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Editorial

Working with, not on: Co-research as a methodological, relational, and ethical practice in qualitative research

Sabina Pultz[1] & Sofie Pedersen[2]

[1] *Roskilde University, Department of People and Technology, Universitetsvej 1, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark*
[2] *Roskilde University, Department of People and Technology, Universitetsvej 1, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark*

How do we work *with* people in research and not *on* them? This question is at the heart of this special issue, which brings together contributions exploring co-research as a methodological, relational, and ethical practice. Across diverse empirical contexts, including research with children, young people, professionals, unemployed people, and qualitative research participants more broadly, the articles examine how knowledge is produced through collaboration, negotiation, and reflexive engagement. Drawing on perspectives from psychology, pedagogy, sociology, childhood studies, and adjacent fields, the special issue explores how co-research challenges established understandings of researcher authority, participation, and the production of knowledge.

People have always been part of research in arts and social science. Yet, the emergence of the term *co-research* signals a particular ambition: not merely to conduct research involving people, but to rethink how people participate in the production of knowledge. The prefix *co-* derives from the Latin *com*, meaning "together with", "alongside", or "in connection with". Importantly, *co-* does not simply imply equality or sameness; rather, it points towards plurality and relationality. Co-research is therefore

characterized by the involvement of more than one person in the research process and by some form of collaboration in which perspectives, interpretations, and forms of knowledge are brought together in a plurality.

Although co-research has gained increasing attention, it remains a relatively emerging and still somewhat niche concept compared with related and more established traditions such as action research, Participatory Action Research (PAR), Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), and Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). Co-research has developed in dialogue with these traditions but also signals something distinct. Rather than referring only to specific participatory techniques or stages of involvement, co-research foregrounds the epistemological and relational implications of conducting research together with others. It raises fundamental questions about who produces knowledge, whose perspectives are considered valid, and how research relationships shape what can become known.

The growing interest in co-research reflects broader developments within qualitative research and society. Increasing attention to user perspectives and lived experiences has created a demand for research approaches that make visible voices and forms of knowledge that have historically been marginalized or overlooked. At the same time, institutional and political developments have contributed to the rise of collaborative approaches. Research funders increasingly emphasize societal impact, stakeholder involvement, and inclusion as conditions for research support (see e.g., MacLeod, Manitsa & De Brito 2024). Within this context, co-research has emerged as an approach that seeks to reposition participants and stakeholders as active contributors to knowledge production rather than merely as sources of data.

However, the growing legitimacy of co-research also raises important questions. What does it mean to genuinely conduct research *with* people? When does collaboration become co-research? Is the aspiration itself sufficient, or are there particular practices, commitments, or forms of involvement that need to be present? And perhaps most importantly: who has the authority to decide whether a research process can be considered co-research?

From conducting research *on* people to research *with* people

The questions raised by co-research are connected to longstanding critiques of dominant research traditions. In many ways, modern research has historically been shaped by ideals originating from the natural sciences, where objectivity has often been associated with distance, neutrality, and the possibility of observing phenomena from an external position. Within the social sciences, these ideals have been challenged for decades, particularly by interpretive, feminist, postcolonial, and critical approaches that have questioned the possibility of a detached "view from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988). From a critical psychological perspective, Klaus Holzkamp (2013) argued that psychological research risks missing its object of study when it applies abstract concepts and methods without sufficiently considering that it is dealing with *people* rather than things. Understanding human beings requires understanding their lives, practices, and social contexts. Knowledge cannot be separated from the worlds in which it is produced. This notion is also prominent in the broader field of social psychology of everyday life (Argyle, 1992; Hodgetts et al., 2010; Schraube & Højholt, 2016; Pultz, 2024) and more context-sensitive approaches to a variety of fields (Chen et al., 2026).

Similarly, feminist and intersectional approaches have highlighted how traditional research practices may reproduce unequal relations by privileging certain forms of knowledge while marginalizing others. Research with people who occupy socially disadvantaged positions, including children, racialized groups, disabled people, women, and LGBTQ+ communities, has therefore increasingly called for closer engagement with those whose lives are being studied. These traditions share an ambition to challenge hierarchical knowledge-production and to recognize situated perspectives as central to understanding social realities.

