Silver Empowerment
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CHAPTER 6
MERITS OF CRITICAL MOMENTS OF DISEMPOWERMENT: ITERATIVE PRACTICES OF EMPOWERMENT AND DISEMPOWERMENT DURING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH OLDER PERSONS AS CO-RESEARCHERS

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1. PAR as a vehicle towards empowerment

Participatory action research (PAR) is often presented as a progressive way of doing research, because it is based on horizontal democracy – in other words, equal partnership between experts, researchers and end users in the process of creating new knowledge (Abma et al., 2019; Reason & Bradbury-Huang, 2007). This entails involvement of all those whose life and work are at stake during the research process. This involvement is grounded in the respect for and the need to include the voices of all people in the research in order to come to a proper understanding of our complex world. PAR and related research approaches acknowledge the capacities and strengths of people as credible knowers, even those who have not received formal training as researchers. Building on and mobilising the knowledge of people, including experiential and indigenous forms of knowledge, helps to better understand their life-world and makes research more relevant and impactful (Van Regenmortel, 2020). The egalitarian principals of PAR can empower people and entire local communities that are involved in research. But what empowerment actually means – whether the process of PAR can bring about a feeling of
disempowerment as well and how empowerment and disempowerment can become entangled within research – has not been sufficiently addressed in the academic literature so far.

One of the goals of PAR is to strengthen the empowerment of people involved in research. Empowerment is a complex, relational and multilayered concept. We define it here as

*people assuming control and mastery over their lives in the context of their social and political environment; they gain a sense of control and purposefulness to exert power as they participate in the democratic life of their community for social change.* (Wallerstein, 1992, p. 198; Van Regenmortel, 2008, 2009)

Empowerment is relational and situational; it needs to be developed and maintained on a daily basis vis-à-vis other people in particular situations and contexts (VanderPlaat, 1999; Sprague & Hayes, 2000). Empowerment also has a political dimension: societal structures may foster or hinder one’s mastery over situations. Our focus in this chapter lies on the empowerment that PAR can provide to older people who are directly (as co-researchers) or indirectly involved in research. The literature on participatory research with older people is expanding, but the results that are communicated often represent the end state of the project and recommendations for further implementation elsewhere (Backhouse et al., 2016; Dewar, 2005; Gilroy, 2003). The process of PAR itself, which we see as a relational process of co-learning and co-creation, falls beyond most of the available reports.

To demonstrate the (dis-)empowerment capabilities of PAR, we need to look at it through a care-ethical or moral-relational lens (Abma & Baur, 2014; Abma et al., 2020; Jacobs, 2006). For empowerment to take place, the researchers need to establish a relationship of trust, so the co-researchers can safely learn and explore their lives. The aim of this relational approach is to strengthen the voices of the co-researchers and to include as many perspectives as possible in the ongoing discussion during the research. PAR has an underlying normative and moral horizon, and it requires more than the proper use of methods. It aims first and foremost to create an open and safe space, or enabling niche (see Chapter 1), which enables the people involved to tell and share their stories in a setting they can trust and helps handle complicated group dynamics and unplanned shifts and needs. The prime focus is therefore to create a ‘communicative space’ in which everybody who is involved, including the researchers, feels mutually encouraged, respected and supported to join the process of generating knowledge. Given the complexity of this task, the facilitator needs to pay a lot of attention in order to create such
a communicative space, where all voices can be expressed and all perspectives are taken seriously and explored (Abma et al., 2019).

Although empowerment is central to PAR, the pathways that set empowerment in motion through PAR have not been studied sufficiently (ICPHR position paper 3, 2020). There are some indications that PAR studies might unintentionally even have disempowering effects on co-researchers, due to internal group dynamics among the co-researchers (Groot & Abma, 2020) or politically disempowering situations (Duijs et al., 2019). In the context of PAR with older people, little is known about the empowerment potential, although there are some exceptions (Baur & Abma, 2012). In a number of PAR research projects with older persons, we encountered both processes of empowerment and disempowerment. In this chapter, we focus on how older people and other stakeholders involved in PAR shape processes of empowerment and disempowerment and what the role and responsibility of the PAR facilitator is to counter disempowerment. Our insights will add to the emerging knowledge base of PAR with older people.

