



*Intersectionality and Participatory Action Research.
A methodological proposal applied to the study of feminist
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Intersectionality and Participatory Action Research. A methodological proposal applied to the study of feminist spaces in urban contexts

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Abstract

L'articolo intende esplorare, attraverso il resoconto di una ricerca empirica sugli spazi femministi dei contesti urbani tra Roma e Madrid, una proposta di intreccio tra Participatory Action Research e Intersezionalità. Per iniziare a gettare le basi su cui si è sviluppata la ricerca, l'articolo traccia brevemente la genealogia della ricerca partecipativa e, dall'altro lato, l'incontro con l'intersezionalità. In seguito, l'articolo esplora questa intersezione attraverso tre prospettive empiriche: la posizionalità; l'intreccio tra PAR e intersezionalità nella pianificazione della ricerca con le partecipanti; l'intreccio nell'analisi dei dati e nella diffusione dei risultati. Tutti e tre gli aspetti sembrano indicare alcuni elementi ricorrenti: la PAR, informata da un approccio intersezionale, permette l'espressione della voce di una serie di soggetti, superando la possibilità di espressione che alcune strutture di potere sociale precludono; l'approccio partecipativo rompe il monopolio della produzione di conoscenza da parte dell'accademia, che è spesso maschile, bianca, occidentale, eterosessuale, cis, abile, aprendo a contro-narrazioni agite dai soggetti stessi che incarnano posizioni subalterne; se da un lato questo approccio non risolve lo squilibrio di potere tra ricercatore e partecipanti e il differenziale di potere che l'intersezione di alcuni assi produce, dall'altro permette di portare continuamente in primo piano il nodo del potere.

Keywords: feminist spaces, intersectionality, participatory action research

Introduction

The article intends to explore, through the account of an empirical research on feminist spaces in urban contexts between Rome and Madrid, a proposal for the intertwining of Participatory Action Research and Intersectionality. To begin laying the foundations on which the research was developed, the article briefly traces the genealogy of participatory research and, on the other hand, the encounter with intersectionality. Afterwards, the article explores this intersection through three empirical perspectives: positionality; the intertwining of PAR and intersectionality in research planning with participants; and the intertwining in data analysis and dissemination of results.

Different perspectives of thought and, very often, of collective action have influenced the development of qualitative methodology. Especially for those engaged in understanding social movements, the practice of doing research, and thus of how, with whom, and through which relationships to foster the production of knowledge, has become increasingly important. As Fuster Morell argues, "It could be argued that research is always action research and that there is no such thing as apolitical and / or neutral research" (2009: 21). However, over time a methodology

of doing research with, rather than on, the observed population has been progressively formalised under the name of Participatory Action Research.

This methodology derives from very different and long-standing genealogies (Malo 2001). A first pillar is that of the Latin American tradition of participatory research. Paulo Freire (2013) argued in favour of involving people in the knowledge process and thus of rethinking pedagogy not as a vertical transmission of knowledge but as a horizontal concertation between participants. Fals Borda, moreover, in his study of Colombian communities, developed a participatory approach suitable for capturing the counter-narratives of local populations, broadening the spectrum of who is to be considered a “researcher” (1979, 1987).

A second pillar is women’s consciousness-raising groups and feminist epistemology. In her description of the functioning of a self-consciousness group in the early 1970s, Kathie Sarachild argues that the process of discussion, elaboration, and production of knowledge within groups is in itself the development of a feminist research methodology. As she furthers develops:

The decision to emphasize our own feelings and experiences as women and to test all generalizations and reading we did by our own experience was actually the scientific method of research. We were in effect repeating the 17th century challenge of science to scholasticism: “study nature, not books,” and put all theories to the test of living practice and action. It was also a method of radical organizing tested by other revolutions. We were applying to women and to ourselves as women’s liberation organizers the practice a number of us had learned as organizers in the civil rights movement in the South in the early 1960’s. Consciousness-raising—studying the whole gamut of women’s lives, starting with the full reality of one’s own—would also be a way of keeping the movement radical by preventing it from getting sidetracked into single issue reforms and single issue organizing. It would be a way of carrying theory about women further than it had ever been carried before, as the groundwork for achieving a radical solution for women as yet attained nowhere.

It seemed clear that knowing how our own lives related to the general condition of women would make us better fighters on behalf of women as a whole. We felt that all women would have to see the fight of women as their own, not as something just to help “other women,” that they would have to see this truth about their own lives before they would fight in a radical way for anyone” (1979: 145).

According to this quote, the process of understanding reality, the tools through which it is carried out, the forms of collective action, and the social transformation that knowledge can produce are all closely intertwined aspects that feminist movements have explored.

The third pillar is the workers’ enquiry or con-search, developed mainly by Romano Alquati in the Italian context (1993, 2019). Here, too, the idea that the production of knowledge is a process involving, in Alquati’s case, the researcher himself and the workers at the centre of the research is carried forward. There is no knowledge divorced from those who personally experience it.

