaching-learning process, the potential of PAR methodology

as both a pedagogical instrument and a means to personal and community empowerment.

The objective of the FG was to gather the qualitative perceptions of the students regarding the impact of the PAR methodology on the development of capabilities supposedly promoted in higher education. The discourses collected suggest that using PAR provided students with opportunities to develop several capabilities in work-related functionings. The most relevant results of the analysis appear below, in the following two blocks of reinforced capabilities.

### ***(1) Reinforcement of Respect, Dignity and Recognition Through Horizontal Social Relations and Empathy***

This section details how students developed functionings valuable for the professional practice of social work by strengthening the capabilities of “respect, dignity and recognition” of diversity through “horizontal social relations”, “empathy” and “active listening”.

In consonance with Belda-Miquel and Avella-Bernal (2020, 77), a key means for the expansion of these epistemic capabilities was the construction of “relationships of trust with community actors” through the creation of multiple opportunities and spaces for dialogue with communities. In line with the observations of Caballero, Martín, and Villasante (2019), techniques such as training workshops, guided walking tours through the neighbourhoods and the cognitive mapping technique, besides contextualising the research, served as an opportunity for further reflection and to facilitate the “leap” to community processes, uncovering past assumptions that hindered horizontality among the actors involved.

Especially worth noting is the development of functionings connected to the capability of “respect and recognition of the dignity” of people in situations of disadvantage, in all their human diversity. Particularly, respect and recognition of the cultural difference of the Roma ethnicity increased. Corroborating the results of earlier studies (Leivas-Vargas et al. 2020), reinforcement has been observed in functionings of egalitarian epistemic outcomes that involve cultural respect and recognition in processes of “co-production of knowledge” by University and society.

The aforementioned capability takes on relevance for professionals who will be working with disadvantaged populations in the future. Functionings connected to the capability of “respect, dignity and recognition” and “empathy” for different ways of understanding the world, of knowing and doing, which had been reinforced through the “co-production of knowledge”, were mentioned by students in relation to the acquisition of professional knowledge during the project.

For example, in the FG, Natalia, in relation to one child’s aspiration to become a police officer, reflected on the inequality of opportunities of children

from vulnerable communities and the responsibility social workers have to reduce these social injustices:

Obviously their situation is not conducive to becoming police officers, for instance, but that is also part of our job, isn't it? Trying to make sure that these neighbourhoods have possibilities and that the children here are like the ones in the rest of Jaén. And I think that is what the project did for us at the professional level: it helped us to see that they are people just like the rest and they should have the same possibilities (...) that they can start out with the same possibilities. (Natalia)

## ***(2) Reinforcement of Knowledge and Autonomy Through Co-production of Knowledge, Critical Thinking and Practical Reasoning***

In this section, we explain how this PAR achieves an epistemological rupture with hegemonic knowledge production by promoting the capabilities of “knowledge”, “autonomy”, “co-production of knowledge”, “critical thinking” and “practical reasoning”.

Considering, like Fricker (2017, 53), that “epistemic injustice is fundamentally a form of (direct or indirect) discrimination”, our findings indicate that PAR has favoured the group of capabilities linked with knowledge, co-production of knowledge and social transfer of the kind discussed by Santos (2010, 2018) and Walker (2006) by contributing to the autonomy and the development of the vulnerable communities involved.

With regard to the *discriminatory epistemic injustice* defined by Fricker (2013), by incorporating people's subjectivity (knowledge and experiences) in educational processes, a rupture in epistemic injustice is achieved through the co-production of knowledge. This, as Freire indicates (1970), is “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it. Without it, overcoming oppressor-oppressed is impossible” (32). In this regard, “active listening” has been one of the reinforced capabilities that is most valuable for future professional activity. As Fricker points out (2017, 58) “the more actively a hearer listens the more the speaker's hermeneutical marginalisation is thereby eroded”. Students reported having learned to act more inclusively, valuing and considering the points of view of other people with empathy, comprehension, dialogue and active listening. Tíscar put it this way: “They told us their stories, and about their neighbourhood, and we listened. And that's important to them”. This underlines the importance of establishing consistent social relations that favour the creation of mutual support networks, not just for solving community problems but for self-realisation and personal wellbeing. The students also value the non-hierarchical, horizontal and dialogic relationships with the faculty members involved and the creation of a stable group bond.

The results show that the participatory praxis strengthens the students' capability to carry out effective and efficient collaborative projects. As pointed out by



Maldonado (2007), such projects facilitate the reaching of goals established by consensus and with respect for individual contributions. So, the project has given rise to an interactive learning model based on the creation of new spaces for human and technological interaction, facilitating the strategic planning of actions in order to meet objectives and establish satisfactory group dynamics.

