

‘Taking knowledge on a journey’: Creating conditions for epistemic justice

[Diana Skelton](#), [Brendan Coyne](#), [Beatriz Monje Barón](#), and [Marie-Rose Blunsch Ackermann](#)

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14767503231205235>

Abstract

When participants in participatory action research [PAR] projects live in poverty, practices sometimes fail to draw on their capacity for critical reflection. This is problematic for approaches rooted in covenantal ethics and belief that PAR should empower participants as “actors of knowledge”. To overcome this, one avenue is anchoring projects in principles of epistemic justice, as ATD Fourth World [ATD] did in a three-year research project. For people in poverty, epistemic justice goes well beyond countering testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. This led research facilitators to take unusual decisions about methodology, their role, allocating resources, and interacting with academia. These choices—aimed at empowering participants and ensuring shared ownership of knowledge created—were in many respects successful. However they also created several important challenges around north-south power dynamics, engagement with academia, and the comprehensibility of deeply personal conclusions reached by project participants. More positively, a dogged adherence to principles of epistemic justice created transformational changes in ATD's governance, in how some institutions address poverty, and in the way participants addressed intergenerational traumas and their personal histories.

1. Objectives

The lofty goals of PAR do not always translate into practices founded on belief in the capacity for critical reflection of the participants. (Brydon-Miller, 2008) Covenantal ethics greatly enhance the relevance of PAR to communities where research is carried out; however surrounding hierarchies and positions of power must be recognised to avoid potential for coercion. (Stevens et al., 2016). It is important for PAR to develop collaborative strategies for participation in all phases of a project, including analysing findings. (Brydon-Miller, 2009)

In 2009-12, ATD carried out a PAR project about the relationship between poverty, violence and peace (Brand & Monje-Barón, 2012) with more than 1000 people from 25 countries. The ethics model governing ATD's organisational relationship with people living in poverty is essentially covenantal, which obliges ATD to strive towards epistemic justice.

Because poverty shuts people out of co-producing knowledge, a key project objective was creating conditions for people in extreme poverty to guide the process. In peer support groups, these lived-experience

activists calibrated the pace of work to the situations of participants facing the most challenges.

This paper will outline epistemic justice as the ethical framework underlying ATD's approach. Drawing on a series of internal interviews of the research facilitation team¹, we will then detail the methods used in the 2009-12 research project and describe three challenges:

- For people on four continents to guide the research required facilitators to try to reverse the North-South power dynamic.
- For people in poverty to develop their thinking without interference, broad engagement with academics was delayed until the end.
- The harrowing nature of the subject meant acknowledging trauma and honouring the risks involved in breaking silence.

Finally, we will give examples of how this research transformed participants, ATD as a whole, and other institutions.

2. Epistemic justice and poverty

The words of people in poverty are often used against them. This systematic denial of voice diminishes their credibility and constitutes epistemic silencing. An additional epistemological disadvantage occurs when people lack the time, space, collaborative support, and peace of mind to reflect on—and conceptualise for themselves—their own experiences. Joseph Wresinski (cited in Croft et al., 2021, p. 78-83) described this silencing as psychological torture. Beginning in 1972, Wresinski² voiced concerns that academics 'stole knowledge' from people in poverty. Wresinski's aim was to reverse that dynamic by working towards what we have come to term epistemic justice.

ATD aims to create conditions for people in poverty to co-produce knowledge that is emancipatory because it promotes action with 'unapologetic ethical and political engagement and commitment to [...] positive social change' (Brydon-Miller, 2009, p. 243). These conditions include: shared ownership of every step from conception to publication; freedom for participants to honour their own experience and construct their own thoughts; a safe space for collaboration among peers; and ensuring that the project contributes to a cause participants identify with, creating a sense of belonging to a collective effort.

2.i - Breaking silence

Overcoming epistemic silencing can be particularly challenging when addressing an issue as traumatic as violence. Martine Le Corre, a lived-experience activist who became a lead co-researcher on this project, knew that people in poverty felt constrained:

'The word "violence" is so often used *about* people in poverty that it's not a word we use easily. How

¹ A decade after the project ended, these reflective practice interviews were carried out by A. Lebec between October 2020 and February 2021.

