Qualitative Studies
Vol. 11, No. 3, 2026, pp. 270-292
ISSN 1903-7031

Integrating principles of inclusivity into research with minoritised young people: Insights from co-designed and peer-facilitated focus groups

Satu Venäläinen[1]

Päivi Berg[1]

Kaisa Marttila[1]

Ainara Ossa Rissanen[1]

[1] *University of Helsinki, Faculty of Social Sciences, P.O. Box 54, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland*

Our paper discusses possibilities to enhance inclusivity and to apply principles of participatory approaches within contexts that pose limits to their full application. We specifically discuss the value of enhancing inclusivity in research with minoritised young people on sensitive topics, where the need to avoid objectifying and pathologising the participants is of paramount importance. We demonstrate this with a case example drawn from a broader project focused on developing interventions into youth mental health in Finland. To show how we drew on participatory principles in the project, we track a process of co-developing and implementing a peer-facilitated focus group methodology with LGBTIQA+ young people. We employ the notion of multidirectional mentoring to describe our efforts to arrive at less hierarchical interactions within the co-development process among our diverse research team. This is followed by a description of how the focus group methodology was implemented. Finally, we reflect on the capacity of this methodology to avoid objectification, to create empowering experiences for the participants, and to yield multivocal data. We also discuss the limits to participation in research among minoritised youth on sensitive issues.

Keywords: social inclusion, participatory methodologies, focus groups, stigma, minoritised young people

Introduction

Participatory methodologies are of particular importance in studies on topics that concern minoritised people, who have not only been traditionally pathologised and oppressed by knowledge generated in academic research, but whose views and experiences are also frequently exploited for seeming efforts of inclusion (Fine et al., 2021). In this paper, we discuss the value of participatory approaches through a case example drawn from a research project that explored questions of inclusion and equity in psychosocial interventions targeting young people in Finland. To this end, the project sought to listen and highlight the views and experiences of youth identifying as LGBTIQA+ and/or immigrant-backgrounded and/or neurodivergent on mental health services and their previous encounters with the services. The project is part of a larger Imagine-consortium focused on examining and developing the implementation and efficacy of selected mental health interventions (Martikainen et al., 2026). The consortium was not based on a participatory design, which is why the attempts to move to that direction were not a self-evident part of the project. Rather, we – a research team working in the subproject focused on the questions of inclusion and equity in psychosocial interventions – adopted this orientation through our initial reflections on the values and principles we wanted to implement in the project. Our paper traces this process, which included co-developing and implementing a peer-facilitated focus group methodology among our research team. Our team comprised of both senior and junior researchers, with the latter working from insider positions vis-à-vis one of the group(s) whom our research concerns (LGBTIQA+ young people). The key aim of our article is to demonstrate the value of integrating the principles of participatory approaches into research with minoritised groups on sensitive issues, even when such approaches have not been built into the study design. Furthermore, with a detailed description of our process and practices, we wish to contribute to building practical knowledge on the diverse ways in which participatory research methodologies can be applied in research with minoritised people.

Research and development of mental health services is a key example of a field where participatory approaches are much needed but so far fairly little used and researched. Even though the inclusion of especially minoritised groups in the development of mental health services has been considered vital for dismantling inequalities and thus addressing questions of social justice, its implementation is not

without complications (Scholz et al., 2017). In general, participatory research with minoritised or vulnerable groups such as young people and children has been deemed challenging in many ways due to the specific methodological and ethical skills it demands (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; Cotterell & Buffel, 2023). More specifically, the somewhat sparse literature on the inclusion of young people in mental health service development and research suggests that such projects often entail only superficial inclusion of the groups whom the research concerns (Reid et al., 2018; Stubbing & Gibson, 2021). In superficial, tokenist inclusion, the hierarchies and divisions between researchers and participants remain more or less intact, with sparse efforts at power-sharing among them. In such cases, despite best efforts, research aiming to enhance inclusion may fall short in foregrounding minoritised people's own, experience-based conceptions of what is meaningful for them and beneficial for their wellbeing (Johnson & Martínez Guzmán, 2013). Therefore, there is a need, which we aim to respond to here, to share knowledge on the diverse possibilities for translating participatory ideals into practice, especially in research with minoritised people and on sensitive topics such as mental health.

