12 “Keeping a project during the COVID-19 pandemic alive”

Experiences with co-researchers
of the participatory
STARK project

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- The fanzine method was applied to the conditions of a participatory research project and proved to be an insightful and innovative way to synthesize attitudes and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and to continue to work and research together at a distance.
- The older co-researchers in the project became active contributors by working on the STARK-zine.
- The co-researchers explicate issues important to them in relation to the pandemic, such as compliance with confinement measures, which they interpret as an expression of mutual solidarity. In addition, their zine contributions point to a conflict between protection and civil rights and the impact of the pandemic with its ambivalent impacts.
- The co-researchers seemed to be less bothered by the restrictions during the lockdown. It is unclear how the attitudes of the older people changed during the pandemic and furthermore whether coping behavior changed.

COVID-19 as a catalyst on life situations in old age

At the end of January 2020, first cases of COVID-19 infections caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus were reported in Germany and other European countries and developed into a pandemic. COVID-19 was a turning point for both German politicians and the society, but also acted as a catalyst in a complex societal structure and accelerated certain developments (for example digital technologies) while at the same time revealed weak points of society (Bühlmann 2020). A public discussion started right at the beginning about

who would be most at risk during the pandemic. Early on, older people were identified by experts as a high-risk group and therefore considered in need for special protection (Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen 2020). In fact, older people in particular were at an increased risk of COVID-19 infections. This applied both to the severity of the disease and its course and to the risk of mortality associated with older age (Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen 2020). However, the role of general health and previous diseases of a person and its impact on the severity of the infection was often ignored (Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen 2020).

In April 2020, Kessler and Gellert of the German Society for Gerontology and Geriatrics (DGGG) were the first to give recommendations for public communication on “Corona and Aging”. They criticized the representation of older people in general as weak and as a group that had to be protected by society.

Instead, the public discussion did not reflect that older people are a heterogeneous and diverse group. The general reporting reinforced the perception of a savior-versus-victim narrative that is reflected in the logic of “we as young and healthy versus you as old and sick” (Kessler 2020: 1). Instead, more attention should be given to the potential of older people in coping with the pandemic. For example, the majority of older people showed well-developed strategies for dealing with the challenging circumstances (Kessler 2020).

Under these conditions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the requirements for the implementation of the research project “Social participation and self-determined aging through participatively developed social and digital offerings in the Kannenstieg neighborhood” (STARK) changed.

Therefore, this chapter introduces how the academic researcher of the participatory STARK project handled the challenges during the first lockdown (Robert Koch-Institut, 2020b)¹ in the COVID-19 pandemic (March until approx. July 2020) and at the same time, used the possibilities that opened up for active participation of older people. Based on the work with older participants from the project, we explored how older people dealt with regulations of social distancing and other restrictions and its impact on their social lives.

Social isolation, loneliness, and social participation in old age during the COVID-19 pandemic

Social isolation and loneliness are not purely phenomena in later life. People experience phases of loneliness again and again in their lives (Berlin-Institut für Bevölkerung und Entwicklung, Körber-Stiftung 2019). However, an increase in the risk of social isolation and loneliness is only observed in old age (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2019; Luhmann 2016).

In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic shows a 14% increase in the experience of loneliness among people aged 46 to 90 in 2020 in comparison with previous years. However, when people of different age groups are compared, feelings of loneliness in the first phase of the pandemic were found to be similar for all age groups (DZA 2021).²

Social isolation and loneliness can have a significant impact on physical health and promote mental illness. For example, loneliness can lead to an increase of blood pressure and a higher risk of cardiovascular disease. The risk of dying from a myocardial infarction or stroke is even higher for isolated and lonely people (Hakulinen 2017). Furthermore, loneliness and isolation are closely associated with an increased risk of clinical disorders such as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and even for dementia (Jacob et al. 2019; Rafnsson et al. 2020).

In the fields of public health and health promotion, social isolation and loneliness are addressed through the concept of social participation (Gesundheitsförderung 2016). It refers to the integration of older people in social networks of families and friends as well as their integration into the community and their social environment (UNECE 2010). In old age, participation in societal life is considered as one important factor in promoting well-being and health that can reduce the risk of loneliness and thus the impact of chronic loneliness on health (DZA 2021).

