

## Thinking with autoethnography in collaborative research

A critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics

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**Thinking with autoethnography in collaborative research: a critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics**

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## Abstract

In this article, we propose a distinctive critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics in “collaborative, democratic and transformative” research. Underpinning the approach is the view that the buzzwords of “collaboration” and “co-creation/co-production” may signify equitable, symmetrical power relations and, as a result, romanticize collaborative research as straightforward processes of inclusion. The approach integrates critical, reflexive analysis of the play of power in the “with” in “research with, not on, people” and the “co” in “co-creating knowledge” into the ongoing collaborative research process. As a main method for critical, reflexive analysis, the approach uses “thinking with” autoethnography. In the article, we illustrate the approach by showing how we “think with” autoethnographic texts to respond to discomfort and analyse the tensions in the co-constitution of knowledge and subjectivities in the preliminary phase of a collaborative, participatory research project on dance for people with Parkinson’s disease and their spouses.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, collaborative research, co-creation, co-production, participatory research; poststructuralist strategy of reflexivity; power; relational ethics

## Introduction

*“As I relax on the motorway journey from Ballerup home to Valby, my thoughts turn to the two interviews I’d carried out that day. I’m searching for a tension that I can write about in my autoethnographic piece. I begin to think about the unease I sensed when I responded to expressions of hope that the interview would be useful for the research project” (Louise, June 2019).*

This is an extract from a piece of autoethnographic writing belonging to a collaborative, participatory research project on the therapeutic use of dance for people with Parkinson’s disease and their partners. We, the three co-authors of this article, make up the university research team. In the project, we use autoethnography as a method for working critically and reflexively with relational ethics as an integral part of the collaborative research process.

“Relational ethics” is a concept which a number of scholars have developed specifically for research practice on the basis of a feminist “ethics of care”, in particular, the ethics of care theories of Noddings (2013), Sevenhuijsen (1998) and Tronto (1993). Relational ethics diverges from the procedural ethics of mainstream research which puts forward universal moral precepts rooted in Kantian, Enlightenment thinking. Instead, a relational ethics, building as it does on ethics of care theories, is anchored in relationships of mutual caring in the ongoing research process (Brannelly and Boulton, 2017; Clandinin et al., 2018; Ellis, 2017; Groot et al., 2020). Relational ethics belongs to the wave of scholarship that has burgeoned from the 1980’s onwards in response to the “crises of representation, legitimation and praxis” about the implications for research of social constructionist and poststructuralist thinking that challenged the notion that representations can directly reflect reality including lived experience (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).

The wave covers a multiplicity of approaches all aiming to democratise knowledge production in line with the understanding that all knowledge is a product of situated, relational practices of representation rather than a neutral, context-independent foundation. (The approaches include, but are not restricted to, participatory action research (PAR) (which, of course, has a much longer history), community-based participatory research (CBPR), collaborative action research (CAR), participatory health research (PHR), decolonising/indigenous methodologies, feminist “ethics of care” methodologies, inclusive research (IR) (with people with disabilities) and arts-based research (ABR) (e.g. Phillips et al, 2013; Edwards and Brannelly, 2017).

The democratization of knowledge production means that the authorized knowledge of the academy loses its monopoly on truth and multiple ways of knowing are categorized as legitimate, including bodily, affective and aesthetic knowing and being (Denzin, 2014; Foster, 2016; Groot et al., 2020; Richardson and St. Pierre, 2008). Researchers who follow this expanded

conception of knowledge construe their research as an endeavour where participants engage in mutual learning across difference with the aims of contributing not only to research but also to social justice and social change (Edwards and Brannelly, 2017; Groot et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2013).

Within this wave of research, there is a body of systematic critical, reflexive analyses of how power is always in play in the research process itself, notwithstanding the democratic, collaborative, dialogic ideals and transformative aims of social justice and social change (e.g. Groot et al., 2020; Kumsa et al., 2015; Olesen and Nordentoft, 2018; Phillips et al., 2013). In this article, we draw on, and aim to contribute to, this body of critical, reflexive work with an approach to relational ethics building on a poststructuralist, Foucauldian understanding of power. According to this understanding, power is in play in the co-constitution of knowledge and subjectivities, as certain ways of knowing and being dominate and others are marginalized (Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1980).

