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## **Participation in Research: Experiences from Collaborating with Cocreators During a Study Among Mothers of Teenagers with Immigrant Backgrounds in Oslo**

**Abstract:** In this paper, we discuss what it means to practice participatory research based on experiences from a research process with mothers of immigrant background living in three local communities in Oslo. We reflect upon the possibilities and challenges of participatory research as experienced during a research process conducted in collaboration with three co-creators. Three stories of participation, communities of practice, power and reciprocity are presented to highlight our experiences from participatory research. We found that the community of practice between researchers and co-creators was essential for collecting relevant and verifiable knowledge among mothers of teenagers with an immigrant background. The practice of reciprocity contributed to building trust between researchers and cocreators, and towards the participants in interviews.

**Keywords:** participatory research, communities of practice, power, reciprocity

### **Introduction: Participatory Research in Practice**

In this paper, we discuss what it means to practice participatory research based on experiences from a research process with mothers with an immigrant background in three local communities in Oslo. We conducted the research in close collaboration with three community-based cocreators. In the following, we reflect on the possibilities and challenges of participatory research as experienced during our research process. More specifically, we ask: “What were the driving forces and obstacles to creating a participatory research process?” and “What experiences emerged from establishing a common community of practice?”

Participatory research assumes that verifiable knowledge is collected and produced in a collaboration between academic researchers and actors affected by the research and its consequences<sup>1</sup>. Participation and collaboration indicate the active engagement of more than one part in the research process, ideally

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1 Macaulay, A.C.; Jagosh, J.; Seller, R.; Henderson, J.; Cargo, M.; Greenhalgh, T.; Pluye, P., “As-

from everyone involved, although this is seldom practically possible<sup>2</sup>. The ambitions toward the outcome of participatory research are high<sup>3</sup>. Ideals of justice, empowerment, democratization of research, and sustainable development motivate community workers, activists, and researchers to further develop the participatory methods<sup>4</sup>. The attention participatory approaches have gotten lately stresses the need for more knowledge about how participatory approaches is experienced in practice.

In this paper, we highlight what we identified as the driving forces and obstacles in our specific research process while reflecting on how we established a common community of practice together with three cocreators. The concept of communities of practice and how communities develop deepen our understanding of what we experienced from the research process. Communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”<sup>5</sup> In this paper, we reflect on our experiences as we develop a new community of practice in research together with the cocreators as well as representing certain academic communities of practice, while also encountering other communities of practice of mothers with an immigrant background (they met to share and develop knowledge in motherhood).

Before we describe this further, we let us turn to some central elements of participatory research, before presenting the theoretical perspectives of power over/power with, reciprocity and communities of practice.

## Present Knowledge on Participatory Research

Participatory research is increasingly being encouraged and upheld as an ideal approach for research by political actors, NGOs, large financial institutions like the EU and national research councils as well as internally by social scientists in academia<sup>6</sup>. Research, as an approach to systematically collecting knowledge,

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sessing the benefits of participatory research: a rationale for a realist review,” *Global Health Promotion* 18, no. 2 (2011), 46.

2 Bergold, Jarg and Thomas, Stefan, “Participatory research methods: A methodological approach in motion,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 13, no. 1, Art. 30 (2012), 9.

3 Bergold et.al., “Participatory research method,” 9.

4 *ibid.*

5 Wenger, Etienne, McDermott, Richard and Snyder, William, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 4.

6 Askheim, Ole Petter, Lid, Inger Marie and Østensjø, Sigrid, “Samproduksjon I forskning – hva er det, og hva innebærer det?” (Coproductio in research – what is it and what does it mean?).

can be a tool for oppression, upholding existing structures. When the differences are large concerning status and knowledge about the research process between the researcher and the researched, research can be a tool for upholding and manifesting these differences<sup>7</sup>. Traditional research was often experienced as “alienating and disempowering,”<sup>8</sup> through exclusive vocabulary, standards, and arenas for exchanging knowledge. But research can also be a tool for the opposite: for liberation and antioppression<sup>9</sup>. Participatory research can promote benefits for all actors involved. To include cocreators in research may, in addition to the ideal of empowerment, increase the quality and validity of data and widen the perspectives of academic research.

Participants are often called cocreators or coproducers to acknowledge that knowledge has been created and produced in collaboration. We choose to label our collaborators as cocreators in the research process. In business, cocreation indicates that the consumer and the producer collaborated to create a product or service of value<sup>10</sup>. In research within communities, cocreators collaborate to make scientific knowledge relevant and valuable for the community.