One of the key guiding concepts in our research on mental health and mental health service encounters with minoritised young people is *social inclusion*. The concept encompasses a sense of belonging, agency, and meaningfulness; in a word, an experience of being able to have an impact on matters of relevance to oneself and be recognised as a valuable member of groups that are important for oneself (Isola et al. 2021). It can be considered an antidote for mental distress and other impacts of societal exclusion; a weak sense of social inclusion has been found to predict mental health problems (Haddadi Barzoki, 2024), and is also associated with material disadvantage and a sense of otherness.

In our work, we have adopted a critical social-psychological approach, with which we have analysed the formation of the sense of social inclusion. This approach highlights the interplay of personal, social, and societal levels As a personalised feeling that has been shaped by material and social dimensions of life, it is based on accumulative life experiences but also modifiable and in a constant process of development. Social inclusion links individuals to both interpersonal relationships and group dynamics, as it is formed through experiences of attaching to certain groups or/and relationships, or alternatively distancing oneself, or being excluded, from certain groups and the

identifications that they offer. Societal phenomena and structures are inherently a part of the sense of social inclusion: structural-level systems of oppression and inequality such as racism, cisheteronormativity, and capitalism shape opportunities and limits for identifications with particular groups as well as the sense of agency accrued over a lifetime. Our peer-facilitated focus group methodology addresses these dimensions of social inclusion by aiming to create possibilities for collective, empowering critique of unjust societal systems.

In the next section, we will provide a brief overview of the background to our approach. We will then describe the process of co-developing our peer-facilitated focus group methodology with our diverse research team. This will be followed by a reflexive description of how the focus-group design was put into practice, what kind of insights and experiences the groups yielded, and where might the limits of this approach lie.

Critical participatory approaches, power-sharing and multidirectional mentoring

Participatory methodologies encompass varied approaches with different theoretical roots, but they generally share the principle of disrupting traditional hierarchies of power in research by including the groups of people whom the research concerns in the research process, ideally in all its stages – from formulating the research problem to reporting the findings – and with the aim of allowing them to have a real impact on the areas of focus and the process of research (e.g. Cotterell & Buffel, 2023; Fine et al., 2021). In practice, these ideals may be translated into full-scale participatory research (also called co-research), with the ideal of collaborating with co-researchers across all the stages of the study, or they may motivate smaller measures of inclusion by adopting practices such as member checking or member reflection, to ensure that the analyses align with the participants' understandings. Our study has drawn inspiration from critical participatory action research (CPAR), which has two specific features: first, it is guided by the goal of enacting transformation through collaboration with community members, and second, it draws on critical theory and is ultimately motivated by the aims of advancing social justice by inquiring into and intervening in patterns of societal inequality (Fine at al., 2021; Guy & Arthur, 2021).

The goals of enacting transformation and advancing social justice are of particular importance in research that focuses on minoritised people's experiences, to disrupt

processes of marginalisation and pathologisation that research and the knowledge it yields can contribute to (Johnson & Martínez Guzmán, 2013). A key aim of CPAR is to reverse the patterns of governance by knowledge that such groups tend to be exposed to. To avoid exploiting oppressed groups, CPAR specifically focuses on the needs and perspectives of oppressed groups, in order to generate knowledge that is of value to them and which can contribute to concrete change (Fine et al., 2021).

These principles were important for our study, and led to our efforts to develop a methodology that affords minoritised young people an agentic role in generating knowledge on youth mental health and in developing interventions targeting them. Aligning with participatory approaches' principles of power-sharing and the goal of facilitating minoritised young people's empowerment (Cotterell & Buffel, 2023; Howard et al., 2021), we aimed at advancing social justice not only at the societal-systemic level, but also at the grassroots level of conducting research. For us, the questions of knowledge, power and positionalities were particularly relevant because, as stated above, minoritised youth are in many ways subjected to mental health professionals' knowledge-making that may deny their ownership of (valued) knowledge on their identities, experiences and needs. Our inquiry drew on the idea of all knowledge being situated and thus bound to lived experiences (Collins, 1991). In participatory research, such situated knowing is inherently collective and imbued with a multiplicity of viewpoints and experiences (Chimirri & Pedersen, 2019). Both the professional researchers and the participants/co-researchers possess knowledge that is valuable for conducting research and thereby creating knowledge on the topics of interest: whereas the first group generally holds knowledge and discipline- and methodology-based expertise recognised by the scientific community, the latter is seen as having insider, experience-based knowledge of the communities or phenomena of interest (Kulmala et al., 2024).

