

Between plans and realities: Reflecting on experiences of participatory research in archiving residential Children's homes in Scotland and Germany

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Abstract

In this paper, two researchers with backgrounds in ethnography describe and reflect on their experiences from a qualitative, transnational study called 'Back to the Future: Archiving in Residential Children's Homes (ARCH) in Scotland and Germany. Important goals of the study are the investigation and development of digital community archives for young people, care workers and care leavers from residential homes in order to support their memories of shared everyday life. Methodologically, the study is based on ideas of participatory research in combination with ethnographic elements, although there were some changes in the implementation compared to the original plan. These changes were made on the basis of conditions found in the field and represented attempts to achieve the goals of the study despite some unexpected situations and developments. This resulted in moments of tension, which we reflect on self-critically in this article. Using the example of our research, we highlight some of the opportunities and challenges of qualitative study designs that seek to understand and change realities in the context of social work.

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Residential care, participatory research, critical reflection, young people, ethnography

Introduction

In this paper we would like to reflect on our experiences in a transnational¹ study in the context of social work that is based on ideas of participatory research in combination with ethnographic elements. The study is called ‘Back to the Future: Archiving in Residential Children’s Homes (ARCH) in Scotland and Germany’. It was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in Scotland and Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) in Germany and was undertaken between 2021 and 2024. It was undertaken by multidisciplinary research teams in each country and was interested in the opportunities and challenges of digital remembering in residential care, which involves living as part of a group, through archival materials about everyday life in that setting. The study comprised two phases of investigation. The first phase was historically oriented and examined two institutional archives in Scotland and Germany (Emond et al., 2025; Schäfer and Eßer, 2023) and was used to develop understandings of how everyday group life was previously captured and recorded in residential childcare. The second phase, which we focus on here, was oriented to the present and future. Based on empirical evidence from the literature and field research, we set out to explore and co-design digital community archives of everyday group life in residential children’s homes. In so doing, we sought to understand what contemporary young people, care experienced former residents, and residential workers choose to record and archive about their lives together and how shared experiences could be captured in a self-determined way. In this paper, we explore the opportunities and challenges of working with young people in a participatory way including the tensions that arose for us as researchers who brought with them a degree of epistemological and methodological baggage.

The design of the study was motivated by empirical research on issues of memory and memory-keeping for adult care leavers, which we will describe in the next section. After discussing participation, participatory research and ethnography in relation to social work, we will outline the research design of the study described above with a focus on the planned participation of the residential group members. This section is followed by a description and reflection of our implementation attempts, which led to similar and dissimilar research experiences in both countries. In doing this, we analyse and discuss where our planned procedures were unsuccessful alongside our adaptations, adjustments, and redesigns which were shaped by existing conditions and our experiences in the field. The paper ends with some conclusions about the opportunities and challenges of qualitative study designs that aim to understand and change realities in the context of social work.

Research on the importance of memory objects for care leavers

Many adults who lived in residential care homes for long periods of their childhood and youth have described difficulties in being able to satisfactorily answer identity-forming questions for themselves (RTH, 2010). Thus, when talking about their past in qualitative studies, care leavers often report that they have large autobiographical memory gaps or at best fragmentary memories with regard to their lives as young people (Grønbaek Jensen, 2020; Guerinni et al., 2020; Hoyle et al., 2020). Such difficulties in remembering events, experiences, places and relevant people in childhood and youth are often accompanied by “feelings of ‘discoherence’ in adulthood” (Hoyle et al., 2020: 938).

Those without care experience often take for granted that they have access to a rich personal ‘archive’ for looking back on childhood and youth, mostly created by adult caregivers. In contrast, many people with residential or other care experience lack such resources (Grønbaek Jensen, 2020; Guerinni et al., 2020; Hoyle et al., 2020; Pilz, 2015), which means that, in addition to the myriad other challenges that growing up in residential care presents, they are typically disadvantaged in terms of having access to identity-supporting media for remembering their childhood and youth.

The fundamental relevance of such “identity pegs” (Goffman, 1968: 76) for memory and identity is emphasised in social science memory research. For example, Welzer (2008: 16), argues that autobiographical memory in particular is “extraordinarily dependent on external sources, data and markers”.² He defines these external sources as “exograms” (Welzer, 2008: 16) and argues that they mobilise memories and provide the foundations of identity construction. Seen in this light, the gaps in the autobiographical memories of many adult care leavers may be attributed to a lack of exograms, impacting on their ability to reassure themselves about the past self in an identity-forming way.

