

Participatory action research on webs of caring in the digital age across four European countries

Abstract

Purpose

The digital age requires people of all ages to communicate and organise their lives through digital technologies. The project EQualCare investigates how the growing population of older people living alone is managing this transition, how it shapes their (non-)digital social networks and what changes on a local level need to be brought about. This paper aims to give insight into the process of participatory action research (PAR) with older people in the community across four countries and reflects on experiences made by academic and co-researchers.

Design/methodology/approach

Following the emancipatory underpinnings of PAR, which aims to reduce inequalities through collaboration and co-design, EQualCare involved nine teams of co-researchers across Finland, Germany, Latvia and Sweden making older people the centre of policy development. Co-researchers were involved in formulating research aims, collecting data, reflecting on data, formulating and disseminating recommendations for local policy stakeholders.

Findings

Co-researchers' motivation to invest considerable time and effort was driven by a desire to create a more equal future for older people living alone. Moreover, they were keen to involve marginalised older people and became frustrated when this proved difficult. Power dynamics played a role throughout the process but became productive as roles and responsibilities were renegotiated. Doing PAR with older people can be emotionally challenging for co-researchers when negative feelings around ageing are encountered.

Originality/value

The paper advances understanding on the process of PAR in ageing research by reflecting on the social, cultural and political contexts of doing PAR with diverse sets of older people.

Introduction

This article reports on the project EQualCare that investigates the intersections of digitalisation with intergenerational care for older people living alone and how digital (in)equalities affect their civic participation. The project follows a participatory action research (PAR) design across four European countries (Finland, Germany, Latvia and Sweden) that have older people at the centre of policy development (Walker, 2007). Each country recruited two to three groups of co-researchers who self-identified as people who were well-connected in their neighbourhoods.

The paper advances scientific insights into the process of PAR in ageing research (Bendien *et al.*, 2023) across different jurisdictions focusing on a wide understanding of practicing care in a digital age. The contribution of this paper is threefold:

1. Firstly, it describes and reflects on the process of involving diverse groups of older people in PAR over a considerable stretch of time.
2. Secondly, it presents insights into the power dynamics between co-researchers and academic researchers.
3. Lastly, the paper provides critical reflection on challenges arising during the process of doing PAR.

Methods

The rationale for using PAR was rooted in the epistemological and political founding principles of co-operative inquiry that seek to understand human experience of (inter)actions from being inside the experience and by a shared personal interest in the inquiry question (Yorks, 2015, p. 257; Heron and Reason, 1997). Thus, the project sets out to contribute to the Knowledge base on the intersections of digitalisation with intergenerational care relationships in the lives of older people living alone and to work with older people, as equitable partners and agents of change (Corrado *et al.*, 2020) to make visible and change processes required to support social connectedness among older people living alone (Bindels *et al.*, 2013). The aim was to bring about social change at the local level that would benefit people beyond the group who conduct the research and expand its societal impact by networking across the national co-researcher groups. Following Buffel (2018), there is “an urgent need for social gerontology to engage more fully with such approaches if aspirations for social justice and empowerment are to be realised” (Buffel, 2018, p. 9). A recent systematic review shows that this form of inquiry can play a vital role in challenging negative stereotypes of ageing, and provides opportunities for partnerships between older people, service providers and community stakeholders working together to stimulate change in policy, and empowers before “older people to speak out against discrimination, and for change in systems” (James and Buffel, 2022, p. 21).

The design of the project took inspiration from the work done by Buffel in a project on developing age-friendly communities (Buffel, 2018). The aim was to recruit two co-researcher groups per country that would vary from each other, for example, by geographical location (urban/rural), ethnicity and/or social aspects. Purposely sampled co-researchers needed to fulfil certain criteria and be active in their local neighbourhood. During the meetings, academic and co-researchers set the foundations for working collaboratively, developing the different phases of the research and agreeing on roles and responsibilities. The collaborative work followed six stages:

1. co-designing research questions;
2. co-producing research materials;
3. collecting data among peers;
4. analysing data;
5. co-producing and sharing findings; and
6. translating findings into practice.

