

OPP: WORK, LEISURE, & SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

Participatory research on digital (in)equalities in care relationships among older people living alone

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Purpose Digitalisation is changing social life and relationships. As a result, it has brought with it new cultural ideas and expectations of care, collaboration and reciprocity. Increasing support options and needs for older people coping with digital developments, in terms of both equipment and lifestyle, can present challenges. People living alone experience particular challenges in terms of on- and offline care relationships, because this group is less likely to have access to (familial) support close to home. Increasing digitalisation and living alone in later life has the potential to perpetuate inequalities between generations, income groups and countries based on available care resources and infrastructure. The European project EqualCare investigates the intersections of digitalisation and intergenerational care relationships of older people living alone and contributes to reducing inequalities through collaboration and participatory research. The paper reports on the findings of the participatory research and focuses on how older people living alone negotiate increasing (digital) care needs for themselves and others. **Method** Following the emancipatory underpinnings of participatory action research (PAR), which aims to reduce inequalities through collaboration and co-design (Buffel, 2018; Corrado et al., 2020), EqualCare involved nine teams of co-researchers (aged 65-88 years) in Finland, Latvia, Sweden and Germany. They were involved in elaborating research objectives, collecting data, reflecting on the data and formulating and disseminating recommendations for local policy actors. The paper shows how participatory research with older people as equal partners must be designed in order to promote social change processes and social participation. **Results & Discussion** Four themes emerged from the reflection workshops with the co-researchers: (1) co-researchers understood digitalisation as a challenge, regardless of whether digitalisation was in process (Germany and Latvia) or had been fully implemented (Finland and Sweden); (2) perceived risks of digital exclusion and thus exclusion from modes of participation in everyday life; (3) family members were the most important resource for digital access and support. However, this dependency created new forms of ambivalence between asking for help and independence; and (4) rapid digitalisation of all areas of life was seen as an anti-democratic trend (e.g., in the sense of concentration of power by a few people). The collaboratively developed recommendations stress the need to recognise the pressure put on older people to keep up with new digital developments, and the risk of marginalization when these cannot be met.

References

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