While the line of pragmatic participatory research has been criticized for its ignorance toward power relations in research, and for the differences of interests among participants<sup>11</sup>, ideological, political, and participatory approaches see research as a tool for confronting traditionally narrow perspectives on science and research, and for address power structures and enhancing empowerment within research as well as in the wider society. Collaborative research, community-based participatory research, action-based research, and citizen science are all examples of these idealistic power-sensitive participatory approaches<sup>12,13</sup>. Normative, participatory research is intended to bridge existing power gaps

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In Samproduksjon I Forskning. *Forskning Med Nye Aktører (Co-Production in Research. Research with New Actors)*, ed. Ole Petter Askheim, Inger Marie Lid and Sigrid Østensjø (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2019), 15.

7 Potts, Karen, and Leslie Brown. “Becoming an anti-oppressive researcher.” In *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, ed. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (Toronto: Canadian Scholar’s Press, 2005), 6.

8 Borg, Marit, and Askheim, Ole Petter. “Deltagerbasert Forskning I Psykisk Helsearbeid – Et Bidrag Til Mer “Brukbar” Kunnskap?” (Participation based research in psychiatric health – a contribution to more “useful” knowledge?). *Tidsskrift for Psykisk Helsearbeid 2* (2010), 100.

9 Potts and Brown. “Becoming,” 6.

10 Prahalad, C. K., and Venkat Ramaswamy. “Co-creation experiences: the next practice in value creation.” *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 18, no. 3 (January 2004), 6.

11 Askheim, Lied and Østensjø, “Samproduksjon,” 18.

12 Bergold and Thomas “Participatory Research Methods,” 9.

13 Hecker, Susanne, Muki Haklay, Anne Bowser, Zen Makuch, Johannes Vogel, and Aletta Bonn. *Citizen Science Innovation in Open Science, Society and Policy*, ed. Susanne Hecker, Muki Haklay, Anne Bowser, Zen Ma kuch, Johannes Vogel and Aletta Bonn. (UCL Press, 2018), 27.

between the researcher and the researched as well as between the researched and society. Calls for practicing participatory research often comes with a list of demands for qualifying as authentically participatory<sup>14</sup>. Communication, collaboration, partnership values, benefits, and evaluation are examples of prerequisites for enabling the right empowering process<sup>15</sup>, promoted by Prerna Arora and colleagues. Another way of stating driving forces of participatory research is the four R's of indigenous research, as Peltier explains them: respect, reciprocity, relevance, and responsibility.<sup>16</sup> These two listed sets of requirements overlap some, but also contain some important differences. While the prerequisites of Arora emphasize assessment, meeting academic standards, the indigenous factors of Peltier primarily concern the ones being researched on or with.

Theorists have conceptualized our understanding of participation in different ways. While Arnstein<sup>17</sup> traditionally characterized participation according to a seven-leveled ladder (from manipulation to citizen control), others like Alice McIntyre emphasize the quality more than the quantity of the participation taking place<sup>18</sup>. Focusing on the frequency of participation may divert attention from the outcome of involvement. Involved parties may have different roles, different opportunities to participate, and different competencies, and still find value in participating.

Diaconal research was recently promoted as a distinct approach within participatory research<sup>19</sup>, where participation is combined with action-based research and the ideals of liberation theology and diaconal practice. Stålseth Taksdal and Hilden argue that diaconal research is something more than just “ordinary” research; they propose that diaconal research should “be morally committed to the cause of justice, expressed through action and participatory and dialogical in character.”

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14 Goodson, Lisa, and Phillimore, Jenny, *Community Research for Participation*. From Theory to Method (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2012), 48.

15 Arora, Prerna, Lauren S. Krumholz., Terry Guerra M.S., and Leff, Stephen “Measuring community-based participatory research partnerships: The initial development of an assessment instrument.” *Progress in Community Health Partnerships* 9, no. 4 (Winter, 2015), 553.

16 Peltier, Cindy “An application of two-eyed seeing: Indigenous research methods with participatory action research.” *The International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17 (2018), 3.

17 Arnstein, Sherry R. “A ladder of citizen participation.” *Journal of American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4 (1969), 217.

18 McIntyre, Alice “Participatory action research.” *Qualitative Research Methods Series* 52 (Los Angeles/London: Sage, 2008).

19 Stålseth, Sturla, Arnhild Taksdal, and Per Kristian Hilden. “Research as Diakonia: Commitment, Action and Participation.” *Diaconia* (2018), 167

These antioppressive ideals are shared by many practitioners within diaconal practice<sup>20,21</sup>. Kjell Nordstokke says that “the task of being a bridge-builder is integral to the very nature of diakonia.”<sup>22</sup> In cases in which the research contexts include groups or individuals in marginalizing positions, the importance of making participatory research a tool for integration and empowerment increases. When a group or individual in society is being marginalized, they are pushed to the edge, or margins, of central social arenas. In marginalized positions, groups or individuals experience that opportunities to participate, to generate income, or to receive acknowledgment are significantly reduced<sup>23</sup>. Diaconal practice and idealistic participatory research share the intention of contributing to the empowerment and antioppression of people<sup>24</sup>.

