

Confronting the Complexities of “Co-Production” in Participatory Health Research  
A Critical, Reflexive Approach to Power Dynamics in a Collaborative Project on Parkinson’s Dance

Phillips, Louise Jane; Frølund, Lisbeth; Christensen-Strynø, Maria Bee

*Published in:*  
Qualitative Health Research

*DOI:*  
[10.1177/10497323211003863](https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323211003863)

*Publication date:*  
2021

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Phillips, L. J., Frølund, L., & Christensen-Strynø, M. B. (2021). Confronting the Complexities of “Co-Production” in Participatory Health Research: A Critical, Reflexive Approach to Power Dynamics in a Collaborative Project on Parkinson’s Dance. *Qualitative Health Research*, 31(7), 1290–1305.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323211003863>

**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

**Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [rucforsk@kb.dk](mailto:rucforsk@kb.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# **Confronting the complexities of “co-production” in participatory health research: a critical, reflexive approach to power dynamics in a collaborative project on Parkinson’s dance**

Louise Phillips (Corresponding Author)<sup>i</sup>, Lisbeth Frølund and Maria Bee Strynø-Christensen

Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University, Universitetsvej 1, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark.

## **Abstract**

The literature on participatory health research describes various ways of overcoming obstacles to the co-production of knowledge by redressing power imbalances. In this article, we propose an approach to understanding and analysing co-production which conceptualizes power, not as an obstacle, but as an intrinsic, productive force in bringing “co-production” into being. In the approach, “co-production” is understood and analysed as a tensional, complex, unstable entity that emerges in power-imbued negotiation of meanings throughout the research process. Focusing on a participatory project on Parkinson’s dance, the article’s purpose is to illustrate how the approach can generate knowledge about the complexities of “co-production”. The article also demonstrates how the approach can provide a foundation for a relational ethics that confronts the complexities head-on. In conclusion, we discuss the insights gained into the possibilities and challenges of co-production and the value of the approach as a foundation for relational ethics.

**Keywords:** co-production; dialogic communication theory; embodied, affective knowing; participatory health research; power; reflexivity; relational ethics.

## Introduction

*“We dancers are not objects, we are part of the research. That’s a nice thing to think about.”*

Grethe, co-researcher, panel at symposium, Parkinson’s dance project, 19.10.19

*“I’m sitting here thinking that this reminds me of going to university, that I’m at a lecture [..]*

*There’re a lot of jargon and methods words and that kind of thing”.*

Lone, dance teacher, steering group meeting, Parkinson’s dance project, 23.09.19

The first citation presents a positive picture of empowered participants with an active role in the research as opposed to objects of the researcher’s analytical gaze. The second citation starkly presents a highly unequal relationship in which the authoritative voice of academia appears monological and exclusionary. Both citations stem from the participatory health research project which we, the three authors of this article, are carrying out as the university researchers together with co-researchers –people diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease and spouses who attend weekly dance classes specifically for people with Parkinson’s and (optionally) their spouses (or other family members) in the Copenhagen area, Denmark. The dance teachers who run the weekly dance classes have also played an active role in the project as “bridge builders”, helping the university researchers to establish relationships with the dancers and supporting the collaborative research process as members of the steering group. The first citation is from a panel discussion at a project symposium; the second is from a project steering group meeting about the planning of a collaborative workshop. We suggest in this article that the juxtaposition of the two citations exposes tensions intrinsic to power dynamics in co-production. The article offers an approach to understanding and analyzing the intrinsic tensions in co-production in participatory health research.

In line with the literature, we use “participatory health research” in the article as an umbrella term for an overlapping range of approaches variously labelled participatory health research (PHR), community-based participatory research (CBPR), participatory action research (PAR),

service user-led research, survivor-led research (mental health), public and patient involvement (PPI), inclusive research (IR) (with people with disabilities), arts-based research (ABR), and feminist ethics of care methodologies. Participatory health research has become widespread owing to the ascendancy of person- or patient-centeredness as a key tenet of health policy in many countries (e.g. Langberg et al., 2019). Across the different approaches, “co-production” is considered central. According to the proclaimed aims, university researchers and people who use health and social care services co-produce knowledge in specially designed fora in dialogue between the different forms of knowledge they bring into play (e.g. Groot et al., 2019; MacFarlane & Roche, 2019; Wilson et al., 2018).

The approaches share the ideal of democratizing knowledge production by cultivating multiple knowledge forms and empowering people and communities outside the university as co-researchers in the co-production of knowledge. Proponents assert that, by virtue of their experiences of living with illness, people who use health and social care services have expert knowledge that is of great value to research (e.g. Montoya & Kent, 2011; Read & Maslin-Prothero, 2011). On these grounds, they argue that the participation of service users as co-researchers in the co-production of knowledge enhances the quality of the knowledge (e.g. Abma et al., 2009; Belone et al., 2016). They also maintain that equal partnerships and relationships of mutual respect and trust between co-researchers, stakeholders and university researchers are prerequisites for mutual learning (e.g. Mayan & Daum, 2016). Moreover, they emphasize righting the wrongs of marginalization, stigmatization and social and health inequality through individual empowerment – the achievement of power and control over one’s own life – and community empowerment – the extension of the community’s ability to shape their own future (e.g. Belone et al., 2016; MacFarlane & Roche, 2019). Thus, the aims of participatory health research are not only to contribute to research but also, along activist lines, to further social justice and the health and well-being of co-researchers and communities (e.g. Wilson et al., 2018).

Many accounts of participatory health research point out that power imbalances represent obstacles to the co-production of knowledge (e.g. Abma, 2019; Belone et al., 2016; Read & Maslin-Prothero, 2011). These power asymmetries, it is suggested, are rooted in the historically privileged status of academics as authoritative knowers and in the historically greater truth-value ascribed to academic knowledge over other knowledge forms and to the quantitative paradigm over qualitative paradigms (e.g. Mayan & Daum, 2016; Wilson et al., 2018). It is recognized, then, that traditional knowledge hierarchies persist in participatory health research despite the ideal of democratizing knowledge production and aims of social justice and enhanced individual and community well-being (e.g. Groot et al., 2019; Rose & Kalathil, 2019).

Across the literature on participatory health research, researchers frequently describe ways of redressing power imbalances. One way of redressing power imbalances that is described is the involvement of community members from the start of the research process (e.g. Abma, 2019; Montoya & Kent, 2011). A key point is that “equal partnerships” can be established if everyone participates in mutual learning from the start. Another key point is that equal partnerships are a prerequisite for producing outcomes that improve the health and well-being of participants and their communities (e.g. Abma et al., 2009; Mayan & Daum, 2016). A second way of redressing power imbalances entails designing the research process to fit the needs of vulnerable, marginalized groups (e.g. Read & Maslin-Prothero, 2011). A third way is based on the understanding that power imbalances are inherent in social relations but nevertheless can be redressed through critical, reflexive analyses of power dynamics (e.g. Abma et al., 2009; Collier & Wyer, 2016; Groot et al., 2019, 2020). In all these ways of redressing power imbalances, power dynamics are treated as obstacles to co-production.

In common with the descriptions in the literature, we invited co-researchers to participate in decision-making from the start of the project, we tailored the research design to fit participants’ specific needs, and we engaged in critical, reflexive analyses of power dynamics.

However, rather than treating power dynamics as *obstacles* to co-production, our approach conceptualizes power dynamics as an *intrinsic, productive force* in *bringing “co-production” into being*. According to our approach, *“co-production” comes into being and is constituted or enacted in situated, power-imbued negotiations of meaning throughout the research process*.

