

Co-constructing knowledge of young refugees' lives in Finland

Epistemological notes

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Introduction

This chapter recounts and reflects a research process carried out as a cooperative effort between a group of researchers, a group of young men with a refugee background participating in a special coaching programme, their coaches and a group of arts professionals. The research was a part of ALL-YOUTH studies reaching out to diverse groups of young people who included young men with a refugee background, with the recognition that they were, from many accounts, the most marginalised group in Finnish society. The group we worked with can be considered particularly marginalised. Most had come to Finland as asylum seekers in connection with the 2015–2016 wave of refugees, and they had had rough experiences from their country of origin, the flight and settling in Finland, which has been found to be one of the most discriminatory countries in Europe (YLE NEWS 29.11.2018). Mixing elements in our methodology from participatory research, co-research and arts-based research, we set out to carefully listen to the life stories of these young people (Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021a).

The research project originally focused on collecting and studying the young refugees' life stories; this chapter structures its discussion around four separate accounts of what happened in the process in terms of knowledge co-construction. We start by introducing the background of the research and describing the radical epistemological openness of how we proceeded by having no ready-made plan, research questions, specified objectives or preconception of how the research should proceed. We then walk through the process, discussing along the way some key epistemological points about the conditions for co-constructing knowledge in research settings that are characterised by the participants' diversity and the openness of the research process.

The chapter's discussion utilises ideas from critical epistemology and critical reflexivity (Berger 2015), especially from feminist theories of situated and embodied knowledge and strong objectivity (e.g., Harding 1993; Smith 1987). It is, moreover, inspired by Rosi Braidotti's (2019) conception of "a nomadic subject"

who acknowledges that their knowing is always in the state of becoming and never final and fixed. Such ideas are not widely used in the epistemological debates of youth research, but we believe they have much to offer, especially for participatory research on marginalised youth. We make a related distinction between the concepts of knowledge and knowing (Wasik 2016), arguing that the concept of knowledge is too fixed to be able to capture the diversity and fluidity of knowledges (the plural form intended) typically emerging from participatory research processes. In our experience, the concept of knowing (Kuhn & Porter 2010), which implies an element of “cognition-in-motion”, sometimes better conveys how research participants feel about and understand the dynamically evolving knowledges and skills they learn while engaging in research collaboration.

Our aspiration in the project was to balance the power relationship between the researchers and the other participants (Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021a), so we started from the principle that the researchers’ knowledge cannot be privileged over the others’. Moreover, the collaboration produced different knowledges to which each participant assigned distinctive meanings; thus, it is not ethically justifiable to present the researcher’s knowledge as final. In this text, this commitment to knowledge equality is reflected by all authors in the collective having their own account of how they understand the concept of knowledge and what kind of knowledges they experienced emerging from the research process.

Epistemic issues are debated regularly within participatory research on youth (e.g., Caraballo et al., 2017; Lozenski, Casey & McManimon 2013; Porter, Townsend & Hamsphire 2012; Watson & Fox 2018), but epistemological challenges related specifically to knowledge co-construction within participatory research settings like co-research are still a rather uncharted territory. This text brings up new perspectives to this area by concretely describing one research process and raising through it some key points about the conditions of knowledge production in the context of collectively designed research involving multiple parties.

What and whose knowledge? Critical epistemology for knowledge co-construction

The paradigmatic participatory turn in youth research has brought a significant change in the way the relationship is conceived between the researcher and the research participants. Along with this change, youth researchers have been increasingly interested in redressing those power differentials that have long characterised doing “normal (social) science” (Caraballo et al., 2017; Fine 2008; Lohmeyer 2020; Mubeen & Tokola 2021; Pyyry 2012). Researchers interested in participatory methodology have particularly striven to see young people as competent and capable actors who have knowledge of their own world and the capability to express it in various communicative and creative ways (e.g., Cuevas-Parra 2020; Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021b). In this context, researchers have critiqued expert-led research constellations and stressed that engaging young people in knowledge production is central to really understand their life-world and experiences (Dentith, Measor &

O'Malley 2012). The ethical premise that young people have the right to participate in knowledge production about themselves and thereby also influence policies that affect them has been widely accepted in youth research (e.g., Alderson 2008).

