

# Participant validation: Exploring a contested tool in qualitative research

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## Abstract

This paper examines the use of participant validation in qualitative research, and illustrates that the process of validation can be something more than validation. It can also generate new data and provide the participants with empowering experiences. The paper is based on an action research project involving birth parents in the development of new types of services for parents who involuntarily have had a child placed in care. In addition to discussing the challenges of participant validation, this paper also highlights the methodological, ethical, and empowering effects of this type of validation.

## Keywords

Participatory research, validity, birth parents, child protection, empowerment, quantitative research

## Introduction

The trustworthiness of research results is one of the cornerstones of qualitative research, and participant feedback, often referred to as respondent validation or member checking, is a well established technique for exploring the credibility of results. Participant validation usually requires that the research participants are invited to provide feedback on data during the research process but also after the completion of a research project on the interpretation of all the data.

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However, participant validation is also a contested approach. In addition user participation in the research process can be more than just a validation technique and provide the participants with the opportunity to construct new meanings and experience authentic empowerment.

Involving participants in research in order to explore the trustworthiness of its results has become an important aspect of the growing user movement in Western societies, which is dedicated to promoting access to social care, changing the role of the service user, and democratizing qualitative research. No longer wishing to be seen as the passive beneficiaries of expert advice, service users have argued the case for their own expertise (Beresford, 2002). Service users have also become more actively involved in designing and undertaking social research (McLaughlin, 2010) and Beresford (2013) describes the range and extent of such involvement.

This paper reports on the project 'User participation and professional practice in child protection services', an action research project carried out in cooperation with two child protection services in Norway (Seim and Slettebø, 2011, Slettebø, 2008). It focuses on one of the project's initiatives where the parents with children in care formed a support group together with social workers and foster parents. In accordance with an action research approach the author participated in the planning and execution of the meetings from the group's inception to its conclusion, four years later. At the end of the project, the parents read and commented on the final analysis and the research report. The article explores what is meant by participant validation and provides a critical discussion of the concept, but it also presents the service users experiences of providing feedback in a research setting. How did the parents respond to the description of the group process and to the analysis? What kind of comments did they make, and how did I as a researcher deal with and use this information? The article provides insight into the methodology of participant validation, its usefulness in the research process, and the unexpected discovery of how user participation in research can be beneficial to participants on a personal level.

## **Validity in qualitative research**

There is much debate about validity, trustworthiness, and rigor in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Porter, 2007; Rolfe, 2006). Validity is often assessed in terms of how well the research tools measure the phenomena under investigation (Punch, 1998), but this perception does not resonate with a broader and more recent understanding of the value of using this method (Birt et al., 2016).

Since qualitative data are descriptive and unique to a particular context, and therefore cannot be reproduced, qualitative research often takes the view that reality is socially constructed by each individual and should be interpreted rather than measured. Consequently, criteria based on assumptions of reality cannot be used for testing validity in qualitative research (Barbour, 2001). One of the impediments to achieving validity in qualitative research is researcher bias, which arises not only from the selective collection and recording of data, but

also from the process of analysis and interpretation. Researchers' familiarity with the field may lead them to overlook certain nuances and ambiguities in the data because of their implicit understanding of the research setting. However, familiarity with the setting is also useful when authenticating responses and findings. In qualitative research, researchers deal with these issues when they openly reflect about their presuppositions and acknowledge their subjective judgement.

According to the hermeneutic and postmodern perspectives, no method can deliver on ultimate truth (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In qualitative research, researchers write themselves into their accounts and presentation of findings, and therefore outcomes cannot be detached from the process of data analysis.

### **Participant validation – Merely validation?**

Participant validation, also called user, respondent, informant, or member check, is a process in which the researcher asks research participants and original respondents to check the accuracy of the study in the areas of descriptions, themes, and interpretations (Bloor, 1978; Creswell, 2002), or to provide what Tracy (2010) calls *member reflections*, a term that emphasizes that there might not be a single true reality. It provides participants with an opportunity to re-examine validity in dialogue with the researcher (Stoner et al., 2005) and helps researchers assess their observations and interpretations of data to improve its trustworthiness.

By confronting participants with the researcher's description and analysis of findings from a research project, the researcher can obtain feedback on the internal validity of the data collected. The value of such an exercise lies in the fact that research participants usually have broader knowledge of the context than the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1996). One of the core questions will be whether the participants recognize themselves in the analysis presented. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that the crucial test of a researcher's interpretations is whether the actors whose opinions and behavior he or she claims to describe accept these accounts as valid.

