

COMMON CONCEPTUALIZATION PROCESS

The concepts Identity, Structural Racism and Decolonial Knowledge developed by the Barcelona PAR Group, made up of both “local” and migrant participants, members of Sindillar/Sindihogar and the Autonomous University of Barcelona. The process of conceptualization presented here draws on the participatory, feminist and anti-racist methodologies that the members of the PAR Group have developed throughout our activist and professional trajectories. These diverse experiences compose the general methodological framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in which BRIDGES is based on.

Diversifying knowledge through civil society participation in Higher Education implies for us a process of questioning the hierarchies that shape knowledge production in order to foster participation and the creation of meaningful partnerships. Therefore, one of our first steps was to discuss how this objective would be put into practice in the work of Barcelona’s PAR Group. We agreed to hold face-to-face meetings, emphasising the need for horizontal and cooperative relationships, rotating responsibilities and fostering dialogue, negotiation and agreement among us.

A second step for us was to begin by discussing the foundational notions behind the broader framework of PAR - Participation, Problematization, Reflexivity and Empowerment - in order to reach a meaningful and situated definition of what could these mean for the group. Part of this work of questioning the ways in which knowledge is produced at the University is not assuming universal definitions of ideas and rather work to land how these relate the local context in which they are put into circulation. The fact that they are situated means that the definitions are anchored to a particular context and informed by the experiences of the people who make up the group. Thus, we went through each of these principles in order to account for our previous conceptions and experiences in relation to them, which were then put into dialogue with the theory on participatory methodologies. As a result, we were able to generate a common and localized understanding of the project's methodological framework.

Problematization involves exposing or dismantling the invisibilization of the causes and structural processes involved in hierarchizing and subalternating individuals and their knowledges in geopolitical and historical terms.

Reflexivity refers to the generation of dialogical spaces in diversity that seek to hail us and interrogate ourselves and our ideas.

Participation stems from a will to become engaged with something. But that will only be possible as far as there is a collective space in which to recognise yourself with others and take responsibility in order to empower yourself - something which is only possible if you are part of a heterogeneous group.

Empowerment is directly related to the will to take decisions. We become empowered once we problematise what is taken for granted. We could say that it is a collective process, that there are empowering processes which go hand in hand with participating, taking responsibilities and commitments. It is something inherent to all of us, but we need to need to be able to talk to others about our hidden stories in order to recognise them. Recognising these stories in order to recognise ourselves. Empowerment should start from mutual recognition rather than with lack.

Once this common working framework was defined, we began a series of conversation sessions in which we shared personal and collective experiences and knowledge regarding the project's objectives. After each meeting, each participant filled out a "fieldnotes form" with thoughts and feelings about the process they were having. In the following meetings we would dedicate a space to share the content of this tool and thus encourage the group's collective reflexivity. Thanks to this, we were able to group the issues that were raised during the discussions into the three notions of Identity, Decolonial Knowledges and Structural Racism. These collective discussions also fed the development of the exercises that are linked to these concepts, a process that contributed in turn to deepen our previous discussions. Finally, we synthesised these concepts into a short definition, giving an account of the theoretical, experiential and contextual elements relevant to their definition, providing a language that was common to us and that would facilitate their circulation beyond their context of production, through the Toolkit.

Although each concept has a particular process of development, they share the importance we gave in the PAR Group to avoid reproducing a border between "academics" and "activists", as if they were two homogeneous and opposed blocks. Rather, we aimed at articulating the heterogeneity of trajectories that compose the group. Because of this, the definition, the concepts were elaborated in a dialogue between different forms of knowledge that were significant for us, such as those coming from an activist, academic, experiential, artistic background. The division between "process" of development of these concepts and the result itself is thus a blurry one for us, as we believe that part of questioning traditional ways of producing knowledge involves a problematising practice of consciously linking these two aspects. PAR Barcelona's work therefore shares the importance of offering situated and useful definitions to dismantle structures of exclusion and propose critical alternatives, both in higher education and in other spheres of society.

Finally, we discussed the set of concepts and exercises that we developed to be included in the toolkit and decided that they match two complementary general strategies in which BRIDGES is based: building bridges and breaking down walls. On the one hand, building bridges responds to the importance of strengthening collaboration between academia and those parts of civil society that experience racism. Moreover, we reflected on the identities and composition of higher education faculty. Are there black teachers in the academy? In order to build bridges - we thought- we need to cultivate self-reflectivity and self-evaluation. On the other hand, we also consider it necessary to question, confront, dismantle and demolish, in order to generate reflection that stems from this discomfort. The opposite of this, staying comfortable, means just following an inertia that perpetuates that perceived appearance that racism is isolated from academia. These concerns build up the position from which we aim at making a political intervention; one that opens up the possibility of other ways of doing and thinking, tearing apart the walls of structural racism which constitute academic spaces as well as other institutions of knowledge production and dissemination.