

# YOUNG PEOPLE AS AGENTS OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

## RECLAIMING THE FUTURE

Edited by PÄIVI HONKATUKIA  
AND TIINA RÄTTILÄ

YOUTH, YOUNG ADULTHOOD AND SOCIETY



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# Young People as Agents of Sustainable Society

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This book analyses young people's societal participation as a central dimension of their well-being and as vitally important to secure the sustainable future of humankind and the whole eco-social system.

It develops a theoretical framework for analysing youth participation holistically, embedded in its everyday context, and as a relational phenomenon, underpinned by universal human needs. It introduces innovative methodological approaches to study youth engagements in society.

This book will appeal to scholars and students of youth studies, sociology, sustainable development, youth participation and education. It also offers new knowledge and theoretical readings for policy experts on youth and sustainable development, as well as for NGOs working with youth.

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Edited by Päivi Honkatukia and  
Tiina Rättilä



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We would like to dedicate this book to our young co-researchers and all-age research partners. Without you, this book would not have come into being.

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**Tiina Rättilä** has acted as a senior research fellow in the ALL-YOUTH research project, Tampere University, and is currently positioned as a researcher and project manager at the University of Eastern Finland, studying immigrants' experiences of working life in Finland. In the ALL-YOUTH project, Rättilä and Honkatukia have researched together topics related to youth participation and well-being, including refugee young people's position in Finnish society and young people's relationship to sustainability policies. They have written and co-edited several publications on these research themes, including the book *Tutkien ja tarinoiden kohti pakolaistaustaisten nuorten kestävää hyvinvointia (Enhancing Refugee Youth's Sustainable Wellbeing through Co-Research and Story-Telling*, ed. by Rättilä & Honkatukia), and a special issue in *Nuorisotutkimus (The Finnish Journal of Youth Research*, ed. by Rättilä & Honkatukia), *The Young as Actors in Climate Change and Sustainable Development Policies*, both published in 2021. They have also co-written journal and blog articles on questions of youth participation and well-being together with colleagues and non-academic research partners. Rättilä's main research interests include philosophy of science, democratic and political theory, political and youth participation, civic activism and qualitative research methods, including co-research. She also shares a passion for developing and experimenting with new qualitative research methods, collaborating therewith partners outside the academia.

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**Anna Suni** is a doctoral researcher in the doctoral programme in Gender, Culture and Society at the University of Helsinki. In her dissertation, she examines youth political participation in Finland from an intersectional perspective, looking into the societal effects of gender, ethnicity and age. Her research areas



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# Preface

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This book tells the story, so to speak, of a multidisciplinary ALL-YOUTH research project carried out in Finland between 2018 and 2023. The project has had two objectives. First of all, we have wanted to listen carefully to young people and learn about what they think about their opportunities to influence their own lives, their future and society as a whole. Second, we have examined from different perspectives what kind of structures and practices obstruct youth participation, but also developed and tested new models to strengthen it. As argued in the book, we consider the engagement of young people in society to be crucial both for enhancing their well-being and for building a sustainable society for the future. The book's chapters highlight how these two goals are intricately linked and, moreover, tangled with conditions where humankind is confronting many intersecting crises threatening planetary and human existence: climate change, ecological collapse, pandemics, war, socio-political upheavals and social catastrophes in various parts of the world. These crises have framed the everyday engagements of ALL-YOUTH in many ways, and this book can be understood as one answer to the challenges they pose.

In recent years, youth researchers have actively discussed the possibilities of participatory research to reach especially those young people whose voices are overshadowed in research and society. Encouraged by this discussion, we have intensively explored methodological questions related to equalising the relationship and interaction between researchers and research participants across the age divides. We have come up and tested different solutions to how the views and wishes of the young people and other research partners could influence more potently; how the topic of the research can be chosen to capture the interests of the research participants, what methods would be sensible from the point of view of diverse participants and how the results should be reported in meaningful ways. In the book we present and contemplate our ways of doing co-research and other co-creative methods with young people.

Overall, the book presents, discusses and reflects on studies that the ALL-YOUTH researchers have carried out in different parts of Finland. Some of the book's chapters present new, previously unreported studies and data. The authors make up a multidisciplinary group of researchers representing various fields of

knowledge ranging from politics, sociology, anthropology and law to computer science, environmental science and forest sciences, including also young co-researchers as well as experts from youth work and Theatre Arts. ALL-YOUTH has functioned as a broad umbrella under which diverse research teams have operated partly independently, but at times collaborating intensively in field work, data analysis and in reporting the findings. This kind of undertaking is extremely rare in the field of youth research and has raised interest among international colleagues. Therefore, we collectively felt important to document our experiences to the international audience and to produce this book.

The book's chapters present multifaceted takes on what we have done together and how we did it. They describe experiences of success but also moments of uncertainty and research ethical challenges. In several chapters, we open up our research practices in a more diverse and open manner than is usually the case. In this way, we have wanted to challenge how the uncertainty related to the production of knowledge is often hidden from research reports. We hope that our reflections will, on their unique part, alleviate and put in perspective the pressures experienced by many researchers in tolerating uncertainty and managing the emotions related to doing research.

We would like to express our warmest thanks to our young co-researchers, other research partners, all the authors of the book as well as each other:

Tiina: Päivi, I admire endlessly your knowledge in the field of youth research, your research practices in the field, your wandering theoretical mind and your exquisite writing skills. It has been so good to work together with you. Thank you, Päivi!

Päivi: Tiina, I deeply admire your sophisticated academic rigour as well as your skilful commitment to the empirical knowledge production that is ethically sound and does not shy away from unconventional solutions. Doing research with you is always true fun!

Our joint research journey has been rich, challenging, surprising and productive in so many ways. This book is a living proof of that.

In Tampere, November 10, 2022,  
Päivi Honkatukia and Tiina Rättilä

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## Abbreviations

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ALL-YOUTH	“All Youth Want to Rule Their World” research project
CA	Capabilities Approach
CK	Circular Knowledge action model
COVID-19	Coronavirus epidemic broken out in 2019
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
FRC	Finnish Red Cross
KELA	“Kansaneläkelaitos”, The Social Insurance Institution of Finland
NARAP	National Anti-Racism Action Plan, Finland
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NUMUR	“Young Muslims and Resilience” research project
NUTOPIA	“Utopias of Young People in the Age of Climate Change” research project
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SITRA	Finnish Association for the Celebration of Independence
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989
YLE	“Yleisradio”, The Finnish Broadcasting Company

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# Introduction

*Tiina Rättilä and Päivi Honkatukia*

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## **Understanding young people’s societal participation and well-being: exploring the unbeaten path**

Currently, humankind is confronting many intersecting crises threatening planetary and human existence: climate change, ecological collapse, wars, sociopolitical upheavals and social catastrophes, forced migration and human rights infringements, all of which are entangling in complex ways and are impacted by the still lingering repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The dominant neoliberal model based on continuing economic growth has already exceeded the ecological limits of the earth, and if nothing – or too little, too late – is done, the situation will continue to worsen, leading to disastrous consequences (IPCC 2022). Critical views maintain that the neoliberal economic system causes serious ecological damage as well as increases inequality and the concentration of wealth in the hands of only a few (see e.g., Leskošek & Zidar 2017, 251; Oxfam 2015). Many scholars and experts claim that profound structural, systemic change is imperative to maintain viable, resilient and sustainable conditions for contemporary and future generations (e.g., Gough 2015, 2017; Helne & Hirvilammi 2021). Changes are needed simultaneously in the economic, ecological and social spheres and at the local and global levels, including a substantial reduction in energy-intensive consumption and a move towards a more equitable distribution of wealth. This necessitates a new vision of the future for humanity and the planet’s well-being. Such a systemic transition is thoroughly social, requiring paradigmatic changes in how we view future societies and the relations between the human and non-human world, including serious rethinking of the question regarding what or who is (accepted as) “human” (Braidotti 2013, 2019; Fox & Alldred 2020; Haraway 1991). Importantly, this also requires seriously considering the views and experiences of disenfranchised groups around the world, including in the Global South (Gough 2017; Hill Collins & Bilge 2020, 234–235).

This book contributes to this discussion from a youth perspective. It analyses the often quite abstract ideas of sustainable well-being and sustainable future in relation to the everyday lives and engagements of young people, thereby highlighting sustainability as a youth question. Instead of individual features or achievements, we



understand well-being in terms of the universalistic basic needs of human beings and the entire planet (for it is not only humans who have needs or “agency”; see Bennett 2010) and regard satisfying these needs as the key responsibility of societies (Gough 2017). We highlight meaningful participation in society as one of the fundamental needs, and as such, tightly entangled with the question of well-being. The book’s mission, which is to encourage young people to be actively involved in discussions of sustainable well-being, stems from our own and other researchers’ empirical observations: current local and global developments alarm many young people in terms of how these developments relate to their everyday lives and futures (e.g., Hickman et al., 2021; Hussen 2018; Pekkarinen & Myllyniemi 2019). For example, recent youth protests on climate change have been motivated by young people’s strong sense of injustice, feeling of being deprived of a decent future and a perception of betrayal by their governments (Kippenberg & Rall 2021; Taft 2020; Thunberg 2019; youth4climatejustice 2021; see also Chapters 1 and 7). Even if not all young people engage in protests or regard themselves as activists, many see the future as important because it encompasses their wishes, dreams, fears and uncertainties (Cahill & Cook 2020; Franceschelli & Keating 2018; Honkatukia & Lähde 2020; Nikula, Järvinen & Laiho 2020).

The book’s perspective builds on previous research findings that both highlight young people’s elevated interest in influencing their futures while simultaneously documenting the minimal support they receive from the existing models, structures and means of participation (Cuevas-Parra 2021; Dentith, Measor & O’Malley 2012; Ergler & Wood 2015; Han & Wuk 2020; Walther et al., 2020). Several studies have demonstrated how young people’s voices remain unheard or ignored in decision-making processes and how their participation often tends to be merely tokenistic (Hart 1992; Cammaerts et al., 2016). Moreover, young people’s engagements with society are more often informal and mundane than formal (Barrett & Pachi 2019; Bowman 2020; García-Albacete 2014; Pickard & Bessant 2018). Hence, they tend to remain hidden, unacknowledged or misunderstood in adult-centred visions and discussions (Hearn 2018; Kallio, Wood & Häkli 2020; Shefer et al., 2018). Consequently, young people often feel unappreciated or undervalued as citizens and lack the opportunities to bring forth their views.

*Young People as Agents of Sustainable Society* analyses in depth this discrepancy between young people’s interests and the structures of youth participation. We present insights and findings from collaborative empirical fieldwork processes with young people and professionals. These processes were conducted under the auspices of the extensive ALL-YOUTH research project that was carried out in Finland, where we have studied and sought to inspire young people’s societal participation, intergenerational dialogue and, ultimately, intergenerational justice (Meyer 2016; Percy-Smith & Burns 2013). With intergenerational justice we refer in the context of our studies to the rights of young people for sustainable, healthy and safe (social and ecological) environment now and in the future, and the subsequent duty of the adult society to take these rights seriously, responding to them

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with effective policies. Overall, the scope of our interest in the book is extensive. We examine the opportunities, conditions and policies of youth participation in various contexts and stages of young people's lives, encompassing, among others, life courses towards independence and transitions to working life; participation in legislation; experiences of digital participation; belonging to or exclusion from (mainstream) society; relationship to nature; and young people's thoughts and expectations about the future, especially in relation to the climate crisis. In each context, we ask how young people see themselves as societal actors, including their opportunities to influence decision making about the matters in their lives and future.

In studying young people's societal participation, we regard it as being critical to acknowledge youth as perhaps the most dynamic life phase in the human life course, during which one's social, material and societal positions significantly fluctuate (Chesters et al., 2019; Bynner 2006; Worth 2009). In *ALL-YOUTH*, we have understood this life phase to fall mainly between the ages of 16 and 25, but there are also exceptions depending on the context of each study. Going through youth is a period for growing physically and mentally, forming intimate and other social relationships outside of a childhood family and adapting to independent living. Being young often means reflecting on and developing a sense of oneself as a part of communities and society and making decisions that shape one's future life in significant ways. Moreover, young people's relationship with society is defined by societal power relations and inequalities, here related to, in addition to age, their race, class, gender, sexuality, class, ability or other features. These categories mutually shape one another and modify young people's life phases differently in various situations and contexts (Hill Collins & Bilge 2020, 2). Young people can experience this dynamic and complex life phase in their respective societal positions with excitement, dreams and joy, and they can engage avidly in planning for their future (Arnett 2000). Simultaneously, regardless of their backgrounds, many foster difficult emotions and insecurity related to making important life-altering decisions in an overwhelmingly uncertain world (e.g., Furlong 2009; Madsen 2021). Young people might be insecure about their desired future society, and their plans might come off as tentative and disjointed. However, this does not mean that they lack ideas or that their in-a-state-of-becoming viewpoints should be bypassed. In adult-centred accounts, young people's sometimes abrupt propositions risk being unnoticed, ignored or dismissed, leaving concepts such as sustainable future detached from young people's realities.

The principal objective of this book is to establish a firmer connection between the discussions of youth participation and well-being. Although we find it essential to highlight how young people are positioned in society through policies, institutional practices, public discourses and research, we argue that previous research has not focused enough on how youth participation is linked to the experience of well-being. Consequently, young people's participation is often bypassed or misinterpreted as apolitical or passive, immature, narcissistic, self-motivated and

individualistic type of nonengagement (we will return to this claim later; see also Pickard & Bessant 2018). We interpret this as a sign of a clear gap in the research, despite the growing literature on both themes.

When considering the relationship between participation and well-being, it is essential to note that adult society often sets stringent requirements for young people, who are going through their unique process of navigating towards adulthood and striving for a good life and well-being (McLeod & Wright 2015). In addition to the expectations that they are supposed to follow, including the normative path from school to education and working life, they are surrounded by other ageist and adult-centred demands concerning the “proper” ways of being active in society (Ikonen & Nikunen 2019; Wyn, Cuervo & Landstedt 2015; see also Chapters 4 and 5). Plenty of sources discuss how young persons placed on the “wrong side” are managed by various activation and other policy measures of “a transition machinery” (Brunila & Lundahl 2020; Helne & Hirvilammi 2021; Kallinen & Häikiö 2020). In this book, we particularly contribute to the research tradition interested in what ideals and norms mean at the everyday level of young people and through which processes these ideals and norms produce inequalities between those who are seen to represent the right kind of youth participation and agency and those relegated to a category of (self)excluded, passive, different or even deviant (e.g., Maira 2009; Scanlon 2015; Yuval-Davis 2006; Willis 1993/2014). Our fieldwork vividly documents these processes, as well as young people’s agency in responding to the labels assigned to them.

In discussing the nexus of youth participation and well-being in the research context, we have also found it indispensable to stay alert to what kind of discourses on youth we as adults, researchers and scholars engage in and contribute to and whose interests these discourses defend (Cahill 2015; Wyn 2015; see also Chapter 4). In this respect, the book participates in critical youth research discussions (e.g., Kelly & Kamp 2017) to deconstruct the participation-related prejudices and assumptions with which adult society targets youth and which are still often uncritically reproduced in youth policies and academic research (Hartung 2017; Rytioja & Kallio 2018). In this, we wish to contribute to the discussion of what Hearn (2018, 47) has referred to as “critical studies of adults and adulthood” (CRAS) as a way to make visible how the common framings of young people tend to produce adults as authoritative actors in ways that leave them outside of the critical eye in “absent presence”, whereby adulthood is obvious but left unmarked (see also Haynes & Murriss 2017). We seek to respond to this challenge, even if tentatively, engaging in critical reflection of our own identity and agency in the fieldwork practices and in participating in public debates on the question of youth.

We begin this introductory chapter by identifying our position in the muddled field of discussion on youth participation. We argue why we have chosen the concept of societal participation to describe youth agency in society and describe the two vital sensitising strategies we have selected: seeing youth societal participation as firmly embedded in their everyday lives and as a form of reflexive politics. Thereafter, we traverse through the extensive debates on youth well-being

attempting to find an agreeable space where young people's societal participation could be analysed in close connection with the ideas of sustainable well-being, the key conceptualisations of which have greatly inspired our thinking (Gough 2017; Helne 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi 2017; Hirvilammi & Helne 2014). After formulating our position at the crossroads of debates concerning participation and well-being, we describe the methodological starting points of the book.

Before starting, we would like to make an important note: this Introduction is based firmly on the experiences from the ALL-YOUTH project, but it is also the result of the editors' creative thinking and is not intended to represent the views of all authors. The chapters of the book analyse young people's societal participation from various angles and share an interest in the question of sustainable well-being, even when not all authors address the concept directly. As editors, we have familiarised ourselves meticulously with the discussion of each chapter, bringing together their key themes, ideas and concepts in an attempt to construct a more consistent argument about what we think is amiss in the existing conceptualisations of young people's relationship to society.

### **Towards a relational understanding of young people's societal participation**

When entering research debates on youth participation, one inevitably steps into an already crowded space. Two reasons can be seen as the root causes for this: one is that the concept of citizen participation has a long history in democratic studies, and the other is that the discourse on active citizenship has turned into mainstream thinking, which occupies a great space in policy programmes (Dacombe 2018; Hilmer 2010; Motti-Stefanidia & Cicognani 2018; Walther et al., 2020). Moreover, regarding young people, the vastly growing interest in youth participation can be attributed to the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, which has popularised the notion of citizenship as a fundamental human right for both adults and children. There is now widespread principled recognition among nations, politicians and researchers that children and youth are active members of their communities and that their voices should be heard (Ergler & Wood 2015; Smith 2015). However, despite the abundance of talk about participation, its meaning remains surprisingly unclear, as many scholars have lamented (Theocharis & van Deth 2018; Weiss 2020). Later in this chapter, we will encounter the same critique of the concept of well-being.

To start with, the notion of participation has been traditionally used to describe citizens' contribution to the use of public power in a democratic community, either at the state, regional, local or neighbourhood level (Birch 1993, 80–94). In this context, studies on participation have been interested in questions such as the following: To what extent and how can citizens take part in and influence political decision making over common affairs? Are citizens interested in politics? How active and engaged are they? Do they vote? Do they value democracy and democratic institutions? How much active participation does democracy need

to be considered legitimate? Concerning youth participation, many studies have focused on young people's declining interest in politics through traditional institutions and to the (new) manifestations of their engagement with society (Barrett & Pachi 2019; Bowman 2020; O'Toole 2015). It is also acknowledged that an extensive part of young people's participation may remain unnoticed by adults (O'Toole et al., 2003; Pickard & Bessant 2018).

Especially in the context of new social movement studies, research has shown interest in the forms of participation and activism that occur outside institutionalised processes. These forms and styles have been multifariously addressed as extra-parliamentary politics, political mobilisations, social, political and protest movements, grassroots actions, self-organised activism and so on (van Deth 2014; see discussion in Weiss 2020). Here, the relationship between participation inside and outside institutions has always been notably tense. Political authorities like to keep a close eye on the politics and movements evolving in civil society, observing whether they pose a real or imagined challenge to the prevailing institutions (Rosanvallon 2008). Recently, this phenomenon has concerned young activists who have been struggling to advocate for rapid climate measures and who have been faced with adult critique and even, at times, violent countermeasures (e.g., Bergman & Ossewaarde 2020), as well as young people who resist the discriminatory practices related to race, gender and sexuality (e.g., Shefer et al., 2018). It is important to note here that scholars, too, contribute to the (re)production of such system-oriented discourses with their research results and policy recommendations. For example, this is reflected in the research on youth participation, regularly surveying young people's values and attitudes towards the prevailing political institutions, monitoring their potential discontent and its implications for the system and, hence, bypassing other forms of agency in society (Bowman 2019; Rytioja & Kallio 2018).

Although traditional priorities and conceptualisations are still in place in democratic studies, more recently, the research on youth participation has expanded to cover not only young people's relationship to traditional politics, but also their relationship to society more widely. Scholars have problematised the concept of politics for its overidentification with the political system, which narrows down the meaning of participation to citizens' involvement in decision-making processes (Isin & Nielsen 2008; Plummer 2003). In this manner, many other forms of social and political engagement have been left unnoticed or unaccounted for. Some scholars on youth participation have taken a critical stand on this deficiency and sought to broaden the definition of politics and participation to include a wider scope of activities, spheres of life and styles of influencing (e.g., Aggleton et al., 2019; Harris, Wyn & Younes 2007; Rytioja & Kallio 2018; Theocharis & van Deth 2018; see also Kallio, Mills & Skelton 2015).

Working with this broader understanding of participation, our starting point in *Young People as Agents of Sustainable Society* is the need to boost the visibility of young people's diverse engagements in society and involve their views more decisively in making society more sustainable. This goal requires a sensitive

approach to the complex and evolving nature and heterogeneity of young people's agency, which challenges some of the key assumptions in knowledge production about young people's relationship with society. In society's adult-centred epistemological models, where it is the (white, autonomous, male, able-bodied, heterosexual) grown-up "who is positioned in charge of meaning and knowledge and authorised to set the rules of criticality" (Haynes & Murriss 2017, 972), young people are thought of as special kinds of incomplete human beings and as citizens-in-the-making instead of as complete persons and citizens in their own right (e.g., Worth 2009). Young people are often recounted instrumentally, not as valuable or noteworthy in themselves, but as raw material for society's reproduction. Consequently, young people's everyday life experiences, concerns and knowledge are overlooked in societal discussions. Even if institutional practices have been developed to better enable young people's participation in decision making, for example, from the perspective of young people, these practices tend to remain tokenistic. Here, the societal discourse on youth and youth participation has a long way to go in learning from critical youth and education studies' reconceptualisations of young people's citizenship as being capable and holding age-independent agency (cf. the argument about "agelessness" by Haynes & Murriss 2017, 975–977).

Another problem with the adult-centred imagery of young people's societal participation is that it typically perceives it in binary terms (Bowman 2019, 2020), which obscures the complexities of young people's participation, hence hiding their many forms of involvement in society. The adult-centred frame makes it difficult for young people to view their actions in diverse institutional contexts or among their peers as societally meaningful or political (O'Toole et al., 2003; Weiss 2020). Moreover, it reproduces and reinforces the hegemonic vulnerability narratives that position young people in binding ways as either vulnerable victims (Brunila and Lundahl 2020) or democratically passive "prosocial and conformist" transitional citizens (e.g., Boldt 2021; Wyn, Cuervo & Landstedt 2015; see also Chapter 5). This approach relates to youth participation as a mode of neoliberal governance, forcing young people to advance individual life chances in the context of more or less compulsory forms of societal participation and engagement (Hartung 2017; Helne & Hirvilammi 2021; Ikonen & Nikunen 2019; see also Chapter 4). When young people challenge these expectations, as they frequently do, they risk being labelled as passive, disinterested, disillusioned, disengaged, naive, defiant or even deviant (see Chapter 5). Consequently, many are left with the feeling that their existence and voices are largely bypassed or are being labelled inadequate by adult society.

The approach and concepts developed in this book veer away from this kind of understanding and sanctioning of young people's participation. Although young people's possibilities to influence politics is an important topic that will be addressed, we go beyond the familiar usage of political participation as engagement in an activity that is purposefully oriented to take part in and influence institutional decision making. We prefer the concept of *societal participation*, which can be understood more widely as inclusion, engagement, activity and influencing in the

everyday surroundings and networks in which young people live and act (Harris, Wyn & Younes 2007; Isin 2008; Kallio, Wood & Häkli 2020). In this approach, no artificial distinctions are made between which activities and actions are counted as political and those that are not (as in “civic” activity). Rather, our approach works to counter the tendency to predetermine what participation can mean in research settings and public policies (cf. Barrett & Pachi 2019).

