# A room for trust, comfort, and togetherness

# Lessons learned from focus groups in digital rooms in a research project on Swedish eldercare during Covid-19

## Introduction

Participatory social work research methods are a growing field of research. This article draws from practice-oriented participatory social work research on moral stress and moral agency in Swedish eldercare (Frid 2021; Sørensen & Snorre Wilms Boysen, 2021; Author, 2022). We argue that developing and deepening knowledge on practice-oriented participatory social work methods is valuable to enhance knowledge on vulnerability and improve conditions for vulnerable groups. In specific, we present and discuss the importance of the terms for social workers to participate and alternative ways to include them in research. Traditionally, social work practice and social work research address issues on participatory research in various ways, bringing experiences in research into a cumulative learning process which enriches both practice and research. However, we also see the need for acknowledging the pedagogical aspect of participatory social work research. Julkunen and others contribution on practice-based social work research has been of great interest for us (Saurama, & Julkunen, 2011; Rosengren, Lindqvist, & Julkunen, 2014; Julkunen & Koskinen, 2020).

The Covid 19 pandemic required researchers to develop new approaches and methods to be used in social science research (Lathen, & Laestadius, 2021; Kaufman, et al. 2022; Bolin. et al. 2023). It is nevertheless fascinating how rapidly the public consciousness seems to shift and the dominating circumstance of having to consider the existence of a pandemic has fallen into obscurity after only a couple of years. We consider it necessary to follow up on the consequences of the pandemic, both in practice and in research. Regulations on social distancing were introduced as way to reduce the spread of the Corona virus. These regulations prevented participants in research studies and researchers to meet face to face which has, historically, been the dominant setting for conducting research-interviews. Technology was incremental in the adaptation; the use of interactive programs such as Zoom, Teams and other platforms were used for communication and collection of data. These technological tools enabled researchers, but also other stakeholders, to get glimpses from within eldercare but also facilitated for older people to maintain contact with people outside despite lockdowns.

Focus group interviews is one methodological path to gain knowledge and to understand group processes and knowledge production. The methodology is popular in health and social sciences (Rabiee, 2004; Wibeck, 2010; Dahlin Ivanoff, & Holmgren, 2017). A focus group consists of a group of people who, under the guidance of a moderator, explore ideas and perceptions about a specific topic (Dahlin-Ivanoff & Holmgren 2017). Previous research on digital focus groups shows a broad spectrum of experiences and lessons learned (Kenny, 2005; Tuttas, 2015; Woodyatt, et al. 2016; Colom, 2022; Halliday, et al. 2021; Willemsen, et al. 2022; Zagonel, et al. 2022). Learning from previous research, synchronous focus groups conducted in digital rooms have several similarities with focus groups in a physical room (Turner et. al. 2021). However, digital rooms might change human interaction making it less spontaneous and losing gestures and other forms of nonverbal communication (cf. Lathen and Laestadius, 2021). Other negative aspects could be environmental as background noises or other disturbing activities in the surroundings. One obvious obstacle are technical problems of different sorts, such as bugs in the system, lagging and internet connection flaws. Moreover, lack of competence often due to lack of experience of working with digital tools, and a feeling of inconvenience when communication ‘through the screen’ are also obstructing the interaction. However, there are also positive aspects that come with a digitalization of focus group interviews. The most obvious is related to distance; participants can join digital focus groups from different locations, even different parts of the world. Although they still need a physical room to be digitally present in, this aspect should not be underestimated as it expands the limits for participation. Even physical impairments that used to be disabling becomes a non-issue when conducting focus groups in digital, not physical, rooms. The digital room is easily available by the mere “clicking on a link” – which, in turn, makes the choosing of appropriate platform for the focus group interview a first important task. Based on previous research, it seems that there are benefits for participants that for any reason would have obstacles participation in a physical room (Marley, et al. 2023; Rivaz, et al. 2019; Thompson, 2019).

