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# **The interplay between life trajectories and participation careers**

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## **Introduction**

A long-established discourse on young people engagement portrays them as apathetic and disengaged with political processes. Some scholars state that they are less interested in political matters and less likely to vote, become members of formal organisations such as political parties, and in general describe them as having limited knowledge regarding public issues across the different national and regional contexts (Park et al., 2004). Other scholars, however, remark that such approaches adopt a narrow concept of youth participation (Marsh et al., 2007; Manning, 2010) and a deficit approach to youth (France, 2007), neglecting furthermore the structural barriers young people face in their effort to participate in democratic processes. This analytic approach does not focus on the voices and perspectives of young people ‘leaving us with a perspective of “causes” that are defined by the researcher’s interpretation and moral judgements’ (France, 2007: 37). As a consequence of this narrow concept of participation, only few young people are actually referred to as participating, while a majority of them are reckoned not be involved in forms of public decision-making and/or engagement.

In order to question and differentiate this view, the PARTISPACE research has analysed and elaborated that different practices of young people in public spaces may be referred to as participation (see especially Chapters 6, 7 and 9 in this volume). Complementary to the analysis of collective youth cultural styles, this chapter aims at understanding better how young people’s individual careers of participation evolve from getting involved to staying or changing involvement. In order to reconstruct these processes, this chapter adopts a biographical perspective, trying to shed light on the close relationship between participation and social background and thus elaborating the links between social inequalities and political and civil engagement. Consistent with existing literature, access to participatory activities, and particularly to responsibilities in participation programmes, projects or groups, is background-dependent. Therefore, we do not conceive of young people as a homogeneous group with common needs and aspirations. Otherwise, it would be impossible to understand what makes some young people getting involved in formal settings of participation, which are meaningless for others, who are instead inclined towards informal ones.

By reconstructing biographical narratives of young people engaged in different forms and issues of participation, we will try to detect how participation trajectories (careers) emerge and develop differently, why young people decide to engage, who (significant others) or what (turning points) contribute/support this decision and in what way. The next section illustrates the theoretical rationale for the analysis and sets out the methodology and methods used. After that, we present four clusters elaborated according to the main (f)actors emerging from this analysis of the biographical interviews. We use an exemplary biography in order to illustrate each cluster which we will discuss in the last concluding section.

## **The biographical approach in analyzing youth participation careers**

Among many youth studies exploring the topic, Henn and Foard (2014) reveals that youth orientation to politics is complex and nuanced according to social determinants influencing young people's participatory life experiences. According to them, both social class and educational history have a major impact on youth political engagement (see also Holmes and Manning, 2013) that differs also according to ethnicity and – to a lesser extent – gender. However, reviewing the literature, we note that biographical investigations on youth participation have not yet been conducted. This would be very useful in order to understand both at personal and social levels, how young people's biography influences their participation career and how this in turn shapes their biographical narrative reconstruction.

The evidence (often based in quantitative measurements) of a declining trend in formal and collectivist forms of participation (Norris, 2002) could be interpreted as a new way of adapting to the increased pace of socio-economic change and the ever-increasing complexity in the relationship between citizens and power structures. According to Bennet (2013: 21), this gives rise to individualised politics, and young people consider 'political activities and commitments in highly personal terms that contribute to enhancing the quality of personal life [...] rather than to understanding, support, and involvement in government'. Therefore, the perspective that depicts the *life course* as the institutional expectations regarding the individual's social integration and as an element in social reproduction needs to be complemented by a *biographical* perspective that incorporates the subjective life stories individuals construct in the process of dealing with their identity while progressing through the institutionalised life course.

This implies an interactionist understanding of the relationship between *structure* and *agency* (cf. Giddens, 1984; Emirbayr and Mische, 1998): the life course provides individuals with expectations they (have to) handle with in their biographical construction – coping with or opposing these issues or life events in explicit or implicit ways – while at the same time life course institutions depend on individuals using them for their biographical development.

