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The Promise and Deception of Participation in Welfare Services for Unemployed Young People

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Abstract

This study examined the role of welfare services in the participative citizenship of young people under 30 years of age outside the labour market. Thematic content analysis of the government's white papers regarding participation policies, as well as participatory action research projects in two Finnish towns, were used to identify factors that enable or hinder participation for this group of service users. The paradigm of participation was critically examined with reference to the theoretical framework of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's "dialectic of Enlightenment", which proposes the parallel existence of the promise and the deception of Enlightenment. The results indicated that user participation holds the potential to promote democratization, consolidation, and qualitative improvements in services, especially by valuing experience-based knowledge and enabling the growing political citizenship of young people. However, the promises of the paradigm of participation can turn toward deception when applied as a managerialistic workfare instrument to control young people's behaviour and can even deepen marginalization by focusing only on their absence from workforce participation. The ambivalent role of social sciences and social work as agencies of Enlightenment in developing participation technologies is also discussed.

Keywords: paradigm of participation, welfare services, young people, unemployment, dialectic of Enlightenment

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Introduction

The growing paradigm of participation has expanded into a new mainstream ideology, in the reforms of welfare services and educational systems in European welfare states (Delsen, 2016; The Independent, 2013; Johansson & Hvinden, 2007). Participation in social sciences refers mainly to different mechanisms of democratic citizenship; for example, the expressing of one's opinion, participation in decision-making, and deliberative practices in human communities (Rosenberg, 2007). In the context of welfare services, it also refers to social participation, social inclusion, and the involvement of service users in various processes of services, as well as the co-creation of knowledge (Beresford, 2000, 2010; Matthies & Uggerhoej, 2014). Sherry Arnstein's (1969) classic theoretical framework of "the ladder of participation" is used extensively in researching participation in welfare services. Applying her theory to services, manipulative methods count as non-participation and service systems-led participation is considered as tokenism, whereas citizens' partnership, delegating power, and granting control of services to service users enables citizens to attain a powerful position on the highest step of the ladder of participation. Programs of activation and motivation building for service users (European Commission, 2010; Matthies & Uggerhoej, 2014; Newman, 2005) have accompanied the paradigm of participation. Political institutions and sciences have created categories of non-participative citizens, and targeted measures have been applied to make these categories of people more participative (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency of the European Commission ECEA, 2012; Novy, 2014). Our article is based on the assumption that a large number of the most non-participative groups of citizens are users of various welfare services and are often existentially dependent on them. Consequently, it has become evident that service agencies can play a key role in the participative citizenship of these people – either strengthening or hindering this. In the context of welfare services, participation and marginalization can be regarded as normative twin-concepts that represent opposite ends of the same process. Citizens, especially those who need services, struggle between marginalization and access to participation in their everyday life. The system of welfare services, which may be their most important contact with institutions or society, can pivotally affect citizens' participation in one direction or the other (Matthies, 2014).

Rooted in the deliberative movements of Western societies and the progressive reforms of the welfare state, the participation paradigm can be regarded as an extension of the long project of Enlightenment, as it promises emancipatory processes of justice and welfare for all (Israel, 2010). However, according to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's philosophical concept of the "dialectic of Enlightenment" (1947/2002), all progressive processes potentially embody both promise and deception. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that this dialectic character of Enlightenment is a basic motif of history. Humankind faces a challenge: to realize that the triumph of Enlightenment at the same time invites a constant and corresponding risk of its deception. The risk of turning toward deception grows while the idea of Enlightenment itself progresses (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2002, p. 36). Correspondingly, the participation paradigm has proved successful since entering mainstream discussion in welfare services and public policies. However, critical research of participation policies demonstrates the contingent role of welfare services: any intervention by welfare services embeds the potential to either hinder or enable participation.

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The primary aim of this article is to reflect on the overall results of a three-year research project funded by the National Research Council of the Academy of Finland (2011–2014). The research objectives were as follows: (a) to identify factors enabling or hindering participative citizenship of marginalized groups with respect to welfare services, and (b) to propose new and more relevant practices for enabling marginalized citizens to develop their own forms of participation. We do not discuss the empirical methods and research process in detail, as they involved various levels of data collection and stakeholder groups (see also, e.g., Närhi & Kokkonen, 2014; Närhi, Kokkonen, & Matthies, 2013; 2014). Instead, after summarizing the methods, we reflect on the main findings in relation to the participation paradigm using the critical theoretical framework.