Our reflections on situated, collective knowing and power have led us to closely consider how implicit distinctions may be reiterated even in research aiming to be participatory, and to seek to develop terminology that would assist in disrupting such distinctions. Viewing each party in participatory research solely in the light of the experience-based knowledge that forms the base for their involvement in the study entails the risk of reifying their perceived identities and overlooking multiplicity in the positions that each may hold (Johnson & Martínez Guzmán, 2013; Kulmala et al., 2024). Relatedly,

the common use of the label "co-researcher", in distinction to professional researchers, may reiterate hierarchical distinctions between those deemed authentic researchers, on the one hand, and representatives of groups whom the research concerns (labelled as co-researchers), on the other, despite the efforts to undermine such distinctions. Furthermore, in many cases, those invited to act as co-researchers and to, for instance, conduct interviews among groups they represent are still distinguished (in terms of labelling at least) from the other members of those groups, who by participating as interviewees are easily viewed akin to participants in non-participatory research.

To avoid reiterating and reifying the multi-layered distinctions described above, we have experimented with referring to all parties involved in research as *co-explorers* (see also Chimirri & Pedersen, 2019). With this labelling, we do not wish to insinuate that no differences among the explorers – ranging from professional senior and junior researchers to members of the groups whom the research concerns with limited involvement in the study at hand – would exist or matter. Rather, we build on the idea that each one is multiply positioned, and many of their positionings and identities may shift, both within the process of research and more broadly during their lifespan. As we elaborate in the next section, we put this idea into practice in our study for instance by providing the participants freedom to choose how they self-identify and what they tell about their backgrounds. By underlining the act of co-exploring as a common denominator of all parties involved in research, we seek to overcome (however incompletely) the traditional subject-of-knowledge versus object-of-knowledge positionings in research with minoritised people.

Furthermore, in order to make sense of the positionings and the mode of collaboration among our research team, which emphasised valuing and listening to the experience-based knowledge of the so-called insider researchers (here, the junior members) in our team, we developed the term *multidirectional mentoring,* which we suggest is a useful term for any participatory research. With this term, we wish to underline the multidirectional guidance that occurred in our meetings and interaction. At best, we arrived at dialogue (or rather, as we have elaborated elsewhere [Venäläinen et al., 2026], multilogues) in which our statuses as more senior or junior researchers were deactivated. In these encounters, any of us could step into the position of a mentor with valuable expertise to share and the mentored who responded to the sharing and helped

further develop the input into practices. As we demonstrate in the next section, the input of junior members was indispensable for instance in considering closely and critically the significance of the terms used when inviting participants and the value of having a peer facilitator in focus groups. On the other hand, the input of senior members was needed to ensure that the practices we formulated would fit into the larger framework of research interests and disciplinary requirements for good science as well as the broader consortium in the context of which the study was conducted. The next section demonstrates this by describing how the collaboration among our team unfolded in the phase of co-developing a peer-facilitated focus groups approach.

Co-developing a peer-facilitated focus group approach

The members of our research team – senior members Berg, who acted as the PI for the project, and Venäläinen, acting as senior researcher, and junior members Marttila, acting as a technical assistant, and Rissanen, who did their master's thesis based on the focus group data collected in the project – initially came together for the purpose of developing a suitable approach for data collection for the study at hand. We met on at least a dozen occasions at different phases of the project. We started by reflecting on focus group methodology, which had been chosen as a data collection method for the project at its funding application phase. By assessing the fit between focus groups method's principles and our goal of drawing on participatory approaches, we found a need to customise commonly applied focus group procedures to enhance the fit between the two.

There are several elements in the commonly utilised focus group method which support its use in research conducted *with* minoritised people (Hall et al., 2023) and in research on sensitive topics (Wellings et al., 2000). There is also a tradition of using focus groups within participatory research method (Burns et al., 2021; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2014). With relevance to all of these uses of focus groups, their capacity to facilitate multivocal and fairly unstructured interaction and meaning-making among the participants bears the potential to shift at least some power to the participants in determining the areas of focus that emerge as collectively meaningful for the group (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2014; Wilkinson, 2004). However, turning focus groups into a tool for research with minoritised people, on a sensitive topic and with the goal of enhancing social inclusion, requires a special consideration of possibilities to move

toward power-sharing and non-hierarchy. The key route for doing this is by (re-)thinking the relational positions of the facilitator and the participants in focus groups. In method guides, the focus group facilitator is generally assigned the position of a fairly passive moderator who sets the scene for interaction among focus group participants and then lets the interaction unfold without taking much part in it (e.g. Hennink, 2014; Morgan, 2011) – albeit that the facilitators may engage in various techniques aimed at mitigating their authority, and that in practice, their facilitation techniques may entail diversity along a continuum of active participation and (non-)directiveness (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2014).