The main interest of biography-theoretical research concerns *how* people construct a biography in different cultural contexts and social situations, and *which* conditions, rules and patterns of building can be highlighted in this process. Biographical studies have played a significant role in sociology since the 1920s and 1930s and were further developed by sociologists and educationalists during the 1970s in different research fields and according to different methodological and theoretical traditions and epistemological interests. Bertaux (1976: 206) was one of the first to recognise that as some life-lines do not have a linear course and do not obey some inner logic but, rather, are determined by ‘the historical movements of socio-structural relationships’, lives were worth studying in their very forms. So, according to Bourdieu, the analysed practice represents more a consequence of the socially derived and implicit logics of the embodied habitus than the result of rational deliberation and ‘choice’. That is why Bourdieu refers to biography as ‘illusion’, preferring the concept of habitus. Habitus constitutes a system of durable, transposable, cognitive ‘schemata or structures of perception, conception and action’ (Bourdieu, 2017: 27) that is rooted in socialisation processes within the family and influenced by one’s position in the social structure of a stratified society. It frames the parameters of people’s sense of agency and power of decision-making. Studies following such a more structuralist approach set the focus on the relationship between biography and life trajectory, while studies more oriented towards the paradigm of symbolic interactionism focus more on the internal logics of biographical construction and meaning-making. This chapter follows the first strand of analysis (see Chapter 11 following rather the second perspective).

Young people between 15 and 30 years such as those whose accounts are analysed in PARTISPACE share the distinction of their life stage from both childhood and adulthood while their life situations and conditions with regard to education, training, employment, welfare, housing, and health may differ significantly according to age and phase in the transition to adulthood. We argue that in their life course trajectories they develop ‘participation careers’, that is, particular ways of relating to and involvement in practices in public space. Such participation careers include transitions into and between specific practices, turning points and learning processes which in turn may be related to experiences

with significant others. At the same time, these areers need to be seen as embedded in, structured by and contributing to the reproduction and/or transformation of social structures, especially categories like social background, gender, ethnicity, and formal educations.

## **Sample and Methodology**

The biographical interviews analysed in this chapter have been conducted in the course of the six in-depth case studies of formal, non-formal and informal setting of youth participation carried out in each of the eight cities involved in the PARTISPACE project. Two young people per case were asked to explore their whole life stories in order to reveal those biographical issues influencing their participation during their lives so far contributing to an overall sample of 96 biographies. The data were collected through narrative interviews<sup>1</sup>, which have been audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Analysis consisted in combining the hermeneutic sensitivity of biographical case re-construction (Rosenthal, 1993), and the comparative coding process based on the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This means that first the thematic structure was identified and objectifiable biographical data were extracted. Based on these, hypotheses on the relationship and especially discrepancies between ‘lived lives’ and ‘told lives’ were formulated. The hypotheses confirmed in the further process of analysis were subsequently fixed in codes and memos. In a first step, summaries of the 96 biographies were produced and analysed (Batsleer et al., 2017). The second step of biographical analysis, presented in this chapter, aimed at reconstructing the life course trajectories the young people presented in their narratives: their general narrative self-presentation but also the aspects that were important for our analysis: moments of entry into and change of participatory activities, turning points, learning processes and significant others. Based on the wider sample, 16 biographies were selected, according to the different ways in which young people ascribed the participatory activities biographical relevance and how their trajectories were influenced by social factors such as social background, gender, ethnicity and formal education. These interviews were translated into English to allow for comparative in-depth analysis. Writing a portrait of every interview has permitted an insight into the relationships between the different levels involved, to understand the role of a participatory activity within a young person’s biography and to elaborate different clusters of factors, in terms of constellations of structure and agency, that occur in the interplay between biographies and participation.