At the same time, the participatory turn has posed a challenge to rethink basic epistemological questions, given that participatory research is by its nature a multi-party enterprise. The aspiration to produce knowledge together with many participants who come from different backgrounds and have distinct knowledges, experiences and interests raises important questions that have not been addressed with enough insight. Lay participants in research cannot be required to master skills that academically trained researchers are often accustomed to articulate, such as knowledge of the philosophy of science. We are then justified to ask: on what epistemological grounds does participatory research rely? Whose and what kind of knowledge is accepted as part of the research results? Can researchers decide on the epistemology of the research by themselves without asking the participants? We address these questions by way of describing and reflecting on our own experiences of how knowledge can be co-constructed in a context defined by a diversity of participants. Our discussion is further complicated by elements of a co-research approach without pre-planned research questions, a research design or an idea of how the research process should proceed.

The discussion draws on a few key ideas that have been inspired by feminist social research and critical feminist epistemology. First, we accept Dorothy Smith's (1987, 2005) suggestion that the topics of (sociological) research should connect with people's daily lives by asking people themselves what is important to them, what they want to talk about, what they see as problems in their lives and what their position is in society. This is what we did when we approached the young refugees and asked them to join our research. We spent some time together, getting to know them over casual coffees and conversations. We talked about their life in Finland and other issues important to them (and us), including family, work and hobbies. We asked them to tell us about their lives by means of applied theatre, and they consented, though perhaps with slight hesitation, as none had previous experience of theatre in any form.

Our second point arises from feminist critical epistemology, especially from ideas of situated and embodied knowledge and strong objectivity (e.g., Harding 1993). As Ronkainen (2000, 182, our translation) crystallises it, situatedness refers to knowledge always being "part of the local system of knowledge, way of knowing and interests". To become "better knowers" and understand the limits of our knowing, "we need to have courage to commit, position ourselves and settle". Smith (1987, 177) likewise states that "[w]e must begin with some position in the world", and the specification of that "somewhere" and the explication of the relations to which it is articulated are the aim of inquiry. The principle of strong objectivity refers, in turn, to the idea that science that openly acknowledges its interests and epistemological commitments is less biased compared to knowledge production that does not critically reflect on its assumptions. Strong objectivity entails strong reflexivity, "knowing about your knowing" (Ronkainen 2000, 172).

Again, these ideas capture the social context of our research and the way we (inter)acted with the participants. We started from the explicit recognition that “we know nothing about the lives of these young people” and that we can learn about them only by discussing and acting together – all the while reflexively accepting that we occupy different positions in life and society, which affect our ability to understand each other. This was one of the key reasons why we adopted applied theatre as a method of collaboration, believing that it allows expressing experience that is, by its nature, embodied and visceral, hard to verbalise and discuss rationally. We also recognised the need to reflect critically on our own presuppositions (Berger 2015). For instance, we were aware of the linguistic and cultural differences between us and the refugee youth, and we stressed over whether our cooperation would work in Finnish. Following Harding’s argument about strong objectivity, we will describe what happened in the process and what kind of knowledges we ended up co-constructing.

The third starting point we want to single out here concerns the concept of knowledge itself. We find it useful to apply a distinction between knowledge and knowing, which captures nicely an intrinsic aspect of our experience of co-constructing knowledge in a diverse research collective. Our argument is that knowledge can be too static a concept (something already there, possessable and exploitable) to grasp the process of knowledge formation in research constellations defined by creative participatory methods and an open, undefined research process. In such contexts, what is being generated epistemically is not necessarily a specifiable “body of knowledge” that can be unproblematically conceptualised and represented. Instead, such knowledge can constitute a bundle of different kinds of subjectively sensed, embodied, constructed and dynamically evolving knowing(s) that the participants endow with unique meanings and purposes and that move not only on the realm of knowing but also on the realm of “otherwise than knowing” (Varto 2013). This is especially typical for artistic expressions but is hard to put in the language of epistemology, or language in general.

However, it needs to be pointed out that these epistemological commitments concerned only the researchers during the project. No pressure or specific requirements were placed on other participants (including Olli and Minna) regarding their role in and contribution to the research process.