In times of social distancing to reduce COVID-19 infections, people are increasingly relying on digital technologies to stay in contact with each other. This can be a challenge, especially for older people. A lack of internet access can lead to social exclusion, especially when public life changes to digital formats, as exemplified by the containment measures of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Digitalization in older age during the COVID-19 pandemic

If access and user competence are limited in certain population or age groups, such as the older or the oldest-old groups, this is referred to as the digital divide or “digital gap” (BMFSFJ 2020: 41). Compared to younger populations, older adults are less likely to have access to and use of the internet and digital technologies as basic infrastructure³ (BMFSFJ 2020). Thus, in 2017 the proportion of all retired people with internet access is comparatively high at over 80%. However, there are age differences in this group while in the age group 73 to 78, it is still 64.4% it drops to 39.4% among 80 years and older (Huxhold 2019). In 2020, the percentage of people who have internet access has actually increased and mostly among the 61- to 75-year-old age group.⁴ Especially the age group of 46- to 69-years used the internet more often than before the pandemic. Older people aged 76 and over accessed the internet proportionately less frequently than people aged 46 to 75 (DZA 2021).

The challenge posed by the complex combination of pandemic conditions, advanced age, and lack of internet usage was also evident at the implementation level in the participatory STARK project. During the first lockdown, digital media would have been a great alternative for project activities. However, there was a risk of exclusion for older project participants who had no affinity for the internet and digital media and carrying the risk of social isolation. Therefore, the question arose about the possibilities available to the academic researcher to continue the project with the older co-researchers.

Background to the STARK research project

In the fall of 2019 the STARK project began. It takes place in a city in Saxony-Anhalt in cooperation with a service center for older citizens (“ASZ”) in the district’s community center. The district is populated by one of the highest proportions of older people in the city and dominated by prefabricated slabs (Amt für Statistik, Wahlen und demografische Stadtentwicklung 2019). The high average age and the anonymous residential structures lead to the assumption that a proportion of older people are difficult to reach by the health and consulting services offered in the district. Interviews with social practitioners who work with the older residents reported problems with reaching socially isolated older people.

The aim of the STARK project is to use the participatory research approach to develop strategies to reach older, socially isolated people living in the Kannenstieg neighborhood, to find out the reasons and impacts of social isolation and to develop appropriate offers of social participation.

The STARK project belongs to the research association “Autonomy in old Age” (AiA) (Research ID: ZS/2018/12/96262) funded by the European Union (ERDF-European Regional Development Fund) and the State of Saxony-Anhalt, Germany. The STARK project received a positive approval from the Ethics Committee (Nr. 119/19) of the Faculty of Medicine, Otto-von-Guericke-University Magdeburg. The co-researchers were informed of the project’s aims and their rights in the research and all signed consent forms. The presented contributions are not publicly available and for the purpose of this chapter, all personal identifiers are pseudonymized.

Methodological approach: participatory research in the STARK project

STARK is developed on the research approach of community-based participatory research (CBPR) by involving community members as co-researchers in collaboration with academic researchers and different community actors by conducting joint research practice on the health-related topic social isolation (Unger 2014). The project follows the model of participation in health research outlined by Wright et al. (2010). The model is an instrument and evaluation criterion to discuss and explain participatory research, the degree

of participation, decision-making processes and the reflection of actual participation of co-researchers within the group. Similar to a continuum the project meetings start with the preliminary steps of information, listening and inclusion of the co-researchers to proceed to the steps of participation, such as co-determination and decision-making power (Hartung et al. 2020; Künemund, Kumpers 2019: 149; Urban 2005; Wright et al. 2010).

In order to better understand the processes and the culture of togetherness at the ASZ and the people acting there, the academic researcher used participant observation and field notes in a research diary. Since August 2019, the latter serves as a medium documenting the entire STARK research process and reflecting the research context. In addition to theoretical and methodological considerations, ideas, observations, reactions, and emotions in specific field situations from the study environment of the Kannenstieg neighborhood are documented (Brüsemeister 2008; Köppen et al. 2020).