## Clusters of participation careers

With the aim of understanding and explaining the *ways* in which participation unfolds in young people's lives, and *how* their participation careers and biographies interact in their life trajectories, we explored *whether* and *to what extent* young people's sociocultural and economic conditions, family's values, young people's educational attainments, experiences in formal institutions, influences and type of significant others (peer vs. adults), key perceived life experiences (turning points) support or constrain their engagement. After that, we analysed the learning processes (and achievements) they attribute to participatory experiences both in terms of personal/individual development and a contribution to community/societal change. Following these categories, emerging from young people's narratives – of course with different meanings, different introspective level and words selection – we have elaborated four key clusters of participation careers. Each cluster is, first, introduced through an exemplary case and then discussed according to the categories mentioned above. The discussion section proposes a 'cross-cluster' reflection on the biographical interplay of sociocultural and economic conditions (structure) and learning processes (agency).

### *Fighting for justice from inside the system*

This first cluster is concerned with participation careers of young people who – compared to many of their peers – get involved in formalised setting (youth council, student representation) which are not limited to particular interests but aimed at justice either with a focus on specific groups or in general. In their narratives, these young people, who share familial cultural capital and a migrant background refer to experiences of injustice. Thus, engagement can be interpreted in terms of coping with injustice. This, however, does not explain why and how they have translated their personal experience into a wider political issue. Here, first, the search for experiences of self-efficacy plays a central role: in many respects, the larger the issue, the more power and control is needed to make a difference. This means, second, that these young people, seem to have had experiences of being recognised by others (supportive family and teachers) who referred to them as competent and able to make a difference. Third, these young people have had positive experiences in formal institutions, which require abstracting from the personal present to a universal future and the ability to postpone fulfilment of subjective needs. Finally, these young people manage to find a balance between the world of adults and youth culture – or are even willing to engage with an adult

habitus if it is purposeful to do so, which may imply an increased distance from the youth cultural practices of their peers (see also Lüküslü et al., 2018).

### *Amos*

Amos was born in 2000 in Nigeria. He is the middle child of a family of three. He attended Primary School in his birth place and then at 11 years old moved with his family to the UK (Manchester). In his homeland, his father worked in a prominent banking institution and was engaged in his country's politics. One day, he took Amos with him during a business trip in a nearby country. Meeting one of his father's friends, who was politically active, and listening to him talking about politics, represented for Amos a key turning point in his life; the man 'assigned' him the task of changing the world and from that moment Amos started to think about political participation as an individual duty.

I think one thing I did take away from him was a mission or epiphany and enlightenment shall I say. And it was my dreams, my ambitions point to one word... revolution. And not in a negative way but something positive, something victorious. He said I should change the world. He made me promise that one day I will change the world and become a revolutionary.

(Amos, Manchester, FYR)

In order to undertake this 'mission' of revolution, Amos started to develop himself as a political researcher and leader. Amos is 15 years old now, he attends secondary school and is engaged in the youth council of his city. He is also involved in a sport foundation where he met a famous local black Olympic athlete. Furthermore, he participated in many local projects in the city where he met many key influencers in a range of a youth leadership and social change organization that supports working-class young people. During one of these experiences, he met the former Chancellor of the Exchequer and took a key role as a Member of the Youth Parliament.

Amos's participation seems to be strictly connected to his own sense of destiny guided by the influence of many others he has met, especially by people of colour who succeed in being recognised in the wider community. Amos wants to promote a peaceful (educational) revolution to be achieved both through participation in formal political agencies and in alternative non-formal settings.

A revolution is a change as a whole. Not done as one person. I'm not seeking to be Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Castro ... I seek a change in perspective; the reason these were revolutionary, they caused a united front against something; I'm not going against anything ... Everyone has a key role in terms of change whether it's locally or globally.

(Amos, Manchester, FYR)

Amos, and the others in this cluster, use formal settings which are explicitly devoted to participation and representation for their mission consisting in making people aware of their condition while taking back the power of acting towards a common goal. They identify a clear turning point in their biographies, a situation in which they felt seen, recognised and thus understood, and from which they developed their narratives and biographical constructions in term of learning and struggling for justice from the inside of the system. They do not feel disengaged from political processes or powerless to bring about change, because in different ways, the systems have given them a chance to do so.

