Chapter 2

Researching youth participation – theoretical and methodological limitations of existing research and innovative perspectives

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Introduction

Participation is a widely, but variably, used concept in the social sciences. In sociology, it tends to be concerned with the rules and practices of membership in groups and societies, while in political science, it refers to active influence of citizens in decision-making (see Carpentier, 2011). In youth research, these perspectives seem to overlap; young people's political, social and civic participation is seen as an indicator of their integration into society. There is also a pedagogical strand of research interested in understanding how the democracy learning of young people can be supported. In both youth research and pedagogical literature, and especially in related policy arenas, these perspectives often combine normative and analytical aspects, and the concept of participation is sometimes used uncritically, legitimised by a powerful discourse in which young people are addressed as the future of society.

This chapter seeks to provide theoretical and methodological perspectives that help to *deconstruct* the ideological lenses through which participation is continually reproduced in ways defined by powerful institutional actors, and from there *reconstruct* the meaning of participation starting from the perspective of the participants, especially young people. The aim is to create the basis for a critical grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) of youth participation emerging from the analysis of young people's views and practices.

In broad terms, our perspective may be described as constructivist: participation is seen as constructed by interactions between individual, collective and institutional actors situated in unequal power relationships, produced and reproduced by discursive practices and embedded in discursive orders. An exploratory approach is required, in which several heuristic perspectives are applied and combined. This chapter will introduce these perspectives.

We first give a brief overview of research on youth participation, taking account of the definitions and the methodologies underlying this research and their epistemological and theoretical implications, especially in political theory on democracy and in childhood and youth research. Against this backdrop, we develop our approach in six components: *discourse analysis* (how

participation is embedded in orders of power and knowledge); *policy analysis* (how participation is institutionalised in policy contexts); *social space analysis* (how practices of participation are situated in social space); *style analysis* (how young people are active in public space); *biographical analysis* (how participation relates to subjective identity); finally, *analysis of learning processes*. While the first five components formed part of our original design, the final perspective emerged during the course of the research. It focuses on how participation can be limited by pedagogisation (see below), and at learning processes understood as social and situated activities.

Existing research and theorising

The concept of *participation* is a slippery one. It can mean simply taking part in an activity, such as attending school or joining in sporting activities, and is often used in this way in policy sectors related to youth. It also has a stronger meaning, connoting participation with power in decision-making at an individual or a collective level, in personal or public settings.

In the following sections, we first review how participation is conceptualised in theories of democracy and then consider literature from both childhood studies and youth studies looking at the political, social and civic participation of young people and how it can be facilitated.

Participation in theories of democracy

The concept of participation is closely connected to the idea of democracy and citizenship, especially in the context of modern societies. According to Gerhardt (2007), participation refers to the dialectic between self-determination and co-determination and reflects the relation between the modern promise of individual autonomy and the dependency of individuals from others. Habermas (1984) or Benhabib (1996), therefore, stress the need of combining representation with deliberation. Against this backdrop concepts of participatory democracy have been developed (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984; Carpentier, 2016) concerned with how democracy can be deepened and widened, by enabling citizens to participate more directly in decisions than merely by electing representatives, and by extending the areas of social and economic life which are subject to democratic processes. Young (2000) similarly argues that inclusion of wider groups in decision-making promotes social justice, both because everyone's interests are recognised and because everyone's knowledge is made available.

These arguments and concepts are clearly relevant to the position of young people and have been used to argue for their greater inclusion in democratic processes of various kinds, more or less formally and effectively. However, their focus tends to be mainly or entirely on discussion and decision-making (cf. Carpentier, 2016); see below. Also, they rest on liberal views of

democracy, where relations of power and their constitutive role in society are obliterated and the conflicts that they entail reduced to a simple competition of interests that can be harmonised through dialogue. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001), such concepts and approaches neglect the constitutive status of social antagonism and imply a hegemonic act excluding dissident voices. Similarly, Rancière (1998) defines democracy and the political by the claims of those who are excluded from a societal and political order and therefore by disagreement or conflict. He refers to all institutional arrangements meant to maintain social order – including arrangements of representative democracy – as 'police'.

