

Editorial foreword: Challenging academic participation

This issue contributes to the growing criticisms of and challenges to participatory methods and cultural participation by focusing on ‘academic participation’. By academic participation, we refer to the use of participatory methodologies in academic research, but we also aim to expand the term by including reflections on the modes and conditions of taking part — willingly and unwillingly — in academic systems and institutions as such. The articles of this issue invite the reader to reconsider what and how participation looks like in the academy. Taken together, they suggest that we might need to broaden how we understand, apply and critique participation in academic research: from the participatory methods applied in specific research projects, to how we might foster a more participatory academic system that rejects the current individualization, financialization, and exploitation at play.

Participatory methods hold a promise to erase or at least trouble the ever-present, long-standing hierarchies of knowledge and power within academia. These approaches imply not only creating and sustaining new forms of research practice but new relationships that are distinct from more traditional research endeavours and how they position and organise groups of people. As the contributors to this issue and other scholars note (see Eriksson and Stage this issue), this promise to transform knowledge and relationships through participation rarely materialises or instead offers something else, unexpected or marginal. As one example, Seale and colleagues (2015) have written about participatory methods within the context of higher education in the United Kingdom. Even where goodwill and motivation for participation are championed by research teams, there are “gaps between rhetoric and reality” (p. 550); student voice cannot resolve challenges of participation: who runs and guides a project, whose expertise is valued, how is indifference or resistance to participation theorised, and how do ever-increasing workloads contribute to participation *and* resistance? Thus much about participatory methods is distinct from how we might understand them to be represented or marketed as transformative qualitative approaches for culturally- and community-attuned methods. The “high hopes” of participatory research are discussed by Eriksson and Stage in our first article.

Implicit in this endeavour to trouble sedimented and institutionalised knowledge hierarchies in participatory research is an ethos of care — a care for forging meaningful relationships with participating communities and individuals as well as a care for producing and circulating academic knowledge that matters to and potentially transforms social and cultural practices outside of academia. However, as several of our articles in this special issue show, the ideals and practices of care in specific participatory projects are often challenged by the disheartening realities at present-day universities. In their article, Jensen, Thyssen and Uldbjerg explore this *coming short of care* from the perspective of activist and student communities while Rai and Essilfie in their piece turn to questions of researchers’ mental health care and burn-out in not only academically but also affectively and socially demanding participatory processes. The affective, exploitative, and politicised structures of contemporary academia are pertinent to address from within a participatory framework as these histories of exclusion and exhausted research communities undermine future endeavours and trajectories of participatory research. Participatory research processes can, further, be messy,

exhaustive and drawn out in ways that, as Rai and Essilfie show, are not always in sync with the accelerated temporal rhythms and competitive structures of contemporary grant-based academia. In their article on the mental health situation of UK university employees, Smith and Ulus highlight a communal approach to care in the academy in order to counter the current individualization of successes and, specifically, failures. Issuing a call “to care for both ourselves and other scholars with dignity and respect” (Smith & Ulus, 2020: 845), they emphasise how “care must not be about the individual failing, falling, and fixing themselves” (Smith & Ulus, 2020: 852). Echoing this call, but also widening its perspectives to academia as such, Kofoed in this issue formulates an injunction to *care about academia* as a living and liveable habitat. She ends her essay by asking, for example, “can the pressure from the sense of powerlessness, anxiety and vigilance I hear among our youngest companions drive the development of a more inventive and vibrant care for and about academia?” As such, she highlights how academic participation pertains not only to the methodologies of participatory research, but also is a concept sensitising us to issues of how to foster an academic environment or, in her words, habitat where different forms and modes of research participation and research lives are recognized and cared for in a communal and authentic way.

Turning towards these challenges, gaps and uncertainties of academic participation, however, is not a call to wholly renounce participatory methods as futile. Closer attention to the multiple and messy relationships and knowledge practices (especially those beyond our academic titles) of participation orients us to take seriously questions of empowerment, social change, transformation, exploitation and collective knowledge production. These are questions inherent to all research work, and perhaps all knowledge work including advocacy, creative and activist struggles.

Instead of simply rejecting participatory methods, with all their failed promises and unmet aims, we invite readers to consider:

- How does listening to peripheral perspectives within the academic system such as student teaching assistants, activists, and junior researchers provide new perspectives as to the generation of academic knowledge and research ethics?
- How and why are exploitative and consensus enforcing logics imposed and challenged in participatory research?
- What are the forms of participation in academic knowledge generation and communication that are often overlooked and unrecognised today, even by researchers swearing to a participatory methodology?
- What assumptions about participation are interrogated and which assumptions are left unacknowledged? How does this reinforce or challenge the very aims of participatory methods as transformative approaches?
- How do participatory approaches mirror the power imbalances and marginalisation that structure our cultural contexts and is there space in academic life to challenge these relations?

