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Social Validation as a Key Process to Participatory and Engaged Research: Learning from a Brazilian Academic Program

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ABSTRACT

Participatory and engaged research is an approach in which the traditional boundaries between subject (the one who investigates) and object (the one being investigated) are intentionally blurred and both construct purpose and knowledge. In this type of inquiry, the researcher—alongside research participants—not only analyzes or interprets social reality but actively seeks to transform it. While this approach poses significant challenges, particularly as direct engagement with the field is often seen as a threat to research validity, this article advocates for its value as a powerful methodological strategy for scholars committed to social change. It introduces the concept of social validation, which supports the legitimate recognition of collaborative research not only within academia but also by the communities involved.

RÉSUMÉ

La recherche participative et engagée est une approche où les frontières traditionnelles entre le sujet (celui qui enquête) et l'objet (celui qu'on enquête) sont intentionnellement brouillées, les deux collaborant à développer autant l'objectif que le savoir. Dans ce type d'enquête, le chercheur, aux côtés des participants à la recherche, ne se contente pas d'analyser ou d'interpréter la réalité sociale, il cherche à la transformer. Bien que cette approche pose des défis importants, notamment parce qu'un tel engagement sur le terrain est souvent considéré comme une entrave pour la validité de la recherche, cet article défend sa valeur en tant que stratégie méthodologique puissante pour tout chercheur engagé dans le changement social. L'article introduit le concept de validation sociale, qui appuie la reconnaissance légitime de la recherche collaborative non seulement par le monde universitaire, mais aussi par les communautés concernées.

Keywords / Mots clés : social validation, participatory research, engaged research, South America, Brazil / validation sociale, recherche participative, recherche engagée, Amérique du Sud, Brésil

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INTRODUCTION

In a global context of increasing social inequalities, economic precariousness and climate disasters, more and more academic communities have been concerned with the concrete social impact of their research. The so-called "relevance gap" has led numerous researchers to rescue principes of different forms of participatory inquiry, arguing for the value of a more engaged posture (Pozzebon, 2018). The "participatory turn" is one of the answers of scholars concerned with the social impact of their research and their connection to the investigated field (Alperstedt & Andion, 2017; Wittmayer & Schäpke, 2014). Our first goal in this article is to place participatory and engaged research as a privileged methodological strategy for scholars seeking to promote social change (Pozzebon, Tello-Rozas, & Heck, 2021; Saldanha, Pozzebon & Delgado, 2022). Among the several streams of participatory or collaborative inquiry, we found our main inspiration in the Latin American thinkers Orlando Fals Borda and Paulo Freire, who radically and critically subvert the separation researcher/researched or subject/object. This approach, nonetheless, faces many challenges since, from a more traditional "scientific" perspective, the researcher's direct involvement is often considered to undermine the validity of the entire research process. Additionally, it demands legitimate acceptance from not only the academy but also the community (Pozzebon, 2018).

The recurrent challenges that the direct engagement of researchers with their field and the consequent tenuous separation between researchers and researched bring to the legitimacy of participatory modes of research lead to the authors' second goal: a search for appropriate validity criteria and process for engaged research. We propose a conceptualization of research's social validation that promotes a comprehensive understanding of the activities and roles of engaged researchers, thus taking an important step towards the development of a set of sensitizing principles to guide and evaluate research of collaborative nature. Therefore, the research question guiding this work is: *How to conceptualize and operationalize social validation to increase the legitimacy of participatory and engaged modes of research?*

The empirical inspiration for this article comes from a fieldwork with Polos de Cidadania (hereafter Polos), an academic and practice-oriented program headquartered at a Brazilian Federal University. Polos is a transdisciplinary program of teaching, applied social research, and community service that, for the last 27 years, has been practicing engaged research, with social validation as one of its key operating principles in complex social and environmental conflicts.

