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CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Co-researchers in motion: a journey of evolving relationships. A critical reflection on the co-operation between two older adults and a nurse researcher

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Abstract

Background: There is a growing amount of research in which older adults contribute as co-researchers. The quality of this research depends, among other factors, on the nature of relationships between professional researchers and co-researchers. Reflections on these relationships can offer structured insight into this form of research.

Aim: Our reflection on the co-operation between two older adults and a nurse researcher aims to share the lessons learned based on a critical understanding of our journey. Our main questions are: 1. How has the relationship developed over time, including in terms of mutuality and equality? 2. Which moments have been decisive in this development?

Conclusion: We regard our co-operative relationship as a 'dynamic search'. The meaning of mutuality and equality may change over time and so enrich the relationships. There is a need for further understanding into how these values can be nurtured in different configurations of researchers and co-researchers.

Implications for practice:

- Evolving relations can be nurtured through deliberative sharing of the perceptions, expectations and experiences of the researchers and co-researchers
- Combining a formal working atmosphere with informal moments helps the research team respond to the individual needs of its members
- To enhance equality and mutuality, it is important to appreciate and value everyone's contribution rather than concentrating on 'what' or 'how' individuals contribute

Keywords: co-research, relationships, reflection, mutuality, equality, older adults

Introduction

Participative research is a valuable way to gain an understanding of the emic perspective of those who are dependent on others to maintain their health and wellbeing, whether it be growing and flourishing or dying peacefully (Abma, 2005). Such a perspective in this context centres on the research participants' point of view, by describing their ways of communicating, behaving and interacting (Scarduzio, 2017). In this approach, researchers work with citizens and those close to them, not only as objects of study, but also as co-researchers when collecting and analysing data. A foundation for this approach is offered by the philosopher Gadamer (2004), who suggests our understanding and engagement with the world are historically situated and socially determined, and evolve over time. Considering this worldview in research involving those being studied as co-researchers can provide an enriched understanding of the topics being studied.

There is a growing body of health research in which older adults contribute as co-researchers in different phases of empirical research (Clough et al., 2006; Bindels, 2014; Littlechild et al., 2015; Buffel, 2018a,b). Although this development is regarded as a democratic approach to knowledge production, there are questions regarding its scientific quality and knowledge outcomes (Malterud and Elvbakken, 2020). Moreover, research into person-centred care needs to be consistent with the core values of this conceptual model of care, such as mutuality, equality and responsibility. The development of an appropriate research methodology therefore necessitates learning from research practices in which older adults participate as co-researchers. One important area of study in this respect is the nature of relationships between professional researchers and co-researchers, and how to build on these (Marks et al., 2018). As our research contributes to the body of knowledge in person-centred care, a dialogic interpretation of these relationships, their mutuality and equality is an important element. Mutuality assumes sharing between those involved in the research, while equality means that everyone's contribution, qualities, characteristics and achievements are valued equally. Reflective accounts from an insider perspective show how these relationships and values can develop, what their meaning can be and which enabling factors can be identified.

A better understanding of a particular situation, such as health research with citizens as co-researchers, can be acquired through a dialogic interpretation that clarifies and integrates the perspectives and the interrelatedness of all those involved (Snoeren, 2015). In this article we – three co-researchers, one professional and two older adult researchers – reflect on our long-term experiences of doing research in the context of older adults' changes in dependency and care requirements. The aim is to share lessons learned based on a critical understanding of our journey. Our main questions are:

- How has the relationship developed over time, including in terms of mutuality and equality?
- Which moments have been decisive in this development?

Context

Our collaborative work started five years ago when professional researcher (JSJ), and citizen researcher (JvA), a retired faculty lecturer, became involved in setting up a new learning environment in an undergraduate applied gerontology programme (Jukema et al., 2019a). One characteristic of this learning environment is students' development of services and products in co-creation with older adults (van den Berg et al., 2019). In due course, the other citizen researcher (JJ), already a friend of JvA for some time as fitness course companions, became involved in a number of assignments and activities with undergraduates. We worked together in this context on a number of educational and research activities.

Box 1: The three researchers working together

Co-researcher 1 (JSJ) Male, 53 years old, married, no children. Trained as a nurse, working career in higher education nursing and applied gerontology. Currently a professor of nursing

Co-researcher 2 (JvA) Female, 71 years old, married, no children. Trained as a librarian, MA in Dutch literature, retired faculty social work lecturer

Co-researcher 3 (JJ) Female, 81 years old, widowed, four children, eight grandchildren, five great-grandchildren. Trained as general and community nurse, retired

When JSJ moved to take up the position of professor of nursing at another university, he wanted to continue the collaboration. A generic qualitative research project was started to study the changes in dependency experienced by 32 community-dwelling older adults, in close collaboration with Frits de Lange, a professor of ethics at the Protestant Theological University in Groningen (Jukema et al., 2019b). Undergraduate nursing students performed data collection, while analysis was done by the three of us in collaboration, with one nurse researcher and Professor De Lange. A couple of years later, we continued our partnership in a new exploratory qualitative study into the process and meaning of aging and dependency. Data were drawn from two meetings with one focus group of older adults and from open interviews with three older adults. JSJ participated in the focus group meetings and interviewed one older adult three times, and JvA interviewed two older adults three times each. Analysis was done by the three of us in collaboration with a professional researcher based at a national research institute.

