Qualitative Studies
Vol. 11, No. 3, 2026, pp. 118-147
ISSN 1903-7031

Working *with*, not *on* unemployed people: exploring the ethical dilemmas in situated co-research

Sabina Pultz [1]

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

Co-research challenges conventional hierarchies between researchers and participants by seeking to produce knowledge with rather than on people. This article argues that co-research is not merely a participatory method but a situated epistemological practice in which power, knowledge, and ethics are continuously entangled and negotiated. Applying and further developing the distinction between working on and working with, the article explores how these different orientations shape knowledge production as well as it interrogates selected ethical dilemmas involved in the research practice. Drawing on the collaborative research project INDIGMA, where eighteen unemployed people participated as co-researchers over one year, unemployment is used as an empirical case to examine how a situated approach can be operationalized. The article analyses four ethical dilemmas relating to 1) recruitment, 2) how we investigate together, 3) what we attend to together and 4) how we disseminate the findings in a museum exhibition. The article argues that co-research does not eliminate power asymmetries but relocates them, requiring continuous reflection on how knowledge is produced collaboratively.

Keywords: co-research; situated knowledge; unemployment; power; collaborative research, shadowing

”When you know in advance where you’re going to end up there’s a whole dimension of experience lacking” (Michel Foucault)

Introduction

The growing interest in co-research across the social sciences and humanities reflects more than the emergence of a new family of participatory methods. It signals a broader epistemological shift in how knowledge production is understood. Rather than treating research participants as sources of data, collaborative approaches seek to engage them as co-producers of knowledge, challenging long-standing assumptions about who has the

authority to define research questions, generate empirical material, and interpret social life (Collins et al., 2018; Fine et al., 2021; Kidd et al., 2018; Levac et al., 2019; Novek & Wilkinson, 2019; Park, 2006; Sankofa, 2023; Thiollent, 2011; Wallace & Giles, 2019). As Phillips (2024) argues, this development represents a broader *collaborative turn* within the social sciences (see also Mørck this issue).

Underlying this turn is not only a concern with participation or inclusion (Johnson et al., 2014) or democratisation of knowledge (Edwards & Brannelly, 2017) but a more fundamental critique of scientific knowledge itself (see also Holzkamp, 2013a). Feminist and poststructural scholars have questioned the ideal of detached, neutral observation by demonstrating that knowledge is always situated and produced within relations of power (Foucault, 1980, 1982; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992). Research does not merely discover social reality but actively participates in constituting it and in that sense shape the communities and societies it engages with (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Hodgetts et al., 2020). Categories such as ”the unemployed” are not simply descriptive; they are produced through particular ways of seeing, classifying, and investigating social life. Consequently, the question is not only whose voices are included in research but from where analyses are produced and what kinds of subjects the knowledge itself helps bring into being (Rose, 1999).

This article contributes to the about co-research and participatory methods by applying and further-developing the distinction between working *on* and working *with* unemployed people (Pultz, 2024b). I argue that these concepts capture two different epistemological orientations to research rather than merely referring to two methodological techniques. Whereas working *on* positions unemployed people primarily as objects of knowledge, working *with* begins from exploring their situated engagements with the world. The distinction therefore concerns not only participation but also the location and the distributed source of knowledge production. In social and community psychology more broadly, this discussion is also connected to relating differently to both the people involved in research as well as it enables a more contexutalized understanding of the research object: ”Case studies allow us to conduct more in-depth and less exploitative research engagements with research ‘participants’ rather than on ‘subjects’ to witness and contextualise changes and developments in people's lives.”(Hodgetts, et

al., 2010 in Hodgetts et al, 2020, p.57). The term with signals a fundamental respect for the dignity and subjectivity of the people who engage in research.

The distinction between *working with* and *working on* people has a longer genealogy in participatory research. Heron and Reason's (2001) account of co-operative inquiry offered an early explicit formulation, replacing the conventional division between researcher and researched with an inquiry in which participants act as both co-researchers and co-subjects. The formulation has since travelled across community-based research with adolescents (Litt, 2003), youth participatory action research (Martin et al., 2019; Radlick & Przedpelska, 2024), disability and inclusive research (Layton et al., 2022; Burch, 2024), mental-health and service-user research (Russ et al., 2025), and in unemployment research (Pultz, 2024) and as an explicit ethical ethos in the European HECAT project guiding the co-development of digital labour-market tools *with rather than on* unemployed people (European Commission, 2023). Across these settings, *working with, not on* signals more than the adoption of particular participatory techniques: it positions people with lived experience as knowledge producers who may help define questions, generate and interpret material, and shape how findings are communicated. Yet the phrase is not in itself a guarantee of equality. Because participation may range from consultation to shared analysis, decision-making, authorship, and control over dissemination, the formulation is better understood as an orientation for examining how power, responsibility, representation, and epistemic authority are negotiated in situated research practice.