In practice, participant validation can be carried out in various ways. Individuals may be confronted with the findings and conclusions of a study in a personal dialogue with the researcher, independently of other respondents. They may also discuss the findings and conclusions of a study collectively in focus groups. The number of participants may vary. A preliminary report can be sent to everybody who participated in the study or to a subgroup of respondents. Study participants can be asked to comment on the accuracy of transcribed data, for example after an interview. In addition, researchers can ask participants to comment on various parts of a report, for example a section dealing with participants' input, or an episode or a situation that will later be used in a more complex analysis. Another form of validation is when a researcher presents those whose situation has been explored with the full research report and asks for their response (Seale, 1999). Participant validation is often conducted in the writing phase of a

research project, but it can also be applied over the course of the research process (Barbour and Barbour, 2003).

## **A compelling and contested approach**

The concept of participant validation can be attractive, but it presents many challenges, especially if validity requires participants to vouch for a researcher's interpretations. A range of factors determines whether participants agree with researchers' conclusions, and their response may not always be accurate (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1996). We can only understand the importance of our actions retrospectively, and our memory can be selective. People change their minds over time, and may have poor recall (Johnson and Waterfield, 2004). Participants can claim that they recognize themselves in an analysis, but there is no guarantee that they will not object to interpretations that place them in an unfavorable light (Fangen, 2010). They may respond in a particular way in order to avoid social judgment, but this can also happen during data collection in general. Not everyone has the time or the patience to read an entire report either. Respondents may also have limited interest in the findings, and reading drafts can make considerable demands on their time and can be distressing (Barbour, 2001). Researchers may also risk receiving responses that are detached from the totality of the text. Researchers often seek to provide an overview of a situation, whereas respondents can have individual concerns.

Østerud (1998) has limited confidence in respondent validation as a means of legitimizing a researcher's understanding of a text, an action, or a situation. He claims that such a form of verification is difficult because the researcher's construction of reality often is of a different order to that of the respondents. Language can be a hindrance. It is not a given that respondents are capable of following the argument in a research report. Participants' feedback of a researcher's observations can also be an indication that they simply do not want to express disagreement with the researcher because they don't know what is at stake for them if their actions are presented in an unfavorable light. The relationship between researchers and respondents is often asymmetric, usually to the benefit of the researchers (Ryen, 2002). Respondents may therefore be reluctant to express criticism. It may be in their interest to misinterpret or to give an inaccurate account of their actions in an attempt to portray themselves in a more positive light than they deserve.

Another objection to respondent validation is that research findings should be able to challenge participants' self-understanding and provide new insights (Fangen, 2010). By bringing in new and different forms of understanding, the analysis should go beyond the participants' own understanding. This may be both difficult for participants to understand and uncomfortable for them, and it may be up to the researcher to moderate the analysis.

The participants accounts need to be analyzed in the same way as other data. There must be an evaluation of conditions that may threaten the data's validity.

It may be in respondents' interests to misinterpret or incorrectly describe their own actions, or to contradict the researcher's interpretations (Fangen, 2010). Respondents may interpret the data from different perspectives compared with the researcher. For this reason, while their feedback can be used to modify the researcher's interpretations, their agreement with these interpretations is not necessarily a prerequisite for validity.

Participant validation represents an orientation towards the co-creation of knowledge through collaborative, contextualized action, and links with deliberative and empowerment models of evaluation (Torrance, 2012); it is often used as part of a participatory action research approach (Christ, 2010). Participant validation in action research often goes beyond just the validation of research findings. The validation process may provide respondents with new insights, which can constitute input for change. As we will see later, some of the comments made by the participants in this research study indicate that this was the case.

Respondent validation is one of several forms of what Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) call communicative validity, which is based on the understanding that valid knowledge occurs when conflicting views are discussed in a dialogue. Readers, non-professionals or practitioners can also evaluate research reports, for example from the perspective of their utility. Another form of communicative validation is to gain feedback by presenting research to colleagues and researchers. Respondent validation is therefore not sufficient to ensure the validity of qualitative research. There is also a need to question insights based on the participants' common sense knowledge. Prolonged engagement at the research site, persistent observation, rich descriptions, negative case analysis, peer review, clarifying researcher bias, external audits, triangulation are, in addition to participant validation, important methods of producing useful and trustworthy research findings (Morse, 2015).