Our research focused on the most non-participative citizens. To identify this category amongst the population, we used available statistics for non-voting rates in political elections, which are accurately recorded in most European societies. In Finland, the group with the highest non-voting rate is characterized by low income, little education, limited social capital, living in urban suburbs, being of a young age and, in most cases, being of the male gender (Grönlund & Milner, 2006; Grönlund & Setälä, 2007; Paloheimo, 2005). Due to their disadvantaged profile, members of the identified group are also users of welfare services and recipients of income benefits from the public welfare system.

Consequently, we concentrated on the experiences of young unemployed people aged between 18 and 30 using welfare services in two different cities in Finland. The first step of our empirical process involved understanding the national political framework of the participation paradigm in Finland. Therefore, we analyzed the meaning of the concept of participation in core government white papers. Secondly, in the field of participatory research, we aimed to identify factors of social and labour market services that may hinder or enable participative citizenship of young service users. The results were expected to advance understanding regarding relevant practices for enabling young people to adopt their own forms of participation. Our paper concludes with critical reflections on the technologies of participation and their potential for deception. We also discuss the ambivalent role that social sciences and social work have in researching participation, in its practical development, and in acting as educators of practitioners.

Neoliberalism and Youth in Finland

Finland is generally regarded as a country that applies the Scandinavian model of a welfare state, with comprehensive public responsibility and a high level of welfare provision (Goodin, Parpo, & Kangas, 2004). However, Finland has not been immune to neoliberal tendencies that have been dominant since the mid–1990s, and the enduring economic crisis that began in 2008 (Jokivuori, 2013). Both phenomena have changed the nature of the country's welfare policies (Jokivuori, 2013). When this neoliberal ideology became the framework for restructuring the Finnish welfare state, its visible signs were a deterioration in social transfers, the tax cuts, efficiency requirements, and starving public services of funds and exposing them to market forces (Martikainen & Gauthier, 2016). Consequently, income and health inequality have increased rapidly, and poverty rates have started to grow (Martikainen & Gauthier, 2016). The increase in the number of NEET youth (not in employment, education, or training) has become particularly alarming (Bambra, 2013; Jutila, 2010; Kröger, 2011).

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At the outset of this research project in 2011, the youth unemployment rate in Europe was 21.7% and in Finland 21.1% (Eurostat, 2017). The rates were high due to not only the economic crisis and demanding job situation, but also due to cuts in relevant services in the areas of education, school social work, health services, and youth work (Närhi & Kokkonen, 2014). As a countermeasure to these social problems, young people outside education or employment have become targets of increasingly extensive activation policies. These policies are comprised of inclusion in education, projects against social exclusion, and, most importantly, political measures that favour work over social benefits. In critical discussion, these types of policies are also called workfare policies – a description that underlines the role of activation policies in the gradual dismantling of the welfare state (Saklin & Keskitalo, 2005). The core idea of activation policies is to tackle unemployment as an individual problem, not as a social problem caused by economic structures. Because of this, activation policies focus on the obligation of unemployed people to demonstrate their active search for work and willingness to participate in training. The unemployed are also expected to follow individual activation plans, which are in essence contracts between themselves and the social administration (Aerschot, 2011; Keskitalo, 2007; Raeymaekers & Dierckx, 2013). As compensation for their effort and obedience, activated people can receive support and personal guidance to help them conduct their lives in the complex system of the labour market and social security.

Regarding NEET youth, the stigmatizing label of "*socially excluded*" (World Bank 2013, p. 54) became a popularly used statement in the actor networks of various agencies (Latour, 2005; Perttula, 2015). This ranged from educational, social, and labour market policy-makers, to charity organizations and even to entrepreneurs and managers concerned with the competitiveness of the national economy (Perttula, 2015; Satka & Harrikari, 2008). This shift towards stigmatizing participation policies has had an impact on the work at street level of qualified practitioners in social and labour market services, particularly social workers with a Master's degree or social service workers with a Bachelor's degree. They are now increasingly being tasked with controlling service users' behaviour, and administrating managerialistic service processes related to unemployment. Fewer opportunities remain for undertaking real social work: to empower and support people, and search for structural solutions to social problems. Practitioners struggle to find time to build a trusting relationship or focus on the comprehensive wellbeing of service users. Further, less attention can be paid to factors behind the risk of social exclusion, such as mental health problems or challenges in coping with everyday life (Juhila, 2006; Närhi & Kokkonen, 2014).

