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Participatory Research Methods: A Methodological Approach in Motion

Jarg Bergold & Stefan Thomas*

Abstract: »Partizipative Forschungsmethoden: Ein methodischer Ansatz in Bewegung«. This article serves as an introduction to the FOS special issue "Participatory Qualitative Research." In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in participatory research strategies. The articles in this special issue come from different disciplines. Against the background of concrete empirical research projects, they address numerous conceptual considerations and methodological approaches. After reading the contributions, and engaging with the authors' arguments, we were prompted to focus in particular on those areas in which further work needs to be done. They include, on the one hand, fundamental principles of participatory research, such as democratic-theory considerations, the concept of "safe space," participation issues, and ethical questions. And, on the other hand, we focus on practical research considerations regarding the role and tasks of the various participants; specific methodological approaches; and quality criteria – understood here in the sense of arguments justifying a participatory approach. Our aim is to stimulate a broad discussion that does not focus only on participatory research in the narrower sense. Because participatory methodology poses certain knowledge- and research-related questions in a radical way, it has the potential to draw attention to hitherto neglected areas in qualitative methodology and to stimulate their further development.

Keywords: academic requirements, ethical norms, focus group, degrees of participation, quality criteria, interview, marginalization, participatory research methods, reflexivity, subjectivity, safe space.

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1. Introduction

Participatory research methods are geared towards planning and conducting the research process with those people whose life-world and meaningful actions are under study. Consequently, this means that the aim of the inquiry and the research questions develop out of the convergence of two perspectives – that of science and of practice. In the best case, both sides benefit from the research process. Everyday practices, which have long since established themselves as a subject of inquiry, introduce their own perspective, namely, the way people deal with the existential challenges of everyday life. The participatory research process enables co-researchers to step back cognitively from familiar routines, forms of interaction, and power relationships in order to fundamentally question and rethink established interpretations of situations and strategies. However, the convergence of the perspectives of science and practice does not come about simply by deciding to conduct participatory research. Rather, it is a very demanding process that evolves when two spheres of action – science and practice – meet, interact, and develop an understanding for each other.

By participatory methodology we mean a research style, “an orientation to inquiry” (Reason and Bradbury 2008a, 1). The unity and justification of participatory research are to be found not so much on the level of concrete research methods. Rather, participatory research can be regarded as a methodology that argues in favor of the possibility, the significance, and the usefulness of involving research partners in the knowledge-production process (Bergold 2007). Participatory approaches are not fundamentally distinct from other empirical social research procedures. On the contrary, there are numerous links, especially to qualitative methodologies and methods.

In practice, the participatory research style manifests itself in numerous participatory research strategies. Because of the individuality and self-determination of the research partners in the participatory research process, these strategies cannot be canonized in the form of a single, cohesive methodological approach, such as, for example, the narrative interview or qualitative content analysis. The dictum of process orientation and the appropriateness of the method to the subject under study (Flick 2009) is even more important in participatory research than in other approaches to qualitative research. In our view, in order to gain a deeper insight into the contextual structuredness of meaning and the dynamism inherent in social action, it is worthwhile considering the inclusion of participatory research elements in research designs. Moreover, we believe that – precisely because the participation of all research partners is the fundamental guiding principle for this research approach – a methodological design that can be classified as a participatory design process in the narrower sense, represents an attractive and fruitful knowledge-generating option when it comes to researching the social world in the sense of habituated practice (Bergold 2007).

In order to place the articles compiled in this special issue of FQS¹ in an overarching context, we shall first provide a somewhat detailed introduction to participatory research. After reading the contributions, we were prompted to engage productively with the characteristics, aspirations, and desiderata of participatory research. In the following sections we focus, in particular, on those areas in which further work needs to be done – or in which work has not yet commenced. This will also help to identify the untapped knowledge-creating potential of qualitative methodologies. Because participatory methodology poses certain questions about knowledge and research in a radical way, it has the potential to draw attention to hitherto neglected areas in qualitative methodology and to stimulate their further development.

2. Participatory Research and Action Research

In English-speaking countries, in particular, participatory research has gained increasing importance as a research strategy within qualitative social research (Bergold 2007; Bergold and Thomas 2010). Especially in the debate on action research, systematic reference is made to participatory research strategies. Although there are numerous points of convergence between action research and participatory research, we believe that by identifying the differences between the two approaches one can more accurately define the distinctive features of participatory research (cf. Bell et al. 2004). Another good reason to undertake this differentiation is that a systematic discussion about a participatory methodology in the narrower sense is only just beginning.

Of particular relevance in the present context is the fact that within the debate on action research there is a strong movement which describes itself with increasing self-assurance as “participative inquiry and practice” – the subtitle of the Sage Handbook of Action Research (Reason and Bradbury 2008b). Numerous discussion strands, in which the participation of research partners is conceptualized in different ways, converge in the action research paradigm. The clear reference to participatory methodology is also reflected in the labeling of various action research approaches, for example participatory action research (Par, Kemmis and McTaggart 2005), co-operative inquiry (Heron 1996), participatory rural appraisal (PRA), participatory learning and action (PLA), and participatory learning research (overview in Chambers 2008), etc. The common aim of these approaches is to change social reality on the basis of insights into everyday practices that are obtained by means of participatory

¹ Cf. the complete FQS issue <<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/issue/view/39>>.

research – that is, collaborative research on the part of scientists, practitioners, service users, etc.

The articles in this special issue also differ in terms of thematic focus. The pupils' research project with which Veronika Wöhrer and Bernhard Höcher illustrate the challenges of involving secondary school pupils in social science research perceives itself as PAR in the classical sense. A stronger accentuation of the participatory side can be observed in Hella v. Unger's contribution. She explores on the basis of community-based participatory research (CBPR) the preventive healthcare opportunities opened up by involving members of the researched community in the research. Taking a research project in the area of home treatment for people experiencing mental health crisis as an example, Marit Borg, Bengt Karlsson, Hesook Suzie Kim, and Brendan McCormack identify processes that enhance the motivation for participatory work in professional treatment teams and create communicative spaces. In her contribution, Tina Cook reflects on the problems that occurred when conducting two participatory studies which focused not only on the participation of patients/service users of psychiatric institutions, but also on joint reflection on, and the development of, shared understanding about the specific characteristics of the participants' life situation. Against the background of experiences in research with young people, the contributions by Audrey M. Dentith, Lynda Measor, and Michael P. O'Malley, and by Claire McCartan, Dirk Schubotz, and Jonathan Murphy, focus on the possibilities and challenges of overcoming established power structures in participatory projects. Jean Rath presents a participatory approach aimed at extending the possibilities of co-constructing experiences and meanings. She crafts poems from interview transcripts. As part of a "layered text," these poems provide access to the many meanings explicitly and implicitly expressed in the interviews with the research partners. Stephanie Goeke and Dagmar Kubanski propose that participatory research in the area of disability research in the German-speaking countries be extended to include emancipatory, inclusive, and trans-disciplinary approaches. Moreover – like Jasna Russo – they effectively argue in favor of a radicalization of participatory research. All three authors contend that responsibility for research should be assumed by the persons concerned – in Goeke and Kubanski's paper, by the persons affected by disability, and in Russo's contribution, by "survivors," that is, people who have experienced psychiatric treatment. Against the background of democracy theory, Monika Götsch, Sabine Klinger and Andreas Thiesen reflect on the requirements that arise in the course of the realization of a participatory research project. And finally, in her article on the development of participatory projects after the collapse of the military dictatorship in Argentina, Sylvia Lenz demonstrates the importance of democracy as a context for participatory research.

