

## ...And (Epistemic) Justice for All: A cautionary tale of knowledge inequality in participatory research

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose.** Significant funding has been made available in the UK for social, behavioural and design research that aims to improve health and wellbeing for older adults. The growing importance and use of participatory and co-creative approaches in this field not only reflects a general turn in social research but also seeks to redress power imbalances between researchers and researched. This article uses Miranda Fricker's concept of 'epistemic injustice' as a lens to describe my experience with one such project, and highlights the cautions and considerations that must be made when navigating, handling and amalgamating 'other people's knowledge'.

**Methods.** Personal and theoretical reflection. Primary data for this article consists of first-hand insider observations on how different forms of knowledge were treated in an interdisciplinary, intersectoral participatory research context.

**Findings.** Some participatory studies are hampered by insufficient consideration for a range of ways of thinking, including between researchers and participants, younger and older adults, different academic disciplines, or academia and industry. This can harm project integrity and outcomes, potentially eroding trust in academic research.

**Originality.** By reflecting on a recent participatory study in healthy ageing, this article outlines a theoretical basis to increase the benefits of working with different stakeholders across health and care, design, business and academia. It concludes by suggesting ways that researchers might address epistemic injustice, and so recognise and properly value the range of knowledge types encountered in participatory research.

**Keywords:** care work, co-design, epistemic injustice, interdisciplinary, knowledge equality, older workers, participatory methods.

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### INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to 1) advance a philosophical insight that has special relevance in participatory research; and 2) explore this as a specific challenge using an example of a co-design programme with older care workers.

Participatory research as an identifiable social scientific approach has existed since at least the 1970s (Park 1992). It is intrinsically about power, equity and "an expanded conception of knowledge [that] changes the relationship between the researcher and the researched and between theory and practice", which aims to "restore the place of ordinary people as the creators of knowledge" (idem.,

29-30). While participatory research can encompass a range of study designs, methods and frameworks (Vaughn & Jacquez 2020), it is still about making the best use of knowledges in specific contexts, without unfairly privileging the (white, male, western) epistemologies that have traditionally dominated academic discourse (Foucault 1980; Harding 1998 and many others).

Many participatory approaches use innovative techniques designed to redress the power imbalances in a research context, from asking communities to decide the research question (Atalay 2012), to using specific activities, such as 'walking methods' (O'Neill & Roberts 2019), which bring the researcher into the participant's world. Co-design has been gaining traction in ageing research and "involves people in the design of the products, services or activities of which they are the customer or beneficiary [...] co-design typically devolves power from the project leader" (Davidson Knight 2012, 312). My co-design experience involved introducing methods into a community of older care workers to help uncover their hidden knowledge with the aim of solving a problem.

For older people, such problems might include the physical complexities of ageing, entwined health and social issues, experiences of care and/or being cared for, and so on. Identifying their challenges and establishing how to address these is not simply a case of asking, "what do you want?" but instead requires spending time sharing experiences and generating trust. Many participatory approaches recognise this and deploy multiple methods specifically designed to elicit/generate knowledge that might otherwise be inaccessible.

Research with and around older people is increasingly interdisciplinary, involving social scientists, gerontologists, care designers, policy experts and others. Research funders routinely encourage interdisciplinary and multisectoral partnerships (especially with business and/or industry) and, in health and social care research, usually require some element of 'patient and public involvement and engagement' (INVOLVE 2015; UK Public Involvement Standards Development Partnership 2019). As the stakeholders involved in such research become more diverse, the range of knowledge *types*, to be marshalled, amalgamated and assimilated, also increases. These include:

- Academic and other 'formal' knowledge, e.g. the different specialities and disciplines in research or medicine
- Experiential knowledge, which is complex, layered, holistic and merges lived experiences with other collectively shared knowledges
- Emotional knowledge; understanding the psychological needs of care recipients, such as companionship and mental wellbeing support
- Systems knowledge; knowing how it all fits together, especially what can and cannot be done within a participatory research context
- Wisdom, which encompasses much of the above but has a more 'meta' quality, defined in 1864 by preacher, Charles Spurgeon, as "the *right* use of knowledge" (italics mine).<sup>1</sup>