People with residential care experience have also typically been considered a ‘case’ by the institutions involved in their care with a corresponding ‘casefile’ kept, documenting their journey through the various systems and processes at those institutions. Against the backdrop of sought-after biographical identity pegs and a lack of alternatives, an increasing number of care experienced people have turned to institutional archives in recent years to gain access to their own childhood (Guerinni et al., 2020; Hoyle et al., 2020; Pilz, 2015; RTH, 2010).

Summarising the findings from studies interested in the role of casefiles for care leavers, it can be emphasised that they are typically a very challenging source of information for them (Hoyle et al., 2020). Casefiles can indeed function as a “memory mobiliser” (Guerrini et al., 2020: 202), and for some people they can also have a certain value for obtaining information about their own past and components of their own biography. Nevertheless, for many adult care leavers, viewing an official casefile about their childhood leads primarily to “disappointment and frustration” (Pilz, 2015: 136). Those affected often criticise the one-sidedness of the representation of events by care workers and others in authority, as well as the lack of recording of their own voice and perspective as a young person (Shepherd et al., 2020). For example, Hoyle et al. (2020: 940) determine for the participants of their qualitative study of the casefile viewing experience: “None of the contributors felt that their voices, opinions or versions of events had been

captured in their file”. Moreover, those affected also criticise many other aspects of casefiles as a means of accessing their own past, such as the lack of photos and first-person documents, the use of derogatory language and “unbalanced portrayals of a childhood” (MacNeil et al., 2018: 9) during life and growing up in residential care homes (Guerinni et al., 2020; Hoyle et al., 2020; Pilz, 2015).

It can, therefore, be emphasised that care leavers not only report difficulties in autobiographical remembering and constructing an identity that is perceived as coherent due to the lack of exograms, but that casefiles and recordings often do little to address these difficulties.³ Against this background, it appears that changes in the practice of social work in the creation and accessible archiving of memory objects beyond case files could better meet the needs of adult care leavers. However, these changes would also need to be guided by a knowledge of how their voices and perspectives can be more appropriately recorded in alternative exograms, for which the participation of future care leavers in the production of knowledge seems important.

Participation, participatory research, ethnography and social work

Participation has become a normative and conceptual guiding principle in the practice of social work (Schnurr, 2018). One contributing factor to this is the imperative to take into account children’s views as set out in Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) and the ways in which this has been incorporated into legislation, policy and practice internationally (van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Although this guiding principle is interpreted and actioned in different ways, participation typically involves the recipients of assistance being involved in the decisions affecting them within the framework of this assistance (Reimer and Wolf, 2009). While the principle of participation is largely undisputed in social work practice, notwithstanding critiques around the difference between claim and reality (Schnurr, 2018), it has a much more ambivalent role in the conception and implementation of academic social work research studies, especially in Germany (Eßer et al., 2020; Flick and Herold, 2021; Von Unger, 2014).

Indeed, it has been argued that the academic discipline of Social Work in Germany regards its early flirtation with participatory action research as somewhat of a “‘schoolboy error’” (Eßer et al., 2020: 3) with many in this field considering it ‘unscientific’ because of the lack of separation between the aims of science and practice (Von Unger, 2014). Moreover, at least in Germany, the status of qualitative research as the predominant paradigm in academic social work has arguably been achieved by the fact that the formerly frequent “mixing of science and practice” (Bock and Miethe, 2011: 1192) has been significantly reduced in favour of a clearer separation of these domains. In the international context, however, research in social work is often interpreted in a more practice- and application-oriented way. As a result, greater importance is attached to the participation of researched people, although there are many critiques highlighting nominal or tokenistic approaches that some have called pseudo participation (Bergold and Thomas, 2012) suggesting that this methodological approach can present challenges to researchers and academics more broadly.