From this perspective, co-research represents a move away from a "God's-eye view" of the world and towards more situated, relational, and democratic forms of knowledge production. Yet, co-research also contains inherent tensions. While it challenges traditional researcher authority, it does not automatically eliminate asymmetries of power. Nor does collaboration necessarily guarantee inclusion. Co-research can become an empty signifier if it is reduced to good intentions, extensive descriptions of participation, or the symbolic inclusion of voices without meaningful influence on the research process. Consequently, co-research requires ongoing reflection

on power, ethics, and the conditions of participation. It challenges not only research methods but also researchers' professional identities and understandings of expertise. Even researchers who have never conducted research within natural science traditions may find traces of what might be called a "natural science ghost": assumptions about control, objectivity, validity, and expertise that continue to shape qualitative inquiry.

The specific phrase to conduct research *with*, rather than *on*, people has been articulated through a family of closely related formulations rather than through a single standardized phrase. One of its clearest early formulations appears in Heron and Reason's (2001) account of co-operative inquiry, *The Practice of Co-operative Inquiry: Research "With" Rather Than "On" People* (p. 179), in which participants become both co-researchers and co-subjects. Variations such as *research with, not on*, *research with (not on)*, and *working with, not on* subsequently appear in community-based and participatory research with adolescents and young people (Litt, 2003, p. 315; Martin et al., 2019, p. 302; Radlick & Przedpelska, 2024, p. 1), disability and mental health service-user research (Burch, 2024, p. 3932; Layton et al., 2022, p. 1; Schneider, 2012, p. 155), and person-centered health research involving undocumented and recent migrants (Rivas, 2024, p. 5). Russ et al. (2025) employ the closely related distinction between research *"about"* and research *"with"* people (p. 43). The formulation has also been explicitly adopted in research with unemployed people. Within the HECAT project, *working with the unemployed rather than on them* was articulated as an ethical commitment (Roche et al., 2020, p. 4) and enacted through the involvement of unemployed people, caseworkers, and policy actors in the co-design of digital employment services (Griffin et al., 2025, pp. 150–162). Pultz (2024) develops the formulation *working with, not on unemployed people* methodologically by showing how unemployed people's subjective perspectives and everyday experiences can constitute the analytical point of departure for research (p. 249).

Across these variations, the formulation signals a shared methodological, ethical, and epistemological ambition to recognize people as knowledge producers rather than merely as objects of investigation or sources of data. Across these fields and terminological variations, *working with, not on* signals more than the adoption of particular participatory techniques. It marks an epistemological and ethical reorientation in which people with lived experience are approached as knowledge producers who may contribute to defining

research questions, generating and interpreting material, and shaping the forms through which knowledge is communicated. At the same time, what counts as researching "with" people varies considerably. Participation may range from consultation and participant-generated material to shared analysis, decision-making, authorship, and control over dissemination. The formulation should therefore not be treated as a guarantee of equality or as a simple solution to asymmetrical research relations. Rather, it provides a productive point of departure for examining *how* collaboration, power, responsibility, representation, and knowledge-authority are negotiated in situated co-research practices.

Co-research as epistemological commitment and methodological practice

Rather than representing a single methodological tradition, co-research has developed across multiple theoretical landscapes. These traditions differ in their epistemological assumptions and methodological priorities, yet they share a commitment to questioning hierarchical knowledge-production and recognizing participants as active contributors to research. Co-research does not refer to a single, standardized method but to a heterogeneous landscape of approaches that challenge conventional distinctions between researchers and researched.

One important tradition is critical psychology and practice research, where co-research is understood as a collaborative process of investigating common problems together with knowledgeable subjects (Chimirri & Pedersen, 2019; Højholt & Kousholt, 2014, 2019; Kousholt & Højholt, 2022). Within this perspective, people are not simply informants but participants who possess situated knowledge about the practices and conditions being investigated. Co-research makes it possible to understand problems *from within* everyday life while also examining the social and structural conditions through which these problems emerge. Knowledge-production is therefore approached as a social practice involving different perspectives, positions, and possibilities for participation.