The project coordinator were present at the ASZ on two days to find interested seniors to participate in STARK. The researcher used various access and communication channels, for example prepared flyers and announcements for the ASZ and the Kannenstieg district, wrote short press releases, placed ads on the Kannenstieg homepage, and designed a flyer that communicated the project goals and approach in everyday language. In addition, the project was presented at various meetings, such as the "Seniors in Volunteer Work."

At the end of January 2020, the kick-off event of the project took place and was attended by seniors, academic researchers and stakeholders from the Kannenstieg district. Already at the end of the kick-off meeting, attention was drawn to the first official project meeting in February 2020.

Older participants as co-researchers

Ten seniors participated in the first official project meeting, which was conducted as a focus group (Freitas et al. 1998; Scott and Garner 2013). Narratives on experiences with social isolation, loneliness, and participation were gathered. Four of the older women reported that they were already affected by loneliness themselves. They hoped that participation in the project would improve their situation. In a joint voting process, a date was set for the next project meeting and nine seniors decided to continue participating in further project meetings. With the decision of these nine seniors, the project group was initiated.

The project group consisted of six women and three men as co-researchers, with an age range of 65 to 80 years. Four of the six women are single or widowed. Two other women and three men of the co-researchers group live with a partner.

The majority of participants come from the Kannenstieg neighborhood itself or adjoining neighborhoods. Six seniors were already active members in one of the seniors' groups at the ASZ. Three seniors did not visit the ASZ

regularly but wanted to participate in the group. Thus, some seniors already knew each other at the beginning of the meetings.

Research with fanzines

The COVID-19 pandemic started shortly after the first STARK project meeting in February 2020, and in the course of the first lockdown, the ASZ closed for visitors on March 16, 2020. It was not until mid-June 2020, that the ASZ gradually opened to its visitors again.

In order to stay in contact with and support older people in the community and to avoid isolation during the lockdown, the telephone was the primary tool of communication. Calling the co-researchers proved to be significant in terms of building and maintaining trust with the group, especially at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The goal was continuous motivation and ability to work together as a group during the period of contact restrictions. It was a challenge to develop and test a format in which all co-researchers could participate and contribute at an equal level. Starting from this initial situation, the idea was born to create a fanzine together with the older co-researchers who became in the process the contributors of the fanzine.

The term “fanzine” (abbreviated with “zine”) is a suitcase word made up of the words “fan” and “magazine” (Sülzle 2018: 5). It can be understood as a “product of cultural practices from juvenile scenes – self-designed and self-distributed media (mostly printed documents) that are written within a special context, reproduced, distributed, and circulated within communities by mail” (Sülzle 2018: 4f). In zines a polyphony is laid out, that takes up the participatory principle in an advantageous way. The authors see themselves as a medium of self-empowerment, as they are located exactly where a change from consumer to producer takes place (Schmidt 2018: 41). As a kind of “network medium,” they further have an important function for community building within a milieu (Sülzle 2018: 14). Therefore, zines fulfill in many ways the demands for an exchange format in the participatory STARK research project:

- With their form of asynchronous transfer of information and experience, they reach all older co-researchers on a low-threshold and equal basis and give everyone a voice.
- They offer the opportunity to express and communicate in writing or in the form of pictures, articles or other forms of contributions to create something yourself from a distance.
- They can also be used to maintain and strengthen identification with the project and cohesion within the project during the contact ban.

The consideration of creating a zine together as a group was transferred to the conditions of the STARK project. The following chapter describes the process of the steps involved in creating the “STARK-zine.”

First steps to create the STARK-zine: gathering data together

However, the process to create the STARK-zine, differs from the original idea because the magazine was not intended to be created as part of a leisure activity, but as part of a research project.

Creating the STARK-zine began in April 2020 with the development of guiding questions. The questions were intended to illustrate the topic of the pandemic and at the same time to build a bridge to the project's topic "social isolation and loneliness in older age." The academic researcher formulated eight largely open questions and gave the co-researchers sufficient space and opportunity to contribute their own thoughts and ideas creatively and openly. Table 12.1 illustrates the questions.