 The aim of this article is to contribute with lessons learned from conducting online focus group interviews with representatives from three vocational categories – care workers, needs assessors and first line managers in eldercare. Recruitment of health care professionals – and welfare workers generally – to research projects is a delicate matter, and there is a need for effective and at the same time suitable methods (Flynn, Albrecht, Scott, 2018). In our case, the empirical selection was limited and adapted to a welfare sector that is characterized by low staff density and stressful working conditions. In this article, the premises, benefits, and challenges with focus groups in participatory research is explored in a transition from physical rooms to digital rooms. The knowledge production and the “learning together-process” is interpreted in relation to the premises for participatory processes in digital rooms and in relation to methodological questions of sustainability, access, trust-building, and respect for contextual factors such as time and mobility.

## A room for solidarity and affinity

Eldercare is a vocational field where predominantly woman is employed, and inspiration from feminist traditions is an important backdrop to our own work in the field of eldercare (the research group also consists of woman). Virginia Woolf, 20th-century modernist writer, has had a huge impact on feminist thought. Her essay “A Room of one’s own” (1929) is based on lectures given to women students at Cambridge in 1928 and is regarded as the first modern primer for feminist literary criticism. The essay explores the history of women in literature through an investigation of the social and material conditions required for the writing of literature. Though the setting in the essay is literature and writing, it has influenced the analysis of a wide range of fields. Not least has the essay been a source of inspiration within social policy, where the material conditions (money) for emancipation have been emphasized (Larsson 2003). In fact, the title alone has had enormous impact as metaphor for a modern feminist agenda. The image of a room that the woman writer can own and use to write in, is a powerful symbol. Within social policy, Woolf’s quest for a "room of one's own" is a quest for political power through economic strength. Only when women can manage and dispose of considerable amounts of property and income will they equal the political power of men (Solomon 1989).

In our research project, Virginia Woolf’s plead for a “rooms of one’s own” has been important in two ways. Firstly, as a driving-force for shedding light on a women’s world, an essential institution of Swedish society where material conditions, including wages, are poor and where the majority of the inhabitants are female. Secondly, Woolf’s essay has made us arrange for a methodology where care workers, needs assessors and first line managers were offered separate digital rooms for expressing themselves – a digital room of their own. Though eldercare as a labor-market to a large extent is a women’s world, it is also a hierarchy with a certain division of labour, We argue that the prevailing hierarchy in eldercare practice urges for safe own spaces where the individuals can meet and talk overtly to colleagues working in the same position, but in different organizations.

## Method

The research project titled “Moral stress and moral agency in Swedish eldercare” on which we draw our experiences discussed in this article, is organized into in three phases, of which the first one - the collecting of stories of everyday work causing moral stress – is described here. The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (dnr 2021-04462). In exploring and learning about moral stress in eldercare, focus groups interviews have been our main path for gaining knowledge.

### Study context

The research project is influenced by principles of participatory action research (PAR). PAR is defined as collaborative research that aims to identify knowledge that is practically useful (Abma, Groot, & Widdershoven, 2019; Bammer et. al. 2020; Bendien, 2020), in this case in the field of eldercare. Our understanding of participatory research draws from previous knowledge on the subject and previous experience of PAR and questions concerning productive interactions and societal impact (Dahlin Ivanoff, & Holmgren, 2017; Holmstrand, Härnsten, & Löwstedt, 2008; Ivanoff, & Hultberg, 2006; Kasperowski, & Kullenberg, 2018; Krogstrup, 2006; Lagercrantz, 2017; Author 2021; Author, 2022). “Productive” is not understood as affiliated to economic growth, but to its’ original sense; the action of creating something new with the components at hand; and actions that yield results. Since the transition from interaction to impact is often gradual, there is not always a clear distinction between societal impact and productive interactions. Societal impact could however be defined as the outcome of a process in which knowledge circulates to achieve certain goals that are deemed relevant for the development of society (Spaapen & Van Drooge, 2011).

### Design

The article draws on experiences from an on-going research project where participatory action research (PAR) is the leading guideline. PAR in a contemporary context is understood as a democratization process, where values such as mutual learning, empowerment, improvement, and development of practice are given as much attention as the actual research findings. The research project discussed takes its starting point in Swedish eldercare, investigating situations of moral stress experienced by staff. The project is carried out in close cooperation with three municipalities and educational institutions where future staff for eldercare are trained (social workers and auxiliary nurses). In a previous article (Author 2022) the relations between researchers and practitioners were discussed. We introduced the idea of a specific social work signature methodology. Rooted in a PAR tradition, this signature methodology acknowledges the need for relational work as well as an action-oriented research agenda. We believe this is well in line with the core values and understanding of social work as a professional practice and academic discipline, as defined in the global definition of social work outlined by IASSW and IFSW. PAR today could be understood as a key component when striving for socially robust knowledge (Nowotny, 2003); that is, knowledge that is considered relevant and reliable in the eyes of all actors involved, in this case staff in municipal eldercare.