Our study seeks to contribute to both management and third sector fields, particularly in studies on non-profit and social economy, by the articulation of engaged research and social validation from a perspective that has been under-explored in those literatures. The results show a set of practices and principles to guide practitioners and researchers involved with social change, clearly supporting Canadian and international researchers and collaborators in the development and dissemination of insights that can enhance the impact of nonprofit and social economy sectors. This article begins by positioning the authors' understanding of engaged research and then moves on to the conceptualization of social validation. It then presents a methodological design, and describes an instrumental case study, the Polos program. Finally, the authors systematize practical examples for the application of social validation, with a brief discussion of the implications for research, and conclude with some final remarks.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This work focuses on two central topics: 1) participatory and engaged research, and 2) social validation. The aim of this literature review is to summarize the main ideas and authors and to identify principles and practices that might be organized in a frame to inspire scholars and practitioners seeking to address the concept.

PARTICIPATORY MODES OF RESEARCH

> I am talking about a research standpoint where the separation between the researcher and other social actors (citizens, militants, users, beneficiaries, or otherwise) become meaningless. The division between the subject (one that investigates) and the object (one that is investigated) somehow disappears. Both subject and object construct purpose and knowledge. The researcher's positioning and values are not just activated to analyze or interpret social reality, but to transform it. Again, and not by chance, this kind of qualitative inquiry is not easily justified as valid in the view of numerous academic communities. The engagement and direct involvement of the researcher is often seen as a barrier to the construction of a legitimate knowledge. (Pozzebon, 2018, p. 2)

Criticisms around the lack of direct and practical relevance of the academic work has led several authors to defend the valorization of a more active and engaged academic researcher (Alperstedt & Andion, 2017), seeking to place the needs and voices of communities at the centre of the research process and to position researchers as participants who actively collaborate on the transformative goals of social action (Tripp, 2005). Based on the premise that research and political engagement can be mutually enriching, activist scholarship is known by many names, including participatory inquiry, action research, feminist participatory research, participatory action research, participatory rural appraisal, clinical research, praxis research, experiential learning, and cooperative inquiry, to name a few (Pozzebon, 2018; Collins & Bilgem 2020).

Despite all the existing terms, *action research* is often considered an umbrella concept that encompasses a wide variety of approaches as well as diverse theoretical influences, including pragmatism, critical theory, liberal humanism, phenomenology, and social constructivism (Reason & Bardbury, 2008). Although there is no consensus on who first presented the concept of action research, its roots are attributed to the German psychologist Kurt Lewin, who in the late 1940s published the article "Action Research and Minority Problems" (Lewin, 1946). In the countries of the Global North, Lewin-inspired approaches have focused on organizational reform and industrial democracy, proposing social changes to improve working conditions (Tripp, 2005).

Approaches from the Global South propose emancipatory methods as a means of overcoming dual relationships, such as oppressors/oppressed and colonizers/colonized (Park, 1999). In this context, Freire and Fals Borda stand out. The latter is known for the methodology labeled "*investigación acción participativa*" (IAP) or, in English, participatory action research (PAR) (Cichoski & Alves, 2019). A central conception of Fals Borda deserves attention: *sentirpensar* and *sentirpensante* (Dulci & Malheiros, 2021). The term was retrieved from riverine peoples on the Colombian Atlantic coast and refers to subjects who combine reason and feeling in the production of knowledge (Fals Borda, 2015). In practice, *feeling/thinking* means challenging traditional dichotomous reasoning/feelings

in academic research. This means that researchers do not conduct the research process in a purely rational manner but rather act and decide by listening to their feelings and emotions together with those of community members (Bringel & Maldonado, 2016).

For Freire (2001), dialog is the essence of a humanizing education and emerges from acting and reflecting. Community members, who in traditional research are limited to being passive objects, instead actively participate in the process, providing their opinions and making decisions together with the academic researcher who, in turn, acts as a facilitator to help local actors identify their problems and turn them into a well-defined topic for investigation. This posture encourages genuine and complete involvement, in addition to mutual learning, on both sides (Pozzebon, 2018). Dialog, therefore, plays a fundamental role in the practice of engaged research, allowing different views of the world to be heard and debated and promoting critical thinking. This posture might also promote the exercise of empathy, love, humility, and tolerance (Mota Neto & Streck, 2019).