The above discussion reveals that the ways in which participation is defined in research and public discourses build a complex discursive field in which the scholars of youth participation must orient with a less-than-perfect conceptual guide in hand (see Weiss 2020; cf. van Deth 2014). Acknowledging this conceptual abyss and responding to it in this book, our approach to young people’s societal participation starts with two initial characterisations. *First, our definition of participation relies on a broad and relational understanding of how it is embedded in young people’s everyday lives.* Broadness implies that we are interested in studying the variety of ways young people are linked to society and act in it; this also motivates our use of the term societal participation. By relationality, we mean that participation always rests on a mix of social, political, cultural and, in the final analysis, ecological and planetary conditions. The need for this kind of conceptualisation can be justified empirically, especially given how significantly the current climate crisis and other environmental problems, coupled with other crises and problems related to social justice, motivate and frame young people’s activity. In this way, the issue of youth participation cannot be sensibly separated from the wider socio-political-ecological context.

It is important to note that societal participation is primarily an analytical category in our conceptual framework. It does not entail any normative thrusting of young people into a certain kind of active citizenship. Neither is our intention to cluster them as active versus passive subjects or to label their citizenship as somehow problematic and in need of management by adult society. Instead, our conceptual framework consciously keeps open how young people’s belonging, functioning and influencing in society are manifested in each time and context, here concentrating on the meanings young people assign to their participation.

*Second, we find it helpful to define the nature of young people’s societal participation in terms of reflexive politics theory.* As Rinne (2011, 9) first introduced, the notion of reflexive politics is based on the observation that political activity has diversified and become ever more fragmented over the past few decades. At the same time, the motives and forms of political activity have individualised, so prominent political themes today often arise from individuals’ initiatives and bottom-up mobilisations. The term “reflexive” expresses two aspects of this process of politicisation: the initial (reflexive) reaction to a grievance experienced in one’s lifeworld and the reflective political judgement that follows the reaction and determines what measures a person will take to address the problem (Rinne 2011, 11; see also the discussion in O’Toole 2015).

From the perspective of postmodern theory, reflexive politics can be read as an alternative to the logic of traditional politics, which has become increasingly

market driven and designs public policies in the interest of guaranteeing the economy's competitiveness. Instead of building upon mainstream politics' focus on economic efficiency, competitiveness and scarce resources, reflexive politics brings up personal experiences, such as environmental values, the personal experiences of infringements of sexual integrity or other injustices related to the expression of gender or sexuality and related self-organising forms of citizenship (Rinne 2011, 10; Tormey 2015). At its best, reflexive politics initiates alternative ways of seeing the world, including critical insights into how traditional politics excludes most people from the sphere of political influence. Meanwhile, it can cause friction between civil society and traditional institutions, especially if reflexive mobilisations are interpreted in the framework of protest politics. The different logic and unpredictability of reflexive action and its prolific and imaginative use of performative communication are often met with suspicion and opposing reactions from political authorities.

The theory of reflexive politics aids in interpreting young people's societal participation and bottom-up movements, such as climate activism, Black Lives Matter or youth-initiated social media campaigns inspired by the #MeToo movement (see, e.g., Hussen 2018). For example, Fridays for Future was born out of a single person's privately felt anxiety over the climate and grew into a global movement of thousands of young people who shared the same feeling. Another example is the well-known climate change case brought to the European Court of Human Rights by six young Portuguese activists (see Chapter 1), which stemmed from their frightening personal experiences of forest fires near their homes, the causes of which have been linked to the process of global warming (youth4climatejustice 2021). In fact, dozens of similar court cases have been made in collaboration between young people, lawyers and other adults worldwide (Sahin 2020; see contributions to Henry, Rockström & Stern 2020). Based on these examples and many more, some of which we have encountered in our fieldwork, the theory of reflexive politics works as a valuable tool, helping to clarify our basic argument: young people's participation should be seen as embedded in their everyday lives and connected with an overall framework of well-being, which is affected by the surrounding social structures, public policies and, in the final analysis, the ecological conditions of life on the planet.

### **Well-being – everything and nothing?**

We aim to analyse young people's societal participation, as defined above, in connection with the conceptualisations of well-being. We develop the argument that young people's participation should be understood holistically and take into account the complex ways in which participation is embedded in their needs and well-being (White 2010). As with the concept of participation, well-being is understood in an encompassing sense, recognising that, ultimately, it is based on the well-being of the whole planet. We agree with Helne and Hirvilammi's (2017, 2021; Helne, Hirvilammi & Alhanen 2014) argument that the question of sustainable well-being



cannot be reasonably separated from the broader social, economic, political and ecological context. Our perspective greatly benefits from their theory of sustainable well-being as a deeply relational phenomenon, and it is also inspired by post-humanist thinking, which locates “the posthuman subject” in deep relationality to its fellow non-human species and entities (Braidotti 2013; van der Zaag 2016, 333). We contend that the conception of well-being based on material wealth needs to be challenged because it has severe ecological and social consequences and threatens both the viability of the planet and human well-being.

To start, when thinking about how youth is imagined and articulated in contemporary society, one cannot help but notice the significant role that the discussions on well-being play in defining youth and their agency (Wyn 2015). McLeod and Wright (2015, 1) point out that improving one’s well-being is now suggested as a solution to the myriad of issues that young people face; calls to address well-being are so commonplace and widespread that “they can mean both everything and nothing”. Also, other researchers have commented on the difficulties in defining the idea and concept of well-being in any satisfactory way (Bourke & Geldens 2007; Dodge et al., 2012; see discussion in Cahill 2015).

Although the concept of well-being may seem vague and serve diverse purposes, it is still significant for two critical reasons: one is that it is used extensively as a managing technology in the lives of young people, and the other is that it is an important philosophical idea, continuing and rearticulating the more traditional notion of the good life. For example, Helne (2021, 223; also White 2010) notes that the concept of well-being is positively charged (who could object to pursuing well-being?), inclusive (undoubtedly relevant for all people, regardless of social position), holistic (referring to a bundle of mental, physical, material and social dimensions of being and feeling well) and aspirational. On this positive side, Helne (2021, 223) argues:

Well-being is something people or societies aspire to, and achieving well-being may even be the strongest source of motivation for human action. Well-being is, then, not only an outcome of something but also a force of action and change, both on the personal and the social level.

For the purposes of our argument, it is relevant to note that well-being also constitutes a discursive nexus through which future-related dreams and fears meet and through which it is possible to conduct critical debates on the predicaments of the human condition today and in the future. Young people are increasingly troubled by what could happen to their well-being because of the ongoing eco-social crisis, conflicts and political upheavals around the world. How can the unequal distribution of well-being be remedied within populations, as well as globally, and is there a political will to do so? Do young people have to give up something of their well-being today to “save” it for future generations? What are their opportunities to take part in decision making concerning futures policies, thereby contributing to building sustainable well-being in the longer term?

These constitute some of the crucial debates in which young people have recently risen to prominent roles because they have called for swift action and intergenerational justice in the current intersecting crises (Han & Wuk 2020; Meyer 2016; Skillington 2019; Zabern & Tulloch 2021). At the same time, young people's fervent engagement and commitment to the local and global climate and social justice movements constitute an excellent example of what we want to discuss in this book. Young people's activism(s) can prove how their participation connects with broader societal issues and developments. As we have already pointed out, one of our key arguments is that youth participation should be approached contextually to understand how young people's basic needs are embedded in the conditions defining their everyday lives and how the fulfilment of their needs appears seriously hampered by the concern over their future horizons. Many contemporary social-political-ecological issues directly affect young people and their futures, and many young people are taking a firm public stance on them. In terms of this book, young people's participation is both *reflexive* and *reflective*, responding to the felt injustices around them and taking deliberate action when adult society fails to do so.

For this Introduction, we have explored how the concepts of youth societal participation and well-being are constructed within various research approaches and public discourses, along with how young people can and do contribute to these discussions. Hence, we next examine some relevant strategies and discourses for developing the book's arguments. The following discussion advances in several stages. Through each stage, we first raise key questions about how young people's well-being is defined and then discuss the related theoretical ideas that have informed, inspired and sometimes troubled the authors of this book.

### ***Managing young people's well-being***

Let us start with the following quandary. Cahill (2015, 95–96) aligns with critical youth researchers in the observation that increasing attention in society is attributed to the “problem” of young people's physical, mental, social, material and civic health, even though young people are the population group least likely to experience the burden of disease. In contemporary political, cultural and expert discussions, young people are regularly viewed in terms of their “risk status”, whether at risk and in need of protection or prone to engage in risk-taking and, hence, in need of control or education (Besley 2010; Giroux 2000; Kelly 2006). Along with many other researchers (e.g., Wyn, Cuervo & Landstedt 2015), Cahill (2015) points out that the focus on the attainment of well-being is increasingly idealised and individualised, and it has become a catchall descriptor conjuring notions of young people's “successful” transition to adulthood and full citizenship, which has been defined especially in terms of participation in the labour market (Ågren 2021; see also Chapter 4). In this discourse, there is a tendency to talk about the problems of well-being as if they were psychological or developmental shortcomings rather than problems that come about as the result of social or political processes.

Consequently, there has been a loss of focus on the multiple dimensions of young people's lives with an accompanying lack of attention to how class, gender, race, ability, location and culture shape or moderate their life experiences (Cahill 2015, 100–102).

It is important to reflect on why this keen concern with young people's well-being exists, if they are, in fact, much better situated health-wise than other population groups. What purposes does this worry discourse serve, and how does it impact young people's lives (see e.g., Suni & Mietola 2021)? By asking such questions our intention is not to imply the absence of real problems with the well-being of young people, but rather, the aim is to become sensitised to the reality that studying and policing young people's well-being is by far an innocuous activity but involves designated political, research political and economic interests. Indeed, many critics have claimed that approaching youth well-being as a problem (McLeod & Wright 2015) specifically has to do with the rapidly evolving demands of the neoliberal economy and changes in the labour market to which governments around the world have responded favourably by developing "activation policies" (see Chapters 4 and 5). These have been targeted primarily at young people, aiming to improve their capacities for employability and prevent them from dropping out of society's reach (Brunila, Mertanen & Mononen-Batista Costa 2020; Ikonen & Nikunen 2019; Kelly 2006). The "project of the self" that young people are forced to take up to cope in this kind of economised society revolves around constant self-management and self-surveillance against the "codes of success" that institutions provide (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Brunila & Lundahl 2020; Wyn & Cuervo & Landstedt 2015). At the same time, the management of young people through, for example, education and career guidance is seen as providing a solution to the various social problems identified in their lives. However, according to our and other researchers' findings, some young people experience the activation measures and demands involved as the core causes for their ill-being (Honkatukia et al., 2020).

When the neoliberal-style economisation of society and states' activation policies are linked with the overall atmosphere of contingency and uncertainty inherent in contemporary society, we can begin to understand the social and political complexities within which young people orient their lives and see the implications this has for their well-being. For example, Kelly (2001, 2006) has argued that in late modernity young people are prompted to develop an entrepreneurial, reflexive subjectivity that signals their acceptance of responsibility for navigating the risks created by social change (see also Besley 2010). This is reflected, for example, in how young people are held accountable for their own employment and unemployment situations, even though the latter often stems from structural and global developments (Brunila, Mertanen & Mononen-Batista Costa 2020; Chesters et al., 2019; Scanlon 2015; see also Chapter 5). Thus, the problems of the individual "at risk" are taken as self-inflicted, while society itself is perceived to function correctly and normally.

As researchers who are interested in how young people perceive their lives, it does not feel particularly uplifting for us to take part in a discourse that, in some

ways, exploits young people as the material of the changing economy and labour market. It seems evident that when the activation discourse mainly serves the interests of the economy and government policies, it does not leave space for young people's understanding of the question of well-being, hence easily ignoring their real needs. In this book, we have therefore wanted to take a different approach. In the studies we report, we focus on young people from perspectives that take seriously their own views and experiences and support their well-being. Despite this, we cannot ignore the neoliberal discourse because it comes with productive power that hits young people's lives, penetrating directly and indirectly into their minds and bodies, as well as into their social relations and relationships with society. Therefore, it is imperative to continue to struggle with the discourse and its entangled mechanisms of governmentality, to critically deconstruct how we understand young people and their relationship with society. Many of the book's authors do this as well.

### ***Youth well-being – subjective experience or objective capabilities?***

Moving on, it should be apparent that youth well-being has become not only a commodity-producing industry but also an instrument of political struggle, governance and economic competition. With their knowledge production and policy recommendations, scholars on young people's well-being are also involved in this mix. In research, numerous schemata and indices have been developed for the needs of this political-commercial-scientific industry, in which the well-being of young people has been broken down into detailed components which intend to measure the status of their physical, mental, emotional, affective and social health (e.g., OECD 2022; van der Deijl 2017; Huppert & So 2013). Of course, there is nothing wrong with approaching youth well-being in this manner, that is, as a multidimensional compound and with the intent of helping young people cope in life. However, it is intriguing to note that if we combine the empirical results of years of meticulous research based on both surveys and qualitative data, one finding surpasses the others: well-being, whether articulated in the language of "happiness" or "satisfaction of needs", depends mostly on a young person's relational experience of being accepted by others, of belonging to a valued group as a respected member and of being loved, cared for and supported by significant others (e.g., Daley, Phipps & Branscombe 2018; Jose, Ryan & Pryor 2012; Marksteiner, Janson & Beissert 2021; Montague & Eiroa-Orosa 2017). This is what we know for certain. Other qualities of well-being, be they material or something else, are of secondary influence (apart from meeting the basic needs necessary for survival). However, many scholars find this state of knowledge unsatisfactory, which prompts the following question: what is it that we cannot learn about the constitution of young people's well-being by asking them directly in surveys and interviews?

Here, we enter another debate that has framed the studies on youth well-being: the one between subjective and objective approaches. Subjective approaches have

been criticised for not covering all the social, economic and political determinants of well-being as based only on people's own assessment of it. For example, Clark and Eisenhuth (2010, 70) point out that curtailing justice for young people to subjective well-being wrongly assumes that they can fully ascertain how their own life situation is embedded in the social structure. Clark and Eisenhuth warn that such an assumption may end up romanticising the agency of young people and forgetting that people adapt their preferences and future aspirations to how they are currently doing in life. Nussbaum (2007, 73) has famously argued that focusing on subjective well-being runs the risk of perpetuating social inequality: "It is not enough to ask people what they need to give them a democratic voice". Rather, what people utter as needs should always be analysed as being embedded in social structures. Their life situations, aspirations and values are not simply an outcome or within the responsibility of individual preferences and abilities (Moensted 2021; Wexler & Eglinton 2015).

Therefore, from this perspective, thinking critically about well-being requires non-subjective, general and global criteria that allow us to assess whether attaining well-being is truly and practically possible for all people without compromising social justice. This is what Martha Nussbaum has set out to accomplish in her Capabilities Approach (CA). In CA, well-being is understood in terms of the individual capacities and existing opportunities in society to act on them. The premise of CA is that all individuals are equally valuable and should therefore have equal opportunities to function in society to realise their human nature and personal aspirations, regardless of whether they (are able to) contribute anything to society (Clark & Eisenhuth 2010; Nussbaum 2007, 66). Nussbaum has identified a set of qualities that she believes represent the universal conditions for a good life. These include both economic goods and fundamental rights and liberties, which are bound together with the notion of human dignity (Nussbaum 2016, 173). One of CA's key purposes is to offer a critical yardstick for assessing whether such free agency is possible and the obstacles in society that may stand in its way. Subsequently, the equity of well-being requires that when capabilities are hampered by personal, social or structural problems, they should be addressed through a range of social policies (Hamilton & Redmond 2010; Ziegler 2010).

CA has the potential to study youth well-being. Often, young people are left to struggle (alone) within the complex mix of policies, norms and pressures imposed on them by society. Although CA can be criticised on various grounds, it still provides a potential counter-discourse to the approach that seeks to responsabilise young people for their own well-being individually. CA helps to shift the focus away from what young people seem to be doing "wrong" in their life paths and transitions towards a critical assessment of the real capabilities provided for young people to live a meaningful life (Brunila & Lundahl 2020; Ziegler 2010). This approach obliges us to ask whether real opportunities for young people to self-actualise exist and, if structural barriers are hampering their aspirations, what should be done about these barriers. If young persons are unable to "converse"

their freedom to “functionings” on equal terms with others, what kind of support should be provided to remedy their missing chances?

Although CA clearly hints at the possibility of critically taking up the question of the relationship between today’s well-being capabilities and those of future generations, it does not truly expound on that discussion. Yet, we believe that this is exactly what we need to do to follow young people where they are going, with their worries over the current crises and their repercussions to their future (Hickman et al., 2021).

### ***Towards a needs-based understanding of young people’s well-being***

Based on the previous critical discussion, there are good reasons to move the argument still forward to the question on human needs and conditions of sustainable well-being. Namely, although CA does not use the language of needs, the core set of universal capabilities suggested by Nussbaum can be read as articulating the basic needs of an individual living among others. A needs perspective is essential because it helps to see young people’s well-being as connected to the surrounding social, political, economic and cultural processes and ecological conditions. Discussing sustainable well-being also raises the question of how we should live and act in such a way that the conditions of well-being are maintained for future generations. Our argument is – and here we join Helne and Hirvilammi (2017, 2021), Gough (2017) and Matthies and Närhi (2017), among others – that thinking about well-being in terms of needs and sustainability is not simply a matter of an epistemic preference. What is at stake is a much more serious existential question in relation to which researchers and policymakers inevitably must position themselves. As Helne and Hirvilammi (2017, 37) put it,

What humankind are facing today is not merely a social and economic crisis which threatens well-being but a crisis of our sense of humanity, how we understand our place in the world, and how we put this understanding into practice.

This statement has tremendous importance from the point of intergenerational justice when aiming to guarantee opportunities for youth to flourish, both now and in the future.

The starting point for sustainable well-being is the idea that needs are species specific and permanent. They traverse global contexts and time and concern both current and future generations, meaning that future generations will have the same needs as we do today (Gough 2017, 46). Needs should be met so that “people can avoid harm and be able to function – to pursue their own goals, participate in society and be aware of and reflect critically upon the conditions in which they find themselves” (Gough 2017, 62; see also Allardt 1993). Needs are to be separated from wants because needs are morally significant in such a way that individual

preferences or wants are not. Needs both give significant rights to individuals and impose obligations on them, institutions and society itself.

In their discussion on the conditions of sustainable well-being, Helne and Hirvilammi (2021, 45–47) refer to the principle and ethos of strong relationality. Strong relationality points to the neediness and dependency of human beings, drawing attention to the vulnerability that is constitutive of all life forms. From a relational perspective, well-being depends on people's relationship to their community, society, nature and, ultimately, the whole universe. It is also connected to the time continuum, building on past and present conditions, as well as on the expectations of the future. In this thinking, a human being can no longer be conceptualised as self-centred *homo economicus*, but rather as *homo iunctus*, a being connected to everyone and everything around them (Helne & Hirvilammi 2021, 47; see Braidotti 2013, 2019, and Bennett 2010, for a posthuman and materialist articulation of this idea). Hence, even though needs are linked to individual psychological and spiritual well-being, the way they are realised is a thoroughly social, affective and material issue that is produced in the interplay between social, political, economic and cultural processes and dynamic engagements with the material environment (Atkinson 2013; Chapters 3 and 5).

Moreover, an emphasis on human neediness does not imply, as critics have suspected, that human agency and autonomy lose their meaning. On the contrary, it is our very neediness that makes us active (Helne & Hirvilammi 2017, 5). The notion of agency is the basis for needs-driven well-being simply because, as humans, we are always forwards-orienting actors who must work to survive (labour), create a meaningful life and things around us (work) and keep up the social and political world (act), to borrow Hannah Arendt's (1958) famous concepts. Societies do not hold up by themselves, and people cannot survive without the capability to function and act. These are the things we *need* to do, and according to an impressive body of social and political research, deliberately acting in and for the common world together with others has the tendency to make people happy (Borgonovi 2008; Lawton et al., 2021; see also Roodt 2014). Needs and relationality-based thinking have important implications for the study of youth well-being. Here, young people cannot be held individually responsible for their own destiny. Instead, their choices and transitions in life are an integral part of the processes of society as a whole, interlinked with the broader conditions and developments that underlie them. Thus, when, for example, policy discourses construct the differences between "active" and "marginalised" youth, the reality is that all are part of the same common world.

### ***Young people's societal participation in the context of sustainable well-being***

To recapitulate, we consider it essential to approach youth well-being from the perspective of needs because this allows us to have a deeper understanding of what young people's participation means and how it is embedded into the overall constitution of their well-being. It also helps to direct critical attention to the many

barriers that obstruct youth participation. One of the central things we should understand is the following: when participation is understood in the context of well-being, it is unfair to expect that young people are “active”, as society usually defines it, if their basic needs are not met, like when they face difficulties in making their living, have problems in their social relations, feel excluded by and from society, experience uncertainties with their self-efficacy and so forth. Meanwhile, it should be remembered that the activities of young people are not always visible to the outside world, even if such activities might be critical to their well-being. As discussed earlier, youth participation takes on many different forms that adult observers do not always perceive or understand.

Furthermore, the opportunities and barriers to participation are not only structural and institutional; they are also discursively constructed. As Helne and Hirvilammi (2017, 36–37) argue, the importance of elaborating on the concept of well-being is based on the view that the language we use, the stories we tell ourselves and the concepts and metaphors we live by have an enormous effect on our behaviour. Consequently, they constitute considerable transformative power. Concepts do not merely exist, they *do* things and shape the world (Helne, Hirvilammi & Alhanen 2014). Likewise, how youth participation is seen and understood is influenced by the ways of speaking about it in political and research discourses. This has been well reflected in the recent climate debate. Many young people feel that they are not taken seriously in public discussions. Their anxiety over the planet’s future has motivated them to act, but they criticise how their worries are being treated as a problem itself (Eide & Kunelius 2021). Instead, what should be done is to take rapid action and effect social change to promote the required eco-social transition (see Chapter 7). Politics and policies in the right direction would ease young people’s minds, not (at least solely) counselling and therapy. Of course, not all young people are equally interested in or think in the same manner about such issues, and intersectional analyses are often more informative to understand the variety of positions they take in societal matters (Hill Collins & Bilge 2020). Yet from a relational perspective, the case remains that, in those conditions of social and ecological interdependence, the well-being of all young people is connected to the same socio-political-ecological system.

Needs and capabilities can be conceptually connected. CA raises critical questions about whether society provides those capabilities that meet the participation needs of young people and how the same capabilities can be secured for future generations. From this book’s perspective, it is interesting to note how young people themselves have powerfully raised such issues. Numerous young people around the globe have expressed the need and desire to contribute to public debates and political decision making about futures policies. Their experiences of participation in the debates on climate, environment, social justice and sustainable development vary, but the common sentiment among young activists is that they are not genuinely listened to. Rather, they are often patronised and positioned in the role of immature citizens-in-the-making. It is an essential question whether young participants and activists can create the space for a counter-discourse that would



shift attention from “correcting” problems with youth well-being towards actually effective climate, environmental and social policies. An important related question is what kind of (supportive, critical or neutral) role the research on youth participation and well-being should play in such discourse. Again, these are not simply epistemological issues but ones that challenge us all to assess our relationship with the crises that threaten humanity and how we perceive young people’s lives and agency in them. Our position in this book is that young people should be engaged widely and earnestly in creating policies for the future and sustainable well-being, while also taking their self-organising activism seriously. This requires a clear shift in both attitudes and democratic practices in adult society. Concomitantly, we must ensure that young people are not responsabilised individually for “saving the world”. We need more, better and deeper interparty and intergenerational dialogue and cooperation to bring forward the necessary eco-social transition (see the discussion on this in Chapter 3).