2. Participatory research project ‘To participate is to count’

Our data comes from a PAR project with older persons, conducted in the Dutch province Zeeland in 2017–2018. A detailed report of the impact of participatory research in this project has been published elsewhere (Bendien et al., 2020). In 2016, we as researchers were approached by a voluntary organisation called Festival of Recognition (further FoR), which was organising reminiscence sessions for people with dementia in Zeeland. Their goal was altruistic – to offer a meaningful activity to the growing number of people with dementia in their region. In cooperation with local museums, the FoR volunteers put together about seventy so-called travel bags, sets of old-fashioned objects, organised thematically, aiming to facilitate the remembering process and unlock lively conversations with older people. At the moment of the first contact, the organisation counted fifty older volunteers. It was run by older persons and had already succeeded in securing funds for their activities for five consecutive years.

2.1 A new challenge

FoR had two goals: to extend the reach of the reminiscence sessions by involving community-dwelling older persons and to ensure the continuity of the work by means of tailor-made PR activities. Beside these practical goals, the
volunteers and the researchers together formulated the research question: whether and how participatory research can facilitate the participation of volunteers in the decision-making process about the activities and the future of FoR. This question reflected a shortcoming within the FoR organisation, which at that moment was almost entirely run by just two volunteers. To ensure the growth and continuity of the voluntary work, the organisation needed a more democratic structure that included closer involvement of all the FoR members. Based on these goals, the researchers and the FoR representatives prepared a research proposal, which was subsequently approved and funded by the Dutch charity fund FNO. The study lasted sixteen months (2017–2018).

2.2 Our choice for PAR

It was the researchers’ idea to use PAR as a methodological design for the project. The egalitarian principles of this methodological approach appeared to match the FoR aim to redistribute the responsibilities within the organisation and to stimulate a closer involvement of the volunteers in all FoR activities. The participatory approach was presented to and discussed with the FoR board. The potential advantages of PAR that the FoR board found particularly attractive concerned the organisational structure of FoR. In the case FoR would grow, which was one of the project targets, the organisation would need more older volunteers to address the logistical issues of organising a growing number of reminiscence sessions throughout the province. So PAR was accepted by the FoR board as a methodological design of the project.

2.3 Our co-researchers

One of the FoR board members, who was also the local leader of the project, took the initiative to recruit co-researchers for the project team among the volunteers. All the volunteers were invited. No mention about the PAR methodology was made in advance, since the volunteers were not familiar with the concept. Also no inclusion or exclusion criteria were mentioned in the invitation. The invitation was repeated during the kick-off meeting, with room for questions regarding the project. Initially, ten volunteers expressed interest; they were invited to participate in the project team meetings. They were told they were free to take some time before committing themselves to the project on a permanent basis. This approach to the recruitment remained unchanged over the duration of the project. More volunteers joined the team at later stages of the project. They all had the opportunity to attend the meetings and to make up their minds about participating. The researcher’s
initial estimation was that the team-building process would take two or three months, given that some of the volunteers were already working together. In fact, it took about six months before the core project team emerged. Several critical moments, which we shall describe in detail later on, were responsible for that adjusted timeline. In the end, the project team consisted of seven women volunteers (aged between fifty-four and eighty-seven) and one researcher (fifty-four, first author). One of the researcher’s first tasks was to explain the basic principles of PAR and to make sure they were retained. The participatory design of the project was based on the premise that the team would discuss and, if necessary, sharpen the goals of the project and decide on the course of action in close collaboration with the other FoR volunteers. The participatory design included various methods of data collection, such as participant observation, notes of team meetings, reports of brainstorming sessions with FoR volunteers, interviews and questionnaires. The data analysis, which included team members’ reflections on the PAR process, was conducted during the team meetings and in the course of individual conversations between the co-researchers and the researcher.