² Joseph Wresinski founded ATD Fourth World in 1957.

can I say I'm a victim of violence when people always told me, since I was a kid, that it's us who are violent? No one will believe us.' (Lebrec, 2021)

Le Corre's reminder of the stereotype of 'the violent poor'—often maligned as a 'deviant, defiant, dangerous “underclass”' (Gans, 1993)—ensured that the project advanced with utmost caution. As the facilitator of a People's University³, she focussed a session on the question: 'What do you think violence is?' Making the question straightforward helped everyone feel able to respond. She reflects:

'That evening sparked everything that followed. The activists discovered—and this was upsetting, but also motivating—that we're all called violent: with our children, in our words, our reactions, our gestures. Activists know how they're spoken of. They saw that they hadn't allowed themselves to look at violence done to them. Suddenly one mother announced: “When social workers remove my children, I'm *suffering* from violence, not *being* violent”. From there, ideas sprouted.'

Reclaiming the right to speak about violence felt emancipatory, which gave the research team legitimacy to open this conversation with other activists.

2.ii - Shared ownership of each step

Researchers often interview people in poverty for their own objectives. In the World Bank's 1999 'Consultations with the Poor', quotations were systematically 'stripped of context [...and] editorialised so as to tune out any discordant sounds' (Cornwall & Fujita, 2012, p. 1761). This 'ventriloquising' goes beyond the epistemic injustice as set out by Fricker (2007).

In contrast, for ATD's research, an initial step was led by Ricarl Pierrelouis, a lived-experience activist in Mauritius. His turn of phrase—'poverty is injustice and violence every which way'—resonated strongly for many other activists and became the title of the first regional seminar organised for this project. Research facilitator⁴ Gerard Bureau, who prepared that seminar with Pierrelouis, recalls:

'Ricarl showed there was a reflection about violence and not just a description. Taking people's exact words forces everyone to think differently. Underneath words, you understand their experience and way of thinking. Also, for Ricarl, seeing his words written down made him more aware of his own thinking. He realised it has an impact on others because his words became the title of a seminar.'⁵

The process was similar when activists stressed the importance of speaking about peace as well as violence. Facilitator Rosa Pérez y Pérez explains:

'Participants in Africa helped us figure out what kind of peace we were talking about. It's not definitions you find in dictionaries. It took us a long time to say what peace means. Then Mr. Parfait [Nguiningdji] said peace means finding food for his family. We understood.'

The meanings people in poverty give to certain words can be easily missed or set aside; hence the importance of the shared ownership principle of epistemic justice, which was adhered to by having lived-

³ In this project run by ATD, people in poverty deepen their thinking collectively.

⁴ Section 3.ii explains that the research was facilitated by an operations team that deliberately did not lead but rather created conditions for lived-experience activists to steer the content.

⁵ All the quotes from research facilitators throughout this paper come from Lebrec, 2021.

experience activists define the terms of the research.

2.iii - Constructing broader knowledge with peers

In addition to individual conversations, participants took part in local peer group discussions to construct knowledge. Pérez y Pérez considers group work crucial to addressing sensitive issues:

'Our goal was not to aggravate suffering and to overcome guilt and shame. It was very delicate. We must not be ashamed of our poverty; but violence really takes hold of us. Silent violence sometimes floods you, traps you, doesn't let you understand. They wanted to steal your humanity. How can we find strength to say that we are human beings with dignity, with values? To overcome shame, it was key to be part of a group, reflecting together. Alone in a corner, there's not the same strength. Empathy for each other was liberating.'

Each peer group prepared contributions to exchange with peer groups elsewhere in the world so participants could deepen their thinking in interaction with others. Another research facilitator, Beatriz Monje-Barón, explains:

'Individual participants were not "interviewed" to get information; rather each participant was invited to continue participating in the research with others. Once you think about what others say, you become an actor of knowledge because you're not alone with your ideas. You react to what others say and how it resonates with you. Entering into a process of understanding and exploring concepts with others leads to personal transformation.'

Working in peer groups gave people in poverty the opportunity for individual growth. They also realised that, despite different situations, they were not alone in their suffering. They recognised each other as peers who endure violence due to poverty. Feeling a strong empathetic connection, they were proud to collaborate. This fulfilled a key condition of epistemic justice: 'for people in poverty to feel [...] they belong to a collective effort to bring about a more just world [through] emancipatory action' (Croft et al., 2021). Every participant is also an activist contributing to a cause larger than themselves.

2.iv – Recognition for co-creating knowledge

Knowledge is not neutral. It carries 'class biases and values' and therefore tends to favour 'those who produce and control it' (Gutiérrez, 2016). This is borne out in the World Bank interviews of people in poverty, which were contorted into 'a narrative that casts them [...] as abject, inert, lacking in agency'. (Cornwall & Fujita, 2012, p. 1751-1761)

Action research, according to Brydon-Miller (2009, p. 243) 'is an inherently and explicitly values-imbued practice [that does not] espouse the doctrine of value neutrality and objectivity demanded in conventional, positivist-inspired research'. Each of us has a specific positional objectivity (Sen, 1993), and recognising this can create shared ownership of research contributing to a collective goal chosen by all participants.