Such an understanding of democracy is important in studying ways of youth participation that might not be recognised as such by conventional understandings of participation. It calls our attention to the importance for young people to create spaces of discord where antagonisms can be explored, particularly in their relation with adults or adult-led settings. Apparently, many young people perceive today's democracy as a staged democracy, where an official discourse is displayed with all the virtues and democratic goals that society stands for, but when put in practice will almost securely fail. As mentioned by Prout and Tisdall (2006: 243), 'any rejection by the young of liberal democracy is not just a rejection of adults' politics, but an insistence that political participation can take different forms'. This implies not to limit the understanding of participation wholly to decision-making and debate but to consider also *action* and what young people do together – which they may not define as political. As Dewey (1916) pointed out, democracy is learned and performed at least as much in shared action as it is in discussion.

Participation in childhood and youth studies

Compared to political theory, childhood and youth studies start from apparently clear and narrow definitions of participation in terms of 'involvement in …' predefined political activities, decision-making in institution or voluntary work. At the same time, the hybrid category of 'children and young people's participation' tends to cause confusion. A key difference between childhood and youth is that, at 18, young people are generally entitled to participate fully in formal politics, while also being responsible as adults for their life decisions, which creates a different context for considering their participation in public life.

Youth research in this field has tended to concentrate on the extent to which young people get involved in a rather narrow range of conventional and formalised forms of participation, such as elections, membership in parties, trade unions and other associations. Although there is a growing view that a broader concept is needed to reflect the relationship between citizenship as a status and as 'lived practice' (Smith et al., 2005; Hoikkala, 2009; Loncle et al., 2012a; Tsekoura, 2016), especially under conditions of individualisation and

de-standardised transitions to adulthood, survey designs aimed at measuring youth participation still dominate.

While there is no clear evidence of a general decline in voting among young people across different studies, data reveal that participation in elections at European level largely reflects national voting patterns (Spannring et al., 2008; Fernandes et al., 2015). Research by Marsh et al. (2007) shows that young people generally do have an understanding and interest in politics but feel that their interests and concerns are not addressed by politicians. Young people also tend to engage more in concrete on-off actions than in formal mechanisms and collective expressions requiring membership (Benedicto, 2013).

Other forms of participation examined by researchers include youth parliaments and youth councils (Walther, 2012a) and youth involvement in evaluation of public services (Ray and Pohl, 2006). This has led to consideration of the extent to which young people feel able to influence institutions regulating their lives: schools, youth welfare, health and housing services, vocational training, employment and leisure. It has been argued that apart from – or sometimes rather than – activating rights, such participation has legitimising functions. In fact, in the activating welfare state, individuals are more and more expected to engage and demonstrate self-responsibility in producing human and social capital for their 'employability' (Walther, 2012b).

At the same time, there has been growing attention to non-formal and informal participation. Nolas (2013) emphasises the emergence of cultures of youth participation in youth work in a time where the latter is under increasing pressure. Youth organisations throughout Europe represent ways to express individual and collective voices in different ways depending on political contexts (Mirazchiyski et al., 2014; Pilkington and Pollock, 2015; Pilkington et al., 2017; Pickard and Bessant, 2018). Collective forms such as squatters or 'reclaim the street' (Waechter, 2011) and protest movements like *Occupy* or *Indignados* reflect distrust towards traditional political institutions (Mizen, 2015).

A consensus that youth cultural leisure activities do not count as participation is beginning to be challenged since research findings on youth cultural practice have contradicted the idea of young people's growing apathy and individualisation (Harris et al., 2010; Pickard and Bessant, 2018). Pfaff (2009) has reconstructed processes of political socialisation of young people connected to specific music styles and scenes. By listening to music and belonging to a certain scene in the youth cultural spectrum, young people both express and get involved in social and political positioning. Pais (2008) shows how interpreting youth cultural expressions as new forms of participation allows the opening of a perspective towards new emerging aspects of citizenship. An important change has been the emergence of the internet, mobile phones and social media as dominant modes of communication with a notable impact on political relationships, especially visible in rebellions and protests (Banaji and Buckingham, 2012; Lüküslü, 2014; Sipos et al., 2017).