The discussion in this Introduction has been motivated by how the category of “youth” is articulated in contemporary society and research. Our interest in the book especially lies in how the participation and well-being of young people are constructed within various research approaches and public policies. Our last argument is that, even in the midst of expanding literature, something important gets lost from the picture. It appears that research still has difficulty grasping and conceptualising the dynamics of young people’s everyday lives and agency. Partly, the reason for this is that mainstream discourses tend to reproduce an understanding of youth participation and citizenship as if it were a separate sphere of activity detached from young people’s everyday lives. Such a discourse implies that to participate young people should leave behind their own places, spaces and positions and go someplace else to carry out the actual participatory acts. The idea that societal participation requires leaving behind safe spaces and entering adult-controlled ones is frightening to many young people, hence serving as an effective barrier to their participation (see Chapter 6 for an elaboration on this question). Hence, this thinking creates a picture of the separateness of politics and society from everyday life, as many scholars working within critical citizenship studies have pointed out (e.g., Isin & Nielsen 2008). From a relational perspective of sustainable well-being, there is no separate world of participation (although there are institutions that have designated processes). Instead, as active human beings, we incessantly “participate” in the affairs of the common world. Responding to this and the other problems identified in the chapter, this book presents a more profound understanding of how young people’s needs, participation, well-being, societal structures, culture, discourses and ecological conditions are intertwined in contemporary society.

### **Empirical context**

Although the discussions throughout the book take part in international multidisciplinary debates, the geographical and societal context of our studies centres in Finland around our studies in the ALL-YOUTH research project. Next, we briefly

describe a few central features of Finnish society and youth policies that have framed the work of ALL-YOUTH. Many of them will be discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow.

Finland (with a population of 5.5 million and geopolitical location in Northern Europe with c. 1,340-km-long border with Russia) is an interesting case for exploring youth participation because it regularly ranks at the top of the world, together with the other Nordic states, when evaluated through various indicators assessing the state of society. Finland is known, among other things, for its stable society, working multiparty democracy, universally guaranteed and affordable public services, high level of education and good level of gender equality (cf. Madsen 2021). Even though each of these features are actively debated and even questioned in the Finnish public and are partly countered by other features such as Finland being among the most racist and violent societies (especially against women) in Europe (FRA 2017), interestingly, in various international rankings, Finland systematically places among the top. To cite one internationally well-known longitudinal survey, Finland has been reported to be the world's "happiest nation" for five years in a row (World Happiness Report 2022) based, among other things, on respondents' perception of their own well-being and the opportunities to influence one's own life, in addition to other factors such as the level of gross national product, corruption, health and generosity among people.

In many ways, young people in Finland are also happy and doing well, yet well-being among youth seems to be becoming more unequal, and problems have piled up for some young people, as has been observed in other countries as well (Blackman & Rogers 2017; Cammaerts et al., 2016). For example, the number of young people outside of working life and education in Finland is approximately 50,000, comprising roughly 8% of the age group 15–24 (Statistics Finland 2021), compared with the average of 13% (of age group 15–29) in the EU (Eurostat 2022). However, the figure has gone down since the all-time high in 2015, primarily because of the government's strict "activation policies", which include a major reform of secondary education and placing new requirements for young people to seek employment to secure their unemployment benefits. Moreover, in 2021, the age of compulsory education was raised from 16 to 18 years, which is further expected to lower the number of young people at risk of becoming "marginalised" and to improve their integration into the labour market, thus impacting the youth unemployment rate, which currently figures at approximately 11% in the age group of 15–24 years. Meanwhile, recent reports from the public and NGO-based health service providers suggest that youth mental health and other health-related problems are on the rise, as are problems related to their social relationships, such as violence and sexual harassment, especially among certain groups of young people, including young women, racialised and gendered minorities and young people in care (Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare 2021). The impacts of these diverse developments and policies on young people's well-being are currently actively debated, with some discussants propounding that the discourse on marginalisation should be abandoned because of its stigmatising nature (e.g., Perttula 2015).

In terms of political participation, although Finland is a well-functioning democracy with a high rate of well-being, young people do not participate (as traditionally defined) more actively than in other countries. In fact, Finnish young people experience similar problems with their participation possibilities to young people in other countries. To cite a few developments, the voting activity of young Finns is lower than that of older generations, even if it has been picking up lately (Pirkkalainen & Husu 2020). For example, in the 2019 parliamentary election, the turnout in the age group 18–24 years was 55% (compared with 69% among all voters), which was higher than in the previous 2015 elections. According to the 2018 Youth Barometer, 15% of the respondents aged 15–29 years said that they have engaged in traditional forms of politics like voting, campaigning for candidates or being involved in a youth council (many of the respondents were under the voting age of 18, so the figure here is not representative of young adults' actual voting activity). In comparison, 45% of the respondents have sought to influence societal issues relevant to their lives in some other way. Both figures are on the rise, as is young people's pronounced interest in politics generally (Pekkarinen & Myllyniemi 2019, 27–32; cf. European Parliament Youth Survey 2021). However, despite such trends, a clear difference can be observed between the participation (especially voting activity) of young people in higher and lower socio-economic positions, a difference that has increased at an alarming rate in recent years (e.g., Lahtinen 2019). Gendered differences in societal participation can also be observed, with young women more inclined than young men to impact diverse societal issues (Fransberg et al., 2022). Moreover, one of the most peculiar characteristics of Finnish young people's relationship to politics is that their sense of civic competence (internal political efficacy) is considerably weaker than in other European countries (Kestilä-Kekkonen & Tiihonen 2022). According to surveys, most young people feel that they do not understand political issues sufficiently and do not know how they could act and influence society. These issues have consistently come up in ALL-YOUTH's studies as well. We do not, however, interpret these findings in terms of the dichotomies between active and passive or competent and incompetent young citizens, but instead, we look at the relationship of young people to society and their actions in it much more broadly, as will become apparent later. In this regard, the book presents several important and rarely discussed findings related to, for example, what kinds of ways and spaces of political activity young people feel are safe versus unsafe.

Even if the structures of youth participation have been well developed in Finland, Finnish young people often feel that decision makers do not listen to them, which corresponds to how many young people feel elsewhere as well. Officially, as can be expected, young people's participation is encouraged in public speeches, youth policy programmes and legislative measures, such as the 2017 Youth Act, which seeks to promote the social inclusion of young people and provide them with opportunities for exerting an influence and improve their skills and capabilities to function in society (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021). Moreover, young people's participation in decision making at the local level is expected to be enhanced by the 2015 Local Government Act, which states that every municipality

must have a youth council or other participatory body for young people. However, as we have frequently witnessed, many young people feel that adult society is not genuinely interested in their views and contributions, especially if their views are critical. These experiences weaken young people's motivation for societal participation through official forms. Instead, as has been pointed out, they exercise their citizenship in other forms in their own daily lives, even if they are not always publicly recognised or appreciated (cf. the counterargument in Chapter 6).

The ALL-YOUTH project was established in this multifaceted societal context. It was inspired by the above-mentioned observation that, despite all the serious efforts to truly involve young people more firmly in societal decision making, many of them remain doubtful about their possibilities to be heard and have a say. We proposed a research project in which we would study and experiment on how to take young people's concerns and everyday lives seriously, encouraging them to participate in the formation of society on their own terms. We wanted to pay particular attention to those who are positioned in societal margins to create more possibilities for meaningful participation as who they are. From these underpinnings, we started our exceptionally interdisciplinary journey involving over 30 researchers from diverse disciplines and fields in 2018. Moreover, during the past few years, ALL-YOUTH has collaborated with hundreds of young people from diverse backgrounds. ALL-YOUTH has functioned as a broad umbrella under which several research teams have operated partly independently but at times collaborating intensively in fieldwork, data analysis and in reporting the findings. This kind of undertaking is extremely rare in the field of youth research, and collectively we felt it important to document our experiences to the wider international audience.

### **Methodological underpinnings: studying participation and well-being from a youth-centred perspective**

In the studies discussed in the following chapters, we have developed a methodological approach to turn the conceptual underpinnings presented above into research practice. This means that we have regarded it important to analyse young people's relationship to society as a holistic, dynamic and relational process where researchers seriously consider young people's own views and meanings. *Holistic* here means that participation is an essential dimension of a person's being-in-the-world, which is intimately linked with other dimensions that make a person a physical, mental, social and political being; as such, participation is essentially related to human needs and sustainable well-being. By the attribute of *dynamic*, we refer to participation as situated and variable over time. This implies that different structural and societal conditions enable different forms and meanings of participation (and disable others). Finally, *relational* means that participation is not something a person can decide or choose to do completely by themselves. Instead, it is constructed in a complex and changing relationship to the relations in the cultural, economic and ecological spheres in which the person lives and shares with others.

For us, a central starting point in implementing these methodological foundations has been the genuine interest in young people's worldviews in their everyday life contexts without predetermined agendas. We believe that, as experts on youth themselves, young people have important ideas and experiences of institutions (such as school, education or working life), of engaging in society and of imaginations of the future, if only adults are ready to listen to them (see Chapter 10). Demonstrating this kind of sincere interest towards young people requires not only the willingness but also a readiness to challenge the principles of the prevailing knowledge production paradigm, which is often based on categorising young people's agency as apolitical, antipolitical or disengaged, if it does not fit into the adult-centred view of what is regarded as the right kind of societal activity (Ergler & Wood 2015; Rytöja & Kallio 2018; see also Chapters 4 and 6).

Our approach has been inspired by research examples that have succeeded in showing how young people can act meaningfully in collaboration with other generations on complex societal issues, hence producing important insights into what it means to live in uncertain social, political and environmental times (see Chapter 3). These participatory and experimental studies have shown that young people are not just vulnerable recipients of public policy measures or victims of the difficult circumstances surrounding them. Instead, they have unique perspectives and ideas of responses that can significantly contribute to the development of communities and societies (Helne & Hirvilammi 2021; see also Chapter 1).

We realised that this approach creates the need to move forward from presenting young people's voices or merely documenting their agency or the perceived lack of it. First, it is vital to make young people's commitment to forms of solidarity, care and intergenerational collaboration in their everyday surroundings and in a wider society more visible. Many young people well understand that they are not the only stakeholders; indeed, they are willing to make the world better alongside adults (Howard, Howell & Jamieson 2021; Trajber et al., 2019, 102). Second, action-based participatory methodologies have massive transformative potential, even if we can document only some of that power in this book. Experiences of collaborative undertakings can valorise the concrete aspects of inspiring citizen participation towards sustainability. One such model is presented by Ian Gough (2017, 48–50), a scholar in social policy, who has suggested a specific dual strategy to identify the “needs satisfiers” for universally definable basic needs, that is, what goods, services, activities and relationships are required to satisfy the needs in a given social context. According to him, this entails working together at various levels of decision making and with different forms of knowledge, such as expert knowledge of health and education, and experientially grounded knowledge based on people's everyday lives and contexts. This is not a simple task and needs further development. In our studies, to cite one example, we have experimented with young people on a digital council prototype and reflected on their possibilities to be a part of such research and development initiatives (see Chapter 2).

In essence, our methodologies have been participatory and, on many occasions, explorative. Guided by our knowledge from earlier studies, we had some starting

points in mind when we started the ALL-YOUTH project. As previously mentioned, we have wanted to listen attentively to young people's thoughts and learn about their own ways of expressing their experiences (Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021; Back 2007). To do so, the authors have implemented participatory research methods in various creative ways, with some mixing youth engagement with quantitative survey data, while others have been particularly inspired by the qualitative co-research methodology, taking as our critical insight the idea of forming an equal relation to the research participants as possible instead of retaining an "objective" distance from them (Allaste & Tiidenberg 2015; Barber 2009; Mubeen & Tokola 2021; Smith 1987).

The nature of our collective research activities with young people (and professionals) can also be characterised as co-experimenting. This means that, in many of the studies discussed in the book, we started the process without a preset agenda with firm questions or research constellations. Instead, the process evolved through a discussion with the participants, probing what kind of research undertakings would be possible and meaningful from their perspectives (Percy-Smith & Burns 2013). Proceeding in this manner, ensuring that the participants felt good and safe about what we were doing, required flexibility and readiness to constantly reflect our research encounters also from the young people's point of view (Dentith, Measor & O'Malley 2012). Depending on the context, our joint journey continued in diverse directions. For example, with some young people, we formed research groups. In other cases, we visited their school classes regularly, and with some, we engaged in arts-based activities.

In our version of knowledge co-creation, we have been inspired by standpoint epistemology and the idea of strong objectivity as a form of responsible knowledge production (e.g., Harding 1986). Accordingly, we view that science, which openly acknowledges its interests, is less biased than knowledge production, which does not reflect its interests. Strong objectivity entails forceful reflexivity, "knowing about your knowing" (Harding 1993; Ronkainen 2000, 172). Besides reflexivity, it requires positioning from the researcher. Here, we line up with Suvi Ronkainen, a scholar specialising in research methods, who claims that:

We can know something about the reality, but this knowledge is always local and part of the local system of knowledge, way of knowing and interests. If we want to become better knowers, know what we know and what are the limits of our knowing, we need to have courage to commit, position ourselves and settle.  
(Ronkainen 2000, 182, our translation; see also Chapter 9)

Moreover, we have been intrigued by Rosi Braidotti's (1994, 2013) idea of nomadic consciousness, where the posthuman knower-subject recognises, accepts and even values epistemological uncertainty, resisting assimilation into the dominant ways representation and seeking to converge in their knowing a multitude of perspectives from a variety of disciplines and walks of life. Many of our explorative, multidisciplinary research processes with young people have followed such

epistemological nomadness, acknowledging that we know nothing about young people's lives to begin with and affirming that what we come to know evolves in a process of doing, acting, conversing, imagining and creating together (cf. Braidotti 2019).

### **Critical reflections from the field**

Above we have presented the basic methodological starting points of our empirical fieldwork. In the chapters that follow, we also openly describe and reflect on the challenges we encountered in our experiments and fieldwork (see especially the chapters in Part III). Our plans did not always proceed as envisioned. We encountered various ethical dilemmas, misunderstandings, communication breaks, uncertainties and sometimes even situations that could be seen as failures (see Bradbury-Jones & Taylor 2015). While engaging in such a self-critique, we have attempted to keep in mind an important precept formulated by Kelly and Kamp (2017), regarding how researchers should reflect, besides the research process as such, on their imaginations of what they are doing with the research. Commenting on youth studies, in particular, they remind us that the field constantly struggles with constructing youth as “others”, and this is not easy to overcome:

[S]ocial science/youth studies ought to acknowledge that it stands, always, in some relation to Self-Other binaries [...] there is a sense in which much of social scientific scholarship colludes [...] in reproducing the poor and dysfunctional Other to a privileged (White) normal, rational, transcendental Subject.

(Kelly & Kamp 2017, 257)

Kelly and Kamp continue to describe how youth research is commonly conducted by adults and how it is increasingly governmentalised and, therefore, always risks being adult centred, even if that is not the intention. Youth centredness can also be compromised because of the demands of the institutional contexts where research is done, here in universities and research institutions, where effectiveness in research output must be shown and fierce competition exists over research funding. Therefore, Kelly and Kemp ask researchers to be constantly alert to the question, “Whose dirty linen gets aired as a consequence of the work we do?” (Kelly & Kamp 2017, 530). According to them, critical youth research in the twenty-first century should have a critical ethos that constantly “troubles and unsettles what it is that we think we know, what we do, what we think when we say we are doing critical youth studies” (Kelly & Kamp 2017, 530; see also Dentith, Measor & O'Malley 2012).

In our experiments, we have attempted to follow Kelly and Kamp's advice, and it has not always been comfortable. Anticipating the discussions in the chapters to come, we next elaborate on some of our observations. First, we would like to put forth a fundamental dilemma in our inquiry, namely the question of how we, as researchers and young people as our collaborators, understood the concepts of

youth participation and social inclusion. From the beginning, we have aimed to understand young people's societal participation broadly, and it has indeed been eye-opening to take notice of the many ways and arenas of participation that young people engage in their everyday lives. However, at the same time, the meaning of participation has not always been clear to our young collaborators or us. We have received diverse answers from young people when we have asked how they understand the concept and have also faced silence, gestures of inconvenience and confusion, as well as "I don't know" types of short answers.

Moreover, young people's research participation styles have varied considerably. We have witnessed active participants but also withdrawals, not showing up, bodily expressions of disinterest and occasional verbal resistance and joking, the meaning of which we did not always understand (see Chapter 10). It remains uncertain how these multiple and contingent forms of research participation should be interpreted. Despite sometimes being uncomfortable, our fieldwork experiences have broadened our ideas of what participation in research can mean. We have learned to accept that participation cannot be truly defined beforehand. Neither is it possible to formulate a conclusive definition after the fieldwork.

Second, we regard it as important to reflect on what counts as knowledge or knowing in our co-creative collaborations with young people. Our aim has been to learn new ways of how young people think about the future and their possibilities to impact it. This has been important for us from both the research ethics and quality of knowledge perspectives. At this point, however, we cannot be certain whether the knowledge we attempted to co-create is something new or what, in the end, was the meaning of our research collaboration in terms of knowledge. Neither do we know for sure whether our research participants felt that they had gained new knowledge or skills in and through our collaborations. It seems that no one identifiable body of knowledge was often formed, but instead, different forms of "knowings" emerged, the meaning(s) of which were unique and, hence, different for each participant (see Ergler & Wood 2015). Some issues learned during the processes appeared to be vital for participants, yet they were difficult to conceptualise in epistemological terms (see the argument on this point in Chapter 9).

Third, there is a need to reflect on what happened in our experimental attempts to disrupt the power differentials between researchers and research participants and the inequalities of the ownership of knowledge. Did we in fact succeed in approaching young people as experts in their own lives? In our co-research processes, we encountered many ethical and practical challenges. These included difficulties in discussing the vulnerabilities related to young people's societal positions openly with them or reporting the research findings together in case our interpretations differed, such as when young people with a refugee background in one of our processes tended to responsabilise themselves individually over their employability in the Finnish labour market, while we saw the main problem lying in the labour market's racialised and discriminatory practices (see Chapter 8).

Fourth, in conducting intensive collaborative work with young people, we experienced moments when the related research ethics, such as confidentiality,



not harming the participants and anonymity, were problematised in the field and in reporting the research results. We wanted to stay open to young people's views and perceptions. Therefore, in our co-research experiments, we purposefully did not have a ready-made research plan, research questions or a research constellation at the outset. Instead, we wanted to plan the study together with the young research partners. This is what we did, but it did not occur without problems. Documenting the processes also included moments of uncertainty concerning, among other issues, whether we could use the photos or publish the names of the co-researchers. From the point of view of research ethics, the participants should normally remain anonymous, whereas from the copyright and moral ownership perspectives, they would be entitled to have their names published. We had to search for tailored solutions to these kinds of questions depending on each situation.

Fifth, this kind of participatory undertaking demands a critical evaluation of how we succeeded in bringing young people's voices and perspectives into the public discussion and decision making. It can be asked what giving voice really means. There is plenty of critical discussion in youth research on how naive the objective of representing young people's voices can be (see e.g., Ergler & Wood 2015; Hartung 2017). Citing again the earlier quotation from Kelly and Kamp (2017), one can ask whose dirty linen is aired in research while allegedly giving voice to young people. Ethical dilemmas play a role here, too. For example, what are the consequences of representing young people's accounts when they are, say, misogynist or racist? How should such accounts be represented or interpreted? Should they even be represented at all? What if bringing them to the public eye harms some of the parties involved in the research process? These are complex questions, and there are no definitive answers to them.

Finally, in representing young people's perspectives on their thoughts, dreams and concerns, we have broadened the repertoire of the usual publishing channels towards more popularised outlets. For a researcher, this kind of orientation means helping young people gain access to resources to guide them to act meaningfully in creating and communicating their visions in relevant decision-making circles (Matthies 2017, 321–322). To enable such access, we have collaborated with young people and artists (e.g., Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021). To name a few examples, we have written blog posts, created web pages, made podcasts and produced short films together to help make young people's stories visible.

We have also invited young people to our events as speakers. On one occasion, we wrote an open letter to a minister in the Finnish government based on the messages that young people wanted to convey. We have also organised a roundtable discussion with decision makers to discuss acute youth issues. Based on these accomplishments, we have successfully presented young people's perspectives to the public. In the end, however, it is difficult to articulate exactly what has been made "visible" in and through such encounters and who eventually benefits from these efforts.

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## Guidance for the reader

The structure of the book follows the argumentation described above, proceeding through addressing what kind of structures, discourses and practices of adult society condition and hamper young people's participation; how young people themselves perceive their opportunity to participate in society; and how the ALL-YOUTH project has attempted to meet these challenges by developing and researching new types of participation models that seriously take into consideration young people's own views and needs.

Following this logic, the book is divided into three sections and a total of 11 chapters. Each section begins with a short introduction to its basic themes and ideas, followed by a brief abstract of each chapter. The first section, "Structures and new models of youth participation", discusses the structures, institutions and public and research discourses that determine how youth participation is currently understood, governed and studied. From the beginning, the argument is put forth that the connections between young people's participation and overall well-being and needs are not properly understood or noted in research, not to mention probing into the conditions of building sustainable well-being and the crucial importance of intergenerational justice and intergenerational learning for it. Some authors also take up the critical question of what kind of normative orders, perceptions and expectations of young people's participation and citizenship the dominant, economy-driven discourse is built on, reminding us that "activating youth" is not an innocuous endeavour but rather that it serves the interests of some political order and produces certain kinds of consequences that hamper young people's well-being. On the other hand, the chapters also examine how young people themselves experience their opportunities to engage in society. Moreover, they describe some of the development work, new participation models and research carried out in ALL-YOUTH to seriously listen to young people's own views and needs, inviting them to participate in the production of knowledge about them.

The second section, "Critical views from the margins", continues the discussion started in the previous section by looking at how the existing public, political and research discourses position young people in relation to society. The chapters are especially interested in how young people relate and react to such categorisations, paying attention to how they strive to cope with society's norms, but also how they challenge and disrupt them with their own critical views and social movements. The three chapters in this section argue that the commonly applied binary perspectives in public and research discourses do not adequately describe the realities of young people's engagement with society. Through several empirical examples, the authors show that many young people are in fact very interested in societal matters and strive to create meaningful ways and spaces of action for themselves to get out of the marginalised positions in which society often places them.

The chapters in the third section, "To be(come) seen and heard – but how, and how to study it?", connect with the theme(s) of the second section. It especially focuses on the lives of young adults with a refugee background living in Finland, for

whom the marginalising practices of society and intersecting processes of racialisation, ethnisation and gendering are exposed in a particularly uncovered form, one that necessarily reflects on their well-being. It is with these young people that the interpretive power of the book's argument about the close linkage between participation and well-being is perhaps most clearly visible. The identity of refugee youth is fragile, and their basic needs are not sufficiently met, which also means that their overall well-being and ability to actively participate in society can be much weaker compared with many other young people. They suffer from the experience that they are not accepted into Finnish society, instead facing a lot of structural discrimination and everyday racism. Still, they are ready to talk about their lives, tell their personal stories and discuss societal issues, as the researchers discovered when they invited young refugee men and women to join in co-producing knowledge about their lives. The chapters of the section describe the used participatory co-research and arts-based methodologies, highlighting their importance as an equaliser of research relationships, but also openly and self-critically reflecting on what did not go very well in the research processes.

