

## Exploring co-research interviews with older adults: reflections on research practices and building connections

BY HANNA-KAISA HOPPANIA<sup>1</sup>, ANNI VILKKO<sup>2</sup> & PÄIVI TOPO<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

Previous research has not only shown the potential of co-research with older adults but also pointed out the need for further study, for example on evaluation and how connections are forged between participants. To this end, this paper (1) describes and reflects on the development and implementation of a co-research interview methodology in the NGO sector and (2) analyses the experiences of the participants and the role of shared age group and locality. The results show that the structure of having several interviews and training and reflection sessions was the strength of the method. The co-researchers found the project interesting and even empowering. Expressions of shared age group and local knowledge were common in the interviews and helped build connections. The interviewees valued their participation in knowledge-production on issues related to ageing. Recruitment, resourcing and support for co-researchers when faced with difficult situations are some of the themes that require further attention.

<sup>1</sup>*Dr. Hanna-Kaisa Hoppania*, Lecturer (Public & Social Policy), School of Political Science and Sociology, University of Galway

<sup>2</sup>*Dr. Anni Vilkkö*, Docent in Social Policy at the University of Helsinki

<sup>3</sup>*Dr. Päivi Topo*, Ombudsman for older people, Ombudsman's office, Helsinki

Keywords: co-research, participatory research, participatory methodology, social inclusion, volunteering.

## Introduction

In recent years, the ideals of democratising research have become more prominent in research on ageing, with a rich vocabulary developing in the field. Co-production is used as an umbrella term for “participatory,” “emancipatory” and “inclusive” research, where communities are involved in knowledge creation, and/or user involvement is part of the development of social provision (Buffel 2018, 2019). The potential utility of seniors’ participation in co-research focusing on their own well-being and social rights has been assessed to be promising (e.g. Blair & Minkler 2009). The political trend to promote social inclusion is also strengthening, and various policy programmes aim to improve participatory initiatives (e.g. European Social Network 2017). The principle of “nothing about us without us” has long defined disability activism and research and has also been raised by the civic rights movement amongst persons with dementia. The key idea is that individuals with disabilities or dementia should always be included in decision-making related to their service provision, knowledge production and the public discussion that concerns them (e.g. Franits 2005). This approach has recently become more prevalent also in gerontological research on social and healthcare services, well-being and living environment, and methods have been developed to include older people in research projects (e.g. Barnes et al. 2013; Bindels et al. 2014; Buffel 2018; De Donder et al. 2014; Tanner 2019).

This paper is based on a co-research project with older people. We focus on reflecting on the *research approach and the interview method used*, whilst the wider results of the project have been reported elsewhere (Hoppania et al. 2021, 2020). To contribute to the further development of co-research methodology with older people, the aim of this paper is to (1) describe and reflect on the development and implementation of a co-research interview method in the NGO sector and (2) to analyse the experiences of the participants (co-researcher interviewers and interviewees) and the role of shared age group and locality for knowledge production. We discuss and reflect on the findings in light of the concerns raised in earlier research.

We understand co-research as an approach to research where people with characteristics or lived experience relevant to the issues being studied take part in conducting the research, and in our case, the relevancy was connected to age and living in a particular area. The structure of this paper is as follows: we first discuss the previous literature and then present the context and aim of our study, the research design and data and then findings. We conclude with a discussion and the implications of this paper.

### Literature Review

According to Tine Buffel, co-research and co-production is a viable method for accessing the expertise and knowledge of older people. It is also an effective means for incorporating the views of seldom heard populations whilst providing a forum for meaningful social engagement and mutual learning between older people and other groups (Buffel 2018). Littlechild et al. (2015) highlight the benefits of the quality of data when older co-researchers interview other older people, where they might communicate better with the interviewees and have experiences in common, and the interviewees might feel more at ease with a “peer” interviewer. Mey and Van Hoven (2019) argue that successful participatory research may achieve social inclusion amongst the participants and have relevance to the local community under study, as well as produce rich data and participate in effecting social change. Likewise, Buffel argues that there is an urgent need for social gerontology to engage more fully with co-research methods to realise aspirations for social justice and empowerment (Buffel 2018: 59; see also Tanner 2019).

But despite these benefits, there are many methodological and ethical questions to tackle (see, e.g. Buffel 2018, 2019; Dewar 2005; Littlechild et al. 2015; Mey & Van Hoven 2019; Tanner 2019). There have been critiques claiming that co-research methods can be tokenistic and, in the worst case, contribute to the oppression of services users (Dewar 2005), or that they can function as a way of legitimising elite knowledge (Mey & Van Hoven 2019). Privileged co-researchers, such as those from more affluent backgrounds, might be unwittingly insensitive to the pressures facing people who experience social exclusion (Buffel 2018), and co-researchers might

not always “have the skills to pick up on significant issues and explore them in depth” (Littlechild et al. 2015: 27). It has also been noted that the research field tends to emphasise the positives of co-research based on retrospective narrative accounts of the process, thus better evaluation processes that include the perspectives of all parties have been called for (Littlechild et al. 2015). Mey and Van Hoven (2019: 332–333) identify three topics demanding more investigation, namely, “co-researcher empowerment, production of knowledge and resource investment.” Tanner (2019) notes that very limited attention has been given to analysis of interactions between co-researchers and participants, as well as to the interview process itself and the unique quality of co-produced interviews. In her analysis of interview interaction, Tanner observes how identity or personal characteristics function as bases to build rapport and mutual understanding, but she indicates “the need for greater attention to *how* connections are forged between co-researchers and participants” (Tanner 2019: 305).