In line with its poststructuralist, Foucauldian understanding of power, our critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics is based on a poststructuralist strategy of reflexivity that confronts and explores how research relations are riddled with tensions arising from the dynamics of inclusion *and* exclusion in the “relational becoming” of knowledges and subjectivities (Finlay, 2002; Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1980). It entails recognition of the limits of reflexivity: that critical, reflexive analyses of the tensions in research relations are themselves permeated with power and circumscribed by the discourses within which we researchers construct meaning (Kumsa et al., p. 2015). Pillow has dubbed this strategy “uncomfortable” reflexivity – “a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous” (2013: 188) and “continue[s] to challenge the representations we come to while at the same time acknowledging the political need to represent and find meaning” (2013: 192). By working in precisely this way in the nexus between

knowing and not-knowing, our strategy of “uncomfortable” reflexivity rests on a poststructuralist relational onto-epistemological position that is different from the post-qualitative, new materialist relational onto-epistemological position. Both positions are based on a relational ontology of “becoming”, but the post-qualitative position fully rejects a representational logic – that researchers (or anyone else) can represent reality with words – and proposes “diffraction” as an alternative to reflexivity (e.g. Barad, 2008; Bozalek and Zembylas, 2017; Davies, 2018; St. Pierre, 2021). In contrast, our strategy rests on the assumption that it is not possible, in any text, to avoid representing and hence giving some kind of picture of reality. In line with this assumption, we make use of modes of representation that “trouble” representation by highlighting the partial, situated nature of our knowledge-claims or, in Lather’s words, offering a “stuttering knowledge” (Lather, 2010: 137).

A key assumption that drives our critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics is that the terms, “collaboration”, “co-creation/co-production” and “dialogue”, have gained the status of buzzwords with a taken-for-granted positive value. This makes it difficult to take notice of, and critically attend to, tensions arising from the inexorable play of power in the practices constructed in their terms. As a result, the terms form a discourse that often signifies symmetrical power relations and romanticizes collaborative research as smooth, straightforward processes of inclusion (Phillips et al., 2013, 2020, 2021). Our approach works with relational ethics by integrating critical, reflexive analysis of the tensions in the “with” in “research with, not on, people” and the “co” in “co-creating knowledge” into the research process. This critical, reflexive analysis homes in on the processes of co-creating knowledge and establishing collaborative research relations through the tensional, power-infused co-constitution of knowledge and subjectivities. It attends to the performativity of the terms themselves in the relational becoming of the collaborative project and project “we” (Phillips et al, 2021). As a main method for ongoing critical, reflexive analysis, our approach uses

autoethnography. Autoethnographic texts are well-suited to critical, reflexive analysis since they are manifestly constructed as partial, situated truths from the author's perspective and evoke responses grounded in embodied, affective and aesthetic being and knowing (e.g. Bochner and Ellis, 2016).

In this article, we illustrate our critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics by “thinking with” autoethnography in order to explore the play of power in our project on dance for people with Parkinson's disease and their spouses. Our autoethnographic analyses involve being reflexive about specific power inequities between us as university researchers and the co-researchers with Parkinson's disease linked to the history of stigmatization and exclusion of the voices of people with neurodegenerative illnesses from many mainstream contexts of decision-making including research.

Our autoethnographic analyses in this article are about the preliminary phase of the project. The sparse literature there points at the value of reflexive examination of the preliminary phase given the crucial importance *and* immense difficulties of establishing relations of mutuality amongst collaborative research partners (e.g. Gayá Wicks and Reason, 2009; Kumsa et al., 2015). In this article, we employ autoethnography to respond to discomfort and analyse the tensions in the initial coming into being of our collaborative project in its preliminary phase. We demonstrate and discuss “thinking with autoethnography” as a method for working critically and reflexively with relational ethics as an integral part of the “constant becoming” process of research projects, not just in the preliminary phase.

We will first outline the design of our collaborative research project, focusing on the research aims and design, how we theorise relational ethics and reflexivity and how we integrate autoethnography into the ongoing collaborative research process as a method for working critically and reflexively with relational ethics. Then, to illustrate how autoethnography can be integrated into a collaborative research process, we will “think with autoethnography” in order to explore the

tensional coming into being of our collaborative project in its preliminary phase. Finally, in the light of our autoethnographic exploration, we will reflect on how thinking with autoethnography – as a method for grappling with relational ethics – has an impact on our ongoing research process. In other words, we will look into what thinking with autoethnography *does* in, and to, our research project as a whole in the project’s constant “relational becoming”. We will address the potential of a critical, reflexive approach to the “with” in “research with, not on, people” and the “co” in “co-creating knowledge” as a contribution to how to tackle relational ethics as an integral part of a collaborative research process.