To conclude, the book can be read as an account of our journeys into studying through creative and explorative methods the way young people see the current world, their engagements and future in it. The methodological experiments and innovations documented enable us to better comprehend and analyse the processes of change in converging social and environmental problems from the young generations' perspectives. Hence, the book contributes to the much-needed methodological shift in knowledge production on youth societal participation. The narrative style of the book stems from our willingness to open our research processes in a way that partly transgresses typical academic reporting practices. We find such transparency important, especially considering that our project has been exceptionally wide reaching and explorative from the start. Because we have co-created new research methods and participation models with young people, we have often moved into unfamiliar territory. This has taught us to tolerate the uncertainties associated with conducting experimental research and appreciate its potential to create something new. It is this "creative chaos" that we have wanted to document in the book, thus contributing to a genre of research reporting that discloses the practices of doing academic research in a more vivid and authentic manner (see Helne, Hirvilammi & Alhanen 2014). In addition, as a multidisciplinary group of researchers representing various fields of knowledge ranging from politics, sociology, anthropology and law to computer science, environmental science and forestry, we have had to search for common denominators in our research practices and interpretations. It has not always been easy, but it has repeatedly proved exciting, insightful and inspiring.

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# Structures and new models of youth participation

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### Introduction

She looks around at other students in her class, rolls her eyes and comments, “But it’s not normal kind of participation, so few young people take part in youth councils. Why should we study it?”

(A comment by a student on a research course organised jointly by the ALL-YOUTH project and a local upper secondary school where student groups explored the different ways in which young people participate in society)

The above comment well illustrates how young people often feel about institutionally organised participation. Similar commentaries lamenting the “official” forms of participation could have been heard from young people almost anywhere in the world. In the Finnish context, such sentiment illuminates the fact that Finnish young people are used to living in a stable democracy. This is especially the case for those who have lived their whole lives in Finland and have not come across the situation of democracy being a threatened form of government that must be cared for and preserved. Even if serious antidemocratic uprisings concern Europe today, many young people in the Global North still find such questions distant. This is often combined with their feeling that the authorities representing democratic institutions refuse to listen to them or take their views seriously.

The chapters in this section share a twofold interest. First, they critically analyse the structures, institutions and public discourses that determine how youth participation is currently understood, governed and studied. In the beginning, the chapters advance the argument that the existing approaches to youth participation – both policy and research based – do not properly acknowledge the connections between young people’s participation and overall well-being, not to mention failing to probe into the conditions of building sustainable well-being for the future and the crucial importance of intergenerational justice and learning about it. The chapters identify the obstacles that hamper young people’s societal participation, arguing that preorganised arenas and forms of participation for young people are too often adult and expert centred, where attention is rarely paid to what kinds of participation and on what kinds of topics would be meaningful to the young people themselves. The

chapters describe research processes where more youth-centred ways of organising participation have been developed and tested in ways that serve the knowledge needs of decision makers but that, at the same time, allow room for young people's own critical ideas and appraisal of the conditions of participation.

Going deeper into the issue of youth participation, authors argue that it is not simply a matter of attracting and integrating young people into the practices of the existing system. They critically ask what kinds of normative orders, perceptions and expectations of youth participation and citizenship the presently hegemonic economy-driven participation discourse is built on, how it positions young people in society and what kind of effects it has on their well-being. The authors also take up the difficult question of how research, like the government-funded ALL-YOUTH project, can end up contributing to the (re)production of authoritative and adult-centred discourses, even if the researchers themselves take a critical distance and try to avoid responsabilising young people for the kind of "active citizenship" that the current youth and democracy policies require.

In Chapter 1, the authors, Jukka Viljanen and Eerika Albrecht present the rare argument that one of the elements of a democratic system is its aim to empower citizens to participate in the drafting of laws. Also, young people are citizens, but because of their age or other characteristics, they do not possess effective opportunities to influence the governing of the affairs that impact their lives. According to Viljanen and Albrecht, young people's participation in legislative processes can be both justified from a fundamental human rights perspective and be considered a logical step in the development of participatory democracy. The chapter presents two different empirical cases and political contexts in which young people have had or are strongly pursuing influence over law drafting. They first describe the legislative process in which young people were (e-)consulted nation-wide for their views on tightening Finland's climate law; and after that they review the renowned climate appeal made by six Portuguese young people to the European Court of Human Rights. These cases are particularly interesting in the book's argumentation because they show how young people around the world are trying to influence decision makers to enforce more effective climate policy, which, in turn, is strongly related to their well-being now and in the future. The cases demonstrate that creating sustainable well-being requires negotiations and cooperation between generations, highlighting how such negotiations can be pursued through legislative means.

Chapter 2 continues the discussion on preorganised institutional participation for young people but from a different perspective. The chapter examines what kinds of e-participation services the Finnish authorities provide young people with, what their main problems are and what young people's preferences for e-participation are. As a starting point, the authors, Jari Varsaluoma, Iikka Pietilä, Kaisa Väänänen and Tiina Rättilä acknowledge that, although in the early days of the World Wide Web the idea of using new technology for reforming traditional democratic processes and reinvigorating public participation raised great hopes, with accumulating experience, these expectations have gradually waned. However, even if

research has identified problems with e-participation, there are still good reasons to continue developing it. Participation through digital means is an increasingly important facet of young people's relationship with society and greatly affects their well-being. However, e-participation services are still often designed from expert-led, top-down perspectives so that users' genuine needs are easily ignored. This chapter presents a research project in which these challenges were met by involving dozens of young people in planning and testing a new e-participation service: the Virtual Council. The development of the service followed practices of human-centred design emphasising the inclusion of users in the design process. Thus, when collaborating with young people, the researchers and developers attempted to carefully discover what young people's needs and aspirations regarding e-participation are.

Chapter 3 moves the question of youth participation and well-being away from prearranged institutionalised settings towards more civil society – focused participation models. The chapter's discussion is situated in the vast challenge identified in the book's Introduction: that climate crisis is already endangering people's well-being globally and the state of the planet is at serious risk. In the chapter, the authors, Irmeli Mustalahti, Nina Tokola, Virpi Pakarinen and Venla Siltovuori argue that the challenge of building sustainable well-being for the future can only be effectively addressed by involving young people in climate policy and making eco-social transformation at all levels of society. Simultaneously, they stress that young people should not be responsabilised for building a sustainable future alone; instead, new action models are needed, through which the present complex problems can be solved intergenerationally, utilising innovative means of intergenerational learning. The chapter discusses the development and testing of the circular knowledge model, which was co-created with young people and a group of NGO partners in the North Karelia Region of Finland. The authors also critically reflect on the challenges of such an extensive collaborative effort. As shown in several other chapters of the book, participatory research processes are always unpredictable and may involve developments that go against researchers' well-intended goals and wishes, despite their best efforts.

**Chapter 4** begins with the notion that, for many years, activating young people to participate in society has been on the agenda of both youth policy and youth research. Numerous policy interventions and programmes have been established by national governments and supranational organisations such as the OECD to ensure that young people become involved in the structures and practices of society. As the authors, Henna Juusola, Susanna Ågren and Annika Valtonen argue, young people's inclusion and activity in society has turned into "serious business", which is closely managed and monitored. The authors explore the assumptions that underpin the dominant political and research discourses on youth participation, highlighting their tensions. Empirically, they discuss two participation experiments, both of which used the Virtual Council e-participation service (introduced in Chapter 2). The authors point out some significant differences between the experiments and contemplate on the effects of how and from whose starting points



the participation was organised. The authors also engage in critical self-reflection of their own values, knowledge assumptions and research ethics and practices; they emphasise that the ethical responsibility of the researcher is to become aware of what kind of discourses they take part in with their research. Reliable and valid research requires critical contemplation of whose knowledge and what kind of truths the research ultimately promotes.

## Youth and law drafting

### Developing quality youth participation in legislative processes and courtrooms

*Jukka Viljanen and Eerika Albrecht*

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#### Introduction

In this chapter we engage the issue of youth participation from a rarely applied perspective in the context of youth research: human rights-based climate legislation and litigation. We take forward the idea presented in the Introduction about young people's societal participation being closely linked to their well-being and consider how young people can be more firmly included in decision making over climate change policies and, thereby, over their own future. Our argument is, and here we agree with many other scholars, that young people are endowed with rights which young climate activists increasingly use in innovative ways to influence decisions that profoundly frame their future life prospects and well-being (Daly 2022; de Moor et al., 2020; Wahlström et al., 2019).

Our interest in exploring young people's participation in climate change policies stems from our background as legal scholars with a special interest in human rights law. Within the framework of the ALL-YOUTH project, we have especially focused on how human rights-based arguments can be used to promote children's and young people's societal participation. Related to this interest, we argue in this chapter that there are good reasons why young people should be given more opportunities to participate in legislation that impacts their lives. Moreover, regarding young people's right to participate in climate issues, our discussion is linked to the ongoing debate on sustainability and intergenerational justice. Like many other scholars we too have been intrigued by how young people's climate activism has lately influenced and refocused this debate (Daly 2022). Intergenerational justice has turned into a tangible issue in young people's speeches and actions by referencing the many perils that the climate crisis has already caused and that will continue to disproportionately affect in the future (Knappe & Renn 2022). Young people's participation in climate change policies through lawsuits is a fascinating phenomenon that has scarcely been studied so far.

The focus of the chapter is twofold: first, to consider young people's societal participation from the viewpoint of law drafting, making the argument that public participation in legislation can be taken as a basic democratic right, one that is currently not well established in most democratic countries but that we claim is

important to bring forward. Second, to “flip the coin”, we will discuss how young people have utilised the existing human rights law framework to make their worry over the climate crisis publicly visible and globally push governments to take more effective climate measures. We will present and discuss two cases in which such law-related stand taking by youth is evident, one in the context of amending the 2015 Finnish Climate Change Act and the other in the context of a 2020 lawsuit filed by a group of Portuguese youth in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

Our perspective on youth societal participation can be characterised as structural and institutional. However, this does not mean that we appraise institutional participation as being above other forms and arenas of participation. We fully acknowledge that young people’s societal participation is multifaceted, as attested by the many studies reported in this book. However, it is important, from the viewpoint of democracy, that young people maintain a relationship with societal institutions and their legal basis and that they can feel able to influence those institutions when needed. This too is part of building a sustainable society and future.

The overall ambition of our study is to develop a multifaceted research approach on youth societal participation by combining aspects of youth research and legislative research and highlighting the importance of the legal basis for the societal agency and well-being of young people and, through them, for future generations.

### **Human rights-based participation in climate change policies**

The chapter is based on the observation that relatively little research exists on youth participation in legislative drafting and its meaning for young people’s societal and political agency (Albrecht et al., 2021; Checkoway & Gutiérrez 2012, 3; Gasparri et al., 2021). Youth climate activism has brought fascinating new dimensions to this, challenging researchers and decision makers to rethink how we should understand young people’s political competences and agency. Participation rights per se are, of course, well-known. Universal human rights, political and social rights and, more recently, environmental rights provide, in principle, a strong basis for citizen participation and political decision making in society. Additionally, the participation rights of children and young people are designated by the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is widely ratified worldwide and further supplemented by national legislation. For example, in Finland these rights are safeguarded by the national constitution, Youth Act, Child Welfare Act and legislation on education. Moreover, a national child strategy was created in 2021 to promote these rights (Ministry of Justice 2020, 18). A similar emphasis on citizen participation can also be found in international and national agreements on sustainable development goals. Since the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development it has been widely acknowledged that all environmental issues should involve the participation of concerned citizens (United Nations 1992) and that states should invest

more effort in engaging the public in environmental decision making (Bunders et al., 2010).

While the participation rights of children and young people are well established, the importance and political potential of such rights do not appear to have been properly understood until recently. We would like to draw attention to three points that are relevant here and that underpin our own discussion in this chapter.

First, it can be considered somewhat curious that citizens' participation rights have not been understood to include engagement in law drafting and parliamentary discussions around laws, even as new forms of participatory democracy have gained great popularity. Many countries and the European Union allow the practice of citizen initiative, which can be seen as one way to impact legislation, but it is still an indirect means of influence in which citizens have no control over how the initiative is treated in the parliament if or once it is submitted. The right of citizen initiative is, moreover, generally restricted to adult citizens. Young people are also affected by age restrictions on election participation, which is generally set at 18, another indication that there are significant structural barriers to young people's participation and agency (Beckman 2018; Wall 2021).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that children and young people be consulted in all decisions that affect their lives, a requirement variably met in different countries and administrative practices. Thus, there are good reasons why young people in particular should be offered the opportunity to participate in drafting laws that affect their lives, like for example, climate laws most definitely do. At the same time, participation in law drafting provides one answer to the problem, often highlighted in research, that youth participation in decision-making processes is typically tokenistic. The problem of tokenism, at least to some extent, recedes in legislative consultations because the results of consultations must somehow be taken into account in the law drafting.

Second, one cannot fail to pay attention to the rising phenomenon of climate litigation in which children and young people have played a prominent role. A growing number of young people around the world have sued governments, pension funds and large companies over their perceived failures to respond effectively to the climate crisis, making the argument that the inaction of current and past decision makers destroy their future (Parker et al., 2022). Heiskanen and Sormunen (2020) point out that court appeals are a well-established means for the international human rights movement to seek judicial redress in situations in which national laws do not guarantee the necessary rights. What is remarkable about the recent court appeals, as Daly (2022, 2) notes, is that they involve multiple child applicants suing multiple respondent states (often states where they do not live) to make bold demands for more effective climate change policies. Over 1,000 national climate lawsuits are currently pending worldwide, many involving children and young people (Sabin Centre for Climate Change Law 2022).

Third and more specifically, what particularly interests us as legal scholars is that the recent court cases indicate that human rights and their accountability

mechanisms can be utilised to defend climate change-related human rights while simultaneously tying these rights to the question of intergenerational justice. Intergenerational justice can be understood briefly as a form of distributive justice in which present generations hold an obligation towards future generations not to pursue policies that create benefits for themselves but impose costs on those who will live in the future (Knappe & Renn 2022). It may be noted that basing a legal argument on the connections between the rights of children and youth on the one hand and intergenerational justice on the other has been considered challenging in legal practice, mainly because it has been difficult to show a direct linkage between current circumstances (how they affect children now) and between the experiences of unborn and thus unknown generations. Much has already been debated about how future generations should be defined (Beckman 2016).

It is intriguing for legal scholars how lawsuits brought by children and young people have managed to provide connections between topics that have been priorly addressed separately and that together make up complex arguments about how climate change already affects young people's well-being and futures. This then foregrounds the demand that governments and other powerful actors should remedy the harmful situation now, not in years to come (Sanson & Burke 2020). Many of the already reported cases have successfully linked the arguments on human rights, the perils of climate change and intergenerational justice, and the courts are increasingly responsive to them. Thus, legal scholars have started to refer to a "rights turn" in climate change litigation (Peel & Osofsky 2018). Moreover, due to the time lag of anthropogenic climate change, an increasing number of theorists have called for new legal principles that recognise the intergenerational connection among human societies and articulate the rights and corresponding duties that underpin intergenerational equity (Weston & Bach 2009). For example, to Daly (2022, 2–3), such a development rightfully challenges the traditional procedural and individualistic character of the international human rights law framework, pushing it towards a more holistic approach that better acknowledges the interconnectedness of humans with their environments.

Commenting on the role of young people in the discussion on intergenerational justice, Knappe and Renn (2022) point out that even if the issue has long been debated, young climate activists have succeeded in politicising the debate and "translating" it into speech and concern for global climate justice. Climate justice refers broadly to actions that address injustices against the entire ecosystem, humans merely being one element in it (Daly 2022, 3). In Knappe and Renn's reading, young people have not been taken seriously in sustainability policies, and intergenerational justice has appeared as something like an imagined relationship between the older generations (who have political power now) and the unborn generations. This approach has been effectively questioned, and abstract future generations have been reinterpreted or reconstructed to be closer and directly linked to the present generation of young people. This new framing has been underlined and reinforced by the already visible impacts of global climate change, such as the more frequent occurrence of extreme weather events (Daly 2022, 9.)

## Hearing Finnish youth in climate change legislation and intervening in the Portuguese youths' litigation case: data and methods

The first set of data discussed in the chapter was produced by carrying out a citizen survey in relation to the Ministry of Environment's amendment of the 2015 Finnish Climate Change Act (609/2015). The Climate Change Act is framework legislation that the government wanted to reform to introduce a target of zero emissions by 2035 and negative emissions by 2050 and to update the framework for organising climate policies among different Finnish authorities (Finnish Government 2019). The Act also aims to improve public participation and access to information on climate policies. Citizen participation has been an integral part of the Act's objectives from the start, and participatory rights have been granted to all citizens regardless of age, consequently providing also children and young people an opportunity to express their views on topical climate issues.

The survey, designed by ALL-YOUTH and the Ministry of Environment, was part of a legislative consultation process, and its responses were to be used in amending the legislation. The legislative tradition in Finland emphasises transparent and participatory consultation procedures to enable hearing from interest groups and citizens (Airaksinen & Albrecht 2019; Tala 2005, 132). Young people and indigenous peoples were chosen as the special groups to be heard in this case. Among other citizens (N = 2,458), 389 young people aged 18–25 responded to the Webropol survey, accessible online for five weeks in the autumn of 2019 through the Ministry's webpage and various social media channels. The survey inquired about the respondents' views of their opportunities to participate in climate policy, about the current Climate Change Act and about the needs for changing it. The survey was semi-structured; in addition to simple "yes", "no" and "I don't know" answers, open commentary was possible. The language choices were Finnish, Swedish, English and three Sami languages.

The survey answers were analysed by calculating response frequencies and interpreting open responses qualitatively. However, the results are not generalisable as the survey was not based on a representative sample. Instead of presenting the results in detail (see Albrecht et al., 2021), we will here highlight what young people think about Finnish climate policy more generally and reflect on the wider meaning of their ability to participate in legislation over climate change policies.

After these notions we will turn to a very different and internationally well-known case to explore young people's participation in climate change policies from another legal angle. Six Portuguese young people filed a climate case in the European Court of Human Rights in September 2020 against 33 states, claiming that those states had violated their right to life by not tackling the climate crisis well enough and demanding more ambitious actions from them (*Duarte Agostinho and others v. Portugal and 32 other states*). The young applicants made a powerful argument by tying together the 2017 forest fires in Portugal that caused tremendous material and economic damage and took many human lives, human-caused climate

warming and insufficient and ineffective decisions by the states to mitigate climate change, thereby claiming that their human rights have been fundamentally violated and their futures have been rendered uncertain and insecure.

In November 2020, the Strasbourg Court asked the respondent states to take a stand on whether there was a violation of the Convention's articles that protect freedom from torture or inhuman or degrading treatment, the right to privacy and the right to property. The Court then fast-tracked the case, which is priority treatment in which a case is processed and decided in an expedited order (see Sabin Centre for Climate Change Law 2022). The Court also allowed permission for third-party interventions, which is a practice in which the Court permits parties with relevant experience and expertise to intervene in its cases to assist the Court in its decision making. ALL-YOUTH and Tampere University Public Law Research Group made one of those interventions. In the discussion, we explain the reasons and argumentation behind our intervention.

### **Observations on youth climate change participation through legislation and human rights-based argumentation**

#### ***Finnish young people's views on the Climate Change Act***

Looking first into the Finnish case of the drafting of the Climate Change Act, the main demands from the respondents aged 18–25 can be encapsulated in the following points: the ambition of the Climate Change Act and its concrete measures to curb global warming need to be increased and the timetable tightened; the legislation should be more binding on other actors in society besides public authorities, such as companies; climate policy should be based on science and up-to-date research; and the opportunities and tools for children and young people to influence climate legislation need to be increased.

These demands show that young people are well aware of and concerned about climate change. Their responses differ somewhat from other respondents' answers: they are more serious about climate change than other age groups and demand more often concrete action and binding legislation on various actors in society, which the following comments portray:

We need to act NOW! We need BIG deeds and BIG changes!

It should be binding to a wider group of actors, so that the targets of Finland would actualise.

These observations echo the results of other studies of young people's climate concerns and anxieties (e.g., Piispa & Myllyniemi 2019). They similarly reiterate the arguments made by young climate activists about the gravity of the situation and the need to react to it swiftly and effectively, as well as their criticism of the states' overly lax climate policies. We also interpret the respondents' climate-related

knowledge and understanding to indicate that they have followed the public debate on climate activism and may have participated in climate protests themselves.

The majority of respondents also believe that science should be listened to when formulating climate policies. Different perceptions of climate change emerged in the responses, although the proportion of those who were sceptical about or denied the scientific basis of climate change was lower than with other age groups.

Again, this observation lines up well with earlier research on how young climate activists have demanded a firmer position for scientific knowledge as a basis for climate decisions (see Chapter 7 for an elaboration of this point). Many young people have developed scientific competence in climate issues, which has occasionally surprised adult experts and decision makers and generated controversial reactions. Not all adults want to accept and take seriously the knowledge and views especially of underage climate activists, even ridiculing them on public arenas. Young people have also struggled to obtain updated information on climate policymaking. Gasparri and others (2021, 101–102) argue that young people have been pivotal in denouncing the lack of transparency in international climate change negotiations and pushed for meetings to be open to more observers, including civil society organisations. Despite such efforts, young people’s right to seek information from their governments is constantly challenged. The restrictions on comprehensible information limit young people’s ability to hold governments and other stakeholders to account, which this quote from a young respondent reflects:

I haven’t received any possibility to influence or even enough information on the climate crisis other than that of my own initiative.

Regarding influencing climate policies, the survey, like previous studies, suggests that young people’s climate concerns tend to increase their interest in participating in climate change mitigation and public debate (Albrecht et al., 2020; Piispa & Myllyniemi 2019). However, judging by the survey, young people lack information on where and how to participate in climate “politics”. This is to say that, on the one hand, young people are usually familiar with personal climate-friendly lifestyle and consumption choices in their private lives, and many are willing to limit their material well-being and economic growth due to climate change. Some respondents also mention voting in elections and surveys, like the one in question, as potential means of participation. Otherwise, however, they consider their opportunities to influence climate issues limited, and institutional influencing seems especially foreign to them. Most young respondents agree that children and young people should be given more opportunities to participate in climate-related decision making. They also state that young people’s voices should be genuinely heard alongside the formal hearings:

I can tell my opinion and vote. Thus, I can participate, but I am afraid that my contribution has no weight.



I can make climate actions in my everyday life and participate in demonstrations, but the government will make the final decisions.

The Finnish Climate Change Act case indicates that involving young people in law drafting is indeed possible when political will to this exists. This has not always been the case. Minors in particular are not treated as capable citizens, and their political agency has been viewed with suspicion (e.g., Daly 2022). However, attitudes are gradually changing, and more opportunities are opening for young people as well. This change has been influenced especially by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and by the accumulating research knowledge according to which children and young people have the knowledge, interest and competence to participate when it is meaningful, concrete, comprehensible and impactful. Nevertheless, many adult actors are still sceptical about children's and young people's autonomous agency, as the recent years' examples of young climate activists show. We will return to this question shortly.

In our view, young people could be more regularly involved in law drafting, particularly on issues that affect their lives. This, of course, is not the customary way of thinking about democracy. It has long been assumed that in a representative democracy, legislative power must reside in elected parliamentarians, not in voters (not to mention minor non-voters). However, when we think about this question from the long-standing objective to develop more participatory democracy, opening public access to law making might even appear as a logical step and increase the political system's transparency and legitimacy. Yet some questions need be solved for young people, such as where and how to best reach them, what kind of information they need and how it should be communicated (legal language is often technical and complex). It is also important for many young people that the space for participation is safe and, in the context of the digital environment, anonymous (see Chapter 2). Institutional participation may also easily appear top down and uninteresting from the young people's perspective. A process that allows no interaction and debate between the parties and raises no public interest may mean that participation lacks the ability to affect and emotionally grip young people, hence appearing uninspiring to them (see Chapter 10). This contrasts with the practice of public parliamentary debates that can be heated and inspiring. This contrast raises the question whether public involvement in law drafting could or should be made interactive and dialogical. Still, issues like these do not mean that involving young people in law making is unimportant. On the contrary, it is crucial for a sustainable society to ensure that young people, among other citizens, do not become marginalised from key political processes, debates and decisions that affect their lives.