Three literature reviews sum up the state of co-research by identifying its benefits and challenges (see Blair & Minkler 2009; Corrado et al. 2020; James & Buffel 2022). The most critical of these reviews is that of Corrado et al. (2020), who state that there are great power differences between academics and co-researchers, which bring about unequal collaboration and offer restricted roles for co-researchers. Blair and Minkler (2009) discussed the same themes 10 years earlier but were more confident of the promises of co-research, despite its challenges. For our purposes, the latest review article (James & Buffel 2022) is the most comprehensive and also considers the main arguments put forward by Blair and Minkler (2009) and Corrado et al. (2020).

To improve co-research, James and Buffel (2022) suggest focusing on four themes, which we briefly introduce here in relation to our contribution.

First, the myriad roles of co-researchers require attention, and, in particular, more knowledge is needed about the motivations and expectations of the older people who take on this role. In this paper, we examine the experiences of co-researchers based on oral and survey feedback (see also May & Van Hoven 2019: 332–333). The second theme is related to the support that is available and given to co-researchers (James & Buffel 2022: 22). The training of co-researchers is nearly always part of participatory research processes, but James and Buffel (2022) call for more attention to be paid to the communication amongst co-researchers and academic

researchers and on developing ethical practices which consider co-researchers' needs for support. We discuss the practices we developed to address this issue and the challenges we faced. Third, to improve the quality and validity of research, the positionality of the co-researchers and the power relations that arise amongst different parties require further discussion. This includes focusing on the communication that takes place between the interviewer and the interviewee. For example, James and Buffel found that "few projects reported the details of recruitment or characteristics of the co-researchers, whether this changed over the course of the project (i.e. attrition), and if so the reasons why this was the case" (James & Buffel 2022: 22). In this paper, we describe and discuss these aspects of the process in detail. The fourth aspect of improvement relates to the fundamental ideas of co-research as a democratising, emancipatory possibility (James & Buffel 2022: 23–24). To feed this kind of change and the co-ownership of research processes, older people (or any other group that social science research addresses) should be involved in the project from the planning stage through to the final evaluation. We discuss these ideals.

## Context

The context of our study is a Finnish development programme *Elämänote* ("Grip of Life") (2018–2021), which was funded by the Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA), which is a state-aid authority. The programme brought together 20 NGOs who run local, regional or national projects aiming at the prevention of social exclusion and helping older adults to live at home independently (see Hoppania et al. 2020). The programme's goals were related to the recognition that to enable people to live at home independently for as long as possible, the forms of support must be adjusted to the varied local circumstances and needs. With an aim to enhance social inclusion, the programme, also recognised the potential of older people themselves to participate in the improvement of their circumstances. The programme thus sought to advance and support a variety of different NGO activities. The activities of the programme spanned the whole country from rural villages to city suburbs, and the target group set by the funder was older adults living in "challenging life situations" such as informal spousal care, loneliness, low income and problems with health and functional ability. The projects

offered accessible social and cultural group activities in the community such as art, exercise or cooking classes, and some of them offered and developed active co-leading roles for the participants. Some projects campaigned against the mistreatment and exploitation of older adults or developed and spread new practices in connection with public services and other actors to improve the security and social inclusion of older people.

In connection with the programme, a research project was set up to with the aim of gaining insight into individual experiences about what strengthens the social inclusion of older people, and what role participation in community projects plays in their lives over time. Longitudinal qualitative interviews were chosen as method, and in line with the aim of the programme to improve the social inclusion of older people, the research was planned as co-research. Central in this knowledge production were volunteer older adults who we trained to interview the older people who participated in the NGO projects, and who were living in the same regions and localities as their interviewees. The experiences, feedback and discussions with the interviewers (co-researchers) are a central source of our reflections here, but we also include some discussion of the interviewees' experiences, based on the interview data. The description of the practicalities of the co-research process is also important, in order to gain insight and reflect on the ideals and challenges of co-research methodology.

Our wider research framework is centred around the concept of social inclusion, understood as pertaining to access to material and immaterial resources in one's own physical and psychosocial environment and society. Central to the individual experience of social inclusion is belonging and social cohesion, in the sense that one is part of a community in some meaningful way (Cordier et al. 2017; Isola et al. 2017; Leemann et al. 2021; Ronzi et al. 2018; Smyth 2017).

## Research Design, Participants and Data

For the co-research interview, we developed a conversational approach, drawing on the ideas of active interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium 1995), and theme and narrative interviewing (e.g. Hyvärinen & Löyttyniemi 2005). Epistemologically, we draw on constructo-interpretive approaches (e.g. Curburn & Gormally 2017), which are based on the idea of knowledge as being

situational and relational and which aim to bring out a variety of viewpoints about the phenomenon under scrutiny. Personal lived experiences and connections to the research topic are seen as a resource for research, and co-research design aims to strengthen these elements. The role of the researcher is to interpret the different viewpoints and practice conscious, critical reflexivity about his or her own role and that of the other participants of the research process (Coburn & Gormally 2017). In line with these ideas, the interview was semi-structured and partly co-designed with seven co-researchers participating in the pilot phase (see below) of the study. The interview themes were drawn from the framework of social inclusion.

We trained the interviewers and introduced them to the lists of themes for each interview and suggestions for questions for each theme. The interviewers were advised that they could ask the questions in their own words and follow the conversation, rather than strictly keeping to the order of the themes. We split the interview process into three separate interviews. The first and second interviews were held within a short time span, supplementing each other, and focused on different themes of everyday life, social inclusion and living at home. The third interview was a follow-up interview conducted 10–12 months later.