In ATD's research, even before travelling to regional seminars, participants began to feel a sense of connection. Bureau notes, 'This was not planned, but this research turned into a dynamic that has connected

people for ten years now'. This research was the first time lived-experience activists from ATD engaged with one another on such an intercontinental scale. Knowing the vast material differences between countries in the global North and South, Bureau was surprised that 'there was no unease because of differences in conditions or means. [...] People in poverty recognised each other'.

Monje-Barón adds, 'Connecting people has a crucial impact on each one. It starts with a process of personal discovery: "I can participate". Alongside others, it's a collective action: "I become a participant; I'm no longer excluded"'. This satisfies another condition for epistemic justice for people in poverty: that 'the autonomy and independence of their thinking be recognised and respected by other partners in the process of knowledge co-production' (Croft et al., 2021).

3. Methodology

3.i Building around local teams

To apply principles of epistemic justice and enable widespread and deep-reaching participation, ATD recognised local teams as key actors who had built long-standing relationships with people in poverty.

In 2009 ATD was moving away from a unitary, euro-centric model towards a more horizontal form of governance anchored in several continents. To reflect this reality, non-European regions played central roles in framing the project. This corresponded with the objective of challenging established epistemic injustices, in this case the privileging of issues important to ATD's historic "core territories" over those from more distant regions. Research facilitator Anne-Claire Brand explains: 'Before, our research questions were initiated in France, with other countries getting involved later. This time, the expertise no longer came from one country; the decision was to initiate and facilitate this research-action in each region'.

This approach was reflected in framing initial questions around the subject of violence, a subject first identified by ATD's members in Haïti. Additionally, the facilitation team took a realistic approach to power relationships and was clear-sighted about the importance of acknowledging local concerns. Brand recalls: 'We realised that anything that does not support local teams does not work. It's all very well that [a theme] is interesting; but the project works only when it becomes a support'.

For the project's international objectives to reflect local needs, local actors were deemed the best placed to identify potential participants. This allowed the facilitation team to engage rapidly in a broad range of dialogues, as Monje-Barón explains:

'We asked local ATD teams whom to engage with. They know many people in poverty, grass-roots practitioners, and researchers. We began engaging with people they identified. Through these people, others got involved. By the end, we were engaged with about 1000 actors.'

The quality of relationships built by local teams was also valued. For Brand, long-lasting trust during the project grew from the confidence participants had in local teams: 'Meeting in person allows trust; but not only at that moment in time. Rather, the trust grows from earlier meetings, because they know other

participants and they know ATD. The research became part of this continuity'.

Giving local teams a high degree of agency allowed a broad base of participation, and enabled facilitators to locate themselves within existing trusting relationships.

Framing the project through a decentralised, regional approach, recognising local actors' needs and concerns and accepting a power transfer from international to local actors allowed the project to flourish and to put in place methods based on epistemic justice.

3.ii Separating operational and analytical roles

The way roles were separated between research facilitators and participants was a key element ensuring accordance with principles of epistemic justice. Facilitators played only operational roles—interviewing, transcribing, encouraging dialogues, sharing information, facilitating meetings—whilst the role of analysis was left to participants. Bureau describes this approach:

'In each seminar, our logic was that people in poverty put things in order themselves, even if they needed our support. We couldn't just put people alone around the table and tell them "organise the content". Our contribution was essential. But it was in the background.'

This decision to separate the roles of facilitator and analyst was not taken lightly, as the facilitators were themselves highly interested by the subject. Brand recalls frustration at not contributing to the analysis: 'Our team's responsibility was facilitating; even though I would have very much liked to take part on the basis of what I had personally experienced around this issue'.

Nevertheless, Monje-Barón explains the reasoning behind their decision: 'The goal was not for us to produce our own texts but to elaborate knowledge creating the conditions for others to do it'. Bureau agrees: 'If I'd written my own text, it would have been a way of taking power over this knowledge; whereas our goal was to allow the [participants'] knowledge to emerge'.

As they state, the goal of this separation was to avoid translating the organisational and informational power held by facilitators into epistemic power over the project. This decision granted all participants, particularly lived-experience activists, greater freedom to construct their own analysis and become genuine actors within the project.