### Thorough preparations, try out-focus group

One way of preparing for the focus groups interviews with elder care staff, was to use a try out-focus groups in a digital room with care students at a folk high school. The students were the first batch of students to study care at this specific school. The students and their teachers are partners in the research project and the launch of this new educational program was marked by the pandemic. Taking part of the digital focus group was voluntary and a handful of students chose to participate. For us as researchers this was a good opportunity to test the technical platform and the planned structure for the focus group but also to train ourselves in both technical and educational aspects. In this rehearsal, we learned more about the benefits of an adjusted methodology of reflecting teams, described later in the section Making room for discussion and reflection. Overall, it made us more secure in the reflection structure and more secure in “the making” of digital focus groups. After these rehearsals, the focus groups with the staff were carried out.

### Procedure – selection of municipalities and informants

In total, 4 focus groups were conducted with staff in the field of eldercare in three municipalities. By collecting stories on difficult situations from our three vocational categories of health care professionals, we were introduced to stories related to working conditions, tough decisions that had to be made and feelings of frustration, anger, and grief among the informants. The situations described in the focus groups were not considered as exceptions by the informants, but rather described as elements of their everyday care work. The three municipalities had been selected on the following premises: they expressed engagement and willingness to be part of the research project, they municipalities were according to our estimations sufficiently stable regarding sick leave rates and staff turnover, organization and economy.

In the three municipalities, a collaborating partner had been recruited prior to the research project. The three partners were included in the pay roll in the research project, as a way of recognizing the time and effort put into the joint research project. All three collaborating partners were in leading positions in their respective municipal organisation for eldercare. The collaborating partners were responsible for the recruitment of participants to the focus groups. The only criteria set up by the research were an openness to participate in an on-line focus group.

The focus groups-participants were, before the focus groups were conducted, asked to think about one or more specific situations where they had experienced a situation where they had been refrained to do what they perceived to be the “right thing” to do, i.e., when circumstances outside their control prevented them from working in line with what they perceived to be their vocational ethos.

**Table** Focus group interviews

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Participants | Gender | Moderators and group rooms  | Duration  |
| Focus group 1  | 7 care workers from three municipalities | 7 women  | 2 moderators2 break out rooms 1 technical support  | 2 hours |
| Focus group 2 | 9 care workers from three municipalities | 8 women 1 man  | 3 moderators3 break out rooms  | 2 hours  |
| Focus group 3 | 9 needs assessors from 3 municipalities | 9 women  | 3 moderators3 break out rooms | 2 hours |
| Focus group 4  | 9 first line managers from 3 municipalities | 8 men 1 woman  | 3 moderators3 break out rooms | 2 hours  |

### The premises of the study

The study has been conducted in times of the Covid 19 pandemic and all focus groups interviews have been carried through on a digital platform (Zoom). Considering the topic, moral stress and moral agency in Swedish eldercare, the amount of data has been held at a minimum due to severely restrained working conditions in eldercare. The lack of time is a crucial circumstance that must be considered when planning research in the field of eldercare. The organizations are under strict managerial governance, where time equals money. The time spent on research activities is taken from core tasks within eldercare – which makes it an ethical issue not to collect more data than needed and not using methods that are more time consuming than necessary.

## Empirical findings

In this section we describe and discuss the planning, doing, and learning from conducting focus groups interviews on a digital platform. The platform as a digital room, is different from any physical room. The platform as a digital room is fluid, ongoing, impersonal and does not withhold memories, historical symbols, or place-attached routines. Any routine or symbolic gesture connected to the participant in the digital room, needs to be performed anew. All forms of explicit togetherness need to be repeated, and even then, nothing will be part of digital room in a long-lasting way. These characteristics can one the one side form emptiness, vacuity and can create feelings of uncertainty or rootlessness. On the other side, the digital room can serve as a fresh beginning, making room for new approaches, roles, and expressions to take place. The reception and perceiving of the digital room is, of course, individual and hard to predict. However, as researcher it is be important to consider the impact of the digital room, both on an individual and on group level, to be able to prime for trust, comfort and feeling of togetherness among the participants. When analysing our experiences from conducting digital focus groups, we present in the following section three themes: Preparations – plan, test, and replan; creating trust and togetherness and making room for discussion and reflection.