Some of the principles of participatory research are shared more generally with qualitative approaches including a concern not to reduce researched people solely to research objects, to respect their subjectivity and ground theories in their interpretations, experiences, and actions (Strübing, 2013), for example. With regard to the relationship between science and practice, ethnography as qualitative fieldwork in particular assigns a strong position to researched people and their practices, because field members are usually regarded as ‘experts’ of their fields and ethnographers should learn from them. Along with this, reflection on the ethnographer’s position in a field and the relationship between researcher and researched people has long been part of the standard of ethnographic research in the production of knowledge (Dellwing and Prus, 2012; Hammersly and Atkinson, 2019). While there are some who argue that ‘reflexivity’ in ethnography means supposedly to act normatively, intervene in fields and solve real-world problems (Otto et al., 2021), there are others who “do not believe that reflexivity implies that research is necessarily political, or should be political, *in the sense of serving particular political causes or practical ends*” (Hammersly and Atkinson, 2019: 17). Indeed, since the establishment of the Chicago School of Ethnography, it has been an imperative for many ethnographers not to judge, guide or steer the interpretations and practices of field members, but rather to get to learn and understand them in order to produce disciplinary knowledge about ‘what the hell is going on’ in a field (Dellwing and Prus, 2012).

As researchers with backgrounds in that type of ethnography (see Burns, 2020; Schäfer, 2021), we believe that there are good analytical reasons for observing this call not to guide or steer researched people in qualitative field research. At the same time, we also believe that participatory approaches can enrich qualitative research. As such, we would like to offer some reflections on tensions that arose for us while working on a study about archiving memory objects in residential care, which was based on ideas of participatory research in combination with ethnographic elements. For this, however, we do not want to engage in the debate already conducted in detail elsewhere about different participatory approaches (Bergold and Thomas, 2012; Eßer et al., 2020), discuss disparate terminologies, or work with ‘checklists’ for awarding the label ‘participatory’ to research projects. We understand ‘participatory research’ as a generic term for studies which, in the tradition of action research, facilitate researched people participating in research processes, with the intention of empowering them and not only understanding social reality, but also changing it (Von Unger, 2014). Along with this, we understand participatory research as a methodology that seeks to capitalise on the opportunities, impacts and benefits of involving those directly affected by the research in the knowledge production process (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). The difficulty of reconciling these challenging goals - knowledge production, empowerment and change – has been highlighted by Flick and Herold (2021) who argue that participatory research can easily become a method of action that does not meet the demands of a research program.

In the following, we describe and reflect on the opportunities and challenges in the planning and methodological implementation of the aforementioned study, which took the identified needs of care leavers for memory objects as a starting point to explore practical possibilities for improvement through participatory field research.

Planned participation in archiving residential Children's homes in Scotland and Germany

While the justification for participatory research is not to be found in the concrete methods used, we outline the intended methods here to a) highlight the ways in which the research team envisaged participation in advance of fieldwork and b) to contrast (in the next section) these with how the research proceeded 'on the ground'. In doing so, we seek to highlight the limited plannability of participatory approaches which are influenced by the individuality and agency of research partners (Bergold and Thomas, 2012).

Drawing on the evidence described in the previous sections, a research design was conceptualised for the study that was intended to address the need for both basic and applied research and to enhance knowledge as well as future opportunities for remembering for participants of the study and for care leavers in general. For the phase that we focus on in this paper, this meant that one residential children's home (RCH) in each country was selected by managers of the organisation and afterwards asked whether it wanted to participate in the study. We envisaged that a group consisting of young residents, care workers and former residents of the RCH (who constitute the RCH community) would be recruited to take part in between five and six development workshops over a period of approximately 6 months. Each workshop was to be used to determine the choices of participants in relation to recording and archiving for a digital⁴ community archive and to co-design these archives. A central component of the design was that participation in the study was to be voluntary based on informed consent (including parental consent where required) relating to the methods, the objectives, and the use of the data generated.⁵ In terms of content, the workshops aimed to explore a range of questions including: what types of content should be included; by whom and how should the content be accessed and stored; what should the archive look like and what functionality should it have; what opportunities and barriers exist, and can these be successfully navigated?

We hoped that the members of the group would take very active roles in discussing, recording, and collecting material for the archive according to their own wishes and were interested to understand current practice in this area including any existing collections of exograms such as photo walls, collages or drawings in the RCHs. We anticipated that the joint consideration of existing 'archiving practice' would represent a good starting point for discussion and thinking about other elements of the shared everyday life that could be recorded and archived to support future memories. To actively engage with what already exists and practically test something new, the workshops would also encourage participants to jointly discuss issues such as consent, data protection, suitability, and to flesh out common procedures that may be necessary for the ongoing maintenance of the archive into the future. Consequently, the methodology was designed, at its core, to take the participants and their (memory) interests seriously and to increase their agency through the joint development of a digital community archive.