3.iii Levelling the playing field: taking people at their word

With a broad range of participants from diverse backgrounds—lived-experience activists, practitioners and academics—it was essential for facilitators to counterbalance pre-existing inequalities that otherwise threatened to reproduce epistemic injustices within the project. One method was creating a common point of departure for participants by asking them to speak personally from experience, whether or not they lived in poverty. Asking 'what do you experience as violence?'—and thus framing the central question in terms of each participant's experience—gave a common starting point, and also discouraged those without lived experience of poverty from automatically assuming the powerful roles they traditionally occupy within research projects. Brand explains: 'We wanted practitioners not to position themselves as facilitators but as

participants'.

Emphasising personal experience as the basis of participation allowed facilitators to reduce some inequalities among participants. Notably, it helped avoid the risk of more at-ease participants projecting their thinking onto others, or 'ventriloquising' lived experiences that were not their own. However, it also created the potential for reproducing what Fricker (2007) terms as testimonial injustice. Bureau explains that this possibility was counteracted by making a conscious decision to believe participants: 'Our first step is to give credence. To allow people to express their thoughts and move forward, we take them at their word'.

3.iv Disengaging with academia and embracing flexibility

To further reduce epistemic inequalities, facilitators deliberately avoided engaging with existing academic theory, instead designing questions to evolve at the service of participants. Marie-Rose Blunski Ackermann, involved in the project on behalf of the Joseph Wresinski Archives and Research Centre, explains this approach:

'[The idea is] not to disturb a thought process that develops from the lived experience and analysis of people experiencing poverty with questions that are not theirs, or not yet theirs. This allows thinking to develop at the grass-roots level.'

This choice to let questions evolve locally enabled participation with bespoke approaches for each group and language. Monje-Barón feels this evolutive approach was vital for full expression:

'The methodology was built as we went along. It's an important methodological choice to say "we will build little by little". We began by doing in-depth interviews, taking great care about the words. We put words on the table very carefully, and quite differently in each language, and with different people, to get a feeling for how they resonated.'

By deliberately choosing a loose methodological frame, capable of shifting and changing according to the directions suggested by participants, the facilitators ensured that people in poverty could construct their own understanding of the subject without being unduly influenced by the architecture of the project. This flexibility extended to not choosing until very late in the process the locations, titles and programmes of five regional seminars that formed key moments of exchange. To allow the research to be participant-led, the facilitation team accepted a strong degree of uncertainty regarding thematic content and the project calendar. Pérez y Pérez notes that 'there should always be dialogue about the pace or timing' of such projects; otherwise the participation of people in deep poverty cannot be guaranteed.

3.v Meeting people where they were and developing interview methods

Disengaging from academic debate and embracing a flexible methodology allowed the facilitators to concentrate on meeting participants on their own terms. For Brand, it was crucial that facilitators conduct in-person interviews. She recalls the importance digital recorders took on, for documentation, but also symbolising the fact that each individual interview was part of something larger: '[The recorder] was a sign that participants were speaking up for others or speaking to others'.

Monje-Barón explains that personal interviews were more than a starting point. Facilitators deliberately rejected an extractive model, adopting an open approach:

'We carried out personal interviews from the beginning until almost the end. Interviews weren't just preparatory steps. The word "interview" could suggest a process where someone responds without being able to interfere with the questions themselves. But from the beginning, we asked deliberately open questions simply to set out the themes. The interviews were not designed to acquire information, but rather to allow each person to go as far as they could in developing their thoughts. Methodologically, this is a radically different way of interviewing.'

For Monje-Barón, this method came to underpin the entire project, allowing a broad range of participants to explore the theme in a non-confrontational, open manner. 'We did these types of interviews with 300 people, a majority of whom live in poverty, allowing them to speak very freely in a safe, trusting environment.'

Brand underlines the importance of word-for-word transcripts of each interview in 17 languages. Each transcript included the entirety of participants' words, rather than flattening out dialects, idioms, pauses and verbal tics: 'Having so many written hours of orality was fundamental. All the contributions of people most affected by violence were expressed orally' rather than written. Respecting the oral nature of participants' knowledge circumvented the transfer of power entailed by converting spoken interviews to written text.

Another safeguard against 'capturing' participants' knowledge was the choice to ask interviewees not only to re-read transcripts but to rework them in depth. Bureau describes this process as moving from an 'interview' to an 'agreed contribution', with participants keeping full ownership of their narrative.

Participants were further empowered by the decision to actively share—rather than simply collect—contributions from earlier interviewees. Monje-Barón explains: 'In the interview methodology, there was a moment where the interviewer introduced ideas from other participants. That's it: the interviewee became an actor because they weren't alone with their ideas'.

