The naked truth about migrants' views: User involvement as radical knowledge production

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Abstract

This ethnographic case study examines how knowledge was produced in collaboration between a welfare organization and its target group. The study investigated the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES), which is responsible for the integration of newly arrived migrants through the "introduction programme". To explore how migrants perceived its services, the PES initiated a six-month project in which three employee-researchers and four participant-researchers (migrants participating in the introduction programme) conducted an interview study together. I followed the project as an independent researcher, making observations and conducting interviews with the members of the research group on several occasions.

The study shows the participant-researchers were enabled to obtain quite extensive control over the project. The study also suggests that organizational leadership on practical and methodological matters does not necessarily conflict with the user perspective of the study. The project produced knowledge that revealed the migrants' perceptions in a relatively unedited way. The knowledge produced was 'radical' as it differed considerably from the typical knowledge produced by the organization, which made it unfamiliar and difficult to handle. Not until the final report of the project included an organizational perspective was it made official, and even so the PES made no efforts to publicly present or disseminate the report.

Introduction

The concepts of 'citizen participation' (Barnes, Newman and Sullivan 2007; Clarke 2013) and 'user involvement' (Croft and Beresford 1989) are conspicuous in contemporary neoliberal western political policy, constructing citizens as active and accountable subjects (Clarke 2013) and service users as 'consumers' of free choice on the developing welfare markets (Barnes and Prior 1995). Linked to this development, user involvement in scientific research is emerging in the UK as a policy paradigm in welfare research (Beresford 2013). Also in Sweden, the importance of involving service users in research is becoming increasingly highlighted by research funders (see Forte 2015). However, not all knowledge is produced within academia, and this article describes a project in which knowledge was produced in cooperation between a welfare organization and its target group.

The authority investigated is the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES), which is responsible for the integration of newly arrived migrants through what is known as the 'introduction programme'. The PES desired to explore how migrants perceived its services, and thus initiated a six-month project in which three employee-researchers (employees at the PES head office) and four participant-researchers (newly arrived migrants participating in the introduction programme) conducted an interview study together. The ambition of the project was to allow the participant-researchers a high level of control and influence, thereby ensuring that a distinct user perspective was obtained. I followed the project as an independent researcher, making observations and conducting interviews with the project group on several occasions, and the aim of this article is to deepen our understanding of collaborative knowledge production by investigating the way in which control was distributed in the project.

The results show that the employee-researchers, through conscious and strategic manoeuvres, managed to create a space within the authority in which the participant-researchers gained considerable control. This gave a research product that was highly unconventional in the institutional context. However, this turned out to cause difficulties. In the end, the PES – itself initiator and producer of the study – was hesitant to publish and distribute the report. Hence, the study has shown that the successful implementation of user involvement in knowledge production may challenge the dominating institutional perspectives (cf. Purtell and Wyatt 2011; Julkunen and Uggerhøj 2016). In that sense, user involvement in this case produced 'radical' knowledge.

Background

In a response to trends in contemporary welfare policy, the PES head office has in recent years undertaken several studies to investigate users' opinions, often applying a 'service design' methodology (see Wetter Edman 2011). In addition, the PES has carried out recurring customer surveys that determined participants' opinions of the introduction programme.

The Project Investigated

The project investigated was called 'In the centre of the introduction' and was initiated and implemented by the Unit for Integration and Introduction at the PES head office in Stockholm. The purpose of the project was to gain information about user perspectives in a new way, by inviting participants to be partners in the process of knowledge production. In this way, the PES hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the users' perspective. This approach was unusual, as all previous PES initiatives to obtain user perspectives had been controlled and executed exclusively by employees – a kind of knowledge production termed by Uggerhøj (2012, 84) as 'practitioner research'. The project operated during a six-month period in 2016/2017 and a project group of seven individuals was established to carry it out. They planned the study, conducted 46 in-depth interviews that were transcribed, analysed, and compiled into a written report.

The project was managed by three PES employees (the employee-researchers), one of whom functioned as the project leader. The employee-researchers had formal academic backgrounds, two of them held PhDs and one a master's degree. In addition, the project group also contained four members recruited from the introduction programme (the participant-researchers). These appointments were advertised at local PES offices and over 80 persons applied. The four finally recruited were two women and two men, one of each gender speaking Arabic and one Tigrinya (the most common languages among migrants in Sweden). The initial ambition was to recruit migrants who had completed doctoral studies, but none of the applicants had such merits. Highly educated persons were, however, recruited: a lawyer, a journalist, a historian and a graduate in media and communication studies. Applicants who were able to show a reflexive and critical approach were selected. The participant-researchers were appointed as trainees for the first two months of the project, then employed for the remaining four months.

Why Collaborative Knowledge Production?