All of these approaches, although they have different traditions of thought and tools, converge in the idea of overturning the positivist and rational paradigm that guides the social sciences, in order to rethink the process of knowledge production, the forms of power and the reproduction of social inequalities. A recent and highly codified and developed form is that of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which

has found application in many disciplines, from health studies to migration studies to social movement studies (McIntyre 2007). The latter strand will be referred to specifically in this article.

Over time, it became increasingly clear how substantial the contribution of intersectionality was to participatory research. Whenever we deal with a thick term, such as intersectionality, it is always important to frame its genealogy: where does it come from, how it has spawned. The concept of intersectionality has a double identity, coming from a political background, located in Black feminist's history, and an academic background, through Crenshaw's conceptualisation of the term (1991), and then through the academic debate that ensued. Acknowledging the interrelated work of different dimensions in their lives, the notion stems in Black feminists' reflections since the end of the 1960s. The Combahee River Collective, one of the first radical Black women collectives, founded in 1974, stated through its *Manifesto* (1977) some of the basis of the concept (Smith, 1986):

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. (Combahee River Collective, 2014)

Black feminist movements, in South and North America, started discussing Black women's conditions and their differences, both facing the white and middle-class feminist movement (considered as racist and exclusionary), and the sexism of their Black comrades in the civil rights movement (Combahee River Collective 1977; Davis 2011; Ribeiro 2017). Gradually, the acknowledgement of "differences" beyond the so-called universal sisterhood (one of the main claims of white feminist movement) triggered the political birth of other groups linked to ethnic minorities, then collected under the definition of women of colour or third-world women (Anzaldúa and Moraga, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Min-Ha, 1986; Mohanty, 2003; Davis, 2011). Charismatic activists of these groups, such as Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, claimed the specificity of women of colour, and the impact of different axes of oppression in their everyday life and political activism (Hull, Scott and Smith, 1982; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; hooks, 1981). Deeply rooted in movements' production of knowledge, Intersectionality firstly emerged as an academic concept thanks to Crenshaw's work (1989; 1991). She systematised the meaning of this concept in order to help Black women in their contentions within the workplace, since it was often hard to pinpoint which was the main exclusionary practice (the one based on gender or the one on race), and their cases were often mistreated.

Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group (...) tries to navigate the main crossing in the city. The main highway is 'racism road'. One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street. She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression. (Crenshaw 2001)

Several scholars have worked on the concept, through the notion of privileges and oppressions (Collins 1990), through the issue of additional or transversal

intersectionality (Knudsen 2006)¹, or questioning categories per-se, according to a constructivist and post-structuralist critique (McCall 2005).

In this theoretical framework, the role of subjectivity emerges as an interlocked puzzle. The issue of words and meanings is indeed one of the most challenging in every sociological work. Activists of feminist spaces are heterogeneous, depending on their location on the line of gender, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality. By now, it is impossible to sum up all these differences under the generic notion of “women”.

This issue immediately leads to the question of intersectionality as a research method. Scholars have been questioning this approach as an empirical methodology, as a way to disentangle social reality in several disciplines, such as sociology, political science, migration studies, health studies, and so on. Both engaged in qualitative and quantitative research, intersectionality is considered as a challenging method in order to frame subjects and processes, especially dealing with inequalities and marginal population. Even though its application has been tricky (some scholars stated that the concept works in theory but not in practice), it is also becoming an emergent bridge between disciplines. For instance, beyond the traditional connection between gender studies and urban studies, intersectionality offers a lens to understand interrelated dynamics in the urban space (Angelucci, 2017; Massey, 1985). Public space is not a neutral surface, but it openly or subtly defines who is entitled to join the space, when, how, and who is not. Structures of power, citizenship and liveability are impressed on the surface of the city, and who is excluded are usually the ones aware of these structures.

Depending on their position in the social structure, people are differentially located in space, with differential abilities and opportunities to overcome what geographers refer to as the frictional effects of distance. While we are all affected by the radical transformation of local and global relations outlined above, by the power of multinational capital and global telecommunications, there are radical inequalities in the spatial spread of individuals' lives. (McDowell, 1996: 30)

Along these blurred lines of inclusion and exclusion we can get the complexity of urban dynamics, and the urban experience of subjects and communities. Women and men have different experience of the city, but also white and non-white people, abled or disabled people, young and old people, middle-class or poor people. This methodological concern is specifically important in the analysis of feminist spaces

¹ As the author explains: “In my view the relationships between socio-cultural categories and identities open up to a transversal perspective. Rather than making hierarchies of categories and identities, intersectionality, as the concept is being used in the Nordic countries, takes the different perspectives connected to power in discourses into consideration, power in specific contexts and situations, and power in processes (Søndergaard 2005, Staunæs 2003b, op.cit.). Thirdly the concept of intersectionality has turned towards the transversal perspective as a matter of troubling gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, nationality etc. The great influence from Judith Butler's concept “gender trouble” in the Nordic countries should not be underestimated (Butler 1990). When gender makes trouble, the heterosexuality is problematised, and vice versa. Similarly it may be claimed with ethnicity: When ethnicity makes trouble, gender and heterosexuality are problematised” (2006: 4) [accessed Jul 17 2022].

and their inter-connection with the city, since these structures are equally acting within and without the space.