This conscious effort to share ideas amongst participants as part of the interview process not only connected them to a larger project and showed that their concerns were shared by others. It also ensured that participant-created knowledge was not hoarded by facilitators, but rather diffused continually amongst all participants.

3.vi Investing in face-to-face work

Developing shared ownership required moments of exchange and reflection about not only participants' own experiences, but also those of others. The interview process was based on this understanding. Additionally, facilitators grew convinced of the need to invest in face-to-face meetings among participants. Brand recalls when this became clear to her:

'At the end of an interview, Mr. Parfait said, "Please, take our knowledge on a journey". Instantly I responded: "It's not us who will make your knowledge travel; it's you". I had suddenly made a commitment. Hearing him express so strongly the hope that his knowledge would travel made me

realise that *he* should make it travel. For the first time in so global a project, he became an actor. This is what we wanted: no longer facilitators making knowledge "travel", but participants themselves.'

This decision required a strong commitment from ATD's international leadership. The anti-poor prejudice inherent in visa systems and border policing meant ATD had to deploy considerable resources to enable participants in poverty to travel. Some participants lacked identity documents. Embassies balked at issuing visas to participants classed as unable to prove "economic independence". Border officials were suspicious of travellers who did not conform to their image of an international research participant. To overcome these barriers, ATD expended financial and considerable political capital.

The in-person participation of people in poverty at seminars required interpretation beyond dominant languages like English or French. For Brand, this realisation underlay the initial choice of regional seminars 'so people could exchange in their own language'. Each seminar used only two languages: one local, like Tagalog or Aymara, and one international. At the colloquium that concluded the project, simultaneous interpretation was provided in Haitian Creole, English, Quechua, French, Arabic, and Spanish, enabling participants to speak independently, without relying on project facilitators to interpret for them.

The choices to invest heavily in bringing participants to seminars and ensuring interpretation were vital to redress the inequalities that underlie epistemic injustice. During key moments of exchange and analysis, these choices meant that people in poverty continued to guide the knowledge production process, and that it did not fall to facilitators or academics to recount, rethink or interpret their lived experiences.

3.vii Creating the conditions for lived experience to lead public discourse

Although in-person work at seminars went some way to ensuring that people in poverty continued to have ownership over the process, the risk remained that these participants would be at a considerable disadvantage to those more at ease with public discourse. As Bureau explains, facilitators particularly wanted to avoid a confrontational model of debate that would greatly advantage academics to the detriment of those in poverty:

'During seminars, each participant made a contribution. Then other participants were asked to understand its content; but not to debate it. Debate, as practised by researchers, doesn't exist in the day-to-day experience of people in poverty. It's not because a participant prepared a contribution that they're equipped to defend it in a debate.'

The rejection of exchanges based on debate frustrated many academic and institutional participants, for whom confronting opposing ideas was a key way of deepening knowledge. However, the unequal experience of participants in oppositional debate, as well as the need for a gentle, non-violent approach to discussing deeply traumatic personal experiences convinced the facilitators that it was a necessary precondition for a project based on principles of epistemic justice. Instead, they encouraged interactions based on what Bureau defines as "sharing" or "exchange"; co-construction rather than confrontation: 'Our approach was questions to go deeper into what people were saying; but not deliberation or questions based on our personal interest or

opinions'.

Framing the seminars as places to deepen understanding of each person's experience, and their analysis of it, prevented the reproduction of one characteristic element of epistemic injustice—questioning someone's trustworthiness as a witness. It also created the opportunity to address hermeneutical injustice by inviting academics and practitioners to work collaboratively with people in poverty. Rather than analysing lived experiences from afar, they were encouraged to help participants in poverty equip themselves with the tools necessary to describe their own understanding of what they had experienced. This not only encouraged participants to speak confidently about their personal experiences, but also to continue their development as actors of knowledge, refining their own analyses of the relationship between poverty and violence.

Recognised as legitimate witnesses, and supported by the expertise of other participants, participants in poverty had the conditions necessary to begin speaking publicly about, and taking full ownership of, the knowledge they had built. A final key condition for this was introducing them to less comfortable situations in a carefully graduated manner. Participants progressed from initial interactions with facilitators through the interview process to encounters with other participants in regional seminars. Those who attended the final colloquium then took a further step into unfamiliar territory, with the gradual approach continuing. The colloquium began with several days reserved for the research actors. On the next day they were joined by 25 academics and professionals. The conclusion was a public event with 450 people at UNESCO's headquarters. This gradual approach allowed participants with little experience of public speaking to develop the confidence necessary to respond to questions from an unfamiliar audience, confirming their central position in the research project.