In total, 87 interviews with 33 interviewees and 26 interviewers were completed. Each co-researcher interviewed the same person three times (see below), and one interviewer interviewed just one person, except in the case of four interviewers who interviewed two or three people. Most of the interviews were completed before the corona pandemic. Some interviews were cancelled because of health reasons, the corona situation or other reasons. Overall, the commitment to participate was very good with few co-researchers dropping out before the end of the project. The mean age of the interviewers was 70, and 75 years for the interviewees. Seventy per cent of the interviewers and 76% of the interviewees were women. The socio-economic background was mixed, with the latest profession of both interviewers and interviewees ranging from day care assistants to receptionists, office managers, IT experts, metal workers, farmers, electricians and so on. Nearly all of the participants were Finnish speaking, but one interviewer and one interviewee were Swedish speakers. The Swedish speaking co-researcher also spoke Finnish and participated in Finnish in the training and reflection sessions but conducted the interviews in Swedish.

The interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed. We used Atlas.ti software in the theme and content analysis of the interview data. To focus on the functioning of the co-research method, this paper is based on relevant parts of the interview-transcripts, oral feedback from the interviewers collected during reflection sessions (researcher notes) and on survey feedback from the interviewers ( $n = 16$ ). We coded all of those instances in the interviews, (1) where either the interviewer or interviewee referred directly or indirectly to the fact that both parties are older adults or of the same generation, (2) where the conversation was about local issues and (3) where the conversation was about participation in the interviews.

The feedback from the interviewers was collected during discussions in reflection sessions (see below) where one of the researchers focused on taking notes. After the pilot phase of the study, we also gathered written feedback from the co-researchers with a survey. Those interviewers who took part in the research after the pilot phase were sent an anonymous survey in which we asked about their expectations and experiences of the whole process using both scaled responses to questions and open questions. These data form the basis of our analysis of interviewer experiences, and we use content analysis to describe and reflect upon this data.

The research institute where the study was carried out (The Age Institute) has committed to follow the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2019) in all research activities. In our study, the national guidelines were followed and applied throughout the process. We sought informed consent from all of the interviewees and interviewers and ensured confidentiality, consent and anonymity by discussing their importance in detail in all training sessions with the co-researchers. All of the participants signed tailored consent forms and had the possibility to ask questions and withdraw their consent to participate at any time.

## Findings

In this section, we first describe the research process and the experiences of the participants in the pilot phase and the next phase of the study. This serves to respond to many of the issues that, James and Buffel (2022) note, are often not explained in earlier research. We then analyse the experiences

of the interviewees, and how connections were built between the interviewers and interviewees.

### *Process Description and Experiences of the Co-researchers in the Pilot Phase of the Study*

We started with a pilot study, which was conducted in the Helsinki region, at three locations where the *Elämänote* projects were running in January 2019. The follow-up interviews of the pilot phase were conducted in November 2019. With this group of seven co-researchers, we tested the practicalities of the research, such as how to find and recruit participants, how our invitation letters and consent forms work (i.e. are they clear and informative), whether the training was sufficient to give people the tools to conduct the interviews and whether the interview themes and questions were understandable and relevant. The academic research team included the lead researcher (first author, in their late thirties), a second more senior researcher working in a part-time capacity (second author) and a third more senior researcher working in an advisory role and as a manager of the project (third author).

The co-researchers for the pilot were recruited from a so-called “resident jury” (an informal group of locals gathered to support one of the local projects) and from local pensioners’ associations. A one-page invitation letter was drafted to inform and invite the volunteer interviewers. The recruitment criteria were that they were from the same town as the project, and that they were older adults. The invitation stated that we hoped the co-researchers would be curious about learning something new, have skills to meet new people and listen to them, and could relate to someone in a different life situation. We asked them to commit to the training process and complete the interviews. Seven co-researchers were recruited, comprising of one man and six women.

The interviewees were recruited by the employees of the NGOs running the projects. A one-page invitation letter informed them of the context and goals of the research, the timetables and practicalities, and they would be interviewed by an older person. The only inclusion criteria were that the interviewees had participated in the activities (groups/events) organised by the local *Elämänote* project, and that they were older adults. The NGO employees were directed to ask both men and women

to participate. Seven interviewees were recruited for the pilot, six women and one man.

We met the co-researchers of the pilot four times. The training was held in an easy to reach location in the centre of Helsinki. It started with an introduction to the research project and its goals, and by getting to know one another. Most of the 5-hour session was spent going through the role and tasks of the interviewer, and becoming familiar with the themes and questions of the first interview. Practical advice was given on how to conduct the interviews, and ethical issues and confidentiality were discussed. For example, the danger of both parties already knowing some things and therefore not discussing them explicitly was covered, and the interviewers were instructed to try to be explicit and ask for clarifications. Examples of how to do this were presented. During the training, the co-researchers commented that the semi-structured nature of the interview and the openness and flexibility in how they could discuss the interview themes (cf. Barnes et al. 2013) would be helpful in their interaction with the interviewees. Some co-researchers said that they preferred to use the term “conversation” rather than “interview” when inviting participants. They argued that the word “interview” could make possible older participants think of a more demanding questionnaire or survey interview, which some might find off-putting. They also commented on the style of the interviews in feedback discussions.

The training also covered topics such as how to avoid the usual pitfalls of interviews, and how to proceed in demanding situations. Time was taken to practice the use of the digital recorder. Consent forms ensuring confidentiality were also presented, discussed and signed. Lunch and coffee were served, and travel expenses were covered for several reasons, namely, that we wanted to express our appreciation to the participants for volunteering their time and to also enable less privileged people to participate. Furthermore, the lunch and coffee breaks provided time for informal conversations. The first interviews were conducted within a week of the training, and after that, we met the interviewers for a reflection session, where we discussed the experiences of the first interview and introduced the themes of the second interview. The same co-researcher interviewed the same interviewee twice within 2 to 3 weeks. A third reflection and feedback meeting was organised after the second

interviews, where we discussed the experiences of the second interviews and of the overall process. In co-operation with the co-researchers of the pilot group, we concluded that having two interviews within a short time period functioned well. Hence, the co-researchers supported our intent to arrange the interviews in this way by arguing that it was easier to talk with the interviewees during the second meeting as some rapport had already been established, and both parties were less nervous. The overall theme of social inclusion in conjunction with the open conversational model of the interview also meant that it was possible to refer to the first interview during the second interview. In some cases, this possibility was used. The follow-up interviews were organised for the pilot group in November 2019, 10 months after the first two interviews. Five of our seven co-researchers continued in the process, with one cancelling participation due to illness and another failing to respond to our messages. For the third interview, we again organised a training session before the interview and a reflection meeting afterwards.

