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Monika WILINSKA\*

## Introductory Remarks

In one of the most widely used definitions of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 3) describe this practice as consisting of “a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible”. However, as much as qualitative research “locates the observer in the world”, it also locates the observed in research. This intrinsic complexity of qualitative research becomes even more prominent in research inquiring into such highly social and cultural phenomena as age and ageing.

Qualitative research on age and ageing offers a unique possibility to delve into the ways in which daily practices and meanings ascribed to age and ageing are enacted, are changed and/or maintained. Yet, such research is conditioned upon the meeting between strange and familiar modes of living, thinking, knowing and feeling as exhibited by all parties involved in the research process. This urges us to think about the ways and consequences of constructing knowledge about age and ageing in different settings and the extent to which we can cross various boundaries and borders to challenge stereotypical views, to create space for neglected voices and perspectives and to appreciate people of various ages on their own terms.

This small-scale collection of three articles is an invitation to a critical reflection regarding the ways in which older persons are visible and invisible in research, how older persons appropriate various research activities and which topics emerge as important in navigating current socio-cultural contexts of ageing. In this, these articles encourage deep engagement with the complex relationship existing between research practices and ageing and later life. Issues, such as the processes of knowledge production; context and its meaning in research on age and ageing; the making of research subjects in research on age and ageing; and, the role of media and media practices in research on age and ageing constitute the underlying rationale for the three studies presented here.

In their article, Schiau, Ivan and Biră touch upon a critical area of doing qualitative research with older persons. The authors bring forward the perspective of participatory action research (PAR) and its relevance for research involving older individuals, specifically in studies exploring social media use and engagement among that groups. Importantly, Schiau et al. create a space for older persons who participated in PAR projects to feedback and share their impressions and forms of engagement in such a research project. This accomplished *with* and

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*through* the use of social media (Facebook) that the project focuses on and utilizes as one of key interactive tools facilitating creation of a project community.

Online presence and communication are also a focus of a qualitative exploration conducted by Marinescu and Rodat, who look at the ways in which accustomed users of online health information perceive the role, credibility and status of health-related content that can be found online. The study gives voice to city-dwelling older persons living in Romania and Germany who discuss many ways of engaging with online health-related information and who juxtapose online and offline sources (e.g. consultations with physicians) when searching for relevant knowledge. By identifying several similarities between older adults coming from two different European countries, Marinescu and Rodat emphasize also the role of socio-cultural context in the ways of utilizing online media, especially in the context of health-related information and face-to-face contacts with medical staff.

The relationships between older persons and their general practitioners are the starting point for Daba-Buzoianu, Cirita-Buzoianu and Amalancei's report on a small-scale interview-based research conducted in one of Romanian cities. The study elegantly gives voice to older persons who provide rich account of their interactions with physicians and qualities of the relationships they have with them. As a result, the article tells a well-developed story of how it is for older persons to communicate with physicians, what meanings older persons attach to visits at the physician's office and which interactional features, they consider particularly helpful and pleasant.

In sum, while these three Romania-based studies make an important contribution to ageing knowledge in the country, they also provide insightful *food for thought* for international audience interested in the potential and values of qualitative approaches to ageing and old age. Consistent with the call for this special issue, all three studies exemplify the vital engagement in qualitative research *with* older persons. While Schiau et al. do that directly by employing participatory action research; the two remaining studies achieve that indirectly with their generous and encouraging approaches aiming at opening spaces for older persons to freely present their stories and their points of view.

In none of the studies, older persons are presented as victims, less capable or less knowledgeable members of societies. Instead, all three studies begin from a recognition of older persons in their own rights and on their own terms. Thus, all three studies offer a notable example of qualitative research *for* older persons in their way of breaking with stereotypical images of old age. This is particularly relevant in the context of 'digital divide' discourses that often portray older persons as lagging, lacking skills and understanding of new communication technologies. In their studies, Schiau et al. and Marinescu & Rodat with their qualitative approaches do not ask the question of 'if', they instead ask the question of 'how' to demonstrate the place of digital worlds in the ageing process and old age.

The knowledge *about* old age as created in those three studies is thus far from being patronizing and distant, instead knowledge constructed here is about actual people, their actual lives and experiences. Taken into the account the prevalence of ageism in societal and academic discourses (e.g. Bytheway, 2005; Katz, 2009; Gulleto, 2004), these three qualitative studies demonstrate how research free from ageism may look like.