Following recent suggestions, intersectionality is also a way to perform analysis of data. A complex lens in the collection of data is also a complex lens while analysing them. A way to make the concept of intersectionality more empirical is applying it in our analytical process. In my case, understanding the transversal assemblages of gender, ethnicity, class, age, means framing internal relationships, community's dynamics, individual perception, identity building process, repertoires of contention, locating them in the matrix of differences. The different possibility to speak, to claim, to participate, to discuss, depends on individual assemblages of different aspects. But this is also true while inquiring the relation with the neighbourhood, with groups, with institutions. How do ethnicity and gender matter? How does age organise spaces, communities, political actions? How does the economic dimension affect individual perceptions and more general relations? Why is sexuality a constitutive element of feminist spaces, and what impact does it have on the space in itself?

The article refers to doctoral research carried out in the Department of Political Science and Sociology at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence. Over a period of four years, from 2017 to 2021, the research involved a total of six spaces between Rome and Madrid. The initial question guiding me was: how do feminist spaces imagine, preserve and produce feminist spaces? From this question my doctoral research developed, centred on the urban contexts of Rome and Madrid, through three different types of feminist spaces: a women's house with a relative degree of institutionalisation and historical perspective (Casa Internazionale delle donne [CID] and Espacios de Igualdad [EDI]); a feminist space characterised by forms of direct social action (also in the field of male and gender-based violence) (women's house Lucha Y Siesta [LYS] and Eskalera Karakola [EK]); a queer transfeminist space of antagonist inspiration (space of the Cagne Sciolte [CS] and Plataforma Encuentros Bolleros [PEB]).

My position (of proximity, as a feminist activist) (Reinharz 1992) and the choice of an ethical approach to social research (Milan 2014) led me to choose Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a tool for research design with participants (Fuster Morell 2009, Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014). From the drafting of the research design, access was constructed, the manner and timing of the field, the processing of the research material, and the dissemination of the research. Feminist spaces are a patchwork of differences, whose composition is crossed by different axes of gender, sexuality, social background, origin, age, education, skills (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001, Spain 2016). PAR is a methodology that makes it possible to focus on some of the questions opened up by the concept of intersectionality (Anzaldúa 1987, Crenshaw 1989, Collins 1990): an inter-subjective approach starting from the differences of the participants; a common work of elaborating the voice of communities considered marginal, even in contexts such as academia; the promotion of an intersectional sensitivity among the actors involved, including social services in relation to anti-violence services and centres for the right to health. The radically participatory approach to research made it possible, on the one hand, to develop a depth of relationships that put the imbalance of power in the production of knowledge between the academy and social movements at the centre (although without being able to undo it completely); on the other, to develop tools useful for the participants themselves in their own social and political activities.

In the following sections, I will try to explore the nexus between intersectionality and PAR through three dimensions: positionality; methodology and methods; analysis of data and dissemination of results. Finally, in the conclusions, I will report the process of the research by drawing some final reflections on PAR, intersectionality, and research findings.

The implementation of participatory research represents a promising field in the development of methodologies and methods contaminated by the concept of intersectionality not only at the epistemological level, but also at the relational level. Ultimately, orienting knowledge towards social transformation.

Positionality, Intersectionality and PAR

The PAR approach has the ambition of addressing the power imbalance between the researcher and the participants by trying to negotiate the perimeter of the research from the very beginning. Yet, the researcher can never completely eliminate a certain power they have, because it is they who take the first steps of the research, involves a certain population of participants, and involve the stimulus to begin. This is why the first section of reflection on the nexus between intersectionality and PAR concerns positionality.

To begin, two clarifications are necessary. As many Black, of colour, brown and racialised scholars warn, the concept of intersectionality calls for a political perspective of interpreting social reality (Mohanty 1984, Crenshaw 1991, Moraga and Anzaldúa 1995). Moreover, it is always an embodied concept, which therefore cannot disregard the body, privileges and oppressions, and context. In this sense, there has been a progressive twisting of the concept, sometimes used too casually by white and Western scholars (Carastathis 2014, Hill Collins 2015). The nonchalant use of the concept of intersectionality, especially by those who embody forms of privilege from a position of gendered subalternity, runs the risk of weakening the scope, meaning, and orientation of the concept of intersectionality. As Dhawan and Castro Valera critically argue:

Interestingly, the group that profits most from diversity politics and gender mainstreaming is white, bourgeois, and heterosexual. Even as critical race theory, postcolonial studies, diversity, intersectionality, migration, and globalization studies are increasingly core areas of feminist scholarship, the appropriation of knowledge of marginalized collectivities such as migrants and diasporic subjects in promoting the career of hegemonic groups is widespread. This prompts us to ask whether the highly celebrated discourses of diversity and intersectionality deliver equally to all constituencies or whether they function as an instrument for the differential distribution of rights and justice and as career making machines for intellectual elites. Interestingly, straight white men are increasingly staging themselves as victims of diversity politics, even as the pedagogical deployment of intersectionality in feminist scholarship results in re-securing the centrality of the subject positioning of white women (Puar, 2012, p. 52). Women of color, on the other hand, who were supposed to emerge as new subjects of feminism through intersectional analysis, are deployed as simply “articulating a grievance,” even as the category is emptied of its specific meaning through scholarly overuse (ibid.). (2016: 22-23)

As a young white researcher, I therefore approach intersectionality by trying to bring to the table the contradiction that this use entails. My geographical origin from a historically colonised island, recognising myself as a woman – in the political sense of the term – and queer, have brought me closer – also affectively (Ahmed 2004, 2014) – to the concept of intersectionality. Yet, those same dimensions are always plural, and being a woman, for example, represents both an element of subalternity and, as a cis-woman, a relative privilege. Similarly, being born on a colonised island is an element of subalternity, but it is also accompanied by the privilege of white skin and a class background that allowed me to study and pursue an academic education.

The second clarification concerns the risk of positionality drifts. Authors such as Haraway (1988), Harding (1992), and Rich (1984) invite careful reflection on the risks of claiming the neutrality of science. Science, especially social science, can never be objective, neutral, and universal. The point of observation of the researcher conditions the type of observation, the questions one asks oneself, what one is or is not able to see. Over the years, the issue of positionality and self-reflexivity, albeit with strong resistance, has become an integral part of methodological approaches. Yet, even in the issue of positionality there are risks lurking. Positionality in fact means making explicit one's place within a set of social structures in order to make clear how we are affected by and thus are able to approach a certain social reality. However, positionality cannot begin and end with the researcher. Over the years, positionality has risked becoming an exercise in solipsism or exhibitionism, without actually making itself into a tool for improving research methodology (Roth 2009, Ploder and Stadlbauer 2016). Positionality is a tool that helps one to go in a direction, to orientate the analysis, and to explicate research biases in an ethical manner. Positionality cannot become a way of show-off, nor a way of absolving oneself from the ongoing task of critiquing the contradictions that the researcher inevitably runs into.

These two clarifications are part of the reflections the article intends to propose. I began the fieldwork by consolidating these two initial critical points.

I started the fieldwork through an intersectional understanding of my positionality. In 2017, I was approaching the start of my research from my experience in feminist collectives, which had begun several years earlier. My identification as a woman, queer, feminist, islander, white, were elements that contributed to my interest in feminist spaces. My experience in feminist spaces, and the rather traumatic end of the first collective I had been part of, led me to question whether and in what sense feminist spaces are safer spaces.

The selection of cases depended on my previous experience in feminist movements. In this, the research design was heavily biased despite the participatory approach. Experience in feminist movements was also a means that often shortened the distance with the participants of the feminist spaces involved in the research.

I entered the field with the aim to immediately position myself. Some elements were, of course, visible when I introduced myself in person: my gender, as female; my age, as young; and my ethnicity, as an Italian (even though during *Lucha Y Siesta's* first period of fieldwork it often occurred that women hosted at the house misinterpreted my origin, thinking I was a woman of colour, and getting even more friendly with me). Other elements were not so easily perceivable, such as my level of education, my class background, and the reasons of my presence there.

During the phase of access, when I virtually contacted participants or groups, I described my research and my position in academia, but also my involvement in

feminist movements in several Italian cities (Padova, Florence and Rome) through some networks, such as local and national “Non Una di Meno” assemblies. This element crucially changed the participants’ stance toward me, rapidly opening spaces of trust and intimacy otherwise difficult to achieve.

The feminist spaces included in the research accepted my presence and made bonds of trust possible only thanks to my positioning. In some cases, such as the space of the “Cagne Sciolte” in Rome, this was made explicitly clear. Moreover, the quality of the bonds, and therefore of the disclosure of their experiences towards me, was conditioned by the perception of a common belonging. As the self-reflexive quote retrieved from the fieldnotes addresses: “this has changed the state of relations between us a little: the fact that they have seen, and not just known in a general way, that I am a feminist activist in a movement of which they are also part, and that I hold positions very similar to theirs, I think, has changed their perspective and their approach towards me. Sara, in fact, is very affable with me, much more intimate, and tells me right away how things are going” (Fieldnotes LYS, 04-06-19). The relaxation of relationships and the opening up of spaces of depth in the research relationship is evidenced by episodes like this one, on which I reflected in the fieldnotes:

A young Black girl also comes in and greets them affectionately. She is one of the women of the House. At that point Mina says: “Meet Giada, she is one of us. From now on you will see her here very often.” At that point they broke into a big smile and introduced themselves warmly, saying they didn’t know. [...] I go home full of joy, I can feel it palpably as I drive. Mina’s sentence is an important one, which she said without hesitation: “she is Giada, one of us.” It makes me think a lot. It took a long time to get into a form of relationship. The first email I sent them was at the beginning of March, and now it’s mid-June. In that time we have met and talked, but so far it has been a phase of negotiating access. And yet it’s as if they, as a space, have exactly that attitude towards people who do research, who either become part of the space or can’t do it. It is in itself an embodied example of participatory research, in the sense that so far those who have done extensive research at Lucha have actually entered into the management and inhabitation of the place, never as external users coming to collect data. Even in my case, they agreed to open the space to research when I became ‘one of them,’ that is, when they were able to see unequivocally that I was a feminist comrade beyond research, and that I had every intention of helping the space in any way I could. What happened tonight puts me very much into question, both about my research and in general about the way we understand participatory research. It makes me think that participatory research is in fact feminist research, or that feminist research is in itself participatory research, and on this axis is constituted the channel of entry to the communities and spaces to be studied. There is no other way in which I could have entered Lucha than to become part of it. Both in terms of trust and activism. It scares me and it excites me. It gives me back the sense of my research. Its true meaning. (Fieldnotes LYS, 04-06-19)

As I reflect in the notes, this proximity is both a source of value for research and a risk. In fact, as close as the participants and I were, we had different roles, and so confusing the plans too much risked exposing them in a way that was not entirely conscious, and me betraying, at times, a pact of distance necessary for the research. Distance is always necessary in order to keep a clear eye on the fieldwork, to agree

on boundaries, and also to select the information that will later be included in the research. Distance is also a form of responsibility towards the participants, in order to protect them.

Just as my positionality has shortened the distances to the participants, in other cases it has lengthened them. As I report in this episode, about an interaction I had with a deaf-mute woman working at the Cafeteria at the CID:

I am at the cafeteria asking for a coffee. I try to order but the waitress makes a sign and opens her mouth without speaking. I get that she's not able to speak and listen. She points out a banner with a lot of pictures of the waitress showing with the sign language everything you can order (such as coffee, orange juice and so on), so everyone can order using the sign language when she is working. Finally, I manage to order. I have the impression that she understood even before I used sign language, but she wanted me to notice her disability and so pushed me to find another way to communicate, by respecting her disability. It strikes me, because we are always used to taking for granted that the person we talk to has our same abilities. I drink the cappuccino smiling at her. She smiles too. It seems she knows that I understood that this was a lesson for me, that to interact we have to establish mutual rules of interaction. (Fieldnotes CID, Rome, 25-10-18)

The fact that I was an *able* person meant that I did not immediately recognise the requirements for interaction. The intersectional approach to research allows us to grasp how differences position us differently and alter interaction styles. From the differences, significant elements also emerge for understanding the observed phenomenon itself.

The nexus of PAR, intersectionality, and feminist approaches also concerned affect. The understanding, processing, and sharing of affect and emotions were for me a mediation with the participants and the fieldwork. My fieldnotes are full of reflections filtered through the matter of affect. It allowed me to understand with my body, and to bring into play various channels of understanding. As this example retrieved from the fieldnotes, among many others, shows:

The atmosphere is very affectionate and intimate, I realise that barriers of mistrust have fallen and they are talking to me as if I were their comrade. It is an enveloping sensation and I realise that my involvement in Lucha is already of a different kind. I feel that my willingness to participate is not so much driven by the goal of research as by a form of feminist solidarity, so I feel I want to help them in a moment of great uncertainty and fatigue. We say goodbye with a hug, saying that we will see each other again very soon. I leave Lucha with a hint of sorrow, as when you leave a place of warmth and return to the tepid world outside. (Fieldnotes LYS, 17-06-19)

The mediation of affect, like a compass, provided me with important information on how to orient, modify, or revise the interaction with the participants and the methodology, but it also gave me the tools to clarify the theoretical contributions². On a methodological level and in cross-fertilisation with feminist approaches, the research proposes a reflection on affect as a channel of mediation during the fieldwork and in the elaboration of findings.

² In the end, the theoretical framework of the research has been the bridge between feminist theory, social movement studies and affect theory.

Intersectionality, PAR and Feminist Spaces

After these preliminary considerations on positionality – and its limitations – this second section specifically addresses the nexus between intersectionality and PAR. PAR is inspired by the intersectional perspective: it aims to break down the dichotomy between subject and object, to open up to a knowledge informed by differences, to address the knot of power in research, and to identify how subjects position themselves within social structures in order to then elaborate tools for the transformation of those structures in a shared manner (Fine and Torre 2019).