The combination of practice change and collaborative research – as in the case of PAR – is possible and makes good sense. Nonetheless, action research

and participatory research are also conducted separately, or applied with different emphases in one research project. As Kemmis and McTaggart (2005, 563) point out: “Not all theorists of action research place this emphasis on collaboration.” Participatory research, in particular, shifts the emphasis from action and change to collaborative research activities. Especially in health research, even research funders now recognize that the involvement of service users in the research process makes good sense. In her article, Cook (2012) shows that, in the United Kingdom at least, public and patient involvement (PPI) in research is sometimes even explicitly required by funding bodies. In this framework, the primary aim is not to change practice in the course of research. Rather, the aim is to produce knowledge in collaboration between scientists and practitioners.

Therefore, some representatives of the participatory research paradigm stress that, besides the mere participation of co-researchers in the inquiry, participatory research involves a joint process of knowledge-production that leads to new insights on the part of both scientists and practitioners. From an action research viewpoint, reflection is not without consequences for people’s everyday practices. From a scientific perspective, however, producers of knowledge would be well advised initially to evade demands for pragmatic utility. Therefore, the following elaboration of distinctive features of participatory research is intended as an invitation to the qualitative community to make greater use of participatory research elements – especially if they do not share the aspirations for change that are characteristic of action research. As the articles in this special issue reveal, participatory methods open up new and broader perspectives for the research of everyday practices, especially where the methodology and self-concept of qualitative social research are concerned. These find expression in the basic principles of openness, communication, and the appropriateness of the method to the subject under study.

3. Fundamental Principles of Participatory Research

3.1 Democracy as a Precondition for Participatory Research

Every type of research calls for social conditions that are conducive to the topic and to the epistemological approach in question. In contrast to nomothetic research, which can be carried out under almost any social conditions, participatory research requires a democratic social and political context. The participation of under-privileged demographic groups, and the social commitment demanded of the researchers, are possible only if there is a political framework that allows it. The connection between democracy and participatory research can be clearly seen in Latin America, for example, where, after the collapse of dictatorships, a general increase in participation on the part of the population has been observed, and – linked to that – an upswing in both academically-

driven and practitioner-driven participatory research (Lenz 2012). To put it pointedly: The possibility of conducting participatory research can be regarded as a litmus test for a society's democratic self-concept.

Götsch et al. (2012) argue that in concrete research projects, too, the concepts of democracy held by the participants shape the design and the research process. The authors point out that a society's understanding of democracy – as consensus democracy or majoritarian democracy – has consequences for the extent of participation, the research questions and aims, and the research results.

3.2 The Need for a "Safe Space"

Participatory research requires a great willingness on the part of participants to disclose their personal views of the situation, their own opinions and experiences. In everyday life, such openness is displayed towards good and trusted friends, but hardly in institutional settings or towards strangers. The fear of being attacked for saying something wrong prevents people from expressing their views and opinions, especially when they appear to contradict what the others think. However, participatory research specifically seeks these dissenting views; they are essential for the process of knowledge production because they promise a new and different take on the subject under study, and thereby enable the discovery of new aspects.

In order to facilitate sufficient openness, a "safe space" is needed, in which the participants can be confident that their utterances will not be used against them, and that they will not suffer any disadvantages if they express critical or dissenting opinions. It is not a question of creating a conflict-free space, but rather of ensuring that the conflicts that are revealed can be jointly discussed; that they can either be solved or, at least, accepted as different positions; and that a certain level of conflict tolerance is achieved.

Building on Kemmis (2001), Wicks and Reason (2009) draw on Habermas's deliberations about "domination-free" discourse to develop the concept of "communicative space" – a transition zone between system and life-world – which, in their view, participatory research must open. The authors demonstrate how such communicative space must be produced anew in the various phases of the research process. They distinguish three phases in the process of participatory research: the "inclusion phase," the "control phase," and the "intimacy phase." In each phase, three problem areas – "emotional issues," "task issues," and "organizational issues" – must be addressed.

The authors also point out that the "practices of developing such communicative spaces are necessarily paradoxical and contradictory," with the result that negotiation processes must be continually engaged in. Therefore, the research contract; the boundaries of the communicative space; the type of participation; leadership; opportunities to express anxiety; and the balance between order and

chaos must be continually negotiated. The outcome of this negotiation process is a symbolic space in which, in the best case, the participants can trust each other and, thus, express their views on the subject under study.

Concepts such as “communicative space,” “the counter public” (Dentith et al. 2012), or “discursive approach” (Cook 2012), which are encountered in participatory methodology, underline the fact that the challenge of participation lies in achieving understanding about the subject under study by means of communication. Although they draw on different concepts, authors continually stress how important it is that the research process open up spaces that facilitate communication. They argue that it is decisive for research that a safe space be created in which openness, differences of opinion, conflicts, etc. are permitted.

3.3 Who Participates? How is "The Community" Defined?

With the acceptance of participatory research approaches by various funding bodies (for example, the Department of Health in England and the World Bank), there are a growing number of programs that stipulate the use of participatory research strategies in the funded projects. However, “participation” is understood more as the involvement of any groups of people who are not professional researchers. As a result, the concept “participatory research” loses its clear contours.

A fundamental dichotomy can be observed in participatory research. On the one hand, there are a large number of studies in which academic researchers and professional practitioners collaborate; the practitioners are either involved in the research or carry it out themselves with the support of professional researchers. Prototypes of this kind of research in English-speaking countries include participatory action research (PAR), co-operative inquiry, and participatory evaluation; examples in German-speaking countries are action research and practice research (Heiner 1988).

On the other hand, participatory research is conducted directly with the immediately affected persons; the aim is the reconstruction of their knowledge and ability in a process of understanding and empowerment. In the majority of cases, these co-researchers are marginalized groups whose views are seldom sought, and whose voices are rarely heard. Normally, these groups have little opportunity to articulate, justify, and assert their interests. This is expressed succinctly by Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991, viif.), who define PAR as the “enlightenment and awakening of common peoples,” among other things.

The basic dilemma revealed here is that these marginalized communities are in a very poor position to participate in participatory research projects, or to initiate such a project themselves. This can be observed clearly in two problem areas that are represented in contributions to this special issue, namely “psychiatric disorders” and “disabilities.” Traditionally, research in these two areas has been conducted as research about the people in question and their problems,

rather than with these people (Russo 2012; Goeke and Kubanski 2012). This has led to the development of theories and practices that may well be considered helpful by those affected, but may also be perceived as hegemonial knowledge.