Research collaboration in Valomo

The research project recounted in this chapter was carried out in cooperation with a local NGO “Pakolaisnuorten tuki” (Refugee Support Finland) working with young boys and men with a refugee background. The NGO hosts several programmes that support young refugee men in their everyday lives, offering a range of recreational, educative and civic activities. One of the programmes, Valomo, offers coaching for young men aged 18–29 aiming to help them gain a place in education, working life or some other societal activity the young person is interested in. These young men have gone through the statutory integration phase after arriving in Finland but have

special support needs that the Finnish service system is unable to recognise or meet. Most of the young men in the programme have some form of trauma background, damaging experiences of discrimination and racism, difficulties with the Finnish language and a variety of life management problems (Rättilä et al., 2021). The young men largely come from the Middle East and North Africa, having arrived in Finland in the wake of the 2015–2016 “refugee crisis”. This racialised group faces more discrimination and social marginalisation than other immigrant groups (YLE NEWS 26.8.2019). Their life context is fragile, because they are building their identity and seeking to establish their place in society, balancing between different cultures and social pressures.

We (the researchers) discussed with the coaches the kind of research collaboration that we could engage the young men in who were enrolled in the autumn 2018.¹ We ended up suggesting applied theatre as a possible method that would complement other arts-based activities already planned for the programme. Our thinking was that applied theatre offers a safe and easily approachable art form for people in a difficult life situation to express their experiences, thoughts and feelings (Glover et al., 2016). We then introduced to the group the idea of doing a Playback Theatre performance. The group discussed and accepted the idea, the young men showing some enthusiasm for the chance to meet actors, tell their stories and see them performed “back” to them. This was the start of our theatre project, which lasted for the duration of the programme from September to December. At the same time, we collected research materials, including interviews, video recordings of the theatre performances, photographs, minutes of discussions between coaches, researchers and actors, researchers’ field notes and surveys on the young men’s well-being. We shared much of the material among us (researchers, coaches, actors) and analysed it collectively. As it turned out, we gained a lot of data, but for some time it remained obscure, debatable and variously interpretable as to what was the “knowledge” we thus produced together.

Four accounts of the knowledge construction process

This subchapter explores, through four individual accounts, three personal and one collectively constructed, how the knowledge co-construction was experienced by the authors and the young men in Valomo. Each account has its own story to tell about what was learned in the process. The stories are unique, yet they also share some common features. The shared features do not, however, represent the “final knowledge” gained as the result of the collaboration because none of the parties’ knowledges can be discarded.

Constantly evolving knowledge (Olli Sillanpää, director and head coach, Valomo programme)

I immediately started to think about what and whose knowledge can be trusted in the contemporary world when the researcher asked me to reflect on how I understand

the meaning of knowledge and knowing. There are many claims and stories circulating in the media that are presented as knowledge but whose truthfulness is difficult to substantiate. This critical reflection is directly related to my work with refugee youth and thus to our research collaboration. I am well familiar with what kind of “knowledge” about immigrants and refugees is (re)presented in public. It often involves deliberate disinformation based on undemocratic and xenophobic political motives. In my work with young refugee men, I see how such a media environment, involving prejudices, social marginalisation and everyday racism, affects their well-being and social inclusion in society.

For me as the Valomo programme leader, becoming involved in a research collaboration with the ALL-YOUTH project was an easy choice. The final decision to participate, however, depended on how the young men in the 2018 programme felt about the proposal. It was actively discussed with the group, and all five members agreed to take part. The research interest of the ALL-YOUTH project – the desire to listen to a diversity of young people, including immigrants and young people with a refugee background, and to make their experiences and views visible in society – matched well with Valomo’s goals and values, and the research raised interest and excitement in the group. My motivation for the collaboration related to the prospect that it would provide these young men a rare chance to raise important issues on the public agenda and provide them with new knowledge about Finnish society.

From the beginning, the lack of a ready-made research design and, hence, a set of guidelines to be followed was both intriguing and confusing. On the one hand, this method of doing research allowed us (the young men and the coaches) to influence the process from the start. On the other hand, I was not at all concerned, despite the peculiarities of the project. I was rather enthused, believed that everything would go well, and I trusted the professionalism of the researchers and the artists. We, the coaches, also appreciated how diligently the researchers worked with the young people and took them into account at all stages of the project.