### **A critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics in the ongoing collaborative research process**

#### *Research aims and design*

The project runs from January 2019 to June 2022 and has two research questions as follows.

**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? What possibilities and challenges arise in the tensions in co-production in participatory research?* In this article, we address the second question. For publications addressing research question 1, see Christensen-Strynø et al. 2021, in press, in review; Frølund et al., 2021).

In all phases of the project, from the grant application stage onwards,, we have worked **constructively** with the “with” in “research with, not on, people” and the “co” of “co-creating knowledge” by inviting co-researchers to take part in collaborative decision-making, including in formulating the research questions and design. In the project’s preliminary phase (phase 1), we carried out a six month long ethnographic study in which we participated actively 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 with 43 dancers from the five weekly dance classes and seven dance teachers. The seven dance teachers joined the project as “bridge builders”, helping us to establish relationships with the dancers and communicate about the collaborative research process. We invited the dancers and dance teachers to join a steering group as a site for collaborative decision-making about project activities. 17 of the 43 dancers and all seven dance teachers joined. In addition, in order to further knowledge sharing across practice and research, we set up an advisory board which included 12 of the 43 dancers and four dance teachers as well as three representatives of the project’s collaborative partners and three leading researchers in the field. 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 the co-creation of knowledge through embodied, affective, aesthetic knowing in, as well as about, Parkinson’s dance.

In phases 2 and 3 we invited the 43 dancers from phase 1 to participate as co-researchers in a series of collaborative storytelling workshops which represented the project’s main sites for the co-production of knowledge. To open up for embodied, affective and aesthetic knowing, we facilitated phase 2 and 3 workshops using creative, arts-based methods (e.g. Foster, 2016; Leavy, 2019), in particular, collaborative writing as inquiry, podcasts, dance improvisation and dramatised role play (see Frølund et al, in review and Phillips et al. in review, for discussion of how the creative methods, through different modalities, invoked different ways of knowing). Phase 2 took the form of collaborative storytelling workshops which were designed to co-create knowledge about Parkinson’s dance. To anchor the co-creation of knowledge in co-researchers’ own experiences of Parkinson’s dance as an integrated part of everyday life, workshop activities were based on extracts from the phase 1 interviews. 28 of the 43 dancers accepted the invitation and participated as co-researchers in the phase 2 workshops. The phase 3 workshops built on the knowledge co-created in the Phase 2 workshops in order to develop characters and storylines for

the project's graphic novel (see Frølund et al, in review, for an analysis of this process). 20 of the 28 co-researchers from the phase 2 workshops participated in the phase 3 workshops.

While we have worked constructively, in the above ways, with the “with” in “research with, not on, people” and the “co” in “co-creating knowledge”, we have also worked *critically* with the intrinsic tensions by taking three steps throughout the project. We have not taken these steps in a linear, progressive fashion but, rather, in an improvisational, explorative way sensitive to the emergent, dialogic “becoming” of the project – like moves in a dance. The three “dance steps” were as follows. *First, we have made room for critical voices in the fora for co-creation* (e.g. in the collaborative storytelling workshops, the steering group and advisory board) and those critical voices have concrete consequences for the planning and facilitation of subsequent project activities. *Second, we have reacted to discomfort and critically analysed the tensions in the ongoing research process* using the methods of autoethnography and discourse analysis of transcriptions and field notes from project fora for co-creation (see eg. Phillips et al, 2021). Here, we have followed the poststructuralist suggestion that attention to feelings of discomfort, by challenging our sense of certainty, may jolt us out of a position of control and towards recognition of how our interactional moves are performative in co-creating social realities (e.g. MacLure, 2011: 1003). *Third, we have reflexively acted on the discomfort and critical analyses in making choices over the course of the project.* This article focuses on, and illustrates, our use of autoethnography as a method for carrying out the second and third “dance steps”.