Freire and Fals Borda propose that the production of knowledge is not a process of "discovering" reality but rather a strategy for critically reading and transforming the world (Mota Neto & Streck, 2019). In this posture, a change in the distribution of power and resources toward a more horizontal relation is essential to eliminate poverty and oppression, and this happens only when people use their knowledge to participate systematically and critically in overcoming their problems (Pozzebon, 2018). Therefore, a key practice of engaged research is the co-construction of knowledge: each participant contributes his or her expertise—local or academic knowledge—in a dialogical and reflexive process (Mota Neto & Streck, 2019).

In this article, although the authors acknowledge that *participatory research* is a term widely accepted and conveys the vision of research-building we adhere to, on several occasion this article also uses the term *engaged* research, to reinforce an action-inquiry that combines a constructivist epistemology with a critical orientation along the lines of Freire and Fals Borda. The main objective of participatory and engaged research is to transform social realities, assuming knowledge to be not only cognition but also practice. The purpose is to identify sensitizing principles and actionable practices that can contribute to researchers interested in participatory methods, especially in the management and third sector fields. This article's main argument is that one way to achieve this purpose is through social validation.

A SOCIAL VALIDATION LENS TO PARTICIPATORY AND ENGAGED RESEARCH

To conceptualize social validation, we began by understanding the history of the concept. The initial term, *social validity,* emerged in the 1970s in the field of applied behavioural analysis. With a positivist root, it proposes ways to assess the acceptability, relevance, and impact of research on the society or group involved in the investigation. Kadzin (1977) summarized two ways to verify the social validity of a research project: normative comparison (comparison of pairs in which one individual has undergone, and one has not undergone the intervention) and subjective evaluation (the evaluations of individuals coexisting in the subject). Wolf (1978) was the first to propose a theoretical framework to assess the social validity of behavioural interventions, according to which society must evaluate a given research intervention at three levels: 1) the social significance of the goals (how much the specific goals are in line with what the society truly wants); 2) the social adequacy

of the procedures (participants, caregivers, and other consumers who find the treatment procedures acceptable); and 3) the social importance of the effects (whether society is satisfied with the results, including those that were not expected). One of the most important principles proposed by Wolf (1978) that remains relevant overtime is reciprocity. Guaranteeing reciprocity through community participation (researched individuals/groups) in all stages of the research is seen as crucial to ensure the social significance of the objectives, the social adequacy of the procedures, and the social importance of the effects (Wolf, 1978).

To face the challenge of dealing with a subjective measurement within an essentially objective approach, several authors propose methodological procedures for social validity, including Finney (1991), Kennedy (1992), and Robotham, King, Canagasabey, Inchley-Mort, and Hassiotis (2011), to cite a few. Although these scholars recognize the importance of the acceptance and satisfaction of the researched society/group, the display a preoccupation with the risks that subjectivity bring to academic rigor. Note that this fear is linked to the epistemic and ontological position of this predominantly positivist field.

Departing from the initial positivistic or functionalist perspective, a second concept emerged—*transformational validity*—based on the view that meanings are social constructions and that different views of a given topic yield multiple meanings (Cho & Trent, 2006). Valid knowledge emerges from a conflict of interpretations and actions that are discussed and negotiated between researchers and members of the researched community (Oliveira & Piccinini, 2009). Richardson (2000) used the metaphor of a crystal to describe the transformational dimension of validity as one that "combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, transmutations, multidimensionality and approximation angles" (p. 552).

Supporters of the transformational approach (i.e., there is no absolute and objective truth in human science) see validity as a path to achieve social justice (Cho & Trent, 2006). They are in line with previous work by Lather (1986), who already opposed the positivist principle of researcher neutrality. The author not only recognized the impact of the research process itself but also proposed consciously channeling this impact so that the participants gain autonomy, thus disrupting hierarchical relationships and looking for horizontal ones, seeking the promotion of empowerment of research subjects (Lather, 1986).