A number of critical participation researchers, such as Van Berkel and van der Aa (2012), use the concept of participation technologies while referring to the variety of welfare-to-work measurements, such as regular office visits, individual activation plans, group works, and training courses. However, the various impacts of participation technologies on young unemployed citizens have not been extensively researched. Van Berkel and van der Aa (2012) suggest that little is known about how street-level practitioners contribute to, or resist, the workfare reforms and activation of unemployed people, in regard to the practitioners' key role in the implementation of social policies (Lipsky, 1980). Roets et al. (2012) concluded from their research in Belgium that social workers have a certain degree of discretion to negotiate the understanding of participation in relation to labour market policies (see also Närhi et al., 2013, 2014).

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Stevens, Bur, and Young (2003) compared participation strategies that were applied to combating social exclusion in Europe. They found four different types of targeted participation strategies, which they labeled *People*, *Jobs*, *Rights*, and *Power*. Looking at the long-term efficiency of these social political instruments, Stevens et al. (2003) argued that, ideally, the instruments should be applied in parallel. Nonetheless, if applied in isolation, investment in "*People*" that target individual growth, by approaches, such as participation in group activities, has been the most effective. Enhancement of "*Rights*" was also effective, through developing accessibility to services, and improving information and the communication practices of social rights (Steven et al., 2003, p. 85). In contrast, a neoliberal focus on *"jobs"* and direct access to the labour market only has not been successful, especially when relevant jobs were not actually available in the region (Steven et al., 2003, pp. 86–89). Finally, Stevens and colleagues point out that structural empowerment through the instruments of "*Power*" (the use of deliberative means for enabling participation in public political fields) rarely occurred. Of all the instruments, Power seemed to be the most challenging, and least accepted, in service systems. However, the researchers claimed that individual empowerment could benefit from structural empowerment, if, because of this, political power is also transferred to people. In situations where this was applied, important processes of subjectivization and the strengthening of political citizenship could be observed (Steven et al., 2003). These processes have also affected labour market access. Even today, policies of inclusion and participation have tended to repeat other measures, even if unsuccessfully, rather than shifting power to people in marginalized positions (Stevens et al., 2003; see also Raeymaekers & Dierckx, 2013; Watson, 2015).

Data and Methods

We implemented our empirical research at three different levels and incorporated three different data strands, which are here summarized individually.

Understanding of Participation in White Papers

We initially explored how the political understanding and agenda of participation were manifested in state-based white papers in Finland. We examined how participation was defined and what kind of space was reserved in political agendas for the participation of citizens and, in particular, marginalized groups. The data consisted of: (a) documents describing the programs of the three recent governments covering the era from 2003 to 2015 that we considered from the perspective of planning and implementing participatory policies; and (b) five strategic key papers of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (MSAH, 2006), and of the Ministry of Employment and the Economy (MEE). The latter were expressing the operational level of understanding participation in the context of social services and the labour market.

Both sets of data were analyzed with qualitative content analysis (e.g., Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002; Weber, 1990), which is useful for classifying similarities and differences by summarizing them from the textual data. As Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002) stated, with content analysis condensed descriptions from studied phenomenon can be formed and the results placed into a broader context that includes previous research results. In the first textual data strand, the qualitative content analysis (e.g., Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002; Weber, 1990) was based on a careful and holistic examination of government programs. The analysis paid attention to those parts of the texts that specifically mentioned the words "active citizenship" or "participation", or that

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discussed policy changes relevant to either of these themes. The respective parts of the data were marked and categorized thematically into simplified sub-categories of expressions, such as "democracy", "work", or "education". The sub-categories were then reorganized and tagged into main categories based on theoretical discussion regarding participatory policies (Johansson & Hvinden, 2007; Evers & Guillemard, 2013).

Content analysis was also applied in examination of the ministries' white papers. From the documents, we extracted sentences in which "citizen" or "service user participation" were mentioned. This was again accomplished through careful and holistic reading and included sentences in which citizens' participation and user involvement were implied. In the process of analysis, the original sentences were categorized into simplified expressions. The simplified expressions were then re-organized according to the target groups mentioned in the key papers, in order to analyze how participation documents define different agency groups and, in particular, marginalized citizens.

The Participants

The two further data collection sets of the research were based on participation of service users and practitioners of welfare services. The 20 young service users consisted of people aged between 18 and 30 using welfare services due to being unemployment. They were recruited in both cities through the services which they were receiving - such as public labour market services, social counselling services, and services for social and labour market benefits - and projects provided by NGOs and the public sector, offering activation measures to young unemployed people. These projects included various recycling and arts workshops, and community cafés, where the young people could achieve working life experiences as part of their activation program. However, their participation in the research was voluntary, and motivated by their practitioners and the research team. The young participants played a double role in this research: they were representing the group statistically identified as the most non-participative citizens, as well as being service users of various social and welfare services due to their particular life situation as unemployed citizens dependent on welfare support.