Moreover, research is classified into different theoretical models depending on the labels used to describe the research partners – and this happens without explicit discussion (see Cook 2012 and Russo 2012). This, too, can be clearly observed in the psychiatric area. The label “service user” denotes an extremely heterogeneous group that might also include the family, friends, and neighbors of the patient, in other words, everyone who is affected directly or indirectly by a certain service offering. By using the term “consumer,” research is classified into the economic market model; the term “patient” assigns it to the medical model; and, finally, the term “survivors” (of psychiatric treatment) classifies it into an alternative model of affected persons.

Especially in England, psychiatric “survivors” stress the need for alternative models of psychiatric problems and ways of dealing with them – models that are not shaped by the medical model and thus by the economic interests of the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry. Moreover, they argue that the development of such alternative models calls for independent research that is completely controlled by the survivors themselves.

When research is conducted together with the affected persons, the methodological question arises as to which persons, or groups of persons, should, or must, be involved. This question must be addressed, especially in view of the fact that different groups have developed different knowledge in the area under study. Furthermore, it is the declared aim of participatory research to access and harness these different types of knowledge. Therefore, it is important to determine exactly which groups will contribute their knowledge to the joint research results. Only by so doing, can the different types of knowledge be related to each other, and a possible practical use be outlined.

It is generally argued that those persons, groups, and institutions who are affected by the research theme and the expected outcomes must be involved. However, criticism is voiced that, when it comes to sampling, participatory approaches frequently rely on the utterances of the local participants or the client and that the sample is inadequate or faulty as a result (see v. Unger 2012; Caspari 2006, 375).

Overall, what is lacking is a systematic procedure. However, there are various pragmatic strategies with which the groups to be included can be determined more exactly. For example, v. Unger (2012) presents a solution with which diverse groups such as users and their organizations, community leaders, citizens, clubs and societies, professional practitioners, professional societies, etc. are involved. This can be carried out within the framework of a snowball system via those who are already included, and can take place step by step during the research process.

The methodological problem lies in a distortion of the research process and outcomes if relevant actors are not prepared to get involved in the participatory research process, or if some field participants are quasi invisible. These “invisible” field members can be groups who have been excluded by other actors, or who, for whatever reason, have not received information about the project. Moreover, it would appear plausible that the professional researchers cannot rely on the utterances of the field participants alone, because numerous exclusionary processes may occur in the field, and involvement in a participatory research project may represent a privilege and a distinction for which people compete.

In the area of evaluation, Guba and Lincoln (1989, 40f.) developed the stakeholder approach, in which attention is also drawn to the victims – that is, to those who suffer disadvantages because of the project and the changes it brings, but who are unable to participate in decisions. However, these authors, too, do not go beyond a pragmatic list of groups of persons who may be disadvantaged by the procedure in question.

A systematic solution could be achieved only by a structural theory about the particular area under study. However, such a theory is frequently not available; nor can it be developed within the framework of individual projects. The social location of those people who are affected by the researched problem, who share a material or socio-psychological milieu, and have a common experiential background must be precisely identified. This common background will – at least in theory – facilitate communication and joint action.

3.4 Different Degrees of Participation

Once it has been clarified who should be involved in the research project, further decisions must be made. Which activities the co-researchers should – or can – participate in, and whether there should be different degrees of participation for different groups, are questions that are discussed in very different ways in the literature. Both v. Unger (2012) and Cook (2012) offer an overview of the concepts that have emerged from this discussion. The most well-known model of participation is the “ladder” proposed by Arnstein (1969). Although developed with reference to citizen participation, it has been applied in various attempts to develop an overview of types of participation in research projects (see account in v. Unger 2012).

To determine whether a project fulfils the basic criterion for classification as participatory research, one must ask who controls the research in which phase of the project (see Cook 2012; Russo, Goeke and Kubanski 2012); whether control is exercised by the research partners; or whether they have at least the same rights as the professional researchers when it comes to making decisions. These questions have been posed mainly by research participants – for example persons with experience of psychiatric institutions, or persons with learning

difficulties – who have traditionally been regarded as objects of research, and who have only recently spoken out.

From this perspective, the proposal of ladder models that allow those on the lower rungs no control over research decisions, does little to clarify matters. Unless people are involved in decisions – and, therefore, research partners, or (co-)researchers – it is not participatory research. Ladder models suggest the existence of a continuum, and thereby blur basic differences (Cook 2012). Whether the affected persons are merely interviewed, or whether they participate directly in research decisions, possibly implies completely different social-policy and professional-policy backgrounds and underlying philosophical positions.

So-called “early” forms of participation, such as the briefing of professional researchers by those who are affected by the problem under study, can, at most, be described as preparatory joint activities that may facilitate participation in the research project at a later date. However, the problem with these forms of participation is that they may constitute “pseudo participation.” Goeke and Kubanski (2012) criticize the pseudo-participation of people with disabilities, while Caspari (2006) identifies pseudo-participation in the area of development co-operation. The phenomenon can also be observed in many other research fields, where such “early” forms of participation are abused in order to motivate the affected persons to co-operate and to disclose personal information by giving them the false impression that they have a say in the research process.

To distinguish the various types of participation, we consider it more appropriate to specify the decision-making situations in the research process, and the groups of participants, and to disclose who, with what rights, at what point in time, and with regard to what theme, can participate in decisions. Such a procedure is presented in the present special issue by v. Unger (2012). The situation is quite different in the case of research projects controlled by the affected persons themselves – for example, “survivor-controlled research” (Rosso 2012). Here, by definition, the persons who are directly affected participate in all decisions. However, even in this case, it would appear necessary to specify who, or which group, participates in which decisions, because, here too, there are positions of power and competition between individuals or groups.

4. Distinctive Features of the Participatory Research Methodology

4.1 Material Prerequisites

The fundamental decision not to treat the research partners as objects of research, but rather as co-researchers and knowing subjects with the same rights as the professional researchers, gives rise to a number of questions about the

material resources needed for participation. As a rule, professional researchers receive a salary for their work – although, in academically-driven research, this remuneration is often quite low. Normally, the co-researchers receive – if anything – expenses, and they are expected to make their knowledge available free of charge.

The taken-for-grantedness of this situation must be called into question because co-researchers frequently belong to lower social classes or marginalized groups and have limited material resources at their disposal. This means that such resources must be guaranteed during their participation in the project. Direct remuneration is addressed in a number of articles in the present issue that describe projects in which young people are involved as research partners (Wöhler and Höcher 2012; McCartan et al. 2012; Schubotz and Murphy 2012).

The necessity of material support is not limited to the remuneration of direct co-operation in the research process. Rather, people from marginalized, low-income groups also need other forms of material support. Goecke and Kubanski (2012) point out that, besides paying an independence-enhancing research fee, the willingness of persons with disabilities to participate in research projects can be increased by the provision of assistance on site, and barrier-free access. There is no rule about what material resources should be made available to research partners. It depends on the group in question. Resources provided could include travel expenses, childcare costs, food for participants with special dietary needs, compensation for loss of earnings, etc.