These are some of the questions that the articles in this issue raise.

THE THEMED ARTICLES OF THE ISSUE

The articles of the issue challenge academic participation from different perspectives and with different theoretical and empirical foundations. The first and second articles challenge methodologies of participation, focusing on the conditions and opportunities of research participants and researchers in the field. The third and fourth articles challenge the foundations of participating in academic systems from perspectives within and on the margins of academic institutions. What is common to all four articles is a strong commitment to critically reflect upon and discuss the (participatory) research projects and environments that the authors themselves are

or have been part of. The call for ongoing self-reflection and collective critique is a leitmotif in the special issue.

In the article “How participatory are we really? The pitfalls and potentials of participatory research practices”, Eriksson and Stage investigate their own participatory, methodological practices when doing research with cultural institutions. Drawing on Christopher Kelty’s grammars of enthusiasm and suspicion, they reflect on a ‘suspicious’ lack of dissensus in their participatory research projects, while also balancing the failures and successes of research participation based on participants’ perspectives. Their article presents an overview of current critiques of academic participation, and, using empirical examples, it approaches the issue of how to evaluate the failures and successes of participatory research.

In “This is not ‘interesting’ research: Authentically Co-Creating Participatory Action Research in UK’s Post-Covid Culture Industries”, Rai and Essilfie similarly explore methodological issues of participatory methods, here focusing on PAR (participatory action research). They reflect on the ‘jargon, ideology and aura of authenticity’ prominent in research-council funded PAR, criticising extractivist and colonial dispositions in PAR projects that are validated within an ideology of financialization. Their work builds on a processual and relational, rather than transparency and presence oriented, conception of authenticity in participation. Through three narratives emerging from their own research, they explore the temporalities, valorisations and routines of PAR. They fundamentally question the emancipatory, de-colonial, and anti-extractivist potentials of PAR when it is based on incentives of exploiting marginalized creative workers for financial gains.

Kofoed’s essay “Academic habitats? An essay on research ethics” explores some of the foundational rules and ideologies that research, and especially young researchers, must abide by in order to work within academic systems. She poses a critical reflection on the ways that ethics boards and guidelines help to formalize and individualize ethicality within the academy. Instead, informed by an ethics of care, she suggests caring about academia, as a stance that opens the opportunity for more nuanced and relational reflections on what ethics and integrity mean when participating in academic knowledge construction. Kofoed’s essay, which has been published in a former Danish version in *Journal of Professional Studies*, does not pose a direct critique of academic participation, but it does fundamentally question the prerequisites for being part of academic knowledge construction and the ways that new and becoming academics are trained to think about ethics and integrity in ways that integrate them into an academic system, which does not always create the best foundation for diverse, caring and ethical participation.

The final article, “Activist Participation in Academic Systems: Three autoethnographic case studies of academic-activist positions in knowledge-work” by Jensen, Thyssen and Uldbjerg also explores the boundaries of participation in academic institutions. While Kofoed’s essay challenges the prerequisites of academic participation from an insider-perspective, Jensen et al.’s article explores criticism articulated from the margins of the academic systems. Focusing on activist and student contributions, they argue that even when academic activities are not declared ‘participatory’, researchers and their institutions run the risk of exploiting individuals who participate in academic knowledge construction in often unacknowledged and overlooked ways.

OUT OF THEME

The issue further includes one out-of-theme article by Analisa de Graves. In “Radio of Flesh and Bone: Community Radio in the Authoritarian and Patriarchal Context of Today’s Nicaragua”, she explores the importance and endangerment of community radio in the authoritarian and patriarchal context of contemporary Nicaragua. By employing the corporal prism of “flesh and bones”, de Graves elaborates on three critical dimensions to the current state persecution of Nicaraguan community

radio. First, the immediate threat to journalists, participants, and others working with or supporting independent media in Nicaragua. Second, the cultural threat of silencing and further marginalizing critical voices and publics of for example women and adolescents as is shown in the case of Radio Vos, a feminist community radio working with issues of femicide and domestic violence. Third, the material threat to community radio organizations' access to technology, infrastructure, and security when programming and airing. In order to avoid the Ortega-Murillo government's repression, community radios increasingly move their content and work online. This survival strategy, however, not only risks excluding Nicaraguans without stable or affordable internet access from listening to their programmes but can also hinder local participation and engagement with the community radio station according to de Graves.

We hope the articles of this issue will inspire readers who are working with participatory methods or simply participating in academic systems to critically reflect on their own practises, possibilities and challenges of participation.

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