The participant-researchers were understood as holding two primary skills significant to the implementation of the project: their experience-based

knowledge (cf. Telford and Faulkner 2004; Beresford 2013; Jenssen 2014) and their competence in language.

A core idea of the project was that personal experiences of (forced) migration and participation in the PES introduction programme would benefit the study. The participant-researchers were assumed to understand the interviewees and their situation, and in this way know what questions to ask and how to interpret the answers. Further, the project initiators believed that shared experiences would create trust and common ground between the interviewer and the interviewee, enabling the participant-researchers to obtain more truthful and thorough answers from the interviewees (cf. Svensson and Hansson 2006; Szmukler, Staley and Kabir 2011; Jenssen 2014).

The participant-researchers were also expected to contribute by their ability to conduct interviews in the migrants' native language. Language had been a significant challenge in prior attempts by the PES to investigate the views of newly arrived migrants (cf. Palmer and Ward 2007; van den Muijsenbergh et al. 2016). In contrast, the participant-researchers were able to obtain rich and personal accounts from the interviewees, who sometimes shared disturbing experiences of abuse and feelings of hopelessness, appealing to the participant-researchers to help them. In this case, it was necessary that the employee-researchers assist the participant-researchers to handle the situation, demonstrating the importance of proper training and support when non-professionals conduct interviews on sensitive subjects (Bengtsson-Tops and Svensson 2010; McLaughlin 2010).

Prior Research and Theorization

The target groups of welfare services are described by different terms in different organizations. Here, I use the term 'participants', as this is the term most often used within the introduction programme. The research presented concerns attempts to involve the target groups of various welfare arrangements in research, and the basic ideas are the same for all branches of welfare. As noted in the introduction, user involvement in research is emerging as a policy paradigm and a frequently posed requirement for funding (cf. Jenssen 2014) in welfare research. However, within certain branches of research – such as participatory action research (see McIntyre 2008, Livingston and Perkins 2018) and practice research (see Jenssen 2014; Julkunen and Uggerhøj 2016) – an active inclusion of stakeholders (e.g. service users, professionals, citizens, etc.) in welfare research has long been promoted.

Benefits and Difficulties

Evaluating the effects of user involvement in research might be difficult, as the definition of 'successful involvement' might differ among stakeholders (Purtell and Wyatt 2011). Nonetheless, systematic reviews have shown several positive effects (Staley 2009; Brett et al. 2012; Kara 2013). Early involvement and involvement in all parts of the research process are key to a successful outcome (Barber et al. 2011; Jenssen 2014; Livingston and Perkins 2018). Concerning *initiation and study design*, user involvement contributes to posing research questions of relevance for users, and hence, of interest in organizational service development (Telford and Faulkner 2004; Minogue et al. 2005; Brett et al. 2012). Regarding *data collection*, involving users as interviewers increases the probability of receiving more thorough and truthful answers (Svensson and Hansson 2006; Szmukler, Staley and Kabir 2011). Further, user involvement in *analysis* prevents misinterpretations, provides alternative perspectives and a more initiated understanding of the empirical material; while involvement in *writing and dissemination* increases the likelihood of a distinct user perspective and relevance for service users (Minogue et al. 2005; Barber et al. 2011; Brett et al. 2012). However, difficulties associated with user involvement have also been identified (see Boote, Telford and Cooper 2002; Telford and Faulkner 2004; McLaughlin 2010; Brett 2012; Jenssen 2014). These concern, for example: the difficulty of maintaining satisfactory scientific rigour, increased costs and expenditure of time for the education of user-researchers, an increased need of communication, and difficulties associated with conflicts of interests and perspectives.

Approaches to Involvement

Two broad approaches to user involvement in research have been identified. The first approach is the 'mainstream interest' (Beresford 2002) or 'top-down approach' (McLaughlin 2010). This approach links to organizational benefits such as improved policy relevance and higher credibility. The top-down approach views user involvement in research as a tool to determine 'what works' in welfare services. The second approach is known as the 'service-user interest' (Beresford 2002) or 'bottom-up approach' (McLaughlin 2010). Here, research is expected to assume the perspective of the service users throughout the study, with the explicit ambition to engender change and improve conditions for service users. Beresford (2003) argues user involvement in research generates a constant tension between the two approaches (see also McLaughlin 2010; Purtell and Wyatt 2011), and while a certain degree of compromise is necessary (Carrick, Mitchell and Lloyd 2001; Julkunen and Uggerhøj 2016), several scholars have stressed that it is important that professional researchers are open-

minded towards new perspectives and unconventional processes (Minogue et al. 2005; Barber et al. 2011; Szmukler, Staley and Kabir 2011; Julkunen and Uggerhøj 2016).