Such support for research partners has, of course, advantages and disadvantages. On the downside, “paid” participation can become a job like any other and can cause people to distance themselves from, or compete with, other community members. However, what is decisive is that remuneration signals social recognition of the value of the individual’s contribution to research. If participatory research genuinely aims to put the relationship with research partners on an equal footing, then the socially dominant form of recognition must be used. It should be noted that financial resources for the co-researchers must be allowed for when planning participatory research projects, and that funding bodies must be requested to accept the inclusion of such resources in the financial plan.

4.2 Challenges and Tasks Facing all the Research Partners

In the classical research setting, the relationship between researchers and researched seems to be clearly defined. Basically, it is a non-relationship in which the researcher is, as far as possible, neutral or invisible. Anything else is considered to lead to the distortion of the results or to threaten the internal validity.

This situation changes radically when the relationship between the participants is put on a participatory footing. In this case, the perspectives of the vari-

ous partners and their differences of opinion are important for the process of discovery; objectivity and neutrality must be replaced by reflective subjectivity.

This calls for willingness on the part of the research partners from the life-world under study to enter into the research process, and the necessary knowledge and ability to participate productively. An apparent dilemma inherent in participatory research becomes visible here. On the one hand, participatory research aims, in particular, to involve marginalized groups in the production of knowledge and, by so doing, to foster empowerment. On the other hand, these are the very demographic groups who are characterized by a lack of competencies and social capital (cf. Bourdieu 1983). For this reason, they are deemed also to be lacking the competencies necessary to participate in the research process.

The only way out of this dilemma is to ask who defines these deficits and from what perspective. The answer is obvious: They are defined by representatives of the dominant social group – in this case scientists – who specify the necessary knowledge and ability against the background of their familiar worldview and their methodological requirements. In this way, research becomes a very demanding task that calls for many competencies.

By contrast, the primary aim of participatory research is to give members of marginalized groups a voice, or to enable them to make their voices heard. What counts is that they bring their experiences, their everyday knowledge, and their ability into the research process and thereby gain new perspectives and insights (Russo 2012). The difference between the academic worldview and that of the research partners from the field is actually an asset which must be exploited in the exploration process. Therefore, mutual curiosity about the knowledge and ability of those on the “other side” and what one can learn from them is so important. It enables all participants to acquire new roles and tasks that differ clearly from those of “classical” research.

This means that all participants must change considerably in the course of the participatory research process – both on a personal and on a cognitive level. And yet, the importance of the individual participant and his or her personal competencies, motivation, etc. is seldom addressed in the literature. However, Evan and Jones (2004, 5) clearly formulate the importance of the participants’ life experiences:

One of the strands of argument running through this paper is that biography, one’s personal experience, is of significance for research, whether one is the subject of research, the researcher, or the research reader. It shapes how we respond within and to the research process. If we have control, it also shapes the research process itself.

In participatory research projects, professional researchers acquire new and unfamiliar roles – this is especially evident in the case of user-controlled research. With regard to academically trained researchers, Evans and Jones (9)

note: “The role here, however, is to be an ally, an advisor, an enabler, and maybe a partner, to users undertaking research”

However, role distribution in participatory research is not static. Rather, it is subject to continual change. This is due not least to the relatively long duration of participatory research projects. Months, or even years, can elapse between the beginning and the end of a project. During this time, various developments occur in the group of research partners that shape the way they relate to each other. Such changes in the role structure have long been familiar to us from ethnological studies, in which researchers spend a long time in the field.

Heeg (1996) attempted to capture the temporal sequence of qualitative procedures by using the metaphor of the curriculum vitae. The different stages he describes can be adapted to participatory research as follows: At first, the professional researchers enter the field as “foreigners”; as time goes by they assume the role of “mobilizer,” “service provider,” “provider of information,” and “ally”; eventually they become “patrons”; and, in the best case, they finally become “mentors.”

Within the framework of participatory research there are also other challenges that researchers must face. The research themes, and the biographies and social background of the research partners, call for very intensive contact. However, collaborative research with people who have a history of marginalization is possible only on the basis of trust (Rath 2012). This trust must be allowed to develop; it builds on long-term, honest relationships that are characterized by closeness, empathy, and emotional involvement. The balance between closeness and distance in participatory research is described very clearly by Dentith et al. (2012), who worked with research partners who had suffered traumatic, taboo experiences. Here it is important that researchers show their own emotional reactions. If they were to withhold such reactions and remain silent about the occurrences, they could possibly contribute to the re-traumatization of the research participant (Rath 2012; Dentith et al. 2012).

The academic requirements described in detail in Subsection 4.6 below pose a further challenge to academic researchers. At the present point in time, one can safely say that, in a number of disciplines, scientists who pursue a participatory research project – within the framework of a qualification process, for example – become outsiders in the academic community. This calls for considerable courage and willingness to swim against the current, and, possibly, to put up with disadvantages. The diversity of requirements and roles demands from the researcher very different competencies and skills, and a high degree of flexibility and reflexivity – things that are not acquired in the course of conventional university education.

In a similar way to the professional researchers, the roles of the non-professional research partners, and the way they perceive participation, change over time. At first, they may view the research project with anxiety, distrust, and detachment, and see themselves as outsiders who are expected to furnish

information as in conventional research processes. This changes in the course of participation if and when the participants find that they are taken seriously as co-researchers; that they acquire more and more research competencies; and that they can develop standpoints of their own which differ from those of the professional researchers (Götsch, Klinger and Thiesen 2012). At the same time, they are personally empowered and develop dispositions such as self-confidence, self-assurance, and a feeling of belonging.²

However, participation in participatory research also calls for specific knowledge and skills – in other words, competencies, which the participants must gradually acquire. These include, for example, linguistic competencies, the ability to proceed systematically in the research process, communicative skills in dealing with groups, etc. Professional researchers should offer training courses and workshops on these thematic areas (see “capacity building” in v. Unger 2012) and impart these skills in their everyday dealings with the co-researchers. A key task in this regard is to design training units and choose methodological approaches in such a way that they build on the initial state of knowledge of the participants and develop it further.

The development of different roles is not without conflict. In the various phases, the relationships – and all other aspects of the research – must be continually reflected upon, and emerging conflicts must be dealt with jointly. As elaborated, for example, by Marshall and Reason (2007), continual self-reflection and reflective dialog become a necessity and a quality indicator for participatory research.

4.3 The Importance of Reflection

In participatory research, all participants are involved as knowing subjects who bring their perspectives into the knowledge-production process. The potential of the individual subjects to acquire knowledge is shaped by their biological makeup, their personal and social biography, and their social status.³ In order to reach mutual understanding in collaborative research action, individuals must, to some extent at least, disclose to their fellow researchers the background to their epistemological perspective. On this basis, different perceptions can then be negotiated and related to each other (Dentith et al. 2012; v. Unger 2012). This calls for a high degree of reflexivity in the sense of self-reflexivity and reflection on the research situation and the research process.⁴ In their article in the present issue, Borg et al. (2012) note:

² Arvidsson et al. (2008), for example, found such dispositions in young people with slight disabilities who participated in social activities. As far as we are aware, no studies have yet been conducted on changes in disposition in the course of participatory research projects.

³ See Breuer (2009), who analyzed the relationship between subjectivity, perspectivity, and self-/reflexivity within the research process in grounded theory.