In our view, enacting facilitation from a position of a passive moderator too easily retains a hierarchical distinction between the facilitator and the participants. This is why we ended up developing the notion of peer-facilitated focus groups, based on the idea that the focus groups facilitators should represent and openly identify with the same groups as the participants. Therefore, we decided that only the junior members of our team, working from insider positions, would act as focus group facilitators in our study, without any senior or outsider researchers being present in the groups.[1] This decision was primarily supported by experience-based insights shared by the junior members of our team on the importance of the positionality of the researcher in studies on minoritised people, which resonated with literature on insider research (e.g. Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). In the spirit of multidirectional mentoring, the junior team members shared in our meetings that they are in the habit of checking who or which organisation is conducting a study before deciding whether to participate in it. They also expressed the idea that for minoritised people, such as LGBTIQA+ youth, whether the researcher(s) represents the target group might matter more than the topic of a study, because an insider position creates trust in the study and in its alignment with the values and interests of the group in question. To further diminish the distinction between the facilitator and the participants, we determined that the peer facilitator should not be restricted to the traditional practice of stepping back from the meaning-making in focus groups but instead, when appropriate, should join in the discussion and share their experiences in order to support the non-

[1] Later, the focus groups with neurodivergent youth or youth with immigration background were facilitated by peers other than the original members of our team.

hierarchical standing of all parties, in line with long-standing practices in feminist interviewing developed to cultivate researcher sensitivity to power (Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Yost & Chmielewski, 2013).

When developing the notion of peer-facilitated groups, we recognised that the facilitator positioning in them will not completely erase power differences between them and the focus group participants, and that the position of a peer (Kulmala et al., 2024) or an insider (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015) is not clear-cut and does not automatically guarantee a shared experiential knowledge base among facilitators and participants. The facilitator, for instance, still largely determines the activities undertaken in focus groups. However, alongside other practices we developed, the notion of peer-facilitation may crucially move the interaction in the groups towards a less hierarchical co-creation of knowledge.

In addition to rethinking the positioning of the facilitator, concrete examples of the procedures we developed include, firstly, various measures undertaken to avoid inadvertent stigmatisation, and second, an interactive approach to safer space practices. The procedures we developed to avoid inadvertent stigmatisation largely focused on our efforts to formulate a sensitive invitation to participate in our study, which were to be distributed to reach young people via university email lists, student unions, NGOs working with young and minoritised groups, social media and our own networks. This involved working with what appeared to us as a dilemma: we were interested in the views and experiences of minoritised people since, as mentioned above, they may face a heightened risk of mental health problems and barriers to help-seeking. But to invite on the basis of both a minoritised status and a heightened risk of mental health problems comes with the risk of activating stigmatisation based on those statuses. As the junior members of our team pointed out (and senior members concurred), the talk of risk also easily creates an image of a homogeneous group of minoritised youth at risk, which may not only pathologise the group but also hide differences within it in terms of the severity of the risk and how it may manifest in the lives of young people. We wanted to be open about our study goals and the reasoning behind them, so we certainly wished to avoid masking our reasons for inviting certain groups.

We ended up with a plan to tell the participants as transparently as possible at the beginning of the focus groups why they had been invited to participate, by explaining that

research has shown an elevated risk of mental health issues among minoritised youth and that the accessibility of services and receiving adequate care has often been shown to be weaker for minoritised people. We felt that it was important to couple this explanation with disclaimers noting that this did not mean that the purpose of the focus groups would be to address any possible mental health issues of the participants, or that they would be presumed to have any. In sum, by framing our study purpose with an emphasis on gaining knowledge on questions of equity and accessibility of services (which indeed were our areas of interest), we tried to shift the focus away from the potential interpretation of our invitation being based on assumptions of the participants' mental health status.

When formulating the invitation, we also carefully attended to the terms used for referring to our target group(s) (initially LGBTIQA+ young people). This aroused some debate among us: for instance, a junior member (Rissanen) wished to use the term "queer" in the invitation, because they saw that it did not bear marginalising connotations, unlike terms such as "sexual and gender minorities". We ended up using the term "queer" in invitations that were in English, whereas in invitations in Finnish, an established Finnish term "rainbow youth" was used, for the same purpose of avoiding marginalising connotations with which the potential participants might not identify.