4. Challenges

4.i - The North-South power dynamic

The idea for working on the violence of poverty was originally sparked in Haiti and the Central African Republic, places with long-running armed conflict where ATD has worked since the 1980s. Jacqueline Plaisir, who spent ten years as ATD's national coordinator in Haiti, recalls: 'When the weight of violence, trauma, slavery, colonisation, racism, and misogyny are not recognised by others, even when those with lived experience speak out, no transformation is possible'. Plaisir appreciated that the first research step for Haitian activists was at a seminar in Mauritius. She said,

'It was significant to start in a place that, like Haiti, has a long history of colonisation, slavery, and indentured servitude, and yet that has the autonomy to chart its own path. Activists who felt dehumanised were able to speak about their resistance to violence. They found light when others recognised their dignity'.

Despite the project's origins, Plaisir notes that in the end the issue of institutional violence, brought by activists from the global North, took precedence, edging out discussion of physical violence: 'Countries like Haiti are isolated by the fact that the reality of their situation is inconceivable for people in other countries'.

The facilitation team aimed to enable activists in each country to guide the research. However at the beginning, Bureau felt hamstrung by the fact that no one in this team had personally lived in poverty:

'We didn't succeed at the start because we realised that each of us had questions in reference to our own analysis and opinions. So we weren't managing to allow people in poverty to express themselves without any preconceived ideas of our own.'

This is when they invited Le Corre to join their team. Bureau continues:

'Our reflection hinged on her because, having experienced poverty herself, she had her antennae permanently open to alert us when we were going off course, and also to highlight key elements. We had to enter as far as possible into the logic of the people we spoke with, and not at all into our own.'

As noted above, this was the first time that ATD carried out research not designed at its international centre. Although issues of armed conflict were not taken up outside of Haiti and Central Africa, Plaisir says the project felt unifying:

'When Haitians heard Europeans talk about social workers removing their children, they related to the parents' suffering. Having lost children to violence, malnutrition, or illness, they saw themselves in a similar struggle against the long odds of poverty to keep families together and help children thrive.'

4.ii – Engaging with academics

Another challenge was engaging with academics. Many who were approached were perplexed by the invitation to participate alongside others without conducting the research. Only a few joined in peer groups of regional seminars. Several other academics took part only in the final colloquium. Bureau reflects:

'This was a flaw. We worked for three years with people in poverty; but only a few months with academics. It took time to convince them of our approach, to have confrontations with them. By then, the final colloquium was underway. Only then did most academics have access to our papers, meet activists face to face, and begin to understand a little. It would have taken three more years to work seriously with academics.'

That the dialogue with academics needed more time was clear at the colloquium. A new debate was sparked when Prof. Paul Dumouchel (Ritsumeikan University) stressed that certain forms of violence are: 'not perceived as violence [...] sometimes also by the target of the action themselves. Instead we, and often they, tend to see it as a punishment, as something they deserved, or as just "the way things are"'. (Brand & Monje Barón, 2012, p. 74).

Several activists in the room were insulted by the implication that they are unaware of what is done to them, saying: 'Even when we might not talk about it, we know very well what's going on'. Le Corre recalls:

'It was painful because Dumouchel and another academic told us that in fact we remain silent for fear of reprisals. They said that the law of not snitching is built into our communities, so there's no way for things to get better. We activists absolutely did not agree. Then Ivanite enlightened us.'

Ivanite Saint-Clair, a Haitian activist, said she had different reasons to choose silence:

'One of my daughters was killed by a boy I know. But I live alongside that boy's family. If I accuse him, will it give me back my child? No. What do I wish? That he understand he's on the wrong path and cannot continue like that. But if he's imprisoned, how will his family manage? They are also poor. I haven't gone to court because I don't want to see anyone take their last breath. Violence begets violence.' (ATD, 2009)

Years later, this series of conversations is recalled as one that participants felt deserved more time to deepen properly.

4.iii – Trauma and silence

In this research project, Saint-Clair expressed her deep convictions without making formal accusations and unleashing painful consequences for others. Plaisir reflects that Saint-Clair made a moral choice to remain silent:

'She felt that accusing him would be an act of vengeance that would not honour her daughter's memory. Others saw Ivanite as a victim; but she speaks of taking responsibility so others can live in peace.'

Le Corre concludes:

'Only we have the right to break silence or not. It can't be imposed on us. Breaking silence is not a choice, but a process you live with. Others without lived experience say reasonably, "You just have to speak out"; but activists know that's not how it is. The answers we're offered don't correspond to what we consider necessary. So yes, we remain silent and deal with it until we find a solution to break silence, which can take years.'