⁴ See also Mruck, Roth and Breuer (2002); Roth, Breuer and Mruck (2003).

Reflexivity requires the researcher to be aware of themselves as the instrument of research. This is a particularly important issue for action researchers who are intimately involved with the subject of the research, the context in which it takes place, and others who may be stakeholders in that context.

This requires, on the one hand, a safe space with open communication – a “communicative space” (see Subsection 3.2 above). On the other hand, it calls for numerous types of support on the part of both the professional researchers and the co-researchers. Therefore, the ability to be responsive to the needs of others, to give them time and space for reflection, etc. are decisive prerequisites for collaboration.

Reflection can be focused on different things. Borg et al. (2012) distinguish between personal and epistemological reflexivity. Personal reflexivity focuses on personal assumptions, values, experiences, etc. that shape the research; epistemological reflexivity requires the researcher to recognize the limits of the research that are determined by the basic research decisions such as research question, methodology, method of analysis, etc.

We suggest distinguishing four focuses or types of reflection from which techniques and instruments can be derived that can facilitate reflexivity on the part of participants.

4.3.1 Reflection on Personal and Biographical Attributes and Dispositions

The potential closeness of the research participants, and the type of research theme (socially taboo issues such as sexual abuse, experiences in psychiatric institutions, poverty, etc.) may elicit very personal reactions that can foster, or hinder, the process of knowledge production. Writing from a psycho-analytic perspective, Georges Devereux (1976) was one of the first to point out that reflection on such personal ways of reacting can be used as a source of knowledge. Whether a psycho-analytic theory background is needed for this type of reflection is, of course, debatable.

However, what is undisputed, in our view, is the fact that, in a participatory research context, it is necessary to disclose such personal dispositions – at least to the extent that they impact collaborative work on the object of research. Conditions conducive to such openness can be created in group settings – for example, in the widely used focus groups – in which an accepting attitude is fostered (Borg et al. 2012; Dentith et al. 2012; McCartan et al. 2012). However, there appear to be inadequacies in the way such groups are run in practice. Ideas for improvement could perhaps be gleaned from the various therapeutic and consultation group concepts available.

4.3.2 Reflection on Social Relationships among the Research Partners

As we pointed out earlier, the different interests of the participants inevitably lead to conflicts in the research group from time to time. This means that the relationships between the group members must also be regularly reflected upon in order to shed light on such conflicts and, if possible, to defuse them. As far as we are aware, there has been little discussion in the literature about the way in which such group conflicts can be reflected upon and moderated. This is surprising when one considers that there is a rich body of literature on group dynamics. The concept of “theme-centered interaction” (TCI) proposed by Ruth Cohn (1975) can be considered an example of an attempt to foster social learning and personality development in a group setting. When applying TCI, an effort is made to keep all the elements – the theme in question, the conflict in the group, the individual participants, and the political, ecological, and cultural context (the “globe”) – in view at all times and to reflect upon them.

4.3.3 Structural Reflection on the Social Field of the Research Project

Following Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of sociological self-reflection (1993; 2002), the social determination of the participating knowing subjects, and of the participatory project, must also be reflected upon. The focus here is on the social conditions of possibility and the limits of the individual subjects and the participatory research project as a collective knowing subject. It is a question of reflecting on the political, economic, and social context conditions in which the research theme and the research project are embedded. The aforementioned limits are dealt with explicitly in a number of contributions to the present special issue (Cook 2012; Dentith et al. 2012; Measor and O’Malley 2012; Goeke and Kubanski 2012; Götsch et al. 2012; Russo 2012). In fact, structural reflection is undertaken in all the articles. Therefore, it is all the more important that it be recognized as a separate type – and an essential element – of reflective practice in participatory research.

4.3.4 Reflection on the Research Process

This type of reflection is largely consistent with the concept of “epistemological reflexivity” employed by Borg (2012). By now, it is accepted also as a quality criterion in qualitative research – especially in ethnology. A considerable number of methodological proposals as to how such reflection can be fostered have already been made. They range from research diaries and research workshops to research supervision (see, for example Mruck and Mey 1998).

4.4 Distinctive Features of the Production and Analysis of the "Data"

To a certain extent, research with partners to whom the rituals of academic research are alien and unfamiliar – which is frequently the case in participatory research – calls for new methods of data collection. The question of the “appropriateness of the method to the participants” is particularly relevant here.

From a methodological perspective, the involvement of field partners as co-researchers in the data collection process has various advantages and disadvantages, each of which must be carefully considered. One major advantage is that the co-researchers have first-hand knowledge of the field. Therefore, they understand the way people think and may be able to obtain better and faster access to the desired informants. For example, McCartan et al. (2012) observed that young people in the role of co-researchers had greater empathy and understanding for their peers in the field than the adult researchers did. This facilitates the discovery of “natural codes” – in the grounded theory sense of the word. Goeke and Kubanski (2012) express a similar view with regard to research with people with disabilities.

Methods of data collection should therefore build on the participants’ everyday experiences. This makes it easier for them to understand the concrete procedures. However, it means that new methods of data collection must be developed that are appropriate to the concrete research situation and the research partners. An example of the possible range of methods can be found in Cook (2012, 22), who notes: “The methods chosen by the group for their research included interviews and focus groups, but also incorporated a questionnaire, photography projects, blogs, diaries and mapping processes as ways of generating data.”

The range of methods to be found in the literature is very broad and depends greatly on the research field and the research partners in question. In our view, therefore, it makes little sense to standardize methods of data collection. Rather, it is necessary to follow the Glaserian dictum: “All is data” (Glaser 2001, 145). It should also be remembered that, while many people from marginalized groups may have limited verbal communication skills, they have developed other communication strategies. In recent years, the many possibilities of using visual and performative methods of data collection and representation have been discussed in qualitative social research. These procedures have been documented, for example, in three thematic issues of FQS devoted to 1. “Performative Social Science,” which was edited by Jones et al. (2008); 2. “Visual Methods,” edited by Knoblauch et al. (2008); and 3. “Visualising Migration and Social Division: Insights from Social Sciences and the Visual Arts,” edited by Ball and Gilligan (2010). It is therefore not necessary to go into detail here. However, we would stress the point made by Rath (2012) that, when choosing

methods, the previous experiences of the research partners should be specifically addressed.

It can be difficult for people who have never had anything to do with research to understand the various methodological procedures. Therefore, special training programs are needed to enable them to carry out the procedures applied within the framework of the project. Hella von Unger (2012) reports, for example, that capacity building on the part of research partners represents a core aim in community-based participatory research. It is interesting that, in this way, the participants develop not only specialized competencies required for participation in the research process, but also more general competencies, all of which contribute to personal development. McCartan et al. (2012) observed that the self-confidence of the young peer researchers grew in the course of the training sessions and that they took on a more proactive role as result.

Despite the aforementioned diversity of data collection methods in participatory research, two procedures appear to be applied very frequently, namely interviews and focus groups. We shall now address certain aspects of these two procedures that are particularly visible in the participative approach but are not often mentioned in discussions on qualitative methods.