Drawing on Bakhtin’s dialogue theory (1981, 1984, 1986), our approach conceives “co-production” as a tensional, unstable product of situated negotiations of meaning across different voices. In this conception, “co-production” is in a constant state of coming into being throughout the research process. Since “co-production” comes into being in negotiations of meaning across different voices, its enactment is a process of *relational becoming*. Drawing on Foucault (1972, 1977, 1980), the approach conceives power in terms of complex dynamics of inclusion *and* exclusion in which particular forms of knowledge and identities dominate and others are marginalized. By both enabling and constraining the articulation of different knowledges and participant-identities, power dynamics in co-production work to shape the conduct of (co-)researchers. In addition, the approach draws on Wetherell’s theory of affect and emotion (2012) and work in arts-based research (e.g. Leavy, 2019) in order to conceptualise *embodied, affective* ways of knowing.

The approach homes in on the socially and culturally specific nature of the meanings ascribed to “co-production” and views the negotiation of meanings as part of a contested discursive terrain in the current sociopolitical conjuncture. Here, we build on research that identifies a widespread discourse across social and health care policy, practice and research which romanticizes co-production as a smooth, straightforward process of inclusion in which equal partners participate on an equal footing (e.g. Phillips, 2011; Rose & Kalathil, 2019). According to this research, “co-production” – together with other key signs in the discourse such as “(equal) partnership”, “participation”, “dialogue” and “empowerment” - have gained the status of buzzwords with a taken-for-granted positive value. This makes it difficult to attend critically to the complexities of the relations and practices constructed in their terms. Thus, the terms themselves may invoke a promise

of co-production as a straightforward process of inclusion among equal partners, regardless of whether or not researchers are reflexively aware of - and try to redress - power imbalances. In applying our approach in this article, we focus on the nature of the *promise of inclusion* invoked in the research process and the *performativity* of the promise in shaping the relational becoming of “co-production”.

The purpose of this article is to present a critical, reflexive approach to understanding and analyzing “co-production” as a complex, tensional, unstable product of dynamics of inclusion and exclusion throughout the research process. The main aim is to show how the approach can be put to work as a framework for analysis of the enactment of “co-production” in participatory health research in order to generate insights into the possibilities and challenges of co-production by confronting the complexities. In so doing, we build on, and hope to contribute to, the body of critical, reflexive analyses of power dynamics in co-production - that is, the third way of redressing power dynamics mentioned above (e.g. Phillips et al., 2018; Collier & Wyer, 2016; Groot et al., 2019, 2020). We do this by applying our approach in analysis of the relational becoming of “co-production” in a research project on dance classes for people with Parkinson’s disease and sometimes their spouses (or other family members) in Denmark. In our outline of the research design and the conclusion, we highlight how the approach has served as a foundation for working reflexively with the ethical issues that arise from recognition of the complexities of collaborative research relations. Thus, while our main aim with the article is to demonstrate the use of the approach as a framework for analyzing the complexities of co-production, we also indicate how the approach can shape an ongoing research process by providing a foundation for relational research ethics.

First, we describe our approach to understanding and analyzing co-production. Then we outline the participatory research design, indicating how the approach has served as a foundation for working reflexively with relational ethics in the research process. Then, in selected project sites,

we analyze dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the constant becoming of “co-production” in order to generate complexity-sensitive knowledge about the possibilities and challenges of “co-production”. In the conclusion, we critically discuss the insights gained into the possibilities and challenges and the value of the approach as a theoretical platform for relational research ethics.

### **A critical, reflexive approach to understanding and analyzing “co-production”**

Our approach to understanding and analyzing co-production draws on Bakhtin to conceptualize the *tensions* in collaborative research relations. Bakhtin construes all communication as “dialogue” in the sense that meaning is produced relationally in the tension between multiple – and often contradictory and opposing – voices (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986). Meaning making is dialogic because it is relational in two senses. First, the meanings of objects (e.g. “co-production”) and selves (e.g. “co-researchers”, “university researchers” and the collaborative project “we”) emerge in the negotiation of meanings in social interaction in which the participants address each other’s voices. Second, meanings are produced through the intertextual relations of utterances to earlier and future utterances. In Bakhtin’s understanding, voices are both the media for the uttered speech of embodied persons *and* discourses, ideologies, perspectives or themes (Bakhtin, 1981). An individual person articulates multiple voices; the self is “multi-voiced”. People simultaneously address the voices of addressees in the conversation and the voices of others who are not physically present (Bakhtin, 1984, 1986). Bakhtin asserts that the unity that emerges in meaning making is the tensional product of two competing tendencies, the centripetal tendency towards unity and the centrifugal tendency towards difference (Bakhtin, 1981). In the interplay between voices, meanings are formed but, as a result of the play of difference across voices, those meanings are polyphonic/multi-voiced, tension-ridden, and unstable. Utterances, then, are open to new interpretations through new, socioculturally and temporally situated negotiations of meaning and are therefore “unfinalisable” (Bakhtin, 1986: 118-119). Hence, co-production”, “(co)-researchers” and the project “we” - are always the unstable,



unfinalisable products of socioculturally and temporally specific, dynamic meaning making across voices and, therefore, in a constant process of relational becoming.

The approach goes further down a poststructuralist path in drawing on Foucault's theory of discourse and power/knowledge which asserts that our knowledge of the world and identities come into being in historically contingent discourses which exclude or marginalize other ways of being, knowing and doing (Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1980). Drawing on Foucault, our approach understands voices as discourses which each construct a particular form of knowledge and particular identities. In meaning-making through the interplay between different voices – in our case, the coming into being of “co-production”, “(co)researchers” and the project “we” – certain voices and therefore certain knowledge forms and identities dominate, and others are marginalized. Drawing on Foucault's theory of governmentality which conceptualises technologies of self through which subjects are governed, it can be said that co-production itself – in all forms of enactment - shapes the conduct of university researchers and co-researchers and hence, in Foucault's terms, works as a technology of disciplinary power (e.g. Foucault, 1991). In the approach, a Foucauldian critique of dynamics of inclusion and exclusion forms the basis for *reflexivity* about the effects of that disciplinary power. In line with its Foucauldian foundation, this form of reflexivity builds on the poststructuralist premise that research objects and subjects are the unstable, emergent products of situated, relational dynamics in the research process (Finlay, 2002). The approach, then, is designed for critical, reflexive analysis of precisely *how* “co-production” and the “we” of co-researchers and university researchers come into being in the negotiation of meanings in selected sites of co-production. The analysis homes in on how different voices ascribe different meanings to “co-production” and construct – or contest – a project “we” of co-researchers and researchers. This includes attention to the performativity of the *promise* of inclusive, democratic processes in enacting “co-production” in ways that both enable and circumscribe the articulation of multiple voices.

The approach draws, too, on Wetherell's theory of affect and emotion (2012) and arts-based research (e.g. Leavy, 2019) in order to heighten its sensitivity towards embodied, affective knowing, including visceral feelings of discomfort and joy. Wetherell's theory offers an understanding of emotions as situated social activities which are relational, dialogic and performative: emotions create objects and identities by being "signified, negotiated and evaluated in the inter-subjective moment" (2012: 74). Arts-based research provides insight into the embodied, affective dimensions of knowledge production and, in particular, insight into how collaborative engagement in arts – including dance – fosters reflexivity and empathy and hereby stimulates multiple ways of embodied knowing, including aesthetic and kinesthetic knowing (Leavy, 2019: 5).