Another academic at the colloquium, Magdalena Brand, later reflected about the word 'silence':

'We academics see only one dimension: our own, that of submission [...]. Whereas the people who live in poverty see two dimensions: ours (passivity) because they suffer the consequences of our passivity; and theirs (resistance) which allows them to stand up to poverty and to our passivity.' (Blunski Ackermann et al.)

Although Le Corre and Saint-Clair felt that this research honoured both the trauma and the resistance of the participating activists, the research facilitators regretted not having more time for activists and academics to collaborate on the final report in a participatory way.

5. Long-term transformations

This research project had several long-term ramifications, both for individual participants and across ATD Fourth World. In Bolivia today, lived-experience activists — regardless of their current financial situations — say they are less in poverty because they feel transformed by the process. Reflecting on their experiences

brought a sense of meaning and purpose and showed them the world can change.

5.i – Intergenerational trauma and restoring one's soul

One peer group was located on Reunion Island, in the Indian Ocean. Activists there who descended from enslaved people said only during this research did they learn that slavery was not a punishment for individual wrongdoing but a historic injustice. Having been raised to feel guilty about their ancestors' past and to bow when greeting white people, participating in this research transformed their understanding of how history continues to haunt their lives today.

For lived-experience activist Amanda Button in the UK, this research was the first time she spoke to others about the most traumatic events in her life. A decade later, before 300 people, she explained:

'Poverty is about what life throws at you. [...] You feel ashamed. People are judging you. [...] I was convinced something was fundamentally wrong with me. [...] You hit rock bottom, where you feel you might as well be six feet under. At ATD, I met others in the same situation. [...] We're all treated as equals, not "them" and "us". It made me realise that [...] it's the situation that was so abnormal that it stripped our humanity away. When we come together with others, you feel honoured in your soul. People have their soul destroyed, but [...] this is where we feed our souls.' (ATD, 2019).

Other activists spoke about the dehumanising of the violence of poverty. Button's message is that this impact can be counteracted through a network of mutual support where people are together striving to overcome injustice.

5.ii – Internal and external institutional change

For ATD, this research was a seminal moment of organisational transformation. It reinforced the increasingly horizontal evolution of our governance by confirming the crucial role of lived-experience activists in all our decision-making structures. It led to new experiments in the ways teams worked at local, national and international levels. The research also led us to develop new language for speaking about violence and peace, and new ways to express our knowledge and understanding of poverty and the priorities for our actions. Some of this was expressed in the book series *Artisans of Peace Overcoming Poverty* (Skelton, 2016), which told the story of the research.

The research also had far-reaching effects in ATD's public advocacy work at the United Nations because it gave a model for undertaking international participatory evaluation of the Millennium Development Goals in 2012-2014. This in turn influenced the design of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In France, an activist who played a key role in the research on the violence of poverty, Bernard Ducrocq, spent three hours informing a senator that this work highlighted the impact of poverty-based discrimination. The senator was so struck that he began fighting for 'social conditions' to be added to the law as a grounds of discrimination. This change was made in 2016. (ATD, 2016) In parallel, the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) was spurred to integrate into its work measurements of institutional and social mistreatment. Looking back, Bureau sees this as proof of the long-term impact of this research:

'It's not that people step away from daily life to do research and then return to daily life. Once people broaden understanding of their lives, they gain tools to defend themselves and move forward. Activists say this. Nadine Ducrocq said, "If we want to have peace, the first step is not us; it's the government". She challenged the prevalent thinking: that "the poor must be integrated, they must learn". But the daily violence of poverty leads Nadine to say: "Unless the government starts, I can't take the first step to live in peace".'

Conclusion

Deep understanding of epistemic injustice and poverty allowed ATD's research facilitators to identify conditions necessary to ensure that participants in the PAR project on poverty, violence and peace could become empowered "knowledge actors".

These conditions were broadly identified as: allowing participants to decide when to break silence about trauma; sharing ownership of each step of the project; allowing participants to construct broader knowledge with peers; and recognising them as co-constructors of knowledge. Satisfying them pushed facilitators towards unorthodox, but reproducible, decisions, including: building from the interests of local groups; distancing themselves from positions of epistemic power; sharing with participants knowledge as it was constructed; deliberately disengaging from existing academic theory; and rejecting fixed time-frames and methodologies to better reflect the needs and rhythms of participants in poverty. ATD also invested heavily in allowing these participants to work face-to-face throughout the project.