I would like to point out that when I replied to the researcher’s question about what kind of knowledge our research collaboration produced, my reflections were not confined to that time period only. My memories and interpretations of our collaboration in 2018 are intertwined with experiences throughout the time I have coached young refugee men. I knew a lot about the background, life situation and problems of these young people to start with. Most of the young men in Valomo programmes have difficulties in managing their lives and experience various physical and mental disorders. Many also foster feelings of hopelessness about their future. Most of them also have a traumatic background from war and violence in their home country. The identities of these young men are fragile in the midst of different cultures and social pressures. Our research collaboration did not add much to my existing knowledge, even though it needs to be kept in mind that each group and each individual are always unique, and we constantly learn something new about each other while working together. I was not at all sure what kind of knowledge the researchers felt they had achieved at the end of the project, and

I often inquired about it in our joint discussions. I was easily able to relate my own perceptions of refugee youth to that framework later when the researchers began conceptualising their research findings in terms of well-being theory. That theory especially aided in understanding the experiences of the young refugees' (non) belonging in Finnish society.

I feel that I learned a lot from our collaboration, although I may not be able to articulate exactly what it means in terms of research knowledge. Here I assume that learning means acquiring new knowledge and skills that can be used later as competence when engaging in some activity. For example, I picked up a lot about conducting academic research when following the activities of researchers and discussing our observations together. At the same time, the research collaboration provided an opportunity to reflect critically on our work in Valomo. In fact, the research collaboration has had a major influence on how we have later developed our coaching methods. Last, I would also like to mention that – even if this is also difficult to put in terms of an argument – our collaboration produced positive feelings and close collegiality, and it is my understanding that such (affective, empathic, embodied) experiences are important for the development of knowledge. It felt good working together, and we have continued to cooperate to this day.

***“Everything fell into place – but how did I ‘know’ it would?”
(Minna Hokkanen, actor, teacher of acting skills, Playback
Theatre professional)***

Responding to the researcher's question about how I understand knowledge and knowing, I see knowledge most importantly as a relational phenomenon, something born out of interaction and cooperation between people. Knowledge in this sense means learning new things by doing and acting together with others. On the other hand, it is not easy to distinguish knowledge from ongoing processes of thinking, interacting, understanding and learning – or sensing, feeling, embodying, that is, to separate “knowledge” from all sense-making activities that we constantly engage in. From a daily life perspective, knowledge is “attached” to everything we do and to how we operate. Knowing, instead, is a more personally and viscerally felt “I know what I am doing, and I am aware of it” kind of experience. I presume this sense and interaction-focused understanding of knowledge and knowing is related to the fact that I am a professional actor and teach acting skills in the university. Human interaction is the starting point for everything we, actors and acting teachers, do in both positions. Moreover, for the actor's profession, corporeality is the most essential tool for internalising, processing and producing knowledge, and it also helps to make it visible to the audiences. For example, my own white, middle-aged woman's body can convey its own kind of knowledge when placed on stage in active relationships with other actors.

For me, joining the research collaboration with ALL-YOUTH and Valomo as the artistic coordinator and director of the Playback Theatre project was an easy decision. I jumped in eagerly, even though the starting point for the cooperation

was somewhat peculiar. As already pointed out, the researchers did not have a pre-prepared research set-up that would have provided a precise framework for the project. I understood that the objective of the research was to listen to the stories of the young men through using storytelling techniques such as applied theatre, but how the research process should proceed and what kind of knowledge was expected to emerge from it was not predefined. Rather, the researchers had decided on a more “learning by doing” type of approach. This is a familiar technique to me as a performing artist, but I wondered how it would work in the context of academic research.

My orientation to the project was aided by the fact that I had some previous experience of artistic collaboration with refugee youth. Still, in the beginning I was concerned about whether we would be able to communicate and understand each other enough in Finnish. I also did not know beforehand whether the young men would be familiar with the culture of theatre, and if not, would I be able to explain its meaning and the actor’s profession to them understandably. Not to mention, how to explain the relationship between the theatre project and the research process (when I did not really understand it myself)? However, after meeting with the young men and the whole research group, my worries evaporated. It turned out that we understood each other quite well despite the partial language barrier, and the young men were clearly interested in theatre and the opportunity to tell us their stories.