3. Critical moments of disempowerment

Using our empirical data, we shall present four critical moments that we associate with practices of disempowerment during participatory research with older persons. We shall elaborate on their learning potential, the responsibilities of the researchers, which we call ‘ethics work’ (Abma, 2020; Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2018) when such moments occur, and the conditions under which they may be ‘turned around’ to create a positive impact on all parties involved. We call these critical and ethically salient moments because certain perspectives and underlying value commitments of the people who were involved in the research were conflicting, creating an impasse. If they had not been attended to adequately, the situations that we describe could have undermined the progress of the entire project and even brought it to a halt. The members of the project team might have felt disempowered by certain developments or behaviour, which could have induced them to leave the team. We felt these situations were in need of critical reflection by the entire team, and we hoped each of these situations had a learning potential which, if applied in a timely manner, could in fact empower the members of the team. Critical moments can relate to a single situation or to a pattern of actions and behaviour during the various stages of the project. Our descriptions of the critical points have the same format: we present an issue, we illustrate it with examples from our
project and we reflect on it, using an ethical approach within participatory research based on ‘ethics work’ (Abma, 2020).

3.1 Critical moment I: Is PAR for me?

The first critical moment is about the question whether and why an older volunteer should contemplate becoming a member of a PAR team. The reasoning that, due to their fragility, older persons are represented in participatory projects less frequently than other groups has been addressed in the literature before (Dewar, 2005; Gilroy, 2003; Ray, 2007). The growing number of PAR projects with older persons encouraged us to question that assertion. We decided to look for a more specific explanation why certain older persons choose to take part in participatory research and others do not.

During our project, the question of eligibility to become a member of the PAR team emerged during the team-building stage, and it continued to have reverberations over the duration of the project. Eligibility is understood here in terms of an individual’s capacity to fulfil the expectations that the participatory project requires: jointly taking part in the meetings/brainstorming sessions, drawing up an action plan, taking responsibility for certain tasks and taking action when necessary. We assumed that the largest barriers that older FoR volunteers could face when invited to become members of the PAR team were the volunteers’ physical or mental capacity related to fragile health and the expected time investment volunteering would require.

The recruiting for the research team was conducted by the chairperson of the FoR board, whom all the volunteers knew very well. No restriction in regard to age or ability was mentioned in the recruitment letter. Moreover, a special remark was made for persons with restricted mobility, that their participation was also welcome and that transportation would be arranged by the project team. The dynamics of building the team were complex. Some volunteers who joined the group at the start left shortly afterwards. Others joined the group at later stages. The critical moments we describe below concerns (1) the members who left because their expectations of PAR did not match the state of their physical and mental health, and (2) the members with fragile health who did stay on the project for the same reason.

Examples from the project

Initially, ten older volunteers responded to the invitation. Two of them left the group soon afterwards. One of them, who had joined the project team at the start, had lost her partner shortly before. In the beginning, taking
part in the project appeared to her to be a sensible way to distract herself from her painful thoughts and memories. However, the active engagement and the degree of commitment that PAR demanded, especially during the initial stages of the project, did not match her expectations. Another older volunteer left the group after the first meeting, explaining that her fragile health would not allow her to take up new responsibilities within the project. All the same, both women continued doing voluntary work for FoR, thus staying in contact with their network.

During the following months, after the project had officially commenced, three new volunteers joined the project team. One of them, Elisabeth (seventy-six), had also lost her partner a couple years before. She felt the loss acutely and could not talk about her late husband without becoming emotional. She also had a serious heart condition and talked openly about the fragile state of her health with the team. In contrast to the experience of the volunteer who had left the group, she saw her involvement in the project as a way to stay in control of her emotions. She resisted the idea that her health condition would define what she could or could not do. Being actively engaged in a meaningful way was exactly what empowered her and gave her strength to go on with her life.

**Reflection on the critical point**

These examples demonstrate that taking part in participatory research is not always associated with empowerment where older persons are concerned. The personal circumstances, health and the level of fragility varied among our potential partners. Some of them were better off refraining from new activities. When the first two women left the group, the researcher considered approaching them individually to try to convince them to stay on board. She would have been driven by two incentives: first, her own conviction that PAR was good for older participants and would have a positive impact on their lives; second, without enough team members, the project would fail. Whereas both incentives had empowerment at the basis of her reasoning, the result could have been disappointing for all parties involved. Besides, keeping people from leaving the team on the grounds of saving the project would be what we can call a lack of ethical sensitivity. Furthermore, the two women in question could have left the project at a later stage after all, and the negative impact of their departure would then have been felt much more strongly, both within and outside the team.

All this means that what we as researchers experience as a practice of empowerment during PAR can have a very different meaning for the participants. The example with Elisabeth illustrates this point. In her case, the impulse of
the researcher could have been to protect her from harm by excluding her from certain project activities. But as the conversations with Elisabeth at later stages of the project showed, such a condescending attitude could well have resulted in undermining Elisabeth’s good will and her being in control of her own decisions.