Some decisions taken in pursuit of epistemic justice created formidable challenges. Despite efforts, the north-south power imbalance continued to make itself felt in the project findings, which explored more actively with questions around violence identified in the Northern hemisphere. The decision to not engage broadly with academic research from the beginning made it difficult for academics who joined in later to understand the analyses constructed by participants. This also limited time for meaningful collaboration between academics and participants living in poverty, such that thorny subjects were not satisfactorily explored.

Nevertheless, choices made did allow the project to follow the principles of epistemic justice. As a consequence participants felt strong ownership of the process, and delivered unique insights into the interplay between poverty, violence and peace. Many recognised that the process transformed how they thought about themselves and their histories. The project changed the way ATD conducts PAR. It also reinforced ATD's commitment to a covenantal relationship with people in poverty. Finally, due to ATD's continuing advocacy, the project also led to significant changes in national and international institutions.

References

ATD Fourth World. (2009). *Un chemin vers la paix*. Internal report on a seminar in Mauritius. Joseph Wresinski Archives and Research Centre.

ATD Fourth World. (2016, August). *France Bans Discrimination on Grounds of Social Conditions*. ATD International website <https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/france-bans-discrimination-grounds-social-conditions/>

ATD Fourth World. (2019, June). *Soul Restoring*. ATD UK website. <https://atd-uk.org/2019/06/01/soul-restoring-the-values-of-the-atd-fourth-world-community/>

Blunski Ackermann, M.R., Le Corre, M. & Brand, M. (2015). La misère est violence – Rompre le silence – Chercher la paix. In Le collectif 'Les chercheurs ignorants' (Eds.) *Les recherches-actions collaboratives*, Presses de l'EHESP. <https://www.cairn.info/les-recherches-actions-collaboratives--9782810903771.htm>

Brand, A.C. & Monje Barón, B. (2012). *Extreme poverty is violence—Breaking the silence—Searching for peace*, International Movement ATD Fourth World. <https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2015/07/ATD-Rompre-Anglais2.pdf>

Brydon-Miller, M. (2008). Ethics and Action Research: Deepening our Commitment to Principles of Social Justice and Redefining Systems of Democratic Practice. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*, SAGE Publications. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781848607934.n19>

Brydon-Miller, M. (2009). Covenantal Ethics and Actions Research: Exploring a Common Foundation for Social Research. In D. Mertens & P. Ginsberg (Eds.) *The Handbook of Social Research Ethics*, SAGE Publications. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483348971.n16>

Cornwall, A. & Fujita, M. (2012). Ventriloquizing 'the Poor'? Of voices, choices and the politics of 'participatory' knowledge production. *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 33, n° 9, p. 1751-1765. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2012.721274>

Croft, T., Skelton, D., & Drayak, T. (2021). The value of belonging, inner freedom, knowledge and thinking for overcoming epistemic injustice. In K. Goldstraw (Ed.) *Socially Distanced Activism: Voices of Lived Experience of Poverty During COVID-19*, Policy Press. <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/socially-distanced-activism>

El Remali, M., Randell-Shaheen, S., Bennett, B., Haig Friedman, D., & Tardieu, B. (April 2019). The Ethics of Participatory Action Research on Poverty. *Baillet Working Papers n°2*, Joseph Wresinski Archives and Research Centre.

Fricke, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.

Gans, H.J. (1993). Violence and Poverty: Images and Realities of the 'Underclass' in *The War Against the Poor*; Basic Books.

Gutiérrez, J. (Spring 2016). Participatory Action Research (PAR) and the Colombian Peasant Reserve Zones: The Legacy of Orlando Fals Borda. *n° 22, Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, Center for Global Education. <https://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue/issue-22/participatory-action-research-par-and-colombian-peasant-reserve-zones-legacy-orlando>

Lebrec, A. (2021). Interviews of M. Le Corre, G. Bureau, A.C. Brand, B. Monje-Barón, and M.R. Blunsch-Ackermann. Joseph Wresinski Archives and Research Centre.

Sen, A. (1993). Positional Objectivity. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 22(2), 126–145. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265443>

Skelton, D. (2016). The Violence of Poverty and the Search for Peace. In *Artisans of Peace Overcoming Poverty*, vol. 3. ATD Fourth World. <https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/artisans-peace-overcoming-poverty-volume-3-understanding-violence-poverty/>

Stevens, D.M., Brydon-Miller, M. & Raider-Roth, M. (2016). Structured Ethical Reflection in Practitioner Inquiry: Theory, Pedagogy, and Practice, *The Educational Forum*, 80:4, 430-443, DOI: 10.1080/00131725.2016.1206160