In childhood studies, a major influence has come from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) adopted by the United Nations in 1989 and the 'ladder of children's participation' (Hart, 1992). The CRC established children's right to participate in decisions affecting their lives and also to freedom of expression, association and so on. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) has clarified that the right to participate in decisions applied to children collectively as well as individually – much practice, and some policy, having already been built on that understanding. Much of this practice has been criticised as tokenistic, paternalistic and not inclusive of all children and young people (Thomas, 2007; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010). Some have even argued that participation can be seen as a neoliberal tool for achieving compliance (Raby, 2014). Also, the dominance in discourse of 'voice' and 'listening to children' has been increasingly questioned. Lundy (2007) proposed a four-part framing of participation as 'space', 'voice', 'audience' and 'influence' which still implies that children and young people express their views and adults make the decisions. That limitation has begun to be addressed by a focus on *dialogue* – where all voices come together in a process that can end in some shared agreement (Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Mannion, 2010). This means attending to the *spaces* in which dialogue takes place – how they are chosen, constructed and managed, the relations which they express and permit, and the identifications that actors bring to the space (cf. Tsekoura, 2016).

However, that still leaves us within a discourse of conversation, debate and discussion, and it still assumes that children and young people's participation necessarily involves adults. An alternative view proposes to move away from what people *say* to each other and look at what they *do* together. Percy-Smith (2015) has pointed out that children and young people do not always want to sit in a room and talk, with each other or with adults, but that does not mean that they do not want to take part in what is going on in a community. When we look at children and young people's participation in political campaigns, social movements as well as in school or community, we see that this is at least as much about shared action as it is about discussion.

How much support young people need in order to participate in this way is seen to depend not only on their capacities but also on specific barriers that they face. Barriers and capacities vary with age and other demographic variables, and barriers may sometimes appear in the guise of facilitation. An example is in the school sector, where the main vehicle for student participation has been student councils, more or less managed and convened by teachers and frequently regarded as irrelevant by many students (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006; Robinson and Taylor, 2013). At the opposite end of the continuum, there are many examples of students taking direct action to express their concerns, walking out or going on strike, in the face of strong opposition from teachers and other adults (Cunningham and Lavalette, 2016).

Shier (2001) has argued that participation by children depends on adults being prepared to give up some of their power, in a structured, consistent and committed way. Organisations working with children and young people in Latin America and South Asia, where actions and approaches are sometimes more radical than in the affluent West, use a concept of children's *protagonism*, which emphasises young people's agency and their capacity to *lead* action for change (Liebel and Saadi, 2010; Nuggehalli, 2014). In this way, it is argued, participation can become transformative rather than merely instrumental (Tisdall et al., 2014).

This brief review of the research literature from childhood and youth studies shows that there is still much uncertainty as to what is meant by youth participation, on how it is to be conceptualised and understood. While youth research tends to conceptualise youth participation as political, social and civic participation, reflecting an understanding of 'participation in …' (something predefined), the emphasis in childhood studies is more on involvement in decision-making concerning one's own life. In contrast, debates in political theory are more profound in questioning and reconceptualising concepts of democracy and participation. There is much to be learned from bringing those perspectives together but also a need to move on to a more open question about participation grounded in observation of what children and young people actually do in more or less public spaces.

New theoretical and methodological perspectives

Much existing research conceptualises youth participation as 'involvement in …' (decision-making, elections, parties, non-conventional political activities, associations or civic initiatives). This means that the ways of 'taking part', and the parts of society which are at stake, are predefined, and that analytical and normative aspects of participation are interwoven and seldom reflected on. As a consequence, a large share of everyday life practices in which individuals take part in society are not recognised as participation.

This volume, therefore, develops a critical understanding of youth participation by reconstructing meanings of participation from what young people do in public spaces, what it means to them and what claims are inherent to these practices. We start from a minimal working definition of participation as 'practice in public spaces' (including spaces often described as semi-public or local, but where some amount of collectivity and openness is present) to avoid problems involved in classical approaches of conceptualising participation as intentional action and measuring young people's orientations and activities in relation to normative and ideological indicators. First, we assume that in activities marked by individuals as participation, more drivers are involved than those intended and declared. Second, we assume that acts undertaken in public space, even without consciousness of public space or of a wider community, include claims of being a part of this wider community

and are invested with meaning and knowledge shared with others. We, therefore, seek traces of these claims on public, shared or common good, even when they are not explicitly declared.