The meetings with co-researchers across the countries varied but all included training session on research methods, reflection meetings on data collected and the process of collecting it and dissemination workshops with local policymakers.

Recruitment

The academic researchers discussed different avenues of recruitment in their monthly meetings and in a project specific online chat. Previously established contacts with organisations working for and with older people proved particularly helpful by allowing academic researchers to give presentations, distribute poster and flyers, and writing in newsletters. The recruitment process took up to three months per country to ensure diverse sets of older co-researchers.

In Finland, three women and one non-binary person were recruited to the first PAR-group from a community centre in Helsinki. One person had English as mother tongue, and all others had Finnish. The meetings were mostly held in Finnish, with translation to English when needed. For the second PAR group, people from the Swedish-speaking community in the metropolitan and southern coastal area of Finland were contacted, which led to a group of four women.

The German team recruited a group of eight older people, who lived in different neighbourhoods in Frankfurt/Main, but who were willing to meet at a central location. The group started with one man and seven women, aged 67 to 88 years. A second group of older people was recruited in Egelsbach, a small town about 20 km outside of Frankfurt/Main. A group of seven people formed, one man and six women, aged 74 to 86 years.

The Latvian team chose a former industrial town close to the capital Riga, and a small town and rural area in the Western part of the country. Group one consisted of seven women aged 68–78 years, one of them was Russian and the others Latvian. Only three of the group received a pension above the average pension in Latvia (505 EUR at the end of 2022). Group two consisted of eight women and two men. One of the participants was Russian, and two were bilingual Latvian and Russian. Group three was formed in the second location and consisted of six women and one man, aged 60–81 years.

The Swedish researchers recruited in two municipalities in southeastern Sweden: an urban group in Kalmar and a rural group in Mörbylånga. Three men and four women aged 70–80 years, all degree educated, formed the urban group. For the rural group, four women and two men aged 65–77 years and scattered throughout the municipality were recruited. Some had academic backgrounds, and some had vocational or equivalent qualifications.

Several teams experienced dropouts mostly due to health issues of the oldest members. Moreover, it was not possible to recruit persons from ethnic minorities in any of the countries. In Finland, Sweden and Germany co-researchers were relatively well positioned on a socio-economic scale. Few group members voiced a difficult financial situation, whereas some others explicitly voiced the opposite.

Meetings

The groups met either on a fortnightly (Germany and Sweden) or monthly basis (Finland and Latvia) allowing for an extensive phase of getting to know each other, building trust, finding out about the project and how to develop it. Meetings took place in locations provided by organisations, or at the university, and there were always hot drinks and sweets. This phase lasted between 12 and 18 months. In Latvia, where the PAR process was completed in a shorter time span [1], one group still meets sporadically to discuss local actions.

The PAR groups were facilitated by one to two academic researcher each, all women except in the case of Sweden and Latvia. All degree educated and approximately 40 to 60 years younger than the co-researchers. Some of the student assistants supporting the meetings were male. The mismatch of age, gender and in cases education encouraged co-researchers' sharing and explaining, as no common experiences could be assumed. The academic researchers of EQualCare met once a month to discuss all aspects arising from the PAR groups.

The meetings had different topics which were agreed and communicated with the co-researchers via agendas and meeting minutes. The topics included introducing the project, getting to know PAR, developing research questions and an interview topic guide, discussing research ethics and how to find people to interview and practical use of voice recorders. During and after data collection, meetings reflected the experiences of interviewing, identified categories for the analysis and included debates on how the analysis should be done.

Data collection

It was agreed that co-researchers should conduct interviews with older people living alone in the community who vary in terms of income, health, mobility, education, reasons for living alone and level of digital participation. In Latvia and Germany, the co-researchers conducted 40 interviews, respectively. The Finnish groups conducted 34 interviews, and the Swedish groups 29 interviews.