The interviews conducted within the framework of participatory research are normally semi-structured – a type frequently used in qualitative research. Experience has shown that, after appropriate training, the various research partners are well able to conduct these interviews – generally in teams of two. In the participatory research situation, it can be clearly seen that the outcome of an interview must be perceived as a situation-dependent co-construction on the part of the interview partners (see McCartan et al. 2012). This has already been discussed in the qualitative research literature. However, another aspect is also revealed, one that was demonstrated many years ago by Selvini Palazzoli (1984) on the basis of a systems-theory-based communication theory. The author does not perceive communication between two partners as a dyad, but rather as part of a much larger system of communication. She adapts Haley's system of communication as follows: "1. I (the sender), 2. say something (a message), 3. to you (the apparent receiver) and inevitably and simultaneously (parallel circuit), 4. to him/her/them (simultaneous co-receivers), 5. in this situation (context)" (273; our translation).

In our view, these considerations are of considerable relevance to participatory research because, here, the virtual presence of the participating community must always be borne in mind. Rath (2012) incorporates this notion into her study, although she derives it from a different theoretical background. In view of the imagined listeners, she contends that an interview is not purely a private conversation between the interview partners, but that it is, in a sense, public.

The second instrument that is frequently used within the framework of participatory research is the focus group. This label stands for a lot of different procedures. The common denominator is that a group of different types of

research participants is formed, and that these participants are given the opportunity to enter into conversation with each other in a safe setting and to deal with aspects of the project. It can be said that the focus group is one of the key instruments for the creation of a “communicative space” (see Subsection 3.2 above). In the best case, all relevant issues are discussed. This open dialog becomes the central starting point for the entire participatory research enterprise.

However, focus groups can also assume other tasks. For example, if participants do not hail from the same context, focus groups offer them an opportunity to get to know each other (Russo 2012). Moreover, together with other methods of data collection, focus groups can make a taboo theme known in the community and “get things moving” there (v. Unger 2012, 47). In teams of professionals, they can facilitate frank exchanges between the team members (Borg et al. 2012). They also frequently serve to collect data because in the open and – ideally – relaxed atmosphere, it is easier to address taboo themes (v. Unger 2012; Dentith et al. 2012; Measor and O’Malley 2012; Cook 2012). This succeeds also in the case of young research partners when the focus groups are run by peer researchers (McCartan et al. 2012).

As far back as 1967, Glaser and Strauss (1967) stressed the desirability of conducting data analysis in groups that include lay people. This applies particularly to participatory research because it ensures that the various perspectives flow into the interpretation during the data analysis process and that the research partners gain an insight into the background to their own viewpoints and that of the other members. It is not surprising, therefore, that a number of authors in the present special issue report that data were analyzed in focus groups together with the research partners (Borg et al. 2012; Goeke and Kubanski 2012; McCartan et al. 2012; v. Unger 2012; Wöhrer and Höcher 2012).

For similar reasons, the research findings are also discussed in focus groups. Russo (2012) points out that it is possible to validate findings communicatively in focus groups and that other effects can be observed at the same time: “Focus groups in survivor-controlled research set off a collective process whereby participants start to take ownership of the research.” Here the author is referring to a central process that participatory research aims to foster. Hence focus groups can be considered as an instrument that encourages this process of appropriation.

4.5 Distinctive Features of the Representation of Findings

The representation of participatory research findings also has a number of distinctive features. Above all, the multi-perspectivity and multivocality must be preserved in the representation of the results (v. Unger 2012; Cook 2012; Russo 2012).

In traditional academic writing, authors stay in the background. It is considered somewhat unscientific to write a text in the first person. Indeed, in some cases, authors consistently refer to themselves in the third person. The required distance is symbolized by this third person, and the impression is given that the statements made are “objective.” They have been cleansed of the personality of the scientist, so to speak. As a rule, the texts aspire to be unequivocal and to follow scientific logic.

In participatory research, by contrast, the various contributions to the results must be clearly visible. Riecken et al. (2004) call for an “Ethics of Voice” in participatory action research. In their publication, all participants in the study were given a chance to voice their opinions and positions. In a report about a study accompanying a psychosis seminar, Hermann et al. (2004) experimented with various texts in order to identify the contributions of the participants, who commented on the scientist’s deliberations from the perspective of the persons affected. In the present issue, Rath (2012) takes a more radical step. She uses poetry to make “the emotional” visible; to highlight the constructed nature of texts; and to challenge the conviction that knowledge derived from academic texts is “certain.” The research partners – women training to be rape crisis counselors – were amenable to this procedure because there is a tradition in the area of sexual abuse of using poetry to articulate traumatic experiences.

However, the representation of the results of participatory research cannot be limited to texts. In order to render the findings understandable to affected persons, to give them a basis for further discussion, and to reach a wide audience, other forms of representation are needed. When discussing data collection (Subsection 4.4 above), mention was made of the use of visual and performative methods. The application of such procedures in the representation stage, too, can make the research findings easier to understand.

4.6 Academic Requirements and Funding Conditions for Participatory Research

Nowadays, participatory research strategies are accepted – or even desired – in many practice contexts. In academia, by contrast, participatory research enjoys much less recognition as a fully-fledged research method. If at all, it is perceived as a strategy in the “context of discovery.”

The following are some of the criticisms leveled against participatory research:

- Participatory researchers do not formulate hypotheses that can subsequently be tested, and even the research questions emerge only gradually during the process of engagement with the research partners.
- The closeness between the research partners prevents scientific distance on the part of the academic researchers, who are so entangled with the researched persons that it is not possible to separate the researchers’ contribu-

tion to the collected data from that of the researched; hence the quality criterion of objectivity cannot be fulfilled.

- Exact planning is not possible because the negotiation of the various decisions during the research process prevents the estimation of the duration of the project and the expected findings. And, above all:
- When “classical” quality criteria are applied, the research is not acceptable because it is neither objective, nor reliable, nor is it valid.

From the perspective of a methodology that invokes the normative theory of science, these arguments are by all means accurate. Although the standpoint outlined above is more widespread in some disciplines than in others, it dominates the science sector both in the universities, when it comes to assessing theses, dissertations, etc., and in the major funding organizations, when applications for research funding are being reviewed.

This problem is faced by qualitative research in general. However, one outcome of the long-standing debate between the “exact” sciences and the humanities about the “object of science” is that interpretivist methods are increasingly being accepted as a basis for concrete research. This can be seen, for example, from the fact that qualitative approaches enjoy greater acceptance in certain disciplines, for example sociology and ethnology. That said, the aforementioned closeness between research partners in participatory research – and the skepticism that this provokes from some quarters – means that it has not been able to benefit as much from the increased acceptance as “conventional” qualitative research has done.

The dissolution of the subject-object relationship between the researchers and the researched is a further grave problem for the academic recognition of participatory research. In participatory research projects, the role of active researcher – and knowing subject – is not held by the academic researchers alone but by all the participants, with all the consequences that this brings for data collection, analysis, interpretation, and the publication of the findings.