The theatre project lasted four months, including planning the project with the researchers and the coaches; getting to know the Valomo group; a Playback Theatre performance for the young men, which I directed; and a tour in the largest local theatre house, my working place. The process culminated in a closing performance, where the Playback Theatre group I also work with brought a short play on the stage based on the young men’s stories as a summary of our project. The play was followed by an on-site Playback Theatre performance, in which actors created snapshots of the thoughts and feelings evoked by the performance in the audience (Hokkanen 2021).

Reflecting back on what I learned from our collaborative project, the first point I would like to make is that I was surprised by how everything seemed to fall into place in the process. It felt like I just “knew”, artistically speaking, what to do and how. In hindsight, I am unable to justify where that “knowledge” came from, and I wonder about it now, but I found the process an overall success. Second, regarding the stories the young men told us about their lives, there was nothing new about them as such. I had encountered similar heartfelt stories of refugees’ experiences many times in the media over the past years, and they were familiar to me through my profession as an actor. It was easy to identify with them and feel empathy.

Third, as an experienced Playback Theatre maker, I was not surprised at how the young people reacted when actors “returned” their stories to them. The young men had no previous experience of theatre, yet they quickly understood what the idea was about. It was a joy to observe how exhilarated and impressed they were when their stories were made visible and brought on stage. This initial observation

was confirmed later when the Valomo coaches told us that the theatre performances were discussed by the young men spiritedly for weeks afterwards.

Last, I would like to mention the affective and emotional aspects of the project. We were swayed by a wealth of emotions on many occasions while listening to the young men's stories and watching the actors playing them. Some stories made us laugh, others made us feel very sad. This emotional dimension was an important part of the collaboration and fortified its significance to us all. It is a well-known fact in both everyday life and in art-related research that the making and experiencing of art is bodily conveyed and includes dimensions that reach towards an "otherwise than knowing" kind of experiencing that is difficult to express in terms of research knowledge.

I feel a strong sense of gratitude when I think about our collaboration in 2018 for being given an opportunity to be part of a project that was meaningful and relevant to the young men in Valomo. I find that the short play produced in the project succeeded in crystallising their (anonymised) life stories and made them visible not only in all their pain but also in their hopes. This was clearly important to many, as the coaches later told us.

Wrestling with (fascinating) epistemological uncertainty (Tiina Rättilä, the responsible researcher in the Valomo project)

My interest in the nature of co-constructed knowledge relates to the observation that the concept of knowledge itself is often left obscure in accounts of participatory research. The participatory process is usually described vividly and informatively, but the authors do not say much about what exactly the "knowledge" is that was produced as a result. My thought is that this is no coincidence and that articulating and representing co-constructed knowledge can be challenging for participatory research because the process involves many parties, each approaching the studied matter and the collaboration from their own backgrounds, positions and understandings. I am interested in the diverse knowledges and knowings that participatory research produces and how the knowledge co-construction comes about in practical terms. My suggestion is that participatory processes may not necessarily produce knowledge compatible with everyone's understandings, that sometimes negotiation over different understandings of what is regarded as the "end-product knowledge", especially as formulated by researchers, may in fact displace important participant experiences and knowledges. I think it is important to probe whether and why negotiating and seeking interpretive compromises between diverse knowledges is justified epistemologically: why would this kind of knowledge be more valuable or "better" than knowledge that leaves the differences visible?

Based on this epistemological interest, I asked the other two authors of this text to contemplate their understanding of knowledge and knowing and to share from their own perspective what kind of knowledge they felt our research collaboration produced. I reflect here on the same question from my own perspective. It should

be mentioned that our research team in Valomo consisted of three researchers; in addition to me, there was another female researcher and one male researcher (see Chapter 8). We are all white and middle-aged with a middle-class background, and we represent the position of intellectual authority in society, whether we like it or not. This is, however, my personal account of the project and the collaboration. It would be a different story if it was written by one of the other researchers or if we had produced it collectively (see Berger 2015).