Principles of egalitarian participation unite researchers, church and community workers, and political activists. For example, the NGO network promoting participatory processes for the UN sustainable development goals: “Participatory research comprises a range of methodological approaches and techniques, all with the objective of handing power from the researcher to research participants, who are often community members or community-based organizations.”<sup>25</sup>

However, there are some obvious challenges associated with the practice of participatory research. Broad participation involving many actors means that control over the process and quality of outcome, according to academic tradition, is weakened. Collective decision-making is time-consuming and demanding, relying on an effort from all parties involved. The ideals of equality, justice, and empowerment also involve the risk of hiding real power differences. The ideal of full participation can be difficult to follow. Like values, ideals rely on context to materialize<sup>26</sup>.

20 Haugen, Hans Morten, *Diakoni i velferdssamfunnet. Mangfold og dilemmaer* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2018), 57.

21 Ham, Carlos E. “Empowering diakonia: A perspective from the world council of churches,” ed. Stephanie Dietrich, Knud Jørgensen, Kari Korslien and Kjell Nordstokke (Oxford: Regnum, 2014), 107.

22 Nordstokke, Kjell, *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment. An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Diakonia* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2009), 46.

23 Klyve, Arne, Ute Inne, *Oppsøkende sosialt arbeid blant ungdommer (Out/in social work among youth)* (Bergen: Gyldendal akademiske, 2006), 71.

24 Potts and Brown. “Becoming,” 6.

25 <https://participatesdgs.org/methods/>

26 Askeland, Harald, “Values – Reviewing the Construct and Drawing Implications for Values Work in Organisation and Leadership” ed. Harald Askeland, Beate Løvås and Gry Espedal, *Understanding Values Work: Institutional Perspectives in Organizations and Leadership* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 26.

The ideals and principles of participatory research must repeatedly be cross-checked with reality and real experiences. In order to practice the ideals of antioppression and antialienation, we need to understand the mechanisms that are active within the research processes. Later, we reflect on this when we look into our experiences from participatory research by adding the concept of communities of practice, power-relations and reciprocity.

### **Theoretical Concepts of Power, Communities of Practice, and Reciprocity**

The power-sensitive ideals of equal relations are anything but new perspectives. Over 100 years ago, in a managerial context the social worker Mary Follet labeled this as power with people<sup>27</sup>. While power over refers to the situation where one person makes decisions that affect someone else, power with refers to the situation where a group of people make a choice that affects them all. Follet contrasts in this way control (power over) with integration (power with). An integrative power with, she says, relates to “power achieved through relationship and the ability to see one’s actions as part of a greater whole.”<sup>28</sup> Integration, Follet says, is “a social process where two or three people meet to decide on some course of action, and separate with a purpose, a will, which was not possessed by anyone when he came to the meeting but is the result of the interweaving of all.”<sup>29</sup> Later, Habermas, Kemmis, and other social scientists followed up with the notion of “safe spaces,” where power and status is indifferent to decision-making<sup>30</sup>.

Power with and social practice are closely linked to the anthropological concept of reciprocity<sup>31</sup>. Reciprocity is crucial when it comes to being sensitive toward the power balance in social practice. Reciprocity is also the result of the dynamics in social practice of giving and receiving. As the indigenous researchers in Peltier’s study said, one must acknowledge the need for balancing the gifts.<sup>32</sup> Notice that there is a need for returning a positive service action or physical gift, not necessarily the opportunist strategy of offering something, only to expect something in return. Ties of trust and solidarity are created between people practicing reciprocity.

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27 Melé, Domènec and Rosanas, Josep “Power, Freedom and Authority in Management: Mary Parker Follett’s ‘Power-With’ Philosophy of Management 3, no. 2 (2003), 36.

28 Follet, Mary Parker “Community Is a Process.” *Philosophical Review* 28 (1919), 587.

29 Ibid.

30 Bergold and Thomas, “Participatory Research Methods,” 6.

31 Peltier, “An Application of Two-Eyed Seeing,” 7.

32 Ibid, 6.

Research is practiced within specific fellowships and communities of practice. These research communities develop their own practices, with their own value hierarchies, their own specialized terminology and reference frames<sup>33</sup>. When researchers, practitioners, or other persons interact in research processes, they may represent different “communities of practice.”<sup>34</sup> Communities of practice are defined as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”<sup>35</sup> Communities of practice range from giant long-term existing communities, like academic disciplines, to smaller local informal and short-term communities like a project group or a counseling network. When academic researchers collaborate with community members, academic communities of practice meet the practices of the community field. Ideally, the individuals develop, through participation and collaboration, a common community of practice. The researcher and the researched create and define the understanding of research while practicing research<sup>36</sup>.