#### *Relational ethics and a poststructuralist strategy of reflexivity*

Relational ethics, as pointed out earlier, diverges from procedural ethics in understanding ethics as rooted in caring values and relationships in the ongoing research process (e.g. Ellis, 2017; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). In the procedural ethics applied by ethical committees, as Kuntz

(2010: 429) notes, “there is little space available for self-reflexive examination of how our studies are implicated by learned assumptions concerning representation”. Practising relational ethics, in contrast, is a way of working with ethical concerns throughout the research process – as part of the “*the very doing of qualitative research*” (Lester and Anders, 2018: 3). As Bochner and Ellis (2016: 154) put it, “[r]elational ethics of care focuses on the particular, local, concrete circumstances at hand, not the universal, abstract and theoretical [...] [r]ather than relying on objective standards, acting ethically depends on engagement”.

We suggest that relational research ethics ought to take account of our special responsibility as university researchers in the making of spaces for multiple voices, articulating multiple forms of knowledge and subjectivities. As researchers, we recognize that we play the primary role in framing and facilitating the processes of co-creation. At the same time, we argue, from a poststructuralist perspective, that researchers cannot take full ethical responsibility for ensuring a space that opens up for all voices, since power pervades all social relations and one discourse will always dominate in setting the boundaries of the sayable and do-able (Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1980). The ethics of care provides a way of working with research ethics that resonates well with the strategy of reflexivity that we follow in our project and illustrate in this article. Dubbed “discursive construction” by Finlay (2002) and “uncomfortable reflexivity” by Pillow (2003), this strategy builds on the poststructuralist premise that knowledges and participant subjectivities are the unstable, emergent products of situated, relational meaning-making in the research process. The strategy is an especially good fit with the type of ethics of care that explicitly links caring relationships to questions of power, social inequity and social justice such as in the work of Joan Tronto (1993) and Sevenhuijsen (1998). This is because this type of ethics of care embraces the understanding that the self and moral identity are emergent in social interaction (Sevenhuijsen 1998: 56).

Our poststructuralist strategy of reflexivity embraces sensitivity towards embodied experiences and emotions as among the dynamic forces that, in interplay with one another, bring social realities into being. In so doing, it follows a relational ontology which posits that material things and meaning-making are entangled with one another in bringing the world into being. However, as noted earlier, our onto-epistemological position differs from the post-qualitative, new materialist position in insisting on the value of a strategy of reflexivity as a means of attending to *precisely how* research objects and subjects are emergent products of the co-constitution of knowledge and subjectivities in processes of becoming, and to the consequences with respect to power/knowledge. By doing so, our strategy, we argue, is a way of taking ethical responsibility for the view that it is impossible to avoid representing – that is, constructing objects and subjects in meaning - and thus giving some sort of picture of reality, even in the post-qualitative inquiry approaches that refuse a representational logic and claim to evoke rather than to represent.

### *Thinking with autoethnography*

Autoethnography is one of several creative arts-based research methods providing modes of representation which relativise researcher truths as partial and situated and create space for the dynamic, unfinalizable voices of ‘others’ (e.g. Leavy, 2019; Richardson, 2008). Autoethnographic texts actively solicit dialogue by drawing attention to their status as narrative constructions from the perspectives of the author and by resonating with readers’ own lives (Bochner and Ellis, 2016: 71). In this article, we use autoethnographic stories to destabilise the voice of the authoritative researcher and interrogate power/knowledge in the ethnographic study in the initial phase (phase 1) of our project. While the stories form part of the ethnographic study, they are *auto*ethnographic as opposed to ethnographic since they draw on the literary genre of autobiographical writing in order

to turn the researcher into a desiring, personally invested, relationally constituted subject of research (Sundén, 2012: 170).

Our stories signpost the limits of reflexivity – that we are generating a “stuttering knowledge” (Lather, 2010: 137) owing to our own enmeshment in dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the co-constitution of knowledge and subjectivities in situated, relational practices. This means that inquiring into our research process with our autoethnographic texts enables us to deal ethically with the experienced loss of control that accompanies recognition of the emergent, situated nature of research knowledge and participant subjectivities. Crucially, it helps us to take ethical responsibility for our *incapacity*, given our own enmeshment in dynamics of power/knowledge, to take full responsibility for ensuring that all voices are articulated and heard in the co-creation of knowledge in the research process.