From the first critical moment, we learn that empowerment and disempowerment in PAR are embedded in practices of inclusion and exclusion and that the impact of participation of older persons cannot be assessed without taking into account their autonomous and relational choices. Fragile physical and mental health does not necessarily lead to disempowerment, as long as the persons themselves are well in charge of their decisions, including the decision to not participate in research. This critical issue also makes us aware of our normative ideals as participatory researchers (PAR is empowering for older people) and how these ideals can become disempowering when implemented in a paternalistic or dogmatic way.

3.2 Critical moment II: Am I worthy?

The second critical moment relates to the societal imaginary of ageing and the self-perception of older persons (Levy, 2009; Lindenberg, 2019). When older persons are invited to participate as co-researchers in PAR, they – as well as the researchers – have certain expectations in regard to their involvement in the research activities. The societal perception of ageing, however, can be experienced as disempowering at the moment when an older person considers joining a research team. The predominant image of older persons as fragile, infirm or needy, which is often conveyed in the media and political discourses, can lead to self-stigmatisation and impede older persons from participating in research (Schuurman et al., 2020).

Examples from the project

Martha (eighty-seven) joined our project later than most of the other volunteers. She had just started as a volunteer at FoR and did not feel confident enough for that work, as she explained later. She was curious though, and that was the reason why she had joined the PAR team, albeit provisionally at first. It was much later, when she became one of the most active team members, that she explained how she felt about herself at the beginning of the project:

I have always done voluntary work, also when I was working. However, eventually, especially when you have passed eighty, they think that you don’t want to anymore, don’t they? Or that you are not able to do it anymore.
Anyway, they don’t invite you any longer. And that is a pity. And then I heard about the Festival of Recognition and I thought, I could do that, and I am going to apply. Because I think that you also do it for yourself. It goes in both directions, doesn’t it?

**Reflection on the critical point**

Martha’s experience shows us how the societal division on the basis of chronological age can have a double negative influence on an older person. First, the person feels excluded from activities on the grounds of perceived fragility. Such a protective behaviour, which can also be called paternalistic, does not take into account the opinion of the individual person. Second, the older person can internalise this imaginary of old age, which disempowers the individual even further, because she or he would tend to comply with these images and behave accordingly. Martha’s example was different. PAR offered her an opportunity to do meaningful work, irrespective of her age and health condition. With the support of the team, she managed to turn the disempowering image of her own old age into an example that repeatedly inspired the entire team. For instance, she openly voiced her dissatisfaction with the ‘societal ado about loneliness’, stressing that ‘talking without taking action would not help people who feel lonely’. To show how it could be done, she placed an announcement in the local Catholic Union newspaper just before Christmas, inviting people who felt lonely on Christmas day to join her for a cup of tea. That Christmas day, she received eleven guests who had responded to her invitation. As Martha put it herself, empowerment goes both ways: you give and you receive something in return; it is reciprocal.

Martha’s example entails another important lesson of how practices of empowerment and disempowerment can interact. An important condition for Martha to turn away from self-stigmatising thoughts about her age towards active participation was the communicative space that had been created within the PAR project. That space was based on equality of all the group members, irrespective of their chronological age or former experience, and was characterised by mutual trust and a feeling of belonging. The creation of such a space involved a lot of ethics work on the part of the researcher and the rest of the team (see also the next critical moment). ‘We want to hear what everybody’s thoughts are on the matter, and we do not interrupt each other’ was the ground rule of the team, to which everybody agreed at the very beginning. The application of this rule was not self-evident, though. For instance, it took some time before the members of the team started to present their opinion openly, and even more time before they actually started listening to each other.
In the beginning, the researcher and the local leader of the project addressed Martha directly, asking for her opinion and by doing this offering her the floor to speak. Soon, it became the norm within the group to ask somebody who had kept silent to give an opinion on the matter. Martha had kept quiet when she first joined the team. Only when she saw that the opinions that were given did not have a hierarchy of power, that her life experience as the oldest member of the team was an advantage and not an obstacle in the eyes of the others, did she find her voice, literally and figuratively. The respect and genuine interest with which her co-researchers listened to her was empowering for Martha as well as for the rest of the team. Martha became one of the focal points of the end conference organised by the project team, where the co-researchers and the researcher presented the results of the project.