Furthermore, we planned that the workshops should be moderated by a former resident of the residential group (care leaver) as a co-researcher, who should be trained for this task. This was considered important to minimise a hierarchical gap between older

researchers and younger participants during the workshops and to make use of the lifeworld knowledge and social relations of this former resident. In epistemological and methodological terms, on the one hand, this should help to clarify the potential added value of the study for young people, because it was assumed that these care leavers would probably already have the experience themselves that autobiographical memories fade and that memory objects are important. On the other hand, this should enable the researchers to observe and record the interactions and practices of joint decision making during the workshops with field notes. The workshops were to be supplemented by field visits and individual interviews with participants to explore their views and experiences of being involved in the workshops and developing the archives, combining the participatory approach with some ethnographic procedures.

Overall, many ideas of participatory research were envisaged for the study design, although some elements were also decided by the research teams (with the aid of advisory groups) in Scotland and Germany before approaching the residential groups. For example, no joint negotiation of the research questions, goals or methods used were undertaken because our funders in Scotland and Germany expected clarity in this regard in the application process. In the following, we describe and reflect on the implementation of this planned participation and its combination with ethnographic elements from the perspective of researchers who were responsible for participatory fieldwork.

Realised participation on archiving residential Children's homes in Scotland and Germany

With the help of managers of organisations which run RCHs as our practice partners in Scotland and Germany, both research teams were able to recruit one RCH. In Scotland, this was in a large town and, provided care to six young people one of whom was aged 9 with the other five aged between 14 and 19 and of mixed genders. It was staffed by several care workers who operated a rota system that ensured that there were always at least three adults available to the six children. In Germany, the RCH was in a rural area and cared for eight boys, ranging in age from 9 to 17 years, with most being between 12 and 13 years old. It was staffed by several care workers, who described the RCH as “understaffed”. This meant that on a day-to-day basis a maximum of two care workers, and often only one, were responsible for the care of 8 children.

Realised participation in Germany

In the German RCH, during the initial interview with the care workers, I (Maximilian Schäfer) learned that contact between the care home/staff and former residents would “always break off quickly” (Fieldnote 29/06/22) after they moved out and that it was “not realistic” (*ibid*) to find a former resident who could act as a co-researcher. In this respect, the participation of a former resident as a co-researcher had to be dispensed with in Germany, which entailed several consequences. First, this meant that I could not benefit from the lifeworld knowledge, memory experiences and social relations of a person with “insider status” (Von Unger 2014: 42) in my exchange with the young people. Instead, I

had to find the 'right words' and 'understandable arguments' on my own to explain the research design in a comprehensible way and to convincingly convey the potential added value of voluntary study participation. During the preparation for the first meeting with the young people for the purpose of getting to know them, presenting the study, and inviting them to participate, it became very clear to me that a 'real understanding' of the research design and a childlike recognition of the possible added value of voluntary study participation would be a highly preconditioned undertaking.

In essence, the study offers support to the young people to address a future need, which the research teams in both countries had identified using empirical evidence but that the young people had not experienced yet. To assist their understanding and facilitate their informed consent to take part, I would consequently have to stimulate the young people to undertake some mental time travel in which they would have to think about their future past, putting themselves in the role of a future care leaver who wants to remember the shared 'here and now'. Since I considered this to be an atypical and rather demanding mental operation for young people, I was quite sceptical about whether they would want to engage. After a sleepless night of thinking through this pedagogical action and the first two-hour workshop with the young people, I was consequently very relieved that they all expressed that they wanted to participate in the study and engage in the future workshops.