### **Participatory research design**

Our project on Parkinson's dance has two research questions: **Research question 1:** *What do people with Parkinson's disease and their spouses experience as the role of Parkinson's dance in their everyday lives by virtue of specific embodied, sensory and aesthetic experiences?* **Research question 2:** *What possibilities and challenges arise in the tensions in co-production in participatory research?*

In the project, we address both questions through a participatory research design in which university researchers (the authors of this article) and co-researchers co-produce knowledge with roots in co-researchers' experiences of Parkinson's dance. This article addresses research question 2 (for publications addressing research question 1, see e.g. Christensen-Strynø et al., in press). In this article, we address research question 2 by analyzing the tensional enactment of "co-production" using the critical, reflexive approach outlined above. As noted earlier, this critical, reflexive approach has also provided us with a foundation for working reflexively with relational ethics throughout the research process in order to support ethical research relations and, in so doing, to raise the quality of the answers to both research questions. In sketching out the participatory research design below, we will indicate how we have used this approach as a foundation for relational ethics.

The research design is outlined in **Figure 1: Research Design**. [INSERT FIGURE 1: RESEARCH DESIGN HERE]

Our take on relational ethics is driven by recognition of the complexities of co-production. We build on work on relational research ethics based on the “ethics of care” thinking of Tronto (1993) (e.g. Brannelly & Boulton, 2017; Groot et al., 2019, 2020). Tronto’s ethics of care links caring relationships to power, social inequity and social justice and, in so doing, merges the agendas of research and activism. As Tronto (1993: 124) puts it, “the vocabulary of care” “makes us connect our broadest political and social aspirations with the consequences and effects of our actual practices”. Relational research ethics locates ethics in relationships of mutual caring in the ongoing research process. This is in contrast to the procedural ethics of ethical review boards with their anchoring in universal moral precepts along the lines of Kantian, Enlightenment thinking. Our take on relational ethics is a way of acting on our responsibility as researchers and facilitators of “co-production” to create spaces for mutual learning across multiple voices. But, along poststructuralist lines, it takes account of our inability, since power pervades all collaborative research relations, to take full ethical responsibility for ensuring that voices are articulated and heard on an equal footing.

As pointed out earlier, according to the ideals of participatory health research, it is a precondition for mutual learning that co-researchers are involved in formulating the research aims and design and that relations of mutual trust are established (e.g. Abma et al., 2009; Montoya & Kent, 2011). We have tried to follow these ideals by applying our approach to understanding and analysing “co-production” as a foundation for practising relational ethics during the research process. This has meant that we have tried to cultivate the democratic inclusion of multiple voices, articulating multiple knowledge forms including experiential, embodied, affective knowledges. To meet these preconditions, we (the university researchers) collaborated closely in the formulation of the grant application, including research aims and design, with the two collaborative partners, the Parkinson’s Association and Tivoli Ballet School. We analyse parts of this process below.

An overview of the participants and their roles in the different project phases is presented in **Table 1: Research Participants** [INSERT TABLE 1: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS HERE]. After funding was obtained, we began the project with a six-month long ethnographic study (**Phase 1**). Here, we (the university researchers) participated actively, over a period of four to six months, in five different weekly dance classes for people with Parkinson's disease and (optionally) their spouses in Copenhagen and environs, and carried out qualitative interviews. The seven dance teachers who taught the five weekly dance classes joined the project as *bridge builders*, helping us to establish relationships with the dancers and supporting the collaborative research process by participating in the steering group and advisory board (see below). We invited all the people with Parkinson's and their spouses who participated as dancers in the five weekly dance classes to join the project as co-researchers. 43 dancers from the five weekly dance classes (37 people with Parkinson's and 6 spouses) accepted this invitation. All 43 dancers and the seven dance teachers gave their informed written consent to participation as, respectively, co-researchers and bridge builders, with the freedom to withdraw from the project at any time. This entailed consent to the audio-recording and transcription of all the material generated in the project as material for empirical analysis, including the processes of co-production themselves. Ethical approval from an ethical review board was not required as it is not customary in Denmark.

We carried out qualitative interviews with the 43 dancers and seven dance teachers. We also invited them to join a steering group which would work as a site for collaborative decision-making about project activities. 17 of the 43 dancers and all seven dance teachers joined the steering group (see Table 1: Research Participants). In addition, in order to further knowledge sharing across practice and research, we set up an advisory board. 12 of the 43 dancers and four dance teachers joined the advisory board (see Table 1: Research Participants). At the end of Phase 1, we held a symposium in which we gathered all the dancers, dance teachers and other stakeholders together to engage as co-researchers in co-producing knowledge through embodied, affective, aesthetic knowing

(see Table 1: Research Participants). To encourage the co-production of knowledge *in* as well *about* dance, the symposium consisted of dance workshops and discussion panels.

In Phase 2, we invited the 43 dancers from Phase 1 to participate as co-researchers in a series of collaborative storytelling workshops which, together with the workshops in Phase 3, represented the project's main sites for the co-production of knowledge. 28 of the 43 dancers (24 people with Parkinson's and four spouses) accepted the invitation and participated as co-researchers in the Phase 2 workshops (see Table 1: Research Participants). The workshops were designed as sites for co-producing knowledge about Parkinson's dance rooted in the co-researchers' own embodied, affective, aesthetic ways of knowing. To encourage these multiple ways of knowing, we used collaborative arts-based research methods in the workshops such as collaborative writing as a method of inquiry, podcasts and dance improvisation (e.g. Leavy, 2019). In order to anchor the co-production of knowledge in co-researchers' own experiences, workshop activities were based on extracts from the interviews in Phase 1. In Phase 3, we carried out a second set of collaborative storytelling workshops with co-researchers in order to co-produce a graphic novel, building on the knowledge generated in the workshops in Phase 2. 20 of the 28 co-researchers from the Phase 2 workshops participated as co-researchers in the Phase 3 workshops (17 people with Parkinson's and three spouses) (see Table 1: Research Participants).

The genre of graphic novel is well suited to communicating experiential, embodied forms of knowledge. The purpose of our graphic novel is to communicate research results collaboratively and in an accessible fashion to people with Parkinson's and their families and relevant groups of practitioners (including medical and nursing students) and researchers interested in participatory research communication, thus contributing to the fields of narrative and graphic medicine. We are also in the process of writing articles collaboratively with some of the co-researchers for a similar primary readership as the graphic novel. These collaborative publications

run in parallel with the publication of articles intended for a primary readership of researchers and written in academic language – such as this article.

As well as opening up for multiple forms of knowing, applying our approach as a foundation for relational research ethics has meant that we have attended critically and reflexively to intrinsic dynamics of exclusion as well as inclusion in co-production, recognizing that it is never possible for co-researchers to participate as equal partners at any stage. To do this, we have designed and facilitated sites for co-production so that there has been room for critical voices, and we have taken those critical voices into account in the planning of future activities. We have critically reflected on the tensions by using autoethnography to invoke embodied, affective knowledge, including feelings of discomfort and joy. We have also reflexively acted on this knowledge in making choices over the course of the project (see Phillips et al., under review). Our analysis in this article includes analysis of how feelings of discomfort, social connectedness and joy invoke responses that contribute to enacting “co-production”.