### *Achieving responsibility step-by-step*

The second cluster refers to participation careers of young people who share the same middle-class sociocultural background and have progressed smoothly through formal institutions, and especially education. While some have experienced critical life events, they have not interpreted them in terms of injustice. They are driven by normative perspectives, but they do not position themselves within societal conflicts. In fact, they encounter possibilities of engagement during their educational and professional careers or organised leisure time activities. Hence, these young people have also had positive experiences with and in formal institutions, and they know how to benefit from recognition within these contexts. They do not refrain from compromising their identities with an adult habitus. Their self-efficacy is an institutionalised one inasmuch as they rely on institutionalised roles and activities and the power they entail. Nevertheless, it also includes discovering the political dimension of one's institutional and professional status, and the ethical value of contributing to society beyond the fulfilment of standard roles and obligations – enriching and/or diversifying their identities (Honneth, 1996).

### *Léna*

Léna is a 23-years-old French woman, who was born in a small village in Brittany. She comes from a middle-class, socially moderate and apolitical family. After her high school diploma, she moved to Rennes, the closest university-city. At the age of 20, she entered the board of the youth centre in the youth municipality council in her town; her involvement in public institution allowed her to work on youth issues and to orientate professional practices and facilities for young people.

We decided on the project. We participated in the actions over a period of almost a year. If we wanted it to happen, we had to get involved and take part in the actions [...]. It was a commitment

also to get to something too ... and participate in the dynamics of the commune. (Léna, Rennes, FYR).

On her mother's advice when she was 17, Léna undertook the youth work certification to look for a summer job she liked. After obtaining her diploma, she enrolled on a university degree in education and youth work. Despite not having a clear career plan, she wanted to go on with her studies and, during her second year of studies, once again, following her mother's advice, she did an internship in Brest where she was in charge of a career guidance project and advising young people about various possibilities. Gradually, Léna got more involved in local youth organizations until she was elected as a youth representative at regional level. Important actors – the youth worker in the recreation centre, her mother, the supervisor of her internship - punctuated Léna's commitment path. Despite her parents having never been involved in a social or political organisation, they supported her, when she started participating in the youth centre, 'because it was making people meet people, it was about something' (Léna, Rennes, FYR). Nevertheless, all her experiences of participation allowed her progressively to define her own values and to determine her identity. For example, she considers her university study as a real turning point:

My way of seeing the world, of seeing ... really ... society, of everything that was inequality, everything that was animated, Recreation ... Really, it opened my mind. It was the best two years of my life. (Léna, Rennes, FYR)

Léna's commitment seems quite conventional and linear – formal participatory spaces, supported by meaningful actors. Even if she has not developed a proactive attitude or self-initiate, little by little she knows what she wants for herself, for youth and for society. Her convictions take shape and she succeeds in linking her involvement with her professional project.

In this cluster, the striking commonality between young people is that formal education (and a sort of conformity within this institution) and then employment led them to these forms of engagement. In this way, participation is a professional choice that has the ethic and social benefit of allowing them to work towards societal changes.

### ***Personal and professional development by caring for others***

This cluster refers to careers characterised by voluntary engagement in terms of care and responsibility. Doing something for others provides both experiences of self-efficacy and recognition in terms of a return for altruism. Some of these young people have to cope with insecure identities. Voluntary engagement is embedded in (non-governmental) organisations that provide a feeling of belonging and a 'risk-free' orientation to clear roles and tasks

avoiding competition in an uncertain social constellation, such as a peer group. Different from the cluster ‘achieving responsibility step-by-step’, this mode of participation does not necessarily require engaging with adult-like roles or practices but allows being young, yet in a specific, partly pre-defined way that is open for negotiation and appropriation within a clear set of rules. Experiences with institutions tend to be ambivalent. Although the activities of volunteering tend to be rather organised and publicly recognised, these young people have not necessarily had positive experiences in formal institutions; indeed, organised volunteering – including the adults involved – can be experienced as ‘doing something’ with different ‘types’ of adults in an organisation that is alternative but accessible. These directions of development represent a personal improvement for the young people involved, enhancing their self-empowerment process and the achievement of transversal and proactive skills (also suitable for a future career).