Based on the pilot interviews and feedback received during the reflection sessions, we concluded that no largescale changes were necessary when considering the continuation of the research project. Based on the discussions with the pilot group, we made some minor changes to the phrasing of some of the interview questions and emphasised the conversational nature of the interviews in the next phase of inviting participants.

Whilst the co-researchers of the pilot gave valuable feedback about the process and actively discussed its various aspects, we did not get them to reflect much about their own role as interviewers. They did comment on how they managed to cover the interview themes or if they failed to ask the interviewee to give more details about a particular question. But overall, the interviewers were more eager to discuss the person they had interviewed, to talk about what kind of conversation they had had, and what kind of interpersonal relations were formed during the interview. We interpreted this focus on the person of the interviewee to be related to the attitude of the co-researchers to volunteering, as one of the reasons they gave as their motivation to participate was to meet new people. To try to gain a better understanding of the interviewers' experiences, more structured feedback, including a survey, was planned and organised for the co-researchers who were recruited after the pilot.

*Process Description and Experiences of the Co-researchers in the Next Phase of the Study*

After the pilot, the interviews were expanded to the rest of the country, and training was organised in four large towns in the regions in which the NGO projects were running. Nineteen co-researchers and 26 interviewees participated in this phase of the research. We largely followed the practices developed in the pilot. Due to the geographical span of the projects and resource limitations, we used video calls (via Zoom) and phone calls to discuss the feedback from the second interviews. These calls were organised with the help of the local NGO partners, as we did not require the participants to have a computer or the know-how to use video conference tools. The video calls made the interaction between researchers and interviewers somewhat more formal than in the previous face-to-face communication, and the answers to the questions we posed to the interviewers were shorter. Nevertheless, all of the co-researchers gave feedback about the interviews, although we did not hear the informal dialogue which usually brought a rich variety of viewpoints into the group discussions. As planned, we continued with face-to-face meetings for the training and reflection concerning the third interviews. But due to the corona pandemic, the reflection sessions for some of the last interviews were also conducted individually by phone.

Most of the co-researchers had no previous experience of interviewing or research, but many were active volunteers in the NGO sector prior to participating in this project. When asked about their motivation for being a co-researcher, they underlined the importance of social inclusion in old age, an opportunity to learn new skills, and to do some societally significant work. They also stressed the need for training and support and reflected on the limitations of their own skills. However, their most common worry in advance was how they would manage to use the digital recorder. Whilst the majority of the interviews were conducted successfully, in three interviews (with two co-researchers), the recording failed. Afterwards, many commented with some relief about how the use of the digital recorder had not been so difficult after all.

During the reflection sessions, as in the pilot phase, we asked the co-researchers about their general feelings and thoughts after each interview, how they perceived their own role, whether they thought the location of the interview (in most cases, the interviewee's home) affected the conduct of the interview and whether any difficult questions or themes had

arisen. During the final meeting, we asked them about their experience of the entire process, including the training and reflection sessions. Nearly all of the interviewers reported that they felt at least a little nervous or tense before the first interview. They stated that they were excited about meeting a new person, and nervous about how they would manage to carry out the interview. Most said that the second interview was easier, and in many cases, the third interview was the most relaxed.

In the reflection sessions after the third interview, the co-researchers expressed their satisfaction with having participated in the project, and they were happy that they had gained a new experience and learned how to interview. They further emphasised that they had enjoyed the meetings and discussions with the other interviewers, as well as with the academic researchers, and they said that they appreciated that expenses were covered, and that food was served.

Our interpretation is that the informal conversations over lunch and coffee breaks aided in creating a more relaxed atmosphere for the reflection sessions, which was conducive for open and honest conversation. Some interviewers were also somewhat apologetic about not getting what they thought they should have out of the interviews, and some fretted about missing chances to ask clarifying or follow-up questions. Our interpretation here is that some of the co-researchers had quite high expectations of themselves and the interview process, and as they considered the topic and the goal of the research project to be very important, they wanted to perform well. In the reflection sessions, we discussed these experiences and expectations, and the nature of the type of knowledge we were aiming to create (the epistemological underpinnings). On the other hand, successes in establishing a good connection with the interviewee were also noted, and one co-researcher who interviewed two people noted after the final interview that it “went like a dance,” expressing confidence in his skills as an interviewer and being pleased that he had managed to create a good connection with the interviewee.

There were also some instances where the interviewee had shared some quite intimate and difficult issues and feelings. In our estimation, the co-researchers handled these situations well, displaying social skills and life experience, which showed in the interview data as expressions of empathy and understanding. There was also one interview where the interviewee had a very difficult life situation, and this spilled into the

interview, and the interviewer felt ill at ease. The situation was resolved after the co-researcher received support by discussing the situation with the local NGO project worker (face to face) and with the researchers (by phone) and then carried out the second interview in which the atmosphere was better. This exemplifies the need to have time to reflect and discuss the various experiences that such interviews might produce. In our trainings before the interviews, we included discussions about possible challenging situations and had ample time to reflect on the experiences of the interviews afterwards in group meetings and/or video and phone calls. We also anticipated such difficulties when planning the research themes and questions by including an uplifting question at the end of each interview, which directed attention towards positive issues such as the strengths of the interviewee. We encouraged the co-researchers to contact the lead researcher without hesitation if there was anything they wanted to talk about, and a couple of the co-researchers called the lead researcher after their interviews to discuss their experiences.

