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Book review:

Participatory research with/and social media

Amira Sofie Sandin (2021). Var(a) snäll och gilla: medforskning med unga om identitet och sociala medier. Borås: Högskolan i Borås.

English Title: (I) Kindly like: Participatory research with young people about identity and social media.

(I) kindly like is a doctoral thesis by Amira Sofie Sandin in library and information science. It is an ambitious and comprehensive thesis, written in Swedish and focusing on how four groups of 16-year-olds use social media in their identity work. It is a wide-ranging study divided into eight chapters and covering nearly 300 pages. The empirical material for the thesis was collected between 2015 and 2017. The aim of the thesis is twofold. The first aim focuses on participatory research and the idea that, through their participation in this research project, young people are co-constructors of the research knowledge. The second aim concentrates on young people's identity work through their use of social media. The second aim emphasises more specifically how young people do identity work by posting and liking photographs on social media.

I would like to describe the twofold aim as having sprung out of the empirical work. I imagine there was not initially meant to be such a twofold aim, but that it is rather an outcome of how the empirical work developed. This is not unusual in qualitative research projects. A consequence of the twofold aim is an imbalance between the two aims, whereby the main contribution of the thesis leans towards and then settles down into the very interesting and reflexive participatory methodology. This is a methodological approach that in this case extends far beyond much of the participatory research conducted, for example, in child and youth studies, where participatory research has increased over the last 30 years and has been given special attention. Since Sandin's focus is on young people, this thesis touches on child and youth studies, as does some of her referencing. Sandin's special contribution to participatory research is her transparent struggle with the limitations and possibilities of the method.

Sandin is inspired by Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire's (1970/2012) social theory of 'the pedagogy of the oppressed'. This is a theory that provides tools and language to be able to reflect upon and

understand processes of oppression, emancipation, and empowerment. These keywords are central to Sandin's reflexive stance. She investigates how her own circumstances as a white academic woman differ from those of the engaged young people with immigrant backgrounds who are taking part in the study. The fundamental idea of the pedagogy developed by Freire, according to Sandin, is that all human beings, no matter who you are or what you carry with you in life, can develop critical thinking through expanding your own knowledge, your reflective stance, and your actions. This builds on the idea that everyone has the capacity to change the world by naming and/or labelling it. Knowledge, according to Freire and Sandin, is always intertwined with power; thus, knowledge is never neutral. That knowledge is never neutral is a widely accepted ontological stance in today's human and social sciences. The idea that power is what makes it unbiased cannot be described as *the* general way to understand knowledge as unbiased. Rather, it is one way among many others that it can be biased. Drawing on Freire, however, power is *the* central idea, along with the idea of empowerment, for acknowledging knowledge as unbiased in the thesis.

Altogether 13 young people, five young men and eight young women, divided into three groups *Pašteta* (five young men), *Byyns forskare* (four young women) and *Disney Princesses* (four young women) signed up to participate in the study in their spare time. They all decided upon their group names and their pseudonyms during the research process. For example, the girls in the Disney Princess group called themselves Mulán, Pocahontas, Rapunzel and Snow White. Each group conducted five research meetings together with Sandin, and all the groups participated in social activities including bowling, paintball, laserdome and restaurant visits together with Sandin. Eleven of the co-researchers participated in a final follow-up interview 18 months or two years after the research meetings had finished.

The research meetings are described both as group discussions and workshop meetings. The young people talked about their own and others' social media posts and their liking strategies on Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. Sandin brought back analyses from the groups, of which she made theoretical re-analyses, only to bring her analyses back to the groups for reworking them together. The content of the analyses shows that these young people use the three media platforms in three different ways in their identity work.

To discuss identity, Sandin draws on Erwin Goffman's (1990) theory of the dramaturgical perspective using the concepts 'impression management', 'face' ('I'), and 'role' to study identity work through social interaction. Using this approach, identity is understood as being made in and through social relations. Goffman's identity theory is widely used in social media research, even though it was created before the era of social media. To compensate for this, Sandin combines Goffman's ideas about identity with those of more contemporary media researchers who work on identity and young people, like David Buckingham (2008, 2013) and Dylan E. Wittkower (2014). It is, however, unclear exactly how or if they contribute to developing Goffman's thinking around identity. The thesis does not have a theory chapter, instead theories appear and are discussed throughout the book.