## **Ethical aspects**

There are many ethical aspects when involving research participants in the validation process. In social research, service users may feel that their confidence is being betrayed in reports when they recognize themselves or others and make judgements accordingly, even though ethical standards of anonymity have been followed. Would they have expressed themselves in the same way if they had known that the material would be published and the results used to support service development they disagree with? We also have to take into consideration that taking part in validation exercises can be distressing and embarrassing, for example when returning transcribed data verbatim about how they have expressed themselves in interviews. They can also feel distressed by being reminded of previous traumatic experiences. On the other hand the process of reading your own experiences reflected in those of others, can facilitate a feeling of collectiveness. This aspect can be an important spin-off effect among participants who feel alone and stigmatized. Taking part in co-construction of knowledge can also facilitate for empowerment

in the sense that the participants can construct new meanings for practice (Andreassen et al., 2019).

Røthing (2005) discusses the dilemma of respondent validation in terms of the relationship between ethical responsibility and analytical freedom. Rather than choosing one or the other, she claims it is possible to pursue both. Researchers have a duty to use empirical data to present a critical analysis, but they should simultaneously allow respondents to be “owners” of the text. One may also ask whether it is ethical to evaluate services without including the interests, values, and views of the stakeholders involved?

### **Empirical basis: The user participation project**

The context of the present study is a larger research study that looked at how child welfare service users and social workers understood the concept of participation. What were their actual experiences with regard to participation, and how could service users increase their power? In accordance with an action research approach (Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Kemmis 2001), the researchers explored and developed models that had the potential to provide users with more power. Testing out these models provided the researchers with the opportunity to study in depth some of the factors that might promote participation in real organizational settings.

In preparation for the different models, the researchers interviewed children, parents, and social workers to chart their understanding of and experiences with participation and collect their ideas for improving participation. Most of the parents were pleased with the opportunity to participate, but parents with children in care often felt disempowered in their dealings with the authorities (Seim and Slettebø, 2011). However, they were interested in testing out models for collective participation. To this end, a support group, called the User Group, was established for parents with children in care. The first meeting of the User Group took place in April, 2003 and meetings continued until June, 2007. During this period, more than 30 parents participated at one time or another, as well as three social workers, two foster parents and various invited guests. The author attended all of User Group meetings in the role of an action researcher, and the group process has been analysed in another paper (Slettebø, 2013).

### **Methods: Data collection**

The description and evaluation of the group meetings were based upon: field notes from participatory observation of 32 meetings; 8 focus group sessions with parents, foster parents and social workers; 10 in depth interviews with five fathers and five mothers; telephone interviews with the 20 parents who had participated in the User Group meetings for the first time. In addition six parents who attended only one meeting and did not return were interviewed as part of a drop-out analysis. The researcher wrote the minutes from the meetings and the focus groups and shared them with the parents.

In accordance with an action research approach, I participated in the planning and execution of the meetings from the group's inception to its conclusion. While the research approach enabled me to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes in focus, my close relationship with parents may have simultaneously diminished my critical view of group processes and of the participants.

In my analysis, I did not try to moderate my interpretations in light of the fact that the participants would be reading and commenting on the report, but I felt somewhat uncomfortable letting the parents read my interpretations. What would their reaction be? Would they be able to understand my analysis and use of theory? How would I deal with resistance and denial? Was it ethical to let them read about issues that had caused them so much pain? Although I had doubts, I had known most of them for more than four years and my impression was that they were capable of dealing with these issues. They had chosen to participate in the group on a voluntary basis, and I rarely received critical feedback when reading the minutes from meetings.

The preliminary report describing and analyzing the User Group was read and commented on by seven service users, or approximately a quarter of all the participants of the group: four mothers, two fathers, and one grandmother. They represented the stable core of the group, and probably the ones who had found it most useful. The seven participants were given a 70-page paper version of the preliminary report. They requested two weeks to read and comment on the report, and within three weeks all the participants had read the document. Comments were collected through individual telephone interviews. All the parents had comments, but the extent of their feedback varied. The parents' comments were then incorporated verbatim in the text and analyzed as additional data.

The purpose of carrying out participant validation in the present research project was twofold. On the one hand, it gave the participants the opportunity to read my descriptions and interpretations and to comment on them. I used their feedback in discussing the trustworthiness of my interpretations, but found the responses useful and valuable source of supplementary data and insight. I also felt it was ethical to let the participants read and comment on what I wrote about them and how their statements had been interpreted. I wanted to share my understanding of the interaction in the group and how they had contributed to organizational learning and change of practice.