Research on unemployment has historically been dominated by approaches that exemplify working *on* unemployed people (Pultz, 2024b). Across psychology, labour market research, and policy studies, unemployment has frequently been examined through predefined constructs such as motivation, self-efficacy, employability, mental health, and well-being (Saks, 2006; Wanberg et al., 1999; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). While this research has generated important insights, the questions posed have typically been formulated independently of unemployed people's own concerns, positioning them primarily as objects of scientific inquiry (Kulmala et al., 2024) and seldomly exploring whether these research questions align with what is at stake for the people involved. In Foucauldian terms, such research does not merely describe unemployment but participates in producing unemployment as a particular object of knowledge and hence

also shaping possibilities for who unemployed people become as subjects, as the nexus of power and knowledge influence both how unemployed people are governed and how they govern themselves, as well as shapes more intimate experieences of how they come to feel and relate to themselves in that situation (Pultz, 2017, 2018, 2024a).

Working with unemployed people starts from a different premise. Rather than asking what unemployment *does to* people, it asks what unemployment comes to mean in particular historical, institutional, and cultural contexts viewed from the standpoint of those living through it (Pultz, 2017, 2024a). This shift follows Haraway's (1988, 1997) argument that all knowledge is situated and that there is no ”view from nowhere” from which we can understand unemployment, nor the concepts of dignity and indignity. Knowledge is always produced from *somewhere;* from particular lives, histories, bodies, and places. Research therefore becomes an encounter between situated perspectives rather than an observation conducted from outside social life (see also Holzkamp 2013a, 2013b).

This epistemological shift also entails a different understanding of power. Rather than locating power within institutions, Foucault (1980, 1982) conceptualizes power as dispersed throughout the mundane practices and relationships that organize everyday life. Knowledge and power are inseparable because knowledge itself participates in constituting subjects by offering particular conditions for how people can understand themselves and live their life, referred to by O’grady (2004, p. 98) as: ”power’s hold is at the intra-subjective level”. Consequently, concepts such as dignity and indignity cannot be understood as abstract moral categories imposed from above but should be investigated as situated and relational engagements that are continuously produced, negotiated, and contested in everyday interactions.

Beginning inquiry from these situated practices, what Foucault terms an *ascending analysis* (Ettlinger, 2011) implies that inquiry begin at the microscale of everyday practices and sites, where norms are “invented and organized from the starting points of local conditions and particular needs” (Foucault 1980, p. 159) and then relate these to more grand scale. Seeing as freedom is inherent in power relations (Foucault 1982, p. 221) such sites also contain possibilities for resistance and contesting potential violations of dignity. People can speak up and defend their sense of dignity in more or less explicit ways. This microscale analysis makes visible the multiple forms of resistance

and counter-conduct through which people defend, reclaim, or reconfigure their dignity, even from vulnerable positions.

This understanding also resonates with Højholt's (2005) argument that research should not primarily look *into* individuals but rather look *with* people from their situated position towards the social practices in which they participate. Experiences are not treated as private psychological states but as relational and contextual dynamics emerging through people's ongoing engagements with welfare institutions, family life, local communities, labour markets, and broader socio-economic conditions (Boland & Griffin, 2015; Chen, Pultz, Sharone, 2026; Friggieri, 2022; Jensen, 2025). The analytical task is therefore to investigate how experiences become meaningful through participation in everyday life (Shraube & Højholt, 2013).

Yet experiences and context sensitive knowledge cannot simply be ”collected” (Hodgetts et al., 2020). Working with situated experiences as an analytical concept is challenging, because it is an elusive analytical object (Brown et al., 2011), especially when conceptualised as embodied, affective, relational, and continuously unfolding (Ahmed, 2004, 2024; Bjerg & Staunæs, 2011; Brown & Reavey, 2015). A commitment to situated experience therefore does not imply that researchers should seek exhaustive descriptions of lived reality or gather endless data, despite alluring contemporary technological possibilities. Rather, it requires methodological practices capable of following how experiences become meaningful in particular situations without abstracting them from the social relations through which they emerge (Chen et al, 2026). Co-research thus becomes not only a strategy for giving participants a voice but also a way of positioning inquiry alongside people's ongoing engagements with the world. Exploring dignity and indignity at a microlevel holds the potential to develop an analytical interest in the counter-conduct, identifying in what ways, people act to resist or even twist the social norms that provide a powerful back carpet influencing experiences of dignity and indignity to begin with.

If dignity and indignity are constituted in situated everyday practices, and if these practices are only partially accessible from the outside, then knowledge about them must be developed together with the people whose lives they organize. However, working *with* people does not dissolve power asymmetries. Rather than eliminating unequal relations between researchers and participants, collaborative research relocates them (Hodgetts et

al., 2020). Questions of authority, interpretation, representation, and responsibility remain central, albeit in new forms. The challenge is therefore not whether power can be removed from research but how it is continuously negotiated throughout collaborative knowledge production.

The article draws on the collaborative research project INDIGMA[1], in which eighteen unemployed people participated as co-researchers over the course of one year. The aim here is not to systematically analyze the whole body of empirical material, but rather to select and tease out dilemmas and tensions we have encountered in relation to key questions while conducting co-research within this field.