### ***Mert***

Mert is a 25-year-old Turkish young man. He grew up in the ‘modern’ Izmir, the third biggest Turkish city, and in a family, which comes from one of the most conservative Turkish regions. His conservative family has a low status social and cultural background; however, it is supportive: actually, he is the first one in his family to attend university. Concerning his educational choice, Mert affirms that he specifically chose to study far from home in Eskişehir in order to learn to be independent and live with a friend. Mert seems well aware of the importance of education for his personal (and, probably, professional) development. At the university, he finds a significant other (a professor) who put him in touch with the youth section of an humanitarian NGO, an association that deals with blood donation. He believes that joining the NGO was the turning point of his life, because he perceives it as project-oriented activities motivated by innovation that gives young people’s ‘fresh brains’ the opportunity to produce additional value and therefore he ‘has devoted’ himself to the NGO.

Participation is lived by him as a learning process. He remarks that before entering the association, he was very shy and he could not even talk with foreigners or in front of a public audience. Through the NGO activities, he experienced the opportunity to develop leadership and coping skills, self-confidence in a ‘caring for others’, a motivating project and his autonomy and personal construction of values, so all those potentials he has always been aware of, realising what he calls his ‘dream’ by becoming the head of the local branch:

I knew that I had a potential for leadership, people told me that. But I thought that being a leader meant to yell to other people, to be tough or dominate others... before... It didn't happen in one

day... but slowly, I've read books about it... I've learned that leadership wasn't about yelling but... was about creating good relationship.(Mert, Eskişehir, NGO)

In this cluster, despite their different sociocultural contexts, resources and experiences, young people share the progressive development of specific, but also personal skill in terms of relationship building and self-esteem. Their participatory experience is connected to the act of caring for others, while receiving public recognition for their activity.

### *Looking for alternative places for themselves*

The young people in this cluster, due to their family backgrounds, developed a critical stance to social standards and practices and use participation to emancipate themselves and change minds and behaviours around them. Their desires to shift away from their families or school experiences have emerged during their adolescence through questioning themselves, and their dissatisfactions and passions. During this time, they understood, uncovered or experienced something that resulted in a turning point in the way they perceive themselves, their family or their environment. In their stories, 'significant others' appear and play different roles. They decided at some point to change things while being apart from or at the margin of the environment, they were criticising. All of their activities, as they question norms and standards, address a more general political or social question.

They share values and ways of getting involved in activities. They are looking for meaning of their self-development and a possible collective change starting from their individual biographical experiences. Consequently, the careers of these young people are oriented towards more informal spaces, and youth cultural practice rather than adult habitus. This implies either creating something new or occupying and transforming existing spaces to make them both subjectively meaningful and valued by peers and with an added value for learning-by-doing and self-learning. They are acting at a micro-level, experimenting with alternative forms of themselves for some sort of self-change and, potentially, collective endeavours.

### *Lisa*

Lisa is 25 years old and works as a janitor in a public kindergarten. Born in Bologna, she comes from quite a patriarchal family and her education was clearly oriented by her father's values.

My father is a 100% Southern man, so obviously the son and the daughter are two different things, of course, the son is the one who deserves full trust and the daughter instead is the one who has to stay home up to 40 years. (Lisa, Bologna, UG)

Lisa did not like studying; therefore, she needed more years than usual to get her higher school diploma. She attended the last three years of upper secondary school in a southern region because her grandparents, who lived there, were ill and needed help. This mobility gave her the opportunities to flee from her father's control. Once she completed school, at the age of 22, she came back to Bologna and started working. Through self-empowerment, she progressively copes with her patriarchal education relegating women in the backstage.