These are not just domains of learning; they emerge from different perspectives, types of reasoning, and are acquired in different ways. They need to be balanced and configured effectively to enable the best outcomes for participatory research with older adults. This article also considers other arbiters of knowledge in participatory research; not only the intended primary beneficiaries, but also those representing the wider care sector and commercial business/design agents.

Different groups of 'knowledge bearers' inhabit a relational terrain in which each holds different power in relation to the others. "The decision to define some groups' knowledge as the most legitimate, as official knowledge, while other groups' knowledge hardly sees the light of day, says

something extremely important about who has power in society” (Apple 2012, 195). It follows that marshalling different forms of knowledge, from different stakeholders with different origins, is a tricky business. Participatory research and co-design must therefore pay close attention to knowledge-oriented power relationships. These are examined here using the lens of 'epistemic injustice', treating someone unfairly “in their capacity as a knower” (Fricker 2007, 1), of which two main categories exist:

*Testimonial injustice* occurs when a person’s knowledge is doubted because of their identity or the group they belong to. For example, being ignored or silenced because of their gender (“what would *she* know?”); being distrusted because of their race or ethnicity (police or juries giving less credibility to black witnesses); being dismissed as unreliable due to a health diagnosis (“you don’t know what’s good for you”); or having one’s knowledge dismissed due to assumptions about age (Richeson & Shelton 2006).

*Hermeneutical injustice* occurs when a concept, tools or language are unavailable for a person to fully comprehend their experience. Fricker (2007) argues that asymmetrical relations of social power can skew hermeneutical resources, so that disempowered groups have less capacity to understand their social experiences. For example, the term ‘sexual harassment’ did not exist until the mid-1970s, so anyone experiencing unwanted sexual interest might a) struggle to understand their discomfort due to a lack of hermeneutic tools and discourse on the issue, and b) have difficulty convincing others to take their discomfort seriously. In a world that is institutionally constructed to fulfil the needs of the most privileged, the available hermeneutical resources do not serve marginalised groups well. This is illustrated by academic language itself, which is recognised as “one of the sources of production or maintenance of epistemic inequalities” (Godrie et al. 2020, 10).

This article 1) gives a partial overview of participatory research with older adults and the potential for epistemic injustice to interfere with this; 2) describes the different ways in which epistemic injustice emerged in a co-design project with older adults; and 3) explores the implications for wider research and makes tentative recommendations for avoiding epistemic injustice, to improve research integrity and outcomes for participants.

## EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH OLDER ADULTS

Davidson Knight (2012) found co-design to be a key element in successful intergenerational initiatives, while Phillips and Morgan (2014, 11) note that “the active involvement of older people in the production of adult social care is necessarily better established than in health care”, which they attribute to the service user and disability rights movements – both also fertile grounds for epistemic justice research. This journal recently devoted an issue to “novel and participative approaches to researching key concepts with older people”, which the editorial concluded, “active collaboration with older people within the projects, research and frameworks reported on or argued for here has promoted new approaches to be taken to reviewing and applying the key concepts being examined, from ‘place’ to ‘risk’ to ‘technology’” (Poland 2022, 70).

A systematic review of empirical studies involving older users in technology design (Fischer et al. 2020) drew more ambiguous conclusions. Among these was the finding that while most participants

enjoyed the sense of ownership their participation engendered, some were disappointed when the technological platform they had developed was not implemented. The authors also note, “designers retain a considerable degree of control about what knowledge from users to include and what to ignore...” (idem., e520).