### ***Portuguese young people in the European Court of Human Rights – and ALL-YOUTH's intervention in the case***

We encounter a very different legal and political context in the second case of young people's participation in climate change policies. Nevertheless, young

people share worries about climate change and views of how it should be addressed on both occasions. We will first present the *Duarte Agostinho* case, then introduce the ALL-YOUTH's and Tampere University's intervention in it, and lastly discuss the case's significance for young people's societal participation, especially as an example of a tool based on the international human rights framework.

The *Duarte Agostinho* application is a 13-page document in which applicants put forward "facts" related to the case, "alleged violations of the Convent" and responses to the required "compliance with the admissibility criteria". The document is accompanied by a 20-page Annex with further arguments and evidence. All in all, the application's length exceeds well over 600 pages. The stated goal of the application is to seek a legally binding decision from the ECtHR that would require European governments to take urgent action to stop the climate crisis. The young applicants demand that European countries adopt much deeper and more immediate cuts to emissions released within their borders and overseas.

The applications' most foundational argument is that climate change is already interfering with the applicants' right to life, their right to respect for their private and family lives and their right not to be discriminated against (Articles 2, 8 and 14 of the European Convention of Human Rights, respectively). Regarding the first argument, the applicants claim that climate change affects their right to life simply by creating a risk to it, a risk that is projected to increase significantly over the course of their lifetimes. The text refers to the forest fires, worsened by climate change, which killed over 100 people in Portugal in 2017. The Appendix states that:

*Immediate* action is required to prevent or mitigate, to the extent possible, the risks (of yet greater magnitude) that the Applicants stand to endure later in their lives [...]. The Court's assessment of these risks [...] must be undertaken bearing in mind the precautionary principle, the concept of intergenerational equity, and the requirement (under Article 3(1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) that the "best interests of the child" must be a primary consideration.

According to the second argument presented, climate change affects the applicants' right to privacy, meaning also their physical and mental well-being. As the text mentions, Portugal has recently experienced more intense and prolonged heat-waves resulting from climate change, which have disrupted young people's ability to exercise, to spend time outdoors and sleep properly. Furthermore, extreme events are expected to dramatically worsen over time if the current policy path is not changed. Moreover, as a result of facing such a future, climate change is taken to necessarily impact the applicants' mental health. They worry and are anxious about the world in which they and their families will have to live.

The third major argument relates to the fact that so far states have been unable to agree globally on what they must do to stop global warming at 1.5 degrees, as agreed in the 2015 Paris Agreement. The text claims that no globally shared understanding exists of what each state's "fair share" of the burden sharing is. Thus,

states have taken advantage and chosen self-serving interpretations of their share. The collective outcome, then, is that the 1.5 degrees target cannot be reached. The applicants demand that the ECtHR must resolve the uncertainty around the fair share question in favour of their view, not in favour of the states. This argument is meant to prevent states from escaping their responsibility for the harm caused by climate change through emissions cuts that are collectively too weak to stop the climate crisis.

The application presents numerous other facts and arguments, but we can see already from these few excerpts how the case seeks to link several complicated phenomena and concepts: the effects of climate change on the environment and human well-being, human rights and their violations; the vulnerability of children and young people in the face of the climate crisis; the transboundary responsibility of the states for the repercussions of climate change; requests for immediate action; and the responsibility for intergenerational justice defined in a new, broader way. These elements are constructing a complex line of argument not only to appeal to the Court but also to influence public discussion about what kind of climate policies states should pursue. Young people are using their voices in an exceptional way here, which has amazed (and annoyed) many adult observers and researchers.

We next bring forth arguments from our own intervention in *Duarte Agostinho* that support the justification and argumentation of the case. Our intervention (ALL-YOUTH and Tampere University 2021) in the case was motivated by the research carried out in ALL-YOUTH, where we have sought to develop more youth-centred ways of exploring young people's societal participation and well-being, relying crucially on the idea of sustainability. The following arguments are especially relevant for the present discussion. First, we appeal to the evolutive character of the Convention on Human Rights, arguing that it should follow the times and consider whatever relevant new knowledge and understanding emerge in science and society:

Our aim is to contribute to developing principles (in order) for the Court to interpret in accordance with the object and purpose of the Convention and following an evolutive approach recognizing the Convention as a living instrument which should be interpreted in light of present-day conditions. In our submission, we aim to discuss particularly the life phase of youth and its vulnerability in climate change and how this should be taken into account in the Court's analysis.

(ALL-YOUTH and Tampere University 2021, 2)

Second, we point to the already existing scientific consensus and international trends in climate change litigation that provide guidelines for how states should act to mitigate the climate crisis.

The applicable framework for state responsibility can be structured on established principles of international environmental law. Possible risks to the environment and the right to health, the precautionary principle, along with the

principles of harm avoidance and common but differentiated responsibilities, provides a justification and guidelines for states to take actions. The principle of sustainable development, with environmental protection and the conservation of natural resources its central elements, is inextricably linked to an adequate standard of living. Moreover, the principle of common concern of humankind creates the link between climate change prevention and, inter alia, core human rights, children's rights and intergenerational justice.

(ALL-YOUTH and Tampere University 2021, 3)

Third, we allude to the earlier acknowledgement by the Court according to which the 2005 Aarhus Convention constitutes a strong international commitment on the right to information, participatory rights and access to court. There is evidence that, while children's and young people's participation have been taken seriously in some countries, other Aarhus convention's provisions remain unfulfilled. For example, there are problems with the possibility of challenging actions before the national courts in climate issues. *Duarte Agostinho* litigation also mentions that questioning climate policy in court is particularly difficult for young people.

Fourth, we argue that climate change causes structural human rights problems because it disproportionately impacts those who have contributed least to the problem, such as young people in the Global South and future generations. We consequently need to take seriously the issues related to intergenerational justice, acknowledging that the substantial risks to health, security of food supply, availability of water, housing, agriculture and natural ecosystems affect younger generations more than older generations.

Because young people and children do not have the same opportunities to influence and participate in climate change related decision-making, vulnerability of young people and children should be taken into account while striking a fair balance relevant to assessing whether states have failed in their positive obligations. A further relevant factor to be considered is that children and young people are less independent to protect themselves from the negative impacts of climate change by reason of not being able to take concrete measures like migration or other necessary safeguards.

(ALL-YOUTH and Tampere University 2021, 6)

Whereas the outcome of the Portuguese youth case is still unknown at the time of writing, its significance as the first step in the European level climate litigation is already imminent. This can be deduced when looking at the other interveners who include, for example, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, Amnesty International and Save the Children. The intervention procedure in the case can be seen to strive for generating dialogue between the Court and the international human rights network and to develop new interpretative principles that lower the threshold for national-level climate litigation. It also suggests that the Court's aim

is to reinterpret the Convention, originally drafted in 1950, to better reflect today's key societal problems and developments. There needs to be relevant practice from all the major human rights bodies in order to consider the emerging consensus that climate change is an important human rights issue.

Now, what can we learn from this case? As mentioned already, *Duarte Agostinho* is significant in many ways, but we especially want to draw attention to two conclusions: what the case educates us about the societal agency and political competence of young climate activists and its reliance on human rights-based argumentation; and how the case challenges the whole human rights law framework to take into account the relationship of human beings to their environment, an important innovation in this field that may have far-reaching legal and political consequences.

The role of children and young people in the complaint and the public attention it has received gives researchers and decision makers a serious reason to rethink their perceptions of children's and young people's political agency and how it should be explored. It can be argued that never before have children and young people had so much power – albeit, especially in legal action, with the support of emphatic adults. They are practically “changing the world”, especially if the lawsuit goes through and obliges dozens of states to tighten their climate targets and actions. Daly (2022, 4–5) argues that the case, and youth-led climate activism in general, is highlighting the extensive potential that children and young people have for political activism. Moreover, youth activists have come to be seen by many as uniquely competent on climate change. The climate crisis has repositioned children and young people as prominent public activists and litigants, even on a global scale; while in the past they often been portrayed as victims in need of protection, and the human rights monitoring mechanisms have tended to emphasise children's protection rather than their status as active and potentially political individuals.

Nevertheless, despite all their significance, young people's climate complaints and climate activism should not be overestimated, and their agency be regarded too naively (see Chapter 8). There are still many barriers to young people's participation that should not be overlooked. For example, young people do not generally have the necessary knowledge, procedural, financial and social resources to be able to prepare and file appeals on their own without professional adults' support. Gasparri and others (2021, 101) point out that young people's engagement in formal accountability mechanisms is made extremely challenging by issues like the high costs of legal action, hierarchical social norms relating to gender and social status, lack of support from adults and civil society and young people's lack of legal standing to file lawsuits. For example, *Duarte Agostinho* was initiated by a law firm whose employee contacted and recruited suitable young people from an area where wildfires raged. We should therefore pay more attention to the presence of representatives of the older generations participating in the actions and networks when evaluating young people's climate activism. This can be seen as an important aspect of intergenerational cooperation and learning, which can have a crucial role in discussions over intergenerational justice (see Chapter 3 for this kind of argument).

Several scholars have argued that the international human rights law framework has generally failed to emphasise and accommodate children's and young people's political capabilities. According to Daly's critique, analysis or jurisprudence is scarce around rights such as freedom of assembly or freedom of information for children. The focus has been overwhelmingly on the vague notion of the children's and young people's "right to be heard" and the accompanying concept of "children's participation" that has likely contributed to the "freedom" rights of children being overlooked. This, to Daly, makes the organic nature of child and youth-led climate activism all the more striking and remarkable. It seems, then, that children and young people have found their own way to operationalise the civil and political rights relating to "freedom", such as assembly and association, through climate activism.

The second point we can bring home from young people's climate activism and litigation is that they seem to be provoking changes in the entire international human rights law framework, challenging the traditional individual-focused approaches. The result is that human rights law may become more capable of encompassing claims that relate to human beings' relationship to the environment. Another powerful element in this shift is that youth activists have brought to human rights a linkage between the environment of present and future generations that has expanded the view on intergenerational justice. They also argue that they anticipate the harm to worsen in their lifetime and claim that if sufficient steps are not taken now, unacceptable harm will be a certainty for them, which goes some way towards bridging the gap in the climate change debate between adults now and hypothetical humans in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Our starting point in this chapter has been that there is too little discussion of the legal basis for youth participation and its importance in both legislative and youth research. We have contributed to this debate by presenting and discussing two different cases in which young people have been involved in the climate policy debate and decision making. We would like to make a few last points to conclude.

Participation in law drafting and filing court appeals are strong forms of institutional participation. They differ from many other forms in that they cannot, by definition, remain (at least completely) tokenistic. The final decisions are communicated in one way or another to the involved parties in both cases. Moreover, many researchers have drawn attention to how human rights-based climate litigation and movements are empowering youth in a remarkable way. They have educated young people that there is more life and meaning in democracy than just voting. For example, young climate activists have often turned to everyday political actors and influencers in society in general. As young people's action for the climate becomes more public and their participation gains more visibility and recognition, they are also more easily invited to take part in institutional debates. Young activists have also had a significant impact on the public debate on climate

issues in widening the discussion towards a broader moral debate on the rights and responsibilities of both individuals and collectives in relation to a sustainable future (Haywards 2021, 3–4).

However, from a critical perspective, young people's participation through legal means can be very demanding and require a lot of personal resources, time, knowledge and long-term commitment, which often is not practically possible for young people without the support of adult actors. We should therefore pay more attention to how participation through legal means affects the well-being of children and young people. It may be presumed to strengthen their self-confidence and agency, yet it can also feel stressful and adding to their responsibilities. We can detect a dilemma here: children and young people have the right to be heard and taken seriously in matters that affect their lives, but they may lose some of that free and secure childhood and youth to which they are also entitled when they push to use that right.

Nevertheless, it is possible to conclude with Gasparri and others (2021, 105), that young people's demands and activism for climate justice have reinforced the intersection between climate change and human rights. Young people are pioneers through their actions in ensuring that a human rights-based approach to climate change is translated into policies and practice. Policymakers and educators, youth workers and other members of the adult population who interact with young people in diverse spheres of life to encourage such efforts must then create opportunities for young people to meaningfully engage in decision making and ensure that they do not face discrimination. They should bear in mind their responsibilities to younger generations in terms of intergenerational justice, which should be understood not only as our duties to unborn future generations but also to children and young people now. Young people have been leading the way, and, ultimately, it is now the time for adult actors to support and join them as allies in this action.

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# Experimenting with youth-centred e-participation

## The case of the Virtual Council

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### Introduction

This chapter examines opportunities for online societal participation that public authorities in Finland provide for young people. We are interested in the features of such services, the assumptions on participation they are based on, and the experiences and thoughts of young people themselves on using them. Our key concept is e-participation, which construes how citizens can be involved in political processes and interact with policymakers by using various digital technologies and tools (e.g., Khan & Krishnan 2017; Lindner & Aichholzer 2020). We use e-participation instead of digital participation, which points to a wider spectrum of online social participation (e.g., Pietilä et al., 2021a, 2021c), or digital activism, which refers to self-organising online action by Internet users intended to influence societal matters (see the discussion in Özkula 2021). This chapter focuses on the relationship of young people to the institutionally defined e-participation services and practices and leaves aside the question of the more widely understood digital participation. Moreover, we utilise the concepts of user experience and human-centred design from the field of human–technology interaction, from which Jari, Iikka and Kaisa approach the study of youth participation, while Tiina, a political researcher, is interested in the relationship of youth participation to democracy. User experience refers to how users perceive and respond to systems and services, that is, what kind of effect using a service induces in a person, and how a system or service corresponds to the needs, expectations and requirements of users (International Organization for Standardization 2019; Hassenzahl & Tractinsky 2006).

The underlying idea of the chapter, in congruence with the argument presented in the book's Introduction, is that society needs young people's active contributions to be sustainable, and the opportunity to influence decisions concerning their lives is a vital part of young people's well-being (e.g., Rexhepi, Filiposka & Trajkovic 2018). Digitalisation advances at a rapid pace and digital services have become ever-more important contexts for young people's social engagements. Thus, it is important to inquire how we can build e-participation services that are interesting, inclusive, equitable and effective, especially from young people's perspectives. The argument here is not that it should be expected of young people that they be active

specifically in those digital arenas that are provided by public authorities. Instead, we consider it more important that all young people have knowledge of existing means of e-participation, possess sufficient skills to use them and have enough self-efficacy to act when the interest or need arises to influence policymaking.

The chapter also pays critical attention to the assumptions under which young people's e-participation has been studied in the past. Researchers have often expressed concerns about why young people are not interested in the existing channels of e-participation offered by public authorities and how they could be attracted to participate more actively (see the discussion in Banaji & Buckingham 2010). As this book argues, the problem with such thinking is that it tends to work under adult and expert-centred presumptions about participation, lacking a practical sense of what kind of features and practices make digital services user friendly and motivating for young people or difficult to use and non-motivating. Consequently, there is a lack of research on young people's needs – especially those with little or no prior experience of societal participation in official contexts – in relation to e-participation and on how the current digital participation services are able to meet them.

We have engaged dozens of young people in our own research in the development and testing of a new e-participation service, the Virtual Council, initiated under the auspices of the ALL-YOUTH project. The approach to the development of the Virtual Council has followed the practices of human-centred design that emphasise the inclusion of users in the design process. Thus, when collaborating with young people we have paid close attention to what kind of needs and aspirations they have regarding e-participation. We therefore consider the Virtual Council to function as (1) a tool to explore youth e-participation, (2) an object of research around which we have gathered feedback while iteratively developing the service in collaboration with young people and (3) an end result of our design project. Towards the end of the chapter, the user needs and aspirations expressed by young people in the development phase are tentatively reflected in experiences of testing the Virtual Council service in practice.

### **Developing a youth-centred approach to studying e-participation**

The idea of using new media for democratic processes and political participation was framed as novel, modern and highly innovative in the early days of the World Wide Web (Lindner & Aichholzer 2020). The democratic potential of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) was emphasised until the end of the 1990s by both scholars and political decision makers who shared far-reaching expectations that the new media would induce a fundamental change in existing power relations and hierarchies in society, by giving citizens a much greater say in political processes (Hennen et al., 2020, 2; Häyhtiö 2010; Rheingold 1993). The Internet, as an open and easily accessible space for political discussion and information sharing, was held to have the potential to function as an effective remedy

against the perceived failures of representative democracy (the declining levels of electoral activity, political interest, political trust and democratic legitimacy) through increasing direct communication between citizens and political authorities and improving the democratic and deliberative quality of political opinion formation (Hennen et al., 2020, 2; Banaji & Buckingham 2010). These features were, ultimately, hoped to enhance the legitimacy of the whole democratic system.

However, the original expectations of a fundamental reform of modern democracy through Internet-mediated communication have gradually waned as experience of putting e-democracy into practice has accumulated (Hennen et al., 2020). For example, van Dijk (2012, 53 ff) has noted that while e-democracy has significantly improved access to and exchange of politically relevant information, its realisation in terms of supporting public deliberation and community building has been disappointing. He has found no perceivable effect of ICT-enhanced public participation on democratic decision making, and it seems that the new e-democracy practices rarely allow citizens to enter the core stages of decision making and policy execution. The same observation is made, for example, in a UN report on e-participation, which states that the development of the Internet has brought only a modestly growing focus on citizen involvement in policymaking (United Nations 2016). De Paoli and Forbes (2020) also point out that successful e-participation strategies and implementation are still very limited. It is now widely accepted that just building services for e-participation is not enough, and many researchers have argued that the “build it and they will come” approach does not suffice to counteract the overall decline in public participation (159).

We have found in our own studies that young people may not, in fact, know of the existence of e-participation services, and even when they do, the relevance of such services for their lives may be unclear. Moreover, the schools’ democracy education (at least in Finland) does not include systematic teaching and practice of e-participation methods, which makes it understandable that young people are rarely versed in using them. The distinction between e-participation and the more widely understood digital participation and activism is clear: while a large proportion of young people use digital tools competently for social networking, content production and bottom-up activism, e-participation services remain unknown and underused, and there is little common ground between these digital spheres. There is also a clear gap in research knowledge in this regard. The decline of young people’s interest in traditional forms of political participation, offline or online, has been widely lamented (fair or not), while research literature on young people’s use of social media and digital activism is mounting and rather positively tuned (e.g., Córtes-Ramos et al., 2021; Boulianne & Theocharis 2018). Researchers are generally not interested in what factors explain the differences between young people’s e-participation and wider digital participation. This is something we should learn more about.

While research has recognised many problems with the previous forms of e-participation, we think that there are still strong reasons to continue developing it. As this book argues, participating in the affairs of one’s community and society is

an important part of a person's well-being. Furthermore, when considering young people's societal participation, the importance of digital culture and its continuously morphing manifestations simply cannot be ignored. Yet, previous public e-participation services have not been particularly attractive to young people, even if participation through digital means is an increasingly important facet of young people's relationship with democracy. Nevertheless, some basic and well-proven elements of e-participation are already there, and the practices of e-democracy have already changed communication between citizens and governments in many ways, for example, by providing better and faster access to all kinds of public information, e-consultation processes and, to an extent, online elections (Hennen et al., 2020, 3). Studies from Finland also show that voting aid applications and social media are now among the most important channels for young people to seek information about elections and candidates (e.g., Borg & Koljonen 2020). Moreover, many researchers have argued that e-participation does have the capacity to enhance young people's democratic education and participation in political opinion formation both offline and online (e.g., Lindner & Aichholzer 2020).

However, what we should learn from past research debates and implementations of e-democracy is that new technology does not in itself provide a simple and easy silver bullet to solve all issues related to political participation. It is essential to analyse the problems associated with previous implementations when designing new e-participation services and pay attention also to what kind of barriers to participation they may generate. We should also bear in mind that obstacles to offline political participation are often reproduced in the online world. Online participation is not automatically inclusive and equal even if it is affordable, fast, easy and conveniently place independent (Pietilä, Varsaluoma & Väänänen 2019; Serban et al., 2020).

Regarding the prevailing characteristics of existing e-participation services, one in particular must be mentioned, while many other problems follow from it. That is, although public authorities are increasingly interested in utilising digital technology to develop young people's participation (see e.g., STEP 2015), the problem is that e-participation services are still mainly designed from top-down perspectives without engaging intended users in their development. Consequently, the genuine needs of users – like those of young people – are often ignored. Such top-down approach also characterises the agenda setting of institutional e-services. As the authors of Chapter 4 point out, official youth consultation is usually based on the knowledge interests of political authorities. The issues raised on the agenda can then appear very distant from the perspective of young people's lives, making it difficult to see what difference they can make. Many studies have observed that it is essential for young people's participation that the topic at hand touches on their lives in some concrete sense (Pietilä, Varsaluoma & Väänänen 2019, 2021c). Some digital services, such as the Finnish “Nuortenideat.fi” (“Young People's Ideas”, Demirbas 2021), do allow young people a chance to influence setting the agenda, yet they too have the problem of rarely managing to generate productive dialogue between them and decision makers. Lack of dialogue and feedback creates one of

the biggest barriers to participation. Young people have also outlined it as one of their user needs (Pietilä et al., 2021c).

The top-down practices of e-participation present a wide range of challenges from the perspective of the individual citizen. An important point is that many young people feel that their skill set is insufficient to even dare to try to (e-)participate, echoing the question raised in Chapter 6 of the book. It has been suggested that e-participation services are usually based on the same kind of ideals of rational communication as in the model of deliberative democracy (Häyhtiö 2010). Such idealistic expectations about the “right kind of communication” may put unnecessary pressure on young people and may induce a feeling that they are ineligible to participate. For example, Banaji and Buckingham (2010) point out that there is a dominant conception in the academic and policy literature in this area that is not so different from the conceptions dominating debates about offline participation before the Internet era. There are

implicit rules about good behavior, implicit constructions of identity, a favoring of certain kinds of responsible or “pro-social” orientations – all of which are embedded in the designs of websites, in how young people are addressed, in the kinds of (limited) participation that are invited, and in the way actual participation on the sites is moderated.

(Banaji & Buckingham 2010, 23)

The development of e-participation services aimed at attracting wider sections of youth should, therefore, be mindful not only of young people’s interest or disinterest in taking part but also of their varying needs, resources, skills and styles of communication. It is also necessary to consider the always lingering question of how the processes and practices of participation can be made impactful and, thus, motivating for young people.

## **The Virtual Council – what, why, how?**

### ***Starting point of the research and development of the Virtual Council***

The research and development of young people’s e-participation in the ALL-YOUTH project has had two main objectives. The first was to develop a new e-participation service that better meets young people’s participation needs. The second objective was to link the new service to societal or political processes in a way that ensures that policymakers and young people have opportunities for real dialogue. To ensure that these objectives are met, the project has collaborated with several governmental ministries, local governments and well-established NGOs like the Finnish Red Cross.

In the development of the Virtual Council service, we have considered it important to use human-centred design (HCD) methods. HCD refers to the planning of digital

services, platforms and processes involving end users as key players in the design process (Ardito et al., 2014; Gulliksen et al., 2003; International Organization for Standardization 2019; Maguire 2001). It can be seen as holding a more holistic conception of the human (which is a generally important idea in this book) in comparison with the other widely used method, user-centred design approach. HCD is characterised by iterativeness, which means that services and tools are developed in several stages based on feedback from end users, and similar rounds of development can be repeated multiple times.

HCD can set other objectives for the service besides the number of users and the frequency or duration of use, although these are also important data that can reflect, for instance, the acceptability of the service to users. Other objectives and indicators may include conditions for the service from the point of view of its quality and user experience. In the context of e-participation, they may be related to issues such as keeping the thresholds for various participatory activities as low as possible to make the experience of participation meaningful and rewarding and to improve the participant's sense of self-efficacy (Pietilä et al., 2021c, 2022). Another important issue is related to who is invited or expected to use the service.