The outcome of collaboration across communities of practice should preferably reflect the common learning process. An example of an harmonious outcome of participatory research is the concept of “two-eyed seeing,”<sup>37</sup> which is described as “to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and to see from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and to use both of these eyes together.”<sup>38</sup> From his research in collaboration with indigenous community members, Peltier states that, when indigenous people become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed: “Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms.”<sup>39</sup> The different social fields collide, and that can affect the practices within the academic as well as the community fields. Participatory research not only change “the others”; it also changes the internal conditions for

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33 Bertram C. Bruce & John A. Easley, Jr., “Emerging communities of practice: collaboration and communication in action research,” *Educational Action Research* 8:2 (2000), 244.

34 Kemmis, Stephen. “Understanding Professional Practice: A Synoptic Framework.” In *Understanding and Researching Professional Practice*, ed. Bill Green (Rotterdam Sense Publisher, 2005).

35 Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, *Cultivating Communities*, 4.

36 Peltier “An application of Two-Eyed Seeing,” 6.

37 *Ibid.*, 2.

38 Marshall, M., Marshall, A., & Bartlett, C., “Two-eyed seeing in medicine,” in *Determinants of Indigenous peoples’ Health in Canada: Beyond the Social*, ed. M. Greenwood, S. de Leeuw, N. Lindsay, & C. Reading (Toronto, Canada: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2015), 335.

39 Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. New York, NY: Zed Books., 2013), 193.

research. This can be an asset as well as a challenge. Participatory research, for example, can challenge the established norms of schemas for research ethics<sup>40</sup>. Participatory research requires an approach that accepts this ambivalence and uncertainty<sup>41</sup>. Theories of communities of practice highlight how parties in social interaction contribute to a common outcome. We draw upon these insights together with the insights of power relations and reciprocity when we turn to our own cocreated research process.

When doing research among mothers of teenagers with an immigrant background, we encountered some of the obstacles mentioned above, as well as the immense potential and opportunities inhabiting in the processes of participatory research. We encountered the collision of communities of practice, the establishment of a new community of practice, and we experienced how reciprocity was practiced. Below we elaborate on how we experienced collaborative research among mothers of teenagers with an immigrant background in Oslo.

## Method

### Describing the Participatory Design

We conducted a participatory study with and on mothers of teenagers with an immigrant background in Oslo. The research process we chose and collaborated on with cocreators was part of a project with the title “Parenting Teenagers in a Context You Were Not Yourself Raised in.” This project was initiated by the two authors of this article and is now the PhD project of the second author. The PhD project includes more interviews in addition to those mentioned in this paper. The research concerning this paper was limited to three group interviews with altogether 27 mothers of immigrant background with teenaged children.

The participatory element of the research came into play through the collaboration with three cocreators who took part in the planning and performance of the interviews, the analysis of data, and the sharing of research results in different ways. The transcription of the group interviews was done word-by-word in its totality by the second author of this paper. The greatest part of the analysis of the data and the writing of articles was done by the researchers without the cocreators. We met the three cocreators through our engagement in community work and through a snowball effect of networking initially with

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40 Lid, Inger Marie and Rugseth, Gro, “Samproduksjon av kunnskap i forskning: noen forskningsetiske refleksjoner” (Co-production of research: Some research-ethical reflections) In *Samproduksjon I Forskning. Forskning Med Nye Aktører* (Co-Production in Research. Research with New Actors), ed. Ole Petter Askheim, Inger Marie Lid and Sigrid Østensjø (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2019), 164.

41 Potts and Brown. “Becoming,” 6.



one cocreator. We describe the collaboration with the cocreators in more detail under Findings.

The group interviews were conducted in three different parts of Oslo during 6 months of Winter/Spring 2018/2019. The group interviews were arranged at local arenas: a library and two community facilities. In each group, there were 8–9 participants in addition to the two researchers and one or two cocreators present. The transcriptions were partly read by one of the cocreators, and all interpretations were discussed. Research results were presented by us as researchers or together with some of the cocreators at several gatherings to which, among others, also participants from the interviews had been invited.

### **The Collaborating Actors in Research: The Cocreators and Researchers**

All cocreators had bachelor's degrees, and two of them were in the middle of their master's studies. All three had immigrated to Norway as children. Two of them were themselves mothers to young children, and one had an adult child. All three were engaged community members, involved in issues of community development, gender, and families, either as a social worker, family therapist, social entrepreneur, or volunteer in community work. The cocreators were themselves not in marginalized positions, so they differed from most of the mothers in the group interviews. They had grown up, however, under the same conditions as many of the informants and were familiar with both the cultural codes in this specific community of mothers with an immigrant background as well as the cultural codes in most of the Norwegian population, including the academic codes. Their "cultural translations" helped us to adjust our strategies for the project to fit the needs of the mothers with an immigrated background.