PAR is a challenging option for everyone interested in studying marginal and non-hegemonic populations, in my case women, lesbian, non-binary, and queer subjects involved in feminist spaces. It is, as Coghlan and Brydon-Miller call it, “a participatory and action-oriented approach to research that centres gender and women’s experiences both theoretically and practically” (2014: 343). As an approach to the empirical inquiry, it allows a “democratic, equitable, liberating and life-enhancing qualitative inquiry” (MacDonald 2012, 34) that produces a shared knowledge on the topic between researcher and participants. PAR complies with “the need for researchers from across a number of disciplines to participate with people in improving and understanding the world by changing it” (McIntyre 2007: ix). Involving a cyclic process of research, PAR allows an extended focus on every part of the research, from the research questions to the dissemination of results, always shared and co-constructed with the participants. This approach stimulates a strong self-reflexivity in the researcher, confronting herself with views, meanings and actions expressed by participants, but also being aware about her position in the field. PAR is a valuable option facing social and feminist movements, as Milan singles out:

The field of social movement studies demands a special engagement with the ethical dimensions of research for a number of reasons. First, as social movements are bearers of “new ways of seeing the world” (Cox and Flesher Forminaya 2009, 1), social movement research cannot ignore the knowledge and the political imaginaries movements themselves have produced: not only should research operate within the boundaries of said political imaginaries, it should also be respectful of the processes and reflexive practices (often participatory, horizontal, “from below”) that led to the creation of said knowledge. By way of example, researchers investigating participatory social movements should ideally try to embed some of those very same participatory mechanisms in their research design. (Milan 2014, 446)

As these initial considerations show, the intersectional approach appears to be very much related to PAR. Several researches have explored this nexus (Lykke 2010, Schurr and Segebert 2012, Tolhurst et al. 2012, Levac 2013, Sallah 2012, Heiskanen et al. 2018, Fine and Torre 2019, Woolf and Wamba 2019, Thorius et al. 2020, Wheeler et al. 2020, Fine et al. 2021). How does intersectionality inform participatory approaches? The first step concerns the way we ask ourselves questions about the social world. As Matsuda argues:

The way I try to understand the interconnection of all forms of subordination is through a method I call “ask the other question”. When I see something that looks racist, I ask, “Where is the patriarchy in this?” When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, “Where is the heterosexism in this?” When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, “Where are the class interests in this?” (Matsuda 1991: 1189)

Intersectionality enhances our comprehension of the complexity of categories (McCall 2005) but also the complexity of the composition of participants to the research process. As Fine et al. outline with regard to the extensive quantitative research project *What’s Your Issue?*, a multigenerational, national, participatory survey designed by and for LGBTQIA+ youth, it is worthwhile to address some issues in the design of a participatory and intersectional project, like: “who holds the vision: With whom and for whom is the project designed? [...] Coresearchers: Who constitutes the research team? [...] Recruiting an inclusive sample: Who is being interviewed, surveyed, engaged in the inquiry? [...] Speaking to/with varied audiences” (2021: 348).

In the case of my research project, intersectionality gave me the lens *to see* participants and their own context. With regard to the Italian cases, the CID was composed of mostly white women of older age, who had long participated in feminist movements, and who carry a certain historical perspective and toughness in relation to the generational divide. The second case, LYS, is instead composed of participants aged 30-50, who come from a variety of feminist and intersectional experiences, and strongly inspired by popular feminism and direct social action. Being, however, a women's house and also a shelter for women escaping violence, the women of the collective, mostly white and highly educated, and women hosted in the shelter, mostly migrant women from different backgrounds, live together. Finally, in the case of CS, the composition was largely white women, trans and non-binary, lesbian and queer people.

By virtue of composition and context, our interactions changed. In the case of CID, gender was not decisive, but age mattered more. Being young compared to them made our relationship less equal and my proposal less understandable, less legitimate. In some cases, the attitude of the participants only changed when they discovered my affiliation – that is, being a doctoral student at the Scuola Normale Superiore, which is considered a university of excellence in Italy. Faced with an affiliation they considered very prestigious, their behaviour towards me also softened, leading them to be friendlier, closer. In this specific interaction, it is visible how class conditions interaction styles, even in contexts where it would seem to be a less relevant or more questioned axis. Intersectional sensitivity allowed me, in the course of the research, to understand what elements were at play in their individual and collective construction of meaning, and how they were at play differently depending on context, ideology or involuntary and often unconscious background.

As much as the interaction between me and the participants changed according to the different axes at play, so did the concept of safe space, which from the beginning was our puzzle. The concept of safety is indeed highly debated in feminist theory (Stengel and Weems 2010; Holley and Steiner 2013; Arao and Clemens 2013; Flensner and Von der Lippe 2019), feminist movements and the geographies of sexuality (Bell and Valentine 1995, Duncan 1996, Borghi and Rondinone 2009). As many studies have shown, safe spaces are not stable and finite configurations, but rather a process through which forms of power and subalternity are challenged to

construct more liveable dimensions for those who are usually subject to fear, threat, danger, attack, violence. As the Roestone Collective explains, the concept of safe space recalls and breaks down binary dichotomies and stable identities to open up an understanding of differences:

We argue that safe spaces should be understood not through static and acontextual notions of “safe” or “unsafe,” but rather through the relational work of cultivating them. Such an understanding reveals several tendencies. Namely, safe spaces are inherently paradoxical. Cultivating them includes foregrounding social differences and binaries (safe–unsafe, inclusive–exclusive) as well as recognizing the porosity of such binaries. Renegotiating these binaries is necessarily incomplete; a safe space is never completely safe. Even so, we encourage the critical cultivation of safe space as a site for negotiating difference and challenging oppression. (2014: 1346)

As spaces in which differences are negotiated, they can only be understood through the lens of intersectionality. For whom and under what conditions does a space become safer? Is a safe space for a young queer person equally safe for a mother with children? Is a safer space for a migrant woman coming out of a violent situation equally safe for an elderly woman living in the neighbourhood?