For the second, the research participants consisted of the 20 street-level practitioners who worked with young people facing unemployment. They were employed as social workers, project workers or social care workers in the public labour market services, social counselling, and social services or in activation projects offered by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or public sectors in the two cities. The practitioners were regarded as street-level experts who were in direct contact with young service users. They voluntarily participated in the research during work time out of a personal and professional interest.

Group Interviews on Participation Policies

In the second set of data collection, the study focused on the practical level of implementing participation policies. We held group interviews in two Finnish cities in order to examine how policies of participation are concretized within young people's lives, and the practices of people who are working with them. We asked young people and their practitioners in separate group interviews what factors enable or hinder participative citizenship, and subjectivization of marginalized citizens, in the field of welfare services. We interviewed 20

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young people altogether, in five groups. Each group was interviewed twice, as the discussion about their experiences of factors promoting or hindering participation in services were separated as interview themes.

In a similar research setting, the 20 practitioners from both towns were interviewed twice. In addition, these interviews focused on the question of how participative citizenship of young unemployed service users was enabled or hindered in the context of services.

We used group interviews to collect the data because they enabled the discussion to go beyond individual points of view and provided a chance for collective knowledge formation (Hennink, 2007). Another aim of group interviews was for them to function as a way to think collectively about necessary changes in service systems. Additionally, group interviews offered a space for creating ideas for actions in the resulting Participatory Action Research (PAR) process (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) of our research project.

The interview data were also analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Based on our research questions, the data were divided into two categories: "the barriers of participation" and "the possibilities of participation". The main categories found in the coded data were participation in service systems, participation in labour market, and participation in society in general. Furthermore, we created sub-categories based on the question of how barriers and possibilities were understood in the data. These expressions then led to further combined categories.

Based on the research question, the data from these interviews were divided into the categories of "defining participation", "the barriers of participation", and "the possibilities of participation." Sub-categories were then formed from each according to how they were evident in welfare services: (a) definition; (b) hindrances of participation; and (c) possibilities of participation. These sub-categories then led to new, shared categories and, after this process, the analysis was deepened with a theoretical-conceptual discussion of participation in the existing literature.

PAR as a Framework in the Increasing of Participation Opportunities

As the third level, documentation of the PAR process (Banks, 2016; Kindon et al., 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Smith, 2016) and participatory observation (Spradley, 1980) were applied as data collecting methods. Our aim was to find out how it might be possible to increase the participation of young adults by acting together with their peers and practitioners of social and employment services in order to bring about changes in the identified hindering factors. We were interested in how young people were able to participate in the development processes of local welfare services. Furthermore, we were interested in discovering the ways of participating that young people considered as important.

The main results of both the practitioners' and service users' focus group interviews were discussed in joint meetings together with both groups. These new types of shared reflective discussions across the separated roles of practitioners and service users became inspiring starting points for the PAR process. Young service users themselves, to address improvements in the Experiments with a number of new more-participatory practices were experimented. The PAR

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process lasted two years, with the actors being mainly local young people who had participated in the focus group interviews, supported by their practitioners and our research team. During the PAR, they discussed their experiences of social, employment, and health services, and planned ways to achieve changes in the issues they found challenging. The main agenda of the young people arose from joint discussions with the practitioners. Its main goal was to speak to decision makers about young people's life situations in unemployment, and how welfare services could better meet their real needs. The data from the PAR consisted of the researchers' written observation diaries, which documented various field situations, occasions, and actions undertaken by young people.

The young people's agenda included different actions. One group of young people produced peer-supportive leaflets for their peers in similar situations, sharing their experience-based knowledge about how to survive in the welfare system, giving practical hints, and empowering their peers. Some of the young people were invited, as experts, to take part in municipal service planning groups and to assist in the training of future social workers at our university through sharing their experiences and suggesting how the services could better meet their needs.

Besides developing a list of suggestions for service improvements, a group young people also made two videos about "Life in the jungle of the system of social security". They presented their suggestions and the videos, as well as individual case stories, at several discussion forums, panels, and press conferences where practitioners, managers, and local politicians took part. Furthermore, regional members of the national parliament were invited to discussion forums where young people described the challenges they experienced with the welfare system, presented their suggestions for improvements, and showed the videos. In addition, the media broadcasted interviews with the group of young people on the radio and TV and printed them in newspapers. The media input of the young people was broadly shared and discussed on social media and, in particular, on Facebook. We used qualitative content analysis to investigate the different documentation of the PAR process, such as researchers' observation diaries, protocols of meetings with young people and practitioners, and press conferences. The core question used in this analysis addressed the various dimensions and contents of participation that occurred in the PAR process. Although we performed analysis of the data, we discussed its progress intensively with the participants at regular meetings during the PAR process.