The article proceeds by introducing more thoroughly to the study of dignity and indignity. The analysis is organized around four interconnected dilemmas that arose throughout the research process. The first concerns how co-research begins, namely how participants can be invited into research without reproducing the stigmatizing categories the project seeks to challenge. The second examines how knowledge is generated, asking what it means to investigate dignity by looking *with* participants at the social worlds they inhabit rather than looking *at* them. The third addresses interpretive authority, exploring how collaboratively produced empirical material should be analysed and whose interpretations become analytically decisive. Finally, the fourth considers representation beyond the research process, discussing the ethical implications of translating co-produced knowledge into a public museum exhibition adressing dilemmas in co-research related to research dissemination.

Taken together, these four dilemmas illustrate that the shift from working *on* to working *with* participants fundamentally transforms the ethical and epistemological questions of research. I argue that these dilemmas are not shortcomings of co-research but constitutive of what it means to work *with* rather than *on* people. Developing methodological language capable of analysing these dilemmas is essential if the collaborative turn is to move towards a richer understanding of co-research as a situated epistemological practice, facing the unsettling troubles it contains, rather than romanticizing it.

[1] The project is led by Sabina Pultz and Magnus Paulsen Hansen; Maggie Müller did the fieldwork in Denmark, Mark Connaughton in the US, and Aurelie Gonnet in France.

Working with unemployed people: a situated approach to co-research

To illustrate the epistemological orientation proposed in this article, I draw on the collaborative research project, INDIGMA, that explores experiences of dignity and indignity among unemployed poeple living in smaller cities. Unemployment serves here not simply as the empirical topic of the study but as a case through which to examine what it means to conduct research *with* rather than *on* people. The project therefore uses unemployment as an empirical entry point for developing and reflecting on a situated approach to co-research with a group of people who are to some extent socially marginalized (Chen et et al., 2026). Approaching unemployment from this perspective requires moving beyond understanding it as a discrete institutional category or labour-market status. Rather than treating unemployment as an individual condition that can be measured through predefined variables, we approach it as something lived through everyday participation across multiple social contexts. By taking the subjective standpoint as vantage point for research, we aimed to explore situated individual experiences of dignity and indignity embedded in a particular environment shaped by the political and institutional surroundings. But what does dignity even mean?

Dignity is a widely applied concept and while it suggests something abstract and normatively 'good', the actual meaning in concrete contexts evaporates, and it remains a contested concept in the literature (Bluestein & Allan, 2025; Jütten, 2025; Gibson et al., 2023; Misztal, 2018). However, paraphrasing the principle *absent but implicit* in narrative theory (Holmgren, 2017; White, 2003) values often become clear, when they are stepped upon. Similarly, experiences of dignity are more readily detectable, with people feeling humiliated, disrespected, invisible etc. (Pultz & Hansen, 2026). Different conceptualisations of dignity stress different aspects of the concept often refered to as dignity as either innate/inherent or earned (Gibson, 2023; Hansen & Pultz, accepted). Acknowledging this plurality of the concept, we approached it bottom-up by empirically investigating what dignity and indignity means in the context of peoples everyday life. Feeling dignified or the opposite is not a one off event, but rather something that is layered and composite emerging from many different spheres in life.

Building on a strong scientific legacy working with participatory methods conducting action or practice research (Collier, 1945; Holzkamp, 2013a; Park, 2006; Kidd et al., 2018; Levac et al., 2019; Røn Larsen & Højholt this issue) and theorized

within critical psychology (Højholt & Kousholt, 2019; Højholt, 2024), this enables a situated understanding of what these young people experience in their everyday lives (Argyle, 1992). We explore subjective experiences of dignity and indignity as situated practices (Lave & Wenger, 2004), following co-researchers across the composite character of everyday life. From this perspective, working *with* does not mean looking deeper into individuals in search of their inner experiences. Rather, following Højholt (2005), it means looking *with* people from their situated standpoint towards the social worlds in which they participate. The analytical interest thus shifts from individuals as isolated units of analysis to the relationships, practices, and institutional arrangements through which experiences become meaningful. Working *with* people consequently requires research methods capable of accompanying participants across the multiple contexts in which everyday life unfolds.

This epistemological commitment informed the methodological design of INDIGMA. Across three field sites in Denmark, France, and the United States (2023–2026), we collaborated with eighteen unemployed co-researchers, following each participant over approximately one year. Rather than relying on interviews alone, we combined ethnographic shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007) with participant-produced photography and photo elicitation. Shadowing enabled researchers to accompany participants through ordinary activities, including life at home, leisure activities, job searching, and meetings with welfare institutions. In addition to observing verbal accounts, the method made it possible to attend to embodied practices, affective atmospheres, and the subtle negotiations through which dignity and indignity are lived in everyday situations (Ahmed, 2014; Arman et al., 2012; Pultz, 2024a).