Without the support of a former resident as co-researcher, the methodological procedure and my role during the subsequent workshops also changed considerably. Instead of participating in the workshops as an observer and recording the interactions and the practices of the field members with field notes, I now took on a very active, structuring, and guiding role during the workshops. I also noticed that the demands of workshop leadership, conversation facilitation, and data collection as observer greatly overwhelmed me. Therefore, the German research team decided that all further workshops in the German RCH would be filmed with the written consent of the young people and their caregivers and subsequently transcribed, relieving me of the data collection by means of participant observation.⁶

This active role also extended to the practice of collecting and archiving potential exograms because, contrary to our expectations, there was no current practice that related to this aside from the maintenance of institutional casefiles, which collected only official reports and correspondence. Through field conversations before and after the first workshop, I found out that the care workers would occasionally take some photos of shared everyday life with their own cell phones; but I was also told that they would not collect, display, prepare, print, hang, or give the photos to the young people when they move out of the RCH due to lack of staff and time. This meant that photos of shared experiences typically remained unseen on care workers' cell phones. Accordingly, one boy stated to me at the beginning of my field visits: "There are somehow no pictures here at all" (Fieldnote 30/08/22). Furthermore, the young people also did not use their cell phones - not all young people owned cell phones - for recording and collecting potential exograms, for example in the form of photos and videos, due to a strict regulation of cell phone use in the RCH. In this respect, no ordinary practice of collecting and archiving materials of a shared everyday life could be reconstructed in this care home, which meant that there was no existing culture of collective remembering⁷ with the help of exograms.

However, the care workers agreed to send me ‘their’ photos so that I could collect them and show them to the young people at the next workshop to get their perspective on which, if any, could be included in the archive. This generated for the first time a collection of potential exograms for the young people and at the subsequent workshop, the young people looked together at photos of shared experiences, talked about them and, after my questions about their archiving wishes, decided that they wanted to keep most of these photos in the digital community archive. I also sometimes took photos of the RCH and of joint activities myself, showed them to the young people, handed them iPads that I had brought with me, encouraged them and the care workers to record things that were meaningful to them, and then decided together which materials should be included in the digital community archive and which should not. Participation in decisions brought about in this way meant that young people sometimes decided against the inclusion of materials in the community archive which, in my opinion, would have been good reminders for them in the future, although of course my guidance did not ultimately go so far as to overrule their decisions. Additionally, making joint decisions about materials for a community archive could also mean, at least sometimes, that these were quite strongly influenced by individual ‘opinion leaders’ in the group, who were then simply joined by others who may have taken different decisions for an individual archive.

In this respect, my role implied some authorised activation of field members’ practice, which meant that I guided them to acts of recording, collecting, joint decision-making, and archiving that they would not have realised in this way without my influence, even if the contents of the archive were always based on their joint decisions. Although this approach of guided participation on creating a digital community archive worked, it repeatedly evoked some tension in me, as it felt unfamiliar acting in a field and to take on such a guiding role vis-à-vis field members.

In the end, this led to the participants selecting a large collection of common exograms for the digital archive, which significantly expanded the possibility of future remembering of childhood and youth in the RCH for these young people. This also meant a significant departure from the ethnographic imperative not to guide the practice of people studied, but to analyse their ordinary practice. Instead of illuminating the ordinary practice of non-collection, non-archiving, non-decision-making, and shared non-memory in all its shades, the study participants were confronted with a whole range of new, hitherto unfamiliar ideas and relevancies, and encouraged to engage in practices that were previously unusual for them. For example, care worker Jane B.⁸ emphasised after the workshops:

“I think it’s really cool that you did the project in our residential group (...). I would never have thought of it in that way (...). I am really positively surprised and it has once again made it clear which things the youth welfare services somehow don’t manage so well, especially with such important things” (Interview Jane B. 17/05/23).

This positively evaluated confrontation with a new and only gradually comprehensible idea and the animation to engage in new practices was also emphasised, for example, by 13-year-old Ali S. after the workshops:

“At first I thought to myself, ‘Okay, I don’t really get it,’ but then, when you explained it properly, I thought, ‘Yeah, okay, it’s a good idea’ (...). I was also proud of myself because it was the first time I had done this [He recorded his own video about the everyday life of the residential group, watched it and archived it] (...). Personally, I think it’s really good because soon I’ll know again what was going on here, all the boys who are or were here, and that I can remember the good times here” (Interview Ali S.23/05/23).