The sites for analysis in this article are from the funding application stage and from Phase 1 as follows: the research funding application, the partnership agreement made at the start of Phase 1, the invitation to co-researchers distributed at the start of Phase 1, the steering group meeting which took place at the end of Phase 1 (the project’s second steering group meeting), and the symposium that took place at the end of Phase 1. We have selected the *research funding application, the partnership agreement and the invitation to co-researchers* because of the importance for participatory research of the active involvement of co-researchers in formulating the project aims and design and of the early establishment of relations of mutual trust as a basis for mutual learning. We have also selected the *steering group meeting* because it was the forum for joint decision-making about the design of the Phase 2 collaborative storytelling workshops which represented key project sites for co-producing knowledge. Finally, we have selected *the symposium* because it brought university researchers, co-researchers and other stakeholders together, enacting

the principle that knowledge is co-created throughout the project rather than only generated and communicated in the form of “research results” by the researchers. We analyze each of the sites in turn. In the cases of the steering group meeting and symposium, we analyze transcriptions of audio-recordings.

### **The research funding application, partnership agreement and invitation to co-researchers**

The participatory nature of the research project fitted the call for applications of the funding body: the call stipulated that projects bring together researchers and actors in the field of practice in question in tightly integrated collaborative relations. To involve the collaborative partners, including future co-researchers, in decision-making from the start of the project, we held a series of meetings in which the collaborative partners and future co-researchers contributed to formulating the research aims and design and gave detailed feedback on drafts of the research funding application written by Lisbeth and Louise. In addition, a future co-researcher, a dance teacher, Lisbeth and Louise presented and discussed the project in a meeting with representatives from the funding body as part of the application process. Crucially, the application process built on the extensive groundwork during the previous year by Lisbeth whose spouse has Parkinson’s disease, in which she attended a series of Parkinson’s dance classes and Parkinson’s Association meetings about Parkinson’s dance, spoke to other dancers and their partners about Parkinson’s dance and, in so doing, drew on and extended her own experiential knowledge, gained a deeper understanding of the area, and built up a network of potential collaborative partners. The final research funding application made clear that the project was based on a solid commitment to co-production in which co-researchers’ experiential knowledge is harnessed:

*“Research on patient participation in research and development projects provides solid backing for the value of participation [...]. At the same time, patient participation is full of challenges, emanating from tensions in relation to opening up for patient voices. Ulla Mikkelsen,<sup>ii</sup> who has a*

*Parkinson's diagnosis and is a member of the steering committee of the Parkinson's Association's dance initiative, asserts that 'patients with Parkinson's suffer from stigmatization and exclusion where they aren't recognized as people who are able to do anything, and their knowledge by virtue of their experiences with PD isn't sufficiently respected and taken into account in treatment and research'. The project will work with precisely this challenge by applying a collaborative, participatory research design based on principles of empowerment in which people with Parkinson's and their spouses participate as co-researchers and their experiential, embodied knowledge is recognized and placed at the core of processes of co-production. Ulla Mikkelsen has actively contributed to the formulation of the application and is going to be one of the co-researchers''.*

The text highlighted the participatory nature of the project through a direct citation of a person with Parkinson's disease, Ulla Mikkelsen, which identifies Ulla as a key figure in the Parkinson's community - *"a member of the steering committee of Parkinson's Association's dance initiative"*.

Ulla's citation articulates the voice of a community member, expressing her previous experience of stigmatization, exclusion and a lack of appreciation of experience-based knowledge. The text further endorsed the project's participatory character by subsuming the community member voice under the project "we". It does so by defining the community member as a future co-researcher and by stating that *"the project will work with precisely [the] challenge"* raised by the community member by following the principle of empowerment in which *"the experiential, embodied knowledge"* of the co-researchers *"is recognized and placed at the core of processes of co-production"*. This articulates an activist voice, constructing the research project as engaged in the democratization of knowledge and committed to the goal of social justice. It can be argued that our approach to understanding co-production works as a technology of disciplinary power by co-opting the voice of the community member to support the promise of co-production in the emergent project.

On securing funding, we formalized the partnerships with Parkinson's Association and Tivoli Ballet School in collaborative partnership agreements documenting mutual commitment to the



sharing of responsibility for achieving agreed objectives – a common feature of community-based participatory research (Mayan & Daum, 2016: 70). In the written invitation to take part in the project as co-researchers, we described the role of the participant as that of “co-researcher” who would create knowledge together with the university researchers in a range of different activities:

*“We – the research team at X University – would like you to take part in the project as co-researcher. As a co-researcher, you will take part in creating knowledge together with us through activities in the project’s three phases”. [We go on to describe the three phases]*

The “co” in “co-researcher” may itself promise an equal relationship; consequently, the term, “co-researcher” may signify that the co-researchers and university researchers carry out research on an equal footing. A promise of equal relations and joint action may also be invoked in the statement that *“as a co-researcher you will take part in creating knowledge together with the university researchers”*, and, in particular, the term, *“together”*. A romantic voice of co-production is articulated here that idealizes “creating knowledge together” as a meeting of equals with equal degrees of involvement, commitment and decision-making power. The voice constructs a picture of the collaborative research process as a smooth, harmonious, inclusionary process rather than a set of complex, tensional practices in which the university researchers have a far greater say in the design, facilitation and analysis of co-production processes. Consequently, and paradoxically, the voice may work in a centripetal direction to entrench the researchers’ positioning as sovereign researchers who, along the lines of disciplinary power, define “co-production” and the conduct of the “co-researcher”. However, at the same time, in the ethnographic study in which the university researchers participated in dance classes, we judge that there was a move towards creating an inclusive “we” along centrifugal lines and hence constituting “co-production” in plural terms. Our judgement is based on our (the university researchers’) own feelings of belonging and supportive comments from co-researchers as we danced together. The physical social connectedness of dance seemed to invoke a

sense of embodied “we-ness” that contributed to creating caring relationships and formed a foundation for future mutual learning.

### **At the steering group meeting**

We, the university researchers, had pre-set the goal for the steering group meeting (with co-researchers from the dance classes including the dance teachers) without consultation with the co-researchers. The pre-set goal was to obtain feedback on the design of the forthcoming collaborative storytelling workshops which we would use to modify the design of the workshop. This was in line with the overall purpose of the steering group – to provide a site for collaborative decision-making at all the stages of the project. The first part of the steering group meeting consisted of an introductory presentation in which the three university researchers outlined the project activities thus far and timeline for future activities, described the main themes that they had identified in their analysis of the interviews, and sketched out a tentative plan for the collaborative storytelling workshops, describing how they would be structured in terms of those themes. The second part of the meeting took the form of group work in which the participants tried out the arts-based research method - collaborative writing as a method of inquiry - planned for the first workshop. The third and final part was a forum for feedback on the method in the light of the group work. The following analysis is of the first and third parts of the meeting. It shows how “co-production” and a project “we” are brought into being as unstable, dynamic entities through the negotiation of their meanings. The analytical lens zooms in on how power was in play in those negotiation processes, both opening up for and curtailing the articulation of multiple voices. A key tension in facilitation occurred between, on the one hand, creating space for multiple voices and, on the other hand, steering the discussion towards realization of the pre-set goal of obtaining feedback on the coming workshops. The first cultivated the process of dialogue itself, including the expression of critical voices, whereas the second prioritized the product and entailed restricting meta-communication about the project.