We, therefore, apply several theoretical and methodological perspectives as heuristic lenses, all connected to the constructivist epistemological paradigm of *reconstruction*. We aim to analyse how participation is constructed by discourses, is contextualised by local policies, situated in social space, evolves in different styles of practice, emerges in individual biographies and relates to processes of social learning. The following sections explain the methodological approaches that underpin the research design presented in the introduction to this volume (see Chapter 1).

Discourse analysis: the power of knowledge

The following passage from the European Commission (2009: 8) is typical of many policy statements on participation:

> Full participation of young people in civic and political life is an increasing challenge, in light of the gap between youth and the institutions … increasing youth participation in the civic life of local communities and in representative democracy, by supporting youth organisations as well as various forms of 'learning to participate', by encouraging participation of non-organised young people and by providing quality information services.

The words 'full participation' illustrate the normativity of participation: the more the better. Further, the statement includes a supposedly objective diagnosis: participation is decreasing or becoming more difficult. In addition, the passage emphasises desirable forms and contexts of youth participation: civic and political life (assumed to be expressed in 'institutions'), local communities, representative democracy and youth organisations. All the settings not listed are implicitly marked as not being cases of participation. This leads to a second diagnosis: young people are not capable, not well informed or are afraid to participate. From this deficit perspective, it is clear how the gap between youth and institutions is to be closed: young people have to change and adapt, but they need support, encouragement and education (see also Chapters 3 and 12 in this volume). The objective is for them to participate in something that is already happening without them.

In a post-structuralist reading, discourses are constellations of power and knowledge that create an order of what can be seen and what can be said, what is seen as normal, or deviant, in a given context. While the idea of discourses as *orders* of knowledge stresses the powerful persistence of discourses, the concept of discursive *practices* refers to the emergence of orders of knowledge from processes of (re)production and interpretation (Wrana, 2015).

The power of discourses has been also analysed with regard to processes of subjectivation. Butler (2015) refers to the fact that individuals are at the same time recognised and addressed as actors of their lives and thereby subjected to a specific normative order. This means, the way in which young people are addressed and link their selves with the community by engaging voluntarily for the 'common good' and by subjecting themselves to the knowledge order of individualised societies, depends on the dominant discourse and images of youth in a given situation. A discourse perspective also brings into view the amalgam of emancipatory traditions and neoliberal demands of self-responsibility of the activating welfare state (Walther, 2012b).

In terms of methodology, a discourse perspective implies analysing how specific knowledge is being mobilised to produce situations and address individuals in particular ways. Discourse analysis often is limited to analysing policy documents that are likely to be taken up by many policy actors, as in the example above, and thus influence a wider discursive arena (see Chapters 3 and 4). However, discourses are being constantly produced and reproduced not only by institutional but also by individual actors. While analysing the repertoire of key concepts structuring a discursive arena provides insights into the respective discursive order, analysing practices constructing objects, making distinctions, reasoning and justifying, addressing and positioning subjects enables us to reconstruct its emergence, often in complex and contradictory forms (Wrana, 2015). Such complex practices can be found in interview transcripts or ethnographic field notes (e.g. Chapters 5, 8 or 12), revealing how participation emerges from young people being addressed as 'citizens in the making' (Hall et al., 1999) and re-signifying this discourse in different ways.

Institutionalisation of participation through youth policies

Institutions are an important element of discursive orders, providing continuity across time and space. Most processes of institutionalisation of youth participation are related to youth policies. Youth policies can be briefly conceptualised as 'the overarching framework of governmental (and sometimes non-governmental) activity directed towards young people: at, for and with them' (Williamson, 2007: 57). Youth policies reflect how a society addresses young people and what is seen as necessary and normal for growing up successfully according to dominant norms. Youth policies can address young people as a resource for society that needs to be 'nourished' (European Commission, 2009: 2) or as a problem for others and for themselves that needs control and correction. These trends tend to change according to time and context; at present, values of employability and self-responsibility are central in youth policies across Europe (cf. Loncle et al., 2012a).