Global context

All of the above initially took place against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and the different sets of restrictions across the four countries, which brought about challenges for the co-researchers and academic researchers. These ranged from not wanting to expose co-researchers to harm, as set out in the project's ethical considerations, to providing a safe social space in which co-researchers could meet and rekindle much wanted social contacts. At a more structural level, and with the start of the war in Ukraine, co-researchers in Latvia found themselves having to come to term with a 30% inflation rate that had a direct impact on their involvement in the co-creation process as some of the results will show.

Working with the data

Although data are often collected by co-researchers, with interviews being a prevalent method, the analysis often does not involve the co-researchers to the same extent (James and Buffel, 2022). This shift away from working collaboratively can be viewed critically as a form of paternalism on the side of academic researchers (Flick and Herold, 2021), but it can also be connected with other factors, such as lack of time or co-researcher's disengagement with lengthy and difficult to read transcriptions, as was the case in EQualCare. To facilitate the analysis process, the academic researchers provided access to printed transcriptions, coded segments, summaries and reports in varying combinations. Thus, where academic researchers had maintained a moderating role in earlier phases of the project, the analysis phase enhanced the co-creation character (Warwick-Booth *et al.*, 2021) of the projects with academic researchers coding transcriptions prior to meetings and co-researchers reflecting on the material "(...) from their own lived experience, enabling a richer understanding of the meaning and significance of interviewees' responses" (Barnes *et al.*, 2013, p. 483) and

validating them in the process. These sessions were recorded and provide, next to field notes, and reflections by the academic researchers, the data presented in this paper.

Findings

The findings are presented in three overarching themes:

1. Theme 1 sheds light on the value of doing PAR as a co-researcher.
2. Theme 2 examines the dynamics between co-researchers, academic researchers and persons interviewed.
3. Theme 3 provides insights into the co-researchers' critical self-awareness and expectations of what they wanted to achieve.

As the paper is not a comparison across the countries but a reflection of the joint process, themes do not systematically report from each country.

Theme 1: value of doing participatory action research as a co-researcher

There were several reasons to join the project as a co-researcher, which are presented in three subthemes: digitalisation, sociability and getting marginalised voices heard. These themes are intertwined, and sociability includes both inward sociability, to operate within their group, and outward sociability that considered digital reach of people and institutions.

Subtheme 1.1: digitalisation.

Digitalisation was a very emotive topic and a central tenant for co-researchers to know more about how other older people living alone were dealing with this process. Both groups in Germany were interested in exploring through the interviews the social networks and the role of digitalisation in the everyday lives of older people living alone in the community.

In Finland, a country where digitalisation is advanced, and many services have been moved online, concern was expressed about those people who did not have the required technological skills to carry out everyday tasks online. One of the co-researchers was especially interested in how technologies and digitalisation could support people with disabilities as well as how different digital programmes and applications could support older people by retaining their cognitive skills.

In Sweden, the urban co-researcher group generally emphasised the importance of older persons being able to get help and support with digital challenges. The co-researchers in the rural group emphasised the specific challenges of older people in rural areas, as well as of those who did not want to engage with technologies at all. During discussion sessions on the role of co-researchers in the interviews, they reflected on their role in relation to digital devices:

We're the ones sitting here who can handle it, but the people we're going to interview, if we start talking about this [mobile phone], can be completely incomprehensible and also frightening: 'I don't want one of those,' but tell them that they really have to [...] it's hardly possible to order medicines. (recorded discussion)

Subtheme 1.2: sociability.

In Latvia, Group 1 was motivated by wanting to help the academic researchers and to learn through doing research. Initially, co-researchers were more interested in learning new digital skills than in the results of the project. Group 2 was mostly interested in personal development and saw interviewing as a means. Group 3 was genuinely interested in generating data and considered the project a way to appeal to the local municipality. Compared to Group 1, they doubted collaboration with the local authorities could be successful, as their recent experience of regional reform had turned their previously independent town into a marginal location within a much larger municipal area. The involvement of Group 3 was spurred by an academic researcher's grandparents, who were active in another local group.