### *Breaking the promise of co-production?*

When we had completed the presentation, one of the dance teachers, Lone, made a critical comment:

*Lone: I'm sitting here thinking that this reminds me of going to university, that I'm at a lecture [...] there're a lot of jargon and methods words and that kind of thing. And I'm thinking that, if we really are going to co-produce now, you are in your universe at X University but you're here too with a whole lot of people who are here because they dance and have an illness and are relatives of people with an illness, I'm thinking that you will really have to speak a language that brings us together [...].*

This implies that Lone recognizes the project as a participatory project and accepts the aim and premises of co-production. Lone suggests that, by using a language that belongs to the university, we, the university researchers, were being monologic and failing to build the promised platform for co-production across difference: instead, we were creating division and excluding co-researchers from participation in co-production. To further co-production, “*you will really have to speak a language that brings us together*”.

The obvious solution to the problem Lone identified was that we, the university researchers, began to use more accessible language. Such a solution is backed up by the literature on participatory health research. For example, Read and Maslin-Prothero (2011: 709) state that communication is “central to reciprocal understanding throughout the research process”, and they deemed it “right and proper”, in the case of their own studies involving social and health care service users and carers, that “concepts and language associated with the research were explored and simplified” so that all research participants could understand them. Also, Belone et al. (2016: 131) point out that participants in selected community-based participatory research partnerships identified language as a key mechanism of exclusion, asserting that “excessive use of research jargon often marginalized community participants causing frustration in the partnership process”. We paid heed to this in all the subsequent workshops and meetings by choosing more conversational, casual presentations instead of power point presentations. At the same time we would like to argue that

switching to more accessible language and genre is in itself an insufficient solution since whether or not utterances are accessible is a question of the meanings ascribed to them in interpretation by the listener. We have striven all along to speak in an accessible fashion and we thought that we were doing so until Lone's response.

Turning an analytical eye to space as co-constitutive of "co-production", we suggest that the presence of a large number of people in the room (27 people) furthered the dominance of the voice of academia by limiting the extent of co-production in the plenum discussions (but not in the collaborative workshop activity which took place in groups of 4-6). The large number of people was the result of the university researchers' decision to enable all co-researchers, who so wished, to become members of the steering group. Ironically, the open invitation to join the steering group, with its centrifugal opening up for the potentially multiple voices of co-researchers, itself brought with it a centripetal closure: the large group size inhibited dialogue across different voices, with only a few people making comments in plenum.

#### *Contesting the research aims*

As noted above, in the third part of the steering group meeting, we, the university researchers, invited the steering group members to offer suggestions for changes to the design of the collaborative workshop on the basis of their experience of the group work. The first response to Lisbeth's invitation to offer suggestions for changes to the workshop design was a form of metacommunication about the aim of the project by the co-researcher, Bodil, whose spouse has Parkinson's:

Lisbeth: *What we would like now is some concrete input into what this workshop activity has been like. We would like some suggestions for changes.*

Bodil: *I'd like to relate it a bit to what the aim is for the whole research project because you can say that it contributes positively or negatively. I think, as far as I've understood it up until now, it's something about evaluating what dance can do for Parkinson's. But that isn't necessarily the case?*

Lisbeth: *No, it isn't really an evaluation project. It's not that.*

In metacommunication about the nature of the project, Bodil addresses the university researchers with an inquiry into the aim of the research project as a whole, arguing that the contribution of the workshop activity depends on the project's aim. As well as presenting this inquiry as a question to the researchers, she also puts forward her own understanding that the aim is to carry out a form of evaluation of Parkinson's dance. Bodil indicates the uncertainty of her knowledge-claim by addressing the university team with the inquiry in a subjective modality – *“as I've understood it up until now”* – and also by ending on the question to the university researchers: *“But that isn't necessarily the case?”* Her inquiry positions the researchers as the authoritative “arbiters of truth”. Thus, Bodil opens up, along centrifugal lines, for a form of negotiation of the project by inquiring into the project aim and presenting her own suggestion; at the same time, there is a move in a centripetal direction since she privileges the voice of the academy. Lisbeth's response is in line with the privileged positioning of the voice of the academy since, in refuting Bodil's suggestion, she uses an objective modality (*“It isn't really ....”*) and then a categorical modality (*“It's not that...”*) which presents her response as if it were a neutral reflection of reality. Louise continues to articulate the authoritative voice of academia in outlining the project aims, using an objective, categorical modality which presents her truth-claim as both neutral and certain:

Louise: *Basically, it has two main aims, where the one aim is to create insight, rooted in the dancers' own experiences of going to dance, into what Parkinson's dance can do.*

However, Louise then aligns this authoritative voice of academia with the voice of everyday experiential knowledge:

Louise: *So in that way, it isn't an evaluation project but, on the other hand, we gain knowledge about people's experiences of what dance can do and what it does in their everyday life. For instance, I've spoken to one of you who didn't go to dance in the summer holidays and then experienced on her own body what it's like when you don't go to dance. [...] And that's one of the aims. And the other aim is about gaining knowledge about how we work with co-production, right?*

*We gain insights into the difficulties of working with co-production which we can use. And which other researchers can use to further co-production in their research.*

Here, Louise merges the voices of academia and of everyday dance experience with each other by suggesting, that although it is not an evaluation project, it will still generate research-based knowledge about Parkinson's dance and, moreover, that knowledge will be anchored in dancers' own embodied experiences. The experiential origins of the knowledge are highlighted through the anecdote about the concrete experience of a dancer. Also, the anecdote itself indicates that knowledge production in the project is based on informal, collaborative research relationships (*"For instance, I've spoken to one of you..."*). The project's grounding both in dancers' experiences and in collaborative research relationships is reinforced by the invocation of an inclusive project "we" acting as active agents of action processes: *"So we gain knowledge..We gain insights..which we can use"*. The roots of the knowledge in the experiences of dancers and in collaborative research relationships gives the research legitimacy. In merging the voices of academia and embodied dancing experiences, Louise articulates what Bakhtin calls a "double-voiced discourse" which addresses two groups of Others simultaneously - the university researchers and co-researchers (Bakhtin 1981: 324ff). This double-voiced discourse creates a joint platform for research directed towards generating knowledge about the possibilities and challenges of co-production (research question 2).

*Reducing the scope of the promise?*

In the next turn, the dance instructor, Lone, contests the existence of this joint platform for co-production with researchers and co-researchers, suggesting that the research aim of generating knowledge about co-production (research question 2) is solely in the interests of the university researchers:

Lone: *But that's in your court? It's in your interests to observe what happens when you try to co-produce with us. That's something you are doing, it's not something we are doing?*

Instead of invoking a project "we", Lone distinguishes between a "you" of researchers and "your" of

research aims about co-production *and* an “us” and “we” of co-researchers and dance teachers. In contesting the existence of a joint platform for research on the topic of co-production, centrifugal *and* centripetal movements are in play. On the one hand, there is a centrifugal opening up for divergent understandings of the nature of the project and the project “we” as Lone challenges the joint platform for research on co-producing knowledge put forward by Louise. On the other hand, there is a centripetal movement towards reducing the multivoicedness of the project so that one of the two main research questions - research question 2 - is constructed solely within the terms of the academic voice. Lone questions the scope of the promise of “co-production” in the project by identifying what she sees as a difference in knowledge interests: for Lone, the research question about co-production (research question 2) will produce knowledge solely for the use and benefit of the university researchers; only the research question about Parkinson’s dance (research question 1) can generate knowledge that can benefit the co-researchers. Louise counterargues that the results of research on co-production are indeed in the interests of co-researchers:

Louise: *No, but, at the same time, I think you do have some interest in it because there are a lot of those I’ve spoken with who experience that they otherwise haven’t been heard. And your expertise, that you have experienced Parkinson’s disease and Parkinson’s dance on your own body, hasn’t been recognized as a form of knowledge. So in a way, we think that you also have an interest in working in a research project where your expertise and knowledge are recognized and built upon.*

Here, Louise maintains the distinction between the university researchers and the co-researchers, referring to the co-researchers as “you” and using an exclusive “we” to refer to the university researchers. Constructing an alliance between the university researchers and the co-researchers, she contends that the results of research on co-production will serve the interests of the co-researchers on the grounds that the project builds on their experiential knowledge and therefore creates space for the voice of embodied dance experiences. In doing this, Louise invokes an activist voice which (i) addresses the co-researchers as politically marginalized – they “*experience that they otherwise*

*haven't been heard*" (ii) acknowledges the co-researchers' experiences as a basis for "*expertise*", and (iii) constructs the research project as participatory research – "*a research project in which your expertise and knowledge are recognized and built upon*". Thus, along the lines of Tronto's ethics of care (1993), caring relationships are embedded in a social justice agenda incorporating the voice of a community that otherwise has been marginalized.