We, the researchers and co-writers of this paper, are sociological researchers with academic schooling, one holding a PhD, the other currently working on her PhD. Additionally, both of us, just like the cocreators, live in (sub)urban areas characterized by multicultural, multireligious citizens living under mixed socioeconomic life conditions.

We are all women, mothers of teenagers, older and/or younger children, and have worked with community development in different organizations before our current positions.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

Our analysis and interpretations in this paper are based on the researchers' log done during the research process. Both researchers took notes concerning talks, observations, and reflections among all involved actors during the research study. The notes included experiences of participatory and cocreating elements during the research process. While "analysis involves summarizing what's in the data, interpretation involves making sense of, and finding meaning in that

data.”<sup>42</sup> The analysis and interpretation of data was done through hermeneutic spirals of understanding<sup>43</sup>, moving between the researchers’ notes, literature on participatory approaches, and our own interpretations. First, we read through the notes from the research process thoroughly. Notes on the collaboration between us as researchers and the cocreators, caught our interest and made us go deeper into the literature on participatory research. Three issues stood out from reading and reflecting on the material: the cooperation across and between fields (academic and local community), power relations between the involved actors, and the importance of mutual relations. The concepts of communities of practice, power over/power with, and the concept of reciprocity helped us to interpret the identified categories from the material. In the next reading of the material, we asked questions about what the driving forces and obstacles were for creating a participatory research process in our specific study. We confronted the material with the following questions: In what way were we as researchers affected by the involvement of cocreators? How was the power over the process distributed among us? In what way did reciprocity come to play, and what did it mean for the research process? Below we discuss these issues further.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The cocreators read a late version of this article and approved the content and that their names are mentioned. The participants in the group interviews were anonymized in the transcribed material, but they gave their informed consent to participate. The names of the participants and the geographical area in Oslo are anonymized.

Our material, however, is based on the notes done by the researchers alone. We are conscious about the risk of objectifying the cocreators. Our reflections on the process would undoubtedly have been different had the cocreators been involved in the writing of this reflection. Following the call for a meta-gaze on methodological approaches, as Pettersen highlights<sup>44</sup>, the researchers’ notes, observations, and reflections on methodological experiences are nevertheless relevant to the investigation.<sup>45</sup> The meta-gaze is the researcher’s critical

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42 Trent, Allen and Cho, Jeasik “Interpretation Strategies: Appropriate Concepts,” ed. Leavy, Patricia *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 640.

43 Trent and Cho “Interpretation,” 642.

44 Pettersen, Marit, “Når egen forforståelse blir utfordret. Med metablikk på egen forskningsprosess” (When presumptions are challenged: With a meta-gaze on own research-process). *Fontene forskning 1* (2010), 29.

45 Johansen, Jan-Birger, *Retrospeksjon som vitenskapelig forskningsmetode* (Retrospection as scientific research methodology), *Utdanningsforskning.no* (2017), 1.

self-reflections on their own choices in research. These reflections are often minimized when presenting qualitative methods, as Kvale stated<sup>46</sup>.

## **Findings: Stories of Participation, Communities of Practice, Power and Reciprocity**

Through the analytical process we identified stories in the material that illustrated the concepts of community of practice, reciprocity, and decision-making through integrational power relations in the collaboration between researchers and cocreators. The following three stories illustrate some of the dynamics that came into play between the participants involved in the research.

### **Story 1: Establishing a Community of Practice**

The research collaboration grew from a series of three initial talks between Benedicte and the first cocreator, Ifrah Ciyow, who is a nurse and a social entrepreneur. Both were engaged in the matter of developing their own local community. They found a common concern for all those still voiceless inhabitants in the community; those who weren't easily heard by politicians; those who didn't automatically attend folk meetings or surveys. The initial talks led to more organized meetings involving Silje as researcher and the cocreators Hani Bille, a social worker, culture interpreter, and social entrepreneur, and Fathia Kalif Gele, a family counselor and social activist. Through talks and discussions, we found that we had common concerns for the situation of the mothers of teenagers with an immigrant background. The common purpose of the study became to make the mothers with an immigrant background heard. All participants involved in the research shared the intention that, through the systematically gathered and analyzed information, we would contribute to the empowering of immigrated mothers in marginalized positions. By listening to the mothers with an immigrant background, making their voices heard, and by telling their stories of challenges, strengths, and strategies, we would contribute to improving the conditions for mothering teenagers.