The survey feedback was positive and in line with the oral feedback received during the reflection sessions, but yielded little new information. Of course, it might be that those with more critical views did not return the feedback form, even though it was anonymous (19 surveys were sent out and 16 answers were received). The co-researchers reported that they considered their contribution to be significant for the interviewees, who they stated, felt valued and heard. Some of the co-researchers also expressed hopes that the results of the research project would, in the longer term, lead to better ageing policies, and one co-researcher said that they would like to be interviewed in this manner themselves.

### *Experiences of the Interviewees*

The interviewees discussed their experiences of being interviewed when directly asked at the end of the second interview and, in some cases, made comments about their participation during other parts of the interviews. For example, the interviewees commented on the format of the interview(s) and expressed positive surprise at the interview's conversational format:

I was a bit surprised [...] I imagined you'd have one, two, three, four... answer this, answer that.

However, the three interview structures caused bewilderment for some of the interviewees. One wondered if they would have anything more to say after the first interview. They also commented on the interview themes, with some seeming delighted when they learned that the questions were about normal everyday life, and some commenting on how the questions had given them food for thought:

Of course, I couldn't prepare for what you're going to ask. But these were all about life and how life is ... very interesting.

The comments about the questions and themes often overlapped with the interviewees' appraisal of themselves as respondents. Some interviewees wondered whether they succeeded in answering the questions and giving the information that was sought. They also expressed gratitude at being asked to participate, and that someone was interested in their experiences and viewpoints:

I was really pleased that my opinions are appreciated ... somewhere.

### *Building Connections: Shared Age Group and Localities*

Throughout the interviews, there were many direct and indirect references to the fact that both parties lived in the same area and were about the same age or from the same generation. Shared experiences of retirement and changing family relations often came up in the discussions. If the interviewee mentioned being a parent or grandparent, the co-researcher would reveal that they too were a parent or grandparent, and sometimes this led to a discussion on different aspects of having adult children and/or grandchildren. Changing health conditions and various ailments typical of old age were also topics in which the shared life stage came up, such as in this extract where the interviewee had just spoken about his experience in hospital when he had a heart attack:

Interviewer: Are you on heart medication?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you have other such conditions? Have you for instance had your prostate gland operated on?

Interviewee: Yes

Interviewer: With resection?

Interviewee: Yes, resection.

Interviewer: So you too have experienced these old men's maladies then.

Interviewee: Yeah, all of those.

In this case, both parties were men, which clearly also affected the conversation as they found an experience that they shared related to their sex. It is outside the scope of this paper to thoroughly analyse the gendered nature of the interview interactions, but the relevance of sex/gender would merit further study in the co-research literature. Likewise, in another interview when the interviewee had explained the health issues typical of old age that they had had, the interviewer responded:

I've had something similar - not the same but somehow comparable experiences, so I know a little bit how it affects you or how it feels on a daily level.

There were also references to the fact that both parties had lived through the same times. For instance, they mentioned singers or bands that were popular when they were younger in a way that assumed that the other person would be familiar with them. They discussed how times were after the Second World War, how children were treated differently when they were young, or how the culture was "back in the day."

In this excerpt, both parties mentioned that they were married very young and then discussed how culture around courtship and marriage has since changed:

Interviewee: ... so I didn't really have time for courtship..

Interviewer: ... yes, for youth, kind of? Well, there we have similar [experiences] [...] We are children of our time.

Interviewee: Young people [of today] would laugh at us.

Interviewer: Yes, they would.

There were many instances in the interviews where the interviewers (and sometimes the interviewees) referred to “us older people,” showing that they had in mind the age-specific context of the research and were creating and emphasising a sense of shared reality and lifeworld, even if their individual situations were different. In one interview, this came up in the context of discussing local politics and services, and how older people are not consulted:

Interviewee: ... there was a panel discussion, and not a single older person was interviewed, but [only those who manage our things]. Lots of nice things are organised for us old people, and valuable things, but never did they ask what we'd like - it's the younger people there, they think they know better ...

Interviewer: [... maybe because the generation of our children are more educated than us] they don't understand the world of people our age, where we come from and what we need.

The shared age group also came up when discussing digitalisation and how it has changed and affected the lives of the participants during recent years. Significantly, there was no question about digitalisation in the interview themes, but the co-researchers either asked about it or it came up when discussing everyday life, relationships or problems with services. One interviewee spoke about how she had to learn to use the computer after her husband passed away, and the interviewer refers to “we” in a clear reference to their shared age:

Interviewee: I hadn't had to use the computer [before my husband died]. Now I have to learn everything myself.

Interviewer: Yes. But don't you think this would now be a goal - to learn to use them, because now we must ...

All of the interviewers were at least somewhat familiar with the localities of the study participants. In several interviews, expressions such as “I know the place” or “I'm familiar with the surroundings” were used. Local landmarks were also used to place localities when the interviewee was telling about their life, and the interviewer made it known that these places were familiar to them as well.

The shared experiences of the localities and the understanding of affordances such as local services were woven into the interview discussions. The interviewers shared their local knowledge when the discussion dealt with public transportation, and they shared concerns often voiced by the interviewees relating to the accessibility and affordability of services. Sometimes the co-researchers tried to solve the problems, for example, by giving out contact details for the local service councillor and the service centre, or telling the interviewee about various activities provided by NGOs, municipalities and the church. The co-researchers thus sometimes exceeded their role as interviewers as they actively offered advice whilst helping and encouraging the interviewee to participate. But the expressions that emphasised a familiarity with the local surroundings illustrate that the co-researchers wanted to demonstrate a commonality with the interviewees, and to help them benefit from their taking part in the research interview. In our last reflection session, two co-researchers even said that they had agreed to meet with their interviewee after the interviews, and one of them said he felt that they had established the beginnings of a friendship. We did not anticipate these kinds of developments but suggest that people who participate in a project promoting social inclusion (either as interviewers or interviewees) are possibly in a life situation where they are open to new relationships and reciprocal interaction. Even if this kind of role blurring may in some case raise difficult ethical questions, we did not see it as having affected the interview data but instead interpret it more as a natural process.

