A room for trust, comfort, and togetherness. Lessons learned from focus groups in digital rooms in research on eldercare

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This paper draws on practice-oriented participatory social work research on moral stress and moral agency in Swedish eldercare. We discuss lessons learned from conducting online focus group interviews with representatives for three vocational categories – care workers, needs assessors and first line managers in eldercare.

The focus group interview is one methodological path to gain understanding of group processes and knowledge production: a methodological approach popular in health and social sciences. Learning from previous research, focus groups conducted in digital rooms have several similarities with focus groups in a physical room.

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

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