Table 12.1 Questionnaire for the STARK-zine

<i>Question</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
How was your mood in the last few days?	The mood is expressed through smileys on a scale.
What have you been happy or perhaps annoyed about in the last few days?	The selection can be justified in a free text field under the scale.
What do you currently deal with a lot or particularly in your everyday life? Have you been able to tackle activities that you have been planning for a long time?	The questions aim is to discover what the older people have been thinking about or spending their free time with during the lockdown.
What are you worried about right now? Are there any topics that particularly concern you?	A question on current concerns and needs is also part of the key questions.
During the contact ban, we had to try out new and creative ways of staying in contact with each other and to establish closeness at a distance. How did you keep in touch? Which (creative) ways did you use?	The questions focus on the new ways of contact and communication tested in many places in younger age groups, namely the question of alternative ways of establishing and maintaining contact during the period of contact suspension.
Are there any positive aspects that you can take with you from the Corona period?	The question is intended to highlight the potential positive aspects of the Corona pandemic.
What are you particularly looking forward to when the measures are eased again? What would you like to do again first?	The question is intended to direct a positively connoted look into the future.
Have you recently come across any interesting articles about our project topics "loneliness, social isolation, social participation"?	During the Corona pandemic the topics "social isolation" and "loneliness" become particularly relevant. In this way, the project topics can be skilfully linked between the project topic and the Corona pandemia.

The design of the questionnaire was finished in May 2020. Then, it had to be distributed to the co-researchers in different ways: Two co-researchers received the questionnaire by e-mail and four by mail. Two co-researchers picked up the questionnaire in person at the ASZ and returned it back there after they finished their contribution. Two co-researchers lived in one apartment and decided to fill out the questionnaire together. In view of the continuous change of the situation, there was a processing and return period of approximately two weeks. Finally, the academic researcher began to sift through and sort the answers and contributions. In this context, the authors would like to point out that we have translated all citations and text passages from German into English ourselves.

Finding access to data analysis

The analysis of zines poses special challenges, because in many cases analysis procedures are mainly focused on textual data. Methodical, text-based approaches must be supplemented by corresponding methods in order to be able to deal with the compositional character of image and text in zines (Dietrich and Mey 2018). The academic researcher limited the analysis of the material to considering textual data only, omitting the visual material.

Qualitative content analysis was used for this purpose. It is a methodology used in the context of social science research to analyse generated texts with regard to their thematic content (Mayring and Fenzl 2019).

In a first step, the academic researcher determined the units of analysis. The coding unit in the analysis of the text material in the STARK-zine referred to semantic units, sentences, and meaningful sections as a minimal text component. The context unit was the respective answer of the participating seniors to the leading questions. The body of data collected with the questionnaire, including newspaper clippings, photographs and pictures, was considered as the unit of analysis (Mayring and Fenzl 2019). Subsequently, the researcher followed the process of inductive category development and deductive category application in advance through the guiding questions, which could be summarized into a category network. In order to inductively develop categories, the following domains guided the analysis:

- 1 The different ways of maintaining social contact, with particular reference to digital technologies
- 2 The change of view to possible positive aspects during the pandemic
- 3 Thoughts and moods
- 4 Future perspectives
- 5 Aspects of social isolation, loneliness, and opportunities for social participation

After a first screening of the text passages, in a second step it was analysed if the categories could be assigned to the text passages several times (Mayring and Fenzl 2019).

Similar to a presentation of results in a scientific context, the researcher summarized the categories, prepared them and presented each category in individual articles in the style of a newspaper magazine. In June 2020, the participants received the STARK-zine in printed version by mail and in digital version via e-mail.

From co-researchers to contributors: findings from participatory collaboration in times of social isolation

In the following, we present the analysis of the STARK-zine entries of the co-researchers who became contributors during the process of collaboration. We limit ourselves to the statements that are relevant for this chapter: how did the contributors experience the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic? The entries clearly point to a major dilemma between conflicting values of freedom versus protection. This discrepancy about the contradiction and compatibility of freedom rights and the protection of (older) people is not a new discussion, but it became existential during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Personal freedom or restrictions?