In their comments about the interview method, the interviewees sometimes explicitly referred to the importance of talking to someone of approximately the same age:

It feels important that we are about the same age, us, the interviewee and the interviewer. It feels that the interviewer can somehow better understand an age-mate.

Whilst the age differences between interviewer and interviewee were generally not large, a couple of the interview pairs had significant age differences. In one case, the co-researcher raised this in the reflection sessions but concluded that it was not (in his opinion) a problem. However, in another case where the co-researcher raised that he felt somewhat frustrated with the interviews, and that he did not get the kind of answers

that were sought, the age difference was significant, which might have played an influential role.

On the other hand, a closely shared age group and locality does not necessarily produce a sense of connection. One co-researcher described the first interview as being “terrible” and concluded that they were on a completely different wavelength than their interviewee. However, she reported that the second interview was easier to conduct and went better. In several of the reflection sessions, the co-researchers also pointed out that their varied experiences show that in this kind of conversational interview, the personality of the interviewee also makes a difference in how the interview proceeds. They, for example, commented on how the interviewee was “very talkative,” or “took the discussion in their desired direction” or how it was difficult to get them say very much. As mentioned earlier, we discussed these questions of research methodology with the co-researchers in the first training sessions and returned to them if the co-researchers raised questions during the reflection discussions. But broadly speaking, these kind of concerns are not specific to co-research but are more general concerns of informal, conversational research methods.

In one case, the interviewee did not understand the point of a question that the interviewer asked, and the interviewer then became confused himself. Here, the fact that the interviewer was an older volunteer did not help the situation as he was not able to clarify what the question was about. Instead, the interviewer tried to rectify the situation by referring to “the wise ones” (researchers) in charge of the research, who would figure things out for “our benefit” (i.e. older people). This episode offers a good illustration of how the power differences between researchers and co-researchers can seep into the interview communication, even if the researcher is not present.

## Discussion and Implications

We have described the development and implementation of a co-research approach and discussed some of practices and details, which, according to James and Buffel (2022) and Tanner (2019), have been lacking in previous research, such as the characteristics of the co-researchers, attrition and how connections are forged between co-researchers and participants.

Overall, our experiences and results are in line with earlier co-research findings with older people, and in particular with the potential of such participatory methods to contribute to knowledge related to the well-being and social inclusion of older people (e.g. Littlechild et al. 2015).

Piloting the training practices, consent forms and interview themes were helpful in improving them. Having two interviews within 2 weeks at the beginning of the process was important in building the confidence of the co-researchers, and fostering connections and discussions in the interviews. Our study suggests that the model of two interviews within 2 weeks could also be considered in co-research without a longitudinal element. According to the feedback from the co-researchers, conducting the training with enough time allocated for practicing with the digital voice recorder and having discussions with other co-researchers and researchers in the reflection meetings were important to keep the co-researchers committed to the process. The open, conversational model of the interview allowed various themes that were relevant to the interviewees to be included in the discussions (Holstein & Gubrium 1995). For example, the importance of digitalisation for the social inclusion of older people was discussed with most interviewees, even though this was not mentioned in our research questions (Hoppania et al. 2020).

The fact that both the co-researchers and the interviewees were older adults came forth in the interviews as references to their shared life course position and generational experiences. In essence, co-researchers are invited to pursue a “generational reflexivity” in becoming aware of one’s generational circumstances (Biggs & Lowenstein 2011) because they were asked to participate precisely as older persons talking to other older persons. Thus, the study design can make the participants conscious of their age, which helps elicit generational reflections and discussions of age-related needs in the interviews. The co-researchers and the interviewees were also living in the same region, town or even neighbourhood, and this shared locality was often referred to explicitly or implicitly in the interview data, as well as in the reflection sessions. Particularly, it aided the conversation concerning the significance of the local circumstances for well-being and social inclusion and helped to establish an understanding between the interviewee and interviewer (Hoppania et al. 2021). So in this way, our study corroborates similar observations that were made by the participants of Buffel’s (2018: 57–58) project about how living locally

results in a deeper understanding and richer data about the age-related issues of the area.

An unexpected feature of the interviews was that the co-researchers sometimes exceeded their role as interviewers, as they sought to advise and assist the interviewee in some manner, or in a few cases even begin a friendship with them. An eagerness to advise and help the interviewees also came up in the research by Bindels et al. (2014), and in line with their reflections, we do not see this as necessarily introducing any bias into the research. These kind of concerns have to be evaluated in the context of each particular research project and its aims. In our case, some of the interviewers were already involved in voluntary activities, and this could explain why, in some cases, they were so eager to try and solve problems that were raised by the interviewees. Whilst this “advising” contributed to the wider goal of empowerment for both parties, it clearly raises potential ethical considerations, in particular if the issues that the interviewee is experiencing are of more serious nature because the informed consent was given for the interview and would not extend to any form of counselling. This emphasises the importance of including a consideration of the possible needs of the interviewees that might come up during the interview in the training (e.g. for counselling), and how to respond to these kinds of situations if they arise.

The co-research method discussed here is in line with the constructo-interpretive approach of knowledge as situational and relational (e.g. Coburn & Gormally 2017), creating knowledge together through co-research. Such a process can aid developing the connection between the interview parties in the production of rich knowledge, and the process can be about learning, growth and even emancipation and the possibilities for new social relations (see also Mey & Van Hoven 2019). In our study, the interview themes and questions about social inclusion were close to everyday life, and in that sense, they were also easy to approach.