The cocreators knew many mothers with an immigrant background, through their personal networks and volunteer work. Together, we found it important to listen to these mothers with an immigrant background with an asset-based focus: looking for the mothers' perceptions and their strategies, and making their experiences known. We found, from earlier research and from the cocreators' experiences, that the voices of these mothers with an immigrant background

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46 Pettersen, "Meta-gaze," 30.

were seldom, even though increasingly, being listened to<sup>47</sup>. The mothers (and fathers) were often seen as part of the problems for the immigrated third-culture youth and not necessarily part of the solutions for the kids<sup>48</sup>. These presumptions toward the mothers with an immigrant background went along with some of them facing difficult living conditions: money restraints, language difficulties, increased their risk of being stuck in a marginalized position. We wanted to obtain more knowledge on how mothers with an immigrant background managed their motherhood, what assets they had at their disposal and in fact used, and what possible solutions they saw for their challenges. In accordance with the saying “Only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches,” we agreed upon the importance of talking to the mothers in order to widen our understanding toward the challenges facing third-culture youth and their mothers.

Important decisions for the project were made in this prephase of the project. Together with the cocreators we decided on the selection criteria for recruiting informants. We discussed the benefits of conducting group interviews, the importance of time, and the offering of food and beverage to encourage the recruitment of informants – and we decided on where the cocreators could recruit informants. A common purpose for the project was established among us as researchers and cocreators as well as the understanding of the first research steps.

## **Story 2: Bridging Distances, the Cocreator’s Contributions**

In the conducting of interviews, the cocreators made decisive contributions to the project. The cocreators played a crucial role in building bridges across the distances between researchers and participants in the group interviews (which were the mothers of immigrant background). The three cocreators were crucial to our access to mothers of teenagers with an immigrant background. None of the participants were contacted directly by researchers. Rather, the cocreators used their own networks to contact mothers with an immigrant background in three different parts of the capital of Norway, arranging for three group interviews around Oslo.

We met the first group of participants at the local library after closing hours. The number of participants attending was more than expected. The cocreators had done a tremendous job of motivating them to come, and we had chosen the place and time suggested by the cocreators to make the interviews more accessible to attend.

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47 Smette, Ingrid and osten, Monika Grønli “Et iaktatt foreldreskap. Om å være foreldre og minoritet i Norge” (Observed parenthood: Being a parent and minority in Norway). Oslo: NOVA Rapport no. 3 (2019), 16.

48 Friberg, Jon Horgen and Bjørnset, Mathilde “Migrasjon, foreldreskap og sosial kontroll (Migration, parenthood and social control). FAFO rapport no. 1 (2019), 35.

The cocreators contributed also to bridging the distances between participants and researchers in the group interviews. At first there was a natural distance in the social dynamics of the group: Some of the participants knew each other, but they did not know us, the researchers, and had never spoken to us. We stood out in the group by our looks and by our function as facilitators. But gradually the emotional distance grew smaller, helped by a few crucial elements. First, the presence of the cocreators seemed to make the informants feel comfortable and to trust us increasingly as they observed the dynamics between the researchers and the cocreators. Second, again following the advice from the cocreators, we brought food and beverages to make a welcoming atmosphere. This could also be a sign of reciprocity toward the informants: The mothers with an immigrant background did us a favor by telling their stories, and by serving food we returned a “gift” and showed our appreciation. The role of the cocreators was very important for our access to informants, both practically and emotionally.

Our contribution, or “gift,” in return for gaining access to the informants and building social ties in the interview setting was to bring the academic competence and structure into the collaboration. We also shared information about our own situations and our own vulnerability as mothers. We shared what we felt to be challenging and how we would try to manage the challenges. These elements contributed to building trust, reciprocity, and commonalities despite our apparent differences. It made us get closer to the cocreators and built confidentiality and trust in the relationship.

### **Story 3: Giving Back**

Reciprocity in the relations between cocreators and researchers occurred in the sense that as researchers we felt a natural urge to offer something in return for what the cocreators had contributed to in the project. We had academic legitimacy and networking to offer in return for their efforts. Our common goal and interest in the project ensured us of a sense of community and belonging. The mechanisms of reciprocity strengthened our ties and made us feel obligated toward each other.

Following data collection, we were invited to both academic and community-based events to present the results from the research. The cocreators invited us to present some of our results at four community-based occasions they had organized. The issue of mothers and youth was addressed at these events as were the issue of diversity in communities and how to bridge the differences. The cocreators had invited participants from the group interviews to come. We found ourselves presenting research results in the presence of those living in the reality we were attempting to describe. It made us extremely conscious about how our results might be understood and received by mothers with an

immigrant backgrounds, especially those who had attended the interviews. Would our presentation contribute to alienation and distance? Or would we contribute to confirmation and empowerment? When someone rose up and left the room during our presentation, we became quite uneasy, automatically trying to assess why they left and whether we had offended them in any way. We felt an extra responsibility toward the cocreators to satisfy them with our presentation and to ensure that our presentation would form a positive contribution to the event. In this way, reciprocity came into play. We felt obliged to give something back, back to the community and back to the cocreators.