### *Contesting the research topic*

The above metacommunication about the project aims ends as Louise invites talk about other issues:

Lisbeth: *Yes, we could go into many aspects of this, it's such a big question. I'd really like other questions to come up now.*

This turn closes discussion of the project aims, along centripetal lines, *and*, along centrifugal lines, opens up for discussion of other issues. Bodil comments on the substance of the research agenda and interview themes outlined in the university presentation at the start of the meeting:

Bodil: *Yes, that was just to understand the process. But, on that background, I have something to contribute: there's nothing about gender differences in what you've presented. I noticed at the start how many were in the different classes, under half were men. So I think, I'm totally convinced from everything we've seen today, and have heard before, that many people can benefit from Parkinson's dance but there are many who don't do it, there are more men with Parkinson's, so the question is how we can reach them? But that's obviously not the aim of this project.*

Whereas it was the aims of the project which were subject to negotiation earlier in the meeting, this time Bodil opens up for negotiation about the project's research topic: *there's nothing about gender differences in what you've presented*. Bodil's input to the development of the project is ascribed authority through the statement that "*I have something to contribute*". Moreover, Bodil's suggestion is given further legitimacy by the argument that it is supported by what the group "we" has seen during the steering group meeting and heard in other contexts; this, in turn, reinforces the legitimacy of the steering group meeting as a forum for co-producing knowledge. The legitimacy of both the



suggestion and the steering group “we” is further strengthened by the construction of a steering group “we” who are oriented towards engaging in activism to further inclusion in Parkinson’s dance (*so the question is how we can reach them?*). At the same time, Bodil questions her own authority to define the project’s research topic and make decisions on how the project “we” should act (*“But that’s obviously not the aim of this project”*). However, Lisbeth responds by supporting Bodil’s activist suggestion and pointing out that they can pursue it through research communication:

Lisbeth: *Yes, I think you’re onto something here. We’re working from a humanities-based, social scientific background. In relation to research communication, I think we can create stories together about Parkinson’s that will spread to others who wouldn’t be the first to jump into a dance class.*

By first invoking the “we” of the university researchers (*“We’re working from a humanities-based, social scientific background ...”*) and then an inclusive project “we” engaged in co-production (*“we can create stories together”*), Lisbeth indicates that the roles and aims of the university researchers and co-researchers are aligned with each other. Maria then supports Bodil’s focus on gender differences:

Maria: *We’ve read the interview material and there are clear gender perspectives including unequal participation in dance, particularly in relation to the theme of identity processes. And that’s something you can get out of the material and focus on in further analysis. It may be an important perspective and it’s covered in the material.*

In Maria’s turn, Bodil’s point is given legitimacy by its resonance with the university researchers’ results; in this way, Maria acknowledges the point as relevant input to the project. This represents an orientation away from an activist preoccupation with how to affect change benefitting the Parkinson’s community towards a focus on the research content. Lisbeth asked again for suggestions for changes to the workshop in line with the pre-set goal of the workshop:

Lisbeth: *I’d like to hear, because we’ve only got 10 minutes left, if there’s anyone who can give us some good advice about the collaborative writing activity in the forthcoming workshop?*

In response, several co-researchers and dance instructors, one by one, presented a number of suggestions for changes to the forthcoming workshop.

### *Contesting the platform for “co-production”*

The giving of suggestions for changes to the workshop was followed by a return to meta-communication, this time expressing uncertainty about the status and purpose of the “steering group” and the meeting:

Lars: *I’m a bit confused. We’re a steering group, aren’t we? Where’s the “steering” element in what we’ve been doing today?*

Lars raises doubt about whether the activities at the meeting are in line with the label of “steering group”, drawing on a voice of embodied experience. Louise answers Lars’s question using categorical, objective modalities which present her statements as a neutral description of reality:

Louise: *That you come up with input to the workshops. It’s a steering group which takes part in deciding what we’re doing in the project. So there’s a lot of steering because it’s about contributing to deciding what we do.*

Lars: *Oh, ok yes.*

The construction of the steering group as a collective body for decision-making in the project is reinforced by the shift from “you” (“*you come up with input*”) to an inclusive “we”, “*deciding what we’re doing in the project*” and “*contributing to deciding what we do*”. Thus, Louise voices the promise of co-production as a smooth and straightforward process of inclusion and, along centripetal lines, closes down for any negotiation of the meanings of “co-production” and “co-researcher”. She goes on the defensive, asserting the project’s solid adherence to principles of “co-production”.

Emotions were performative here: she remembers an urge at the time to defend the project emanating from a feeling of discomfort. The discomfort was sparked by the contestation of how they were doing “co-production” in the context of the previous contestations at the meeting – not only the ones analyzed earlier but also a comment in the coffee break by another co-researcher who suggested that

the project's use of the term "steering group" was inappropriate. However, this is not, we suggest, a simple case of closing down an opportunity for the negotiation of "co-production" through metacommunication and hence the inclusion of different voices! Opening up for more metacommunication would have meant less time for suggestions for changes to the coming workshop and consequently have meant less co-production in relation to the workshop design.

To sum up then, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion were in play in all the negotiations of co-production at the steering group meeting. Through these very dynamics, "co-production" and the project "we" were brought into being as unstable, contested entities. The above analysis explores how, through dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, power was productive in particular ways. It highlights that, in the facilitation of the meeting, there was a constant inclusion and exclusion of voices in the tension between creating space for different voices and steering in a direction dictated by the university researchers' pre-set goal of obtaining feedback on the coming workshops in order to further the co-design process. Facilitating the meeting towards that goal involved limiting general meta-communication about the project in line with the time frame of the meeting. Our experience of dynamics of inclusion and exclusion at the meeting, and not least the discomfort we experienced, heightened our sensitivity to the dynamics in the planning and facilitation of the project symposium three weeks later. However, this did not, in any clear-cut sense, mean that a "better balance" was achieved there between inclusion and exclusion! The following analysis of the symposium illustrates how a shared meaning of "co-production" and "co-researchers" was constructed and consolidated in ways that strengthened the project "we" but also inhibited critical voices and, hence, alternative ways of constituting co-production.