Reflection method

To gain a deeper understanding into the relationship between the three co-researchers, JSJ initiated a guided reflection on their working experiences.

First, he approached Miranda Snoeren (MS) to see whether she was willing to facilitate this reflection and if so, in what way. MS was approached because of her skills in the facilitation of reflections by participants in qualitative research. After receiving a commitment from MS, JSJ approached his two co-researchers and all agreed to participate in the reflection. The reflection process was inspired by the critical incident method; this was originally developed by Flanagan (1954) and its application has varied over time (Butterfield et al., 2005). We used it as a retrospective and collective analysis of the collaboration between us. This consisted of five phases. Where Flanagan suggests a somewhat linear approach with an objective observer, we worked collectively in setting up the reflection and in creatively interpreting and analysing our own data (experiences) through an iterative process. This allowed us to have a reflection based on equality and mutuality. The five phases were:

1. *Collective decision making concerning the focus of the reflection*: the development of the relationship, including the meaning of equality and mutuality, as well as how this had affected our own development. A first draft of the reflection guideline was developed by JSJ and adjusted based on comments from the two co-researchers. The central reflection question was: what contributes to the development of our working relationship?
2. *Exploring individual perspectives*: in a 90-minute meeting, chaired by MS, we three co-researchers shared individual understandings and experiences of working together and of our relationships. These were explored to develop a shared understanding of how our collaboration evolved. The dialogue was recorded and transcribed verbatim. MS and the co-researchers all independently read the text looking for what stood out and what needed further work. JSJ collected the proposed topics as a starting point for a second meeting
3. *Identifying critical moments and incidents*: in a second meeting, we focused on when development of ourselves and of the relationship had taken place, and what had influenced this. Crucial moments in individual stories were identified and further explored
4. *Individual, creative expression*: the understanding of the reciprocity between critical moments and the growth of the self and the relationship were depicted in artistic representations by all four of us independently. This process deepened our individual reflections.

5. *Constructing a shared narrative*: transcript, notes of critical moments and incidents, and creative expressions were analysed by JSJ and MS. Evolving themes were member checked by JvA and JJ and served as building blocks for a shared narrative. JSJ, JvA and MS wrote the narrative, working on it in turn. It was shared with JJ for feedback.

Results

We are sharing the results of our reflection in two ways. First, through a narrative description of our co-operation: who did what, motives for participating, significant incidents and experiences. The second set of results is an interpretation of our co-operative relationship: what helps us in developing our relationship, what role does mutuality and equality play in this, and what value does an outsider assign to our relationship. We have brought this together in what we have called a 'dynamic search'.

Our co-operation

When the co-operation started, all three of us realised what we were getting into: the professional researcher (JSJ) needed older adults for his work on co-research, and the co-researchers JvA and JJ viewed JSJ as an enthusiastic and inspiring person and were happy to be invited to work alongside him and to contribute to research that would concern and benefit older adults like themselves. JSJ did the preparatory work, sometimes together with colleagues, and thought about methodologies and the deployment of the co-researchers, who were comfortable in the knowledge that he was responsible and trained for this role. JvA conducted interviews and contributed to the analysis; JJ also participated in the analysis and both provided feedback on the different versions of the manuscripts and presentations. They were given the same role in elaboration and analysis: thinking, analysing and making connections, and enjoyed that part of the research most. They valued the challenge of working as co-researchers together and the opportunity to keep their minds healthy. This, in turn, inspired the professional researcher.

We met once a month at the university and also in the university where Professor De Lange works. We discussed the research together on the train, along with events from daily life and always had an extensive lunch together. In the conversations we had then, we all experienced our motivation gradually rise. This resulted in a second study. JJ had developed an enormous curiosity about what other older adults had to say about organising their lives. JvA thought that contributing to social issues, especially with regard to older adults, was a reason to continue to participate as co-researcher with JSJ. It did not matter that this would cost her more time and energy and JSJ also found this very inspiring. For him, it was important that he could continue to work in co-creation with older adults and publish the findings. All three co-researchers remained dependent on one another in different ways, related to our collaborative work.