The answers to one of the questions (what are you most looking forward to after easing the measures) present an inner conflict: Some contributors describe longing to be able to leave their home without restrictions. The overall wish is to have the choice of meeting with anyone at any time and any place, to enjoy restaurant visits and to shop carelessly to regain some former normality. Nevertheless, they seem to take for granted the incongruity between the desire for freedom and compliance with the COVID-19 regulations. Many express their displeasure with the behaviour of the people around them.

Some parts of the population see the restrictions as an attack on their freedoms and rights enshrined in the Basic Law. They immediately start swaggering and describe the consequences of the "lockdown" as excessive and inappropriate... I am annoyed at the infinite stupidity of people who take to the streets for freedom of demonstration and talk about "Corona invention" and "misleading conspiracy theories"!

(Bm3, 73 years)

The longing for freedom and a considerate and protective behavior in relation to other people seems difficult to reconcile. The STARK-zine entries of several contributors underline this dilemma. A particular point

of contention and criticism relates to public demonstrations during the pandemic. The number of public protest against infection protection measures in Saxony-Anhalt increased during May 2020. The people and their motives for participating in the protests were heterogeneous. A large number of people questioned measures such as the wearing of masks and contact restrictions. Still others questioned the restriction of their basic rights and thus also their fundamentally regulated right to freedom of assembly. The contributors referred to these motives in their statements:

The demonstrators insist on the fundamental right to demonstrate, even though among them may be Corona virus infected and the pandemic, which is already reaching all continents, is getting worse. They reject the precautionary measures (wearing mouth-nose masks, keeping their distance, avoiding the formation of large groups of people, etc.) as it restricts their “freedom”. Do these stupid people prefer to accept illness and death? Is this freedom?

(Bw4, 76 years)

The contributors do not only discuss the meaning of freedom in generally. They also raise the question of what freedom still means when the consequences of these rights include illness and in the worst case death of other people. The process of balancing the alternatives reaches a dimension that consists of a specific dramaturgy.

The contributors to the STARK-zine do not see any restrictions of fundamental rights in the protective measures, but a necessary, albeit annoying evil, which however serves “the collective protection” of fellow woman/men and must therefore be accepted.

In particular, the demonstrative disregard for protective measures causes a high degree of incomprehension and displeasure among some contributors. Some participants of STARK consider it a reckless and thoughtless action that questions the solidarity with one another.

However, the disapproval of the demonstrators seems to be an indicator of an assumed lack of solidarity in the population, a much more existential concern of the contributors. They view it as a personal affront that solidarity is not understood in terms of mutual cohesion and sharing of common values and goals. This assumption can be inferred in statements such as the following:

What annoyed me was that many people do not take the mutual protection by mouth/nose/masks seriously.

(Bm3, 73 years)

This also has consequences for the handling of the mouth and nose protection. From the statements of the Federal Government and the RKI [addition by the authors: Robert Koch Institute] we have learned that wearing

masks is an expression of solidarity and protection for our fellow human beings. Rejecting it can endanger others.

(Bm3, 73 years)

The older people seem to be particularly affected when rules are ignored, i.e., deliberately and intentionally bypassed or simply not taken seriously because it might counteract a national effort to ensure comprehensive protection to which each individual contributes. The demonstrators however, consciously accepted that other people can be infected and the older people consider such violations as personal insults.

Conspiracy myths and control measures

Another issue was the spreading of conspiracy myths. Some contributors perceived the spreading of untruths or misleading non-scientific assumptions as a lack of solidarity, because there are people for whom this would have far-reaching consequences. For example, one contributor writes about a case in which an old man would not even receive telephone calls. His friend wrongly assumed that COVID-19 could spread over the phone. This lack of solidarity and the selfishness of some people caused incomprehension and anger among the old and was sharply condemned by some contributors.

The blame is not exclusively related to those who deliberately act against the guidelines, but also to the control of the authorities. For example, there seems to be a perception that it is the task of the authorities to control the regulations and to react with appropriate sanctions in case of disregard and missteps. Some would even argue in favor of stronger surveillance and more controls to ensure consistent and collective compliance and implementation of measures.