Bochner and Ellis understand evocative autoethnographic stories as themselves forms of analysis: “[S]torytellers use analytic techniques to interpret their worlds and [...] stories themselves are analytic. Storytellers, as well as theorists address the questions: ‘what is going on here and what does it mean?’” (Bochner and Ellis, 2016: 184). Bochner and Ellis refer to Polkinghorne’s differentiation between narrative analysis – where the analysis is constructed in the genre of a story and the analyst is positioned as storyteller - and narrative-under-analysis - where a story is analysed from a detached perspective (Polkinghorne, 1995, cited in Bochner and Ellis, 2016). Bochner and Ellis describe these two forms as follows, drawing on Arthur Frank’s distinction between thinking *with* and thinking *about* a story: “Thinking with a story (narrative analysis) means to experience it as affecting your life and to find in that experience a truth about your life. In thinking about a story (narrative-under-analysis) we reduce the story to content and then analyse it, hoping to find larger categories, themes or patterns” (Bochner and Ellis, 2016: 185-186).

In our project and in the illustration below, we combine “thinking with” and “thinking about” stories. We think “with” the stories by presenting the autoethnographic stories (narrative analysis) and we think “about” the stories by treating the stories as objects of more detached, academic analysis (narrative-under-analysis). We do this because we consider that storytelling and the conventional academic text are each genres of representing reality, including self and other, which make possible *and* constrain meaning-making; combining the two genres, then, opens up for different forms of knowledge about how the collaborative project and project “we” are brought into being.

Moreover, we enhance the analytical dimension further by embedding the autoethnographic texts in conventional academic narrative. This is what Bochner and Ellis call a “closed sandwich, with the traditional framing at the beginning and the theoretical conclusions at the end, encapsulating the narrative meat – or tofu if you’re a vegetarian – in the middle” (2016: 203). In our case, we included a wee hors d’oeuvres at the beginning (of the article)!

Stressing the analytical dimension is for us a way of highlighting what we see as an ethical responsibility that follows from the epistemological position that it is not possible to avoid representing reality -albeit a partial picture and not a direct reflection - and thus producing knowledge. In addition, stressing the analytical dimension supports our knowledge interests since, as a way of working with relational ethics, we use autoethnography to generate specific knowledge-claims: knowledge-claims about the tensions in the “co” of “co-creation” and the “with” in “research with, not on people”.

In the following, we show how we work with relational ethics through the use of autoethnography to analyse the tensions in collaborative research. All three autoethnographic stories are responses to discomfort arising in the tensions in phase 1 of our project.

### **In the tension between the project “we” and the other**

*“Lisbeth: One of the co-researchers who has Parkinson’s has been in touch with dance teacher, Joan, about the possibility of her and members of her class participating in our project. After many phone calls and emails between my colleague in the research team, Joan and me, and calendar alignments, I’m off to visit Joan and her class. [...] I bring with me consent forms and 2-page descriptions of the project. Joan welcomes me, smiling but busy with her playlist. [...] The dance class starts when Joan claps her hands. [...] I try to follow Joan’s quick pace, crossing the gym to various older Danish pop tunes, [...] enjoying dance steps. During the break, Joan hands out candy and makes sure we all drink water.*

*After the dance class, Joan gathers us all in an adjoining room. She gets coffees but forgets to ask me, and passes around cake for the meeting about “research on dance”. Joan then sits down and starts introducing the research project [...] I wait for her to give me the floor. I agree with what she says, it is very supportive, she has really read the information. After some minutes, I smile, say “hello to everyone”, my name, and “thank you for having me today, it is so nice to meet you”. I hold up the consent forms and explain briefly about the research design and giving consent. Joan takes the forms and recaps what it means to participate, promising that she will organize and collect the forms for the research team at the university. I ask if they have any questions, Joan assures me/them that she can answer them or pass them on. Joan then says that it is so good that there is funding to study dance and she hopes it will spread, since so many more people with Parkinson’s should have the opportunity, for example, her mother has Parkinson’s but no dance classes nearby.*

*With that remark, I become more at ease with being quiet and letting Joan’s way of caring unfold.*

*This introduction is different from in the other dance classes – the drive, humour, bouncy energy of Joan prevails. But she has a different stake, too, it's in the family. 'She's a bit like me', I think".*

In the ethnographic study in phase 1 of the project, we invested a lot of time and effort in making contact and establishing warm, friendly relations with the dancers and dance teachers in the five collaborating dance classes, dancing together and chatting about everyday topics as well as talking about the project and answering questions about the research project. This autoethnographic story is about an ethnographic observation the first time Lisbeth visited one of the dance classes. The story describes the series of steps to establish relations with the dance teacher and potential co-researchers which took place before and during the dance class. The text shows the embodied involvement of the researcher both in the activities of the dance class - trying to keep up with the pace, becoming at ease – and with the participants - saying hello, exchanging names. We can see a tension here between establishing a project “we”, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Lisbeth's otherness as a newcomer to, and outsider in, the dance class. Lisbeth's works to become part of the class through her embodied involvement.