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### Preparations – plan, test, and replan

#### Knowledge on the digital platform

Since the focus groups were to be conducted during the pandemic, we planned already from the beginning of the project for focus groups on a digital platform. In the planning, we considered the disadvantages of using digital room, both in relation to ourselves as researchers and for the participants. We had limited opportunities to select platform, however, after just over two years with the pandemic we had much experience of teaching and to some extent doing research in digital forms and were well accustomed to Zoom. These experiences had made us familiar with using the platform but had also made us aware of the limitations connected with the usage of Zoom in particular and digital rooms in general. Not least, we had experienced how technostress can produce feelings of insecurity and uncertainty.

#### Meeting with an expert on focus groups

As a way of preparing for the focus groups interviews, we had meetings with an expert on focus group methodology from the expert-group in the research project. Professor Synneve Dahlin-Ivanoff has vast experience of conducting focus groups, and of teaching and developing the focus-groups method in the field of eldercare. We talked with the expert about the upcoming interviews, our preliminary plan, our worries and hopes, and we asked her questions. Additionally, the expert shared experience and knowledge on the topic and responded to our plan and questions. This meeting had several positive effects on our preparations for the interviews. Besides the knowledge exchange, we had the opportunity to “learn while telling”, that is learning and solving things as we spoke about what we were planning to do. As a research team, we had already established a language of our own and our thoughts and thinking had become more and more collective and collegial. Forcing ourselves to articulate our plan for someone who had not been part of the detailed research design work urged us to specify and concretize the procedure.

The expert also contributed with hard facts and standpoints. For example, she suggested us to lessen the number of participants by adding one more mini-group in the digital room (the break-out room, see table above). Fewer participants would facilitate engagement and encourage participants to speak and share experiences with each other. This we concluded would be even more important in a digital room since it is a somewhat new and odd experience in combination with the fact that they would meet unknown colleagues from other municipalities. In the research project we had already planned for a small collection of data, adapted to the everyday life of eldercare and the working conditions where the possibility of making room for interviews during the workday is limited. This stresses the meaning of being effective, using key contacts for information and reminding participants of scheduled appointments in the project. However, our preliminary plan of meeting all participants from each vocational category (nine) in one digital room was adjusted in line with the expert input of the expert. As a result, we used the function of break out rooms and created three rooms with three participants in each.

The expert also recommended to set up one “try out-focus group” to test, evaluate and fine calibrate the final structure. As described in the method section, the “try out-focus group” was successful in that sense that we became more secure on the structure of the digital focus group.

### Creating trust, comfort, and togetherness for both researchers and participants

#### Prepping hour

Before each focus group session, we had an hour of preparation as researchers. At first it was planned as a single meeting to get started but we realized that the “prepping hour” had several benefits so we decided to insert a prepping hour before each focus group interview. The prepping hour gave us an opportunity to “talk out” and “check in” with each other. By this, we had the chance to talk about ourselves, our state of mind, current situation (both private and work-related) and other topics, political events for example. By doing this, we prepared ourselves by “letting our private self go”, putting our own problems, issues, and feelings aside, and direct our attention fully to the participants and their stories. The prepping hour also included a quick rehearsal, where we in the role of focus groups interview moderators discussed potential scenarios. For example, what do we do if any participant is missing, if the technique fails us or if the participants are silent? The prepping hour provided us as researchers with a room of our own. We believe that the prepping hour promoted our aim to create a feeling of safety and control for the participants when they entered the room, as it served the same purpose for us in our roles – we got the opportunity to collect ourselves and place ourselves in a mode of safety, control and outward attention. We argue that this kind of reflection of the role and “state of mind” of the researchers is essential and not always given enough attention in the literature on research methodology in social sciences.