State regulation regarding the wearing of masks in public transport, I, but also other people observe that many people without masks are sitting in the tram. I called the MVB [public transportation authority Magdeburg]] and reminded them of this. The answer was: "it is better not to take the tram. I go by car. We cannot expel a passenger from the tram, the mask obligation is a recommendation. The public order office (Ordnungsamt) is responsible for this." Answer from the public order office: "The MVB is responsible for its trams." In some West German federal states you pay a fine. In our own federal state it has no consequences.

(Bw7, informant declined to communicate age)⁵

In addition to the inadequacy of controls, one contributor also points to the inconsistency of the measures, which leads to irritation and confusion among citizens.

The contributor questions further measures in another entry: for example, he had observed that in self-serving restaurants, it was possible to pick up

cakes or coffee from the buffet, but the outside area with tables and chairs remained closed to guests. However, a few meters away from the café, he had seen people sitting close together on a wall eating the food that they had previously picked up in the café.

The descriptions of this older man also reveal the ambivalence that many people perceive with regard to infection control measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thoughts about the future after the pandemic

Occasionally, positions related to the current situation also included a reference to the future with lesson learned from the pandemic. Thoughts about future developments tended to have a thoughtful and questioning connotation. They referred to the personal, individual, as well as to the societal level.

The contributors see the lockdown as a chance to get back to essential things in their lives. One contributor states:

I appreciate health and the small, everyday things that seemed so taken for granted before Corona even more [...].

(Bm1, 80 years)

Some call the lockdown a time of deceleration and perceived it as beneficial. “Everything had to be shut down. Peace has returned to society.” (Bw7, informant declined to communicate age)

The situation was described as a phase of stagnation with a cathartic effect of social impact.

There is the aspect of deceleration that is worth taking from the Corona period into the future.

(Bm3, 73 years)

The rush in the stores has also eased. More distance was kept in the stores.
(Bw7, informant declined to communicate age)

One contributor asked herself of how society will develop once the COVID-19 pandemic is over or a vaccine for everyone has been developed.

Another contribution can be considered as an answer to this question:

I don't believe that the majority of people will change voluntarily – most will return to their usual self-indulgence.

(Bm3, 73 years)

Based on these considerations, a date in the future (Autumn 2020) was set as scenario in the questions. The question for the contributors was to look

back at the last months and to think about what might have changed socially during this time – both positively and negatively.

One senior formulates very precisely the striving for maximization and constant growth in Western societies:

It has to be questioned, whether there has to be the oversized supply in certain areas, just because we can. This ever more, ever further was put to the test with this crisis.

(Bm3, 73 years)

Finally, these statements stand for a positive evaluation by the contributors and their concern returning to the value of the “small”, “everyday” things of which attention had been lost over the years and brought back by the pandemic. In this way, the seniors consciously question the prosperity of Western societies and question the extent to which lasting maximization and enhancement in all areas of life is meaningful.

This awareness to the “little things in life” is reflected in almost all the contributions in which they express their enthusiasm for nature and their garden. “*I observe nature, the birds, [...]*” (Bw7) or “*I go for a walk and see so many things I did not notice before.*” (Bw5, 76 years) are phrases that have often been uttered in the context of deceleration and discontinuation of activities. For most of the older informants, a temporary phase of slowing down and readjusting the focus from everyday life to nature did seem to be a good way of handling the lockdown. They note that they enjoy spending their time in the garden and on the balcony or taking walks in the park. These activities turn out to be very beneficial, as they make it possible to combine exercise in the fresh air with something meaningful for them. In addition, gardening or work around the house filled the time and it replaced the activities that the seniors had previously engaged in when they came to the ASZ group activities. Instead, progress in and the state of the garden were reported with pride. Those who did not own a garden used their time instead for creative handicrafts or for further training, for example in the form of online courses. An older woman comments on her talent for improvisation:

I didn't grow up in a “throwaway society” and make a lot out of old things (e.g. pillowcases and patchwork quilts from colourful clothes that are no longer modern, but whose fabric quality is impeccable).