The participation in Sweden was strongly characterised by altruistic elements, with a high attendance rate throughout, and only illnesses preventing co-researchers from attending the meetings. The groups were careful to ensure that the results were fed back to the interviewees and expressed a desire that “the results do not end up on a shelf at the university” and that “something should happen” (field notes). Several co-researchers expressed a desire to “break the cycle of isolation” and hoped that the results and recommendations will achieve this. Similarly, two German co-researchers talked about how being part of the project encouraged them to talk about the topics with others and to contribute somethings to the challenges of older people living alone. As the meetings progressed, the social aspects of PAR became more important across the countries. In Sweden, co-researchers from both groups said they looked forward to the meetings and expressed a sense of satisfaction with the group dynamics.

Co-researchers in Sweden and Germany met up outside the PAR meetings. For the Swedish groups, this started during the interviewing phase with co-researchers expressing that the collaboration on interviews was enriching their personal lives. Caring for each other was expressed through taking material form the meetings to members who were absent. The importance of doing research was expressed by one co-researcher when her phone rang during a session: “I can't talk right now, I'm doing research. I'll call back later” (field notes).

In one of the Finnish groups, the meetings moved from the university to co-researchers' homes. This started with one member not being able to attend the meeting due to chronic back pain and mobility problems. She invited the group to visit her at home. After this, another co-researcher invited the group to her apartment. Strikingly, the discussions in these private settings were different to those in the meetings at the university. Both hosts were very welcoming, and a more friendship like atmosphere emerged. As a result, co-researchers were more open than before and reflected on the interviews more deeply.

Subtheme 1.3: getting marginalised voices heard.

Both Swedish and Finnish groups often raised concerns about marginalised and vulnerable people living alone. One Finnish co-researcher carefully planned to include interviewees from rural contexts. In Finland and Sweden, co-researchers were active in recruiting men, as men living alone were seen as at risk of falling out of social networks. A co-researcher, who identified as non-binary and who was active in LGBTQIA+ networks, focused on access to voices from these potentially marginalised networks. One Latvian co-researcher group repeatedly tried to interview ethnic minorities and economically marginalised people but found that those groups were evasive and the efforts largely failed.

The Frankfurt group was particularly focused on enabling equity for marginalised older people. This might have been connected with their professional backgrounds in social work, mental health, speech therapy and teaching, which they drew on to explain why they took part in the study. “This is political!” was voiced repeatedly in relation to the project and wanting to shape a future for older people. In their view, older people generally did not have a strong voice and were not heard politically or in everyday life. Women were seen as particularly invisible: “And the women who have been lost from sight. People think they are going to die soon, we needn’t bother” (recorded discussion). A former social worker explained how important it was not to just look at the present but to follow cohorts of older people and their possibilities of shaping a desirable future.

Theme 2: power dynamics

The academic researchers across the teams discussed and reflected on how to deal with equal access to knowledge, power and control. Over the course of the project, power dynamics between the academic researchers and co-researchers, as well as among the co-researchers, shifted and tensions occasionally formed within the groups. By wanting to focus more on equity than equality, academic researchers conceded to a partial loss of control in the research process.

Subtheme 2.1: financial compensation.

In Germany and Latvia, paying co-researchers arose as a topic around shared decision-making and responsibility, with some co-researchers expecting academic researchers to do more work as they were being paid. To compensate the time and money spent by Latvian co-researchers, who conducted interviews in cafes, vouchers were issued. This went some way to balance the inequality between paid academic researchers and unpaid co-researchers. However, despite PAR being central to the project proposal, the national funders in Latvia did not allow vouchers or the cover of transport costs. As the majority of co-researchers were on low pensions, costs related to interviewing created a considerable burden on doing PAR. Vouchers and transport costs were financed through personal funds of the academic researchers, who hoped to be reimbursed by EU funding. Thus, vouchers served as a structuring factor for co-researchers in supporting their commitment and equalising relations.

Subtheme 2.2: doing research.