A second, partially overlapping, landscape encompasses participatory, democratic and inclusive research traditions. Here, co-research is closely connected to ambitions of redistributing influence and creating more inclusive forms of knowledge production (Bigby et al., 2014; Layton et al., 2022; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020; Pultz, 2024). These approaches emphasize that research should be relevant to those whose lives it concerns, and that participation involves more than providing data. Depending on the

project, participants may contribute to defining research questions, developing methods, gathering and analyzing material, or communicating findings. At the same time, this literature highlights the importance of examining how power and decision-making are actually distributed, rather than assuming that the designation of participants as co-researchers necessarily produces equality.

A third landscape concerns interpretive, dialogical and reflexive qualitative methodologies, where collaboration is understood as an ongoing dialogue around meaning-making. Here, co-research may involve participants contributing to analytical interpretations, questioning researchers' assumptions and shaping how knowledge claims are developed (Abma et al., 2009; Harvey, 2015; Hemming et al., 2021). Collaborative analysis can introduce alternative interpretations grounded in lived experience, while dialogical forms of member reflection can transform analysis from a procedure for validating researchers' conclusions into a continuing conversation about meaning. Co-research may also take place between researchers through joint interpretation and co-reflection, producing multiple and layered readings of qualitative material (Lyndon & Edwards, 2022).

Finally, childhood studies, feminist participatory research and relational approaches have expanded understandings of co-research by foregrounding questions of voice, representation, power and ethical responsibility (Fleet et al., 2018; Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). These perspectives draw attention to the relationships through which participation becomes possible and to the inequalities that may persist within apparently collaborative research arrangements.

Posthumanist and new materialist approaches further complicate the idea of co-research by decentering the autonomous human participant and emphasizing that knowledge emerges through relationships among people, technologies, material objects, affects and institutional arrangements. In this perspective, collaboration concerns not only who participates but also the social and material conditions through which particular forms of knowledge become possible (Liddiard et al., 2019; Renold & Ivinson, 2022; Pultz & Hansen, forthcoming).

Although these traditions differ theoretically and methodologically, they share a concern with transforming the relationship between researcher and researched. Co-research can therefore be understood less as a fixed technique than as an orientation

towards knowledge production that takes participation, situated expertise, dialogue and the conditions of collaboration seriously. Across these different approaches, several common commitments emerge. Co-research challenges hierarchical relationships between researchers and participants; it seeks to develop knowledge that is meaningful to those whose lives are concerned; and it recognizes that all knowledge is situated. At the same time, the approaches differ in how they understand participation, agency, transformation, and the role of the researcher.

Questions and tensions in co-research

Doing co-research opens up a wide range of methodological and ethical questions. Rather than providing simple answers, the contributions in this special issue explore tensions that researchers must continuously negotiate:

- How are co-researchers and researchers positioned in relation to one another?
- What constitutes quality and validity in collaborative research?
- How can ethical commitments be maintained when interests, interpretations, or expectations differ?
- How can researchers avoid both speaking *for* people and merely "holding the microphone"?
- How can relationships of reciprocity and asymmetry be understood simultaneously?

These questions point towards a central dilemma of co-research: collaboration always takes place within unequal conditions. Researchers and co-researchers may have different resources, responsibilities, expectations, and stakes in the research process. Rather than attempting to eliminate these differences, co-research requires making them visible and working reflexively with them.

Contributions to the special issue

The contributions in this special issue – in alphabetical order – address co-research across different phases of the research process, from recruitment and relationship-building to data generation, analysis, and knowledge dissemination.

Mads Bank examines how practice research approaches can contribute to organizational development. Through a study conducted in a residential care institution for young people, the article demonstrates how collaborative processes can support the development of professional knowledge and practices.

Torben Bechmann Jensen, Oliver Sander, and **Gustav Egede** present the ideologically confrontational method as a form of co-research rooted in critical psychology. Their contribution explores interviews as dialogical spaces where researchers and participants can examine and transform shared assumptions.

Maja Marie Lotz, Marie Kirstejn Aakjær and **Charlotte Wegener** explore how Learning Circles can be adapted as a co-research method attentive to power and care when addressing cross-organizational challenges in elderly care recruitment and retention. They explore how working from within the tensions that arise may be a way to support knowledge co-production on more balanced terms.

Line Lerche Mørck presents co-research with former gang members as a form of counter-hegemonic knowledge production. Her contribution explores how co-research can create spaces for collective reflection on contradictions, interests, and processes of (dis)alienation.