Paphitis (2018, 364) argues that participatory research is about “embracing a plurality of knowledge from diverse perspectives of legitimate epistemic agents who enter into dialogue with one another within a research relationship”. Likewise, Cook et al. (2019, 379), propose that participatory research allows researchers and participants to “move from consensus based on dominant knowledge, or shared assumptions about knowledge in action, to allow new understandings to emerge”. This focus on ‘understanding’ implies not simply regarding knowledge as data or information, but incorporating and assimilating knowledge in its broadest sense; perspectives and understandings that have evolved over a lifetime of formal learning, experience, social interactions, physical repetition and so on.

Epistemic injustice can work in both (and in fact multiple) directions. Reflecting on how participation manifested in their own co-design study, Lindblom et al. note,

*...professionals valued their own and their peers’ long-term experience more than the patients’/significant other’s experience. However, there may also have been an epistemic injustice in that the workshops were based on the patients’/significant other’s needs and their experiences were prioritized rather than the professionals’ work-related experience. Since people’s experiences are the focus of participatory design methods, all experiences should be recognized as a form of expert knowledge and valued equally as any type of knowledge. However, experience is often determined by tacit knowledge, which is typically hard to define, formalize and validate [...] Despite the fact that the co-design process itself should facilitate a user-centred approach with an emphasis on the experience of all users, it is of critical importance to acknowledge the possible presence of epistemic injustice. Hence, such injustice increases power asymmetries and separates rather than unites individuals (2021, 913-914).*

Knowledge signifiers such as qualifications often denote a privilege to which academics and/or professionals involved in participatory research must be alert. The intended dialogue with marginalised participants often becomes subsumed into a dialogue with previous research, or with dominant narratives within the sector. This was seen in the focus groups conducted by Fletcher and Clarke (2020), where lay keyworkers routinely deferred to the judgment of their clinical colleagues, even when this was clearly misguided. Researchers should also be mindful of ‘self-directed epistemic injustice’, in which non-academic participants’ assumptions about those with higher academic qualifications leads to a “credibility excess” (Fricker 2007, 17), skewing the delicate balance of credibility among stakeholders. This might even be considered a form of ‘double hermeneutic’ (Giddens 1987) – the idea that research participants develop a particular understanding of the research itself, which governs their responses to those research practices.

While much has been written about epistemic injustice in relation to mental illness, including conditions commonly associated with age, such as dementia (Spencer 2023), there is a paucity of literature on epistemic injustice against older people. Literature searches (using Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and institutional databases) for ageism-related epistemic injustice yield very little; most results relate to children’s testimonies. This reveals a significant gap in research, relating to a growing marginalised group. This article is not about prejudice against older people *per se* – although the fact that ageism can be articulated in various ways, for example through ‘elderspeak’

(Corwin 2018), means we should be aware of its potential influence on the dynamics of participatory research with older people.

## ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

I have been a researcher on several participatory studies. This article focusses on one specific project, which used co-design approaches with the aim of finding ways to improve the working lives of older (aged 50+) care home workers. Stakeholders included academics from different disciplines, representatives from business/design and social care organisations, and care home workers across all levels of seniority. The social and professional dynamics among and between these groups gave rise to different forms of epistemic injustice. Those dynamics – rather than the project itself, whose premise, methods and findings are less relevant – are explored here. The project is ongoing at the time of writing, so will remain unnamed.

### Methods

While working as an ethnographic researcher on the project, I recorded descriptive field notes in care homes and kept a separate personal reflective journal, which adopted a more critical/sociological perspective. The latter included reflections on group dynamics and interactions, with the intent to create a more reflexive document, to distil insights into opportunities for reflection and to identify successful, replicable elements of the project. It therefore shares elements of autoethnography, but since it was never intended for that purpose, cannot be classified as such in the strictest sense. Instead, this data is explored here using a particular theoretical lens. While this is a personal reflection, which is inherently subjective, it is based on extensive contemporaneous notes and raises valid and recognisable issues.