The analyses of the content show that the young people conduct different identity work on different social media platforms. The three identity 'I's or selves are named: 1) *the ideal self,* 2) *the downplayed self,* and 3) the *unpolished or authentic self*. The difference between them can be described through a tension between a well-prepared self where the 'I' wants to appear and perform under the spotlight to win appreciation and attention through likes. To achieve this, a lot of work has been done backstage to create a good photograph of the 'I', and the 'I' also has to be generous and like other social media users in return. This creates a tapestry of give and take. In the downplayed version of the self, different tactics are used to avoid discomfort and unpleasantness. Effort is then invested in face-saving activities. This self does not share as many pictures online and finds ways to express and

take a stance on political issues without expressing any personal opinions. The degree of publicity declines for the downplayed self. This trend is taken even further with the unpolished self, where photographs are shared only with one's closest friends and depict unpolished pictures from the breakfast table and the like. These pictures can be described as more naked, without make-up, crazy, and authentic. The pictures should *appear* as though they are genuine, true, and authentic.

The question is: to what extent does this thesis contribute to social media research or present strong new theoretical arguments around online identity and identity work? This is not the strongest part of the study. The largest contribution of the thesis, as already mentioned, is the participatory co-research method. Even though the content of the social media posts is deeply entangled with the method, as this is what the knowledge collaboration is about, they can be seen as two quite different issues. The content of the thesis could, to express the point somewhat provocatively, be interchanged for a different topic. Still, it would have to be a topic that concerns and engages young people. This said, identity work on social media is still methodologically interesting for the participatory part of the thesis.

All the groups participating in the research study are groups of friends. They have chosen to participate as groups. This is a strength because it means that dialogues between the young people are fluent and easy-going. All research meetings took place at the university where Sandin worked. This gave access to kitchen facilities to offer coffee (in Swedish *fika*), technological equipment to look at photos together and access to tools like scissors, paper, and glue to make collages in the workshops. The idea to have the meetings at the university was also to show the young people that the project they were participating in was important. It meant moving away from their own institutions, such as school with its set power relations between teacher and student. Also, universities are places for knowledge production.

It turns out, however, that it is not so easy to break down power dynamics just because new places are entered. Universities also have a lot in common with schools. When Sandin meets with the Pašteta group for the first time, she has placed coffee cups and plates around a table in a seminar room. On entering the room, all the young men choose to sit on the same side of the table, facing towards Sandin, expecting her as the researcher to talk to them. Sandin is taken aback by this but chooses herself to take a seat at the side of the table instead of in front of them as a way of trying to break away from the position she has been assigned. Sandin returns to Freire (1970/2012) to discuss and analyse this event and example. She argues that the way in which the boys seat themselves is an expression of how they have internalised the superior oppressor's position (Sandin) and aligned with what they think is expected of them by subordinating themselves. This is the kind of oppression that Freire in his theory wants to abolish. This analysis makes me slightly uncomfortable.

I agree with Sandin that power dynamics can be expressed in the smallest detail of everyday life. My discomfort springs out of the use of the word oppressed. Are you by definition oppressed because, in an unknown setting (the University) you choose a strategy that is familiar to you on the first occasion when you meet the researcher leading the project you have decided to participate in? Could the young men's behaviour also have been expressed as showing respect to Sandin? They also turned off their mobile phones and put them away in order to be able to listen. Sandin uses this example to explain how difficult it can be, even with the best of intentions, to break away from well-established patterns. She argues that both the adult/youth dichotomy, as well as researcher/non-researchers (knowledge), and probably ethnicity and gender, affect the situation. I appreciate this reflection even though I think Sandin is expecting a bit too much of her co-researchers in the way the situation is set up and given that she has not yet initiated the project. This example captures what I would define as a slight drawback that permeates the participatory method when pushed to its limits as Sandin does.