(Bw4, 76 years)

Regardless of age or gender, it was possible to deal with the restrictions quickly and to reorient the activities of daily life. Complaints were hardly expressed in the contributions. Only a slight regret was voiced when usual offers such as sports, card games, or long planned trips were canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Being separated from family and friends

The contributors found it much more difficult to accept the restrictions on contact with close relatives. They described the fact that they cannot see their children and grandchildren for an indefinite period of time, or only see them from a distance, as a stressful situation. There was a great longing for and hope of seeing them again soon based on the fear that because of living apart they might become strangers during the lockdown. This is expressed in the following statement:

When Corona no longer troubles us, I would like to go to B. and L. to see my children and grandchildren again. I have a great longing and almost the impression that we are drifting apart and do not recognize each other. The voice on the phone is only a consolation.

(Bw4, 76 years)

It should be emphasized that the statements of the contributors on the soon-to-be-held reunion of relatives were formulated more as hope than as demands or reproaches. In addition to their preferences, the contributors also considered the ambiguity of the situation, according to which they always adapted and subordinated wishes to the circumstances of the pandemic restrictions.

Contributors expressed a high level of gratitude especially in relation to their own health status during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, they showed concern for their own (mental) health and the health of their relatives. For example, some of them were finding ways to regain physically and mentally fitness after the COVID-19 pandemic. For others, the focus was being concerned about their relatives:

I think of my children and grandchildren, who are currently worried about their jobs, postponing their studies and having to cope with other difficulties, without me being able to help them financially, for example, because I draw a small pension. The main thing in the Corona crisis is to stay healthy and not to get infected.

(Bw4, 76 years)

I also worry about my children that everything is all right. My children all work in the nursing home.

(Bw5, 76 years)

This aim for personal well-being and the well-being of others was also reflected in self-identification as a member of a high-risk group:

I avoid contact with former colleagues or friends, because it is said that 60 to 80 year olds can quickly become infected and ill, as the immune system weakens at that age.

(Bw4, 76 years)

All senior citizens belong to the particularly endangered population group even without previous illnesses.

(Bm3, 73 years)

Of great importance are symbols and gestures that were interpreted as testimonies that their generation is not forgotten or invisible to society:

I received a greeting from the Bürgerhaus [addition by the authors: "Bürgerhaus" a synonym for ASZ] in the form of a piece of cake in my mailbox – for me this was a sign that our generation will not be forgotten.

(Bw4, 76 years)

The quote illustrates that direct human contact or face-to-face conversation was not necessary for all co-researchers to feel that someone was thinking of them.

Discussion

The data shows similarities and differences in the experience and behavior of the older co-researchers during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus is particularly on the emotional dimension of the pandemic.

Consistencies were found in the simultaneity of different expressions of emotion and the oscillation between several opinions that emerged and manifested over time during the lockdown. In this context, the responses reflect on a minor and individual level what is happening on a societal meta-level. The increasing significance of conflict and polarization between the perspectives is also expressed in the statements of the co-researchers. Conspiracy theories are viewed as an expression of a lack of solidarity or as coping with the pandemic, the conflict of moral values between freedom and protection, the view of the future, which seems uncertain and frightening but at the same time also emphasizes hope and "crisis as opportunity."

In this phase of polarization, however, there is always an opportunity for doubt and questioning to lead to new and constructive solutions in coping with the crisis (Bertelsmann-Stiftung 2020).

The findings suggest that the older co-researchers were composed even more confident, in coping with the restrictions that arose from the pandemic situation. For example, although the co-researchers did express worries and concerns, these related less to their own well-being and more to the development of society during and after the pandemic. Thus, they were certainly concerned with the major issues, such as the denial of containment measures or complained with a vehemence about lack of solidarity. At the same time, they maintained a certain continuity in their way of life despite the pandemic from our point of view. In some cases, the co-researchers also seemed to enjoy retreat and silence and consciously emphasized positive aspects of the pandemic.