Not only were the findings validated by the parents' feedback, but the social workers and the foster parents were also invited to comment on the report. However, their comments were not as detailed as the parents' and are not included in the article. The interpretations have been presented to and discussed with practitioners in child protection services, academic colleagues, and fellow researchers, and the findings have been contrasted with the results from other studies. Participant validation was, in this case, part of an ongoing process throughout the project since the parents, social workers, and foster parents read the minutes from the meetings from the beginning. The prolonged engagement in the User Group was also helpful in order to produce useful and trustworthy research findings.



The Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) approved the project. In accordance with the ethical requirements from NSD, participation in group meetings was voluntary. Care has been taken to protect the anonymity of participants throughout the text.

## Findings

In this section I present the parents' responses and comments to the preliminary report and discuss how these have been invaluable in the process of analysis.

### The parents read the report with great interest

The parents took the reading of the report seriously. Three parents told me that they had read the report twice or more. One of them said, "I want to understand everything that has been written in the report." Another said that he had stayed up all night to read the whole report. One of the parents entered a hospital during the time she was to read the document. She brought the report with her and insisted on giving me her comments while lying in the bed in the hospital.

The parents reported that they were not used to reading reports of this kind, and they found the language unfamiliar. One of the parents said, "I spent a long time reading it, but you have picked up all the important things that happened, and you have not beaten around the bush." They appreciated being asked to comment on the report and to take part in the analysis, which could be related to the fact that one of their main motives for taking part in the User Group was to use their experiences in service development (Slettebø, 2008).

Some wanted me to elaborate parts of the report that they did not understand before they would share their comments with me. Some regretted that they had not proofread reports in the past because professionals had drawn conclusions they disagreed with.

### The interpretations were validated but supplemented

The respondents agreed with the overall description of the group process, and they felt that most of the activities and discussions were satisfactorily described in the report. They also went along with my analysis, although they supplemented my interpretations. One of the parents stated,

It was interesting to read the report, and it was exciting to read about the practices presented in a theoretical framework. However, have I been involved in all this? I have forgotten much of what we did and discussed.

Several of the parents expressed that they had gained new insight into the group process while reading the report. They had forgotten many of the activities and discussions that had taken place in the group. One was pleased to read the report



because she had not been part of it from the beginning, and found it interesting to read about the initiation of the group. She said,

I got an overall view of the whole group process by reading the report. I joined the group halfway through, but it seems that there has been a positive development in the group in recent years. You have picked up on many of the group members concerns, and the description is good.

She felt that she had made a positive contribution to the group process, and she was proud of it. The parents saw the report as an important document, and they enjoyed being updated on all the events. Nevertheless, one of them criticized the report for being too negative in the beginning. When asked to elaborate on this, she said,

I was a little bit provoked by the negative presentation of the parents in the beginning of the report, but honestly, I have to say that it is an accurate description too. Not all parents are suited to be parents. Parents are very different. The only thing we have in common is that we have children in care. The families in the child welfare system are very different and experience very different problems.

This parent was referring to a section in the report where some of the professionals had described the parents in disparaging terms. The social workers claimed that the parents would not be able to participate constructively in a group since they would mainly focus on their own needs. At first, this mother felt that this was an unfair description of the parents, but then she nuanced her views. She concluded that the parents did not comprise a homogenous group. She had found it difficult to cooperate with some of them because their self-centered focus, but she emphasized that this did not apply to everyone. Through the validation process, she changed her perception of the other parents. Her comments reminded me that the parents did not constitute a homogeneous group, and I was able to nuance how they were presented in the report. Such critical remarks were important because they illustrated that the parents could express criticism, thereby counter-acting some of the arguments against participant validation.

### **Improved analysis**

The parent's comments through the validation process provided valuable insight into their lives and how they had experienced having their children removed from home, in addition to contributing to further in-depth analysis of the data. The parents appreciated reading their own quotes, especially when they were cited verbatim. Several of them mentioned that it was the first time they had ever been quoted directly in a professional report.

I like that you included quotes. I recognize my own words here and there. This is the first time I have ever been quoted verbatim. I am not used to this. Usually the

professionals rewrite what I say to the extent that I do not recognize myself in their writings.

The parents were pleased to recognize their own thoughts and statements in the report. They were impressed with what they had said, and that their comments were of such importance that a researcher would include them in a report. They wished that the social workers had quoted them verbatim more often in their professional reports. I was reminded that parents in child protection services often are disempowered by the style of writing the professionals often have.