Results

The Biased Finnish National Political Understanding of Participation

Participation appeared as a new growing paradigm in white papers of the Finnish government and was not dependent upon which party was in power. Since analysing each government's papers separately with textual analysis, it was possible for us to identify a slight shift in government policies relating to participation during the period researched. In the programs from 2003 to 2011, the understanding of participation was rather abstract and wide reaching. It covered four focus areas: citizenship and democracy; civil society and the third sector; transparency of administration and citizen participation; and improvement of the functioning of parliamentary democracy. Interestingly, early on, participatory policies in Finland had a strong normative undertone, to preserve constitutional values and to strengthen Finland's

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position at the forefront of democracy, as is highlighted in the following quote from the democracy and citizen participation policy program (Finnish Government, 2007b):

> Finland is bound by its tradition as a pioneer of democracy. It has been among the first in the world to celebrate one hundred years of experience as a country with universal and equal suffrage and eligibility. More recent examples of Finland's pioneering spirit include the discussions on democracy in an information society and on global democracy, organised by the Finnish Parliamentary Committee for the Future. Finland is known as a leading developer of government–citizen interaction along with Canada, the Netherlands and Norway. (Finnish Government, 2007b, p. 2)

In variance to the previous government, the government in power from 2011–2015 that continued implementing policies for active citizenship and participation, changed the ideological focal point of Finnish citizenship from social rights and benefits to an obligation to work. This impacted the distribution of citizenship rights and duties in a way that increased inequality (Kokkonen, Närhi, & Matthies, 2016). The new government's vision presented a clear reassessment of the content of participatory policies. The government in power from 2011-2015, did not place any emphasis on deepening democracy and participation. Instead, it focused on reforming Finland into a performance-oriented competitive state, and activation policies were targeted at youth (Kokkonen, Närhi, & Matthies, 2016). Another target area of participatory policies was long-term unemployment:

> Permanent means for labour market participation will be created for those long-term unemployed who have no realistic opportunities to be employed in the open labour market. The aim is to establish a permanent pay subsidy system for the difficult-to-employ and people with disabilities. The job bank trial will be extended to cover the whole country. The measures targeted at people with reduced working ability must not weaken collective agreements or social security in the labour market in other respects. (Finnish Government, 2011, p. 47)

Interestingly, ministries within the government differed considerably in ideas of how to put the processes of participation into operation, especially with regard to the type of promoted citizenship and the area of participation. For instance, MSAH (2006) followed the tradition of a socio-liberalistic welfare state and public accountability by emphasizing that the social rights of citizens are to be based on reasonable income security and the availability of welfare services. This argumentation can be seen in the next citation of MSAH, which we have discussed more in-depth in another publication (see analysis also Närhi & Kokkonen, 2014):

> The responsibility of welfare society is to make sure that citizens have a reasonable income security and that those who are excluded from the society are taken care of. It is also as important to secure the availability of social and health care services. These elements strengthen the solidity of society, citizen participation and wellbeing. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health [MSAH], 2006, p. 10)

In contrast, the Ministry of Employment and the Economy (MEE) regarded participation more strictly, and from the perspective of economic necessities and the competitiveness of Finnish society. Consequently, the agenda of MEE underlined the duty of citizens to demonstrate

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productivity in the interest of the national economy, and regarded participation as exclusively meaning participation in work. (Ministry of Employment and the Economy [MEE], 2009b.) Various participation technologies, especially for young unemployed people were intensively developed. Hence, it is not the processes of democracy or equality that legitimize these for MEE, but the aim to improve the competitiveness of the country (Närhi & Kokkonen, 2014). Consumerism and service vouchers were seen as the main instrument for allocating service production and creating feedback between service users and systems:

> The development of user- and demand-based services and concepts is possible only if the service users and consumers participate in the development processes. The development of the service market and the initialization of service vouchers are possible only if consumers have possibilities to choose and compare between various services and their costs. This requires the development of commensurate systems of quality and pricing. (MEE, 2009b, pp. 16–17)