The following three subsections describe examples of epistemic injustice I observed at different intersections within the project: with and among participants, between research disciplines, and with business and the care sectors.

### Knowledge inequality with and among participants

Arguably the most critical arena for forms of epistemic injustice to manifest is between the intended beneficiaries of participatory research and other stakeholders (usually academic researchers but also collaborators, such as community facilitators, gatekeepers, managers or industry/sectoral partners).<sup>ii</sup>

#### Channelling or directing knowledge

Participants were told repeatedly they would be the architects of improved working conditions, and that the research and design processes would be underpinned by their own experiences and knowledge. The co-design processes included: 1) 'cultural probes' – posters describing innovations that had been used in other care homes, which participants had to comment upon; and 2) tabletop activities that aimed to stimulate reflection and creative thinking around participants' own circumstances.

The posters, at least in their early iterations, were little more than adverts for other services. While they were intended as 'prompts', participants were not clear what they needed to do and did not engage much. They were hermeneutically excluded. The probes framed the participants as consumers, rendering their deep-rooted experiential knowledge as being more akin to market research data. The tabletop activities were more engaging, for example, 'postcards to the powerful',

which involved writing a postcard explaining current circumstances to a manager, commissioner or politician.

These interventions aimed to unlock feelings, ideas and solutions-oriented thinking, to start the co-design process. But they felt somewhat artificial; channelling a particular type of thinking that failed to connect with either the initial ethnographic work or with realistic potential solutions. Asking participants to mobilise their knowledge through such specific channels creates hermeneutical injustice; their understanding of their own challenges (for which this research proposed to generate solutions) was limited to a finite set of expressions, inhibiting the articulation of more nuanced issues. Although well-intentioned, giving participants a task to complete in a particular way felt epistemically coercive and not like a rebalance of power.

#### Avoiding uncomfortable perspectives

Some participants expressed regressive attitudes towards issues affecting their younger colleagues, such as stress and anxiety, poor mental health, or resilience. There was also a perception that many younger carers were not invested in the job because they lived with their parents, had no dependents and did not rely so heavily on the income. This created an attitude of animosity towards younger care workers, which regularly emerged unprompted. The challenge to the (younger) ethnographic researchers was to acknowledge this as a genuine issue for some older workers even if these appeared to be media-driven constructs. This led to a form of hermeneutical injustice, in that the researchers could never share or identify with these perceptions, or endorse things they understood to be prejudicial – and vice-versa. Both parties were ensconced in their epistemic bunkers (Furman 2022).

The issue of how to balance conflicting perspectives and therefore determine whose knowledge has value is a more general problem for ethnographic research. In this project, intergenerational issues became a no-go area. By determining which problems to include, the project became an epistemic filter, effectively silencing participants' voices on certain issues. Dotson (2011) characterises this as 'epistemic violence', which is defined as "a type of pernicious ignorance that occurs when dominant hearers refuse to meet marginalized speakers "halfway" or on their own or some compromised epistemic turf between them" (Lindsay 2020).

This also speaks to Schön's 'rigour or relevance' dilemma, which argues that the researcher must choose to stand, "on the high ground where [they] can solve relatively unimportant problems according to prevailing standards of rigor or... descend to the swamp of important problems and non-rigorous inquiry" (1987, 3). By selecting the 'high ground', the study marginalised knowledges that, despite being socially constructed, created real challenges for participants.

#### The wider knowledge economy

There existed a tension between experiential knowledge, gained through many years of care work (paid and unpaid), and the policy and regulatory frameworks that govern everyday practices in care homes. The former, *phronesis*, or 'practical wisdom' (Kristjánsson et al. 2021), is a distinct type of knowledge gained and deployed through activities that involve some form of action as well as some form of instinctive, empathetic or flexible component, driven by discretion and adapting to context. Policy and/or legal frameworks on the other hand represent a more formal type of knowledge, which is written down, publicly available and used to control as well as protect people.