First, in line with the participatory and co-research epistemology, we wanted to approach the young men in Valomo as experts in their own lives and avoid presenting ourselves as knowledge authorities. This entailed, for example, that we avoided using academic terminology in our interactions, considering also that some of the young men in Valomo had lived in Finland only for a short time and did not know the language very well, certainly not well enough to engage in theory-informed discussions facilitated by the researchers. Our meetings were very informal; we discussed various subjects over coffee; and when we asked the young people about, for instance, the meaning of a good life, we (the researchers and coaches) also disclosed our own lives, values and professional choices. I can conclude, when reflecting back these discussions, that despite our good intentions, we did not succeed very well in creating equality of knowledge and communication. The young men were too respectful of us, which showed in that they did not dare to ask us if they did not understand something, as the coaches later told us. The coaches occasionally asked us to talk to the young people more simply, but my feeling is that we were unable to do that. Such factors – the flow of communication and mutual understanding in linguistic, cultural and professional terms – are of great importance when considering the (pre)conditions of knowledge co-construction and when reflecting on how the process went and what was achieved together.

Second, returning to the question of what was the “knowledge” we ended up creating in and through the theatre project and research collaboration, my response is that I can’t be quite sure or that I am unable to explicate the results of our project very well. On the one hand, the radical epistemological openness applied in our collaboration made it possible to get to know the young men in Valomo and hear their stories without our having a limited agenda or a preset theoretical framework. On the other hand, such a design later proved problematic precisely for the conceptual articulation of the research findings. In the end, my personal and our shared experiences in the research collaboration were so multidimensional that it proved very challenging to separate the bits of “knowledge” from everything else. We (the researchers) did articulate our findings and formulated our knowledge claims, but processing the data and our experiences into representable knowledge was by no means easy. We had avoided theory-laden language and thinking while actively engaging in collaboration and started asking knowledge-producing questions only later when meeting with coaches and actors for collective discussion and reflection. Even after we had developed our findings into a theoretical argument, I felt that much of what we had experienced and learned during the project went beyond what

can be articulated as research knowledge. Here, I concur wholeheartedly with Olli and Minna's similar reflections.

In this text we make a distinction, as noted earlier, between knowledge and knowing. When I think about the project through this distinction, I can conclude that our collaboration generated a bundle of knowledge claims on the well-being of young refugees that we were able to compare and link with previous research on the subject. Our results here were, for the most part, consistent with earlier findings related, for example, to the importance of belonging for young refugees' well-being and how that can be supported through art. On the other hand, the project developed into something that I think can be better described as knowing in the sense of "learning how to live and act in concert with others" (Arendt 1958) while simultaneously acknowledging and appreciating the participants' personal experiences and knowledges.

Finally, my feeling (but not my knowledge) is that, in the end, the young men in Valomo had only a vague idea of how the theatre project and the research process were related. We did not realise this shortcoming during the project and missed the opportunity to explicate to them that their life stories provided meaningful information not only for research but also for important data for political decision making. In retrospect, it would have been important to end the process with a meeting with the young men to share and discuss our findings together. Instead, we conducted a final interview in which we asked the young men about their thoughts and feelings about the project. Their comments to us on that occasion were polite but scant, leaving us uncertain about "how they really felt" about our collaboration, even when they had talked to the coaches about the project in positive and appreciative terms.

The story of the youth – important contributors to the knowledge construction, but did they see it? (*The author collective*)

We find it essential to also reflect on the project from the perspective of the young men involved. This account has been reconstructed by the author collective because, at its writing, we no longer had direct access to the 2018 group. We cannot claim to be representing their "voice", yet, we assume that, as the result of our collective memory work and analysis, we will be able to bring up some relevant points about what the young men gained from the project knowledge-wise and how they felt about it overall. Olli's reflections particularly play an important role here, because he was in daily contact with the young people throughout the collaboration.

The starting point of the study was to approach these young men as the experts in their own lives and experiences. The researchers sought to even out the power differentials between the participants and interact with the group in such a way that they would not themselves pose as knowledge authorities. However, despite their good intentions, this did not always work out very well. In retrospect, we think that it was probably difficult for the young men to grasp what academic research means and what was supposed to happen in the project. This hiatus stems mainly from

the project including elements of co-research methodology, which meant that the researchers were unable to clearly explain the objectives of both the research and the process to the group when the project started. Some participants' limited language skills also set their own limitations on the interactions. The coaches sometimes commented on the researchers' "difficult language" and occasionally ended up "translating" their speech to the group to explain the matters more simply.