Although co-researchers were active in discussing topics of living alone, care across age groups and digitalisation, they were reticent when it came to doing research. This reticence was ambivalent: on the one hand, co-researchers were pleased to be an active part of the process, and to have been given the possibility to collect data, on the other, they questioned their capabilities and referred to the academic researchers as experts on the topic. When the Finnish groups started to discuss interview questions, they found it too demanding and wanted the academic researchers to design the topic guide. Thus academic researchers offered a general topic guide so as not to steer the co-researchers too much. This topic guide was used as a backbone for interviews, and Finnish co-researchers learnt to add topics that the interviewees found important.

At the early stage of the project, co-researchers did not anticipate many difficulties in contacting people and asking them to be interviewed. As the groups progressed, the topic guide developed and ideas on safeguarding and ethics were discussed, several co-researchers

voiced their weariness. Issues arose around not feeling comfortable asking unknown people for an interview, not wanting to interview people at home or indeed their own home and not knowing how to explain the project and the kind of data collected. Other co-researchers took themselves off and returned with numerous recorded interviews since the last meeting. Swedish co-researchers experienced that ensuring anonymity was important to recruiting interviewees.

Although working on the information material to be distributed before the interviews, the co-researchers in Sweden found the academic language of the information material too difficult and inaccessible and therefore not suitable for potential interviewees. In particular, the co-researchers considered the word “risk” in the informed consent a barrier to participation. To overcome this, the information texts were changed along the ideas of the co-researchers.

Subtheme 2.3: negotiating roles.

Academic researchers had to carefully manoeuvre between providing training on interview skills, recording and informed consent and not overburdening co-researchers with information and concerns. On the whole, co-researchers in both German groups agreed that gathering data was something they could contribute, even though the experience of conducting the first interview was more “nerve-wrecking” than they had expected. Latvian co-researchers actively worked on interview guidelines and perceived themselves as partners in the process. An asymmetry was observed in the relationship between the co-researchers and the academic researchers during the sessions on interviewing. In one of the Swedish co-researcher groups, after the academic researcher had given advice on difficult and challenging interviews, some responded:

“Well, it’s easy for those who have worked with it to come up with answers to all the questions”; “what do you [academic researcher] want to get out of this, what is the purpose?” (field notes)

Other co-researchers were more inclined to follow the advice given by the academic researcher without challenging and discussing the details. The critical stance did not stop the co-researchers from conducting interviews, and they found creative ways of expanding on what they had learnt during the workshops, which allowed them to express a certain degree of independence from the line of the academic researchers.

A point of crisis was experienced by many co-researchers once the first set of interview transcripts were available. Reading lengthy verbatim texts, and coding them was something they felt was too demanding. German and Finnish co-researchers argued that it must be the task of the academic researchers to do the analysis as they had the research expertise, which they as co-researchers lacked. Also, Latvian co-researchers pointed out that they did not have time and equipment to do data analysis. Co-researchers from the Frankfurt group initially looked forward to analysing the data: “I am surprised and pleased to be part of the analysis”, “it is good to be asked” and “we look forward to seeing the transcripts!” (recorded discussion). Their positive outlook ended once they were faced with the transcripts and decided that reading verbatim dialogue was something they could not manage. At this point, the academic researchers decided to code transcripts prior to the meetings so that co-researchers would have access to coded segments rather than whole transcripts. Only in Sweden, did co-researchers lead on analysing the data.

The conflicting ideas of doing PAR between co- and academic researchers, however, encouraged empowerment among the Latvian co-researchers towards the end of their co-creation process. Having learnt to conduct interviews, a group of co-researchers collected life histories to preserve local memory for their local museum.