The type of co-research presented here is a new form of volunteering in the Finnish NGO-sector. According to the feedback discussions and survey data, it was mainly a positive experience for the co-researchers: they considered the training sufficient, and many mentioned that they learned new things or said that the research topic was interesting and that they were pleased to take part in an important project. During the pilot phase of the study, the co-researchers commented on the methodology, but later,

their role as interviewers remained their main contribution. This was due to the resource and time constraints of the project. However, the co-researchers were provided a possibility to join in a discussion when we presented the main findings of the research project in two seminars. Four of them expressed an interest and participated in a seminar in which they shared their experiences. We also invited the co-researchers to join a newly established network of co-researchers at the Age Institute, which would allow contacting them again for possible new projects.

We succeeded in recruiting an adequate number of co-researchers who committed to the process throughout the data collection period. We conclude that several factors contributed to this end: we were able to define the role of the co-researchers clearly enough and the time required for the tasks; the training was sufficient, and the co-researchers had possibilities to reflect on their experiences; and the themes of the interviews were relevant and important to them. This is in line with earlier research, which emphasises the importance of clear communication and offering time for reflection (Bindels et al. 2014; James & Buffel 2022). But it also offers a contrasting example of how a narrower role for the co-researchers (which is not a strength in terms of the ideals of co-research) can nevertheless work quite well in the context of limited resources, which are typical in co-research (James & Buffel 2022).

The interviewees' commitment to participate was also high throughout the process, and they made positive comments on the interview themes and the style of the interviews. Several of them expressed that they were satisfied that someone was interested in their experiences, and that they could participate in knowledge-production on issues related to ageing. The challenges we encountered had to do with misunderstandings regarding some of the interview questions, issues of "being on a different wavelength" some co-researchers reported concerns about getting "good enough" answers and the technical difficulties they faced with the recorder. There were also some interviews where some questions were dealt with superficially or where some of the themes were not explored in much depth. It is hard to estimate whether these could have been avoided with better training. However, our interpretation is that some of these issues had first to do with different personalities, and some are also situations that professional researchers encounter. In our research design, the structure of several interviews helped to alleviate some of these

challenges, but further in-depth and detailed analyses of interview interactions focusing on these kind of challenges would be useful in future studies on co-research.

Notably, we did not encounter problems related to the differences in privilege, insensitivity concerning social exclusion or the lack of explicitness that are mentioned in earlier research (Buffel 2018; Littelfield et al. 2015). This might be partly explained by the fact that the interviewers and interviewees in our study did not differ much in terms of socio-economic background, and the recruitment process for both interviewees and interviewers was similar. However, even though all participants were over 63 years of age, differences in age between the interviewer and interviewee came up in some of the interviews. This demonstrates the importance of being aware of generational and other age-related issues within the general category of “older people” in gerontological co-research. In general, co-research methods are in many ways laborious and also require an attentiveness from the academic researchers that comes close to the ethnographic tradition. Particularly, the researcher must practice critical reflexivity, continuously consider his or her own role, and adjust and adapt according to the changing situation (Coburn & Gormally 2017; Mey & Van Hoven 2019). In our case, the feedback and discussions that featured during the reflection sessions were key to how the process continued, and to the kind of experience that the co-researchers had.

The main limitation of our study is that the experiences of the interviewees could have been examined in more detail, as we only know about their experiences through what came up during the interviews themselves. The recruitment phase and the role of local NGO partners would also merit more attention, and even though the instructions and materials used were the same in all locations, how the recruitment happened in practice in different locations was left largely unexamined. For example, we do not know if the fact that the research was co-research affected who was willing to participate as interviewee. Based on our discussions with the co-researchers, introducing the interview as a low-threshold conversation with another older person might help in encouraging older people to participate who would typically feel intimidated by participating in research interviews.

Additionally, the problems in communication and understanding that arose during the interviews themselves, and also the cases when

difficult situations caused some degree of worry for the interviewer require further examination. The practical time and resource constraints also meant that in this research, we could not offer more extensive participatory roles to the co-researchers. But we do agree with James and Buffel (2022) that promoting the co-ownership of research processes by opening the whole research project to co-researchers and offering them possibilities to participate in different stages of the process would be ideal.

The co-research methodology differs substantially from other qualitative interview methods and requires detailed consideration when updating research ethics, guidelines and practices. The development of (national) guidelines would be useful, especially regarding remuneration, the rights of co-researchers to (professional) guidance and support in case of possible problems, and in delineating the responsibilities of the co-researcher and researchers in ensuring that the interview is not overwhelming for any party. However, in our study, the co-researchers were very supportive throughout the interviews, and in the transcripts, there are numerous positive moments of peer support and reciprocity, boding well for the transformative and rewarding potential of this research approach in the future.

### Corresponding Author

*Hanna-Kaisa Hoppania*, School of Political Science and Sociology, Áras Moyola, Room 224, School of Political Science & Sociology, University of Galway, Galway, Ireland. Email: hanna-kaisa.hoppania@universityofgalway.ie

### Statement of funding

This work was supported by STEA, the Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations, which operates in connection with the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The research was conducted as part of the coordination project of The Grip of Life programme (2018–2021, grant number C 4809). The funding body played no role in the design, execution, analysis or interpretation of data or writing of the study.