3.3 Critical moment III: Who is in charge?

The third critical moment touches upon gender and power sensitivity in PAR projects with older persons. It demonstrates the importance of the methodological and ethical principles of PAR regarding the practices of empowerment and disempowerment (Abma et al., 2019; Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2018; Groot-Sluijsmans, 2021). It also shows what can happen to a project and its team if those principles are violated.

PAR is based on a democratic process of decision-making. From the first meeting when a new team comes together, it is important to ‘set the rules’, like mutual respect for the opinion of others, equal opportunity to voice points of view and distribution of responsibilities among the team members and others. The principles of PAR, while clear and attractive on paper, are not always easy to apply in practice (Jacobs, 2006). The older co-researchers, for instance, could belong to a generation that was brought up in times when authoritative power and fixed gender roles were still in place (Groot & Abma, 2019). Most of the female members of our PAR team belonged to the Silent Generation who were used to a one-breadwinner family model. They were supposed to be good housewives and mothers and often were obliged to quit their jobs, if they had one at all, after they got married. They were silent doers, informal caregivers in the broadest sense of the word, who also shouldered an impressive volume of voluntary work in their neighbourhoods during their entire lives.

Examples from the project

The initial group of volunteers who were interested in the project consisted of eight women and two men. Both men were retired managers with long careers.
They were sincerely interested in the goals of the project and eager to invest their time and skills in the project activities, just like the rest of the group. The first meetings of the group were chaotic, which is not unusual for such projects. After all, the members of the team needed time to get to know each other and at the same time to adjust to the principles of participatory research. The researcher’s challenging role was to explain how an inclusive discussion can be conducted and to facilitate the egalitarian process of interaction.

However, the first meetings demonstrated that there wasn’t any room yet for an inclusive conversation. The team agreed that each issue on the agenda would be discussed by making rounds, so that every member of the team could voice her or his opinion. In practice, however, the procedure was often thwarted by one of the male members, who dominated the entire conversation. This happened so frequently that one of the team members, who was a FoR board member as well, felt the need to address him directly and ask him not to interrupt the others. He consented to the request but soon afterwards resumed his previous behaviour. The tension within the group increased and the meetings became strained. Then one initially enthusiastic female member left the group without providing a clear explanation, so the researcher feared that the others could soon follow her example. Then, after a disagreement about the wordings in one of the project documents, that same male team member left the group. The second one stayed on for a couple months but, in the end, he left the group as well. Both male members explained that the difference between the researcher’s approach to the project and their own views on how the project should be run was the main reason for leaving the team.

**Reflection on the critical point**

Losing a team member is always a loss. In this case, the two male members felt disempowered by the participatory approach, which did not match their experience and expectations. Their background had taught them that making plans top-down and following the chosen strategy was the only way to be successful. PAR employs a very different approach to planning and action. In PAR, plans and actions are in fact the result of a research process and not its starting points. The messiness that can accompany the process of coming to a conclusion together is also a part of the team-building process (Cook, 2009). It is a way of conducting research that has little in common with the traditional managerial approach.

Looking back, it is difficult to say whether there could have been a way to keep those men on board. The situation was complex, time sensitive and emotionally charged. At that point, open reflection on the situation within
the team was not possible because a communicative space of trust and mutual respect had not been created yet. Only after the first male member had left the group, four months after the start of the project, did an open conversation between the rest of the team take place for the first time. The female members of the team began to speak up and give their opinion on the project planning. They expressed their joy about the fact that they finally understood what participatory approach stood for. As one of them put it: ‘oh, now I understand! We may decide ourselves!’ They felt empowered by the discussions in the new communicative space, where they felt safe and listened to. These women carried this project all the way to its successful conclusion. Eventually, they took charge of all project activities, leaving to the researcher the role of observer and facilitator. Both male ex-members followed the development from a distance, and the team was grateful when one of them became involved in the preparations for the end conference of the project.