This distinction emerged subtly in one of the co-design workshops with a care worker and a care home manager. Workers tend to agree with perceived seniority (Kwok 2021). Framed in terms of epistemic injustice, the types of knowledge articulated tended to align with those of the manager,

diminishing epistemic diversity. For example, procedural knowledge was emphasised over emotional insight (although the latter was still deemed important). Similar issues were raised during the ethnographic fieldwork; participants often cited differences between their own practice – based on grounded knowledge of the people they cared for – and on generic guidelines, originating at higher organisational levels. Both scenarios established an epistemic hierarchy in which individuals' practical, everyday knowledge was oppressed by more corporate knowledge, derived from policy and regulation. Managers needed to know and enforce 'systems' knowledge, whereas carers generally felt a need to be more responsive to care home residents. By including managers and frontline staff without first establishing careful ground rules, the co-design workshops caused knowledge expressed to be oriented towards systems perspectives, potentially stifling more interpersonal and emotional standpoints.

### Interdisciplinary knowledge inequality

Epistemic injustice need not be solely against the 'end users' of participatory research. Friedman and Friedman (2009) note, "as disciplines converge, it is often difficult if not impossible to conduct quality research without employing the results of scholarship from other disciplines". The project's academics included geographers, ethnographers, designers and sociologists, and the different disciplines did not always see eye to eye. Friction between disciplines is often valuable and constructive, indicating new lines of inquiry or unexpected agreement, but this requires intellectual humility and the ability to give and receive criticism constructively. Longino (2023) notes, "intellectual humility is almost commanded by scientific pluralism".

During the ethnographic fieldwork phase of the project, one colleague said, "looking forward to getting into the real stuff soon". At face value, this may have simply been an expression of excitement about moving towards 'their' phase of the project. At an epistemic level however, it implies, 'this [ethnographic] data is of limited value compared to what my discipline will generate'. While ethnographic and co-design approaches use different elicitation techniques, generating different knowledge, the value of this research lay in bringing the two approaches together, to synthesise an inclusive, holistic representation of the participants' experiences. The casual dismissal of one approach to data generation is testimonial injustice, in this case indicating that more curated, channelled forms of knowledge generation were preferred. While these methods help to focus, nurture and develop ideas, they side-lined the early less directive approach the ethnography had been intended to fulfil. This has consequences; in a workplace context, these types of slight constitute 'micro-inequities' (Rowe 2008), which have the effect of eroding commitment and loyalty, impairing performance (Hinton 2004), and reducing a collaborative project's intended benefits.

Disciplinary protectionism also manifested in more pernicious ways. I queried the project's bespoke co-design methods selection framework on several occasions. One co-investigator told me we could not be expected to understand each other's disciplines, while the PI assured me they also did not understand the framework but, as a leader, had to 'trust' the researchers. As a senior manager, they may not have had the capacity to be particularly close to their research projects, but preventing the questioning of a framework maintains a 'black box' around it, which seems incommensurate with the underpinning ethics of participatory research.

This might seem like academic squabbling (it felt that way at times), but it has serious implications for research. When a particular academic discipline dominates a project, its thinking will also dominate. While the project's aims and objectives were centred on design/business outcomes rather than sociological insight, the dominance of the former negated the value of the latter. At worst, this

serves to filter, distort or otherwise colour the ‘end user’ knowledge that the participatory research is seeking to reveal.

### Intersectoral knowledge inequality

Academic researchers, professional bodies within the care sector and commercial organisations hold different sets of values and motivations, which cause them to seek out, assimilate and synthesise different configurations of knowledge. Well-aligned, these configurations can add up to more than the sum of their parts, leading to the development of potentially industry-changing products. The project included care sector and design/business representation, both of whom were marginalised in different ways.