Between periods of shadowing, co-researchers documented aspects of their everyday lives through photography, inspired by auto-photography and photo-elicitation approaches (Harper, 2002; Pink, 2007; Warren, 2005). Rather than treating photographs as transparent representations of experience, they became starting points for collaborative conversations about places, relationships, emotions, and everyday practices that might otherwise remain difficult to articulate. Although participant-produced images are themselves shaped by the research context (Jones et al., 2015), they introduce another perspective into the analytical process that is less immediately governed by researchers' observations and questions. In this sense, photography became one practical way of

enacting the ambition to work *with* rather than *on* participants. The extensive engagement required by shadowing also foregrounded the relational character of co-research. Building knowledge alongside participants demanded long-term relationships characterized by trust, negotiation, and ongoing ethical reflection. Researchers inevitably became part of the social worlds they sought to understand, making their own presence and positionality an active element in knowledge production. Shadowing therefore involved considerable relational and emotional labour (Ferguson, 2016; Høybye et al., 2021), while simultaneously raising questions about responsibility, interpretation, and representation. For this reason, ethics was not treated as a procedural requirement addressed through informed consent alone but as an ongoing methodological practice. Consistent with participatory and practice research traditions (Jason et al., 2004; Thiollent, 2011; Wallace & Giles, 2019), the project sought to co-create rather than predefine the empirical object of inquiry (Sankofa, 2023). Rather than assuming in advance what constituted dignity or indignity, these concepts were explored collaboratively through participants' everyday lives attuned to the particularities of what is at stake for each person, located within a particular city, in a particular state (Hansen & Pultz, accepted).

Ethnographic methods (Hastrup, 2002; Jackson, 1998, 2007) and in particular shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007) are employed to capture complex phenomena over time and across life domains in a contextual manner (Chen et al., 2026; Hodgetts et al., 2020). This point is particularly important in unemployment research. While studies of welfare encounters within the street-level bureaucracy tradition (Lipsky, 1980; Cecchini, 2024; Mikkelsen et al., 2024) and research on job-search processes (Kanfer et al., 2001; Wanberg et al., 2020) have generated valuable insights, they often delimit their analyses to specific institutional settings or domains of activity. Such delimitations risk overlooking how experiences travel across contexts. Experiences at the job centre may shape how people experience home; family relationships may influence encounters with welfare professionals; repeated experiences of recognition or humiliation may accumulate across multiple settings (Hansen & Pultz, accepted). Following Dreier's (2001) conceptualization of the *conduct of everyday life* and subsequent developments within critical psychology (Schraube & Højholt, 2016), everyday life is understood as inherently composite, constituted through people's continuous movements between different social practices.

Dignity and indignity should therefore not be understood as isolated events but as a layered and composite phenomening that emerges across these interconnected contexts. This approach aligns with our methodological commitment to working with co-researchers through shadowing and photography, where knowledge is generated together with people rather than extracted from them. Through accompanying participants in their everyday activities and inviting them to photograph situations, objects, places, or encounters that matter to them, we gained insight into the subtle and often taken-for-granted conditions that enable or undermine experiences of dignity as well as we develop a more empirically sensitive approach allowing us to identify novel faces of dignity achored in people's everyday lives.

Who Are We Working With? Recruitment, Stigma, and becoming Co-researchers

In co-research, research objectives are not simply defined in advance by researchers but are developed through processes of collaboration (Sankofa, 2023). We began with an interest in collaborating with people positioned at the margins of the labour market and in geographically stigmatized areas as an entry point for developing a situated understanding of dignity and indignity.

Drawing on critical psychology and social psychology of everyday life (Schraube & Højholt, 2016), as well as Thévenot's (2009, 2011) work on engagement, we designed the research in ways that allowed co-researchers to direct our attention towards spaces, practices, and concerns that were not predefined by our theoretical assumptions. The theoretical premise guiding the project is that people are agentic actors who continuously make sense of themselves and their worlds through everyday practices, reflections, and evaluations.

From this situated perspective, dignity and indignity are not understood as abstract or universal concepts but as experiences that emerge through people's engagements with the social worlds they inhabit. Positioning ourselves alongside co-researchers therefore became a way of exploring how dignity is experienced, negotiated, and contested in everyday life. However, working with people who occupy marginalized social positions requires careful attention to how collaboration is initiated. While co-research approaches are increasingly used with groups who experience marginalization or are exposed to stigmatization (Kulmala et al., 2024), the process of entering into collaboration remains

an ethical and methodological challenge. Before knowledge can be co-produced, relationships must be established, and these relationships are shaped by the categories, assumptions, and expectations that researchers inevitably bring into the field.

Recruitment was therefore not a neutral or procedural first step but an initial site where the possibilities and limitations of working *with* people were felt, faced and handled. The ways in which potential co-researchers were approached influenced how the research project was understood, whether participation appeared meaningful, and whether relationships of trust could develop.

This became particularly apparent because the central concepts of the project, dignity and indignity, were not neutral terms in participants' everyday lives. While analytically important for the research, these concepts carried social meanings connected to stigma, shame, and experiences of being positioned as ’othered’ (Pultz, 2018, 2024a; Sharone, 2024). Introducing the project through the lens of indignity risked unintentionally reproducing the very deficit-oriented representations that the research sought to examine (Pultz, 2018).