Youth policies, and so the institutionalisation of youth participation, are multilevel. At the European level, we see programmatic documents giving overall direction and providing underpinning funding. 'Hard' youth policies relating to employment, training and social security are mainly formulated at national level and can be clustered by comparative analysis in terms of welfare regimes or youth transition regimes (Walther, 2006). While hard policies are assumed to lay the structural prerequisites for young people's participation, they are rarely organised in a participatory way. Participation tends to be more explicitly addressed by non-formal initiatives in the 'soft' policy areas while informal activities predominantly emerge in the context of everyday life. There are of course interactions between scales and sectors of intervention, which are more or less coordinated and which makes the reconstruction and assessment of youth policies more difficult (Loncle et al., 2012b; Pilkington et al., 2017).

Methodologically, analysing the institutionalisation of youth participation through youth policies with a focus on the local level requires a comparative approach that allows focusing on the single (local) case contextualising with regard to welfare regimes at national level and wider policy discourses at European level, that distinguishes programmes from provision and use, that studies actors and their power relationships as well as the interdependence of different institutions (Andreotti et al., 2012). This means that examination of local policy constellations must be multi-perspective and aimed at reconstructing interactions rather than reproducing institutional top-down perspectives (see Chapter 4).

Participation as situated in social space

Our focus is on participation in public space. This can be physical or virtual but has to be understood as social: '… an ensemble of relations that makes them appear as juxtaposed, set off against one another, implicated by each other – that makes them appear, in short, as a sort of configuration' (Foucault, 1986: 22). 'Social space describes […] the space of human actions in society. This means the space constituted by the actors (subjects) and therefore [designates] not only the reified places (objects)' (Kessl and Reutlinger, 2009: 199–200). Social space structures social life while in turn allowing for a multiplicity of meanings and being constantly under construction. The concept 'social space' also opens the possibility of new constructions of 'the public' as private troubles turn to public issues and the personal becomes political.

A key term for understanding the interrelationship of structure and agency in and through social space is *appropriation* as a concept for young people's socialisation and identity development through their relationship with material and symbolic objects. When grasping, using and trying to understand objects – or spaces – in their natural and social environment, young people incorporate the abilities and skills demanded by that environment

(Zimmermann et al., 2018). However, in the process of appropriating space, they also (re)create space by trying to turn it into meaningful *places*.

Cities are configurations of social space characterised by increased density of social relationships and visible diversity, carrying promises of inclusiveness which are undermined by segregation and selectivity. Appropriation is thereby structured by inequality and sanctions for transgressing institutional and socio-economic boundaries. In many cities, commercialisation, privatisation and exclusion are designed into the physical space in order to exclude unwanted groups such as young people who are not acting as individual consumers in the sanctioned fashion (Kallio and Häkli, 2011). At the same time, urban space is closely associated with the public sphere, especially due to the high visibility of different actors, interests and perspectives it provides and its promises of general accessibility and inclusiveness. This shows how public space is not just a neutral arena; it is also a site for interest-based claims and power relations (cf. Skelton, 2000).

A spatial perspective towards youth participation focuses analysis on social relations, particularly relations with the public *sphere*. It requires bringing specific relational spatial orderings or configurations, and their permanent reproduction by different actors, to the forefront (cf. Tsekoura, 2016). A space-sensitive methodology of researching youth participation, therefore, implies a multilevel and multisite approach concerned with visibilities and invisibilities as well as with boundaries and surfaces, asking who maintains these and what lies beneath and beyond (Reutlinger, 2013). This does not necessarily imply conducting an ethnographic study in a strict sense, but rather an approach inspired by ethnography aiming at exploring and mapping actors and relationships; interrogating official meanings and purposes of spaces for youth, and for comparison asking young people about their favoured places and the activities and experiences associated with them (rather than asking them directly what they think of youth participation); following the movements of young people, their interaction partners in and through the city, and the diversity of movements also with regard to gender, class or ethnicity (see Chapters 6 and 7).