At 12, her brother brought her with him to her first football match. Progressively, she entered an Ultra group, in which she was the 'young sister of'. At 16, she changed group in order to overcome her minority status and to be recognised as 'just' Lisa. As a junior supporter, she began helping senior members in the back-office activities before the matches, and of course singing at the stadium. Two years ago, she participated in the creation of the Ultra's Centre:

'We wanted to create our place where people could meet face to face and being able to discuss, maybe even argue, because this happens between opposite ways of thinking, different ideas. It was something that I liked very much. (Lisa, Bologna, UG)

She is currently in charge of the management of the kindergarten opened within the Ultra Centre. Although her biography follows a path of self-empowerment, Lisa was not alone in this process. Besides her brother, the two main significant others who influenced her development were women: first, her mother and second a 50-years-old-woman, who was the only female official member of the Ultra in the north stand (the sector of the Stadium generally reserved to Ultra groups). This older woman became Lisa's role model:

'She has always been my reference point, even because she was the only woman in the group. (...) She was the one who challenged everyone, the one of which being afraid of, all the men treated her equally. (Lisa, Bologna, UG)

Entering the Ultras is also a way to develop herself and to become a stronger woman able to face others and especially men as equals (her father and the other male Ultras). She moved gradually from her personal will to rid herself of her father's educational standards to a collective action in a group that became a 'second family', a combination of self-help and collective solidarity that gives her the opportunity to learn and to value her capacities. Even if she avoids political discussion and does not describe her participation in such terms, her action could be seen as feminist activism in sports arena.

In this cluster, there are some differences between young people in terms of sociocultural backgrounds, opportunities and educational trajectories, but they resemble each other for an engagement aimed at empowering a youth cultural scene and/or an alternative lifestyle which they have been identified as relevant for the own identity. Young people have been socialised

by traditional values, which they rejected in order to build their own identity. Significant others influenced the critical stance they constructed to conquer their freedom. Their self-liberation is a learning process that feeds their motivations and gives them new opportunities to participate and to extend their individual solutions to other people.

## **Comparative discussion**

A ‘cross-cluster’ reflection along the categories elaborated for the analysis can highlight the interplay between sociocultural and -economic conditions, forms of participation and learning processes. The differences between clusters mainly concern the degree of homogeneity of young people’s socio-economic and cultural backgrounds as familial values and educational models influence youth participation. The first two clusters Fighting for justice from inside the system and Achieving responsibility step by step appear quite homogeneous in the sense that the young people originate from middle-class families, while the two others (Personal and professional development by caring for others and Looking for alternative places for themselves) bring together young people coming from various contexts. The four clusters can be positioned on a continuum going from appropriation of (Fighting for justice from inside the system and Achieving responsibility step by step) to emancipation from familial environment (Personal and professional development by caring for others) with sometimes a clear opposition (Looking for alternative places for themselves).

While the level of education clearly orientates young people’s life trajectories, also the influence of different youth transition regimes needs to be taken into account inasmuch as young people’s trajectories are institutionalised in different ways (see Chapter 4). In the analysed biographies, some of them are still studying, while others have finished upper secondary school or university. Educational attainment influences young people’s resources, but their subjective experiences of school are more meaningful for understanding their participation careers as they contribute to building their relation to formal institutions and adults. These two elements distinguish them in term of forms of participation. The analysis reveals a continuum going from positive experiences of school due to a valorised and recognised role on personal development in Fighting for justice from inside the system or to successful and smooth trajectories in Achieving responsibility step by step to more ambivalent ones in Personal and professional development by caring for others and negative ones in Looking for alternative places for themselves linked to alienation or failure experiences.