This tension became visible during our initial fieldwork in Denmark. When presenting the project, a staff member at the local history museum responded: ”So you've come to the ”rotten banana” to study indignity like everyone else”. The term ”rotten banana” refers to a derogatory label associated with the area. Rather than merely expressing a local attitude, this encounter revealed how research questions themselves can become entangled with existing forms of territorial stigma (Wacquant, 2007; Müller & Pultz, forthcoming). By approaching a place through the analytical category of indignity, we risked positioning both the community and its inhabitants through narratives of deprivation, so prevalent in the unemployment literature as well.

This moment became an important methodological lesson. If co-research aims to move beyond working *on* people, researchers must also attend to how their own concepts and categories enter the field and shape the encounters they create. Recruitment consequently became an iterative and reflexive process in which we continuously reconsidered not only what we wanted to investigate, but how the research was introduced and what kinds of subject positions it invited.

Across the three research sites, the researchers therefore sought spaces where initial encounters could develop through everyday activities rather than through predefined

institutional categories. Food projects, libraries, and shared community spaces became important points of contact where conversations could emerge organically. Rather than approaching people as representatives of a predefined category of ”the unemployed”, they gradually developed relationships in which participation could become meaningful in a way that was more attuned to participants' own terms. Only after a certain degree of trust and familiarity had developed did researchers introduce the broader research design and the longitudinal nature of participation. This gradual process was not merely a practical strategy for recruitment but an enactment of the epistemological commitments underlying working *with*: creating the conditions for people to participate as co-researchers rather than as objects of research. In this way, the question of who we are working with became inseparable from the question of how knowledge can be produced without reproducing the stigmatizing relations the research seeks to understand.

What Are We Looking At Together? Negotiating Dignity as a Situated Research Object

Linked to notions above, seeing new aspects of dignity by working with unemployed people rather than on them, dignity is a particularly suitable concept through which to explore the epistemological implications of working *with* people because it is simultaneously universal and deeply contested and anchored in everyday situations in which people’s worth are put to the test.

As mentioned, existing literature distinguishes between dignity as inherent or innate, referring to an unconditional human worth often associated with Kantian philosophy and human rights frameworks, and dignity as earned, referring to the social evaluations through which people are recognized or devalued within particular societies (Gibson et al., 2023). These different understandings coexist and frequently create tensions in everyday life. We conceptualize these tensions as different *repertoires of dignity* (Hansen & Pultz, accepted) meaning culturally available ways of understanding what makes a person worthy, respectable, or valuable.

In many contemporary capitalist societies, one particularly dominant repertoire is connected to economic independence and participation in paid labour. Unemployment therefore becomes a significant context for exploring dignity because it places people in situations where different repertoires of worth may collide. While welfare states formally

recognize citizens' inherent value, everyday interactions and dominant cultural narratives may simultaneously evaluate people through ideals of productivity, self-sufficiency, and labour market participation. The experience of unemployment is therefore not only an economic condition but also a social and moral position that people continuously navigate.

While our ambition was to work with, and both - literally and metaphorically speaking - stand next to our participants, depending on the particular people and the relation between the researcher and the co-researcher, the degree of intimacy and access to more intimate spheres of everyday life, varied across the people involved. The relationality involved in co-research proved to be fundamental in terms of creating boundaries for what we were able to see. For example, a PhD student, Mark, did fieldwork in the rural small city in the US and he was invited for a dinner at 61 year old Sheila's house and was invited to spend the night at her and her husband's place because there was no public transport at night time and Mark didn't have a car (Connaghton, forthcoming). Another participant, Per, initially always suggested to meet public places until it came up in a her to his house as it needed cleaning etc. As their relationship developed over time, he felt comfortable inviting her home(Müller, forthcoming). The relationships built allowed us to enter more intimate spheres of people's every day lives, drawing attention to very granular actions that also proved to be connected to feeling of being a dignified human being.

The most important take away from recruiting co-researchers was that the initial task was to engage in a *relation* and over time invite them to participate in the yearlong study in the formats that suited each person. Our co-researchers vary in terms of age, professional trajectory, economic circumstances, digital literacy etc., and working out the format of participation with each person and customizing research practices to their preferences, turned out to be crucial for engaging them over time and making participation meaningful and relevant to them and thereby also allowing us to see more intimate aspects such as their home and spend time with close ones.

In that sense, flexible and tailored collaboratory practices responding to each co-researcher's habits, preferences, and digital literacy, supports both securing data quality and enables ethical rigor. The point being that in order for co-research based on shadowing, it is crucial to attend to the particular need of each participant and in some

sense 'sacrifice' systematic data collection and lean into more flexible formats and engagements (Pultz, 2018b). These examples illustrate that research designs applying the framework of working *with* requires flexibility rather than standardized access to participants' lives. The ethical and epistemological quality of the research emerged from negotiating appropriate forms of proximity together (Hodgetts et al., 2020). Creating meaningful collaboration therefore sometimes required prioritizing relational responsiveness over methodological consistency. In this sense, the loss of standardized data collection became a condition for producing situated knowledge. As stressed by Pultz (2018b) this flexibility is also connected to empirical sensitivity: ""unexpected turns of events" can become important aspects in the process of gathering data and they can ultimately improve findings as they help empirical sensitivity".