Factors Enabling or Hindering Participation

As well as heavily criticizing services and reporting negative experiences about them, the young people also recognized the value of social and labour market services, as these actually enable their subsistence and satisfy their basic needs (Närhi, Kokkonen, & Matthies, 2013, 2014). Young service users and practitioners represented very different power positions inside the system, and more generally within society. In interviews, both groups also had critical views and reservations about the other, which were rooted in bias and critical experiences regarding the people on the other side of the table. However, we observed a quite unexpected similarity between the positions of these two groups that emerged in the discussions at joint meetings, when both groups came together to reflect upon the outcomes of their separate focus group interviews. Both sides shared critical views about the practices of activation policies, even though they occupy different roles in these practices. Members of the two groups agreed that the complexity and bureaucracy of the system of services and benefits requires a great deal of involvement and knowledge from the service user in order to have their rights realized. Both groups also felt that, in effect, it is the demands of fulfilling activation policies that define the content of counselling between the service user and the practitioner. As a result, the real-life problems of young people could not be discussed in the short time reserved for the cases.

The young peoples' main experience of service systems was one of being an object that is subjected to various measures. They felt that, especially in regard to issues of activation and income support, "things go well if you do exactly what they tell you to do" (young participant 1), and hence this did not support their identity of active agency and participative citizenship. The feeling of powerlessness was intensified by the complexity of service systems and the system of income security, as well as by the scant information about services users' rights (see more in Närhi et al., 2013, 2014):

> And then when everything in your life depends on how like in a way pencil-pushers, on how, they manage to move your application to the right binder in some certain amount of time… then you have just got to keep your fingers crossed that the papers move between the desks fast enough. (Young participant 2)

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Both young service users and practitioners also realized that if a well-functioning interaction between them could be established then a mutual trust and a better chance of promoting participative approaches would develop. The street-level practitioners felt that as the rules are set by the management and controlled from above, they hardly allow space for ethically correct social work or changes in practice, even though the dysfunctionality of the situation is recognized. Young service users would have preferred low-threshold and face-to-face services with better individual focus, and "taking one seriously instead of e-services" – as one of the them argued (impact of digital services discussed more in Närhi et al., 2013, 2014):

> Well, I'm kind of with what Simo said about the jobs office that when those letters are sent they are pretty difficult to understand, but then when you go to talk there with those people things usually get cleared up. (Young participant 3)

> So, the experiences with them are pretty good when talking with people, I mean, really good. You definitely understand them, and they know what they're doing; but it's just because there are those systems, papers and binders, and computers. (Young participant 4)

Analysis of the experiences of young people and practitioners in various services provided us with strong evidence that there are extensive factors hindering the participation of service users. The position of service users in general, and especially the complexity of the system of services and benefits and their individual activation programs, are hindering rather than encouraging participatory citizenship. The joint meetings increased mutual understanding between service users and practitioners, as described above. This became the basis for planning participatory actions based on the results. A young man who stated the following at the end of a joint discussion crystallized the main conclusion with a promising participation suggestion:

> If both you and we know that this system is not working, why don't we go together and tell it to those who make these decisions? (Young participant 5)

Toward Power of Experienced Based Knowledge and Political Citizenship

While summarizing the results of the PAR research, one can conclude that the most important actions were suggested by young people themselves and were based on their own valuable knowledge about the needs for practical changes in service systems. In other words, the core capital of young people used in the actions was their own experience-based knowledge mobilized and systematized by the PAR data collection. The young people's actions through the PAR research can be summarized as follows: (a) providing experience-based information for peer groups facing similar situations; (b) producing knowledge and suggestions for improving services and income systems; and (c) informing political decision-makers and service managers about young people's life situations and ideas for improving service systems.

These components of the young people's actions demonstrated a different understanding of participatory citizenship than what was apparent from the government programs and white papers. The PAR process provided politicization and collectivization of the challenges facing young unemployed service users, while the participation technologies (Van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012) designed in neoliberal white papers were aimed at their de-politicization. The participation

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that emerged was based on young people's own strengths, and not on pointing out their weaknesses or gaps in their knowledge. Their participatory actions did not address an economic dimension of citizenship – like training or working – but instead articulated a political citizenship. The activation policies still provided the formal frame – the space and the time – for the actions of young people, since PAR was maintained as part of their individual activation plans. This was possible because local practitioners were creative and progressive enough to enable this flexibility. It also became evident that if street-level practitioners would support and empower service users intensively and have trust in them, as happened in this study, significant positive changes could be achieved in a win-win situation.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of the government and ministries' white papers, the contradiction of the participation paradigm – its promises and deceptions – can be clearly identified. In its new participation policies, the Finnish government underlines the deliberative democracy and consumer rights of all citizens in general (Finnish Government, 2007a). However, for marginalized citizens in precarious situations, participation often means increased duties and control under the government's program. We argue that this type of two-fold participation paradigm deepens the disparity within society, as people dependent on welfare services and in a precarious labour market situation do not benefit from the greater freedoms, and instead have to behave according to the increased expectations enforced by these freedoms.