Another, related practical effort we made to avoid stigmatisation was to allow the participants to report (as background data for us) their belonging to groups under the LGBTIQA+ umbrella anonymously and with their own words, following the example set by Fine et al. (2021). All of our team members found this important for recognising diversity among LGBTIQA+ youth and to avoid misuse of power by denying the participants the opportunity to self-determine how they are labelled. Again, the junior team members' insider knowledge played a key role here: they pointed out that this allowed the participants to fluidly specify the terms they prefer, and to indicate if these were other than the broad terms "queer" or "rainbow youth" used in the invitation. We adopted a procedure of asking the participants to describe the identities that were important to them with one or more words on a sheet of paper (or alternatively on an online form) at the beginning or at the end of focus groups, which they could fold and give to the facilitator without anyone observing what they had written on it. This was to ensure that no one would need to disclose more about themselves than they wished to in front of others. Obviously, the downside of asking about demographic details in this way

is that we, as researchers, are not capable of linking the identities that the participants reported anonymously with the experiences and views that they shared in the focus groups. Nor did we gain systematic demographic details of the participants' backgrounds regarding e.g. ethnicity, racialisation, social class, or specific sexual or/and gender minority memberships. Whereas this is a shortcoming in a certain respect, for us, foregrounding and supporting the participants' self-determination weighed most heavily. This did not foreclose intersectional analyses, but rather allowed basing them on the participants' own understandings of how intersectional discrimination based not only on belonging to LGBTIQA+ but also on racialisation, class, ethnic background, etc., played out in their mental health encounters (see Rissanen et al., 2026).

The second concrete example of the focus group procedures we carefully planned together are interactive safer space practices. We developed the procedure on the basis of our discussions on the sensitive nature of the topic of our examination, i.e. mental health and minority statuses, and the demands this poses for the peer facilitators. In our co-development meetings, the junior members of our team raised concerns about how to ensure that all participants respected each other's views and did not try to dominate the discursive space or discredit others' views or experiences. When discussing these concerns in our meetings, we acknowledged that safety evolves in interaction in focus groups, which can be unpredictable and entail tension and clashes between opposing views. Despite our efforts at non-hierarchy, we noted the importance of the peer facilitator adopting responsibility for maintaining safety by, for instance, taking note of potentially hurtful or thoughtless comments and encouraging reflection on and awareness of their potential to disrupt safety. We ended up including in the responsibilities of peer facilitators the preparedness to provide tools for the participants to enact alternative interpretations, to make room for mistakes and the sharing of diverging or negative experiences. Further, in order to promote inclusivity in and commitment to efforts to create and sustain a safer space, we included in our focus group script a shared discussion among the participants at the beginning of the focus groups on how to achieve a safer space in practice. We decided to utilise a modified version of existing principles used at our university (https://studies.helsinki.fi/instructions/article/principles-safer-space) as prompts, and to ask the participants about their willingness to align with, customise, or complement them with their own suggestions. The existing principles emphasise encountering others with

kindness and an open mind, avoiding making assumptions about their identities, valuing diversity and a readiness to apologise and forgive if someone is offended. As we discuss in the next section, drawing attention to safety in an interactive manner was valued by the participants.

All in all, our co-development took the form of reiterative collective reflection, through which we revised and re-revised our preliminary plans. The co-development phase resulted in a detailed script for conducting the focus groups. The junior members of our team (who, as mentioned earlier, acted as peer facilitators for the focus groups among LGBTIQA+ participants) finalised the writing of the script so that they could ensure that its wordings felt natural for them to draw on more or less directly in the focus groups. At later stages, the script was used as orientation material in coaching also other peer facilitators.

Peer-facilitated focus groups in practice: venting, laughter and peer support

In this section, we exemplify how the co-developed script for the peer-facilitated focus groups was put to practice. Furthermore, we reflect on their implementation and the participant experiences by drawing on the recorded focus group data, participant feedback delivered orally after the focus group meetings, and the peer facilitators'/junior researchers' reflections and evaluations of the groups, including their own experiences of acting as peer facilitators in them. We draw on four focus group meetings with young LGBTIQA+ people (15-29 years old), which were the first focus groups organised in the project. Later, the same methodology has been applied in in two focus groups with young neurodivergent people and another two with immigration backgrounds, which have provided further support for its functionality. The participants were invited separately for each of these groups, with a leaflet specifically designed for addressing one of the three groups. The participants self-selected to participate by getting in touch with the researchers. The participants answering to an invitation targeting the same target group were assigned to groups of 3-6 participants.