Much can be learned from this critical moment. First, the practices of empowerment and disempowerment are gender-sensitive, especially where older persons are involved. The historical and cultural background of the people involved, their life courses and careers are all important during the team-building process. During this process, the emotional aspects can become extreme for the participants and researchers alike, which can even derail the entire project. An open discussion is helpful but not always possible at a given moment. Finally, the empowerment of one person can lead to disempowerment of another one. This is not always a choice we make; it is the process that we go through during PAR. As researchers, we could not always interfere, but we always share responsibility for what takes place within the project.

3.4 Critical moment IV: Dead after the deadline?

The fourth critical moment refers to the complex organisational dynamics of the entire project, based on the expectations of the participating older volunteers and the donor organisation, which expects certain deliverables and sets deadlines for the project. The ultimate goal of the research team involved in any PAR is successful continuation of the activities after the project has officially come to an end. If this is the case, then one can talk about sustainable change that PAR has brought about, including the empowerment of the participants, who were able to plan, take action and reflect on their activities on their own. That also means that the learning process that the PAR team underwent collectively during the project has been successful and that there has been enough time for the co-researchers to claim and assume ownership of the current and future project activities.
Two organisational aspects of our project can be described as disempowering: the time limitations and the binding condition of the charity fund to specify certain deliverables for the project. The project duration was limited to sixteen months and extension was not negotiable. The project was financed from the last round of a national programme called ‘More resilience – longer independent at home’. From experience, we know that in order for it to produce sustainable change, participatory research requires time. The description of the third critical point already demonstrated how slow a team-building process can unfold and how long it can take before the PAR principles sink in. In our case, it took about six months before our group of older volunteers began to act as a team. By then one third of the project time had already been spent. The team members discussed the time issue many times over the course of the project. They voiced their frustration about what they experienced as ‘making no sense’. They kept asking why the project could not continue for another six more months if the general goal of the charity fund’s programme was to empower older persons living at home? Our older volunteers were convinced that certain actions could be planned differently, less hastily and that more people could have been involved in FoR activities if the project had been allowed extra time. Their dissatisfaction with the time frame was so strong that two team members addressed the researcher personally more than once, requesting her to transmit their opinion to the fund authorities. The fund’s representative responded respectfully to this, showing an understanding for the request but nevertheless stuck to the deadlines, which could not be altered.

Another issue that put pressure on the project was the deliverables that had been included in the research documentation. They had to be tangible and measurable. Therefore, the planning had to contain a number of targets. The PAR team was expected to have attracted at least fifty new volunteers for FoR by the end of the project, as well as at least one hundred community-dwelling older persons as participants in FoR reminiscence sessions throughout the province. In fact, FoR had much more than fifty new volunteers by the end of the project and had also managed to organise reminiscence sessions for more than five hundred community-dwelling older people in Zeeland. Whereas the final figures were very inspiring, the process that led to those achievements has been far from linear. The details of that process are described elsewhere (Bendien et al., 2020). Moreover, these measurable outcomes did not reflect the important intangible outcomes and impact of the PAR project, such as the individual empowerment of the co-researchers. At the end of the project, at least two of the co-researchers took the position of leadership within this
voluntary organisation, one co-researcher became engaged in a large voluntary project abroad, and two other team members established a new foundation that publishes a free-of-charge reminiscence newspaper in the province of Zeeland. The research team felt that narratives would have given a much better picture of what this project brought about.

**Reflection on the critical point**

For participatory research the ethical sensitivity of planning based on figures is high. PAR is not just a methodology; it is a process of personal, interpersonal and community-based change based on learning. There are many unknown factors that cannot be forecast with certainty at the moment a project proposal is submitted, such as the personal features of the team members, their group dynamics and the commitment to the project goals of all parties involved. When the proposal for our project was being written, neither the researchers nor the representatives of FoR could lean on any statistical or other data that could predict the outcome of the project. Therefore, the commitment of the team was to a large extent based on their good intentions only. The planned deliverables of the project were under a lot of pressure when, after the first six months, the team had come to the conclusion that various professional organisations in Zeeland were not prepared to respond quickly and cooperate with our voluntary organisation as we had hoped they would.

The time pressure and the pressure to deliver did not derail the project in the end. The solution came from the team itself, showing how the framework of organisational disempowerment that had been imposed could be neutralised by a creative process and joint action. The team came up with the idea to publish a free-of-charge reminiscence newspaper, which would be of direct interest for the older inhabitants of Zeeland and also contain invitations to FoR’s reminiscence sessions.