Individual work you can do whenever you want, you do it when you can, but working as a group requires time and organisation. Here, if you don't work as a group it is impossible to obtain the results we obtained. We didn't realize how important it is to work as a group ... (Laura)

Also, an increase can be seen in the capability of critical thinking regarding the situations and needs of people living in vulnerable areas. The empathy and greater self-confidence acquired during the participatory process help break the constructs based on prejudices and stereotypes, facilitating emotional regulation and integrity and reducing the anxiety, even fear, of working with people and communities that are socioculturally different, as expressed by Alba:

At the beginning I was kind of afraid to go to the neighbourhood. Of course, it's the fear people create in you! My friends said "You're going there? My goodness! You don't know what you're getting into!". In fact, I said to myself more than a few times "Oh, my, I don't know if I am going to be a good social worker!". I know I tend to be overly fearful and that these things shouldn't make me afraid, but the truth is I was kind of afraid. And then I went there and realized that everything was fine, that they weren't going to do anything to me. The important thing was that they didn't perceive us as a threat, right? And so they were fine with us.

One aspect that really stands out in the students is their awareness and self-evaluation of the knowledge obtained and the development of critical thinking that reinforces and stimulates this aspect and the recognition of difference. For them, the participatory experience has enabled them to get closer to the "other" and see the reality of other contexts with the eyes of that "other", thus increasing the professional empathy so necessary when working with other people. This is how Laura expressed it:

This project has allowed me to see that you don't work for people but rather with people and this is something you really have to keep in mind. We are used to thinking, in other contexts, from the perspective of here, instead of there. For example, we normally think about things from our perspective of privilege, from here, and not from their perspective, there. And this has made me open my eyes about a lot of the stuff they talked about (...). In other words, seeing the other perspective and not just your own.

Finally, it is important to remember that in the training sessions students worked on the skills they needed to act as "facilitators" in the workshops with neighbourhood residents. As indicated by Leiva-Vargas et al. (2020, 94) "the capability of *doing* is the opportunity to participate in knowledge co-

production processes and to communicate knowledge and experiences”. So, PAR, with its emphasis on horizontal relationships among the actors taking part, enhances mutual trust and strengthens the participants’ capabilities to debate, explore and participate critically. It reinforces the functionings related to the capability of “voice” understood as awareness of self-worth and confidence in one’s aptitudes and skills, as regards both professional and human qualities. In this respect, and as mentioned by Walker (2006, 173), it is clear that “Voice also supports the capability of autonomy”. Occupying, within the team, a position with capacity for meaningful and horizontal inter-location helps participants make progress in reasoned decision-making and in taking responsibility for the consequences, thus promoting personal and professional empowerment.

In the practicums done as part of the regular curriculum, you don’t feel like a professional doing a job. You feel like you are in the background. But here we planned, we decided how to act. We were part of the working team; we were on the front line. (Alicia)

A student’s awareness of such progress contributes to a proactive, dynamic and flexible attitude towards learning, in consonance with what Boni et al. (2010, 126) define as “being an active enquirer” and having an attitude that breaks with traditional teaching-learning methods such as knowledge transmission and the competencies model.

The problem is that we are used to being comfortable, to sitting in class with our arms crossed, listening, and when the time comes for exams, studying and that’s it. We knew this class would take up more time, but I think it should be a required class, because it is an experience that those who have been sitting in classrooms listening to the lecturer are just not going to have. (Alba)

## Conclusions

The educational experience of taking part in the Photovoice-Jaén project has been an epistemological break with the traditional pedagogical models of higher education and has allowed for a more inclusive methodological approach to interventions involving vulnerable and socially disadvantaged groups. Immersion in this PAR has contributed to greater epistemic justice, for both students and the communities that took part, because it started out with a necessary political intentionality. We share the valuable critique made by Martínez-Vargas et al (2022) of some PARs which often, although they apply tools horizontally and strive to involve the subjects, do not contemplate in their episteme an explicit political intention to transform vulnerable groups. In our case, reflection on the “for whom” and “what for” of the research generated a debate that turned out to be pivotal in making decisions regarding the use of the techniques at different stages of the project and that has enriched

all participants considerably. We are aware of the limitations pointed out by Martinez-Vargas et al. (2022) with respect to the complexity and impositions of a research model linked to different power structures and believe that the research agenda on the incidence of PAR requires deeper reflection in this direction.