This leads to considerable acceptance problems when it comes to research funding. These problems start with the tendering period, which is often quite short. As a result, it is not possible to develop the research proposal collaboratively because negotiation processes with affected persons take much longer. Cook (2012) and McCartan et al. (2012) point to the problems that arise even when submitting the funding bid; they demonstrate how difficult – or well-nigh impossible – it is to draw up funding bids in collaboration with the research partners.

In most cases, a reviewer’s assessment of the quality of a project is based on the aforementioned nomothetic science model. However, as a result, requirements are imposed that either cannot be fulfilled by participatory research, or that lead to nonsensical restrictions. This starts with the said research questions, which can be formulated only vaguely or in general terms before the project begins. Other characteristics of participatory research also hamper acceptance.

It is scarcely possible to produce an exact timetable because the duration of the negotiation processes among the research partners cannot be accurately forecast. All that is clear is that the overall life-span of such a research project frequently exceeds the normally expected timeframe for funded projects (see Cook 2012). Certain items in the finance plan also meet with rejection by funding bodies. In Subsection 4.1 above, we pointed out that there are good reasons for financially supporting the research partners. However, such items in the finance plan are frequently rejected by the funders.

The situation is similar at the universities, where it is very difficult for a young scientist to submit a thesis or dissertation that employs participatory research strategies. Here, too, the above-mentioned classical quality criteria are applied when reviewing research proposals and assessing the completed works (see Goeke and Kubanski 2012; Cook 2012). Moreover, it is scarcely possible to produce the exact timetables required by universities. In addition, the number of reviewers who are in a position to assess such works is limited. This depends, once again, on the discipline in question. At the present point in time, it is almost impossible to gain a doctorate in psychology in Germany with a thesis based on participatory methodology.

The problem of forging an academic career is further aggravated by the fact that projects with research partners who are practitioners or affected persons is much more time-consuming because extensive discussions must be conducted with them. This means that the production of scientific works lasts much longer and, as a result, the researcher's list of publications is shorter. Moreover, for the reasons stated above, few scholarly journals accept participatory works. Furthermore, marginalized groups are studied more frequently in participatory research projects, and these groups are not the focus of interest of "normal science." This has an effect on the frequency with which the publication in question is cited. And because the Science Citation Index serves as an important indicator of scientific qualification, authors who apply participatory methods are disadvantaged.

Overall, it can be noted that the current scientific structure is extremely unfavorable for participatory research projects. In saying that, it cannot be disputed that it is sometimes very difficult to assess the quality and rigor of participatory projects. For these reasons, it will be very important for the future of participatory research to develop criteria that facilitate the assessment of such projects. On a more pragmatic level, Cook (2012) suggests, for example, that standardized application forms be developed. A checklist developed by Green et al. (2003) to facilitate the assessment of participatory research projects in the healthcare sector represents another pragmatic effort. However, there is undoubtedly considerable need for further development in this regard – and a more intense discussion of quality criteria will be of central importance.

4.7 Justification of Participatory Research Projects

The problem of quality criteria for participatory research is regularly raised by a diverse range of stakeholders: by the clients – be they institutions or the affected persons themselves, who are interested in obtaining empirically sound findings; by the potential funders; by academia, when participatory research strategies are employed in empirical theses, dissertations, and publications; and in scientific discussions.

In qualitative research, the question of appropriate quality criteria has been discussed at length, and various concepts have been proposed. They include, for example, adaptations of the classical, quantitatively oriented, quality criteria – objectivity, reliability, and validity – to qualitative research; and quality criteria developed specially for qualitative research (see, for example, Lincoln and Guba 1985; Steinke 1999). This discussion will not be pursued here. However, in our opinion, the question of quality criteria for participatory research reveals a number of underlying fundamental questions that are also of relevance to qualitative research in general.

If one proceeds from the assumption that, in participatory research, all the perspectives and voices of the participants should be granted equal rights of expression, and that each group possesses qualitatively different knowledge about the social world under study, then it is to be expected that the participants will also have different views on the quality of the research process and its results.

In our opinion, the question of what constitutes “good” research findings is answered very differently by the various research participants, and also by those who review, assess, use, or read these findings. This response depends on the system of values and norms to which the particular stakeholders subscribe; on their individual interests; and on the discourse that takes place in the context in question. Therefore, when asked by a stakeholder whether, and to what extent, a concrete project corresponds to its values and interests, the researchers must furnish convincing arguments derived from that stakeholder’s own discursive context. The fact that diverse groups address the quality criteria question highlights the need for a more context-specific analysis of what is understood by “quality” in the sense of a good participatory research project. In other words, this question cannot be answered in an apparently general way or evaded with reference to the difference between “intra-scientific” and “extra-scientific” standards (see Breuer and Reichertz 2001).

From the perspective of social constructivism – which can be drawn on here as a meta-theoretical approach (Gerger 1985) – the concept of “quality” in the social constructivist sense is a socially defined concept. Westmeyer (2000, 33, our translation) defines such concepts as follows:

Socially defined concepts are constructions by groups of persons who have been commissioned, for example, by social institutions or organizations of international, national, public, or private provenance, and have been vested with

the necessary powers of definition. The constructions that arise in this way are then binding within the sphere of influence of these institutions or organizations until such time as they are revised.

Within the framework of the present Introduction, we shall briefly demonstrate how this perspective can offer a starting point for tackling the problem of quality criteria in participatory research.

To begin with, one must identify the various institutions and groups of participants to whom the participatory research project is accountable. A review of the literature reveals that one can roughly state that participatory research projects are confronted with the task of demonstrating the quality of their work to such diverse social institutions as: science, politics, public administration, the system of psycho-social practice, medicine, and, above all, the users or user groups. In the course of the history of the western world, science has established itself as the social subsystem that judges whether something is “true,” in the sense of correct knowledge. However, participatory research is accountable to many social institutions for whom the criterion of “truth” in the scientific sense of the word is of only secondary importance. Therefore, from now on we shall not refer to “quality criteria,” but rather to justificatory arguments employed in the institutional or contextual discourses in question. We argue that, in the course of social development in the various social spheres of activity, different systems of communication and action with different justificatory norms have evolved.⁵ Each social institution has developed its own values and argumentative structures, and it uses all the powers at its disposal to enforce them. Therefore, the arguments used by researchers to justify a participatory research project and its findings must correspond to these structures because, otherwise, they will not be accepted.

In everyday research practice, these diverse justificatory requirements lead to considerable difficulties because their systematic dissimilarity is not recognized. Rather, they are experienced as incompatible demands that can scarcely be adequately responded to at the one time. This can be clearly seen in a number of contributions to the present special issue. On the basis of four examples derived from these articles, we shall outline the consequences that such diverse, subsystem-specific justificatory structures have.

Several authors (Cook 2012; Goeke and Kubanski 2012; Dentith et al. 2012) bemoan the lack of academic recognition – a problem that we have already addressed here. It should be borne in mind that the participatory projects presented to scientific committees have been developed against the background of justificatory arguments and, above all, values that come from social contexts that differ greatly from the science world. The resulting justificatory arguments do not correspond to the “classical” quality criteria that can be considered to be

⁵ In a similar way, Breuer and Reichertz (2001) provide an overview of the areas and levels of the discussion on quality criteria.

a context-specific justificatory argument within the science system. Therefore, compatibility of the justificatory argument structures in the various discursive contexts can be expected in the long term only if efforts to extend the academic code are successful. The debate on the acceptance of qualitative research methods could be considered an example of such efforts.