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At this point, I want to remind the reader that I am really impressed with Sandin's reflexive stance in relation to the activities in the research groups as well as to the balanced and careful way in which she approaches her co-researchers. Sandin sets off from the idea that knowledge is always biased. Still, the reader can see that a truth criterion is intertwined with the methodological approach. This might be the result of pushing the participant method as far as Sandin does, and not a limitation specific to Sandin's study. It might be an outcome of how research methods in general, or a single method, are always limited in their capacity to capture the entire world. What seeps into the method is the idea that there exists a single perfect way of organising and participating in a research project that will lead us to more correct and truer answers in our research.

This can be explained in yet another way in relation to this thesis. The Swedish title of the thesis then becomes particularly interesting. The subtitle's direct translation is "Co-researching with young people about identity and social media". The even more direct translation of co-researching is *with*-researching, which then becomes "*With*-researching *with* young people about identity and social media" (**Med**forskning **med**…). Sandin states that she is conducting research *with* young people and not *about* them (but about social media). My reflection here is whether *all* other research that invites people to participate in research projects is conducting research *about* people rather than with them, and whether the participant method is the only method that co-constructs knowledge with participants? I find this hierarchisation between methods unfortunate because it suggests that some methods are truer than others. It also raises the question of what the 'with' means.

The *with*, or the co-, is followed by the idea that everyone in the research project, the researcher, and in this case the young people, are expected to feel and take equal responsibility for the research project; hence, yet another unattainable ideal is constructed. How, I wonder, can it ever be equal? Sandin sets off from an idea and a desire that she and her co-researchers should feel equally engaged and responsible for the research project. Initially, her idea was that, if the *with* was not strong enough, there was no 'real' co-participation, which would mean that the method failed, or she failed. This is one such example where, in a brilliant way through reflexive work, Sandin overcomes her own ideas about how knowledge is constructed. Still, her standard for the *with* never fully coalesces. My question is: when does someone become a co-researcher? As a researcher and a PhD student, you train and are trained for years. How rapidly can someone become a co-researcher and what expectations can we reasonably have of people we invite to join research projects? Sandin does a fantastic job of pushing back questions and ideas to her collaborators and compensating them in every way possible when working within the realm of a governmental institution like the university. She is loyal and faithful to her method. It is, however, precisely this faithfulness that causes the method to crack slightly when Sandin does not want to give advice to her collaborators, and when she suggests that co-writing with them would have been the ultimate collaboration. These postures suggest that knowledge can be objective and that there is a best and perhaps truer way of conducting participatory research that contributes truer knowledge, and that this approach is not to intervene with the knowledge one has as a researcher.

Sandin goes further than many others to make the relationship between herself and her co-researchers as equal as possible. There is, however, no explanation of when, where and why this equality is important to the research project. After reading the thesis, due to the excellent reflexive work Sandin has done, I have gained good insight into the position of the researcher. My knowledge about the empowerment of the co-researchers is, unfortunately, less complete.

What is important about the methodological approach is that, after signing up, all the co-researchers chose to stay with the project. They turn up for the research meetings, they share and contribute their insights on social media, and they respond to Sandin's approach to a non-hierarchical way of

organising their shared interactions. They do not always react in the ways that Sandin has planned, which pushes Sandin in her reflexive work. This process is the most important contribution of the thesis because it gives very good insights into what co-research can look like in practice. When Sandin reflects upon her own shortcomings and insecurities, the method is at its best. Her reflections become a way of also analysing the method itself as they expose the limits of what can and cannot be negotiated in participatory research (or co-research as I want to call it in English after having read the thesis), and how far equality can be pushed. The purist truth claim is as a matter of fact a great finding of the thesis because it shows that the method produces biased knowledge.

It is, without doubt, an ambitious and complex thesis and I am aware that I have not been able to cover the entirety of the writing. I could have discussed gender, the ethics of allowing friends to research together, the lack of a theory chapter, the application of theoretical concepts rather than using them to think with or to challenge the empirical findings, and how academic collaboration contributes to our own individual writings. The most important insight I carry away with me from this study arises from the methodological approach. Amira Sofie Sandin shows us in a brilliant way, but perhaps without being fully aware of it, that the research methods we use always also produce the data and knowledge that we research (cf. Law 2004; Sparrman 2014). To be a human being is complicated. To take this into consideration means that different research methods need to be combined, twisted around, and turned inside-out to capture this human complexity. Reflexivity is fundamental to this process.

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