By addressing the three analytical levels -*Methodology level, Cosmological level, Method level* – proposed by Martinez-Vargas et al. (2022) in relation to the capabilitarian participatory paradigm (CPP), the current action-research process has shown that PARs are a suitable tool for the generation of both knowledge and praxis in the Capability Approach. At the methodological level, this process has identified and increased communities' valuable capabilities. At the cosmological level, it has contributed to: (i) the construction of epistemic communities capable of developing collective ontological knowledge about themselves; (ii) identifying their human development goals based on both their own worldview and the deep meanings they attribute to the concept of well-being. Finally, at the method level, this process, ideologically close to the CPP, has shown how research in the field of Social Work can contribute to the achievement of these community objectives, while enhancing the capabilities of (future) social workers as facilitators of community processes.

Regarding methodology, the primary objective was to connect with the communities in two important regards. On the one hand, in relation to academic goals, the methodology focused on achieving functionings by strengthening the individual capabilities of autonomy and knowledge. It thus promoted the comprehension, analysis and resolution of the specific problems of each community. On the other hand, the use of PAR made it possible to analyse problems from a critical perspective, propose solutions in a participatory manner and have a political impact. This generated different opportunities for dialogue and exchange between students and communities in which everyone involved developed individual capabilities (critical thinking and practical reasoning) and collective capabilities (co-production of knowledge, respect, dignity and recognition, horizontal social relations and empathy).

From the community perspective, the project has created in both neighbourhoods a space for participation and group reflection by residents and for dialogic encounters between the knowledge of the University and that of citizens. Such epistemic communities have made it possible not just to analyse and increase the visibility of the problems perceived by their protagonists (such as inadequate urban planning, environmental degradation, economic difficulties, deterioration of social fabric), but also to construct a community narrative around these problems and to decide jointly on specific proposals with which to address them, to be conveyed to policymakers, contributing in this way to epistemic justice as well.

As for the students, from a capabilities perspective, not only has the project promoted a teaching-learning model based on strengthening capabilities that are fundamental in the profession of social work, it has, beyond the Photovoice technique, promoted the skills needed to engage savvily in social and political activity; in short, to exercise their rights as citizens. Several valued functionings was identified: (1) Respect, dignity and recognition based on horizontal social relations. The establishment of horizontal relations instead of hierarchical ones, in both the academic context and the community, has increased the students' confidence in themselves and others, promoting recognition of and respect of the dignity of all through horizontal social relations and a collaborative spirit. (2) Knowledge and autonomy. The students' participation as active agents in knowledge construction has promoted the functionings of co-production of knowledge, critical thinking and practical reasoning with which to infer and draw conclusions from real-life situations. This constituted an epistemological rupture with hegemonic knowledge production, which has helped the students to deconstruct the traditional hierarchical vision of the "expert" role in the relations between service users and front-line social workers. This issue is very relevant in that it aids in the consolidation of professional practices that will promote epistemic justice. Additionally, having their voice listened to in decision-making processes has heightened the autonomy, self-esteem and empowerment of the students.

Furthermore, this paper highlights how important it is to work and educate with a focus on capabilities, not deficits. In this respect, this research shows that education using a capabilities approach and participatory methodologies can provide social workers with a better understanding of situations, problems and needs in disadvantaged communities, and also with the emotional integrity necessary to address them effectively. Social workers who show empathy may be able to compensate the tendency of Social Services agencies to give an overly administrative focus to social work, which dampens society's confidence in the field's professionals.

The development of these capabilities will contribute to greater epistemic justice in the realm of social work intervention promoted, in this case, by the University.

Our findings referring to a particular socio-political and academic context, so they cannot be generalised to higher education as a whole. However, the international universality of the epistemologies that support the work (promoting valuable operations in the area of epistemic justice) is a good starting point for social work practices that are socially fair and replicable in other contexts, both Spanish and European. Shaping the research and teaching agendas along these lines, plus the funding of more projects of this type, will help to reorient the University's commitment to and engagement with society, a question of fundamental importance, particularly in public universities.

## Notes

1. In the 2019/2020 academic year women 84% of social work students at the University of Jaén were women.
2. According to Francés et al. (2015, 103) “Operationally *transectos* constitute graphic representations of a route taken for purposes of field reconnaissance, which is generally done by the research team together with the inhabitants of the territory involved in the research. This technique can be classified within the set of participant observation techniques, in that as the group moves along the route it stops periodically, wherever the participants, who act as key informants, point out places with a special wealth of information (historic landmarks, conflictive areas, gathering places, etc.)”
3. Note: The letters E and D inside the codes indicate the following information of the results of Focus Group: Rooting (E) or number of citations that have been linked to that code which indicates the saturation of the discourse. Density (D) or number of links to other citations. Source: authors. Network created with the software Atlas.ti V.8.

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