Level of Involvement and Distribution of Control

The degree of influence that the involved users are allowed to exercise is often divided into three levels (e.g. Boote, Telford and Cooper 2002): *Consultation* refers to research projects seeking the advice of service users, for instance by meeting a reference group of user representatives. Here, the opinions of service users are considered, but may not be acted upon. *Collaboration* implies a more comprehensive involvement, in which users take an active part in the research process. At this level, the ambition of actual influence is higher. *User control* describes a project in which service users control all, or most, of the vital aspects of the knowledge production, including determining the design and formulating the research question(s), undertaking the study, interpreting the data, writing the publications, and disseminating the results (Hanley et al. 2004). Some definitions also include initiation of the project and control of resources. Consultation and collaboration are the most common levels of involvement, while user control is rare (Beresford 2003; Barber et al. 2011).

Examining how projects are controlled, several researchers have argued that the professional researchers maintain control even when there is an ambition to share this responsibility (Carrick, Mitchell and Lloyd 2001; Minogue et al. 2005). Morrow et al. (2010) suggest that the strong formal positions and advantage in knowledge of professional researchers tend to make their voice the decisive one. Moreover, since users involved in research typically need the support of professional researchers to conduct the tasks, there is a risk that when professional researchers provide this support they assume control (McLaughlin 2010). Thus, cooperative knowledge production contains a constant tension between users being controlled and being able to control the research (Beresford 2003).

Epistemology and Knowledge Claims

User involvement in research acknowledges the importance of experience-based knowledge (Telford and Faulkner 2004; Beresford 2013), where the first-hand experiences of individuals in a certain position are understood as granting them unique insights vital to the knowledge production – a perception close to the epistemology of standpoint theory (see Harding 1993). Several researchers have objected to this starting point and suggest that the 'objectivity' of the researcher is compromised (see Telford and Faulkner, 2004; Hanley et al. 2004). On the other hand, advocates of user-led research state that conventional research into vulnerable groups has

often served to stigmatize those groups (Hunt 1981; Oliver 1992). Thus, user-led research often has an explicit aim to support the user group (Campbell and Oliver 1996; Beresford 2002). A cornerstone of the epistemology that supports user involvement in research is the perception that all science is produced from a certain perspective (McLaughlin 2010; Szmukler, Staley and Kabir 2011; Beresford 2013), which calls the positivist idea of 'objective' and 'neutral' research into question (Boote, Telford and Cooper 2002; Glasby and Beresford 2006). Hence, the discussion on user involvement in research is connected to the broader in-academic epistemological debate on the constitution of valid knowledge and 'evidence' (Boote, Telford and Cooper 2002; Beresford 2002). It has been stressed that research conducted by, or in cooperation with, service users must meet the same scientific standards as other research (McLaughlin 2010), and for this reason the crucial questions that user involvement in research raises are: Who influences and controls the research? What motives guide the project? and, From what perspective is the knowledge produced?

Methods

This article presents an ethnographic case study that has investigated joint knowledge production within a welfare organization. The study was initiated and partially funded by the PES, but was conducted autonomously, and the author had no prior affiliation to the PES. Case studies are particularly suitable when investigating uncommon practices for which few prior examples exist (Flyvbjerg 2004, 96), as was the case for the present study. Seldom has a Swedish central authority had such high ambitions to create knowledge in collaboration with its target group. And furthermore, the voice of migrants, in particular, has been absent in welfare research (Palmer and Ward 2007; van den Muijsenbergh et al. 2016).

Data Collection and Empirical Material

The empirical material consists of interviews, observations, and documents. The seven individuals who implemented the project were interviewed on several occasions during it. The three employee-researchers were interviewed individually between one and three times each. The four participant-researchers were interviewed individually once at the beginning of the project and once at its end. They were also interviewed as a group on four occasions, three times during the project, and once six months after its end. Four other persons were interviewed: the head of the unit in which the project was located (i.e. the manager to whom the project reported), and three employees at the PES who worked with organizational development. The manager was interviewed to give a management perspective on the

project, and the latter three were interviewed to enable comparison between the project and other organizational initiatives intended to gather the opinions of participants in the introduction programme. Overall, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted. All participants gave their informed consent, and all interviews except one were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Concerning the interview with the head of the unit, several appointments was made to conduct a face-to-face interview. However, due to lack of time and alterations in schedule, these arrangements were cancelled by the manager. In the end, an interview was conducted over the telephone, with no recording device available. Instead detailed fieldnotes were written from this interview.

I observed several activities within the project. In total, fieldnotes are available from eleven occasions throughout the project, including project meetings, methods workshops, and seminars at which the project was planned and discussed. I decided not to observe the interviews, to avoid influencing these. The observations amount to 40 hours, encompassing 150 A4 pages of fieldnotes. By using both observations and interviews, the actual processes and the views of participants were captured.