How Are We Attending to Dignity Together? Photography, Everyday Practices, and the Expansion of the Research Object

Exploring experiences, especially with an interest in embodied and affective dimensions calls for research that comes closer to the person. However, the question alluded to above, arises – how close? Negotiating these boundaries in the in-person meetings was one thing as exemplified above. As mentioned, the design was inspired by auto-photography and photo elicitation approaches (Pink, 2007; Warren, 2005; Harper, 2002), so participants documented elements of their everyday lives and used these images as starting points for conversations. The ambition of introducing visual elements to the ethnographic practice was to open up space about materiality and places that might carry great importance but due to their nature would not necessarily come up in interviews. Photographs communicate atmospheres and can be helpful in terms of exploring the more embodied and affective dimensions of the study. This approach mostly proved to be very promising in terms of living up to the ambition of enabling sufficient space for participants to engage with the task in ways that made meaning to them. Some of them took pictures of old photographs, some of them took pictures of their intimate settings such as their bedrooms or as Per took a picture of his morning cup of coffee (see picture 1). The photographs did not function as transparent representations of experience; rather, they opened spaces for reflection about places, objects, routines, and relationships that carried significance (Hodgetts et al. 2022, Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2011). The method proved particularly

valuable because dignity and indignity are often embedded in mundane practices rather than dramatic events. Participants photographed old family pictures, intimate spaces such as bedrooms, and ordinary objects that structured everyday routines. Per's photograph o fhis morning coffee illustrates this point.



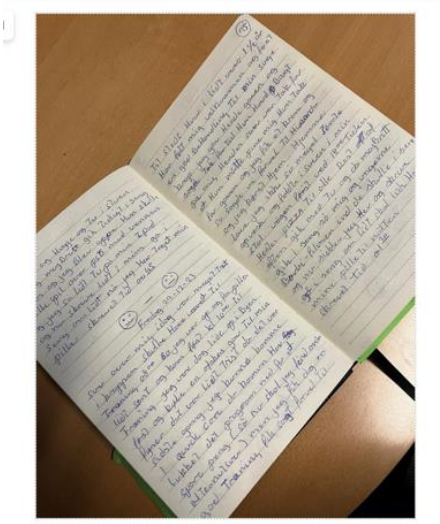
Maggie later interviewed Per about the meaning of the cup of coffee, and he explains the symbolic value of a cup of morning coffee for him (and this meaning resonated widely among the research team):

> "It's the first cup of coffee of the day, and it's almost indispensable, you know. I mean, I can hardly start the day without coffee. Something would be missing, right? If I'm just relaxing at home, it can easily turn into four or five cups over the course of the day. But otherwise, if I have plans or something like that, it's usually just in the morning and maybe a cup in the evening. (…) Some days it's not exactly desire that's driving things. (…) There are just days when I really don't have the energy for anything at all. When even the simplest tasks almost feel like a burden. When I'm really lazy and everything just feels like an uphill struggle. But most days, it's up, then coffee. Once I've had it, I'm more motivated to get started with the day. (…) If I have to head out and do something, I usually tend to feel pretty optimistic about it."

Per guides our attention to the fact that experiences of dignity and indignity take place in the minutiae of everyday life and involve acts that are seldomly verbalized or narrated in connection with dignity. However, explored through photographs we come to see another side of the research object. In the conversation about the coffee, Per alludes to the

different repertoires of dignity suggesting that there are days in which he struggles to find energy and he evaluates himself along the lines of the negative and stigmatizing representation of unemployed available as a cultural resource in most countries evaluating himself negatively as "really lazy". O'grady (2004) cites Bartky exemplifying how even moments without other people in the room, we can still relate to and evaluate ourselves according to demeaning narratives: "Shame required an internalized (as opposed to an actual) audience with the capacity to judge me" (Bartky, 1990, p. 86). While the photo elicitation interview indeed teaches us something about indignity and dignity, the picture in itself also impacted our research process sparking conversation about dignity as connected to the fundamental act "to human" – that is to become a worthy human being each day, through daily practices. These practices are not just basic survival but tether us to who we are and where we are within the realm of possible subjectivities, in part shaped by repertoires of dignity (Hansen & Pultz, accepted). Importantly, the photograph itself became part of the research process. It did not simply provide information about an existing research object but actively transformed how the research team understood dignity. Through these encounters, dignity emerged less as a rare or exceptional experience and more as something continuously enacted through everyday practices the ongoing work of becoming and maintaining oneself as a valued human being.