Part of their relations to adults derive from their school's experiences, even if they refer also to other types of 'significant others'. Young people frequently refer to teachers: in a positive way when they encouraged their initial engagement (Fighting for justice from inside the system) and offer them access to opportunities of participation (the supervisor of internship in Achieving responsibility step by step) or in a more ambivalent one (Looking for alternative places for themselves; see also Chapter 11). Of course, their relations to adults regard also family's members supporting them (mothers in achieving responsibility step by step and looking for alternative places for themselves) and also family's friends who recognised them as competent (Fighting for justice from inside the system). In a larger scale, youth workers give access to some opportunities and members of organisation or leaders are examples of what they would like to be. Peers take part in the involvement process as resources to discover some initiatives or organizations and as new groups of friends when they are met during the activities. Participation is a way to broaden and open social circles and for some young people to create a 'new family' in which they feel more comfortable (for instance, in Looking for alternative places for themselves).

The biographical analysis shows that a set of factors – socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, educational path and personal experiences of school, significant others – influence young people's participation to a different extent. We notice how some good experiences of institutions and relations with adults tend to favour a more formal participation while more ambivalent and negative ones orientate towards informal spaces. Analysing turnings points, motivations and personal needs and expectations, there appear to be a mixture of explanations stemming from various factors rather than or pushing one of them. Fighting for justice from inside the system and Looking for alternative places for themselves have some commonalities in terms of how personal experiences (injustice, failure, alienation) appear as turning points in the involvement process and orientate forms of participation. Significant others activate the involvement process: they recognise young people value or appear as models. From Achieving responsibility step by step and Personal and professional development by caring for others, we learn that participation is embedded in a more general and deep process of self-building. It means that, even if some turning points and significant others can be spotted, they play a smooth and inconspicuous role in young people biographies.

In the main, learning is concentrated in processes of building self-identity and self-efficacy, but specific orientations are derived from the previous life experiences and the social conditions of the young people involved. Fighting for justice from inside the system and

Achieving responsibility step by step are for the most part concerned with skills and competences. However, in the first case, achieving competences and skills represents a way of coping with existing (lived) injustice and finding social recompense for them; in the second case, achieving skills and competence involves a linear development along a formal educational path leading to professions that can benefit society. Learning in 'Personal and professional development by caring for others' and 'Looking for alternative places for themselves' focuses on self-esteem and self-confidence. What differs is that in the first case the reward is the public recognition of the caring activity following institutional conformity which boosts self-esteem; in the second, the self-esteem and self-confidence develop from the need to reject traditional values and to find new ways of participating in order to start a self-liberation process.

## **Conclusion**

From the biographical analysis, it emerges that not only biographies differ but – consequently – also careers and modes of participation. For the understanding of participation, this implies that not one form of participation is to be learned but that engagement enfold in different ways as it is rooted in biographical constellations and thus it is as multiple and diverse as biographies are. This means that getting engaged is not linear and predetermined by a particular set of factors: Young people, by accident or by design, take up particular modes of participation interconnecting their biographical experiences and lived lives. Participatory settings are identified as natural settings that enable individuals to empower themselves. This is the case where the connection between the young people's activity in a social space and the achievement of a sense of belonging that goes hand in hand with the process of learning to be a leader is strong. Participation is also subjectively meaningful for young people and, crucially, it is more often than not deliberate, intentional and a key part of a young person's biography. This is the case for those who sought out particular spaces, created spaces or 'fell into' spaces and decided to stay there. Participation is, therefore, purposeful. It is also evident that getting involved with and thereby contributing to specific styles of participation is a process of seeking a subjectively meaningful and appropriate place and is dependent on a multi-factorial interrelation.

Finally, the analysis revealed that the fixed distinction between 'participation' and 'non-participation' and the reductive and causal ascription of participation to certain people in certain spaces at certain times for certain reasons do *not* reflect the complexity of participation

in individual biographies. A biographical approach has illustrated that it is crucial to go beyond superficial dichotomies of motivated versus de-motivated, interested versus disinterested, political versus unpolitical and engaged versus disengaged, to acknowledge and understand the complexity of young people's styles of participation in space and time.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The same data are used in Chapter Eleven following however a different research question and perspective inasmuch as 'participation biographies' (Schwanenflügel, 2015) are reconstructed, that is dimensions of identity and meaning making in relation to participation over time.

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