The material also consists of about thirty documents. These have been gathered during the fieldwork and contain anything from information letters and meeting agendas to PowerPoint presentations and project reports. The project plan of the investigated project and its final report have been central during the analysis.

Analysis and Presentation

A structured thematic analysis of the material was conducted, during which recurrent themes were identified and linked. Ethnographic analysis is typically guided by what is going on in the field. Hence, the main question of the analysis was: *What significant aspects characterize the process when knowledge is produced in collaboration between a public organization and its target group?* One comprehensive theme that was identified in the material was 'control', which appeared throughout the analysis in several shapes, such as: ambitions and manoeuvres to grant user control, the balance between user control and organizational governance, and control over the research product.

All individual names and other characteristics have been altered to ensure anonymity when the results are presented. Extracts from the interviews have been carefully translated into English, where repetitions and rales have been removed to increase readability. Some of the participant-researchers had migrated to Sweden quite recently, but all interviewees mastered the Swedish language sufficiently well that the interviews could be conducted in

Swedish. In the extracts reproduced below, however, some pronunciations and wordings have been reformed for grammatical reasons, without altering the content of the statements.

Balancing User Control and Organizational Governance

The degree of involvement in research is commonly defined as one of 'consultation', 'collaboration', and 'user control' (Boote, Telford and Cooper 2002). User-controlled research, occurs when members of the user group have control of all aspects of the study, including its initiation and resources – criteria that were not met in this case. Rather, the project was one in which knowledge was produced in collaboration between employees and participants, with an employee-researcher as formal leader, but with the ambition to make the participant-researchers as equal partners as possible (cf. Uggerhøj 2014; Jenssen 2014). The intention of the employee-researchers was that the participant-researchers should have extensive control over the processes in the project, including planning the study, formulating the questions, conducting the interviews, analysing the data, and writing the final report; thereby ensuring that the study employed an independent user perspective. Given these far-reaching ambitions, 'control' emerged as a key concept to investigate. Since previous studies on collaborative research suggest that professional researchers often maintain vital control (e.g. Carrick, Mitchell and Lloyd 2001; Minogue et al. 2005), I paid particular attention to this possibility.

Enabling User Control

In every collaborative project, the initiating organization will exercise a certain amount of control to make sure that the project aligns with the intentions of the organization (see Eriksson 2015). In the investigated project, the project plan constituted an initial framework that set out certain principles, such as the length of the project, the criteria for recruitment and employment, and the stipulation that a qualitative interview study should be conducted and presented as a written report. Likewise, the initial training that the participant-researchers were offered – learning about methods, the PES and the introduction programme – can be understood as a form of socialization and governance. It is possible that such socialization affected the participant-researchers' autonomous perspective, but they considered the training to be indispensable to accomplishing the tasks. Moreover, the employee-researchers inevitably affected the configuration of the project, as they gave suggestions on ways to conduct the study.

At the beginning of the project, the participant-researchers were rather cautious, and expected the employee-researchers to lead the process. It is understandable that the participant-researchers positioned themselves in this way, given the strong formal positions of the employee-researchers and their extensive scientific training, while the participant-researchers came from the introduction programme, and had no prior experience of working in a Swedish authority. Hence, it took some time before the participant-researchers understood that they were expected to take part in managing the project, not only work in it. Other stakeholders than the research group (colleagues at the head office and managers at local PES offices) were invited to give their views on how to conduct the study. It is clear that the project was not by any means designed solely by the participant-researchers. Nonetheless, the participant-researchers were given considerable opportunities to influence the course and implementation of the project. This was mainly a consequence of the employee-researchers' intentional actions to allow user control, which highlights the importance of more powerful actors using their position to enable other actors to exert influence. Three key manoeuvres that enabled participant control were identified.

The first, basic manoeuvre was to *ensure that the project plan had an open-ended character.* Since the details of the study were not specified in advance, there was room to determine the final design in collaboration with the participant-researchers.

A second manoeuvre that enabled participant control was to *assign strategically important decision-making* to the participant-researchers (cf. Morrow et al. 2010, 536). The final decisions about how to implement the project were allocated to the project group, where the employee-researchers left most of the decision-making to the participant-researchers. Based on their experience-based knowledge (as well as the input they had received from the employee-researchers and other actors within the PES), the latter were given the opportunity to determine which methods to use, how to select the sample, and the nature of themes and questions that guided the study. One of the employee-researchers recalls the initial phase of the project:

> We decided that it was better if they [the participant-researchers] did the workshop on interview themes themselves. First, we planned to do it together, but we [the employee-researchers] have our own ideas, and we're not the ones supposed to be at the centre. There was no reason for us to monitor them or to introduce our values and perspectives. They have participated in the program themselves and they know what questions are important to ask. (Interview, 7 November 2016)