The answers to these questions depend on the intersection of many different elements, and complex lenses are needed to understand them. Therefore, during the course of the research, we negotiated with the participants the methods to be used, which differed according to the feminist space. In some cases, the participants made themselves available for one-to-one interviews, which allowed time and space to retrace their own histories. In others, participant observation paths were preferred, as in the case of LYS, because in order to grasp the complexity of the functioning of the space and the interactions between activists in the collective and women in the shelter, it was necessary to progressively become part of it.

The negotiation of methods during the research allowed room for the differences of the participants and how the differences altered the research interaction. In this way, it was possible to construct “a speaking place” (Ribeiro 2017) for communities that are considered marginalised and very rarely find space in both the public and academic debate. Thanks to the feminist and intersectional orientation of the project, the relationships with the participants were inspired by the ethics of care and an ongoing commitment to self-reflexivity and self-criticism. This allowed for the continuous questioning of power in research relationships, as happened at one moment during an assembly, when despite being there as an observer, I was asked directly: “Giada, since you are the one who spends the most time in the space and knows all the dynamics by now, you tell us what to do!” This along with other moments were passages in which to negotiate the privilege of the gaze and the power in the research relationship, without leaving behind the ethics of research and thus the awareness of our mutual roles and the boundaries between us.

Intersectionality is not only a way by which we prepare the research design, learn *to see* participants, negotiate methods and power in the research relationship, but it is also a perspective that informs data analysis and the dissemination of results, as the next section explores.

Intersectionality, Data Analysis and Dissemination of Results through PAR

PAR requires negotiating all steps of the research with the participants: from the research design to the dissemination of the results. In this section I will take a closer look at data analysis and dissemination. How are intersectionality and PAR intertwined in the analysis of data and how can this 'data' be used to stimulate social transformation?

Some of the participants, in the access phase at the beginning of the fieldwork, had explicitly asked me to analyse the research material together. With the CS space, specifically, there were very illustrative moments in which to look at the intertwining of intersectionality and PAR, which I therefore report below. Negotiating the analysis of data opens up a very innovative space of reciprocity in the research process. The researcher in fact has to make a generally very "technical" activity, in my case, constructivist grounded theory, comprehensible to the participants. This step helps to simplify, but not trivialise, the research activity and make it a shared tool for reflection even for those who do not work directly in the academic context.

With CS' participants, we organised two moments where we were all connected on the Jitsi Meet platform, and worked on a Rise Up pad (i.e. free software that did not jeopardise data dissemination). On the pad I had assembled a series of quotes from their interviews, anonymising them. One at a time, they read a piece of the interview and discussed the 'code' to apply to it. Even if they could not agree on a single code, they wrote under the segment various codes that emerged from the exchange. As an example, they read this quote, and it triggered a long and thick discussion among them:

And it is like in relationships, isn't it? Either you take care of the collective, and therefore you too, or it can't work. And sometimes you need to take breaks, because you can't take it all the time. There are ups and downs, times when you have more energy and less energy, times when you need to take a moment to be clearer. And it's just like in relationships in my opinion. And so you stay because you choose to stay. All of us, all of us have had periods when we didn't come into the collective. All of us, from the first to the last. But then we always came back, the ones that are there now. And it's just like in relationships. If you don't take care of yourself and you don't feel the desire there is no point.

The quote, retrieved from an interview with one of the participants, generated a very emotional moment. As the following transcript shows, a lively discussion led the participants to question the meaning of their relationship with space, care, autonomy and self-determination:

Speaker 2: while reading, the emotionality at the moment is a bit preponderant... Shall I say what I think about it? This sentence really resonates with me and I think it's all true. I also think that... That sometimes you need to have a moment of distance, in the sense that you go and when you feel like it you come back. [...] I am very grateful for what we have been able to build together because we allow people to come and go, to give what they can give in the moment they can give it there is no work... [...]

Speaker 5: In the various periods when I couldn't participate for various reasons I always felt I belonged to the collective and it's not that the moment you're not there means you're no longer part of it. I didn't feel at the time that I could devote the time I wanted and the energy I wanted, but I felt I belonged. And every time I came back it's as if I had never really left....

Speaker 7: I think at the end of the day we are used to, at least for me it was so in mixed politics, to have a certain profile of behaviour... With feminism it's like finally becoming autonomous. It's something that feminism allows you to do... in the sense that it gives you the possibility to feel yourself as a person within something that becomes bigger than the set of people who are together at that moment, and so it gives you the possibility to take some things about yourself and find other things about yourself and come together.