After two years of co-operation, something gradually changed in our relationship. JJ had a procedure to insert a new knee, meaning our meetings had to take place at her house. Our customary lunches were now consumed there, provided by JvA. Not only was there a shift in who was responsible for what, the friendly environment of JJ's home was conducive to more personal conversations. We gradually grew closer to each other and we all found ourselves looking forward to the meetings. We began to spend even more time together; for example, JSJ and JvA and their partners all met for a meal. However, there was something else going on. JJ felt she had become involved in the research by accident and believed she wasn't contributing anything. She once told JvA: 'You two should carry on together.' The professional researcher was shocked to hear this and at the next meeting worked hard to convince JJ of her importance and the value of her contribution. We openly shared what we valued in each other and JJ was convinced to keep participating. From that moment on, we also had conversations about our roles and what the collaboration meant to us, which led to even more openness and appreciation for one another – something MS as facilitator immediately noticed during the reflection meetings. As an outsider, she described our relationship as:

'A strong, warm foundation formed by respect for each other. Everyone is allowed to be themselves and therefore different, and is appreciated by others for who they are. Attention is paid to one another, to each other's qualities, needs and uncertainties.'

This was a description in which we recognised ourselves, and the relationship was further deepened during and through the reflection meetings. As a result of the joint reflection, we became more aware about the special elements of our relationship and how it had grown beyond a working relationship between researchers. We now meet as friends and follow and advise each other in our joys and sorrows.

Relationship as a dynamic search

We can describe and value our co-operative relationship as a 'dynamic search': a continuous quest that has shaped our relationships, in which we have paid particular attention – sometimes explicitly – to mutuality and equality. Mutuality has played a role for us in several areas. For example, JSJ, as a professional researcher, was extremely keen to keep co-researcher JJ participating so as to safeguard the emic perspective of the research. For JJ, it was important to share the enjoyment, to receive recognition for her contribution and to keep learning. And the third co-researcher, JvA, wanted to continue to make an intellectual contribution and contribute to the friendship and sociability. For JSJ, sharing substantive knowledge and experience was essential, especially at the beginning of the collaboration, while the two co-researchers placed more value on the friendship.

JSJ describes the relationship creatively as follows (see also Figure 1):

'... in motion, looking, in tune; arriving at something new; looking precisely and from distance, each with their own contribution and then leading to something (a publication) that everyone can see and admire.'

Certain things just occurred during our collaboration, others we consciously initiated. But the common underlying factor, as JJ depicts in her chosen poem (Figure 2) is 'attention for each other and listening to each other', as a prerequisite of mutuality. Our relationship is underpinned by the aid and support we offer each other, suiting everyone's role, abilities, motivations and position. That makes us equal and the recognition of that reinforces this equality. There is a mutual dependence and an (unconscious and fluid) division of roles according to the wishes of all three of us, which is what JvA represents with her chosen image (Figure 3).

Figure 1: Professional researcher JSJ's creative montage

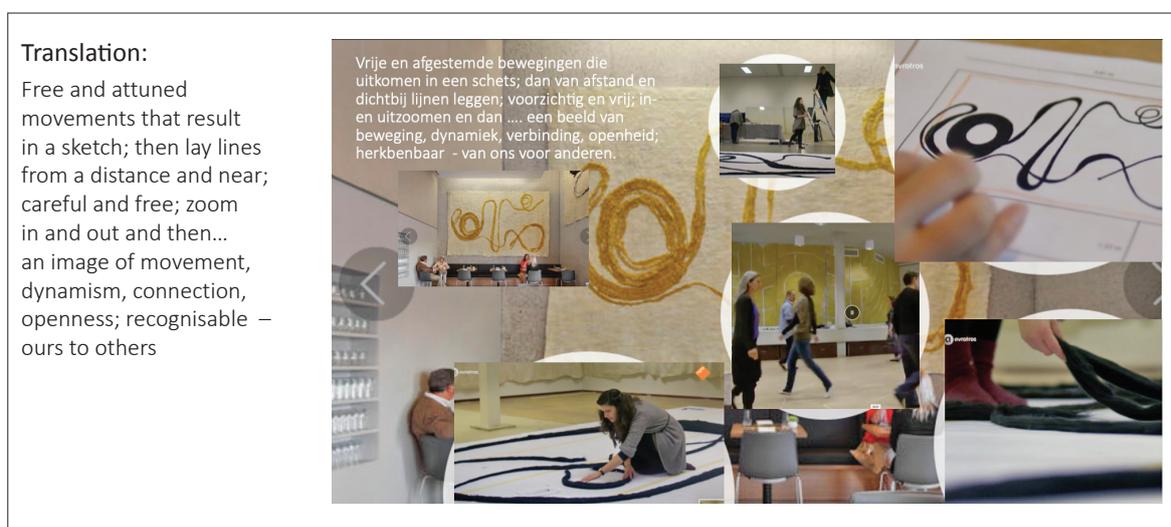


Figure 2: Older adult researcher JJ's chosen poem

Listen

If I ask you to listen to me and
you start giving me advice
then you don't do what I ask.