In summary, in Germany we experienced considerable differences between planned participation and realised participation, that collecting, jointly viewing, and jointly deciding on archived materials of a shared everyday life was a very new and unfamiliar practice for the field members, and that the study participants consistently rated their guided participation positively. Knowing the difficulties of remembering for adult care leavers shown in other empirical work, and given the realities found, my role in the field could retrospectively be described as a hybrid between field researcher and pedagogical “choice architect” (Thaler and Sunstein 2021: 3) who repeatedly organised situations for participants in which many previously unfamiliar practices were carried out and decisions were made. At the same time, the necessary assumption of the role as a pedagogical guide also repeatedly triggered tensions in me, which resulted from my incorporated orientation towards ethnographic imperatives, the complex study aims, and the conditions in the field.

Realised participation in Scotland

In contrast to the German site, I (Andrew Burns) observed during field visits that there was an established practice of keeping memory objects in the Scottish site, with some adults and young people collecting and displaying photographs and drawings in the shared spaces of the building. Through conversations in the field, I was also able to find out that the adults saw it as part of their pedagogical task to take responsibility for retaining memory objects for potential future access of the young people. For example, adults collated individual ‘memory books’ for the young people alongside other digital and non-digital objects. Sometimes this was in collaboration with the young person; however, the adults saw this as their role even if the young person did not request it or refused to engage with the process. In this way, whether the young people participated in the study or not, they could still access a collection of memory objects in the future if they wanted to. There remained a tension, however, in that these items were part of individual collections that young people can access in isolation rather than a group or community archive that is intended for collective remembering.

In another contrast with the German team, one of the young people (aged 19) who lived in the RCH was very interested in the idea of the archive and agreed to be involved as a co-researcher, subsequently taking up a paid role with the team and undertaking joint training along with me on co-design and facilitation. She was able to use her existing relationships and knowledge of the RCH to assist with recruitment, the design of interview schedules, and data analysis. She also facilitated and co-facilitated interviews with participants.

Despite the recruitment of a co-researcher, major problems with the implementation of the workshop approach became apparent in Scotland. The Scottish research team finally

had to accept that the plan of joint development workshops could not be realised in this RCH. In collaboration with the research team, I began to make adaptations to facilitate the participation of young people in ways that suited them. Specifically, I visited the RCH regularly, further developing relationships and took opportunities to talk one-to-one or in very small groups on an ad hoc basis about expectations and aspirations in relation to the archive whenever young people were available and willing to engage.

Like my colleague in Germany, I could not settle for the role of participant observer and had to take a much more active role in producing potential content and driving conversations to explore and understand the perspectives of young people and adults in relation to the proposed archive. This included photo-elicitation exercises where I laid out photographs of the RCH that I had taken, or that were part of existing collections held by the residential workers and asked those young people and workers who were willing to discuss the appropriateness of these for the archive. Moreover, along with the co-researcher and wider research team, I adapted the interview schedules to collect more of the data that we anticipated collecting in workshops and undertook semi-structured interviews with young people and adults in the RCH and with some care experienced adults.

While this represented a significant departure from the intended approach to data collection, it was an effective way of facilitating participation and building knowledge about the views of participants in relation to the content and functionality of the proposed archive. Beyond this, it highlighted interesting aspects of the study itself, including the ways in which young people and adults understood participation and responsibility in this area. For example, 17-year-old RCH resident Donald responded to an early description of what the archive could look like and do by saying “That sounds great Andrew. You make that and I’ll tell you what I think about it”, immediately challenging my preconceived ideas about the ways in which young people would want to participate in this project. At a subsequent photo-elicitation exercise, he again indicated that he felt adults had responsibilities in relation to the archive:

Andrew: Would you want the ability to upload stuff yourself or would you want the staff to do that or...?

Donald: The staff to do it probably (Photo Elicitation with two young people, 13/12/22).

Knowing that he had a memory book that he actively contributed to, I followed up with him and he let me know that he gave the staff photographs, they put them into his memory book, and they held onto his memory book for him. So, while he was happy to contribute content for the memory book, he felt the responsibility for putting the content in and keeping the content safe lay with the adults. This was an opinion shared by adults, both workers and those with care experience, who recognised that young people should have opportunities and support to participate in projects like these if they wish, but that adults held responsibilities for considering their future needs.

I think as the adults in the house we've all got a responsibility to do that, and to upload things, and to make sure that they've got a record of what they've done. It is much more of a parent sort of thing to do when the kids are younger isn't it? You take the photos, you take the videos, you're the one that organises the trips and all that sort of stuff. Aye, I think it's important for us to take that on (Evan, Staff Member, Interview, 11/3/24).