## References

- Barnes, M., Taylor, D. & Ward, L. (2013). Being well enough in old age. *Critical Social Policy* 33(3): 473–493. doi: 10.1177/0261018312471163
- Biggs, S. & Lowenstein, A. (2011). *Generational Intelligence: A Critical Approach to Age Relations*. London: Routledge.
- Bindels, J., Baur, V., Cox, K., Heijing, S. & Abma, T. (2014). Older people as co-researchers: A collaborative journey. *Ageing and Society* 34(6): 951–973. doi: 10.1017/S0144686X12001298
- Blair, T. & Minkler, M. (2009). Participatory action research with older adults: Key principles in practice. *The Gerontologist* 49(5): 651–662. doi: 10.1093/geront/gnp049
- Buffel, T. (2018). Social research and co-production with older people: Developing age-friendly communities. *Journal of Aging Studies* 44: 55–60. doi: 10.1016/j.jaging.2018.01.012
- Buffel, T. (2019). Older coresearchers exploring age-friendly communities: An “Insider” perspective on the benefits and challenges of peer-research. *The Gerontologist* 59(3), 538–548. doi: 10.1093/geront/gnx216
- Coburn, A. & Gormally, S. (2017). Critical reflexivity. *Counterpoints* 483: 111–126. Available on <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45177774> [Accessed March 1, 2021].
- Cordier, R., Milbourn, B., Martin, R., Buchanan, A., Chung, D. & Speyer, R. (2017). A systematic review evaluating the psychometric properties of measures of social inclusion. *PLoS One* 12(6): e0179109. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0179109
- Corrado, A. M., Benjamin-Thomas, T. E., McGrath, C., Hand, C. & Laliberte Rudman, D. (2020). Participatory action research with older adults: A critical interpretive synthesis. *The Gerontologist* 60: e413–e427. doi: 10.1093/geront/gnz080
- De Donder, L., De Witte, N., Verté, D., Dury, S., Buffel, T., Smetcoren, A.S., Brosens, D & Verté, E. (2014). Developing evidence-based age-friendly policies: A participatory research project. In *SAGE Research Methods Cases* (pp. 1–14). London: Sage Publications.
- Dewar, B. (2005) Beyond tokenistic involvement of older people in research – A framework for future development and understanding. *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 14: 48–53. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2702.2005.01162.x

- European Social Network. (2017). Co-production: a powerful approach to social services design. *European Social Network, News*. Available on <https://www.esn-eu.org/news/co-production-powerful-approach-social-services-design> [Accessed January 21, 2021].
- Franits, L. (2005). The issue is – Nothing about us without us: Searching for the narrative of disability. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* 59: 577–79. doi: 10.5014/ajot.59.5.577
- James, H. & Buffel, T. (2022). Co-research with older people: A systematic literature review. *Ageing and Society*, 1–27. doi: 10.1017/S0144686X21002014
- Holstein, J. & Gubrium, J. (1995). *The Active Interview*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Hoppania, H.-K., Vilkkö, A. & Topo, P. (2020) "Jos mä sit kerran tulen." *Elämänote-ohjelman osallisuustutkimuksen tuloksia, osa 1/2* ["Well if I Come Just Once" – Results of the Social Inclusion Research of the Grip of Life Program, Part 1/2]. Ikäinstituutti/Age Institute. available on <https://www.ika-instituutti.fi/tuote/jos-ma-sit-kerran-tulen-elamanote-ohjelman-osallisuustutkimuksen-tuloksia-osa-1-2/> [Accessed May 10, 2022].
- Hoppania, H.-K., Vilkkö, A., & Topo, P. (2021). "Se on mukavampi yhdessä tehdä." *Elämänote-ohjelman osallisuustutkimuksen tuloksia, osa 2/2* ["It's Nicer Together" – Results of the Social Inclusion Research of the Grip of Life Program, Part 2/2]. Ikäinstituutti/Age Institute, available on [https://www.ika-instituutti.fi/content/uploads/2021/09/Elamanote-2\\_172x245\\_7\\_VALMIS.pdf](https://www.ika-instituutti.fi/content/uploads/2021/09/Elamanote-2_172x245_7_VALMIS.pdf) [Accessed May 10, 2022].
- Hyvärinen, M. & Löyttyniemi, V. (2005). Kerronnallinen haastattelu. In J. Ruusuvaara & L. Tiittula (eds.), *Haastattelu. Tutkimus, tilanteet ja vuorovaikutus* (pp. 189–222). Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Isola, A. M., Kaartinen, H., Leemann, L., Lääperi, R., Schneider, T., Valtari, S. & Keto-Tokoi, A. (2017). *Mitä Osallisuus on? Osallisuuden viitekehystä rakentamassa*. National Institute of Health and Welfare. Available on: <https://www.julkari.fi/handle/10024/135356> [Accessed January 21, 2021].
- Littlechild, R., Tanner, D. & Hall, K. (2015). Co-research with older people: Perspectives on impact. *Qualitative Social Work* 14(1): 18–35. doi: 10.1177/1473325014556791
- Leemann, L., Martelin, T., Koskinen, S., Härkänen, T. & Isola, A.M. (2021). Development and psychometric evaluation of the experiences of social

- inclusion scale. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 23(3): 400–424. doi: 10.1080/19452829.2021
- Mey, E. & Van Hoven, B. (2019). Managing expectations in participatory research involving older people: What's in it for whom?, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 22(3), 323–334. doi: 10.1080/13645579.2018.1563977
- Ronzi, S., Orton, L., Pope, D., Valtorta, N. K., & Bruce, N. G. (2018). What is the impact on health and wellbeing of interventions that foster respect and social inclusion in community-residing older adults? A systematic review of quantitative and qualitative studies. *Systematic Reviews* 7(1): 26. doi: 10.1186/s13643-018-0680-2
- Smyth, J. (2017). *Social Inclusion*. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. Available on: <https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-129> [Accessed February 12, 2021].
- Tanner, D. (2019). Opening communicative space: What do co-researchers contribute? *Qualitative Research* 19(3), 292–310. doi: 10.1177/1468794118770076
- TENK. (2019). *Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK guidelines 2019*. Publications of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK 3/2019. Available on: <https://tenk.fi/en/ethical-review> [Accessed January 5, 2021].