### **Discussions and Reflections – How Did We Practice Participation in Research?**

Many of the methodological issues we address in this paper are already “old news” for traditional qualitative research. Sensitivity toward informants/participants, being accountable toward practice, and wishing to uplift marginalized voices have been done before without a participatory approach<sup>49</sup>. The same issues are addressed, but they are given extended attention. Demands and impatience toward making the research results relevant and useful for practice, for example, are unquestionable imperatives when collaborating with the community-based cocreators, while in traditional research relevance to practice is in some settings more or less a compulsory point to add at the end of an article.

As researching practitioners, we moved beyond the academic community of practice into the organized community-based practices. The dynamics between the different communities of practice became evident during the planning and conducting of interviews as well as during the presentation of research results. When preparing for and meeting with the informants, trust had to be established and misunderstandings had to be avoided as much as possible. In the shifts between the communities of practice, we transferred information and perspectives across practices. The ongoing collaboration with the cocreators helped to create a gentle and respectful encounter between researchers and participants. The cocreators acted as bridgebuilders between the different communities of practice.

We experienced how the participatory process was carried out within the common community of practice, which we established and developed in col-

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49 Spencer, Renée, Pryce Julia M., and Walsh, Jill “Philosophical Approaches to Qualitative Research,” in *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Leavy, Patricia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 84.

laboration with the cocreators. Our common community of practice developed mainly through the practicing of power with, making decisions by communicating and sharing ideas (illustrated in Case 1), and by practicing reciprocity; contributing to each other according to our common interests (illustrated in Case 2 and Case 3).

The power with, understood as a collective, integrating decision-making process, was experienced mostly in the initial phase, when we were drawing up the research design, as described in Case 1. The most apparent collaborative element was the involvement of cocreators in this initial phase prior to the research and in the handling of the results after the data collection. Through an integrated “two-eyed seeing” method, we believe that we did manage to enrich the academic research process<sup>50</sup>. The three cocreators were also involved in the research to varying extents. Not all of them participated actively throughout the whole research process, and they had therefore varying influence on the process. Their contribution had to fit their own interests in the project and their available time, in line with McIntyre’s understanding<sup>51</sup> of qualitative participation.

Earlier elaborations on participatory research emphasized the risks and concerns involved in conducting participatory research<sup>52</sup> and the collision of different systems of conduct and practice. Both the risks for exploitation of vulnerable practices when encountered with the powerful academic field<sup>53</sup> and the risk for compromising important ethical standards within research<sup>54</sup> have been addressed by others. We experienced some of these concerns. For example, while handing over power, we also lost some control over the process. During the process we varied between using power with and power over, and sometimes the cocreators had more control of the situation; this partly happened during the community arrangements described in Story 3. There is the risk of acting as an uncritical microphone stand on behalf of the cocreators, blindly following their agenda. It is challenging to combine the social ties and reciprocity with the academic ideal of critical and objectified observation. As researchers we experienced the tension between the positive outcome of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity<sup>55</sup> and the academic focus on detachment and critical distance. Reciprocity, and the sense of “owing” the cocreators something, might collide with the ideal of academic freedom. In that way reciprocity could be a problem if it were to lead us to withholding important information. Fortunately,

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50 Peltier, “An application of Two-Eyed Seeing,” 2.

51 McIntyre, Participatory Action Research.

52 Bergold et.al. “Participatory research method,” 9.

53 Ibid.

54 Lid and Rugseth, “Challenging” 165.

55 Peltier “An application,” 3.

this was not the case in our situation, but could be one of the downsides of reciprocity that must be given careful consideration in participatory research. As researchers, we are expected to insert our own qualified interpretations. On the other hand, there is also the danger of being paternalistic, objectifying, and alienating. In retrospect, we could have done more to involve our own academic community of practice and to introduce more academic perspectives into our common community of practice with the informants and cocreators. This could have made our assumptions more open for discussion and may have enriched the analysis more.

Although the interpretations of the transcriptions were discussed with especially one of the cocreators, as researchers we had more power over the decisions in the analysis than the cocreators. In line with McIntyre, it is not necessarily important for all participants to be involved in every step of the process<sup>56</sup>. In retrospect, however, the power with could have been better restored through more involvement by the cocreators in the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Some of the arenas we presented results in made it important to translate and customize the analysis to the listeners. This was not always easy. We had to restrain ourselves and reduce our academic freedom to interpret the present data according to earlier research and theoretical concepts. The cocreator's engagement in the topic of research and our attachments toward the cocreators helped us to remain accountable throughout the analysis and presentation of results. In retrospect, we wish we had presented our analysis to a smaller group only for the informants before presenting it to a bigger group of people. In a smaller group, we could have discussed these contradictions and maybe created new knowledge about the situation by being informed from our different perspectives on the matter. On the other hand, our attachment toward the cocreators had the incorporated risk of releasing us from keeping the necessary academic distance. The mechanisms of reciprocity make the academic distance challenging.