One of the most important elements that helped the co-researchers to overcome the effects of disempowerment caused by the pressure of time and deliverables was that they acted as a team, which we call *relational empowerment* (VanderPlaat, 1999). This meant sharing responsibilities and openly discussing all the failures of the first stages of the project. During those discussions, the language was almost rough at times, and some of the volunteers became quite emotional. Their pride and honour stimulated the feeling that they should deliver what they had promised to do. The challenge that they faced was to show to all parties involved that older volunteers, in fact seven older women, could, with the support from the other FoR volunteers, indeed effectuate substantial change.
The researcher felt the same kind of pressure as the rest of the team, but the feeling was not new to her. As researchers, we are often expected to work within a time frame that is too short to achieve our goals, working overtime and sometimes promising to deliver more than we know is reasonable – all this to secure funding for the project. In participatory research, you share part of this kind of pressure with the volunteers who, if paid at all, are compensated on a very basic level only. The financial accountability, while important in itself, can therefore also have a disempowering effect on participatory research with older persons. Such thoughts can become disempowering to the researchers themselves as well. At such moments, the support of colleagues and critical friends is invaluable.

The main lesson here is that in order to overcome the disempowering effects of organisational issues, you need to trust your team and take responsibility for any outcomes the project can have. For traditional projects, this is the task of the researchers only, but PAR is about sharing successes and also failures of research with the co-researchers. Doing PAR is challenging but, when employed the right way, PAR will never feel like a solitary process. A key issue is that PAR is time sensitive and often requires time. When the time is right, which means when the PAR team starts acting as a team, an iterative exchange between situations of disempowerment and empowerment can be observed. Without proper ethics and personal involvement, empowerment can turn into disempowerment, but when proper attention is paid to that, the situations of disempowerment can be turned into an empowering process of learning and co-creation. During those moments, the researcher, too, can often learn a lot from the team, especially from the older volunteers with a life worth of experience.

4. Discussion: Lessons learned

The analysis of the four critical moments shows that empowerment or disempowerment that occurs during PAR is a moral-relational process that requires continuous reflection from all parties involved. PAR can foster relational empowerment of a mutually supportive process, mobilising the strengths of people. Relational empowerment emerges through interaction with others (VanderPlaat, 1999; Sprague & Hayes, 2000). Yet, in this process, disempowerment can also occur, and this will challenge the researcher to continuously engage with ethics work and emotion work at all stages of the research (Woelders-Peters, 2020; Groot-Sluijsmans, 2021).

The first lesson learned is that empowerment or disempowerment can be connected with practices of inclusion and exclusion. This means that the
introduction of PAR on an individual or community level must be followed by explanation and fine-tuning in regard to the wishes and assumptions of all interested parties. The researchers as well as the potential participants can be influenced by societal clichés about who may or may not participate in research. An open conversation about PAR before the start of the project can reduce these barriers, but that takes time, which can become an issue because of the project’s limited time frame. If, however, the participants have sufficient information and time in advance to make their decisions, then there is more chance that, whatever decision they take in regard to their participation in the project, they will feel empowered by it. Not participation itself but the possibility to make their own decisions and express what they need to participate in a manner that is meaningful to them empowers older people. This implies that researchers need to be open to the expectations and ideas of older people about what makes participation meaningful for them. As we saw in the first critical moment, researchers can overestimate or underestimate the capacities of older people. They should always be aware of their own normative assumptions regarding what older people can and want to contribute to the research.

The second lesson is that the practices of disempowerment, as in the case with the volunteer who felt excluded from the voluntary work because of her age, can be internalised; to address that, we need to have an open and safe space, or enabling niches, where people can experiment and where each opinion and each team member matters. Participation and empowerment are not static phenomena that develop in a linear fashion (Van Regenmortel, 2008). Participation and empowerment cannot be ‘given’ to people; that would be a paternalistic move, introducing a hierarchy and power asymmetry. Giving power would imply that one can also take that power away again. Empowerment needs to grow from ‘within’, and that process cannot be steered or quickly fixed by an overambitious researcher or policymaker. On the contrary, an overambitious professional may lack the sensitivity and empathy to tune into people’s deeply held, and often unconscious, ideas about older people’s capacities. When older people feel isolated, cut off from the rest of society, lacking a role and without perspective or control, one cannot just expect them to be willing to participate. What one can do is create a welcoming, social and safe environment. Through interaction, people can strengthen their ‘power from within’ and develop confidence in themselves and the group (Baur & Abma, 2012). To paraphrase Paulo Freire: people cannot empower themselves, nor can others. It is through communal experiences that people, who experience a lack of influence or the burdening of stereotypes that
marginalise their position in society, can become empowered. Empowerment understood as growth and not as an external activity which is directed at fixing a person can be an answer to the paternalistic ageist approaches where older persons are turned into subjects to protect or activate.