The attitudes and expressions of the participants in the STARK-zine can be interpreted as a specific form of experiential and coping behavior. Findings from other studies in the COVID-19 pandemic support our observations about how older people cope with life's challenges. For example, an exploratory diary study of 776 people aged 19 to 91, Klaiber et al. (2021) drew attention to the fact that of all the groups, those over 60 were the least emotionally distressed. In contrast, younger study participants exhibited lower perceived coping efficacy in the presence of stressors during the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic (Klaiber et al. 2021). A study at the University of Georgia of 833 people over the age of 60 demonstrates similar findings. Here, the authors describe that in the 60- to 70-year-old age group, about 36% were stressed in the wake of the pandemic. Among those aged 71 and older, the rate was only 26%. The research groups attributed these effects to life experience and the habitualized coping strategies of older people (Emerson 2020).

In April 2020, the research team led by Röhr et al. (Röhr et al. 2020) at the University of Leipzig also found that the 1,005 older people aged 65 to 94 participating in a standardized telephone survey showed little change in terms of mental and social health during the COVID-19 lockdown in Germany. Lang (et al. 2021) focused on similar issues in their "Corona and Age"-study on personal experiences, attitudes, concerns, and behaviors regarding COVID-19. A total of 7 online surveys of 2,200 people aged 18 to 95 took place between March and December 2020 (Lang et al. 2021). The research team notes that participants younger than 60 are becoming aware of the fragility of their own lives for the first time. The cohorts born from the 1960s onward had not yet experienced a crisis greater than this one. The fact that life brings threats is more an experience of older age. However, they can also learn to cope better with unexpected situations (Dörhöfer 2020).

This would indicate resilience to the pandemic situation while disproving common age-related stereotypes of weak and vulnerable older people (Röhr et al. 2020). Older people do not represent a homogeneous group and, accordingly, it is not possible to generalize about the experience and behavior of older people in the pandemic. However, the state of research to this point is incomplete.

Conclusion

The comments made by the co-researchers in the STARK-zine are not sufficient to allow general conclusions about the development of resilience among the older co-researchers with regard to coping with the pandemic.

The questionnaire for the zine was not originally developed with the intention of drawing conclusions about older people's experiences for a scientific publication. Rather, the focus was on using the zine to create a participatory format for exchange, interaction, and further collaboration in the STARK project.

This reveals for us the specific potential of the approach. In addition to collecting data, the STARK project succeeded in testing and adapting an innovative research method using zines for participatory research. Moreover, the zine reflected the participatory moment of the research project, which not only enabled the heterogeneous group of co-researchers to participate from their different life situations, but also stimulated them in a creative way to reflect and to question their experiences and feelings. The STARK-zine can also be used to trace the development of older people from participants to co-researchers to contributors. Following this, each co-researcher was able to contribute according to his or her own expectations and personal resources, and was subsequently represented in the STARK-zine. It would be conceivable to increasingly use the zine as a method and to develop it further in the context of the participatory research paradigm. Zines can be used in creative and individual ways in participatory research projects. However, this would also require further development of analytical methods for analyzing both textual and visual content of zines. Thus, it should be considered that participatory creating a zine is time-consuming and that the development depends on people contributing.

Notes

- 1 The internationally established term “lockdown” can be used to describe cross-sectoral restrictions (e.g. restrictions on contact in the public and private spheres, business and school closing). The restrictions imposed in Germany in March 2020 had a lasting, drastic economic and social impact.
- 2 Data are based on a postal brief survey on the COVID-19 pandemic in June and July 2020 as part of the German Aging Survey (representative cross-sectional and longitudinal survey of persons in the second half of life, conducted since 1996).
- 3 Data basis is formed by the data collected since 2002 and most recently in 2017 from the German Ageing Survey (BMFSFJ 2020:62)
- 4 Data are based on a postal brief survey on the COVID-19 pandemic in June and July 2020 as part of the German Aging Survey (representative cross-sectional and longitudinal survey of persons in the second half of life, conducted since 1996) (DZA 2021:3)
- 5 No information is available about the co-researcher’s age. She only stated that she was receiving a disability pension and had not yet reached the regular retirement age of 65.

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