#### Structure of focus groups

While the prepping hour made us researcher ready, and in the end contributed to making the digital room more stable, a generous amount of “leisure time” in the beginning of the focus group session created time for a “check-in” with the participants and playing with the digital platform. As a “check-in” we used the question “where are you (geographical) and where do you sit (in which room)?”. As members of the research team, we also answered the questions, making room for a joke or an anecdote of the room we were sitting in. Additionally, we spoke openly about our technology anxiety, letting the participant know that we were a bit tense but that we would solve eventually problems and as a group (the participants included) we would have a great time even despite possible technical problems. The playing with the platform included changing the video background or telling a funny story of a recent digital meeting experience. We also wrote our names and sites as heading on our squares on the screen. These activities, letting the participant know about our technology anxiety and the “checking-in”, served as an icebreaker in which we all could meet, join, and share our thoughts and questions. We also believe these activities prepared the participants and to some extent tweaked the researcher and participant role's power asymmetry.

Each focus group consisted of 7-9 participants. All the four focus group interviews were structured the same way and followed the same procedure:

1. Introduction (10 minutes) with all participants, 1 main moderator, 1 assistant moderator and 1 moderator in charge of technology.

2. Check-in (10 minutes) with all participants, 1 main moderator, 1 assistant moderator and 1 moderator in charge of creative questions

3. Group discussions in smaller groups (in break out rooms) – 3-4 participants from different municipalities and 1 moderator, 30 minutes.

4. Break 15 minutes.

5. Continued group discussion in break out rooms, 30 minutes. Group discussions (in the breakout rooms) where each participants presented his/her dilemma. This was followed by shared reflections in the group. Discussions were recorded and transcribed. Group discussions were ended by a short break before everyone was transferred to the main room.

6. Reunion in the main room and feedback from the breakout rooms. This was followed by a final reflection on the experiences of taking part in the digital focus group. 1 main moderator and 2 assistant moderators (30 minutes)

#### Prejudices

When creating these rooms for mutual understanding of each other's everyday working life, we had our prejudices on how each vocational category would be and act in the focus group. We presumed that the care workers would be more reluctant, low key, and less sharing than the other two groups, because of the power asymmetry within eldercare. We further thought that the first line managers and the needs assessors, being trained social workers used to participating in meetings including collective supervision in their daily work, would be more comfortable talking about their work and reflecting on stressful situations in group discussions. Overall, we were prepared for acting as more active moderators in the care workers’ focus group, than in the ones with needs’ assessors and first line managers. It turned out that we could not notice many differences in terms of activity in the groups, so in the end our role stayed more or less the same in the different focus groups. In all four groups the sharing of difficult work experiences opened up for collegial reflections and support.

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### Making room for discussions, reflections, and togetherness

In our experience of conducting focus group interviews in a physical room, creating a safe space for discussions, learning and knowledge production has been a main priority. This is in line with our interpretation of practice-oriented participatory social work research and rhymes with our understanding of eldercare as a gendered sector. In this sector asymmetric power relations between different categories of vocational groups strongly influence the organization and implementation of care work. When creating a room for solidarity and affinity, we need to consider these asymmetric power relations. The jurisdiction of the different categories of personnel is strictly defined. This means that care workers in their daily work implement decisions made by needs assessors. In other words, their care work is conditioned by the work of the need’s assessors. Moreover, the first line managers represent the employer, in relation to the care workers. The power relations between the needs’ assessors and the first line managers are less clearcut and depending on different local organization. With these unequal power conditions as a given premise in Swedish eldercare, we set up three separate rooms where each category of staff got their own safe space. In the separated rooms each vocational category met colleagues across municipality boarders – care workers from the three municipalities were mixed together, and the same with the needs assessors and the first line managers. The intention was to create a room for togetherness within each vocational category and further to create possibility for exchanging experiences and reflection on work tasks, work conditions, core values and what they perceived as difficult situations at work. In other words, the room aimed to create a mutual understanding of each other's everyday working life.

#### The power of reflection

The three of us are experienced teachers at the social work education in Sweden. One specific educational facet of the social work program is Personal and Professional Development (PPD). PPD aims to strengthen the students in their professional role, giving them tools for continuously being able to reflect upon their selves, their role, their function and for being able to revalue their knowledge and their perception of the society and the situation of the people they are set to meet and help. One such tool is the ability to help other people reflect on their situation. In the focus group session, we used the power of reflection, and adjusted the methodology of reflecting teams (REF) into a digital version. The methodological structure was the following: As one participant shared her/his story, the other participants first listened and then reflected upon it. This was done with our encouragement and question: what are your reflections upon this story?