The groups began with the routine procedures of giving information about the study and asking the participants to sign consent forms. The participants had already received information and consent forms before coming to the groups, but additional care was taken at the beginning of each group to explain the study aims in plain language, to

give the participants space to ask questions, and to explain why they were chosen in the manner outlined above. According to our script, the facilitator (one per group in the groups discussed here) could share their identifying as LGBTIQA+ while introducing themselves, if they wanted to. The invitations to participate had mentioned the facilitator belonging to the LGBTIQA+ community, thus the participants had this knowledge when they volunteered to participate. The participants were told in the beginning that they could share their own experiences to the extent that they felt comfortable with or could just talk about the topic on a general level. Other ways in which we attempted to promote a sense of safety was by arranging the groups in a familiar space, the student library (on the importance of this, see e.g. Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2014), and by providing the participants soft drinks and snacks, put on offer immediately upon their arrival to make the event feel comforting and casual. This was followed by the negotiation of safer space policies as outlined above. This indeed proved important and enhanced the quality of the data: some participants expressed their willingness and comfort in participating in the study knowing that it would follow the safer space principles. The discussion that followed was prompted with the help of questions that tapped into the participants' knowledge about mental health as well as their experiences of and views on the accessibility and equity of mental health services and on how to improve these. Based on the research interests of the larger consortium in the context of which we worked, we also asked the participants to evaluate one of two low-threshold psychosocial interventions, and used the intervention's protocol, an introductory video, and working materials as stimulus materials for discussion (see Martikainen et al., 2026). The interventions were 1) Adolescent interpersonal counseling (IPC-A) and 2) Groups for Health (G4H), the efficacy, equity and inclusivity of which the consortium aimed to evaluate and develop. Since we were interested in the equity and accessibility of mental health services, the questions we used as prompts included asking the participants to consider how (fear of) racism, cultural differences, transphobia, and homophobia might influence help-seeking and receiving among minoritised young people. This was to move even more explicitly toward collaborative knowledge creation, where the interpretative frames – such as intersectional theory – are not just used by researchers but are put on offer as tools to be drawn upon collaboratively for sense-making by researchers and participants alike even at the stage of data collection. As mentioned in the previous section, these frames

generally resonated with the understandings and the vocabulary used by the participants, possibly due, in part, to most of them sharing a similar educational background (most were or had been university students).

In the meetings among our team after and alongside the focus groups, the peer facilitators/junior researchers shared their experiences and thoughts on the groups they had facilitated, which we then discussed and drew upon in evaluating our methodology. Overall, the junior members underlined the value of the method and felt that the groups had succeeded in creating a safe environment for the participants to share their experiences. The discussions in the group were intimate and detailed, and included constant shared laughter, nods, and verbal expressions of agreement and understanding among the participants (see Rissanen et al., 2026; Venäläinen et al., 2026). As the junior members recounted, many of the shared experiences felt like collective experiences. At the end of the focus groups, the participants frequently expressed gratitude, and some spoke about having experienced the group as facilitating much-needed "venting" on the topic, or having felt as a peer support group. The junior members told in our reflexive meetings that they largely shared these feelings. A junior member of our team who drew on the focus groups in their master's thesis, wrote in their thesis (Rissanen, 2024, p. 33): "the shared laughter, new relevant information, experiences being shared among peers, and the validation towards each other all felt important and radical".

However, the facilitators also experienced the groups as burdensome, and the heaviness of the topic and the experiences that were shared was also evident in other ways. To get a hold of this aspect of the groups, we reflected on the role of laughter in the groups in our reflexive sessions. The abundance of laughter appeared not only as a sign of shared understandings and relief in getting to "rant" and "vent" (in the words of the peer facilitators and the participants), but as the peer facilitators reflected, also as a coping mechanism or a buffer that allowed the handling of extremely difficult experiences (c.f. Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2016), and it may have also enabled the participants to hide their uncertainty and nervousness. Many participants shared experiences of having encountered various forms of micro-aggression when seeking help for mental health issues, or in healthcare in general, ranging from being asked inappropriate questions, the professionals failing to listen or understand their views or interpretations of their problems, to a lack of knowledge on how minority status impacts mental health (Rissanen

et al., 2026). One participant summarised that "it's just a matter of luck whether you get a nice therapist or psychiatric nurse". The commonality of these experiences that became evident in the groups seemed to create a combination of hope and despair that resembled a feminist affective mode called respair (Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019), in which anger, hope, and despair are all simultaneously present and are linked with an awareness of existing inequalities and their harmful effects. Quite similarly, in our case, sharing hurtful past experiences with mental health services appeared to consolidate both a firm belief in a need for transformation and a sense of collective agency in contributing to such transformation. This was achieved by sharing experiences that were seen as originating from systemic injustices produced by cisheteronormativity. Alongside "ranting", the participants articulated critique and demands toward the system in defense of their rights to be fairly treated. One participant, supported by others, crystallised this as follows: P2: "Yeah, so it's like, no queer person has any obligation (P4: Hmm) to explain to anyone, and it's really the other person's job (P1: Yeah)".