Theme 3: working with and through lived experience

This theme explores the knowledge co-researchers brought to the project and how they deal with the reality of doing PAR. The co-researchers professional backgrounds partly reflected their attitudes towards learning and taking action and came to the fore while conducting interviews and discussing the data. On the one hand, their professionalism set high standards for the interviews, on the other, their understanding of research was deeply entrenched by quantitative survey or experimental design ideas. Co-researchers wanted to do the interviews well but often felt they lacked the required skills. This became apparent when multiple versions of interviews turned up with one marked as the “right” version. Many co-researchers in Latvia prepared the interviews diligently, calling the interviewees and inquiring about their background to ensure the interview went well. The transcripts showed that the interviews were conducted in a news-reporter style, rather than a more narrative generating style:

We did this: I turned on the device whilst we discussed those three issues, then I turned it off. After I was ready to talk again, I turned it on. But we didn’t listen [after the interview]. I was afraid of that. (recorded session)

Co-researchers noticed the short answers and reflected that interviewees provided more detail when the recorder was tuned off:

I noticed many interesting things when I turned off the recorder. When the recorder was on the interviewee had very pragmatic answers to my questions. As soon as I switched off, then the interesting things came. (recorded session)

Thus, co-researchers in Latvia asked interviewees to repeat what they had said, so that they could record that, too. As a result, data in some groups consisted of fragmented interviews containing the “official interview” and audio snippets recorded in the conversation that followed the interview.

Next to developing interviewing techniques, some Finnish co-researchers were very concerned with the similarity of the data they had collected. There was a lot of reflection around their own networks, how similar people in many ways were and how privileged these people seemed particularly in comparison to the marginalised people they had wished to interview. There was an ongoing worry that the data they collected conveyed an all too happy and carefree picture to policymakers. As a result, the co-researchers stopped interviewing despite the academic researchers’ encouragement to continue. However, this process led to advanced reflections on their own privileges and how that affected the whole project. In another Finnish group, a co-researcher refused to conduct interviews with friends as she wanted to reach out to people isolated at home, whom she contacted through social workers at a community centre she was active in.

As noted above, co-researchers were not always comfortable in their role as researchers. During the first session in Germany in which interview transcripts were jointly read, a co-researcher recognised her interview. Reading the verbatim dialogue led to a process of

extreme critical self-awareness. In her view, she had posed unclear questions and gone off on tangents involving incomplete sentences. For everyone present at the session, it became clear that the exposure to the transcript was having a very negative effect on the co-researcher and continued until the next meeting:

X tells me that she has spent the two weeks since the meeting with the transcript doubting herself. She feels she is not suitable for the project and that the age-related restrictions she is experiencing are reflected in the transcript. Moreover, topics from the interview touch strongly upon her own life and confront her with her own anxieties. She is very withdrawn during today's meeting. (field notes)

Co-researchers reported that they had felt alone after interviewing and that they would have benefited from supervision in addition to the regular meetings. The strong social coherence of the group and the support and trust developed over a year by all members allowed the co-researcher to recover from her experience and remain in the group. In terms of methodology, the experienced crisis points to questions around what PAR exposes older co-researchers to in projects that can be very close to their own (negative) experiences of ageing.

The considerable time co-researchers spent in the project was intersected by other events in their lives, such as ill health or bereavement. In some cases, co-researchers left the project, in others they brought their experiences to the group. In Finland, one co-researcher's husband was diagnosed with memory disorder, requiring her to care for him and their estate. She remained in the group but her emotional process was very present in the meetings. As in the previous example, the group provided a space for reflection and support which exemplifies the social impact PAR can have on those involved.

Discussion

The paper has provided insight into the process of doing PAR in a project that investigates the intersections of digitalisation with intergenerational care relationships in the lives of older people living alone. The paper sets out to contribute to the advancement of PAR on three levels:

1. firstly, by describing and reflecting on the process of involving diverse groups of older people in PAR over a considerable stretch of time and across jurisdictions;
2. secondly, by presenting insights into the power dynamics between co-researchers and academic researchers; and
3. lastly, by providing critical reflection on challenges arising during the process of doing PAR.