Nevertheless, Lisbeth is still taken aback when the teacher takes over the presentation of the project as part of the project “we”. Lisbeth's discomfort may be a response to a felt tension between establishing the project “we”, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Joan's otherness as new to the project. According to the story, this tension is diminished when Lisbeth approves of Joan's description of the project: “I agree with what she says, it is very supportive, she has really read the information”. When Lisbeth learns that the teacher also has a close relative with Parkinson's, the tension is dissipated further: “With that remark, I become more at ease with being quiet and letting Joan's way of caring unfold”. The tension is alleviated even more, and the project “we” is further consolidated, by Lisbeth's identification with the teacher: “she's a bit like me”. This identification seems to support the mutuality in their relationship as people with shared life



experiences as close relatives of someone with Parkinson's. In Caine et al.'s terms there is "a coming alongside [...] in unfolding lives" (2020: 273). The next story dwells on a tension emanating from an imbalance that hinders mutuality.

### **In the tension between facilitating and investing personally**

*"[After an interview] Maria: As I pack up my laptop, recorder and notes, Lucas asks me about my background, and it strikes me that there, up until this moment, has been a significant imbalance in our exchange. While Lucas has invited me into his home, served me ginger biscuits and shared his thoughts, memories and ideas with me, I have shared almost nothing personal about myself with him [...].*

*I realise that my discomfort is connected to not having been able to project anything of importance to myself and my own values into our conversation. And when Lucas asks me about my background and what my interests are in relation to doing research, I get the feeling that he has also been missing something more from me.*

*Eager to answer his question, I begin to talk about my interest in studying the cultural representation of marginalised embodiment and identity in relation to my own experiences of growing up and living with both congenital and acquired disabilities [...] Lucas responds by listening with great interest, which I understand as his way of approving my reasons for being there and having made him talk about his life. I begin to feel more at ease, and I realise that I might have to articulate my own investments more clearly when interviewing people as a way of letting them care for me. I feel grateful that Lucas asked me about my life. Still, it bothers me that I didn't know how to get there without being asked directly. But maybe, after all, it is not just my responsibility.*

*Maybe this is part of what co-creation is, I think to myself as I unlock my bike and wave goodbye to Lucas.*

Reading this text, we think of another of Caine, Clandinin and colleagues' dimensions of relational ethics – “the necessity of understanding that ethical relations are always lived embodiments that ask us to be still and to attend carefully to, and with, silence and with contemplation” (Clandinin et al., 2018: 14). A key question is *how* we can attend carefully to the silence. We suggest that one strategy is discomfort. Maria experienced discomfort in feeling an imbalance in the interview with Lucas. This discomfort led her in the autoethnographic story to explore the roots of that discomfort. There is a tension between facilitating and listening to the other's account of his experiences and reciprocating as a dialogue partner with an account of one's own experience.

Is there a move in Maria's autoethnographic story towards a relationship with mutual investments, even though it is still patently unequal? The story opens up for thinking about power imbalance and unequal engagement, allowing us to explore the consequences of different kinds and degrees of investment. Caine et al. (2020) and Clandinin et al. (2018) talk about relational ethics as distinct from an ethics of care. While an ethics of care is characterized by “care for one another”, relational ethics is characterised by mutuality – “a ‘becoming together’ with responsibility to and for each other” (Caine et al., 2020: 273). In Caine et al.'s words, this entails a kind of “coming alongside slowly to attend closely to the stories lived, told and not told” and “of attending to the ongoingness of researchers' and participants' lives in motion, attending that is only possible by seeing each moment as within unfolding lives” (2020: 273). To what extent can we talk about coming alongside in unfolding lives given that we meet the co-researchers in carefully planned project settings? In the project's preliminary phase – the ethnographic study taking place in the project's first six months – the collaborative part of the project is still just a promise (see the third

story below) and Lucas has invested much, much more personally into the interview – in the form of personal stories – than Maria.