If I ask you to listen to me
and you start telling me why
I shouldn't feel something the way I feel it
then you don't take my feelings seriously.

If I ask you to listen to me
and you think you should do something to
solve my problem
then you abandon me
strange as that may seem.

So please just listen to me
and try to understand me

and if you want to talk, hold on and
I promise I will turn to you
and I will listen.

By Leo Buscaglia (translated from the Dutch)

Figure 3: Older adult researcher JvA's poem

Spoons

Jan leans on Jopie and me (a spoon on two forks)
We support Jan
Without the spoon, we are just two forks
Without the forks, Jan is just a spoon
Now we form a whole together as an (art) work
So we have as a work of art
meaning for each other
and we give meaning to each other
The rest of the attributes clearly belong to Jan
After all, he also has to deal with many others in his work
Which we sometimes also get to know/work with
after all, they are attached to Jan.
The spoons
also make a tinkling noise
And that indicates that all three of us enjoy it



The 'dynamic search' was fed by at least three critical moments: the change of work setting, the sharing of JJ's insecurity and the planned reflection with the three of us. The latter has, for example, provided insight into the dynamics of the motives for co-operation and the responsibilities that accompany our search for mutuality and equality. These have changed over time and some have had fundamental importance for one co-researcher, yet much less so for the others. The concern of one co-researcher (do I offer added value?) was not a personal issue for either of the others, until it was

expressed. One co-researcher feels very responsible for power relations among the team but this does not worry the others. And while one co-researcher thinks about the preconditions for meetings (is lunch properly organised?) another is mainly concerned about their output (presentation or article). Our collaboration, which in due course became enriched by friendship, was embedded in a safe and respectful environment.

Discussion

In a concluding section, we would like to discuss two matters in greater detail: the issues of citizen participation in research, and the relationship between co-researchers. Our reflection shows that the various parties involved have different views on the nature and extent of participation in this research. The level of participation seems to depend on the experience of equality and mutuality in the relationship, which is determined by the attention and respect for each other and the willingness to invest in the relationship, not by what is actually brought into the relationship (intellectually or through goods or services). However, while the relationship has value for those involved, that value may differ. For example, we can learn from our reflection that co-operation in qualitative health research has a different meaning for non-professional and professional researchers. For older, non-professional researchers, it may contribute to strengthening their own identity and the feeling of 'making a difference'. Participating in research offers opportunities for older adults to remain cognitively active, gives substance to the time that has become available in retirement and allows a contribution to social themes. This resonates with a recent study from Scheffelaar and colleagues (2020), which shows co-researchers have individual goals and external goals, such as being valuable to other service users. Moreover, an inclusive collaboration requires valuing the individual contributions of co-researchers. According to Nierse (2019), a precondition to this is ownership of and active involvement in all research phases. Our reflection shows that responsibility for other, non-research-related activities (such as providing lunch and hosting meetings) can contribute to this, provided such responsibilities are perceived as important by the others involved. This sheds a different light on how the participation literature in general advocates the highest possible form of participation by citizens (Arnstein, 1969); there the highest form is considered to be 'control' – involvement in decision-making and holding managerial power. Co-researchers may not seek or need this. From a study among patients involved in studies as researchers, we see a diversity of motives, preferences and intentions, as well as different understandings of partnership, meaningfulness and what constitutes 'good' engagement (Johannessen, 2018). As such, the participation of non-professional researchers is valuable in terms of inclusion and reciprocity, not necessarily of equal input and power.

For professional researchers, collaboration with 'the target group under study' can offer an enriching insider perspective (Nierse, 2019) and the chance to gain expertise in this evolving field of research. Open dialogue to obtain mutual understanding, as well as the evaluation of decision-making processes and power relations, helps shape and develop the relationship between stakeholders (Nierse, 2019). As our reflection reveals, the aim is not solely to reduce power differences, but to understand power processes and to reflect on them in terms of each participant's ambitions and needs. Building and maintaining these relationships is a challenge that entails a variety of authentic and positive interactions in the process of facilitating mutual understanding, appropriate participation and genuine influence on the project (Heckert et al., 2020). Furthermore, our reflection shows that once an open, appreciative relationship has developed, these characteristics can strengthen that relationship in a natural and organic way.

Conclusion

The development of relationships between a professional researcher and older adult co-researchers, with no formal training in qualitative health research, needs deliberate attention by those involved, as well as support by means of reflection. The meaning of important values such as mutuality and equality may change over time and in doing so enrich the relationships. This impacts on each of the collaborators, regardless of their position in and contribution to the research. Further understanding of the ways in which these values might be nurtured in different configurations of professional and citizen researchers will be beneficial to future health studies.

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