From a methodological point of view, the researchers' actions, their immersion and ethical integrity in data collection, and the possible consequences for the subjects involved in the research are as important as what is produced (Cho & Trent, 2006). Transformational validity requires a reflective and empathic attitude from the researcher in working with the subject, diluting relationships of authority, power, and privilege (Oliveira & Piccinini, 2009). It is not only up to the researcher to assume that he or she is active and aware of his or her role in the production of knowledge, as the participants become co-investigators of the research. For this, promoting researchers' immersion and ethical integrity in data collection is proposed by Cho and Trent (2006) as fundamental for developing mutual trust.

Despite the historical importance of the terms social and transformational validity, in this work we favour a more processual view, adopting the term *social validation*. It is important to mention that the authors are not relating social validation to other uses that might be made of this term, as in

psychology and marketing research. Social validation is applied here as a process for evaluating the social relevance of collaborative research, particularly in the nonprofit and social economy domains. It implies conducting research according to the needs and expectations of the community involved, assuming a dialogical relationship throughout the investigation process.

In fields such as management and the third sector, several authors have proposed strategies that contribute to such a processual view of social validation. Antonacopoulou (2009) proposed "unlearning" as a way of learning for researchers to have a positive impact and for professionals to play the role of co-researchers. This requires the practice of asking different questions, expanding the possibilities for the investigations and the results, i.e., being modest and humble in the learning process (Antonacopoulou, 2009). In a similar vein, Marcos and Denyer (2012) highlight the importance of the practice of imagination, that is, of creating an environment in which there is no "right answer" and thus opening possibilities for new and co-created ideas and models.

Sharma and Bansal (2020) argue that co-creation should be understood not only through specific episodes or events but also through a constant process of interaction between academic and practical knowledge that allows the two types of knowledge to overlap over time. The authors identified two devices that emphasize the co-creation process: temporal connections and recognition of the incompleteness of objects. Temporal connections allow participants to understand the co-creation process more broadly, as part of a gradual process. This ensures the continued participation of everyone in the project, even if they do not always feel that co-creation is taking place. Second, the recognition of the incompleteness of frameworks, hypotheses, and results motivates both parties to build processes collectively. We connect this device to both dialogicity and reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2004).

Summarizing our review up to now, we saw that a positivist view prevailed in the initial conceptualization of validity, seeking to determine the degree to which the knowledge produced by researchers was objective and reliable (Cho & Trent, 2006). In other words, when the objectivity and reliability of the process are valued from a positivist or functionalist perspective, the engagement and direct involvement of the researcher are considered a threat to the validity of the research.

Table 1: Building a provisional set of sensitizing principles for social validation of participatory and engaged research

Principle	Main sources
Empathy, humility, and tolerance	Mota Neto & Streck (2019); Antonacopoulou (2009)
Mutual trust	Cho & Trent (2006)
Temporal connections	Sharma & Bansal (2020)
Dialogicity	Freire (2001); Mota Neto & Streck (2019)
Horizontality	Fals Borda (2015); Lather (1986)
Reflexivity	Freire (2001); Mota Neto & Streck (2019)

Since the 1980s, with the arrival of transformational conceptualizations, a slow but progressive advance has taken place in the debate about criteria for evaluating non-positivist research. This work

aims to advance this debate. Table 1 summarizes the main ideas discussed so far, articulating insights from engaged research, social and transformational validity, and more recent debates that point toward the emergence of social validation as a relevant and missing process. This systematization proposes a set of sensitizing principles to guide and evaluate participatory and engaged research.

Our provisional lens indicates that, in order to conquer legitimacy through social validation of an engaged research alongside a given community, we should consider a set of sensitizing principles. The basis is to cultivate empathy, humility, and tolerance (Mota Neto & Streck, 2019; Antonacopolou, 2009) to build mutual trust (Cho & Trent, 2006). Those basic elements are a corollary to engage from a long-term relationship, guaranteeing temporal connections (Sharma & Bansal, 2020) toward the achievement of certain mutually agreed goals. In this relationship, dialogicity (Freire, 2001; Mota Neto & Streck, 2019) and horizontality (Lather, 1986; Mota Neto & Streck, 2019; Fals Borda, 2015) are foundational principles. Finally, to nourish the constant refinement of the engagement, reflexivity (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Freire, 1979; Mota Neto & Streck, 2019) and imagination (Marcos & Denyer, 2012) appear also as relevant principles. This is not a prescriptive path, but a sensitizing and inspirational one.

METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

To empirically illustrate and enrich a provisional social validation lens to participatory and engaged research, the authors opted for an in-depth instrumental case study. Using the terminology proposed by Stake (2005), an instrumental case study allows the production of results that go beyond the case examined, facilitating the understanding of a broader theoretical issue through the investigation of a particular empirical context. The objective is to produce an understanding that can be applied not only to the investigated case, but also to others with similar contexts. The case study selected for this research is Polos de Cidadania, a Brazilian academic program that illustrates in an exemplary way the issues raised by this study, since the work carried out by the program was and is guided by engaged research and social validation. Therefore, Polos was selected for theoretical reasons.

Data collection was organized from a vast number of empirical materials. Many documents were consulted, most of them being available on the web, either from Polos' different communication channels (website, Instagram, and Facebook), or in articles published by newspapers and other vehicles, reports, dissertations, theses, in addition to project materials and institutional presentations provided by the Polos' team. In addition, weekly meetings were held for approximately two months, and three semi-structured and in-depth interviews were held, with an average duration of an hour and a half each. The interview script focused on historical, contextual, and methodological aspects of Polos' transformations, processes, and relationships between the actors. Two interviews were conducted: with one of the coordinators of Polos and one with an academic professor who has worked in collaboration with Polos for many years.

Finally, the analysis method was abductive in nature (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000), i.e., from the authors' framework of practices, they coded the empirical material in search of the emergence of actions that corresponded to the categories already identified, or that would transform them. It was an interactive process between concepts and empirical material. In terms of criteria for bringing

quality and rigor to the methodological path, the four criteria for critic-interpretive standpoints was used: authenticity, plausibility, criticality, and reflexivity (Pozzebon, Rodriguez, & Petrini, 2014).

PRESENTING THE CASE: POLOS DE CIDADANIA

Polos is a transdisciplinary program of teaching, applied research, and community service of a federal university situated in the state of Minas Gerais, in the southeast of Brazil. Between July and December 2020, the authors held weekly meetings and conversations with the coordinators. The goal was to understand the historical, contextual, and methodological aspects of Polos' actions. Their responses are quoted in this section. In addition to those interactions, we also collected numerous documents, master's and doctoral dissertations as well as institutional presentations provided by the Polos team.

Polos was founded in 1995 by Miracy Gustin, a lawyer and professor in the Faculty of Law, who pioneered ways of reconciling academic activities with the concrete promotion of citizenship and human rights.

> We are very proud to say that the program has its matriarchal basis. This is something that feeds us and guides us daily. Our biggest reference in the program is a woman, and her name is Miracy. (Polos Coordinator, 2020)

Since its creation, the program has promoted participatory research through immersion in different territories where the lives of citizens are marked by highly complex social conflicts, whether urban or socioenvironmental (Rubião, 2010). With a team of professors and students who are extremely engaged in their work, Polos activities are marked by several lines of work, including psychosocial and legal assistance for individuals in situations of vulnerability and social exclusion; conducting courses, lectures, seminars, and training; technoscientific production; participatory diagnostic and evaluative research; providing assistance to social and community movements; supporting popular organization and mobilization; and creating networks for the protection and promotion of human rights. According to its creator:

> The actions of this methodology must go beyond the scope of temporary emergency actions. The action mechanisms and the results must occur in a rooted and permanent way in the daily lives of the communities, through the review of social practices, to favor popular mobilization and organization, consolidating citizenship. (Miracy Gustin, public interview, 2005)

The first phase of a Polos project is immersion, the duration of which varies according to the context. Observation, listening, and understanding are fundamental strategies during this phase. Sustained immersion allows the problematization process, in which the Polos interdisciplinary team, composed of students and researchers together with professionals and community members, collectively reflects on the issues experienced, thinking together, and trying to understand the realities and problems while sharing the construction of proposals. Therefore, one of the practices put forward by Polos is the submission of a master or doctoral research proposal, from its very beginning, to the approval of the community members. Respecting the particularities of each project, the purpose of this phase is to deepen the dialog as much as possible, collectivizing the debate and sharing questions between academic and community members. Another often-used strategy is the *roda de con-*

versas, a circle of conversations, preferably involving 12 to 15 people, in which everyone has space to horizontally speak and listen. The researcher simultaneously assumes the roles of researcher and participant in the group (Rubião, 2010).