Ranting and laughter, therefore, appeared to perform important functions in the groups: they enabled the participants to retain a sense of control and safety, consolidated peerhood and mutual understanding and hence strengthened a sense of community and social support. Collectively critiquing and ridiculing the discriminatory system potentially enabled the participants to gain a sense of agency and social inclusion due to having gained access to positions of critics of an unjust system (Guy & Arthur, 2021). According to the peer facilitators, the moments of shared laughter when critiquing the system enabled maintaining ethicality in the focus group encounters by moderating and lightening the emotional burden and the discomfort that may arise when tapping into sensitive topics and hurtful experiences (Wellings et al., 2000). As outlined in our script, the peer facilitators played a key role in supporting the participants in regulating the emotional burden of participation in the groups. At the end of each meeting, they offered the participants an opportunity to stay to talk about any discomforting thoughts or feelings, and to assist them to seek further guidance or help with a list of services, particularly those with known expertise in working with young LGBTIQA+ people.

The collaboration among our team continued while preparing conference presentations and analysing the data. The analyses drew on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which we found particularly well-suited to our aims of arriving

at nuanced, reflexive and multivoiced insights. Not all participated in all analyses or all stages: some, for instance, held the main responsibility for preliminary coding, others took the lead in identifying themes, while yet others helped refine them. However, we returned to collective interpretation at various phases and in different compilations, to discuss and modify initial observations and themes together.

The analysis phases further confirmed that we had ended up with rich data that enabled in-depth insight into minoritised experiences and views on the services' shortcomings and possibilities for improvement. The value of having a peer facilitator who represented both the same age group and, like the participants, openly identified as belonging to LGBTIQA+ people, became clear through the emphasis the participants put on practitioners' age and LGBTIQA+ identities. They reported several encounters with older practitioners – whom they associated with lack of awareness of gender and sexuality diversity – imbued with a sense of insecurity and of being misunderstood. In contrast, peer support groups were valued because of the absence of a "moralising adult coming to talk to young people about young people's issues", as one participant stated. Also when describing successful encounters with individual practitioners, the participants emphasised the value of practitioners openly identifying as LGBTIQA+ people and being young(ish). This is how one participant described a successful encounter with a practitioner who they told was "a lesbian and really young": "I was like OMG okay and we just chatted, and it was really nice, and like I didn't have to explain anything separately, so yeah there are some of those [kind of practitioners] too". These descriptions stand in stark contrast to the majority of experiences shared in the groups, in which the felt need to explain and account for one's identity and experiences in encounters with practitioners often led to being forced to adopt responsibility for educating them about gender and sexuality diversity (Rissanen et al., 2026).

To ensure that the focus group encounters would not replicate the participants' problematic experiences, having a peer facilitator in focus groups, with intimate knowledge of minoritised identities and experiences, appears highly important. The fact that the participants openly shared their previous experiences of unsafe encounters with practitioners, alongside their positive feedback, suggest that the focus groups succeeded in creating safe enough spaces for sharing and providing mutual support. However, based

on noticing that the groups can be experienced as burdensome, we also gained insight into the limits of this methodology and its potential for empowerment. We discuss these in the next section.

Discussion

Ideally, enhancing social inclusion in research requires that the researchers, firstly, ask questions of value to the groups whom the research concerns; secondly, seek to ensure that inclusion in the research process is enriching for the participants/co-researchers; thirdly, interpret the data with frameworks and concepts that pull out the threads of greatest importance for the thriving of the groups whom the research concerns; and fourthly, disseminate the findings responsibly and effectively to enact transformation in the conditions of life of these groups. While the co-development and implementation of the peer-facilitated focus group methodology described above was motivated by these principles and appears promising in living up to them, there are obvious limits to practicing inclusion in our case, as there are in many others. For instance, clear power differences remain within and between our research group, consisting of senior and junior members, and the focus group participants, who did not have any opportunity to influence our (initial) research questions or analyses (though we did offer the opportunity to comment our early versions of them). This goes against the general idea in participatory research to include those whom the research concerns in the phase of formulating research interests as well as, ideally, in the analyses. However, we also noted above that the need to balance overly burdening the participants/co-researchers may override the ideal of including them at all stages, especially in research that delves into minoritised and hurtful experiences. All in all, what our case exemplifies is the enactment of partial inclusion, which, however, we see as having crucially shaped our study's capacity to generate meaningful and impactful insights and experiences of participation for minoritised young people.