### **At the symposium**

The symposium was held at X Ballet School three weeks after the steering group meeting and was open to the 43 dancers, 7 dance teachers, the university researchers, representatives from the administration of the Parkinson's Association, the management of X Ballet School, and researchers

from other institutions on the advisory board as well as an invited Parkinson's dance group from Stockholm Ballet Academy and the co-founder of Dance for PD®, David Leventhal, who ran a dance workshop at the symposium (see Table 1: Research Participants). Louise's welcome speech – delivered informally with the rest of the participants around her in a circle - presented the symposium as a forum for mutual, embodied learning:

Louise: *[..]The aim of the symposium is that we learn from each other across the dance classes in the project. That we together gain a better understanding of Parkinson's dance. There's an old-fashioned view of research that you only learn at the end when you've arrived at the research results. And that you only use your brain in research and not the rest of your body! And that it's serious and not fun! Our position in this project is that we learn from each other throughout the research process, that we can learn a lot through bodily experiences like dancing, and that research can be both serious and fun. So we hope that the symposium will be inspiring, informative and fun!*

The construction of the symposium as a forum for mutual embodied learning is reinforced by its opposition to an image of conventional research in which knowledge is not generated until the final results and emotions and shared bodily experiences such as enjoyment, humor, playfulness and laughter are irrelevant to knowledge production. This opposition is underscored by the shift from a “you” who follows the old-fashioned view of research to an inclusive project “we”: “*Our position in this project is that we learn from each other.*” This construction of the symposium was strengthened over the symposium's two days and worked to consolidate the project as a participatory project with a strong project “we”. Belief in the centrality of collaborative, embodied learning to co-production, and the centrality of co-production to the project, was likewise consolidated. At the start of the closing panel, Mette, one of the seven dance teachers and “bridge builders” in the project, spotlighted the transformative, affective effects of sensory engagement and visceral feelings of joy and social connectedness in dance:

Mette: *Yes, I just want to start by saying that I'm extremely tired but I'm also very high and I'm*

*moved because we've come together here as a gathering of different kinds of people. Researchers, people affected by Parkinson's, dance instructors, and from different countries [...]. Just think of the intensity we can produce together and the joy we can generate!*

Moreover, Mette emphasized the caring relationships generated by affective connection in dance:

*Mette: I've also experienced love between each other. Even though we don't know each other, when we danced one of the group dances with David, one of the other dance teachers helped out one of my dancers. That moved me a lot.*

Following these comments, several of the closing panel members, and audience members continued to stress the transformative power of collective engagement and affective connection in dance at the symposium. They endorsed the collaborative nature of the project and the symposium as a forum for co-learning within the project, and positioned themselves as active parts of the project “we”. In particular, they ascribed a transformative role to community dance as an embodied, collective activity that builds caring relationships and itself represents a forum for mutual learning (Houston, 2019, Thompson, 2020). In linking the caring relationships and feelings of community connectedness with the possibilities for enhanced community health and well-being, they articulated a strong activist voice. This brought “co-production” into being relationally as a space/time of embodied mutual learning directed at generating knowledge enhancing individual and community well-being along activist lines. In this becoming process, “co-production” was enacted as processes of inclusion across difference, with embodied, affective connectedness (not least, visceral feelings of joy and belonging) through dance playing a central role. This resonates with work in arts-based research describing “an aesthetics of care” as the outcome of an “astonishing sense of connection between different people involved in making art together” (Thompson, 2020: 46). Since the project was strengthened as a collaborative space for mutual learning, it is easy to argue that what happened at the symposium realized the possibilities of “co-production”. At the same time, it is important to heed that conflicting perspectives were silenced. The possibilities *and* the challenges of participatory

health research rest in the tension between the alluring promise *and* complex messiness of co-production. We discuss this further in the concluding section.

### **Conclusion and further perspectives**

As we have noted earlier, researchers often identify power imbalances as obstacles to co-production and use different ways of redressing the power imbalances. One way of redressing power imbalances is the participation of people as equal research partners from the beginning. Another way is a flexible, creative approach in which researchers enable “meaningful participation” by tailoring the research design to the specific needs of marginalized groups. And a third way takes the form of critical, reflexive analyses of power dynamics. Our approach, as we also pointed out earlier, builds on the body of critical, reflexive analyses of power dynamics in co-production. In particular, our analysis resonates with Groot et al. (2019, 2020)’s reflexive analyses of power dynamics in a mental health care project which they (co-researchers and researchers) have carried out collaboratively as part of a relational ethics in which caring relationships are nurtured. For instance, their analysis shows that the voices of service users who participated as co-researchers were marginalized or silenced in various phases of the research process. One phase was in discussions of the research results with stakeholders who did not value the experiential knowledge of service users. Another was in academic writing practices which excluded service users who had limited writing skills.

As well as building on the existing body of research, we actively contribute to it by offering a distinctive approach that theorizes power not as an obstacle to co-production but as a productive force in the constant relational becoming of co-production through the ongoing negotiation of meanings in collaborative research relations. Equal partnerships are impossible since “co-production” is always enacted in particular ways that open up for particular ways of knowing—including experiential, embodied, affective forms of knowing - and close down and marginalize others. The approach homes in analytically on how “co-production” comes into being and is enacted through the very dynamics of inclusion *and* exclusion.

In this article, we have presented and illustrated this approach to understanding and analyzing co-production. The purpose of the analysis was to generate complexity-sensitive knowledge about the possibilities and challenges of co-production. At the same time, we have illustrated how the approach can provide a foundation for working reflexively with a relational ethics that confronts the complexities of “co-production”. This way of working with relational ethics navigates the tension between encouraging multiple ways of knowing in line with dialogic, democratic ideals *and* taking heed of the inexorable play of power where certain ways of knowing inevitably prevail and others are excluded. In the following, we sum up the knowledge generated into the possibilities and challenges of co-production and reflect on the approach’s value as a theoretical platform for relational research ethics.

#### *Possibilities and challenges of co-production*

A key point of departure was that the discourse of “co-production” invokes a promise of inclusive, democratic processes harnessing the experiential, embodied knowledge of co-researchers. In analysis of dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in this article, we have explored the performativity of the promise – that is, what the promise *does* in the relational becoming of “co-production” across different voices. And here lie the *possibilities* of co-production: the promise is constitutive in bringing “co-production” into being as a practice resting on caring relationships and cultivating ongoing mutual learning. In the research funding application, partnership agreement and invitation to co-researchers, the project’s commitment to the promise was explicitly made, making possible - but not guaranteeing - participatory research practices based on ideals of democratizing knowledge production. At the steering-group meeting, space was created for negotiations of “co-production” in which the project aims and “we” were contested across different voices. At the symposium – through embodied, aesthetic and kinesthetic knowing – “co-production” was consolidated as an inclusive, collaborative endeavor, potentially benefitting all project participants across research and practice.

However, the analysis also showed that the specific ways in which the promise was realized led to *challenges*. The challenges arose because what the promise “is” and “does” is embedded in complex, tensional processes of relational becoming. “Co-production”, then, becomes an object of negotiation to varying degrees depending on the context and always subject to the play of power in dynamics of exclusion and inclusion. When the terms of the discourse of co-production operate as buzzwords with a taken-for-granted positive value, they may invoke a promise of smooth, straightforward processes of inclusion among equal partners. In the research funding application, partnership agreement and invitation to co-researchers, “co-production” was romanticized in this way. At the steering group meeting, it was subject to negotiation but always in the tension between creating a space for multiple voices *and* steering in a particular direction to live up to the pre-set goal of the university researchers; feelings of discomfort were performative in opening up for and closing down the articulation of multiple voices. At the symposium, critical voices were almost non-existent as “co-production” was constituted relationally – through embodied knowing in dance, building on feelings of joy and physical and social connection - as a solid, inclusive, collaborative endeavor.