Theme 1 illustrates how co-researchers recognised the political aspect and the value-based approach of PAR, which allowed them to share and gain knowledge about social issues close to them (through group discussions and collecting data) and bring about change (through recommendations and interaction with local policymakers). Inward sociability transpired as central to building trust and friendships in the meetings in terms of relations between co-researchers and by exchanging experiences and ideas on the emotionally charged topic of ageing in a digital age. This leads to personal and collective growth, and empowerment of the co-researchers, expressed through the planning of further projects and socialising beyond the meetings. But co-researchers also performed an outward sociability by seeing PAR as an opportunity to give a voice to marginalised older people in their communities. Wanting to

bring about change and work towards a more equitable later life resonates with Buffel's work on what motivates older people to take part in PAR (Buffel, 2018).

However, Theme 2 and 3 show that getting in contact with more marginalised older people was difficult for the co-researchers across the four countries. Latvian co-researchers found that even if they did interview people dealing with poverty and isolation, the interviewees were reticent to providing much insight into their situation. At the outset of planning EQualCare, the hope had been to gain access to marginalised persons through co-researchers. This was communicated transparently in the meetings, and co-researchers were encouraged to interview people within and beyond their social networks. Many co-researchers were very willing to reach out to people who were not part of their usual network, but their experiences show that the social background of co-researchers has a direct impact on whom they can recruit and that crossing social divisions is rarely possible. Thus, PAR does not automatically mean access to marginalised groups, and considerable outreach work is required at the planning stage if the latter is to be achieved (Warwick-Booth *et al.*, 2021; Corrado *et al.*, 2020).

Academic researchers' need to relinquish power is a central theme in reflections on PAR (Bendien *et al.*, 2023). In EQualCare, this was supported by time, regularity of meetings and involvement of co-researchers at all levels of decision-making, allowing both sets of researchers to reflect on actions and next steps. Co-researchers learnt that they could create their way of collecting data at the same time as asking for and using material provided by the academic researchers. In the process of getting to know each other, and preparing co-researchers for field work, academic researchers shifted from a moderating and leading position (required in the beginning when initiating the groups and subsequently called upon but also contested by some co-researchers) to one that was more in line with co-creation, where both sides worked and learnt as equals, bringing different skills and experiences to the project (Warwick-Booth *et al.*, 2021).

Finally, doing PAR with older people raises issues around their emotional integrity in the process of collecting data and in sharing stories close to their own experiences of ageing. Being exposed to one's own speech in transcripts, hearing about someone else's journey through bereavement or how they care for a cognitively changing partner can amplify concerns about growing old. Bodily and mental decline, loss of partners and friends, poverty and loneliness are experiences associated with increasing age, regardless of whether they are seen as an inevitable downward trajectory or brought about by social structures. Buffel (2018) notes that one of the reasons co-researchers in her project took part was to stay mentally active. This was not something that emerged explicitly in EQualCare, but narratives around needing to stay active and socially connected to survive in a rapidly changing (digital) world were repeatedly stated during meetings. Indeed, one of the recruitment criteria for becoming a co-researcher was to be well connected, so that people were being addressed who were actively creating a lifestyle that would allow them (relational) independence. Thus, PAR (unwittingly) exposed co-researchers to issues they were actively trying to fend off, which goes some way to explain, why it was difficult for them to talk to more marginalised older people (Buffel, 2018).

Conclusion

This article has contributed to PAR methodology in the context of age and ageing in three ways:

1. Firstly, it has highlighted the importance of empowerment to older co-researchers, who do not see themselves as particularly powerful actors traversing the quicksand of a youth orientated digital age.
2. Secondly, it has shed light on the dynamic nature of relationships between academic and co-researchers as well as co-researchers and people interviewed that are shaped by the co-researchers' generational relationships, their former employment and their willingness to speak out.
3. Thirdly, attention is drawn to the potential risk of exposing co-researchers to negative feelings around their own ageing, which may require additional supervision. In the understanding that PAR is not a set of methods to be followed but a methodology that is relational and situated and therefore requires dynamic and creative methods, these results aim to strengthen PAR with older people.

Note

1. As some of the co-researchers were working, and almost all of them had responsibilities (e.g. gardens, grandchildren), or were sceptical of time investment, meetings were fewer but longer.

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