By practicing reciprocity with the cocreators – mutually contributing and receiving information and services – and by sharing the common joys and sorrows as mothers and engaged community members, we experienced the sense of common grounds and social ties. Through commonness and reciprocity, the asymmetric relations were counteracted somewhat. But focusing on commonness when the positions are in fact different includes the risk of concealing underlying power structures, making it difficult to address the structural inequality. Even though the differences were not as major as those between researchers and cocreators, and we as researchers tried to express our willingness

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56 McIntyre, Participatory Action Research.



to receive all kinds of comments and input from the cocreators, the cocreators could possibly have withheld some of their opinions for the sake of maintaining a good relationship and in respect of the researcher position in the project. On this we can only speculate. But it is important to address the social ties combined with the real power differences when one seeks to keep an open a powerless space for communication among all participants.

The cocreators challenged the very slow process for publishing results common in academia. The academic practice of writing articles is very unpractical for those who wish to make use of the new knowledge to strengthen practice. Their challenges and honesty toward us did balance the power between us and by that strengthened our communal confidentiality.

The main benefits for the participatory element of research was the important input provided to the power-sensitive research design, some of the analysis and understandings of quotes, the access to participants for interviews, the confidence from the participants in the interviews, and lastly the accountability to practice. Perhaps we also contributed to some of the reflections on these issues in the communities. By giving feedback and presenting results to cocreators and participants, we hopefully expanded the knowledge base for the cocreators in their community work and gave some legitimacy to their work. In the shifting between communities of practice, we encountered the importance of building trust by expressing the commonalities and the reciprocity between us and the other cocreators and participants.

The power balance between researchers and cocreators was strengthened by the fact that the cocreators had their own interests in participating in the research. That may have made it easier to practice reciprocity. We as researchers could offer the cocreators a link into academic networks, giving legitimacy to their activities. By acknowledging the mothers' right to be heard, we hopefully also contributed to strengthen their communities.

The participatory element of the research – to involve three engaged community members, to conduct group interviews, and to present the results to the communities – together formed a small contribution to an empowering process already in motion. Instead of seeing the research process as a starting point or endpoint in the pursue of justice<sup>57</sup>, we experienced how research is integrated as a minor part in the wider empowering processes of the communities. We met the informants only in a short period of their lives. We collected data and gave the knowledge back to a wider audience of women and service providers. And we brought the knowledge further into academic arenas, which was possibly our main contribution. The cocreators facilitated the meetings between us and the mothers, and it was the cocreators who facilitated arenas for us to present

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57 Stålsett, Taksdal, and Hilden, "Research as Diakonia," 172.

the results. In some sense, we could say that we participated in their plan for strengthening parents with an immigrant background and help the processes of integration. The community of practice that was established between the cocreators and the researchers during the research project continues even now after the research ended. The cocreators kept (and continue to keep) the link between research and practice communities alive and have made us continually aware of who we were accountable to in our research: the mothers of teenagers with an immigrant background. We still share the same concern for marginalized women (and men) with an immigrant background. New projects are being planned, and our networks are being widened even further.

## Conclusion

We experienced how participation in research can be done by developing new communities of practice, and where the driving forces for participation is the power with and reciprocity. The community of practice that developed between the researchers and cocreators was essential for collecting relevant and verifiable knowledge among mothers of teenagers with an immigrant background. The practice of reciprocity contributed to building trust between researchers and cocreators, and toward the participants in interviews. By contributing to our different communities of practices, we strengthened the ties between us, building solidarity, and the possibilities for further collaboration. Hence, participation is not limited by the timeframe of the research-process but carries on. Our research project was hopefully a contribution toward some of the informants' empowering processes, although limited in time and space.

The differences in power within the community of practice between cocreators and researchers is still only partly described and could be further elaborated on. Even though we aimed to counteract asymmetric relations and exclusion in the research process, we are surrounded by structures of inequality in society and in research. And we are limited by our timeframes and resources. Practicing power with and participatory decision-making takes time. This time must be given in the frame for research projects if the participatory approach is to be fulfilled. Influence on decision-making intricately influences the social practice and should be further described to understand what makes participatory research empowering. Additionally, the researchers' role as participants in communities of practice and the different ideals for participatory research are issues to be further developed. The need for participatory research and reflections upon the practice remains.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Ifrah Ciyow, Hani Bille, and Fathia Kalif Gele for their valuable contributions to the project as well to this paper. We would also like to thank the supervisors in Silje Hole Hirsch' PhD, Beret Bråten, and Parvin Kiamanesh for valuable comments in right time. Research and academic writing are undoubtedly collective projects.

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