#### Strengths and limitations of the digital room

After the other participants had shared their reflections on the story told, the current ‘story-teller’ shared hir/her reflections on the others’ reflections. This routine served to strengthen a meta-process, aiming to encourage a reflective mind-set and to further develop the story into a collectively shared experience. Gradually, ‘scenes’ that appeared as recognizable for every care worker/needs assessor/first line manager in Swedish eldercare today took shape. It is important to recognize the importance of physical setting when it comes to reflecting together, and the ability to read each other's body language and moods in the room should not be neglected. A digital room reduces the ability to use our senses. This reduced ability constitutes a limitation in a reflective team exercise. At the same time, the digital room creates a distance, that can be both promoting and inhibiting. Previous research shows that while some participants’ voices are enhanced in digital rooms, compared to physical rooms, other become more silent (Author 2022). As all the focus groups in this research project were conducted digitally, the research design did not allow us to draw any conclusions considering whose voices were enhanced and whose voices became more silent, compared to an IRL-scenario.

In the third step, the group discussions in break out rooms, we experienced the power of collective learning processes when participants told their stories and created collective ones, putting words to everyday work difficulties that exceeded municipal boarders. This was confirmed in the fifth step, where participants reassembled. In their feedback the participants in all the three vocational categories expressed their appreciation for having had the opportunity to share experiences and confirmed a feeling of “togetherness”. They also described positive emotions of being “seen” and being “part of a collective”.

We found the design with separated rooms for each vocational category successful since the participants seemed comfortable and since the participants in each category were engaged in the discussions. We further believe that the separated rooms strengthened the feeling of responsibility in order to fully contribute to the discussion and to take an active part in bringing the topics forward. The plead for a room of one’s own in Virginia Wolf’s essay has been interpreted as a pragmatist rather than a radical approach (Solomon 1989). In line with such an interpretation, the women will be able to follow in the footsteps on men by carving out a space and here amasses a certain amount of capital (ibid. p. 333) As social workers, we look upon the establishment of the institution of universal, tax-funded eldercare as a major victory for the feminist enterprise. The radical step was to move care for the old (and the young) from the private to the public sphere. This was done decades ago. However, eldercare as part of the labor-market is still undervalued, and under-funded. Moreover, its’ organization is stratified, and the care workers are blatantly subordinated. The setting up of rooms of their own, we argue, can be a constructive way of promoting a climate where hitherto untold stories are told and where individuals representing vocational groups whos’ experiences are seldom asked for. This approach is part of a research tradition where research perspectives as consciously and overtly chosen in solidarity with underprivileged groups (Eliasson Lappalainen 1987).

#### Prejudice and reality

Conducting the focus groups led to a revision of our previous assumptions. It changed our stereotypical ideas about each vocational category and how participants would behave during the focus group. The needs assessors and the first line managers, being in a higher position in the organizational hierarchy than the care workers, appeared more cautious and more eager to answer balanced and correct. The care workers, those who work closest to the older persons in the everyday care work, were the ones who openly and in detail described everyday work life as they experienced it. The care workers let emotions, negative as well as positive, take place in the discussion to a larger extent than did the needs assessors and the first line managers. Overall, the care workers were more active and “took more space” than what we had expected. The care workers did not reflect overtly over the general idea of them “being at the bottom of the organization” and “not being listened to”. The first line managers and needs assessors, with their way of being and taking space in the focus groups, showed an awareness of their position and often weighed their criticism of the organization against the importance of being loyal to the organization and representing the employer. Their emotional expressions were often controlled, and the criticisms were well-formulated based on consideration of the organization and their respective limited opportunities to, according to their reasoning, be able to contribute to a change.