One of the parents wanted me to elaborate on how the parents experienced the financial consequences of having a child placed in care. A father said, "You must describe the financial crisis families experience after a child has been removed." This comment made me examine the minutes from meetings where the parents' had discussed their financial situation after their child was removed. When children are placed in care, their parents consequently lose several welfare allowances for the child. The parents felt the withdrawal of benefits as an additional punishment, because the most of their fixed costs remained the same even though the household decreased in numbers. In poor families, child welfare allowances were often used to support the costs of daily living, and not only for the child. As a consequence of these comments I became more alert to the structural difficulties and poverty this group of parents faced, a matter that is often overlooked (Davidson et al., 2017).

## **Validation of theoretical concepts**

Contrary to my expectations, the parents were not only interested in reading about the group process, they were also interested in the theoretical analysis. They found unfamiliar concepts and theories interesting, and they enjoyed reading the analysis. They wanted me to explain concepts like empowerment, autonomy, validity, and co-optation. Some would not share their comments before I had explained the concepts they did not understand.

One of the mothers wanted to know the meaning of empowerment. Having explained the theoretical concept of empowerment, I asked her if this could be a valid description of her experience in the User Group. She replied:

After they took my son away, I used to sit at home and cry, but I have changed. I will not do that anymore, because it does not solve my problems. You do not move ahead this way. I have spent a lot of time mourning, but now I am on my feet again. Meeting other parents in the User Group has been a great help to me in this process, meeting up with other parents who have the same experiences as yourself.

This quote illustrates how this mother had moved from a feeling of powerlessness to a situation where she had taken control of her life. Meeting the other parents had supported her in this process. The mother's description of her own development seems largely to correspond to the theoretical description of the

empowerment process (Slettebø, 2013). It is not a given that service users and experts have the same perception of empowerment (Wilson and Beresford, 2000), but in this case, these perceptions seem to coincide.

Another parent made the comment included at the beginning of this paper: “Habermas, I can’t remember that we ever talked about him.” I had to explain to her why Habermas’ deliberative theory could be useful to understanding the communication in the group. I had used the concept “knowledge workshop” as a way of describing the process of interaction between the parents and the professionals in the group. The mother then said:

It is interesting that you use the term “knowledge workshop” to describe the work we did in the group. It is important to describe it as such. It has been a dialogue. Together we have shared and questioned thoughts, and opinions have been shaped and reshaped.

She found this concept accurate to describe the communication in the group, and she wanted to incorporate it in her own vocabulary.

In their own way, the parents validated the central theoretical concepts applied in my analysis of the group. However, they may have agreed to my use of concepts for lack of familiarity with other, and perhaps more useful, concepts. Discussing the theoretical concepts with the service users provided me with the opportunity to explain in detail the various target groups of the report. Consequently, I used theoretical concepts to develop ideas that they were not familiar with. The parents accepted these arguments, but they stressed their main concern was that the findings should lead to organizational changes. This demonstrates that the parents could maintain their own interests as well as acknowledging my requirements as a researcher.

## **Reassessment of methodology**

Some of the comments encouraged revisions to the methods of data collection. One of the parents commented that I should place more emphasis on the emotional experiences of having a child removed, and one said,

I would like you to describe the parents’ feelings when the child is removed. What kind of people are parents? Go deeper into it. They cannot just be left destitute, but they need help. The reader must see that there are people behind the parents.

This father stressed the importance of portraying the parents as human beings and individuals with independent needs, and not only parents with children in care. I was surprised by the comment because I thought that I had presented the parents in a respectful and nuanced way. This comment led me to review and compare the information collected during the individual interviews and the focus groups. I found that my description of the parents’ feelings after their child had been

removed was largely based on data from the focus groups, and less on information obtained from individual interviews. While reviewing the various datasets again, I found that the parents had talked more openly about their emotions of grief, sorrow, and loss in the individual interviews than in the focus groups. Perhaps this is not very surprising, but the literature on focus groups does not, in my opinion, clearly address the limitations of these groups in this respect. The participant feedback contributed to a critical review of the different research methods used.

## **Strategic thinking**

The parents' comments did not always express altruistic thoughts. They revealed that parents had their own motives to participate. One of the parents claimed that his participation in the group was meaningful to him because he thought it could improve his relationship with his children. He looked forward to telling his children that he had participated and the responsibility he had taken in the group.

The parents wanted to present the report to people with power, and hoped that it would contribute to changing the child protection services:

I just hope the right people will read this report so there may be a change in the system. It is important and well written, if only it would get out, for example to Karita Bekkemellem (the Minister of the Department of Children and Integration). The report should be accessible to all the courts. It should not be of interest only to us. This group has to be introduced on a national basis.