Care sector representatives brought a deep knowledge of the sector’s broader political and economic challenges, as well as valuable *realpolitik* perspectives. Despite this, they had little influence on the project’s design or implementation. Early findings pointed towards pre-existing innovations – but the project’s focus rested upon inventing something ‘new’, using academic approaches, rather than on finding ways to develop and improve existing solutions. One care sector representative confided in me, “all the low-hanging fruit has been taken”, which I took to mean that most avenues of inquiry were well-known and had been addressed as much as possible within the sector. The remaining ‘big’ issues, such as resource allocation, social inequities, or the status of care work in the UK are more intractable.

Simultaneously, there was a sense that the commercial design and business colleagues would be able to devise solutions, if only they could be provided with a well-articulated problem uncovered through mysterious and esoteric academic techniques (described by one co-investigator as “clever data stuff”). However, the business representatives focussed on ‘common sense’ questions; real-life considerations around appetite/take-up, market shaping, scalability, opportunity costs and so on. Their knowledge, drawn mainly from industry experience, centred on the pragmatic needs of businesses and end users: ‘Can this work? What will people make of it?’ I think this disarmed the “clever data stuff” colleagues.

There will always be a grey area between ‘blue-sky research’ and the practicalities of solution and/or product development. Both endeavours require and use different combinations of creative and practical knowledge. The project paid significant attention to the theoretical and spent a lot of time exploring design processes and developing bespoke graphical methods frameworks, but this detracted from the practical matters of knowledge generation. Hiding in an academic bunker did not really align with the participants’ motivations.<sup>iii</sup>

## BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Individually, many of these issues may have had little impact. In combination however, they created a nexus, which stifled certain perspectives and eroded the project’s integrity. Despite the faint irony in using philosophical language to describe this, the privileging of academic-type knowledge over experiential, industry and sectoral knowledge can lead to several harms:

By overselling co-design as a way to empower participants to solve their own challenges, one research colleague actually deterred two key gatekeepers, who were unconvinced by the intellectual approach and later said they felt “coerced”. The potential participants felt alienated, not just from the project, but from academic research more generally. Senior Product Developer, John Cutler,



refers to this as getting 'oxbow laked'. He says, "Try too hard to sway people to your way... and you risk ending up becoming a lake" (Cutler 2022). While the prospective study site and its participants would continue as normal, navigating or managing challenges in their own way without intervention, this project risked becoming an oxbow lake, potentially jeopardising future collaborations between those care home participants and other academic researchers.

As research with older adults increasingly relies upon collaboration between disciplines, the risk of 'interdisciplinary alienation' increases. All teamwork requires a certain level of cohesion to actively "tackle structural impediments in order to counteract interdisciplinary alienation" (West, 1989, cited in Burrow 1999, 22). Likewise, collaborations between academic researchers and private businesses (in this case, independent care homes and commercial design agencies) entail a complex set of relationships, not least in terms of their ethical implications (Croissant & Restivo 2001). The oxbow lake effect, interdisciplinary alienation, and the historically fraught relationships between academia and industry can erode project integrity and ultimately reduce public trust in science.

Hermeneutical injustice deserves special attention in participatory research contexts. Unlike testimonial injustice, which is a form of direct discrimination that is comparatively easy to observe and call out, hermeneutical injustice is more nuanced and insidious. Several participants commented that they did not understand what they needed to do with the poster probes that were installed in their workplaces. These early versions were retrospectively deemed an 'iteration', but by all accounts, were simply not clear enough. By rendering the task and its purpose less accessible, the project excluded participants from this vital early stage of the design process. While this hermeneutical injustice did not actively harm participants, it limited their voice, diminishing the amount of early data the project could have generated. The issue was resolved to some extent by redesigning the posters to make them more engaging, although piloting and sense-checking them would have been preferable.