At the same time, the promise of the collaborative storytelling workshops (to take place in phase 2) effects the ethnographic study (phase 1) since we address the participants as co-researchers and talk to them about the co-creation of knowledge to come in phase 2 and about how we will work to anchor that knowledge in practice so that it benefits the co-researchers and their communities. Thus, on the one hand, it could be said that we are not coming alongside the co-researchers in their everyday lives with the same intensity as we would if we had extended the ethnographic study where we were together with the co-researchers at dance classes every week - a meeting tempo common in narrative inquiry. However, on the other hand, our research aims are, in one sense, more collaborative than narrative inquiry since, in our case, co-researchers contribute to determining the content, form and research aims of processes of co-creating knowledge and participate in those processes as co-researchers.

In the next story, we further explore the power imbalance built into spaces of collaborative research by focusing on dealing ethically with the experienced loss of control that comes with recognition of the emergent, situated nature of research knowledge and participant subjectivities.

### **In the tension between not-knowing and control**

*“[following on from the text at the beginning of the article] Louise: Still somewhere on the motorway between Ballerup and Valby, I turn first to the end of interview with Hilde that evening. On completion of the interview and just after she’d shown me around her beautiful garden, I thanked her and she replied that she hoped that the interview would be a useful contribution to the*

*research project. I assured her that it would. I said that she - and the other people with PD and their relatives who were part of the research project - had experiential knowledge about PD dance that was extremely valuable. We would be using that experiential knowledge as the foundation for the co-creation workshops in the autumn [..]. I talked about it as “our” research project in which we would be learning from each other in order to develop Parkinson dance practice further.*

*It strikes me then that all the people I have interviewed have said something similar to what Hilde said and I have responded in similar ways with promises of mutual learning and mutual gain. I start to think about what Arne said at the end of his interview earlier today and how I responded. He said, ‘I hope that what we talked about was useful for the research project. I’m interested in what you manage to get out of all this data, I’m concerned that you’ve got far too much data, but then there’s a professor involved in the project – I felt that he made it sound as if the professor were someone other than me! – and you don’t get to be a professor for nothing, so I suppose things are going to be alright’.*

*I smiled and said something I hoped sounded reassuring - something about how I was sure that it would be alright since we were three researchers on the project who had different areas of expertise and plenty of time to do detailed analyses of different dimensions of the research topic. I can’t remember Arne’s response but recall he didn’t contest my words.*

*I think about how, in both cases, I was conscious at the time of my effort to project my confidence in the value of the interview as a useful contribution to the research project and in the value of the project as a useful contribution to the world (that it would be meaningful and useful for people with Parkinson’s, their relatives, health care practitioners and researchers) – even though the participants did not themselves express any expectations about the usefulness of the project results. Each time, I can sense the enthusiasm in my voice and the energy in my movements. But, in the*

*moment of being conscious of that effort, I also feel an unease that I am now reacting to here in the car. I realise that this unease signals a tension between what I promise to participants and also my own confidence (I do feel confident about the project's worth), on the one hand, and, on the other hand, what can happen in the future. How do I know the interview will be of use to the project? And how do I know the project will be meaningful and useful for people with Parkinson's, relatives, health care practitioners and researchers? I project confidence as if there were certainty now, as if knowledge were not emergent in the "co" of co-creation! And I take responsibility as if I were in full control, as if this were not a collaborative project! The collaborative nature of the project radically affects the ethnographic part. In our framing of the ethnography – in all the different parts – we invoke the project "we", we speak of "our" project, and thus the project is brought into being as a collaborative one. And in so doing, we are making promises as if we know they will come true."*

So what is at stake in Louise's story? How does it get to grips reflexively with the tensions in the "with"? The tension with which she grapples is about – on the one hand - taking heed of the emergent nature of collaborative research whereby the framework is never fixed in advance but constantly co-created by university researchers and co-researchers in the course of the research process and – on the other hand – taking ethical responsibility for research relations, the research process and meeting the research aims.

Emergence comes from the Latin verb to 'emergere', meaning to become visible or known, to rise to the surface or come into view (Phillips & Christensen, 2013: 264). As noted earlier, researchers ought to pay attention not only to ideas and knowledge-claims but also to disconcerting, gut feelings (MacLure, 2011). Reflexive sensitivity to emergence is crucial because, in practices of co-creation, the researcher, in principle, relinquishes full control of the process and opens up for multiple voices, while still managing the process in order to meet research goals.

Reading this story made us aware of the performativity of an awareness of emergence: what a recognition of a loss of control and an embrace of emergence *do* in collaborative research practice.