Later, the participant-researchers met one of the employee-researchers to present the themes they had agreed upon. This fieldnote extract describes the meeting:

> Cecilia [an employee-researcher] starts the meeting, saying that today we are to discuss the themes for the interviews you have come up with. She says that the employee-researchers don't want to steer the content, but they are curious about the themes. The participant-researchers tell Cecilia about the themes, and Cecilia writes them on the white board. Cecilia clarifies certain points, and together they discuss some themes that the participant-researchers are uncertain how to formulate. Cecilia makes minor adjustments to the formulations, but she is consistently reluctant to alter or suggest alternative themes. The final theme is 'housing', and Cecilia comments that housing is perhaps not an issue under the authority of the PES. But it's an important matter nonetheless, she says, writing 'housing' on the whiteboard. (Fieldnote extract, project meeting, 22 November 2016)

The employee-researcher does not interfere with the decisions made by the participant-researchers. Even when the themes depart from what is commonly understood as 'the responsibility of the PES', Cecilia encourages the topic since it is important from the participants' perspective. Similarly, when planning the project, the employee-researchers intended 'women's participation in the introduction programme' to be an overarching theme of the study. However, as the participant-researchers did not embrace this theme, the employee-researchers did not insist on keeping it.

The third manoeuvre was actions taken by the employee-researchers to *ensure that an organizational perspective did not impinge on the perspective of the participant-researchers*. Not only did the employee-researchers refrain from inflicting their own opinions, they also took measures to protect the participant-researchers from other organizational influences. Several such precautions were taken during the analysis and write-up of the study. In a group interview, the participant-researchers recall the process:

> **Pascal:** They [the employee-researchers] were helpful and supportive, but they never decided what we should write.
>
> **Wagaye:** No. And when we asked them for prior reports written by the Employment Service, to see how they were formulated, they said: 'We don't want you to be affected, we'd rather see that you didn't consult those publications'. (Group interview, 16 February 2017)

Dissuading the participant-researchers from reading prior reports was one way that the employee-researchers tried to avoid organizational influence

on their perspective. Moreover, another unit at the PES that specializes in 'customer-driven development' offered to aid the project during the analysis. However, in the words of one of the employee-researchers:

> We asked another unit to contribute with methodological guidance /…/ but they were foremost interested in analysing the interviews, and that's exactly what we wanted to prevent this time. This is supposed to be participants' perspectives, without our [PES employees] involvement. So, we had to decline their offer, because they wouldn't compromise on that issue, they were determined to participate actively in the process of analysis. (Interview, 11 January 2017)

By turning down the offer of assistance from the development unit, it is possible that the investigated project lost valuable analytical expertise. The choice, however, was yet another decision taken to secure an independent participant perspective.

What to Govern?

Service users involved in research are usually not experts in the craft of research. Thus, training, support, and guidance – indeed a kind of governance – are appropriate and desirable in collaborative research in order to ensure that the research is conducted in a methodologically sound manner (Minogue et al. 2005; Morrow et al. 2010; Brett et al. 2012). Still, it might be unreasonable to expect that service users take equal responsibility for all aspects of a collaborative study, and for this reason it is vital to consider how to balance participant control and organizational/ professional leadership.

As noted by Julkunen and Uggerhøj (2016, 7), even if 'equal partners', the stakeholders of a collaborative research project have different interests, power positions, experiences and skills. The participant-researchers were recruited based on their experience-based expertise (cf. Jenssen 2014) and were expected to use this expertise to accomplish a study with a pronounced participant perspective. Hence, it was a crucial aspect of the project that the participant-researchers were in control of matters concerning research focus and questions, gathering information and data interpretation. The employee-researchers, on the other hand, were trained researchers and experts in the craft of research. However, the far-reaching ambitions to generate an independent participant perspective resulted in the employee-researchers withdrawing somewhat from governing these aspects of the project as well. But the participant-researchers found it difficult to handle the considerable responsibilities placed on them connected to the craft of research, such as determining research methods and writing reports. They were noticeably insecure at a workshop on methodology, in which the user-

researchers alone planned the design of the study. The discussions were characterized by confusion of qualitative and quantitative measures, and indistinct relationships between the aim of the project, the research questions, selection of respondents, choice of methods, and analytical ambitions. Likewise, writing the final report without assistance proved to be a difficult task, and it became necessary for the employee-researchers to take charge, guiding the participant-researchers on how to proceed. As recounted by one of the employee-researchers:

> As a researcher, you anticipate that everybody knows how to use empirical material and turn it into a report. But these people [the participant-researchers] are not scientists, which we somewhat forgot. /.../ We imagined they would be able to work much more independently writing the report. /.../ Now, we have been sitting down with them, discussing how to organize the report. Much more hands on, like supervising a thesis. Also, they were trying to write the text together the four of them, and it would have been impossible to finish on time, so we instructed them to divide the writing between them. (Interview, 3 February 2017)

The participant-researchers, uncertain about how to write the report, welcomed this more distinct guidance that the employee-researchers eventually provided. Overall, it would have been possible for the employee-researchers to exert a more distinct leadership concerning the craft of research without endangering the independent user perspective of the project. Hence, this study suggests that collaborative research projects that aim for a pronounced user perspective can be guided by the division of control presented in table 1:

Table 1. Division of control in user-oriented knowledge production

Require considerable user control and little professional governance:	Require less user control and allow more professional governance:
– Formulating research focus, themes, and interview questions – Conducting interviews – Interpreting the empirical material – Determining the content of publications	– Practical issues of methodology, concerning, for example, interviewee selection and data collection – The craft of analysis, concerning how to conduct a structured analysis – Structure and production of publications

Indeed, it is meaningful to enable user influence also for matters concerning the craft of research (highlighted on the right side of the table). However, more distinct professional leadership in these tasks might benefit the study and help to ensure that the project meets academic research standards (cf. Julkunen and Uggerhøj 2016). Shared decision making rather than full user control might be preferable in these aspects of the process (cf. Carrick, Mitchell and Lloyd 2001).

How to Govern?

Collaborative research projects might demand more coordinating leadership than conventional research projects (Minogue et al. 2005; McLaughlin 2010), simply because some members of the project group have no formal training in or experience of conducting research. As it had not been possible to recruit to the project participant-researchers who met the intended criterion (that the participant-researchers should be trained researchers), the measures that had been planned to support the participant-researchers were partly unsatisfactory, since they did not correspond to the skills level of the individuals recruited. Despite this, the project group managed to conduct the study and the employee-researchers worked hard (at times taking on extensive overtime) to ensure the success of the project. And consistently, they governed the project in terms of methodology rather than by impinging on issues of perspective and interpretation. The following extract from a project meeting preparing the interviews is characteristic of the way the employee-researchers intervened in the project:

> After discussing the interview themes prepared by the participant-researchers, Cecilia [employee-researcher] says that she doesn't want to affect the content of the study, so she won't comment any further on that. However, she would like to add something to help them approach the interviews.
>
> "It's important that you let the interviewees speak," she says. "A common mistake is to focus too much on the questionnaire, hastening through to make sure to finish. But often you get a lot of answers just from one initial question, if it is formulated openly, so try to give the interviewees time to elaborate."
>
> The participant-researchers nod in assent and a longer discussion on interview methodology follows. (Fieldnote extract, project meeting, 22 November 2016)

Later, when finalizing the project report (written by the participant-researchers in Swedish), the balance between the control exerted by participant-researchers and by employee-researchers again became manifest. Here, the employee-researchers made substantial contributions

to prepare the text for publication and reduced the number of pages from 70 to 35. Such drastic cuts might indeed raise questions about what was omitted as the employee-researchers edited the final draft, and this editorial work must be understood as a form of control. When I asked the participant-researchers about the completed report, one of them replied:

> Before the last feedback [from the employee-researchers], we had written extensively about the feelings of the interviewees, but it was perhaps too painful to read [because of the disturbing content of the migrants' stories]. The final edit is better. A colleague [in charge of press relations] read the final text and said that it was still troubling to read, but at least it's possible to read it now. And what we wanted to convey, it gets through anyway, it is all still in there. (Interview, 21 March 2017)

The editorial work of the employee-researchers adapted the report to presumed or explicit organizational demands. The language was corrected to an acceptable standard, and the decrease in the number of pages made the report consistent with other public reports of the PES, which seldom exceed 30 pages. While decreasing the number of pages was primarily achieved by making the Swedish language more efficient and cutting very long extracts, the text was also edited such that it would not be too 'painful' to read. The probable reason for the latter editing was to make sure that the management would be willing to publish the report. Nonetheless, the participant-researchers were satisfied, and recognized the content of the report as their own analysis. Indeed, the modifications had toned down the most conspicuous content of the interviews, but the themes, arguments, and conclusions drawn by the participant-researchers were maintained. Hence, the knowledge produced still had a distinct participant perspective, giving vivid accounts of migrants' personal experiences.