Styles of participation

Starting from the assumption that young people feel alienated from both the form and content of formalised participation, a key concern in reconceptualising youth participation is analysing *what* young people do in public spaces and *how* they do it. This has been addressed by the concept of 'style' originally developed by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). 'Style' was understood as the specific appropriation of the products and symbols of mass culture by young people 'as young people' and everyday life became a particular focus of cultural studies (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Willis, 1977; Hebdige, 1978). Culture was conceived as a map of meanings which could

deviate from the dominant-hegemonic culture and become a sub-culture with the potential of resistance. Consequently, youth subcultures were studied under the angle of how these groups appropriated cultural goods and how the processes of appropriation were influenced by the social positions of their members. The concept of subcultures has encountered criticism inasmuch as it implies marginal and subordinate status in relation to mainstream culture while neglecting its creative aspects beyond mere 'imaginary solutions' (Fornäs, 1995). Other authors refer to post-subcultures offering a reconstruction of young people's cultural life styles and life worlds and thus providing access to informal ways of participation in society such as meeting among peers, hanging out and engaging in self-initiated social activities (Miles, 2000; Bennett, 2015). They are articulations of identities against the backdrop of different social positions and may be seen as the performance of 'struggles over recognition' (Honneth, 1995), frequently coupled with a need and will for distinction. In this sense, youth cultural styles can be understood as implicit articulations of the 'political' in its relationship with the personal (Batsleer, 2010). Thus, the relationships and boundaries between young people's everyday life activities, identity work and resistance become more fluid (cf. Ferreira, 2016).

In terms of methodology, entering the field with questions 'what are they doing?' and 'why are they doing it?' may obscure the search for meaning; 'how?' questions allow for more open and precise descriptions and thus provide more reliable access to the 'what?'. In consequence, starting from reconstructing the *how* of practices opens a new perspective of 'what for?' inasmuch as consequences of actions may differ from declared intentions (see Chapters 8 and 9). Style is the way that meaning-making and experience/practice are linked. It both recognises and creates the possibility of emergence and thus needs being reconstructed to understand the different forms of participation. Apart from participatory observation, group discussions can give access to practical knowledge of young people by reconstructing how they refer to each other and the shared meanings of their activities in public spaces. In contrast, individual interviews tend to force individuals to focus on their individual part in these activities – which of course is relevant for the reconstruction of biographies.

Analysis of participation biographies

Biographical analysis is interested in understanding how individuals reconstruct their process of becoming, their involvement in specific practices and positions and the making of subjective meaning of this in the context of their life story. Biography implies a time perspective of identity processes over time across past, present and future. Schwanenflügel (2015) has developed the concept of *participation biographies*, referring to the accumulation of subjective experience of self-determination and recognition

in relation to the public sphere. This implies that from every individual's life story, a participation biography may be reconstructed by referring to those biographical constellations in which involvement in specific practices in the public sphere became subjectively meaningful and 'functional' (cf. Wood, 2017).

Locating biography at the individual level does not mean opposing it to social structure. It is conceptualised in terms of duality of structure (Giddens, 1984) or 'the sociality of biography and the biographicity of the social' (Alheit and Dausien, 2002: 15). It may be helpful to distinguish biography from the concepts *life course*, representing the normative, age-based and institutionalised phases, roles and positions, and *life trajectory*, the actual sequence of events and career of steps in an individual life. Thus, the three concepts are related in terms of a dialectic of structure and agency. The life course stimulates biographical construction as it confronts individuals with demands that need to be appropriated in the process of subjective meaning-making. At the same time, it depends on being used and reproduced by individuals in constructing their biographies which is then articulated in actual life trajectories.

Biographical analysis is a reconstructive operation aimed at understanding 'how' individuals construct their life stories and how they make subjective meaning of social situations and life events in their narrative; it does not aim at discovering who and how an individual is 'in reality'. Biographical analysis draws on narrative biographical interviews in which individuals are invited and encouraged to tell their whole life story without giving them too much further direction. Analysis reconstructs the subjective meaning-making and relates it to the social context in which the narrative has been produced (cf. Rosenthal, 2004).

Analysing participation biographies implies reconstructing how individuals present themselves in general in the construction of their life story and relate it to specific experiences and positionings in relation to the public sphere. Analysis may either focus on reconstructing different kinds of participation careers from the sequences of events in young people's lives (see Chapter 10) or on elaborating dimensions of subjective meaning-making related to involvement in practices in the public sphere (see Chapter 11).

Reflexive analysis of learning processes

The final perspective is one that developed during the course of the research. The review of existing research literature has revealed how the challenge of youth participation is often seen as to ensure that young people learn how to participate. Much existing work in this area comes under the heading of citizenship education, defined by UNESCO (1998) as 'educating children, from early childhood, to become clear-thinking and enlightened citizens who participate in decisions concerning society'. Citizenship education is

often discussed as an answer to the 'problem' of weak political engagement among the young while neglecting the relevance of learning in everyday life (Biesta et al., 2009; Wohnig, 2017).