We conducted a series of studies in a workshop setting on the needs of young people in relation to using e-services, before the development of the Virtual Council commenced. The concept of user needs refers to the explication, during the design process, of the necessities, constraints and demands that the user assigns to the service. We incorporated a scenario-based working method in our studies as one of the key means of gathering data (Pietilä et al., 2021b, 2021c). The concept of scenarios in HCD contexts refers to written descriptions or stories of users executing tasks with proposed technological solutions. Such scenarios may include descriptions of problems for which a hypothesised technology, device or service provides a solution. They may be used to convey and illustrate designers' ideas to end users for their evaluation or they can be applied to analyse various ideas for solutions, their potential and feasibility at initial stages. Scenarios can be either highly abstract or very detailed and tangible in their nature (Rosson & Carroll 2002; Bødker 2000). In our case, researchers presented five different scenarios describing various hypothetical interaction features and use procedures of e-participation systems, which were discussed in 17 small groups over the course of six separate workshops (altogether 74 participants from general upper secondary schools and from youth groups outside education, employment or training). The overall aim of the user studies was to systematically acquire information regarding the needs, expectations and preferences that young people have concerning e-participation services.

### ***Identifying young people's e-participation user needs***

We identified four main categories of user needs resulting from the studies (Pietilä et al., 2021b, 2021c). These were labelled as (1) trust and safety, (2) motivation to participate, (3) actual impact of participation on decision making and (4) effective

and efficient use of service (in the sense that the service delivers the functions it promises). Nearly all groups brought up topics related to the safety theme, especially in terms of safe space (mentioned in 14 out of 17 groups). Workshop participants were worried, for example, about the appearance of provocative discussions (trolling) in the Council and argued for the need to use moderators and to establish clear rules for the service for it to feel safe to young people. Anonymity (mentioned in 10/17 groups) was seen in this context not only as an important enabler of open discussion but also as a risk of attracting trolls. The workshop participants suggested that users should register with their real name, but they could also use nicknames so that administrators would still know who the users are. They also recommended that it would be beneficial when someone joins the Council for the first time if they were already familiar with the service either from school, other official channel or advertisements in social media, which would evoke trust towards the service (mentioned in 6/17 groups). For instance, Scenario 1, in which participants were invited to use the service via email, was considered suspicious by some participants:

I am quite skeptical with those... when you need to register [...] and you haven't heard about it before, then hardly.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the needs related to motivation to participate, "personally interesting topic" was seen as one of the main motivators (mentioned in 10/17 groups). However, one test group consisting of young people outside education, employment and training contemplated that including participants in discussions who are not initially interested in the topic could still provide new and worthwhile viewpoints. Competition, gift-cards or monetary rewards were considered motivating, especially if the e-service was initiated by authorities (mentioned in 6/17 groups). However, a material type of rewarding system was considered unworkable if the discussion were to be facilitated by other parties, such as individual citizens. In that case, advocating a common social or political goal together was seen as enough gratification for participation. Finally, according to some workshop participants, there should be an adequate number of users in the service to make it "credible" (mentioned in 6/17 groups).

Having a real impact on decision making was regarded by the participants as one of the most important conditions for participation (mentioned in 9/17 groups). One participant from a high school test group commented:

The first thing that makes such service attractive is how impactful it is.

One way to support young people's e-participation would be to highlight examples of prior successful discussions. However, this would require evidence that decision makers have also taken part in the debate (which does not occur often). Only through such knowledge could young people feel confident that their participation in the e-service really matters (mentioned in 5/17 groups). Nevertheless, many



workshop participants were worried that they do not have enough knowledge of the issues to be able to take part in the discussions. One participant asserted that:

[...] if I do not know and I am not interested, then I won't even try to have an influence, because it seems wrong to try to affect something that [...] I don't know anything about.

Subsequently, to support young people's e-participation, adequate material on the issues should be made available and easily accessible before the discussion starts on the selected topic in the service (mentioned in 5/17 groups).

One of the things the workshop participants appreciated, in terms of the needs related to effective and efficient use of service (through designated, well-functioning features), was the availability of useful search features, such as filtering existing discussion groups based on tags and setting favourite topics or tags to receive notifications from new discussion groups (mentioned in 8/17 groups). The possibility of volunteering for upcoming discussions before they start was also mentioned.

### ***Features of the Virtual Council***

Based both on evaluation of previous e-participation services (Meriläinen, Pietilä & Varsaluoma 2018) and on user surveys of young people (Pietilä, Varsaluoma & Väänänen 2019), we have developed the Virtual Council as an attempt to meet young people's needs in a way that makes their participation as easy and effective as possible. The Virtual Council can be implemented at different levels of governance and phases of decision making to engage young people in planning and decision-making processes or to provide space for sharing their experiences on societal issues. It enables setting up individual "virtual councils" to discuss a selected topic and to formulate a "final statement" based on the discussions to be handed over to the authority or other actor concerned for further action. (See Pietilä et al., 2021c, 2022, about details of the service.)

From the organizer's perspective, the Virtual Council process consists (1) preparing for the Council, (2) inviting participants, (3) facilitating the discussion, (4) creating the final statement and (5) providing feedback to the participants. When a new Council is created, the organiser (usually also acting as the administrator) creates a title and a short description of it, sets the schedule (one Council generally goes on from one to two weeks), uploads background documents to support the discussion, prepares final statement questions for the participants and recruits discussion facilitators. Next, participants are invited via an email that includes the password to the Council; first, however, they need to register with the service to be able to join the discussions, which are carried out using aliases. Participants are asked to answer some final questions at the end of the discussions to summarise their thoughts on the topic. Based on the answers and the chat discussions, the final statement is prepared by the organiser or facilitators, but it can also be prepared by participants themselves (see Chapter 4). Participants can also comment on the

statement, after which the organiser delivers it to any relevant party or parties. Finally, the organiser (ideally) provides feedback to the participants regarding the further use and impact of the final statement.

One of the key elements of the Virtual Council is that it is designed to support young people’s participation in various ways, which includes providing many-sided information on the topic at hand. This feature is essential, given that many young people feel they do not have enough knowledge about societal issues to be able to participate in the public debate, as previously mentioned and as prior research suggests (see the discussion in Chapter 6). Another way to support young people is to recruit several facilitators who engage actively with the participants, ask for their views, encourage them to present their ideas and respond to them promptly. It is also important that the facilitators regularly thank the participants for their contribution. The significance of active and encouraging facilitation for successful e-participation cannot be overstated (we will return to this question in the next section). However, each Council implementation has its own specific content and applications of supported features, as the service can be used for various purposes and different forms of councils. The service hosts a collection of features from which the organisers can choose the ones they find most conducive to each Council.

Figure 2.1 describes one example of the Virtual Council process implementation in which a government official creates a Council and invites participants to it. Each

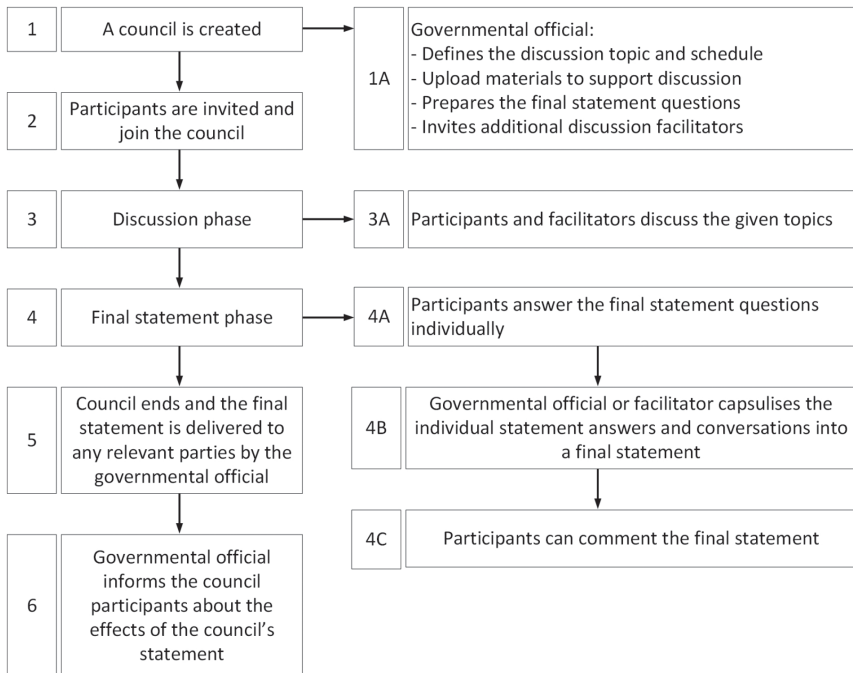


Figure 2.1 A flowchart describing the Virtual Council process.

Council has a real-time textual discussion tool (box 3) with many conventional chat features. The chat includes features such as reactions to individual messages (“Agree”, “Disagree” and “Well argued”) and allows replying to a message, which starts a sub-thread. Furthermore, the service has a section for background materials (1A) to support the knowledge basis of the discussions and a tool for generating the final statement (4). The section enables the administrators (who can be anyone) to upload informative materials that are affiliated with the discussed topic to enable a deeper conversation and the formation of more informed opinions.

The final statement feature enables the Council to generate a written conclusion that reflects the central opinions and viewpoints presented during the discussions. The statement is prepared as follows: all participants are asked to reply individually to a set of open-ended questions after the discussion phase is over and the process is approaching its deadline (4A). The answers are pseudonymised, after which the organiser or one of the facilitators reviews them and writes a summary based on them as the final statement of the process (4B).

### **What have we learned so far?**

Systematic research on practical experiences using the Virtual Council service is pending now that it has been adopted for general use by the Ministry of Justice (we will return to this). However, during the testing phase we have requested feedback from both young participants (Pietilä et al., 2021c) and the organisers of the Councils and have tentatively reflected on whether the service is able to respond to the user needs identified earlier. The following inferences can be drawn from these reflections, which are based on experiences of around 15 Councils organised by our project collaborators (the Finnish Red Cross and several learning institutions) on a range of topics touching on young people’s lives. These are worthwhile to keep in mind for further research.

First, regarding the issue of safety, which was one of the most crucial user needs emphasised by young people early on in the project, the young participants have appreciated the anonymity of the service, the participation of safe facilitators in the discussions (such as researchers and youth workers or volunteers) and having the Councils implemented in cooperation with known, trustworthy collaborators. One of our project partners, the Finnish Red Cross (FRC) Youth Shelters, has found that the rules of fair conduct, designed by young people themselves, have helped to create a safe atmosphere for the Councils so that the young people have felt free to talk about the topics as themselves, not needing to worry about someone judging or trolling the discussions. The participants in the FRC Councils often pointed out that the culture of conversation on adult-led social media platforms tends to be intimidating and allows bullying, which is why many young people may feel scared to participate on those platforms. This same problem, young people’s fear of engaging in adult-dominated arenas of participation, has come up in ALL-YOUTH studies and is also reflected in this book’s chapters (e.g., Chapter 6).

We have likewise concluded when developing the Virtual Council service that the interpretations of young people's lack of interest in societal questions and participation are based on at least partly misplaced assumptions. Many young people are indeed interested in societal issues and are eager to discuss them, as long as the participation arena is perceived as safe and free of harassment. Developers of youth e-participation should pay serious attention to this point.

Second, the participants' feedback shows that easy registration to the Virtual Council service and clear user instructions improved its trustworthiness. On the more negative side, participants pointed out that technical problems (like registration not going through) and missing features (such as notification to users of new messages in the chat) sometimes affected how they felt about its reliability and efficiency. However, in overall, it can be noted that the participants did not expect miracles in terms of the service's technical usability. For them, the most important thing was that the interface of the service is simple enough and that it can be used through mobile devices, as very few young people today use personal computers. The aesthetic of the service, in turn, was preferred to be "youth-like", making it inviting and similar enough to the social media services that young people already use routinely.

Third, regarding why and how they have been motivated to take part in the Councils, the users have mentioned factors such as enjoying the positive atmosphere, learning about interesting topics, being able to give and receive peer support and having the possibility to have a real impact on the discussed topics by when the final statements are delivered to public officials and political decision makers. Small material rewards such as coffee or movie tickets are appreciated as participation motivators, yet they are not considered necessary. Instead, the participants stressed how important the facilitators' role is in keeping the discussion in the Council alive and engaging. They have found it highly motivating when the facilitators encourage discussion, provide further information on the discussed topic when needed and respond to discussants' messages individually, showing interest in and appreciation of everyone's contribution in this way. Such acknowledgement is significant not only psychologically but also because expressing themselves in writing (which, so far, is the only mode of communication available in the service) may not be easy for all participants. It is important to emphasise to the participants that the lack of literary skills is not an issue and that everyone is allowed to come in and express their ideas freely in their own style.

Finally, we want to mention one more point related to both offline and online participation. We have noticed, both in developing and testing the Virtual Council service as well as in ALL-YOUTH studies more generally, that it is often not enough to invite young people to take part (in any kind of event or arena) simply by distributing nice-looking advertisements in public spaces. Young people who are unaccustomed to, or are afraid of, participating in societal forums often ignore general invitations. Instead, they appreciate it when they are contacted personally, which gives them an opportunity to express and talk about their potential

misgivings about taking part in the proposed activity with the inviting party. This phenomenon applies also to e-services. The fact that such services are provided in the first place is not enough to get young people interested and motivate them to come along. Meaningful social contacts and interaction importantly motivate to use e-participation services, like societal participation generally – especially if the service provider is an institution that is unknown to young people at the outset.

## **Conclusion**

Above, we have critically discussed the current state and development needs of public e-participation services for young people and presented the development and testing of our own service model, the Virtual Council. The project has had two main objectives. First, to develop a new e-participation service, based on young people's own views, that better meets their participation needs and aspirations. Second, to link the new service to societal or political processes in a way that ensures opportunities for policymakers and young people for real dialogue and that the final statement prepared by each Council truly reaches (local or national) decision makers. We have collaborated for this purpose with several governmental ministries, local governments and well-established NGOs. We will present a few evaluative remarks on each objective to conclude the chapter.

The user needs we identified at the start of the project point to specific requirements in e-participation services to make them meaningful and motivating for young people. First, young people's experiences of not having enough knowledge to be able to participate in societal discussions suggest that there is a need for clearly articulated supporting material and facilitation on the service so that participants have enough information at their disposal to be able to conduct a productive discussion and form a shared opinion on the discussed topic. Second, the need for a safe environment is affiliated with a need for privacy and conflict avoidance. These needs can be addressed by allowing anonymous participation and providing clear discussion rules and discussion facilitation. Third, the general experience of young people that their voices are not taken seriously by authorities points to the need to involve them more actively in youth e-participation services. Fourth, young people's unfamiliarity with the official political agenda can be translated as a need to base e-participation discussions on topics that have practical value for their lives.

It is possible to say that in many respects we have succeeded when evaluating the Virtual Council from the perspective of these participation needs. Apart from occasional technical problems, which are annoying for users but an inevitable part of digital software development, the young people who have tested the service have expressed their satisfaction that participating in the Councils has been easy, safe, interesting, motivating and educational. Nevertheless, we are aware that the service's existence and its features alone are not enough to inspire young people to use it. Young people need sufficient information not only about the service but also about the experiences and recommendations of their peers so they can become

interested in and dare to venture into the service and perceive it as trustworthy. The well-organised discussion facilitation in the Councils is also of great importance to the user experience on the service, as we have seen. The discussion in the Council remains lively and meaningful for young people when the facilitators know what they are doing. However, if the facilitators are unenthusiastic about their work or have insufficient facilitation skills, the conversation in the Council can remain diluted and the users' participation experience may turn out to be unrewarding, in which case they may be unmotivated to participate again. Moreover, and unsurprisingly, the Virtual Council has not succeeded very well in creating a dialogue between young people and decision makers. The Councils' organisers have complained that, despite their best efforts, (local) decision makers have only rarely agreed to participate in the discussion. Based on experiences so far, it seems that the facilitators have, as it were, had to make up for the absence of – and stand for – the decision makers, which is not the purpose of the service and does not contribute to its societal impact.

The dialogue between young people and decision makers has remained minimal so far, but this can be expected to change in the future and the second goal of the project to be realised, at least in principle. The Virtual Council has transitioned in 2022 to a national online service managed by the Ministry of Justice. The ministry's goal, with the help of the service, is to make children's and young people's voices more audible in decision making, including those young people who otherwise would not be heard or participate in the societal debate. Mirroring the findings of our project, the discussions in the Councils (to be organised as a collaborative effort between the Ministry and interested societal partners) will be supervised by a trained facilitator who oversees the discussions' progress and safety (Ministry of Justice 2022). How the Ministry succeeds in its goal of involving young people in decision making with the help of the Virtual Council service remains to be seen and studied later.

We would like to conclude by presenting a word of caution, noting that recent technological progress and the availability of new digital services have created both possibilities and risks for young people's participation. Digitalisation itself does not solve any challenges with participation, because it is possible that e-participation services end up reproducing the structures and inequalities of traditional off-line participation (Oser, Hooghe & Marien 2013). Additionally, digital services may present new kinds of barriers to participation related to their usability and accessibility (Meriläinen, Pietilä & Varsaluoma 2018) or related to the educational level and to insufficient information retrieval skills of at least some young people. Not all young people are digital natives, as the critical literature has often pointed out (e.g., Ståhl 2017). Therefore, instead of thinking of any single digital service as a silver bullet that solves all e-participation problems, it might be more justified to approach e-participation as an ecosystem of various services. Essential to this thinking is that there should be alternative platforms and tools to meet the varying participation needs of differently positioned and skilled young people as equally and inclusively as possible.

## Note

1 Citations have been translated from Finnish by Jari Varsaluoma.

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# Intergenerational learning

## From responsabilisation of young people towards sustainable well-being

*Irmeli Mustalahti, Nina Tokola, Virpi Pakarinen, and Venla Siltovuori*

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### Introduction

This chapter addresses the possibilities of intergenerational collaboration and learning. As the editors point out in the Introduction, the challenge that humankind currently faces is vast: the climate and other crises are already threatening the well-being of young people, not to mention the well-being of future generations. Despite this, attitudes towards the crises differ among decision makers, businesses, individuals and researchers, which engenders tension between young people and older generations as to how these issues should be confronted. On the one hand, young climate activists have spectacularly highlighted their worries about global warming and called for effective measures to slow it down. On the other hand, many adults have dismissed young people's concerns and even ridiculed their activism (see the discussion in Chapter 7). The public discourse, in turn, tends to blame previous generations and responsabilise the next generations to act and adapt to the changes (Albrecht et al., 2020; Erkkilä et al., 2021).

We approach this problematic through pondering how young people can be actively involved in building a sustainable society capable of tackling the problems of climate crisis and not merely responsabilise them. By responsabilisation we refer in this context to the assignment of responsibilities to individual subjects without making sure that they are granted the resources, powers and decision-making opportunities necessary to carry those responsibilities (Mustalahti & Agrawal 2021; Erkkilä et al., 2021). In the case of responsabilisation of young people for the climate crisis, this means, most of all, that they are expected to contribute to solving it as active (individual) citizens, yet without actual (collectively shared) power to make the necessary changes and decisions. Making decisions over climate policies are rather left to experts and politicians. In our approach, we have not wanted to stress adult expertise but to engage young people's knowledge, ideas and initiatives and cross expose them to a variety of other actors interested in sustainability issues. Here we may note that the interaction of ideas and initiatives between multi-levels and multi-actors in the era of climate crisis is characterised by a structural dilemma: while various international and national agreements are fostering whole nations towards sustainable way of living, consuming and producing,

the sustainability transformation would rather require changes at the local, community, private and individual level (see e.g., Antal & Hukkinen 2010; Paloniitty et al., 2022; Halonen et al., 2022). That is why in this chapter we are especially interested in how young people can take part in the transformation through actions and collaborations in their own everyday environments.

With this premise as our starting point, we have planned and tested a new action model that aims to ensure that young people and young adults (aged 16–30, following the life-course definition of young people and young adults in the ALL-YOUTH project; see the Introduction on this point) are not left alone with their climate concerns but can influence climate issues by working together with other actors. For this purpose, we have developed and tested a Circular Knowledge model by applying diverse participatory methodologies with a group of young people and several NGOs in the North Karelia Region of Finland. Based on the theoretical framework of sustainable well-being connected with the idea of (personal and common) environmental citizenship, we demonstrate how the model can act as a catalyst and guide for a shift towards sustainability transformation particularly within local communities. Our chapter also contributes to the book's discussion on intergenerational justice but does so by emphasising a local and contextual bottom-up perspective.

We, the chapter's authors, come to the multidisciplinary field of youth research from environmental policy, forest sciences, development studies and geography. Two of us, Irmeli and Nina, work as researchers at the University of Eastern Finland. Virpi is an extension officer at a local municipality and a doctoral student at the University of Eastern Finland, and Venla is a master's student and the project's co-researcher at the University of Eastern Finland. Our strength as an author collective is that we can bring novel ideas and models to research and discussion on young people's societal participation in the context of sustainable development and the ongoing environmental crises.

### **Studying intergenerational learning and co-creation for sustainability transformation: our conceptual understanding**

Sustainable development and the changes required to achieve ecological, cultural and social sustainability have been on the agenda of various disciplines for decades, including those we come from (Persson et al., 2018; Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz 2005). There has also been a lively cross-disciplinary debate among researchers and policymakers about what the sustainability transformation requires from the present generations without hampering the life conditions of future generations (Knappé & Renn 2022; Huttunen et al., 2021). Answers to this challenge with intergenerational justice have been sought, perhaps most notably, in the field of education, with an emphasis on raising children and young people for sustainable lifestyles and consumption choices (e.g., van de Wetering et al., 2022).

However, our viewpoint is that this kind of pedagogy-focused approach to environmental education and citizenship is not enough to meet the crisis or to take seriously the concerns of young people. Moreover, we consider it a problem that until now the role of young people in the sustainability transformation has typically been approached from a top-down perspective in policymaking, education and often also in research (see e.g., Soneryd & Ugglå 2015). Indeed, there is a tendency to responsabilise young people to act as dutiful subjects who should not only take care of their personal well-being but also simultaneously contribute to greater societal well-being, or “well-doing”. Young people are approached in this kind of mindset from individualised, neoliberalist assumptions that overemphasise personal traits such as self-responsibility, entrepreneurship and motivation in addition to individual “freedom” and “choice” (Bečević & Dahlstedt 2022). The problem with such thinking and the policies it produces is that it does not provide the kind of social structures and practices that different generations could use to deal with the challenges of intergenerational justice together.

Our research group, which is part of the ALL-YOUTH umbrella project, has been interested in precisely this problem and has worked to develop solutions to it. Together with young people and a number of local NGOs, we have developed and tested a new action-based model to address and productively channel the climate anxiety that many young people currently feel and to promote sustainability transformation in practice. Here, we agree with many other studies and scholars calling for research to innovate and study practices that enable reciprocal, intergenerational learning (Boström & Schmidt-Hertha 2017; Sánchez et al., 2007; Mannion 2012; Vanderbeck 2007) as a way of moving from confrontation-inducing, age-differentiated societies towards collaborative, age-integrated societies (Riley & Riley 2000). By intergenerational learning we refer, along with Boström and Schmidt-Hertha (2017), to the mutual and dialogical communication of knowledge, skills, competencies, attitudes and habits from the younger generations to the older ones and vice versa. Intergenerational learning opens space for generations to learn and understand each other’s perspectives, yet without necessarily having to adopt them. The potential for intergenerational learning is seen especially in increasing social cohesion. However, Boström and Schmidt-Hertha (2017, 1) point out that intergenerational learning is more likely to occur under certain general conditions than in specific pedagogical arrangements (like those at schools). Conditions where the knowledge and skills of all people involved are valued and welcomed, where a collective interest in a certain topic or common aim brings people together and where an atmosphere of respect and openness to new experiences is prevalent are ones where intergenerational learning is found to work best.