Influenced by the thought of Paulo Freire, dialog is one of the fundamental points of Polos' work. The program seeks to expand its communication channels, working in a network in which participants think together about issues raised by the communities themselves. One of the guiding principles of Polos is clear: community members, the local actors, should be the protagonists. Contrary to a logic of productivity, rather than carrying out projects that seeks fast results, the program goes at the pace of the dialog, "at the pace of local people" (Polos coordinator, 2020).

In addition to Paulo Freire's perspective, the program's methodology is inspired by the work of Colombian sociologist Fals Borda, reiterating the importance of the researcher being involved in the process he or she studies, transcending mere observation (Cichoski & Alves, 2019; Fals Borda, 2015). One of Fals Borda's central ideas is feeling/thinking, which in terms of the practices of Polos means entering intensely into the daily lives of communities and allowing oneself to be affected by their ways of existing and re-existing. This posture seeks to meet those involved in their speaking places.

Popular street theatre is a fundamental axis of the Polos program. Polos uses the popular street theatre work carried out by the troupe *A Torto e a Direito*, inspired by Augusto Boal's "theater of the oppressed." Polos' initiatives provide awareness and critical education for those in situations of vulnerability and social exclusion (Pereira, 2019; Rubião, 2010), reaffirming the political and pedagogical character of theater.

> We have no doubt that the presence of the theater is essential. But not just for managing teams. At various times, we are faced with such difficult situations that for us it is very clear that a technical intervention or scientific production will not be enough. (Polos Coordinator, 2020)

After the immersion and questioning phases, the troupe can be called to create a play or theatrical sketch on a certain theme. The creation process requires research and dialog between program members and the local community, which is essential for theatrical interventions to be in accordance with the positions defended by Polos and to ensure that the different points of view and places of speech are included. At this stage, the troupe seeks to articulate and combine the so-called local and academic grammars (Pereira, 2019; Rubião, 2010). The main objective of the theatrical pieces is to awaken reflection and reaction of spectators, whether for awareness, mobilization, or problematization of the issues identified in the research/work process. The very same piece is never presented twice: the texts are constantly revised, rewritten, and modified based on audience response.

The theatrical pieces do not have a planned conclusion, instigating the potential of individuals to change the course of the events. In addition, some features of the theater of the oppressed, as conceived by Augusto Boal, such as the notion of *spect-actors* with the aim of increasing public participation (Pereira, 2019; Rubião, 2010).

Finally, but no less importantly, the entire action of Polos is outlined by the so-called ethics of care, a legacy of the founder, Miracy Gustin, which consists of permanent care for others and for oneself. This posture, combined with feeling/thinking, recognizes and values the sensitivity, empathy, and

subjectivity of individuals. Respecting each person's time and process, the ethics of care goes against the logic of efficiency that seeks fast and measurable results.

> We must produce justice, we must produce knowledge, we must produce science. But always guided by an ethics of care. We need to take care of the teams, take care of ourselves, take care of dialog. (Polos Coordinator, interview, 2020)

An example of this positioning is the strategy used by Polos to call everyone in the community and in the research team by their first name, showing sensitivity and attention to the individuality of each participant. Care also takes place within the Polos work structure. There is daily monitoring of researchers, with weekly meetings between the coordinators and the other team members (other professors, researchers, students, and interns). In these meetings, people are invited to share their doubts, experiences, anxieties, and challenges, significantly contributing to the ongoing formation and reformulation of the program.

SOCIAL VALIDATION IN ACTION

We argue that Polos has been consolidating its unique methodology over 26 years of operation. The program reinforces the role of the university in the construction of a fairer and more egalitarian society. The process of identifying the tools and methods in Polos' day-to-day activities, therefore, represents a path in the search for a deeper understanding of the practice of engaged research and the application of social validation.