The Unconventional Character of the Knowledge Produced

The character of the knowledge produced from the project differed in several ways from other studies on participants' perspectives within the PES. Previous projects were intended solely for intra-organizational service improvement purposes, and the results were typically presented as diagrams or tables (the surveys) or fused into a single image that showed strengths and weaknesses of the services (the service design projects). These projects were primarily documented as bullet points in PowerPoint presentations, intended (only) to enable the transfer of knowledge within the PES. The project investigated here, in contrast, was intended to create and disseminate new knowledge. Thus, the format – the systematic

presentation of a study on participant perspectives compiled into a report – was unusual. Furthermore, the typical public reports from the PES convey figures on unemployment rates and service delivery, or comprise annual reports that summarize the work of the organization. The report from the project described here, on the other hand, took a distinct narrative approach (see Burner 1991), presenting intimate and sometimes sorrowful, violent, and disturbing stories of involuntary migration, transit and attempts to become part of the Swedish community.

Concerning the content of the report, there were both similarities to and differences from the contents of other studies on user perspectives within the PES. Essentially the same comments appeared concerning the services provided. These included comments that pointed out the difficulty of understanding the structure and content of the introduction programme, requests for increased possibilities to meet PES officials, criticism of the quality of some activities in the program (such as language training and work practice), and suggestions that the activities need to be more personalized. Thus, in this respect, the knowledge produced confirmed what was already known, rather than produced new insights.

However, the knowledge produced also differed from that of previous studies. One such difference lies in its thoroughness. Other studies typically presented short quotations from users representing areas of improvement, whereas the report from this project gave considerably longer and more detailed accounts indicating also *why* these areas were perceived as problematic. The most significant difference, however, concerned perspective. As all knowledge production departs from the perspective of those who conduct the research (Alvesson and Deetz 2000), an alternative perspective than the one that dominates within the PES was obtained by involving participants. The prior studies, carried out by employees, had focused exclusively on existing PES services; a perspective characterized by the political formulation of integration (heavily focused on labour market integration and language education) and the formal duties assigned to the PES. The perspective of the project report was significantly broader and addressed several other topics beyond the boundaries of current PES services, such as: health, housing, family and living conditions, social integration and relationships with the majority society. Instead of focusing on the support currently provided, the report focused on the support that migrants perceive as necessary. Thus, the report reveals the discrepancy between the political formulation of integration and migrants' perceptions of their needs and hardships. This way, the report gives access to alternative formulations of what the introduction programme could (or should) contain to become an effective program, and helps to explain why the introduction programme is not reaching its objectives. Such knowledge is

valuable also to actors outside the PES, as it gives insight into what kinds of effort need attention if integration is to be achieved.

Receiving and Disseminating the Report

The knowledge produced by the project was intended for two purposes: (1) it would be used at the PES head office to develop the introduction programme, and (2) it would be disseminated to be used by local PES offices, and authorities and actors outside the PES.

Six months after the end of the project, the report was indeed being used in development projects at the PES head office. However, the report had been classified as 'working material', not to be disseminated outside the PES head office – not even within the PES organization. The manager interviewed emphasized that it was important that the report be disseminated but argued that this was 'problematic while the report was in its current state'. The employee-researcher in charge of the project had expected that the management might hesitate to publish the report (an exacerbating factor for this was that all three managers at the unit had been employed after the project had been approved). In the words of the employee-researcher, after a meeting with the management group where they had proved to be reluctant to publish:

> I think it's completely wrong, and I told them. This was one of my worries, that the report would be stopped. /.../ And this is an extremely important perspective, because nobody's asking migrants for their opinions. Now we have that knowledge, and it's a shame if it can't be used. Because it's not only about the employment service, it's about the entire Swedish reception of migrants, about welfare politics and the organization of welfare. /.../ But there is a fear that this report suggests that the employment service is not doing a good job. And we [the employee-researchers] have tried to address that in the report, tried to also show what improvements are made by the authority, but apparently it wasn't enough. But since you are here, the organization will have to do something. In some way, that's why you were brought in to begin with, because something like this might happen. (Interview, 3 May 2017)

The employee-researchers had tried to take precautions to enable dissemination: they had toned down the most disturbing narratives and inserted short passages that gave an organizational perspective into the report. Moreover, employing me as an outside researcher was a measure taken partly to secure publication. It is not possible to determine what influence my presence had, but the report was eventually published, about nine months after the end of the project. The report as published, however,

differed from that which had been initially drawn up by the project members.