From the focus group interviews, the experiences of young service users and street-level practitioners demonstrate how the Janus-faced paradigm of participation occurs in the practice of services. In our opinion, the implementation of such participation policies often further strengthens the negative experiences of marginalized segments of the population. This is not only due to the fact that job seekers have more obligations placed upon them and that, especially for young unemployed people, there are stricter controls and rules. It is also attributable to the instruments of public social and labour services, which have been weakened through a reduction in staffing in spite of higher caseloads, combined with an increase of digitalized services and managerialistic understanding of service production. The capacity of service systems to offer meaningful and more self-directed opportunities for low-threshold jobs and training is radically reduced due to austerity policies and the on-going crisis of the labour market in Finland (Närhi et al., 2014). The practitioners in our study regard their task as a "mission impossible," where they experience serious ethical dilemmas and contradictions because of not being able to offer what young people need (Närhi et al., 2014). They are required to demand activities from service users, which in many cases are not meaningful or possible.

The participation technologies that pervade activation policies and services at all levels focus on individualized, rather than collective, means of seeking solutions. The core target of services is increasingly shifting from public accountability for empowering and supportive interventions toward regulation and control over vulnerable citizens. These participation technologies are in stark contrast to the professional codes and ethics of progressive practitioners (Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2012). According to Sarah Banks (2011), there emerges a growing interest in highlighting social work ethics in the context of neoliberal policies, as part of a progressive movement to offer a critique of these policies through emphasizing professional agency and social justice.

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The results of our research go hand-in-hand with the findings of Stevens, Bur, and Young (2003) on participation strategies by investing in People, Jobs, Rights, and Power. The young people in this research believed that the most empowering services are individual face-to-face contact with workers and group-oriented activation measures. They demanded better information about, and realization of, their social rights. Pushing them only toward job training and job seeking is not seen as a realistic strategy. Finally, one of the most important results of the research is that some of the groups of citizens assumed to be the least politically participative ended up becoming politically active. Drawing on their own personal experiences and applying these in a wider social context transformed them into politicized beings (see also Beresford, 2000, 2010). Most of the actions they took were directed toward sharing their experience-based knowledge with political and administrative decision-makers at both local and national levels. However, we interpret that this does not result from the conscious decisions of young people to become specifically politically active, but rather from their need to be heard and valued by service systems and policy makers in order to be able to change their difficult life situations. We regard that the process of collecting experiences and stories from their peers, and using them in encouraging information leaflets, can also be considered as political action. The demands of young service users were strengthened by the similar standpoints of practitioners. If the powerful type of participation that we experienced in our research were to be scaled up, a supportive environment would be needed, as well as major changes in the values, culture, and work settings of welfare policies and services (Närhi et al, 2013, 2014).

Based on our findings, we argue that the forms of actions that young people themselves developed demonstrate a new, political dimension of participatory citizenship amongst marginalized people. It challenges the mainstream concept of inclusion embedded in participation policies, which are mainly interested in labour market participation and the economic contribution of young people (Steven et al., 2003). In her analysis of multiple longitudinal research designs, Watson (2015) found that the conditionality of workfare-based benefits has a depressive effect on any forms of participation, and in particular on forms of democratic political participation. However, it seems that current activation policies are still strengthening such depressive participation technologies, even though the evidence put forward in support of the policies is questionable.

The current research findings also highlight the importance of continuing processes of democratization by promoting the participation of the most non-participative citizens at all levels of welfare services. At the same time, they critically document how the paradigm of participation has been co-opted to turn against its own objectives. The activation policies with sanctions do not promote participatory citizenship. Rather, they train young people to function reactively according to the regulations of various authorities and to follow the given measures in order to maintain, at least, their very basic level of income.

Contribution to Social Work Policy, Practice, and Knowledge

Our results support the argument that welfare service provision plays a crucial role both in strengthening and in weakening active, participatory citizenship. Despite the different status of practitioners and service users, an unexpected positive outcome of the research is that new kinds of alliances start to grow, as does a broader public awareness of these problems through their exposure in the media. However, it is only the voices of young people themselves that give the

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agenda a politically authentic value that demands the policy-makers listen to it. In the study, collaborative networks of research are co-created by practitioners and service providers. However, the role of NGOs working with young unemployed people turns out to be more significant than the role of public agencies. It seems that NGO practitioners have more control of their work, less hierarchies, stronger loyalty, and a clearer ethical commitment to the interests of their service users than practitioners in public services do (van Parys & Struyven, 2013). On the evidence of our research, NGOs definitely provide a clear enabling factor for participatory citizenship. This positive finding maintains the hope that changes are possible inside public agencies. Raeymaekers and Dierckx (2013), looking at the case in Belgium, found that the more social workers experience professional freedom and an empowering work environment, the broader they interpret the performance of activation policies with their service users. Having fewer possibilities for making one's own decisions, and less communicative peer-support with colleagues, leads to narrow and disciplinary ways of applying workfare policies (Raeymaekers & Dierckx, 2013).