Despite having some problems understanding what the research project was about, the young men seemed to appreciate that the researchers wanted to listen seriously to their thoughts and experiences. They were also interested in the theatre project. None of the young men had been to the theatre before nor were they familiar with what kind of cultural institution it represented, which makes it understandable why their visit later to the local theatre house and the visit of the Playback Theatre group in Valomo was an inspiring experience for many. Seeing their stories acted out in front of their eyes clearly amazed and delighted them. Some reflected on the played-back stories verbally by stating, for example, that "that's exactly what I felt in that situation, but now I think I could have acted differently". It was interesting to see how the young men were able to quickly embrace the idea of storytelling, the importance of sharing stories and utilising Playback Theatre as a means of looking back at their lives from a different perspective (Vettrainoa, Linds & Jindal-Snape 2017). It was, moreover, an empowering experience for many of them to see their stories presented on stage, as they later commented to the coaches. These young men who are used to living in a socially and societally marginalised position became at least momentarily visible through our project.

It is difficult to say anything exact regarding what we can conclude about the kind of knowledge the young men gained through the project. It needs to be pointed out that the research project was part of the overall programme at Valomo, which makes it difficult to distinguish its meaning and impact for those young people from the other programme activities. However, we can still propose that they learned something about, for example, the institution of the university and its meaning for Finnish society, as well as about the meanings of theatre as an art form and a cultural institution. They also acquired new perspectives on their life course, past choices and future possibilities through the theatre project.

We in the author collective also have different emphases in our interpretations of how the young men experienced the project. As Tiina sees it (and worries), the young men were hardly able to properly grasp what their significance and contribution to the research ultimately was. From Olli's perspective, the theatre project and the discussions with the researchers brought new elements to their lives and provided useful knowledge about Finnish society. He also stresses that it was important for the young men to be treated respectfully by the researchers because they usually suffer from structural marginalisation and everyday racism.

Minna would like to draw attention to the meaning of the closing performance. The short play made the young men's stories visceral and tangible to the audience, while it simultaneously justified their past experiences of conflict, violence

and flight, as well as the hardships involved in settling in Finland. They were able to feel that “I too matter, I am a valuable human being” from the respectful and sensitive portrayal of their experiences on stage. This was possible to sense and partly hear from the young men as they watched the final play and later verbally commented on it.

Conclusion

Our experiences of research collaboration in the context of the Valomo programme support the argument that the results of co-constructed research are not easy to put into conceptual findings. We think that participatory research should be very careful when engaging in collective knowledge work not to marginalise or tune out different voices for the sake of producing knowledge and research publications that the scientific community sanctions as “proper”. In fact, we might apply here the same principle that participatory research ethics employs in which all research participants have an equal right to be heard and taken into account and no one’s contribution is “wrong”. Perhaps it is equally important to accept that all participants have the right to their own knowledge and to (re)present it in public.

The requirement for conceptually representable knowledge is also problematic in another sense. Think, for example, about young research participants like the young men in Valomo. We were in no position to require them to have previous or conceptualised knowledge of the theme of the study or to engage them in the formation of theoretical knowledge after the project. Theory-building was also demanding for us (the researchers), and it took time. It is important to recognise the possibility, when collaborating on research with young people, that the collaboration may produce a wide range of experiences, learnings and outcomes that even researchers may not be able to put into argumentative knowledge. Sometimes it happens that the young people and researchers are able to analyse data together and build joint research presentations based on it. However, not only is this not the kind of outcome that research involving young people can require in principle, but it is also not the case that young people could be easily converted to “semi-professional” researchers who would replicate similar scientific practices that we as academics have trained ourselves in. Experienced researchers using participatory and co-research methods are well aware that each process is unique, depending on both the objectives of the research and on the background, characteristics and expectations of the research participants, which then means that each project and process needs to be tailored to suit the context. In the Valomo case, we asked the young men to tell us stories about their lives and hoped that we could all learn something important through them. We did not demand anything else, and even when telling stories was voluntary, as research ethics states, everyone in the group seized the opportunity with some degree of enthusiasm.

We have been surprised by how far our research collaboration that occurred years ago has taken us and by the kinds of new initiatives it has engendered. We have continued to reflect on our collaboration within the collective, and we feel that

our knowledge, knowing and understanding of the 2018 project continue to evolve, with ever new layers of understanding added each time we meet and reflect on our experiences.

Note

- 1 The group of researchers included Päivi Honkatukia and Jarmo Rinne, in addition to Rättilä.

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