Purtell and Wyatt (2011) recognize that profound user involvement in knowledge production might produce a result that does not correspond to the expectations of the actors who initiated the project. If this occurs, the tension between user interests and organizational interests becomes evident (cf. Beresford 2002). The report from the project investigated here appeared to pose a challenge to the PES. Merely the fact that the knowledge had been systematized and composed into a written report – potentially possible to disseminate indefinitely – might have been a source of insecurity. Since the PES is one of the Swedish authorities that has been the object of most public criticism in recent years, it is understandable that the organization would be cautious about distributing knowledge that might engender negative publicity. The following fieldnote extract describes the head manager's view of publishing and distributing the report:

> The head of unit says that the project report has been classified by the management group as working material because they needed to think twice before publishing it. He says that he sees the report written by the project members as a 'first draft', and that colleagues [none of whom were part of the project] are currently working on producing 'the final version, as he envisages it'. When I ask, the manager identifies two main issues that must be addressed before publishing. Firstly, they must think through how the 'customers' views and feelings are presented. Their perceptions are real, he stresses, but the report must also demonstrate what the PES is doing. Otherwise it gives the impression that the authority doesn't have a clue and is doing nothing, and that's not true. Secondly, they must take precautions in relation to other authorities mentioned in the report. (Fieldnote extract, telephone interview, 15 September 2017)

As evident in the extract, the relatively untainted participant perspective of the report presented a challenge. I have shown elsewhere (Eriksson 2013) how users' criticism must be 'embedded' before it can be received by a welfare organization. While criticism expressed alone and directly often creates organizational resistance, criticism expressed together with 'constructive' suggestions and confirmation that the organization is also 'doing good' is more easily received (see also Barnes, Newman and Sullivan 2007, 94). The report from the investigated project largely lacked such embedding. Consequently, a five-page preface was inserted into the report before making it official. This preface gave a PES perspective on all main themes of the report, commented about the content, and described measures taken to address the problems expressed.

However, the report shows that many difficulties that face migrants are *not* connected to the work of the PES or due to failures of the PES to deliver the services they are obliged to provide. It can be argued that it would have been in the interests of the PES to present these results, but – as expressed by the manager – this aspect of the report also raised difficulties. Since the report highlighted critical concerns about the work of other authorities, it was difficult to publish such results officially without having consulted those other actors. The PES took such measures, which introduced a further delay into the publication of the report.

The manner in which the PES handled the report demonstrates the ultimate power possessed by the organization. This power, mediated through the management group and the head of the unit, enabled the PES to exert greater overall control by determining how the knowledge was used and distributed and preventing it from being disseminated until it had the proper shape and the situation was deemed safe. The report is now official and may be disseminated. Still, the PES has made no efforts to present it publicly, nor has the final report been included in the PES public database of official reports. This means in practice that the knowledge produced is not accessible to the public or any actor outside the PES. This final note is crucial, since it clearly indicates that there is still something about the report that makes the organization hesitant about disseminating it.

Concluding discussion

The work presented here demonstrates how a public welfare organization – the public employment service, responsible for the integration of newly arrived migrants – works with knowledge production in cooperation with its target group. The study shows that it is possible to enable quite extensive user control in such knowledge production. The employee-researchers used conscious manoeuvres to create a space within the authority in which the participant-researchers could work relatively untainted by the dominating organizational logic. The study also highlights the importance of proper professional support and suggests that organizational leadership and shared decision-making on practical and methodological matters do not necessarily conflict with the user perspective of the study.

The project produced knowledge that was unconventional within the institutional context, mainly because it revealed the migrants' perceptions in a relatively unedited way. From the point of view of the organization, the knowledge produced was 'radical' as it differed considerably from the typical knowledge produced, which made it difficult to handle. It was impossible to publish this naked truth about migrants' views without additional, mitigating, information. Not until the report included an

organizational perspective was it made official, and even so the report was not included in the public database of official PES reports. This demonstrates a continued reluctance to disseminate such radical knowledge obtained by taking the perspective of migrants. For this particular study, where knowledge was produced within a public welfare organization, this can be interpreted as arising from tension between user interests and organizational interests (cf. Beresford 2002; Purtell and Wyatt 2011).

The findings of the article, however, also mirror a more general question within academic research, concerning the delicate relationship between researchers and research funders. Academic research is increasingly dependent on external funding – not only from public research councils, but also from private actors (see, for Sweden, UKÄ 2017, 13). Such dependence may influence the kind of knowledge that is produced and might cause difficulties for researchers who suggest or intend to publish research that does not correspond with the interests of the funders (see e.g. Ashcroft 2006; Holman 2015; Grove 2017). Ultimately the issue concerns what/whose perspective guides research (cf. Alvesson and Deetz 2000), implying that academic freedom and the possibility to conduct critical research might be at stake (Bennich-Björkman 2007). Academic researchers must address and handle this issue. In the project described here, the employee researchers were aware of possible conflicting perspectives and took measures to enable dissemination. They secured the support of the leadership, tried to adjust the research product to organizational expectations, and invited me as an outside researcher to the project. However, as this example indicates, taking measures is not always enough. In this case, the management personnel at the unit hosting the project were exchanged during the project, which may have altered the prerequisites for dissemination of the knowledge produced.

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