Table 2: Concrete illustrations for social validation of engaged research

Polos' practices and tools	Principles achieved
Immersion: the first phase of any project in a community is a deep immersion in the context.	Temporal connections; mutual trust
Research approval by the community: the submission of any research proposal (masters, doctoral, or other type of project) to the approval of the community members.	Mutual trust; dialogicity; horizontality
Community protagonism: the demands as well as the definition/diagnosis of the problems and issues come from or are led by the community.	Horizontality, dialogicity
Conversation circles (*roda de conversa*) and dialogical meetings: members of Polos act as facilitators, promoting occasions to exchange experiences with community members, social movements, government, and universities (all the actors involved) in an ongoing dialog, seeking to ensure that everyone has space to speak and to listen.	Horizontality; dialogicity
Mutual learning: the team tries to integrate local and academic knowledge.	Dialogicity; horizontality
Tolerance with time: respect for the time required by people in the project, breaking with the logic of efficiency and quick results.	Temporal connections
Ethics of care: all people involved are addressed by their first name with empathy and respect (members of the community feel considered when this happens) and the research members ask about everyone's wellbeing before discussing aspects of the project.	Empathy, humility, and tolerance; mutual trust; horizontality
Feeling/thinking: the members of Polos try to think, act, and feel together with the community.	Empathy, humility, and tolerance; reflexivity

Table 2 presents the practices and tools of the program and how they connect to the principles of social validation of engaged research previously discussed.

This systematization provides examples of concrete practices and tools actioned in the research process; it constitutes a practical guide for the application of social validation by researchers and practitioners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The main objective of this article is to contribute to the North–South dialog on the consolidation of the concept of social validation as a strong tool to increase the legitimacy of participatory and engaged research. The research question guiding this work is: *How to conceptualize and operationalize social validation to increase the legitimacy of participatory modes of research, particularly the engaged ones?* The a) systematization of extant literature, the b) proposal of an actionable and analytical framework, and the c) analysis of the Polos' case study allow us to elaborate some important implications for research and practice. We argue that our study contributes to both management and third sector fields by the articulation of participatory/engaged research and social validation from a perspective that has been underexplored in both literatures. The results show a set of principles, illustrated by practices and tools, to guide practitioners and researchers involved with participatory social innovation, particularly those involved with nonprofit and social economy organizations.

Although the source of inspiration came for engaged research practiced by a Global South nonprofit centre, the authors' social validation lens could be analytical transferable, or using Cunliffe's (2002) words, could "resonate" with researchers and practitioners working with other methods and contexts.

First, this article contributes to the debate on the impact of academic research, answering to the recent call of Lachapelle (2021) for processes that seek a concrete transformation of the causes of inequality, discrimination, and exclusion. We outline the importance of engaged research for the promotion of social transformation. Working as a bridge between theory and practice, engaged research encourages researchers' involvement with the field not as a threat to academic research, but as an emancipatory tool. Through dialog, listening, and other practices inspired by Freire and Fals Borda, researchers can align themselves with key actors and co-build knowledge that advances in discussions about social fissures. The authors articulate the meanings of social validation as a historical process with the perspectives of two thinkers from the Global South: the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire and the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda.

Combining their emancipatory research and educational perspectives, the consideration of people as acknowledgeable and feeling/thinking (sentipensantes) social actors leads to an awareness in which a reflexivity is linked to action in the territory where they live. This process is engendered by aspects that unite solidarity, cooperativism, and an active hope (the verb esperançar defended by Freire). In this way, the emancipatory transformational possibility is consolidated through participation and the construction of social justice (Fals Borda, 1962; Freire, 1979).

Second, this article adds a new layer to the debate about participatory and engaged research: the presentation of the concept of social validation and a framework for operationalizing the process.