Sabina Pultz examines four ethical dilemmas in collaborative research – situating her work in research with unemployed people – and shows that co-research does not eliminate power asymmetries but instead relocates them, requiring ongoing reflection on how knowledge is produced together.

Anna Busk Mailund focuses on the ontological conditions of knowledge production with children. Drawing on agential realism and emergent listening, she demonstrates how knowledge emerges through relational, embodied, and material processes.

Maja Røn-Larsen and **Charlotte Højholt** discuss co-research as an epistemological commitment to investigating common problems together with participants as

knowledgeable subjects. Drawing on research with children and questions of inequality, they demonstrate how collaborative approaches can reveal aspects of social problems that may remain invisible from a researcher-defined perspective.

Christiane Oved Særkjær, Louise Ejgod Hansen, and **Nanna Holdgaard** examine relational dynamics in co-research with children in cultural institutions. Their contribution highlights how knowledge production is negotiated through relationships characterized by asymmetry, reciprocity, and dependency.

Sebastian Tobias-Renstrøm explores disagreement as an inherent and productive aspect of co-research. Drawing on Psychology from the standpoint of the subject, he examines how disagreement challenges researchers and co-researchers while also creating possibilities for developing knowledge through democratic and emancipatory inquiry.

Gry Marie Tybjerg and **Sofie Pedersen** explore how researchers and young people can create democratic spaces of inquiry. Through the concept of an ethics of activism, they conceptualize co-research as a commitment to supporting young people's collective agency without imposing predetermined forms of transformation.

Satu Venäläinen, Päivi Berg, Kaisa Marttila, and **Ainara Ossa Rissanen** explore how participatory principles can support inclusive research practices when full co-research is not possible. Through research with LGBTIQA+ young people, they examine how less hierarchical collaborations can be developed while also addressing the ethical limits of participation.

Maria Christina del Villar-Toribio turns attention towards the analytical phase of qualitative research by examining member checking as a collaborative and reflexive practice. Her contribution demonstrates how participants can actively contribute to interpretation and challenge researchers' analytical authority.

Ditte Winther-Lindqvist, Sarah-Emilie Gundolf Josiasen, Marie Kolmos, Anne Maj Nielsen, and **Dorte Kousholt** examine Research Circles as a collaborative approach in early childhood education and care. Their contribution explores the balancing acts

involved in negotiating ownership, direction, and knowledge between researchers and practitioners.

Taken together, the contributions demonstrate that co-research extends beyond increasing participation. Rather, it involves ongoing negotiations of relationships, ethics, power, and knowledge production. Across diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical contexts, the special issue contributes to specifying both the commonalities and differences within co-research approaches. Ultimately, co-research is not defined by a particular method or technique but by a commitment to rethinking research as a collaborative, situated, and relational practice. It asks researchers not only how they can study people, but how they can create conditions for knowledge to emerge together with them.

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About the Editors:

Sabina Pultz, PhD, Associate Professor in Social Psychology at Roskilde University, Denmark. Her research focuses on the social psychology of unemployment, inequality, and welfare governance, exploring how institutional conditions, societal norms, and power relations shape people's everyday lives, self-understandings, emotions, affects, and possibilities for action. Central to her work is an interest in how social and political problems become individualized and psychologized, and how people experience, negotiate, and resist institutional expectations, with particular attention to situated dignity, shame, and hope. Theoretically, her research draws on critical social psychology, governmentality studies, and the sociology of emotions and affect, with particular attention to lived experiences, subjectivity, and agency. Methodologically, she works primarily with qualitative and participatory approaches, including ethnography and co-research with people in marginalized positions.

Sofie Pedersen, PhD, Associate Professor in Social Psychology at Roskilde University, Denmark. Her research focuses on subjective processes of recovery and becoming by investigating how developmental dynamics are co-produced in everyday life, in the intersection of institutional conditions and human agency. Central questions revolve around *how* and *who* we become (as subjects) as well as the meaning of the (socio-material) environment in relation to (the creation of) self-understanding, normativity, and experiences of agency and action possibilities. Theoretically, she is rooted in cultural-historical activity theory, critical psychology and ecological psychology, and methodologically, she is situated in a practice research tradition, with extensive experience in participant observations and co-research, in particular with young adults and psychiatric service users.