Generating such conditions is what the collectively created Circular Knowledge model aspires to accomplish. It utilises a reciprocal mentoring model based on recognising, valuing and reinforcing everyone’s competences, which can include their knowledge, skills, desires, experiences, networks and even personal contacts (Kanniainen, Nylund & Kupias 2017). The model’s underlying idea is that just as

circular economy prevents material over-consumption and promotes sustainability, knowledge can and should also be circulated for this purpose. Circulating knowledge is already taking place, for example, when people share their experiences and tips on a sustainable way of life in social media peer groups, but the advantage of the Circular Knowledge model is that it brings different generations together around the same table for discussion and action steps. The model simultaneously promotes common environmental citizenship alongside and even instead of individual environmental citizenship, based on the premise that the wicked problems that currently threaten the planet and societies are so enormous that they cannot be tackled without wide-reaching and effective common solutions in local communities and beyond (Hake 2017; Smederevac-Lalic et al., 2020; cf. Dobson 2007).

Apart from intergenerational learning, our discussion is linked to the relationship between youth participation and sustainable well-being, the major theme of the book. We are interested in how a participatory model such as Circular Knowledge can contribute to the well-being of young people through seeing it as interconnected with the surrounding climatic, ecological and other environmental conditions. Here we follow and appreciate the pledge made, already decades ago, by the Finnish sociologist Erik Allardt (1990, 1993), that social scientists should pay more attention to the relationship between social life and the planetary system and understand that human well-being is always dependent on the state of the biological and physical environment (Allardt 1990, 10, 13, 16). More specifically, we utilise the theory of sustainable well-being presented by Finnish social researchers Tuula Helne and Tuuli Hirvilammi (e.g., 2021) who have further developed Allardt's ideas. They too think that human actions and societies cannot be separated from nature and that human well-being and the vitality of ecosystems are profoundly interrelated. Helne and Hirvilammi (2021, 45–47) emphasise the principle and ethos of “strong relationality” by which they refer to the neediness, dependency and vulnerability that is constitutive of all life forms. Relationality implies that people's well-being hangs on a balance with their relationship to the surrounding community, society, nature and, ultimately, the whole universe. Human well-being is also connected to the time continuum, building on the past and present social and ecological conditions as well as on their expectations for the future. We will return later to the theory's key concepts (having, doing, loving, being) when describing how we have used them in the analysis (cf. Chapter 5). It should also be noted that sustainable well-being and environmental citizenship are closely linked in our conceptual understanding: building sustainable well-being, that is, meeting the basic needs of human beings now and in the future, is not possible without common endeavours to care for the environment and solve problems that affect people's lives everywhere.

Furthermore, we consider it important to approach the conditions of young people's participation and well-being by taking into account the capabilities that society offers to young people. By capability, we refer first to the conditions of enablement that make it possible for people to achieve their goals and values, and second the

availability of opportunities and resources to do so in practice (Mustalahti 2018; Sen 1999, 2005). It is possible to note, when considering the popular discourse of responsabilisation and how it reflects on the question of capabilities, that many societies lack structures that would offer young people the sufficient conditions, information and resources to be able to respond to the responsibilities that society bestows upon them (Mustalahti & Agrawal 2021). It is often stressed that young people's "voices" should be heard in decision making, but we should also ensure that they have actual possibilities to choose what type of activities they want to engage in, when and with what intensity (see Chapter 8 on a similar argument).

The following section explicates our starting points for a study in which we explored how people from different age groups engage in intergenerational learning as a way to build both personal and common environmental citizenship. Our main focus is on what we can learn from the experiment from the perspective of sustainable well-being. We highlight the successes of the project but also raise potential difficulties with intergenerational learning, especially when new technologies are utilised as a platform for interaction and collaboration.

### **Developing, testing and researching the Circular Knowledge model through action-oriented research methods**

#### ***Co-creating the model in North Karelia***

We set out to develop a new action model based on our interest in enhancing young people's opportunities to influence climate and environmental issues through intergenerational learning. The research context is located in North Karelia, Finland, where the University of Eastern Finland works in close cooperation with various actors in the region, local administration, NGOs and residents. To begin with, it is good to note that North Karelia is historically, socially and economically close to forests and agriculture. The province is sparsely populated with long distances between service centres, and it is distant from national-level decision making. The aging of population together with gaps in older residents' digital skills, in particular, make up key future challenges especially for rural municipalities (Turunen 2020). Tourism-related businesses with food-related services are considered to bring new economic opportunities for the younger generations in such a sparsely populated area (Havas & Adamsson 2020). Older generations have a lot of silent knowledge and experience with traditional food-processing methods, famous for North-Karelian culture, and here intergenerational learning can be thought to be helpful in developing innovative livelihoods.

The CK model was co-created during 2019 in collaboration with several local NGOs<sup>1</sup> and a group of young people recruited from the region's upper secondary schools, universities and immigrant communities. All in all, several dozen participants (aged 16–65) took part in the development process. We convened with the participants in a series of workshops where we decided on the general goals and

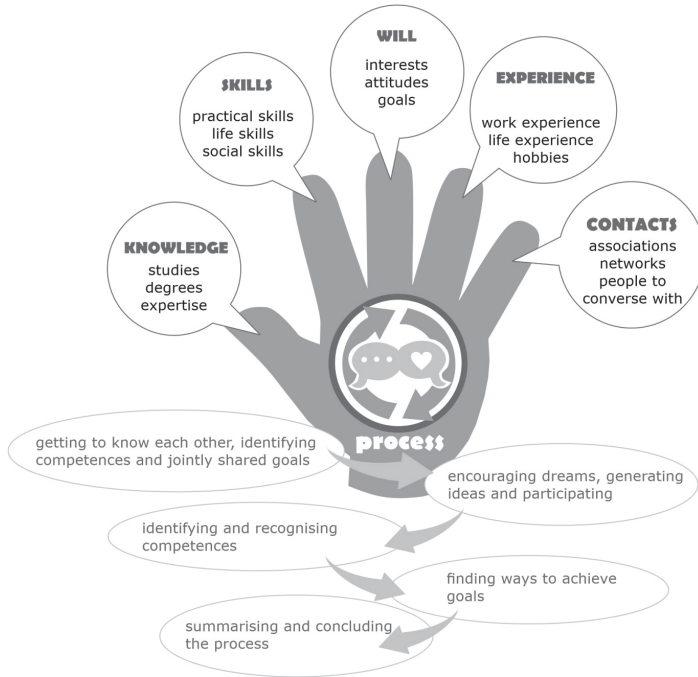


Figure 3.1 Circular Knowledge action model. Based on “Tieto kierto on toiminta” (2022), designed and translated from Finnish by Virpi Pakarinen.

principles of the model and outlined the steps, questions and tasks it comprises (see Figure 3.1).

The central aim of the model is to provide opportunities for young people to be recognised, par older adults and “experts”, as competent actors with experience of their own environment, ideas for dealing with climate and environmental crises and capacities to act. Here young people are not responsibilised and left alone with their concerns but are offered opportunities to act with their peers, supporting adults and various networks of actors. We conjecture that the model can serve to build forms of broad-based personal and common environmental citizenship, which will contribute to young people’s well-being, and which can also be considered to point a way to outlining the conditions of sustainable well-being for the future.

Our research, as previously pointed out, is embedded in the theory of sustainable well-being, especially as it is articulated by Helne and Hirvilammi (2021). We use the theory in the context of the CK model in the following sense: living together as a community (*being*) and acting as environmental citizens require an environmentally friendly lifestyle and actions (*doing*) from all generations, which in turn presupposes that there are capabilities (*having*) for citizens to be able to carry out

the sustainability transformation. All this requires emotional attachment (*loving*) with both people and nature. Furthermore, we would like to mention the human need for *becoming*, which is raised by Helne and Hirvilammi in the context of the dimension “being” but which we would like to mention separately, understanding that becoming responsible environmental citizens necessitates learning processes whereby individual and (or) communal capabilities are recognised and goals for desired change are identified. We will employ these concepts later when analysing and interpreting our data.

The model has been tested together with several dozen volunteers (aged 16–65) between 2019 and 2021. In testing the model, our research group has been partnered by a local branch of the “Sivis” (translates as “Civic”) Study Centre, which is a nationwide and politically independent NGO that organises non-formal adult education, for example, in the fields of health, education, culture and the environment, to support active citizenship and sustainable way of life (Sivis Study Centre 2022). Sivis has contributed significantly to the project through taking part in designing the model, recruiting participants, forming the live groups (to be explained below) and facilitating the groups’ work.

### ***Introducing the data and methods***

We have tested the CK model in two different contexts. In the first case we recruited, in collaboration with Sivis, seven test groups named live groups (in distinction to the second case in which the model was tested by one integrated online group), to share knowledge about how to enhance the sustainability transformation in the region and thereby also influence climate change. A total of 30 participants took part in the groups, each of which included participants under and above 30 years of age. The groups were formed by young people choosing for themselves an experienced mentor with whom they wanted to work and circulate knowledge. Following the steps of the model (see Figure 3.1), each group met five times during the period of approximately six months. In the beginning, the groups needed moderate guidance and encouragement by the Sivis coordinator and the researchers. Once they gained momentum, however, the groups took on an independent role in organising their work and implementing the task which they took up on (also chosen by young people based on their own interest), such as establishing reading or cooking groups, producing podcasts on issues related to sustainable well-being or developing marketing strategies to promote sustainable livelihoods in the region.

In the second case the model was tried out in a very different context, aiming to help the small local entrepreneurs (from food processing, handicraft and tourism, which are particularly prominent industries in North Karelia) to develop more sustainable business models by using new technology. Our thinking behind constructing this case was that sustainability transformation cannot be implemented by individual citizens alone, but the whole society is needed to make it happen, which means that companies and entrepreneurs, too, must participate. Our assumption was that in this question as well, the younger and older generations



can collaborate and circulate knowledge to innovate more sustainable business practices, here experimentally in an online environment. Moreover, if successful, such sustainability-inducing intergenerational collaboration can have far-reaching effects on the well-being of the participants as well as society as a whole.

A total of 33 participants took part in the online group (6 participants under 30 years, 27 participants over 30 years), of which 28 were (mostly middle-aged) entrepreneurs. In this case, the entrepreneur participants were recruited through the professional networks of Virpi, who was in charge of this part of the research, and the young participants were recruited first (unsuccessfully) through Facebook, and later by contacting local educational institutions. As it turned out, young participants were hard to recruit for a research project in a business-related context, and eventually only six young persons got involved. Two of them were also involved in the design of a special online platform for the project, which included a portfolio page for each participating entrepreneur, a shared e-commerce platform, a discussion forum and a Moodle learning environment. The original goal was to create a complete digital infrastructure where it would be possible to practise web-based commerce, share experiences and learn new ways of doing business sustainably, as well as carry out action research on the whole process. This turned out to be an ambitious endeavour that did not, in fact, go smoothly, as we will see later.

Throughout developing and testing the CK model, our research approach was action- and co-research-oriented and thus strongly participatory (for an explication of the co-research methodology, see Chapters 8 and 9). This methodological commitment was based on an observation that participation in sustainability research is still often limited to specific stakeholder groups, while researchers are struggling to find ways to engage lay citizens in a meaningful dialogue and mobilise their local knowledge in research projects. We have, nevertheless, managed to incorporate the ideas and experiences of individual citizens and NGOs in our own research collaboration (Chevalier & Buckles 2019; Reason & Bradbury 2008; Boylorn 2008). Intergenerational learning, flowing from the younger age groups to the older ones and vice versa, has played an important role throughout the process, while we, the researchers, have attempted to avoid imposing our “professional” views on the participants (Swantz 1996). Here, we would like to single out our co-researcher and co-author, Venla, who has participated in the project since the start of ALL-YOUTH in 2018, contributing to it comprehensively from outlining the research agenda and questions together with the researchers to writing a long-term autoethnography, co-creating the Circular Knowledge model and testing it as a member of one of the live groups. She has also been interviewed for this study and has conducted several peer interviews herself among the other Circular Knowledge live groups.

The data reported and reflected in the chapter have been collected by facilitating and observing the groups’ activities and interviewing both younger and older participants. Altogether 22 semi-structured interviews (14 of them with the young participants) were conducted, inquiring what the participants thought about the CK model and how they felt about the intergenerational interaction it was intended to

promote: did the model help identify their own and others' skills and strengths; how did taking part in the knowledge sharing in the groups affect their well-being; what did they think they had learned from the experiment and what of the learned issues they would like to recycle further. The interview data were analysed thematically, reflecting the findings on the theory of sustainable well-being, and the observation data were analysed through critical reflection by the research team collectively. It should be noted that the following analysis is based on the young participants' interviews only, with an interest in how they experienced the CK model and the success (or not) of the intergenerational learning it sought to promote.

## **Observations and reflections on the action research process and interviews**

### ***Intergenerational learning in live groups***

The initial purpose of the experiment was to confront young people's climate anxiety and strengthen their capabilities to deal with it. As it turned out, many older adults shared young people's concern for the planet's fate and pondered ways of influencing societal development towards a more sustainable direction. Sentiments like these point to problems that participants of all age groups felt with being able to live and act sustainably. In this regard, the CK model produced many positive impacts, perhaps more so than we had dared to expect. We can make four main observations indicating such impacts.

First, the interviews show that encounters and discussions between people of different ages on a common cause managed to strengthen at least some of the capabilities required for a sustainability transformation. Many live groups' participants brought out in the interviews how coming together with others, sharing thoughts with them and getting feedback on their own ideas boosted their spirit, motivation and self-confidence to act in accordance with their environmental values. They felt good about this, after having considered such issues and anxieties for a long time on their own. As one of the young participants pointed out:

Earlier I felt depressed when faced by environmental issues, but as I started in the Circular Knowledge group, I realised how knowledgeable I actually am. Even if the theoretical ponderings during my university studies had left me with somewhat unsecure feeling.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that our own understanding and assumptions regarding intergenerational learning also changed during the research process. To begin with, we assumed that it is essential to recognise and acknowledge young people's personal knowledge and competencies and thus support their confidence in their personal role as environmental citizens. We still find recognition of young people's competencies important, but we now understand better that many young people, like others involved, were especially looking forward to sharing their experiences,

knowledge and skills collectively, hence making visible the need for the concept of common environmental citizenship. These experiences and feelings were expressed, for example, in this way by three young participants:

Meeting face to face and hanging around are important. Being together creates a light feeling compared with the heaviness of environmental issues.

Peer support and an environment allowing person to person discussions really help.

Our group was supportive, and participants of different ages made it great. Knowledge does circulate and even persons of my age can circulate.

We can see that the nature of “having” seems to have much to do with the importance of community, belonging, shared values and common knowledge, in addition to (or even apart from) the satisfaction of people’s material needs, when we interpret observations such as these through the theory of sustainable well-being. This point was also argued in the book’s Introduction, and it shows, for example, in this comment:

Best things in Circular Knowledge are people coming together, joint ponderings on what we can do and on how knowledge affects us.

The second observation is closely entangled with the first one. One of our aims was to connect people who shared the same kind of worries about climate change and were willing to care for the environment and feel solidarity about the life of future generations. This we understand as emotional attachment with both people and nature, which in the sustainable well-being theory denotes the need for “loving”. The CK model was designed to enable openness, mutual commitment and trust, and these elements indeed seemed to work out in practice. Based on the interviews, it seems that sharing worries, knowledge and ideas with others can foster communality between people and increase their emotional and social well-being. Peer support and a safe space for discussion were also appreciated, as we can see from these citations:

Best for me was peer support and environment where I was able to talk to people and they helped me.

I was surprised of the equality in the group. Well not really surprised, but like, it was pleasant, and the relationship was so reciprocal.

The importance of interaction was again emphasised when the interviewees were asked what was the most important knowledge or skill that they gained in their live group. Appreciation of the peers’ contributions was also expressed, such as here:

My self-confidence increased due to interaction with others in an interested atmosphere.

Our third observation is that participants in the live groups were not so much interested in single environmental issues as they were in a more holistic understanding and change where the sustainability of one's whole way of life (or the life of the whole community) is re-considered in relation to nature and the state of the environment while also envisioning more sustainable ways to live by. One of the participants shared her motto:

Nature doesn't need humans to flourish, but humans do need nature to flourish. Moving to Mars is not an option.

The CK model was also seen to support the transfer of traditional ecological knowledge and skills. Both younger and older participants brought forth such views during the interviews, such as these two:

We were various people from different ages. I wish to point out the important aspect of preserving traditional knowledge and skills.

The Karelian traditions, both old time and extremely modern, must be recycled as a legacy of generations and suited to the current generation. It is a comprehensive knowledge entity of 360 degrees, "from cradle to grave" kind of lifestyle. The principles of Circular Knowledge model are eternal.

These sentiments equate with the human need for "being", as the theory of sustainable well-being has it. Being stands for the need for integration into human society and to live in harmony with non-human nature, and self-actualisation is seen as the highest form of need satisfaction (Maslow 1962). One of the young participants describes their "being" in relation to their live-group experience this way:

I got to learn about other group member's environmental knowledge and skills which helped me to recognise my own values and skills. Voicing my thoughts enabled also visioning what I still need to learn.

The fourth observation concerns the thoughts of the young participants about their abilities and opportunities to influence environmental issues in their communities or society more widely, which relates to the dimension of "doing" in the sustainable well-being theory. During the experiment, we came to recognise that young people can, to some extent, exert influence on other actors. This is mainly because many young people today have updated knowledge on environmental challenges such as global warming, degraded water quality and biodiversity loss, and they tend to have more transformative visions about sustainable development than older people (see e.g., Lawson et al., 2018; Albrecht et al., 2020; Barraclough et al., 2021). They occasionally manage to influence the people around them, such as family members, through their own knowledge and example. However, young people have limited access to decision making, which causes frustration when they would like to accomplish rapid changes (Matthews 2001; Clarkson et al., 2013;

Yunita, Soraya & Maryudi 2008; Mitrofanenko et al., 2018; Thew 2018; Thew, Middlemiss & Paavola 2020; Hujala, Junntila & Tokola 2021).

Furthermore, although decision makers are at times willing to hear young people's views, the rules of the game in society and politics are typically outside their scope of influence (Arts & van Tatenhove 2004; Arts, Leroy & van Tatenhove 2006). This is both a structural problem of not providing meaningful participation opportunities for young people and a subjective feeling of lacking the abilities and confidence needed to enter public arenas (see Chapter 6 for an argument on this). In this sense, the CK model provided young people with an experience of being included, recognised, appreciated and listened to by older participants and the researchers. Solidarity within the group encouraged and brought them self-confidence to act as environmental citizens, which they did not find easy in their everyday lives with people close by, as the following interviewee explains:

Actually, it is a pretty good thing that we didn't know each other because when I talk about these matters to people who know me well, they already have an idea of me, or prejudices. But I can very openly ponder my goals with the mentors and the peer group members and get ideas from them.

Our interviews and observations show how young people appreciated learning from and about others and being able to put their own knowledge and skills to the test. They became aware of their distinct knowledge grounds, including gaps in them, while interacting in the groups and accordingly decided together on the group's goals. This enabled a fruitful ground for intergenerational learning, sharing and mindset widening, which proves the importance of a *communal* approach to environmental citizenship.

### ***Unfamiliarity with digital technologies as a barrier to web-based intergenerational learning***

Experiences of intergenerational learning and collaboration in an online environment proved very different compared to the live groups. As in the former, the aim was to try out the CK model for mutual learning while at the same time help the entrepreneur participants to create more sustainable business practices. However, as it turned out, even if the entrepreneurs appreciated the opportunity to learn about e-commerce, which was a new issue for them, the kind of intergenerational sharing of values, knowledge, visions and solidarity that characterised the interactions of the live groups remained absent in the online group.

As to the reasons why this was so, three observations especially need to be mentioned. First, the entrepreneur participants struggled with the new communication technology (e.g., joining the online meetings), which they were not used to, in contrast to the young people in the group. In this regard, older participants expected to receive help from the younger ones, but this did not work out, when the young declined from being reduced to the role of "IT support" – which, moreover, would

have required the level of technical skills that most of the young in the group did not possess. Differences in participants' digital communication skills occasionally led to a tense atmosphere, and some of the entrepreneur participants ended up leaving the platform, declaring it as "a useless waste of time". This kind of negative encounters certainly hindered the formation of positive intergenerational communication and solidarity within the group. The next two citations highlight how the young participants felt about the group's interaction:

There was not much feeling of togetherness in the group due to very little joint activities and low intensity of conversations. I was often the only one who tried to keep the discussion going. The others were silent or replied only selectively to the facilitator's questions.

There were hardly any spontaneous conversations, and there were only a few participants in the arranged [online] meetings. The interaction was mainly with the facilitator.

Moreover, while the entrepreneurs expected above all to get technical help from the group to run their online business, the young participants were hoping to create connections with them and thereby perhaps find work and training opportunities – both of which failed. The diverging expectations did not meet and, as a result, both young and older participants were unsatisfied with the results of the online project.

Our second observation is that the entrepreneur participants seemed to value their previous experiences and existing knowledge over any new ideas that the young participants attempted to present. In fact, the entrepreneurs' ineptitude or even unwillingness to learn from young people obstructed innovation and activity in the group, which decreased the motivation of the young participants to continue working together. Our data indicate that young people were ready to commit to a longer-term development of sustainable business practices (instead of mere "green washing" of business; see Tateishi 2017), but this potential remained untapped in the group. Observations such as these can have relevance on a more general level, thinking, for instance, about situations where young people are seeking a change in society's status quo but lack adequate resources and support from older generations. They are then left with few other means to pursue this than via activist mobilisation. This can lead to the withdrawal from public democratic arenas of those young people who have transformative visions, which can result in disruptions in intergenerational relations.

A third point to keep in mind is that during the testing of the CK model a worldwide COVID-19 pandemic broke out, which made especially the online experiment more difficult. Originally, our intention was to organise face-to-face meetings where the participants could have designed the platform and plan their group work together. However, the pandemic forced the group to drop live meetings and interact online only. At the same time, local businesses not only in North Karelia but all over the country shifted their activities from local marketplaces

to virtual arenas. As mentioned, in this difficult situation, the entrepreneur participants were hoping to receive help from the young participants, and when this did not happen, they were disappointed. It was also problematic that from the beginning it was difficult to find young people who had sufficient technical skills and motivation to try the CK model in a business-oriented environment. Finally, only two young participants continued in the online group to the end. This result differed clearly from the live groups for which recruiting interested participants was not an issue.

In terms of the concepts of the sustainable well-being theory, we can make the following notes. Whereas in the live groups, where “having” seemed to be closely connected with being part of a community with shared values, the entrepreneurs of the online group were mostly concerned with material questions through how their business was doing in the middle of the COVID-19 situation. On the one hand, this is understandable; especially in the small localities of North Karelia, doing business is not easy, and entrepreneurs are worried about their own livelihood. On the other hand – and this observation is related to the “being” and “doing” dimensions of the theory – it can be noted that the entrepreneurs who participated in the online project seemed to be business-minded people, who found it difficult to open up to ponderings on the state of the world and building a sustainable society, that is, to questions and problems that they did not feel connected to in their own everyday lives. It was as if the young and older participants lived in at least partly different worlds, the two groups understanding differently what kinds of things in life, society and the planet are important and in need of action, and what kind of actors they need to “become” to secure future well-being. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that young people (including those who participated in this study) spend a lot of time online and find social interaction in digital environments easy. Older entrepreneurs were not accustomed users of computers and digital services, and it did not feel natural for them to interact online.