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## **Involving Older People in Participatory Action Research: An Example of Participatory Action Design**

### **Abstract**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has as a main goal the collaborative construction and production of meanings between the researchers and the participants. PAR has been largely used in the area of technology creation and appropriation involving end-users in different stages of technology designing process. However, research studies concerning older people and their use of technology employ PAR to a lesser extent. In the current paper we provide arguments for the value of different participative action approaches when studying technology appropriation by older people, and present an example of a participatory action design that we have implemented in three Romanian cities, with people 60+, to reveal the way older adults depict their experience in using Facebook. We used a five-step collaborative research design – (1) initial evaluation; (2) training session; (3) immediate evaluation; (4) group co-creation; (5) final evaluation – to reflect on the participants’ experience through groups techniques and participant observation notes. Results reveal the fact that one trainer per each participant, adapting the interaction to the participant’s individual needs, intergenerational trainer-trainee communication and patience, as well as proper timing of the organized sessions are key factors to foster participant engagement with social media. In addition, the proposed participatory action design proved to have some potential to empower older people in long time engagement with social media.

**Keywords:** Participatory Action Research (PAR), PAR & older people, Participatory Action Design (PAR), older people and social media engagement.

### **Introduction**

During the last decades, research rhetoric has moved to not only include multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches, but also an action-oriented approach that challenges the traditional relationship between the subject, the object and the context of

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the research. The increasing interest in participatory action research (PAR) sought to reconnect the ivory tower of academic research with a more hands-on approach of social dynamics (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013, p.1). Aimed to empower “ordinary people” in and through research (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007), this bottom-up approach has gained centrality not only in social science, but also in health or environmental sciences, as it provides a powerful interplay between research and practice.

The core research dynamic is the *collaborative* construction and production of meanings between the researchers and the participants. Therefore, the relationship between the researcher and the subjects of the research is redefined in less hierarchical terms, as it is no longer about the symbolic dominance and control of the former over the research process. On the contrary, PAR is primarily about a dialogic framework in which the participant takes on an active co-researcher role and is, hence, actively engaged in the research process at all stages. From a broader sociological theoretical perspective, this could place PAR within a symbolic interactionism logic (Genat, 2009), as meanings and interpretations emerge and are subject to a continuous process of negotiation between the researchers and the participants, as well as between the participants themselves. One of the main advantages of facilitating a collaborative research context is that “the practical knowledge that emerges is usually a better fit for those for whom it is intended, since they themselves helped generate and make sense of the findings” (Piercy et al., 2011, p.821).

### **Participatory Action Research in the Area of Technology Creation and Appropriation**

PAR is significant in the area of ICT with the implementation of user-friendly design of applications to fit customers’ needs and daily habits. Such approaches are employed by the field of Human-Computer-Interaction (HCI) and are used for prototype designing and testing, concerning the final product/application appropriation and use. Therefore, the approach is defined as **Participatory Action Design (PAD)**, as a model of involving users in the co-creation of the designing product, alongside the entire process (Ding, Cooper, & Pearlman 2007). The Research and Development (R&D) areas are using PAD by involving end-users in different stages of the process: establishing a research agenda, formulating the research questions, involving participants as research assistants or advisors, involving participants in testing prototypes or ideas and in the evaluation process – as for example continuation in use, advantages and dis-advantages of the implemented ideas (Wu, Richards, & Baecker, 2004). Since the first uses of PAD models in the 1970s, when they assisted the implementation of computers in work environments, the approach has been successfully extended to other areas, such as urban design and transportation (see Carmona, 2010; Taylor, Braveman, & Hammel, 2004). Still, PAD remains a research approach largely used in the ICT design for users with reduced capabilities or impairment associated with ageing: for example mobility related problems (Hitchen, Williamson, & Watkins, 2015; Muller, 2003; Seale et al. 2002) and Ambient Assistant Living (AAL) technologies designing or socio-technical solution (i.e. Quality of Life technology- QoLT devices and systems) to reduce the effects of cognitive impairment or other cognitive disabilities impacting individuals’ social life (Slegers et al., 2012; Spinuzzi, 2005). The use of PAD model in research follows some steps in which the end-users get involved in the co-creation process (see for example Ding, Cooper, & Pearlman, 2007): (1)