### **Thinking with autoethnography: afterthoughts**

In this article, we have proposed and illustrated a distinctive critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics which builds on a poststructuralist strategy of “uncomfortable” reflexivity and employs “thinking with” autoethnography as a main method for carrying out critical, reflexive analysis. We suggest that the approach provides researchers with a way of acting ethically on their responsibility for reproducing power relations in the relational becoming of collaborative research projects and concomitant project “we’s”. Autoethnographic analysis is a method that suits this approach well since it presents the tensions in collaborative processes not as absolute truths but precisely as a starting-point for reflexive dialogue – a reflexive dialogue that recognizes the power inequities which inexorably persist despite the democratization of knowledge with its heightened negotiation of knowledge and subjectivities (Author A and other, 2020).

The approach integrates autoethnographic analyses of the tensions in the “with” of “research with, not on, people” and the “co” in “co-creating knowledge” into the ongoing research process. As we noted earlier, the approach has three steps, construed not along rigid, linear lines but as malleable, improvisational “dance moves” responsive to the dialogic to and fro of the “with” and the “co”. The first step consists of constructing sites in the collaborative project for the articulation of multiple, including critical, voices, articulating embodied, experiential knowledges. The second step involves reacting to discomfort and critically analysing the tensions in the ongoing research process using the methods of autoethnography and discourse analysis of transcriptions and field

notes from the fora for co-creation in the project. And the third step takes the form of acting reflexively on the discomfort and critical analyses in making choices in the course of the project. In thinking *with* and *about* the three autoethnographic stories above, we have illustrated how we use autoethnography as a method for carrying out the second step – reacting to discomfort and critically analyzing the tensions - specifically in relation to the preliminary phase of the project (the ethnographic study that took place in the three-year project's first six months).

We turn now to the third step – how we have acted reflexively on the discomfort and critical autoethnographic analyses of the tensions. Our emotional discomfort with the complexities of invoking a project “we” across difference (Lisbeth's story), of responding to unequal investments (Maria's story) and of making promises as if we were in full control of the project as it unfolds as a collaborative, dialogic endeavour (Author A's story) reflects not only the specific tensions we identify in the stories but also two overarching tensions.

One overarching tension is between effortsto make space for multiple voices the co-creation of knowledge, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the circumscribed nature of our – university researchers' and co-researchers' - scope for action both within the project itself and in relation to its socially transformative potential. This tension can be understood as what Kumsa et al. (2015: 434) call an “ongoing struggle between our inescapable entanglements in the tangled webs of ubiquitous power relations and our desire to break free of them”. Our discomfort and autoethnographic analyses have made us more aware of this overarching tension.

The other overarching tension that we see across all three stories is between constructing the project as joint processes of co-creating knowledge as if all participants had equal investments and scope for action, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the far greater say that we, the university researchers, have in the design and facilitation of the co-creation processes and analyses. We suggest that this tension arises in phase 1 in positive accounts of the project as

collaborative and dialogic that we use to invoke a project “we” in face-to-face interactions with new co-researchers as in Author A’s story above, in written and oral invitations to people to join the project as co-researchers, and in public dissemination positioning the project as a valuable contribution to research and practice. All these accounts articulate a voice which carries traces of the discourse of dialogue romanticizing “collaboration”, “co-creation” and “dialogue” as straightforward processes of inclusion (Author A, 2011; Author A and others, 2013, 2018).

We act on these two overarching tensions reflexively in the ongoing research process by paying heightened attention to the different ways in which the collaborative project and the concomitant project “we” are invoked in different contexts and across time over the course of the project. This attention to the contextual and temporal specificities is driven by our understanding that the project and its “we” are the unstable, unfinalizable products of spatially and temporally specific, relational practices and, therefore, are in a constant process of “becoming”.

In acting reflexively on the discomfort and analyses of the tensions throughout the course of the project, we pay heed to the socio-culturally and temporally contingent content of the voices articulated across stories (Bakhtin, 1981). This is in line with the type of ethics of care that “draws out the connection between morality and politics, and calls for political recognition of care” (Brannelly and Boulton, 2017: 343). In the polyphonic articulation of voices - constructing specific knowledges and subjectivities – certain voices inevitably come to dominate and others are marginalised. We suggest that sensitivity to how the polyphonic space is populated with, and circumscribed by, different voices, articulating different and competing understandings of the “with” in “research with, not on” and the “co” in “co-creating knowledge”, helps us to map the precise ways in which power is in play in the “with” and the “co”.



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