The importance of the political system becomes very clear in the article by Sylvia Lenz (2012), who highlights the incompatibility between dictatorship and participatory research. There can be no justificatory arguments for this particular political context without fundamentally denying the participatory research approach. This is an extreme example, but even in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany and other western countries there have been political constellations in which the justificatory arguments for participatory research have encountered acceptance problems because of their incompatibility with political policy programs. For example, the justificatory arguments of research projects are accepted by state research funding programs only if they fit in with the prevailing political values.

Another social sphere discussed in the present special issue is that of conventional medicine. Here, too, the consequences of incompatible justificatory arguments are highlighted. In the articles by Jasna Russo (2012) and Tina Cook (2012), which focus on “psychiatry,” and in Goeke and Kubanski’s (2012) article on “people with disabilities,” it can be clearly seen how difficult it is to conduct genuinely participatory research – that is, research with or by the affected persons and from their perspective. Research by people who have experienced psychiatric treatment (“survivor research”), for example, explicitly aims at the development of an alternative to the dominant biomedical model of mental “illnesses” (Russo 2012). As the alternative model is based on personal experiences, the justificatory arguments are not compatible with the biomedical model. Such research is frequently dismissed as “unscientific” and “subjective” by conventional medicine, and its findings are not incorporated into the canon of knowledge of the discipline.

The economic system is defined by the allocation or non-allocation of resources in the form of money. Numerous contributions to this special issue address problems of obtaining funding; they draw attention to the inhibiting influence that various funding conditions have on participatory research (Cook 2012; Goeke and Kubanski 2012; McCartan et al. 2012; Russo 2012; Wöhrer and Höcher 2012). This is particularly striking in the case of psychiatric research funded by the pharmaceutical industry – an example furnished by Russo (2012). This research aims at the development of marketable pharmaceutical products. The author notes that the massive funding of research by the pharmaceutical industry has led to the dominance of the biomedical model of mental illness. By contrast, the development of alternative models from the perspective of the affected persons is hampered by lack of funding due to the fact that the justificatory arguments advanced do not comply with the central goal of the

economic market model espoused by the pharmaceutical industry – that is, profit maximization. Therefore, the answer to the question of who funds or rejects a research project, and what interests are behind the decision, must also be part of the statements on the quality of a research project.

The considerations presented here are in line with the current debate on quality research. Flick (2011) also argues that the quality criteria in qualitative research should be context-specific. However, the contexts that he has in mind differ from those used here. In his opinion, the relevant contexts are “on the one hand theoretical and methodological schools,” and “on the other hand, in recent years, the differentiation of the various fields of application of qualitative research” (403f., our translation).

Breuer and Reichertz (2001, 37, our translation) identify eight quality criteria areas and levels that have been discussed since around the 1970s. They note that the “relevant discursive contexts ... have become more numerous and, often, more differentiated.” And they point out that there has been a distinct shift away from intra-scientific discourse about quality criteria towards an external discourse determined by industry, politics, and the media. The authors propose a strategy of clarification that entails acknowledging and developing the broad range of arguments and examining the importance of the social and scientific contexts for scientific activities.

In our view, it would also be worthwhile to analyze the requirements of justification of the various social institutions more closely in the manner described above in order to achieve a systematic conceptualization of these requirements and a more specific assessment of the extent to which individual qualitative and participatory projects must be justified in the context of specific social institutions. Against the background of such considerations, justificatory arguments such as usefulness, authenticity, credibility, reflexivity, and sustainability should be discussed.

4.8 Ethical Aspects of Participatory Research

Participatory researchers are particularly called upon to address ethical questions. The closeness to the research partners during participatory projects repeatedly requires ethically sound decisions about the norms and rules that should apply in social dealings among the participants; about how data should be collected, documented, and interpreted in such a way that they do not harm the participants and that their privacy is assured; and about the reliability, duration, and timeframe of the professional researchers’ availability, etc.

The necessity for an ethical basis for such decisions becomes clear against the background of the fact – reported in various articles in this issue – that participatory research is always in danger of being used by very different parties for purposes that contradict its postulated fundamental concept.

On the one hand, the offer of involvement and participation in decisions can be used to entice people who normally do not have such possibilities to work in research projects. This is considered to be a way of gaining easier access to groups who have a critical view of research. The danger of misuse of participatory methods exists in evaluation research, for example. Caspari (2006, 377) describes the instrumentalization of the concept of participatory methods in international development projects, which leads to “participatory concepts being reduced to individual data collection methods, their combination, and application” (our translation).

On the other hand, trust, and the closeness it engenders, facilitate access to deeper, and perhaps taboo, layers – both in the minds of the participants and in the life-world. Here the danger of transgression and, therefore, of serious damage is always acute. Hence the need for clear ethical standpoints, which should not be abstract, but must refer to the concrete situation (Wöhrer and Höcher 2012).

It is especially those who have years of experience of research, and who perceive it as being directed partly against their interests, who will insist that ethical norms be adhered to. In the area of survivor research, there are guidelines entitled “The Ethics of Survivor Research” (Faulkner 2004), in which the main points of ethical behavior in research are presented clearly and understandably (see Russo 2012).

As far back as 1998, Wadsworth (1998, 5) drew attention to the fact that researchers conducting participatory research must be aware that research is inevitably value-driven and that its action effects must be assessed. These action effects include:

- “the effects of raising some questions and not others;
- the effects of involving some people in the process ... and not others;
- the effects of observing some phenomena and not others;
- the effects of making this sense of it and not alternative senses;
- the effects of deciding to take this action ... rather than any other action.”

Different value preferences with regard to these decisions also lead to conflicts and confrontation between the research partners and within the community under study. For example, even the decision to actively participate in a research project about a taboo theme can lead to alienation and to mistrust on the part of the other community members vis-à-vis the participants in the research team (v. Unger 2012).

The research project and the publication of the results can have considerable negative consequences for the research participants. This is demonstrated by Dentith et al. (2012) in their contribution. They describe how the British tabloid press used government reports of research findings about teenage pregnancy to publish sensationalist reports. Neither the researchers nor the research funders can exercise sufficient control over the way findings are reported. Therefore, it is always necessary to reflect with the affected persons about what can happen

when hitherto invisible, taboo problems are made public. However, the concrete consequences can scarcely be foreseen. This gives rise to the dilemma of having to choose whether to defer the publication of problems that are in urgent need of public discussion or to publish them for that very reason. If the latter option is chosen, counter-strategies must be developed with the research partners.

We would like to conclude with a quotation from Dentith et al. (2012) that we consider to be a fitting description of the fundamental objective of ethical norms for participatory research:

Insofar as one of the primary purposes of inquiry is to heal the alienations that characterize modern consciousness, participation provides a throughway to relationality and healing that objectivist and Cartesian methods necessarily reinscribe via the distance and fragmentation that they evoke.

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