Based on our collaborative reflections, we argue for the importance of critically considering the terminology used, for instance, for referring to the collaborating parties in participatory research. We have used terms such as co-explorers (also Chimirri & Pedersen, 2019) to avoid hierarchical connotations that underline the distinctiveness of professional researchers and representatives of the groups whom the research concerns.

Furthermore, we suggest the utility of the notion of multidirectional mentoring for making sense of the collaborative process of bringing different knowledges and experiences together in research. This notion includes the idea that the positionings of all the involved parties are malleable and may shift during the process of collaboration, which affords different kinds of possibilities for accruing knowledge for each party. For instance, during our collaboration, the junior researchers who acted as peer facilitators became the key experts by experience in our team regarding how the focus groups methodology we had co-developed worked in practice, and their expertise played a key role in our evaluations of the approach.

We conclude with two key observations that sum up our inquiry. First, based on our experience, we feel safe to claim that having peers as focus group facilitators is highly beneficial. This enhances both the quality of the materials that the focus groups generate and their capacity to cultivate "political synergy" – a sense of empowerment derived from collective critique – (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2014) among participants, and thereby create an empowering experience for them. The feedback from the participants and the experiences of peer facilitators suggests that the groups had been largely experienced as empowering. Simply put, the fact that the participants felt, as far as we know, that they did not need to explain in the focus groups what it is like to be young minoritised people enabled them to share experiences of how common it is to have to do so in other contexts, particularly in encounters with mental health services. We consider it highly likely that this would not have happened to the same extent if the senior researchers of our group had acted as facilitators; it appears that solidarity was forged especially at the intersection of age and minoritised identification in the groups.

Our second observation relates to the limits of enacting participatory research when studying sensitive topics. With minoritised groups, there is a risk of overburdening the members of a community with research invitations. A careful balance should be sought in terms of the extent of participation asked for (including the peer facilitators), the burden this creates, and the potential rewards for the participants/co-researchers, such as an empowering experience, concrete compensation for participation, and/or the benefit to the community. The more is asked from the participants/co-researchers, the greater the risk that only a select group who might be in a more privileged position will participate (c.f. Kulmala et al., 2024). These patterns in self-selection easily reiterate the patterns of

marginalisation that the research aimed to disrupt. In sum, we underscore the importance of also enabling less intense participation when working with minoritised groups. Even when full-scale participatory research is not possible, due to the above considerations or restrictions in time or budget, we posit that small-scale participatory procedures also matter; they can enrich the data and strengthen the participants' sense of empowerment and social inclusion. This is all the more important when working with minoritised groups, with whom there is specific value in reshaping positions of authority regarding knowledge made available to them.

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About the Authors:

Satu Venäläinen (she/her) is a Lecturer and a Docent in Social Psychology at the University of Helsinki. She completed this article while working as a research fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. The bulk of her research has focused on gendered and intersectional violence, otherness and stigmatisation, and the discursive and affective processes through which these are enacted and resisted. She has a keen interest in developing participatory and creative methodologies based on relational, embodied and affective knowledge generation.

Päivi Berg (she/her) currently works as a University Researcher and Principal Investigator in the project 'Young People's Inclusion and Equity Psychosocial Interventions', funded by the Strategic Research Council established within the Research Council of Finland (Grant No. 352700, 372320) at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki. Päivi holds a PhD and the title of Docent in Social Psychology, and she has also a background in youth studies. Her research interests relate to young people's equality and inequalities in different contexts, such as sports and physical education, leisure and working life.

Kaisa Marttila (she/her) holds an MA in Social Policy. Her research has focused on questions of young people's inclusion and equity in mental health services and she has also interest in themes related to family studies.

Ainara Ossa Rissanen (they/she) is a young queer person based in the Basque Country. They hold a BA degree in Psychology and an MA in Social Psychology. Their research has focused on queer experiences with mental health services. They are currently interested in collaborating with the queer community to eliminate LGBTI+ phobia and improve social and personal living conditions.