This illustrates that the parents also had strategic and political motives in their responses. They regarded research as means of influencing people in powerful positions to whom they themselves did not have access.

## **Empowering processes**

The parents said that reading the report left them with a feeling of self-worth. They were not used to reading about themselves in such positive terms. Reading reports about themselves usually left them with a feeling of mistrust and powerlessness. They were proud of their own contributions to the group and the activities they had been part of, such as convening meetings, giving talks, participating in discussions, and producing various written notes. They were impressed by their own capabilities, especially their ability to express and articulate their experiences and viewpoints, both in the group meetings and in the different interviews. They wondered why reports written by the child welfare services did not focus more on their competences and qualifications.

Some of the parents had even archived all the minutes in folders because they saw them as valuable documentation of the activities they had been involved in. One parent said: "I feel important because my participation has contributed to such an important initiative in child welfare. This group is something that we have needed for a long time."

The parents very much appreciated that their viewpoints were of such importance and that they were invited to read and comment on the report. One said, “Did I really say that? Well, quite cleverly formulated, wouldn’t you say?” The process of participant validation placed them in a different position compared to what they were used to. Instead of being on the receiving end of efforts to provide advice or help, the roles were reversed, and they were the ones providing help to others—even to a researcher.

## Discussion

Contrary to the criticisms and limitations of participant validation addressed earlier in this paper, I have experienced that this type of validation process can be very constructive. When we started the project, we were warned by other social workers and other academics that we should not expect parents who had children in involuntary care to cooperate, and if they did, their motives would be self-centered. We did not experience this in either their participation in the support group or in the process of validation. The parents who read the preliminary report took the reading of the report seriously. Their comments validated the descriptions of the activities in the group and made valuable contributions to validating both the description of the group process and the analysis. Some of them validated the theoretical understanding of empowerment from a recipient perspective, which suggests that the concept of empowerment is not necessarily simply a professional construct. Comments made by the parents also encouraged a more in-depth analysis of the kinds of data different research methods generate.

The parents’ responses were also of a strategic character. They hoped that their participation would result in organizational learning. However, their motives for participation were not entirely altruistic either. Some of them hoped that their involvement would improve their relationships with their children, who would see them as responsible parents, perhaps contrary to earlier perceptions. Some of the parents described their participation in almost therapeutic terms and spoke of the importance of verbalizing their emotions.

The parents did not express that the process of validation represented a considerable demand on their time or that it was a distressing experience, and I was surprised that they were not reluctant of reading a long report. Perhaps they wanted to give something in return for being presented in a respectful way. Rather, they read the report with enthusiasm and took the time to make detailed comments. Their comments were very relevant, but some needed certain concepts to be explained before they would share their comments. Language was a barrier, and in order for them to overcome it, I had to take time to explain theoretical concepts. When this was done, the parents could follow the argument. If the report had been written in English and not in Norwegian, the language barrier would have been even more of a problem. The academic expectation of publishing in English could therefore be seen as incompatible with participant validation in this case.

It is possible that the parents did not want to express their disagreement with my interpretations because of their closeness to me, and because, as a researcher, I could paint them in an unfavorable light and prevent them from contributing to organizational changes. Lack of opposition to my views could also be the result of my own lack of critical distance as a researcher. However, some parents did express criticism and disagreement, for example in what they had perceived as a negative description of the parents in the beginning of the report, but also when they exercised control demanding theoretical concepts elaborated before passing on their comments to me. This suggests that they had not been completely co-opted by the process.

Participant validation does not correct the imbalance of power between respondents and researchers, but in this instance, my regular contact with the parents in the study over several years created trust in the researcher-participant relationship. The parents were also familiar with my interpretations of the group processes from reading the minutes I produced from meetings over years.

In participatory research it is an ethical responsibility to ensure that service users have a central part in the research process and in the co-construction of knowledge if they want to. This paper has illustrated how participant validation can be a useful way of improving the quality of research findings and meeting important ethical requirements of the adopted research methodology. Its findings, however, move beyond just the methodological value of participant validation. In professional practice contexts practitioners and researchers are usually in control of how service users' voices are expressed in both professional work and research. This paper has highlighted how the creation of opportunities to engage in participant validation activities can be experienced by service users as respectful, inclusive and empowering processes which enhance their value. Finding ways to further develop approaches to participation validation is an ethical research and practice imperative.

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