In summary, in Scotland we did manage to recruit a co-researcher with 'insider status' who helped the research team in a variety of ways. However, we were unable to implement the workshop approach and had to work more with one-to-one conversations and interviews to gather the views and to ensure participation of young people in the development of the community archive. Perhaps because of the existing practice and their generally older age range, the young people in Scotland were much clearer about the ways in which they wanted to participate in the project and where they felt that adults should take responsibility. While I also adapted my approach to the realities in the field and took a more active role than originally planned, I ultimately guided the practice in the field less strongly than my colleague in Germany, with the consequence that no situations of joint decision-making and curating in relation to content for the community archive arose.⁹

Discussion

Our transnational research team developed a study design that tried to explore and counteract an expected future problem regarding memory and memory objects that had been highlighted by care leavers in other empirical work. However, as researchers in two selected RCHs, we encountered different realities when trying to implement this idea. While in Germany the participation of a co-researcher failed, the implementation of workshops with young people and care workers worked. In Scotland it was exactly the opposite. The two countries also differed in their common practice regarding the collection of objects of remembrance. In order to attempt the participatory development of a community archive, as field researchers we both had to take a more active role in the field than originally planned.

While experienced differently in each research site, the challenges of implementing this project evoked tensions in three key areas that resulted from assumptions that we made as researchers and that were implicit in the research design. Firstly, as researchers with backgrounds in ethnography, we brought a degree of epistemological and methodological baggage with us to this project, which meant that we were initially reluctant to take on active roles in directing or guiding activities in the field. We had not anticipated this tension as we understood participatory research to be a power-critical approach to research that seeks to avoid acting paternally towards participants (Eßer et al., 2020). However, we were equally aware of the difficulties expressed by care leavers in other empirical work with regards to autobiographical memory and the lack of memory objects (for example, Guerinni et al., 2020; Hoyle et al., 2020) and the potentially difficult task being asked of young people in terms of having to imagine their future past. Knowledge about the field (including the reactions of actors within it to our methodological approach) emerged from this tension and, on this basis, we adapted our approach, taking on the role

of pedagogical ‘choice architects’ in order facilitate and support the participation of young people in this project.

This issue of participation brought up a second area of tension, albeit a different tension in Scotland compared to Germany. Although the young people in the Scottish RCH increasingly recognised their own use of objects of memory as a result of conversations about the archive, they still showed only a limited interest in recording and archiving themselves, with some viewing this as an adult responsibility possibly because of the existing practice within the field. While this challenged the assumptions about participation implicit in the research design, the resultant adaptations arguably better suited the ways in which young people wanted to take part. In the German RCH, the young people were much more quickly engaged in recording, archiving and curating after the animation to mental time travel, perhaps also because the care workers *did not* collect any memory objects for them before conducting the study. However, participation in the development of the archive, with a view to decisions for or against the contents of the archive, sometimes also meant that the young people decided against the inclusion of archival material in the archive, which may have actually expanded their shared memory possibilities in the future even more than the jointly selected archival material would have done. Given that our relationship to the past changes over time (Josselson, 2009), neither young people nor adults may be able to fully predict the future wishes and needs of young people. Nonetheless, adults should consider the ways in which they facilitate and support the curation of memory objects by, with, or for young people by taking account of their views.

The third tension arose around assumptions in the research design in relation to joint curation and joint decision-making for this digital group archive. In Germany, the young people worked together in development workshops to jointly determine content for the archive. In the decisions made, ‘opinion leaders’ among the young people sometimes had quite a large influence, which created the impression that young people at least partially decided against content that may have had personal meaning for them individually¹⁰. The lack of pre-existing practice with regard to collecting and archiving objects of memory in the RCH meant that there were no individual collections of memory objects. Therefore, tensions arose regarding the focus on group archiving and group decision-making whereby memory objects of personal significance to some young people may be excluded from the archive and not be stored elsewhere for future access. The role of adults in facilitating the curation of collections of possible memory objects is further highlighted here. In Scotland, existing practice meant that the young people could access individual collections of memory objects. Perhaps because of this, they were less interested in taking part in development workshops. This meant that, despite the archive being intended to capture everyday *group* life and provide opportunities for collective remembering, no joint-curation or joint decision-making was undertaken during this phase of the project, potentially impacting the future relevance of the archive to the group and, subsequently, their engagement with it. Might these young people, like those in the other studies cited earlier, look back in future and feel that this archive does not sufficiently capture their voice?