The principle goes beyond just language. By paying close attention to *whose* knowledge is seen as credible – and who attributes credibility to whom – previously hidden power structures are revealed. For example, while the ethnographers did not share the more conservative worldviews held by some participants, these issues were evidently very 'real' for those care workers. However, the wider research team seemed to perceive these issues as 'lowbrow', so dismissed and excluded them from further exploration. As with many so-called 'culture war' issues, we (researchers) were not prepared to fully engage with those perspectives (nor proposed any counterargument for participants to respond to). This kind of 'wilful ignorance' is a close relation to hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2017, 55). I would go so far as to say that wilful ignorance permeated the project, which failed to address these types of problem even when they were raised during meetings.

But there are ways to make things better. Although epistemic injustice was not acknowledged during the project, some *ad hoc* adaptations were made. For example, terms such as 'co-design' were excised in communication with participants, as were references to the methods framework. However, these efforts were only focussed on the care workers and not the wider research team, so they can only be considered partial.

Had the project considered epistemic justice from the outset, it may have been possible to incorporate more sophisticated mitigations. Godrie et al. propose an evaluation framework to help researchers reflexively evaluate their own projects, to "create a polyphonic space respectful of the diversity of socially situated positions, and [foster] our capacity to reduce some asymmetries in terms of social status and perception of legitimacy among the participants" (2020, 10). Their

framework is “organised into seven sections, each containing several questions that members of a participatory research project can answer” (idem., 11). In their view, as mine, participatory research “constitutes a laboratory for observing, understanding and attempting to reduce epistemic injustices through building bridges between team members” (idem., 1).

The John Templeton Foundation endorses ‘intellectual humility’ and recently released a \$3.4m grant for research into ‘humility in inquiry’, which it frames as an “epistemic virtue” (Ballantyne & Schwarz 2022). Expressions of interest for this grant included several programmes exploring how to improve participatory research methods.

Healthy research culture seeks to democratise the research and innovation landscape, for example, by embracing decolonialisation, widening participation, increasing opportunities for early-career researchers, improving Equality Diversity and Inclusion, involving service users, and developing better collaboration. These types of initiative can mitigate against some of the effects of the (often-unintentional) errors described above. With that, I would also add that if you detect knowledge inequality / epistemic injustice in a participatory research context – whether in the form of early career hubris or senior academic complacency – call it out. This is a form of epistemic resistance, “the use of our epistemic resources and abilities to undermine and change oppressive normative structures and the complacent cognitive-affective functioning that sustains those structures” (Medina 2017, 3).

## CONCLUSION

It is important to report when research goes badly and to understand the reasons why. Several factors eroded the integrity of this project, including channelling participants’ knowledge in ways that only served the research agenda; stifling problematic opinions; and failing to pay attention to the nuanced and complex relationships between policy and practice. Unresolved differences in focus between academic disciplines, and between academia and the ‘care sector-business complex’, also harmed the project’s outcomes. These issues can be viewed in epistemic terms, specifically as epistemic injustice, which has become increasingly relevant in health and care research over the last 15 years.

Recognising that knowledge takes different forms and that not all of these are considered equal, allows us to pay special attention to how epistemologies operate and interact in different participatory, interdisciplinary and intersectoral contexts. Once acknowledged, it is possible to act to increase epistemic justice, by paying attention to language, evaluating projects in epistemic terms, exercising intellectual humility and using ‘epistemic resistance’.

Both epistemic justice and participatory research are underpinned by ideas of fairness, equity and agency. By raising awareness of epistemic injustice in participatory research, illustrating the nuanced forms it can take, and suggesting possible ways to avoid it, I hope to contribute to the wider project of creating a more democratic landscape for participatory research involving older adults.

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<sup>i</sup> This list is partial and intended only to illustrate what is meant by 'knowledge types'. I have indicated these as appropriate in the discussion, although in reality the boundaries are far more nebulous.

<sup>ii</sup> Arguably all stakeholders are participants and all stand to benefit from the work in some way. In this article, 'participants' is used in its normal sense – referring to older care workers, who are the subjects of the study.

<sup>iii</sup> I left the project before its completion, so cannot comment on developments following my exit.