It may be argued that citizenship education in itself is inherently didactic and adult-dominated while Barber (2009: 38) questions the assumed link between forms of 'participation' and citizenship: 'The proposition that youth participation is fundamentally democratic is perhaps flawed if we acknowledge that many examples of so-called youth empowerment are adult dominated and in many ways stage managed'. This aspect may also be interpreted in terms of 'pedagogisation': more and more areas of society and social life are being re-interpreted as individual capacities which need to be developed through education.

The idea of learning to participate before actually participating disregards established social learning theory (Bandura, 1963). Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) argue that learning is necessarily situated by joining communities of practice via a process of 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Learning occurs through absorbing the modes of action and meaning of this community as a part of the process of becoming a member while also invests the own meaning-making and thus transforming the community. Percy-Smith (2015) emphasises that participation necessarily brings about processes of learning as both individuals and those involved in interactive processes with them re-position themselves with regard to society. Thus, learning and participation are interrelated and need to be seen as thoroughly social processes in a double sense: learning evolves from being involved in social practice and is not only the individual addressed as learner but also the other actors involved who learn.

In terms of methodology, this means first that existing settings of participation, especially those institutionalised formally or non-formally with the aim of fostering young people's participation, need to be analysed with regard to processes of pedagogisation: what are underlying intentions and do they leave scope for appropriating and interpreting them in different ways. This can be done by contrasting young people's and adult practitioners' views or by participatory observations of how adults and young people interact in formal and non-formal settings or how institutional representatives address young people who are informally active in public spaces. Second, learning processes can be elaborated by biographical analysis reconstructing turning points in the way individuals present and position themselves with regard to others. Third, ethnographic studies can be a fruitful approach to observing and reconstructing pedagogical interaction. This culminates where the tool of participatory observation is applied in the framework of action research projects of and with young people where the boundary between researchers, educators and young people is made permeable, shared action and experience is reflected on in a dialogic and diffractive way, and new habits of practice are enabled to be repeated (Percy-Smith, 2011).

Conclusions: reconstructive perspectives on power and practice in public spaces

From the standpoint that much previous research has pursued a narrow understanding of youth participation that reproduces adult perspectives and interests, the aim of this chapter was to develop theoretical and methodological perspectives that allow a re-conceptualisation. This implies three things: a broad and open working definition according to which young people's practices in public space need to be seen as potentially participatory, even if they are not recognised as 'participation' by others; a theoretical perspective and methodology that is able to identify and reflect the normative and interest-led aspects of dominant concepts of participation; a reconstructive approach aimed at the inherent meanings of young people's practices in public space alongside the discursive, institutional and pedagogical practices addressing young people as citizens 'in the making'.

The elements of this perspective – discourses, institutionalisation, social space, cultural styles, biographies and learning – suggest three *theoretical* aspects as crucial in understanding (youth) participation:

- Participation needs to be seen as *social practice* which means that participation is 'done' in complex interactions, negotiations and struggles.
- These social practices articulate, reproduce and transform *power relationships* inherent to processes of institutionalisation and domination but also of coping with everyday life which may involve latent or manifest contestation and resistance.
- Finally, participation implies that social practices and power relationships emerge in *public spaces*, that is spaces where what is done is seen and heard by (if not always addressed to) others. They are practices which in some sense make public claims.

The research process was, therefore, necessarily designed in terms of exploration and discovery, making young people's activities its primary object, but contextualising them in the complex discursive and interactive networks from which they emerge. This means the *methodological* baseline of the design described in the introduction (see Chapter 1 in this volume) is *constructivist*, aiming at deconstructing and reconstructing the meanings different actors and discourses ascribe to participation; *ethnographic*, not in a strict sense, but in the sense of following and engaging with the field in constituting the research object; and multilevel or better, *multisite*, in order to avoid reifying hierarchies between different actors and perspectives. The aim is to develop a theoretical understanding of participation grounded in the analysis of the interactions between *how* young people are addressed by others – especially adults and institutional actors – and *what* young people do in, and with regard to, public spaces.

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