The third lesson is related to the principles of PAR (ICPHR, 2013), which, generally speaking, have to be observed, even if it means that some of the team members could feel disempowered on a specific moment. The implementation of ethical principles in PAR is closely linked to the personal moral compass and intuition of the researcher. Blindly following the principles can result in ‘thinning out’ the good ethical foundation on which the relationships are built in the first place (Abma, 2020). Besides, as we have seen, power and ownership within PAR can turn into gender-sensitive matters. They entail a lot of emotion work on the part of the researcher as well as the co-researchers. Emotion work includes the efforts to show the ‘right’ emotions in a particular situation, according to Arlie Hochshield (Abma, 2020). In PAR it is expected that the researchers are empathic and caring, yet there are limits to what PAR researchers can do, and there are occasions when researchers may cross their own personal boundaries. The first author of this piece reflects how this work can be emotionally intensive. This is a direct result of the relational and ethical dimensions of participatory research in relation to people who find themselves in marginalised positions. The PAR researcher is not neutral and may encounter situations of injustice that make an appeal on the responsibilities of the researcher. Think of the situation when the co-researchers requested the researcher to renegotiate the time frame with the funding agency. The researcher sees the irrationality of the situation and tries to change the situation but is not able to do so. A way out of such emotionally charged situations is an open conversation about the issue at hand, which, again, is difficult to carry out if the communicative space of trust has not yet been created.

The final lesson is that almost any practice of disempowerment can be turned into empowerment after all. We can identify several conditions that facilitate such a turnaround. First, the team must act as a team, including the researcher. The teamwork means that emotions can be showed openly, and frustrations, too, can be aired. Second, the openness about mistakes and failures must be as welcome as sharing a success. Once again, this would require a safe space, where the team members can trust each other. Third, any project team needs critical friends, within or outside academia, so that complex situations involving difficult decisions and emotional work can be held against a new, refreshing, critical and constructive perspective.
5. Conclusion

In our vision, PAR is not only a technical endeavour but a practice in need of reflection on normative and ethically challenging situations. We have shown how, in the context of involving older people as co-researchers, PAR can stimulate empowerment but at the same time can create situations of disempowerment. This indicates that, in practice, normative ideals of social inclusion and justice may be hard to realise, for example, because we as researchers and the older people themselves, too, have internalised notions regarding ageism, which can lead to an underestimation of their capacities and desire to participate. Therefore, PAR researchers have a moral responsibility for ‘ethics work’ (Abma, 2020). This is more than just following ethical principles and codes of conduct. Ethics work entails the work and effort one puts into recognising ethically salient aspects of situations, developing oneself as a reflexive practitioner, paying attention to emotions and relationships, working out the right course of action together and reflecting on it in the company of critical friends (Abma, 2020). Ethics work is practical because it is always situated and attuned to the particulars of a situation.

Working in this way, PAR with older people extends instrumental and proportional knowledge about their lives, and it yields knowledge related to morally and relationally challenging situations that they encounter, living a meaningful life where one is still valued as an older person. The co-creation of this kind of knowledge is empowering for everybody involved if deliberate attention is paid to a communicative space where each participant can share experiences and mutually create and nurture an ‘empowering society’ (Van Regenmortel, 2002; Van Regenmortel & Fret, 2000). As Tine Van Regenmortel pointed out, an empowering society is a society that responds creatively to the capacities of individuals, including older people, organisations, groups and communities, leaving room for autonomy, stimulating partnerships, and providing reinforcement and silent support where necessary. In a society like this, attention is paid to structural mechanisms of social exclusion, including ageism, whereas opportunities for everyone are promoted through active participation.

Notes

1. All names here are pseudonyms.
References