#### *Relational ethics and the limits of reflexivity*

We have also suggested that the approach we present for understanding and analyzing “co-production” can serve as a foundation for working reflexively with relational ethics in the ongoing research process. It does so by drawing attention to how exclusion *and* inclusion shape the relationships created in negotiations of “co-production”, constituting or enacting “co-production” and “(co)researchers” in particular ways that exclude other ways of knowing and being. Thus, the approach can provide researchers with a way of acting ethically on their responsibility for reproducing power relations in the relational becoming of “co-production”. At the same time, it is important to take heed of the limits of reflexivity both in applying our approach as an analytical framework and as a foundation for relational ethics. According to the epistemological position underpinning the approach, critical, reflexive analyses of relational dynamics in collaborative



research are themselves permeated with power and circumscribed by the voices within which we, as researchers, construct meaning.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank The Velux Foundations, Denmark for funding the research and the co-researchers, bridge builders and advisory board members for their contribution to the research. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers and our colleagues, Camilla Dindler, Birgitte Ravn Olesen and Michael Scheffmann-Petersen, for their helpful suggestions for revision of drafts of the manuscript.

## **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **Funding**

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article: This work was supported by The Velux Foundations, HumPraxis Programme [grant number 22801].

## **ORCID iD**

Louise Jane Phillips <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7493-9430>

## **References**

Abma, T. A. (2019). Dialogue and deliberation: New approaches to including patients in setting health and healthcare research agendas. *Action Research*, 17, 429–450.  
doi.org/10.1177/1476750318757850

- Abma, T. A., Nierse, C. J., & Widdershoven, G. A. M. (2009). Patients as Partners in Responsive Research: Methodological Notions for Collaborations in Mixed Research Teams. *Qualitative Health Research*, 19, 401 – 415. doi: 10.1177/1049732309331869
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. M. Holquist (Ed.). C. Emerson & M. Holquist (trans). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and Trans. Carly Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Belone, L., Lucero, J. E., Duran, B., Tafoya, G., Baker, E., Chan, D., Chang, C., Green-Moton, E., Kelley, M. A., & Wallerstein, N. (2016). Community-Based Participatory Research Conceptual Model: Community Partner Consultation and Face Validity. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26, 117–135. doi: 10.1177/1049732314557084
- Brannelly, T. & Boulton, A. (2017). The ethics of care and transformational research practices in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Qualitative Research* 17(3): 340–350. doi: 10.1177/1468794117698916
- Christensen-Strynø, M.B., Phillips, L. og Frølund, L. (in press). Disability as dialogue: Engaging with disability as an embodied way of knowing in Parkinson's dance research. I J. Hughes & M. Bartesaghi (Ed.), *Disability in Dialogue*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin.
- Collier, A., & Wyer, M. (2016). Researching Reflexively With Patients and Families: Two Studies Using Video-Reflexive Ethnography to Collaborate With Patients and Families in Patient Safety Research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26, 979–993. doi: 10.1177/1049732315618937
- Finlay, L. (2002). Negotiating the Swamp: The Opportunity and Challenge of Reflexivity in Research Practice. *Qualitative Research*, 2, 209–230. doi: 10.1177/146879410200200205
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality, trans. Rosi Braidotti. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (Ed.). *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, pp. 87–104. University of Chicago Press.

- Groot, B. C., Vink, M., Haveman, A., Huberts, M., Schout, G., & Abma T.A. (2019). Ethics of care in participatory health research: mutual responsibility in collaboration with co-researchers. *Educational Action Research*, 27, 286–302. doi: 10.1080/09650792.2018.1450771
- Groot, B., Haveman, A. & Abma, T. (2020). Relational, ethically sound co-production in mental health care research: epistemic injustice and the need for an ethics of care, *Critical Public Health*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2020.1770694>.
- Houston, S. (2019). *Dancing with Parkinson's*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Books.
- Langberg, E. M., Dyhr, L., & Davidsen, A. S. (2019). Development of the concept of patient-centeredness—A systematic review. *Patient Education and Counselling*, 102, 1228–1236. doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2019.02.023
- Leavy, P. (Ed.) (2019). *Handbook of Arts-Based Research*. London and New York: Routledge.
- MacFarlane, A., & Roche, B. (2019). Blurring the Boundaries between Researcher and Researched, Academic and Activist. In S. Banks & M. Brydon-Miller, (Ed.). *Ethics in participatory research for health and social well-being: Cases and commentaries*. London: Routledge. Pages 56-79.
- Mayan, M. J., & Daum, C. H. (2016). Worth the Risk? Muddled Relationships in Community-Based Participatory Research, *Qualitative Health Research*, 26, 69–76. doi: 10.1177/1049732315618660
- Montoya, M. J., & Kent, E. (2011). Dialogical Action: Moving From Community-Based to Community-Driven Participatory Research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 21, 1000 –1011. doi:10.1177/1049732311403500
- Phillips, L. (2011). *The Promise of Dialogue: The Dialogic Turn in the Production and Communication of Knowledge*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Phillips, L., B. R. Olesen, M. Scheffmann-Petersen, & Nordentoft, H. M. (2018). De-romanticising dialogue in collaborative health care research: a critical, reflexive approach to tensions in an action research project's initial phase. *Qualitative Research in Medicine & Healthcare*, 2, 193–200.

Phillips, L., Frølunde, L., & Christensen-Strynø, M. (under review). Thinking with autoethnography in collaborative research: a critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics.

Read, S., & Maslin-Prothero, S. (2011). The involvement of users and carers in health and social research: the realities of inclusion and engagement. *Qualitative Health Research*, 21, 704–713. doi: 10.1177/1049732310391273

Rose, D., & Kalathil, J. (2019). Power, Privilege and Knowledge: the Untenable Promise of Co-Production in Mental “Health”. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 4, 1–11. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2019.00057

Thompson, J. (2020). Towards an aesthetics of care. In A. S. Fisher & J. Thompson (Eds.), *Performing Care: New Perspectives in Socially Engaged Performance*. Manchester University Press.

Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. Routledge.

Wetherell, M. (2012). *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*. London: SAGE.

Wilson, E., Kenny, A., & Dickson-Swift, V. (2018). Ethical Challenges in Community-Based Participatory Research: A Scoping Review. *Qualitative Health Research*, 28, 189–199.

### **Author Biographies**

Louise Phillips is professor of communication and coordinator of the Dialogic Communication Research Group at the Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University, Denmark. Her research is on dialogic and participatory approaches to producing and communicating knowledge including approaches to collaborative research. ORCID: 0000-0001-7493-9430

Lisbeth Frølunde is associate professor and member of the Dialogic Communication Research Group at the Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University, Denmark. Her research is in the fields of visual communication, narrative inquiry, arts in health, and arts-based research.

Maria Bee Christensen-Strynø is a postdoctoral researcher and member of the Dialogic Communication Research Group at the Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde

University, Denmark. Her research traverses the fields of critical and cultural disability studies, visual culture, and dialogic communication.

---

<sup>i</sup> **Corresponding Author:**

Louise Phillips, Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University, Universitetsvej 1, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark.

Email: [louisep@ruc.dk](mailto:louisep@ruc.dk)

<sup>ii</sup> All co-researchers and bridge builders (dance teachers) have reviewed the manuscript and given written consent to publication. Their real names, rather than pseudonyms, are used in line with the wishes of the co-researchers and bridge builders.