Our results demonstrate that if social work aims to support participation and involvement in active citizenship, a genuine respect for service users has to be evident by taking seriously their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences about services. Active citizenship also demands a new type of power relationship between service users and welfare services. Feeling that one is an accepted part of society is a precondition for genuine participation in society. Correspondingly, participation technologies may enforce marginalization when young people do not experience this acceptance.

Our research indicates a growing need for social work to enter into public discussion to help make space for different kinds of understanding about welfare services and the situation of marginalized groups. According to our results, this happens at its best when the voices of service users themselves are listened to and thus inform policy makers, and are heard in the media, so creating new alliances of social work research and practice. As such, raising public awareness is a key strategy to promote changes in society, as well as in the welfare service system. Our research provides evidence that by using methods of group building and knowledge production, social work can enable service users, even in precarious life circumstances, to strengthen their political citizenship. In such cases, social work has a new opportunity to tackle marginalization effectively.

A theoretical breakthrough of this research concerns the critical perspective on the paradigm and technologies of participation. Even when young people follow all the given participation requirements and run all the designed activation paths, there is no guarantee of any real chance to achieve permanent work in a way that is comparable with previous generations (Matthies & Uggerhoej, 2014). As Roets et al. (2012) found among people with mental health challenges workfare is not understood as an obligation to work but instead as a right to employment. Many young unemployed people remain in situations where they are not offered reasonable work and are instead categorized as risk groups to be increasingly controlled. This is also the case in Finland, where society's accountability for safeguarding the rights of all individuals to good-enough-life perspectives is declining in favour of protecting privileged segments of society (and their property) against the increasing number of people living precariously. Individuals in precarious situations are increasingly left on their own with the

rhetoric of self-responsibility, community orientation, civil society resources, and the spirit of voluntarism (Saari, 2016).

In accordance with the concept of the "dialectic of Enlightenment" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 27), we can draw the conclusion that the emancipatory potential of participation is at risk, especially due to the obligations and self-governance promoted by the neoliberal design of policies (activation, life-long guidance). The promises of the new participation paradigm can become a mass deception for millions of European young people facing unemployment if the measures directed at them are only obligations to seek jobs that, due to high unemployment, do not actually exist.

Despite the evident benefits of the PAR process, several challenges need to be reflected upon. We found that becoming connected and establishing a trustful relationship with young people is challenging and time consuming. Getting them motivated is not possible without the help of street-level workers from the NGOs who already know them. The participation of social workers from the public sector is mainly limited to group interviews, as they could not find time to be part of further actions. Also, the research team underestimated the time needed for practical collaboration with young adults and workers from various agencies. Regarding the impact of the PAR process, changes in structures and services are always challenging. However, the empowerment of changes in the attitudes of young people themselves and public opinion, especially through positive media, is more visible. Respect and the sharing of power are necessary for achieving real participation that can also bring about deeper changes. Further, the challenges of the scientific analysis of the data of the PAR process beyond practical development were also underestimated.

It remains questionable as to whether involvement in participatory programs significantly improves the lives of, and services for, marginalized citizens. One has to keep in mind that the various forms of mutual support and voluntarism have become part of the very same participation technologies that are instrumentalized to reduce public responsibility for welfare issues. The same could also be said of social work research, although this can be addressed through authentic citizen participation in PAR-oriented research projects. Social work research has the possibility to deliver methods, tools, and knowledge as instruments for a *participation society* in which public accountability is rapidly disappearing.

In conclusion, the social work role in practice, research, and development needs constant critical self-reflection relative to the ever-present Janus-face of the participation paradigm. Social work must identify the potentially marginalizing effects embedded in its interventions that are thought to be participatory. Notwithstanding the constant risk of disillusion, there is no other chance than to hold on to the utopian promise of participation and the welfare society. The task of critical social work is to reflect constantly on how to protect the democratic potential of participation and inclusion from becoming "a mass deception", and on how to protect critical social workers themselves from becoming cynical about reforms.

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