The longitudinal nature of shadowing further emphasized that co-research is not a neutral process. Sustained participation inevitably influences participants' conduct of everyday life. The relationship with researchers creates new opportunities for reflection and articulation. The amount of and quality of communication over the year is not pre-designed but adapts to personal and relational dynamics. As mentioned, we emphasized the importance of incorporating flexibility into the design (Pultz, 2018b). At the very least, having (one more?) conversation partner during a year's time sparks reflexivity and in that sense the researcher becomes a mirror of the participant. Jimmi had never before written a diary, but participating in the study, he started one as fruitful format to convey his everyday experiences. He gave the diary to Maggie who took a picture of it (see picture 2).



Enabling space for participants to shape their own contribution, makes room for independent initiative and valued contribution that are crucial to our joint knowledge production. It also testifies to the developmental movements that participation sets in motion in personal lives, for both researchers and co-researchers. Such moments demonstrate that collaboration does not simply uncover experiences; it can also become part of the processes through which people reflect upon and develop their own lives.

How Do We Share Knowledge Together? Dissemination, Representation, and Public Encounters with Co-produced Knowledge

A final question concerns what happens when collaboratively produced knowledge leaves the research encounter and enters wider publics. While co-research often involves inviting co-researchers to participate in academic publications, we explored alternative forms of dissemination that could engage broader audiences and preserve the situated character of participants' experiences. Together with co-researchers, we developed a podcast in collaboration with the science media platform Videnskab.dk and curated the exhibition *The (un)worthy* at the Danish Welfare Museum in Svendborg.

Dissemination became another site where questions of power, representation, and interpretation had to be negotiated. Selecting photographs and quotations for public display involved decisions about what aspects of participants' lives could and should be shared. Although participants were involved in these processes, collaboration did not remove questions of responsibility. Rather, it required continuous dialogue about how

experiences could be represented without reducing individuals to examples of unemployment, vulnerability, or indignity.

The museum context added another layer to these questions. The exhibition was situated in a former poorhouse divided historically between the ”deserving” and ”undeserving” poor. This history resonated strongly with the research project's concern with dignity and social evaluation. One particularly striking historical detail was that the deserving poor were allowed a morning cup of coffee, whereas the undeserving poor were not. This connection between a seemingly ordinary practice and broader moral evaluations of worth became a powerful illustration of how dignity is embedded in everyday life and situated in particular places in time and space.



We invited the Danish co-researchers to the reception, however they were not able to make it. At a later visit, one of the participants did come to see the exhibition, meet with Maggie who he knew and the author as well as her research group.

Walking through the exhibition together with him became an important moment of reflection for the research team. We wanted to share the experience and the joy of producing a creative output, but were also worried how it would be to see how other people relate to exhibition. He expressed joy seeing his own photograph and words alongside those of other participants. Walking around the exhibition constituted a fruitful as well as practical way of attending to a ”common third” (Schwarz & Nissen, 2023) which is an opportunity to gather around something, an object of attention, and relate to both individually but more importantly together. Looking at photographs together provided a nice way or working with participants, both in the photo elicitation, but also

during the exhibition as it supports the ambition of looking with and at something together. The experience reinforced that the project was not about documenting exceptional or 'exotic' lives, but rather about spurring conversations about how all people in different ways seek recognition, negotiate social expectations and seek to maintain a sense of worth, on the labour market, but luckily also outside it.

The exhibition thereby functioned not only as dissemination but as another collaborative research space. It created opportunities to continue conversations about dignity beyond the original research encounters and invited wider publics to reflect on the sources through which people are judged as worthy or unworthy. In this sense, dissemination became an extension of working *with*: not simply communicating findings about people but creating spaces where knowledge could continue to be negotiated. The invitation of the exhibition was to spur conversations about what sources of dignity people have in their lives and stimulate a critical discussion about whether we rely on the right sources in how we evaluate others and each other across these societies.

Discussion: The ethical tensions of working with

The ambition of working *with* research participants is to challenge the epistemological asymmetries embedded in research designs that position people primarily as objects of knowledge. However, this article has also demonstrated that co-research does not resolve the power relations inherent in knowledge production but relocates them into new spaces of negotiation. Through the case of co-research with unemployed people, this article contributes to ongoing discussions about the ethical and methodological complexities of collaborative research, particularly when using qualitative methods such as shadowing and participant-generated photography.

The article has explored these tensions through four interconnected questions: what we attend to together, how research objects are constituted collaboratively, how situated experiences can be explored through visual and ethnographic methods, and how co-produced knowledge can be represented beyond the research encounter, including the translation of co-produced knowledge into a public exhibition at a welfare museum, raising questions about voice, authorship, and audience. The article also critically interrogates the inherent trade-offs embedded in co-research practices. Across these dimensions, a central argument emerges: working *with* requires researchers to remain

attentive to how their own concepts, methods, and institutional positions shape the knowledge that becomes possible.

The empirical focus on dignity and indignity among unemployed people illustrates the importance of this situated approach. Beginning from the experiences of people who temporarily or permanently do not conform to the dominant social norm of economic self-sufficiency made visible alternative sources of dignity that are often overlooked in unemployment research. Through collaboration, seemingly ordinary practices, such as preparing a morning coffee, maintaining relationships of care, or sustaining everyday routines became analytically significant because they revealed how people create continuity, meaning, and worth in their lives. Rendering visible these overlooked infrastructures of dignity is valuable going forward, and developing the intricate relationships between power and knowledge, that form the back carpet for how subjects come to be in particular communities and societies.