Both of us found that research plans carefully worked out in advance sometimes fail and must be changed to adapt to the conditions found in the field. Moreover, these changes created considerable tensions within us, which not only challenged us personally, but provided opportunities for reflection and promoted a deeper understanding of phenomena that were important in the context of this qualitative study.

Conclusion

This paper reported on plans, changes, opportunities, and challenges in the implementation of a qualitative study that drew on ideas from participatory research with ethnographic elements to expand and empower the agency of future care leavers, in addition to generating knowledge. Through the unvarnished description and critical reflection of our experiences, we sought to provide insight into our approach and the tensions that arose in the process, illustrating how challenging it can be to work towards the dual aim of a study that seeks not only to understand but also to change realities in the context of social work. We particularly wanted to show that the planned or realised change of realities or guiding of people in a research field by researchers, while not unusual for social work practitioners and some ethnographers orientated towards activism, is worthy of discussion for qualitative field research.

As ethnographers (with particular backgrounds), and for the research to be participatory, we expected participants to take more of a lead role and were reluctant to direct activities (or change the field) ourselves. However, knowing (from empirical research) that these young people might have a future need that they might not yet be able to fully appreciate, we felt a moral obligation as adult researchers to invite them to participate in the creation of a resource that might meet that need. While this form of support offered could be criticised as “epistemic paternalism” (Flick and Herold 2021: 299), at least in a tendentious way, we would like to emphasise that ultimately all views, opinions and choices were respected, and we were always acting with the young people’s assent/consent.

While there may be areas that we or others can identify that could or should have been done differently in this project, we argue that the plannability of participatory approaches is limited because, by their very nature, they are influenced by the individuality and agency of research partners/participants. While the resulting tensions for researchers should by no means be underestimated, they can be used productively through the process of reflexivity (Eßer et al., 2020).

The clear naming and reflection on power dynamics between researchers and study participants is always important including weighing up the goal and the means of influencing and exercising power by researchers, which in our opinion always requires the informed consent and authorisation of participants. We also believe that particular sensitivity to these issues is required when adult researchers meet young study participants. As irreversible as the inequality between adults and young people is, in the sense of a non-reciprocal responsibility of adults for the care of young people, we believe that it is important for qualitative research to take the perspectives and relevance of children seriously and to understand them, especially when these challenge the researchers and

evoke tensions. Through challenge and tension, qualitative research can strive to create the greatest possible transparency regarding plans and methodological procedures, especially with regard to the intended and/or realised guidance of study participants through participation in research processes.

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Notes

1. Although the overall project includes a comparative analysis of the sociocultural contexts in Scotland and Germany, we do not focus on this aspect of the project in this paper as it forms part of another planned publication.
2. All translations from non-English texts are ours.
3. We note that recording practices in social work have been and continue to change (see [Muirhead, 2019](#)) alongside other identity-supporting practices such as life story work (see [Hammond et al., 2020](#)).
4. Given the difficulties outlined in the literature relating to accessing casefiles and other information, digital archives were selected so that the young people could access them into the future at a time and place of their own choosing. The longevity of digital materials can also be questioned with ever-changing technology, so the software that was developed included a function to easily extract the data in a format that could be stored or transferred to another digital platform in the future.
5. In Scotland, young people were compensated for their time through voucher payments. In Germany, it was assumed that the prospect of participating in a study with understandable benefits for young people could already be a sufficient incentive for voluntary participation.
6. For technical support, I was accompanied by my colleague Malte Heyen from the German research team, who, as an IT expert, was responsible for programming the archive software to be developed.
7. In using the term ‘collective remembering’ or ‘collective memory’, we draw on one of the definitions of [Hirst et al. \(2018: 439\)](#) that ‘collective memory [can be defined] as individual memories shared by members of a community that bear on the collective identity of that community’.
8. Pseudonyms are used to refer to participants in this paper.

9. Opportunities for joint curation and decision-making were made available later in the study where young people and adults had the opportunity to pilot the archive software.
10. While the archive eventually contained 133 photos and 16 videos related to various aspects of everyday group life, some photographs of toys that seemed relevant to some young people were ultimately excluded based on group decisions.

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