Speaker 2: maybe it's also somehow understanding the sense of not feeling alone [...].

Speaker 4: To me what struck me about this sentence is the bit where it says you stay because you choose to stay. [...] the ability to understand the good that space does and the good you do to that space. So a reading of how you feel that allows you to choose to stay there and not stay there out of habit [...]

Speaker 6: to me the question of desire strikes me, that is the desire that is sometimes the other side of the heaviness of doing politics...

The choral discussion allows each person to find and express their own voice (Ribeiro 2017), even in the differences. The shared analysis of data shows how the same sentence takes on a different meaning depending on the person interpreting it, and how the production of shared meanings passes through a negotiation of differences, also questioning what and how we are able to interpret and give meaning, depending on the different distribution of privileges and oppressions. This process does not seek universal or generalisable readings, but instead encourages the expression of one's own voice, and the sharing of a meaning, or set of meanings, that do not flatten but account for differences. This process also challenges the monopoly of the academy – often white, heterosexual, cis, middle-class, able-bodied – in the production of knowledge, recognising how the latter is a process that involves many more places and subjects than the academy envisages, but whose knowledge by virtue of that power dynamic is not authorised/legitimised.

Attending the discussion was a valuable moment for me to test the analysis process I was tackling alone, to see the data through their eyes, and to better define some categories I had inferred. For them, it was a moment to better understand the research and how it works, and also to reflect on their own collective history and the constant knowledge production that takes place in their community. Paradoxically, the online form, which is usually a limitation, was indicated by the participants as a virtue, because the distance imposed by the medium allowed them to release emotions and an affective immersion in their history that they would perhaps have struggled to do in presence.

Like data analysis, dissemination is also a field where intersectionality is at play. PAR allows us to experiment with many ways of making research results usable, beyond academic publications. These experimental ways make it possible to: a) play

with languages other than the academic one, and produce knowledge that is also accessible to those who cannot or do not wish to have higher education (think of people with different abilities, people who are blind and/or deaf, people with different levels of education, and so on); b) negotiating a meaningful use of the data for the participants, i.e. a use that can also produce benefits for their policy work; c) questioning the places and actors on whom the results might have an impact, e.g. local governments, social services, neighbourhoods, schools and so on. This use of the results can help promote intersectional sensitivity among the actors involved, e.g. in the case of all actors involved in anti-violence services or in the case of an awareness-raising activity; e) leaving room for the expression of many voices and experiences that are not hegemonic or that struggle to find space in the public debate, without the mediation of those who have access to different positions of power (such as those who have the privilege of working in the academy); f) actively involving participants in places where access would otherwise be more difficult, such as conferences, seminars, international workshops. As an example, in the case of the research on feminist spaces, we are developing a series of tools to disseminate the results, such as writing collective texts for blogs and sites³, participating collectively in conferences and seminars, and using the results for fundraising projects for the spaces. Also in the pipeline is the idea of a photo-novel and a feminist science fiction story telling the story of one of the spaces through different means.

Conclusion

The article attempted to explore the connection between intersectionality and PAR through some insights from empirical research conducted with three feminist spaces in Rome and three feminist spaces in Madrid. These insights build on existing literature that has explored the nexus, both through empirical research and methodological reflections (Lykke 2010, Schurr and Segebert 2012, Tolhurst et al. 2012, Levac 2013, Sallah 2012, Heiskanen et al. 2018, Fine and Torre 2019, Woolf and Wamba 2019, Thorius et al. 2020, Wheeler et al. 2020, Fine et al. 2021). First, the article explores the existing literature on the PAR approach and the emergence of the concept of intersectionality. It then focuses on three aspects: positionality; the intertwining of PAR and intersectionality in research planning with participants; and the intertwining in data analysis and dissemination of results. All three aspects seem to point to certain recurring elements: PAR, informed by an intersectional approach, allows the expression of the voice of a range of subjects, going beyond the possibility of expression that certain social power structures preclude; the participatory approach breaks the monopoly of the academy's production of knowledge, which is often male, white, Western, heterosexual, cis, ableist, opening up counter-narratives acted out by the subjects themselves embodying subaltern positions; while this approach does not resolve the power imbalance between researcher and participants and the power differential that the intersection of certain axes produces, it does allow for the knot of power to be continually brought to the foreground.

These considerations represent only an initial attempt to systematise insights from empirical research on feminist spaces. Many points remain open, e.g. concerning the unintentional reproduction of certain exclusionary structures even in methodologies that are strongly oriented towards challenging those structures, the

³ As an example: <https://www.intersezionale.com/2020/10/13/re-inventare-autonomia-esperienza-di-lucha-y-siesta/>

actual impact of this research on the social context, or the failures that very often occur when applying experimental methodologies. For these and many other issues, the need for future in-depth studies remains open.

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