I concur with Janes (2016) who points out that we need to be attentive not to romantize or overly appreciate the ethics and normative stance involved in many participatory approaches. Janes (2016, p. 110) notes: "CBPR [community-based participatory research] makes particular claims to socially just, ethical research and to participatory practices that ameliorate power. If these claims remain uninterrogated, the "goodness" of CBPR is naturalized and the everyday practices of CBPR under-documented and under-theorized". Co-research with marginalized or vulnerable groups has been characterized as ethically and methodologically complex and thus in need of *further* reflection and development (Kulmala et al., 2024).

Doing this research, questions emerged regarding the appropriate degree of influence participants should have, the proximity of the researcher-participant relationship, and the allocation of responsibility for the knowledge produced. Such situations exemplify how participatory research can simultaneously empower participants and create dilemmas regarding boundaries, responsibility, and the distribution of epistemic authority.

Exploring experiences of indignity and dignity from the vantage point of unemployed people involved addressing the question of what are other sources of dignity for people who are at least temporarily not living up to the predominant social norm of being economically independent? Incorporating a flexible and dynamic design that allowed for

individual customization, resulted in broadening the analytical scope when identifying everyday life acts that were particular meaningful and dignifying for our participants such as the cup of coffee or care relations as we have explored elsewhere (Connaughton & Pultz, accepted). When developing this knowledge with our co-researchers, we need to stay warry not to overly depend on these alternative sources of dignity to solve the fundamental challenges these people face in their lives. As o'Grady (2004, p.98) warns against here: "Although marginalized groups can and do develop critiques of the dominant culture and construct alternative identity practices, it is important not to underestimate the myriad ways in which mainstream culture continues to discriminate against those who do not fit the norms and the ceaseless invitations to internalize the oppression". We have not solved the problems that these people face through working with them, rather than on them, but we have co-produced concepts and language that can qualify and provide a better foundation for the important discussion about whether we treat people with dignity in society and whether we have developed and practice the "right" sources of dignity.

Developing a language that allows us to identify what repertoires of dignity people have available to them in navigating their own lives and their sense of feeling dignitified, also provides the starting point asking the question: what kind of repertoires would we like society to be guided by? Throughout the research process, questions repeatedly emerged concerning the appropriate degree of participant influence, the boundaries of researcher–co-researcher relationships, and the distribution of responsibility for collaboratively produced knowledge. These questions are not practical obstacles that can be solved through better procedures; rather, they are constitutive tensions of working *with* people. Collaborative research simultaneously creates possibilities for recognition, agency, and alternative forms of knowledge while raising difficult questions about intimacy, representation, interpretation, and epistemic authority. Working *with* unemployed people therefore does not solve the social inequalities they encounter, nor does it replace the need for structural critique. Rather, the contribution lies in developing a richer language for understanding how dignity is negotiated under unequal conditions. By identifying different repertoires of dignity available to people in everyday life, co-research can contribute to broader discussions about which forms of recognition societies privilege and which sources of dignity they make available. The question is therefore not

only how individuals maintain dignity within existing social arrangements, but also what kinds of dignity repertoires societies ought to cultivate.

Conclusion

This article has argued that co-research should be understood not merely as a participatory method but as a situated epistemological practice. Using co-research with unemployed people as an empirical case, it has explored how a commitment to working *with* rather than *on* people transforms the processes through which research questions, empirical material, interpretation, and dissemination are developed. A central insight is that collaborative research requires openness not only in who participates but in what becomes the object of inquiry. Rather than defining research objectives exclusively in advance, the collaborative process allows research questions and analytical categories to be refined through engagement with participants' everyday lives. Shadowing and participant-generated photography enabled this openness by allowing co-researchers to direct attention towards places, practices, and experiences that might otherwise remain invisible. However, working *with* does not remove the asymmetries between researchers and participants. Instead, it requires continuous negotiation of responsibility, interpretation, and representation. The ethical challenge is therefore not to eliminate power from research but to develop practices that make its operation visible and open to reflection. By examining the dilemmas involved in recruitment, situated inquiry, interpretation, and dissemination, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of co-research. Collaboration is not valuable because it produces uncomplicated forms of participation, but because it creates spaces where different forms of knowledge, experience, and authority can encounter one another. The task of co-research is consequently not to replace researchers' perspectives with participants' perspectives, but to create conditions in which knowledge can emerge through the encounter between situated positions.

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About the author

Sabina Pultz is Associate Professor in Social Psychology at Roskilde University, Denmark. Her research explores the intersections of psychology, politics and everyday life, with a particular focus on unemployment, marginalization, emotions, affect and situated dignity. Drawing on critical social psychology, she investigates how people experience and negotiate institutional conditions, power relations and social inequalities. Her methodological interests include qualitative, ethnographic and participatory approaches and collaborative knowledge production grounded in people's lived experiences.