## Reflections and discussion

### Lessons learned

We believe that focus groups in digital rooms is a suitable forum for participatory and collaborative processes in social science research. Drawing on a discussion PAR as “signature methodology” in social work (Hoffman et al 2022), we argue that taking responsibility for relations and wellbeing of participants in the research process is in line with the ethos of social work. In this article, reflections on digital focus groups highlight the responsibilities researchers have for creating a room for trust, comfort, and togetherness in the digital room. Using a digital room for conducting focus group interviews allowed us to invite participants from different parts of the country, living and working in different municipalities (cf. Turner et. al. 2021). It enabled us to show respect for their limited possibilities to allocate time for participation. If participation would have required travelling, it would have been impossible to gather participants from three different municipalities. Being an eldercare worker in Sweden today often equalizes workdays with few or no posts labelled “competence development” or “further education” scheduled. One important lesson for future research projects is that the use digital rooms might enable the inclusion of health care professionals that otherwise would not have been able to participate in research projects. Nevertheless, this strategy of compliance or adaption must be combined with a critical analysis of what it means to a workplace or to a branch not to allow for self-reflection and discussions concerning difficult situations at work.

The importance of being prepared is another lesson learned. Using key contacts, and truly using the know-how of the members of the expert group tied to a research project are examples of how to work smart and at the same time show respect for the task – and for the people involved. This reflects what Flynn et al (2018:6) describes as being effective and using key contacts for information. For example, what do we do if a participant is missing, if the technical devices do not work or if the participants are silent? This sort of “troubleshooting” (Turner et. al. 2021) made us more secure and able to create a feeling of safety and control for the participants. In addition, the prepping hour before each focus group interview facilitated for us as research team to create a safe and sound environment in the digital room.

### Focus groups and signature methodology

Our experiences of conducting focus groups in digital room made us think about what we as researcher bring into the process and what tools we use in creating togetherness. We also started to discuss which lessons learned from conducting digital focus groups are relevant for all focus groups interviews, no matter digital or physical. We began to talk about the fact that we are three trained social workers, with a PhD in social work who all teach at the social work program. We do believe that meeting people ‘at eye level’ and creating relationships in a way that is in line with the core values of social work distinguish social work research (Author 2023). To be able to do this, as researchers we need to be trained in becoming aware of our own strengths and limitations, and how we can handle these in the best way. With this awareness, we can take responsibility for the relationship - in the same way that a teacher takes responsibility for the relationship with students, and the same way a social worker takes responsibility for the relationship with clients.

With the term signature methodology in social work, which is based on the idea of signature pedagogy (cf. Authors, 2022), we want to capture and shed light on research that is characterized by relationships and relational factors (Author 2023). By this, the relationships shape the research design, the approach, implementation, and the co-creative processes that follow. In our case this is exemplified with the three of us constituting the executive research team being social workers, we do at the same time have different roles and bring different types of expertise into the research project. In specific, one of us (ME) is a trained nurse assistant who has worked within eldercare, on different positions, and has been involved in eldercare research for 15 years. SH has been employed as an eldercare worker for five weeks, during a summer a few years ago, and has been engaged in research on social policy issues for 15 years. KH has never worked in eldercare, but has done research on labor market policy, the organization of health insurance and social work education the last 20 years. Thus, a prolonged engagement (Lincoln 1995) in eldercare is united with knowledge gained in other settings and curiosity that only a beginner or an outsider are blessed with. This mix of views, based on the common ground of being a professional social worker, enable us as team to rise above our own initial preconceptions.

## Conclusions

The focus group interview is one path to gain understanding of group processes and knowledge production: a methodological approach popular in health and social sciences. Learning from previous research, focus groups conducted in digital rooms have several similarities with focus groups in physical rooms. Based on findings presented in this article, focus groups might enable vocational groups whose voices are seldom heard to speak up and to mobilize when sharing experiences of difficult work situations with fellow colleagues at other places.

However, digital rooms might change human interaction, making it less spontaneous and losing gestures and other forms of non-verbal communication. Technical problems - bugs and lagging - often occur as obvious obstacles for online communication. Moreover, lack of competence often due to lack of experience of working with digital tools, and a feeling of inconvenience when communication ‘through the screen’ are also affecting the interaction. Nevertheless, technical issues that at first sight appear as obstacles also work as ‘power equalizers’ when we as researchers get technical support from the interviewees.

There are several positive aspects that come with a digitalization of focus group interviews. One evident advantage is related to distance; participants can join from different locations, even different parts of the world. This connects the concept of social sustainability with methodological questions of access, trust-building, and respect for contextual factors such as time and mobility.

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