After analyzing the Polo's methodology, the authors conclude that community involvement throughout the research process is essential for social transformation since these groups understand the exact dimensions of which actions truly trigger change. The Polos program seeks to interact dialogically with the community throughout the research process—problem formulation, design of a framework theory, data collection and analysis, and presentation of results. Thus, subjectivity does not appear to be a "problem" to be solved but rather is a fundamental potentiating element. The combination of techniques used by Polos shows that it is possible to guarantee the reliability of research data without giving up on explaining the participants' values and worldviews, including and above all political ones. The practices presented offer support of the choice of tools and methods used in data collection and legitimize engaged research in response to the predominantly positivist academy.

In terms of implications for practitioners, the study of the Polos experience allows for a deeper discussion of the practice of engaged research and social validation. The work methodology developed by Polos over 26 years is based on the active involvement of community members and the search for autonomy and social transformation. The three principles of interaction between Polos, communities, and governments are dialog, art, and ethics of care. Based on the work of Paulo Freire (2001), dialog is seen as the essence of a humanizing education that takes place in two dimensions: acting and reflecting on reality (Menezes & Santiago, 2014). The use of dialog as a methodological tool has challenges. It is especially noted in a context of unequal power relations, such as when women are silenced or not listened to in meetings or communities, and their existence becomes invisible in activities that involve the participation of companies or public institutions. In this posture, the community itself, which already exists in a situation of social vulnerability, points out its difficulties and needs, avoiding even more violence and amplifying the ways of existing and resisting in such territories.

In addition to dialog, Polos puts into practice Fals Borda's feeling/thinking. The Colombian sociologist pointed out that the researcher must transcend observation and engage deeply in interaction with the community, allowing him- or herself to be affected by the subjects' way of living and reliving social struggles (Cichoski & Alves, 2019; Fals Borda, 2015). Another fundamental focus of Polos' work is transformation through art. It relies mainly on social theater inspired by Augusto Boal. The process of creating theatrical pieces occurs between the artists, the researchers, and the community, with local and academic grammars mixing to create a transformational performance (Rubião, 2010). Finally, the third fundamental element is the ethics of care. The Polos team starts from the premise that they must permanently take care of others, of themselves and of the consequences of their research. This posture emphasizes the sensitivity, empathy, and subjectivity of individuals with respect for each person's time and difficulties.

Finally, we highlight some challenges (far from being the only ones) that emerged when analyzing the case study of the Polos program. Putting social validation in practice is not simple. The effort involves diverse actors, perspectives, and values and can be planned only to a certain extent. The groups with which the research is carried out frequently find themselves in situations of extreme social vulnerability. For engaged researchers, it is necessary to reinforce reflexivity and humility to ensure that the scenario of violence is not reinforced. Often, the researcher needs to place him or herself in the position of "standing by" the community, reinforcing the autonomy, centrality, and protagonism of these populations rather than providing answers and seeking results.

Among the main limitations of our work, we could consider the limited number of interviews and the fact that a substantial part of the weekly meetings was carried out online due to pandemic restrictions. Although the secondary data were extremely abundant and rich, more interviews with people involved with Polos' activities would be beneficial.

We believe that engaged research, supported by actions consistently and consciously developed to support social validation, represents both a *praxis* field of critical research in management and third sector studies and support for social transformation that deserves further reflection, debate, analysis, and practice. We encourage researchers to explore, challenge, experiment, and further develop these concepts. This agenda has become even more relevant as business schools and law schools have consolidated as academic and university spaces historically marked by difficulties in dealing with methodological pluralism while proposing to train people capable of supporting the most urgent and necessary social transformations of our time.

NOTE

1. Some examples compiled from the literature are criteria for authenticity, including fairness and ontological, educative, catalytic and tactical authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989); critical criteria, including positional, communitarian, voice, reciprocity and sacredness principles (Lincoln, 1995); pragmatic validity (Kvale, 1995); feminist post-structural validity, including ironic, paralogical, rhizomatic and voluptuous forms of validation (Lather, 2001); reciprocity criteria (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001); truth-based criteria, including communicative, pragmatic, and transgressive validity (Sandberg, 2005); responsibility-based criteria, including reductionist and epistemological validity (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010); and authenticity, plausibility, criticality and reflexivity (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Pozzebon, 2018). A recent work was even more disruptive, proposing a "metodologia OTRA" (Harari and Pozzebon, 2023).

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