Finally, in terms of “loving” it is clear that the online group was missing the kind of emotional attachment that characterised collaboration and interaction in the live groups. Young people had climate and environmental concerns and values that they wanted to promote in the group. The entrepreneur participants, in turn, did not see the same need to discuss environmental issues, and there was no joint discussion on the online platform. Instead, older participants tended to treat young people mainly as IT support, which indicates that power relations were built up in the group, where older adults unreflectively assumed that their interests are primary, and the task of the young participants is to help them with their problems. It was evident from the interviews that young people experienced this relationship as unequal, and they felt that the older adults in the group did not listen to nor value their knowledge and ideas.

In summary, sharing and circulating knowledge online can be a demanding task with a heterogeneous, multi-age group of people who “live in different worlds”. In the online case, challenges such as different levels of competence and experience, diverging interests and a constricted time to properly plan the experiment ended

up hampering the participants' motivation to work together in a committed, reciprocal manner. Subsequently, the kind of collective and communal environmental citizenship that developed in the live groups remained absent in the online group. As Boström and Schmidt-Hertha (2017) pointed out, intergenerational learning is more likely to occur under conditions where everyone's knowledge and skills are valued and where there is an atmosphere of mutual respect and openness. This is something we should consider carefully and study further to make pursuing sustainability and environmental citizenship feasible and meaningful also in the digital environment.

## Conclusion

We have discussed in this chapter how people from different ages can share their knowledge to find ways to contribute to the sustainability transformation, which is crucial not only for young people's well-being but also more widely when considering the conditions of future sustainable well-being. We have described the development and testing of the Circular Knowledge model that is designed to respond to young people's climate concerns and enable intergenerational learning and collaboration. The model intends to counter the top-down responsabilisation of young people and provide them alternative avenues of acting as recognised, capable actors alongside older generations, adult experts and decision makers.

Based on our observations and interviews, intergenerational learning within the context of the Circular Knowledge model proved successful in many ways. Intergenerational collaboration fostered communality and emotional and social well-being among the participants, especially in live groups. The model encouraged young people to be outspoken about their environmental advocacy and reinforced their experiences of both personal and common environmental citizenship by recognising and strengthening the capacities and agency of young people when interacting in multi-age groups. In contrast to the traditional idea that younger generations learn from the older ones, the testing of our CK model showed that older generations can also learn from young people. In our mind, this speaks to the power and potential of age-integrated learning and collaboration to contribute to the wider question and challenge of creating intergenerational justice.

However, testing the model in the online format produced rather different results, already because the online group meetings were technically too difficult for many of the older participants to take part in. We had originally planned to organise live meetings for the online group to increase equality in the participants' knowledge sharing, but the COVID-19 restrictions prevented this. The question remains, how the online group might have developed had the participants been able to meet in the live workshops in normal, non-COVID circumstances, but we conjecture that at least some of the problems in the online interactions would have been avoided.

All in all, our discussion shows that the Circular Knowledge model can be used for promoting intergenerational collaboration, and it can indeed act as a catalyst for sustainability transformation and increase social cohesion especially in local



communities. It is possible to argue, when reflecting our observations in the light of the relational theory of sustainable well-being, that at least for the live groups' participants, environmental citizenship signified not only carrying out intergenerational learning but a more holistically understood constitution of the human subject. The participants recognised their lives and well-being as fundamentally entangled with those of other people and with non-human nature. Building sustainable well-being requires acknowledging this basic premise, which is clear to many young people but not so clear to older generations. More opportunities and models for intergenerational learning are therefore worth developing to pursue the sustainability transformation as a collective effort by each and for all.

## Notes

- 1 Members of the following partner organisations contributed to co-creation of the model: The Finnish Red Cross, the Finnish 4H Youth Association, the Siviis Study Centre, the Finnish Forest Centre, the Regional Council of North Karelia, the ENO Environment Online (a global network of schools and communities for sustainable development) and Ohjaamo Joensuu (offering employment services for young people under the City Council).
- 2 All citations in the text have been translated from Finnish by Nina Tokola.

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# Governance of young people's participation

## Critical reflections

*Henna Juusola, Susanna Ågren, and Annika Valtonen*

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### Introduction

In youth policy and youth research, activating young people to participate in society has been on the agenda for many years (Bessant 2004; Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021; Shefer et al., 2018). Numerous policy interventions and programmes have been established by national governments and supranational organisations, such as OECD (2017), to ensure that young people attach to the structures and practices of society. For instance, Finland's National Youth Work and Youth Policy Programme for 2020–2023 strongly emphasises the importance of youth participation in preventing social exclusion (Ministry of Education and Culture 2020). Additionally, both in Finland and elsewhere, emphasis is placed on integrating young people into the labour market. The aim behind this is to maintain economic growth and prevent marginalisation, as discussed in Chapter 5. Such goals and programmes are telling examples of the kind of economic, political and social expectations that authorities now place on young people. Their inclusion and activity in society have become “serious business”, which is managed and monitored closely.

Our task in this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, we explore assumptions that underpin the dominant political and research discourses on youth participation in Finland, highlighting also tensions between them. Empirically, we review and discuss two cases, utilising the Virtual Council e-participation service (described in Chapter 2), that illustrate how the discourses come to embody how youth participation is currently understood, structured, practised and (often) researched. The cases we present are linked to the objectives of the ALL-YOUTH project to probe the obstacles of young people's participation and develop more youth-centred ways of participation, including the creation of spaces where young people can freely and safely discuss their participation experiences. We point out some significant differences between the experiments and contemplate therewith the importance and the effects of how and from whose starting points the participation is organised.

On the other hand, our interest in the chapter is methodological, and our purpose is to critically reflect our own values, research ethics, knowledge assumptions and research strategies. As for the critical reflexivity, we especially emphasise the researchers' ethical responsibility to be clear about the type of discourses they take

part in through their research and the type of narrative on youth participation they contribute to (see Sukarieh & Tannock 2016; Kelly 2018). At the same time, we point out the challenges associated with this responsibility. According to our experiences, the researchers' critical standpoints and ethical concerns may be sidelined in multi-stakeholder research contexts, especially the ones initiated by authorities, despite their wishes to approach youth participation with a critical mind. This observation raises some key questions in terms of knowledge production. We stress that it is an important part of reliable and valid research to ask whose knowledge and "truths" it ultimately promotes, as we have attempted to do in our own research (cf. Kelly 2018). In Chapters 8 and 9, this methodological stance is called "strong objectivity", in reference to the critical feminist epistemology.

The chapter consists of the following elements. We highlight the complexities of the public and research narratives currently defining youth participation; we describe the two study cases that experimented with a new (e-)participation method, the Virtual Council; we explain our critically reflexive approach to the discussion in the chapter; we review the research processes and their results reflexively, explicating along the way our own concerns as researchers who wish to promote young people's participation and well-being, but who sometimes become curtailed in these aims when the research process is defined by diverse interests of multiple stakeholders (see also Chapter 9 for a different angle on this problematics).

### **The ambiguity of youth participation**

In this book, the participation and well-being of young people are approached through several disciplines, perspectives and concepts. Our point of view arises from how youth participation is defined and managed through public policies, measures and practices. Consequently, we pay attention to the structures and organisation of participation – which we call unimaginatively "official participation" – and the societal discourses that guide them. Throughout the discussion, we are interested in how those discourses affect the way participation is defined and studied in youth research. We start from the prevailing discourse, where young people's active participation is taken as a self-evident goal and considered important for securing and strengthening the legitimacy of democracy and the entire social system (Cammaerts et al., 2015; Martin 2012).

As to the structures of youth participation in Finland, young people's participation is enabled and governed by several laws as is pointed out in Introduction and Chapter 1. Policy-wise, one of the most significant ones is the Youth Act (2016), which strives to enhance young people's engagement in society based on several guiding principles: transnational interaction, cultural diversity, healthy lifestyle, sustainable development and respect for the environment. The Act regulates the preparation of a cross-sectoral programme for youth work and youth policy, outlining detailed four-year goals. The central goal of the 2020–2023 National Youth Work and Youth Policy Programme is to guarantee meaningful life and inclusive possibilities of participation for all youth. The goal is promoted through a number

of policy initiatives, including measures that promote young people's employment and coping in everyday life and offer more opportunities for them to influence society (Ministry of Education and Culture 2020). We would also like to point out how the recent legislation on education, such as the Act on Vocational Education and Training (2017), is geared to strengthen the role of educational institutions in guiding young people's development towards active citizenship – the kind of citizenship that the state sees fit or necessary for maintaining the existing society with its values and interests (attuned to neoliberalism, as argued in Chapter 5). When we add to these policies typical public representations of young people as incomplete and vulnerable or irresponsible and risky (Setty 2020; Vesikansa & Honkatukia 2018; Fionda 2005) or, at times, as a force for change that “saves the world” (Bessant 2020), we can begin to see how contradictory the discourses that define young people can be.

However, despite that society buzzes so much around activating young people to participate, the question of youth participation in terms of how it should be understood and organised is not at all simple. Here, we would like to point out two complexities. First, youth participation is not an easy issue because it is politically charged, connected to the future of democracy and heavily governed (Dean & Hindess 1998; Foucault 1991). Youth participation has indeed become serious business, one that is even seen to indicate the future of society and its economic success (Bessant et al., 2017; Kelly 2018). Moreover, the governmentality (Foucault 1980, 1991) that frames how youth participation is thought and spoken about, how it is managed and how it is supposed to work produces its own roundabout “truths” that are needed to justify how it is currently run (also Kelly 2018). These truths, which include a certain understanding of what young people's active citizenship should look like and how it should be pursued, are produced in public and research-based discourses alike. According to this conception of citizenship, young people are expected to participate in society, most of all through the labour market (including taking care of their own employability; see e.g., Bessant, Farthing & Watts 2017), but also through other (conventional) means, such as voting and acting in civil society organisations. These are also the kind of goals that Finland's democratic politics explicitly strive for. Furthermore, the dominant discourse tends to see young people not as full citizens, but as citizens-in-the-making who require special guidance from adults and professionals to be able to participate in society in normatively acceptable ways (Bessant 2020; Nikunen 2017; Sukarieh & Tannock 2016).

Second, as it has been found in many studies, despite the myriad policy efforts to develop youth participation, the methods and arenas specifically designed for young people are often too narrowly understood, tokenistic, uninteresting and ineffective from the young people's viewpoint (e.g., Bessant 2020; Nikunen 2017; Suni & Mietola 2021; see also Chapter 6). The official structures and practices of participation have clearly not been planned by listening to what young people themselves think and feel about them. Instead, participation organised by adults tends to bypass young people's voices and aspirations, especially those who come from

marginalised positions (Bessant 2004; Cammaerts et al., 2015; Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021). We will see an example of this problem of bypassing when we present our own cases and experiences. Meanwhile, young people's participation in their own terms is not necessarily welcomed, especially if it is seen as disruptive or as a challenge to society's (elite) status quo.

In ALL-YOUTH, we have tried to tackle these barriers and prejudices through developing and studying more youth-centred forms of participation, aspiring to use new kinds of research strategies that engage young people from various backgrounds in the production of knowledge that concerns their lives. As several of the book's chapters demonstrate, these aspirations have sometimes been rather successful, but researchers have also faced difficulties when carrying out participatory research in the field. These kinds of challenges are discussed extensively in the third section of the book. In this chapter, we speak about our experiences of studying two participation experiments, using the Virtual Council e-participation service. We review how the experiments were planned and implemented and critically reflect our endeavor to study and promote young people's societal participation.

### **Practising ethically sustainable research: critical reflexivity as methodological guidance**

As many youth researchers, we find both necessary and valuable that young people are offered meaningful opportunities to participate in society. We agree with the argument presented in Introduction that young people's participation needs and their connection to young people's well-being have been insufficiently understood thus far (see Helne & Hirvilammi 2015; Gough 2017). Like many other researchers (e.g., Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021), we are concerned that policy measures intended to activate young people to become productive members of society and the labour market may turn against themselves and can actually worsen the well-being of young people.

As a starting point, we think that if youth researchers are interested in the well-being of young people, they should also pay keen attention to what kind of effects participation policies and practices have on young people's lives. Likewise, we find it important that researchers practise critical self-reflection and contemplate their own assumptions about youth participation, including what kind of discourses they take part in through their own knowledge production (Kelly 2018). In our studies, we have attempted to do so by utilising ideas from critical reflexivity (Högbacka & Aaltonen 2015). From the methodological point of view, critical reflexivity has at least three important benefits: it helps the researchers to see themselves and their research work as part of the social world they are studying. Second, reflexivity opens space for ethical reflection on the relationship between the researcher and the researched; for example, how the researcher's assumptions and research practices might influence the research participants and even guide them to act in a certain way (see Subramani 2019). Third, critical reflexivity can enhance researchers' awareness of the conditions of knowledge and the fact that research always



produces truths about its “object”, which in turn has real-life consequences for how society sees and treats specific groups of people (Subramani 2019; Högbacka & Aaltonen 2015). Recognising the researcher’s personal positions, surrounding cultural and societal factors, and the epistemological assumptions behind the chosen research methods are therefore important aspects of the reflexive research process.

When writing this text, we have extensively reflected on the ways in which youth participation is generally discussed and what is expected of it. We have tried to make visible how young people’s participation is guided by various policy measures, and how these measures potentially affect young people’s understandings and experiences of their own participation (see Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren 2021, 2023). While critically analysing such discourses, we have continuously reflected on how our own institutional research environment, collaboration with research partners, theoretical frameworks and previous understanding of youth participation have influenced the knowledge that we have generated (see e.g., Kallio, Honkatukia & Valtonen 2022). In this reflection, our research ethics have also been put to the test from time to time. We feel that sometimes we have been pushed to operate between the rock and the hard place, considering that the ALL-YOUTH project is funded by the government through a programme (The Strategic Research Council) which is expected to work closely with multiple stakeholders in society to provide solutions for the societal inclusion of young people in a way that supports sustainable economic growth. As part of this collaboration, we too have inevitably contributed to the discourse that defines and manages youth participation. On the other hand, we have also consistently tried to take a critical distance from this discourse, especially from the assumptions related to economic growth. As stated above, strengthening the social inclusion and well-being of young people is an important value and goal for us, but we do not always agree on the policies and means to achieve it, or the research approaches that uncritically accept public participation policies as starting points of the inquiry.

### **Dilemmas of youth participation – reflexive notes on two research processes**

The two cases discussed here – one on young people’s participation in the preparation of the national anti-racism action plan (“the Action Plan case”) and the other bringing out young people’s experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic (“the Pandemic case”) – were conducted in the online context of the Virtual Council e-participation service. Developed in the ALL-YOUTH project, the Virtual Council seeks to enhance young people’s participation by providing online space with a tool to engage in discussions on desired societal topics. This kind of e-participation tool is relatively new in Finland, one which the Finnish youth and democracy policies regard with high hopes (Ministry of Education and Culture 2020). It is also a key means to diversify democracy and human rights practices in educational institutions, as stated in the National Democracy Programme (Ministry of Justice 2021a). In the future, e-democracy tools are expected to become more widely used.

The two studies were carried out independently in different sub-projects of ALL-YOUTH, the Action Plan case studied primarily by Henna and the Pandemic case primarily by Annika (also, other researchers were involved in both processes). Susanna did not take part in the empirical work, but in another ALL-YOUTH study she has made similar observations about the impacts of the dominant “neoliberal” discourse on young people’s experiences of their position in working life and society more generally (Ågren 2021; Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren, 2023; see also Chapter 5). In writing this chapter, we have reviewed and reflected thoroughly the two research processes and their results and have subsequently chosen to speak about ourselves as a collective “we” (occasionally also as unnamed “researchers”). Hence, we present our shared understandings of what went on in the experiments, and what they teach us about young people’s participation in settings that are structured and managed by authorities, or in the second case, by a well-established and internationally known NGO, the (Finnish) Red Cross.

### ***The Action Plan case: innovative (e-)participation – but on whose terms?***

In the first case, we studied the preparation of the National Anti-Racism Action Plan (NARAP) in the spring of 2021. The preparation was coordinated by the Ministry of Justice (from now on, “the Ministry”), the responsible authority in the government for reforming and strengthening the structures of Finnish democracy. NARAP is based on the goals stated in the Government Programme (2019–2023) of Prime Minister Sanna Marin to draw up an action plan against racism and to improve good relations between different population groups (Finnish Government 2019). The Ministry considered young people as a key group to be consulted in drawing the plan (Ministry of Justice 2021b) since, according to studies, young people in Finland are increasingly experiencing racism both on personal (Halme et al., 2018) and structural levels, especially in educational contexts (Jauhola & Vehviläinen 2015). Representatives from the Ministry suggested a collaboration with ALL-YOUTH to organise the consultation using the Virtual Council service prototype. From the Ministry’s perspective, virtual consultation sounded appropriate, particularly because the ongoing pandemic had made it challenging to organise in-person events. Also, the Ministry was interested in experimenting with a new kind of e-participation instrument because of its perceived potential to involve young people in decision-making processes more widely and more meaningfully (Ministry of Justice 2021b).

The consultation was eventually implemented as a collaboration between the Ministry, the ALL-YOUTH project, three educational institutions (comprehensive school, vocational institution and general upper secondary school) and a Finnish Red Cross (FRC) Youth Shelter (institutions came from different parts of the country). The Ministry was responsible for practicalities, such as recruiting the partner institutions, determining the schedule for the consultation and providing

relevant background information about NARAP. Local organisations were responsible for recruiting the participants. The role of the researchers was twofold: to provide the Virtual Council service prototype with technical support and to study the usefulness of the service as a means for hearing young people, especially from the viewpoint of an inter-organisational collaboration between authorities and other actors. For the study, researchers conducted several interviews with representatives from the local organisations and the Ministry, but they did not facilitate or otherwise participate in the work of the Councils.

Altogether, five Councils were organised in February and March 2021, including approximately 60 young persons between 14 and 17 years of age. Each Council went on for one to two weeks. In educational institutions, the Councils were implemented either as part of the daily classwork or as part of the activities of the student union. In the FRC Youth Shelter, young people participated in their spare time. The basic tenet of the Virtual Council service is to generate a concluding statement, based on the facilitated discussions on a topic that is regarded important for young people and/or for decision making. In this case, the concluding statements were prepared by the participants themselves, but they can also be prepared by, for example, the facilitators or the head organiser. In terms of substance, the statements stressed the need to provide safe spaces for young people to share racism-related experiences, develop non-discriminatory practices for job and other recruitments and promote diversity in society in general (Ministry of Justice 2021a). All statements were communicated to the Ministry, which utilised them as a part of the final version of NARAP (Ministry of Justice 2021b, 51–52).

Here, we will not describe the Councils, their discussions or final statements in more detail (see Chapter 2). Instead, we want to take up two reflections, through which it is possible to shed light on some of the dilemmas regarding pre-arranged institutional participation for young people.

First, in the Action Plan case, the research context was defined by the Ministry's pre-set goals to consult a group of Finnish young people and collect their opinions on the plan being prepared. The task of the researchers was to find out how this goal was achieved and to evaluate the functionality of the Virtual Council generally as a way of consulting young people. The research setting was therefore limited from the start by the knowledge interests of the Ministry and by the fact that interviews would only be made with representatives of the involved institutions. Originally, the purpose was to interview young people as well, but none of them showed interest in being interviewed. Retrospectively, we think that this was primarily due to that their participation was organised institutionally, where the researchers had no direct contact with young people themselves. On the flip side, neither were the representatives of the institutions involved in planning the research, which meant that they were not familiar with its starting points and objectives. In this way, the interests of the Ministry and the researchers regarding the experiment were crossed, and no fruitful dialogue formed between them. In afterthought, we can conclude that in the research based on multi-stakeholder cooperation, especially when powerful actors are involved, it is important to have joint discussions

about the goals and implementation of the research, not to mention the different theoretical understandings regarding the topic itself. In the best scenario, this way of proceeding enables a critical discussion among the parties, which was unfortunately missing in this case. In addition, registering the young people's own views on how they experienced their participation would have been essential information. The research data were clearly insufficient and several knowledge needs of the researchers were not met.

Another challenge was the tight schedule of the research, given that the timeframe for the preparation of the plan was already set in the Government Programme. As a result, the researchers did not have enough time to carefully consider the starting points of the project nor implement the research as reflexively as they would have liked. The schedule and the fact that the study's knowledge interests were determined from the Ministry's point of view led us to critically reflect about who the study ultimately benefited. On the bright side, the consultation of the young people was certainly well-intentioned and meant to support the dialogue between young people and decision makers on the issue of racism in Finnish society. Moreover, the consultation did give young people a practical chance to impact national policymaking, as their contribution was recognised in the published version of NARAP, which included a separate chapter on young people's views of anti-racism (Ministry of Justice 2021b, 51–52). On the other hand, there was no interactive dialogue between the Council participants and decision makers after the consultation, and the whole experiment appeared as more or less top-down arrangement, which the young people could not influence.

### ***The Pandemic Case – organising the Council in a more youth-centred way***

In the second case, a Virtual Council was organised in a close collaboration between ALL-YOUTH and a FRC Youth Shelter to hear young people's thoughts about how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their lives. The FRC Youth Shelters, situated in several larger cities in Finland, support young people under 25 years of age in various matters, such as family and social relationships, independent living and coping with school. They also offer young people a temporary place to stay if needed. The project had previously collaborated with this shelter and knew the staff, which made the collaboration comfortable and trustworthy from the start.

The Council was organised in April 2021 in the middle of the pandemic at a time when the Finnish government rapidly changed safety regulations to prevent the uncontrollable spread of the coronavirus. The measures had a major impact on young people's everyday lives, especially opportunities to go to school and meet friends. When the project contacted the Youth Shelter to propose the study, its theme turned out to be one that young people had already suggested to the staff as a possible subject for a Virtual Council (which the staff and many of the young people were familiar with due to FRC's prior involvement in the development of

the service's prototype). Both these factors, that the people at the shelter already knew about the service and the ALL-YOUTH project and that the young people could participate in choosing the topic, proved important in how young people felt about their participation and how the research succeeded.

In terms of the topic, it is interesting to note that at the time of the research, two competing narratives existed in the Finnish public about how the pandemic affected young people's lives. First, there was the "worry narrative" where young people were seen to suffer from social isolation and the shattering of their dreams for the future. Another narrative in turn took young people as selfish and careless risk-takers and even super-spreaders of the virus, as they were seen to disregard the public safety guidelines by going out to have fun and meet with their friends. In the research, we were interested in what young people thought about the pandemic and how they felt their behaviour in relation to the pandemic was judged in public. Additionally, we wanted to hear how they thought the public support services had succeeded during the pandemic. For example, did they feel they got the help they needed in coping with the difficult situation? Thus, the Council provided a platform for young people to share their experiences of the pandemic and an opportunity to express their opinions to the decision makers. By doing so, the young participants managed to challenge the general narrative, which saw them either as vulnerable victims with no capacities for agency or as careless and selfish spreaders of the virus.

The Council was advertised to young people aged 18–29. Eventually, 13 participants were recruited by the FRC with the help of several youth organisations and the Youth Shelter volunteers. The Council ran for two weeks; the participation in it was voluntary throughout; and the anonymous discussion was open 24/7 (as always in the Councils). Due to the anonymity, the actual ages of the participants remained unknown, but the organisers' and the researchers' assessment was that the participants were young adults. In contrast to the Action Plan case, here the researchers were actively involved together with the volunteers as facilitators in the discussion, commenting empathetically and encouraging the participants to express their views. The organising team arranged on-call persons to facilitate the discussion for several hours a day to make sure that everyone received a response to their input. As a thank you to the participants, the FRC provided everyone with a participation certificate and a gift card to a retail store chain.

In reflection of how the discussion went in this case, it is important to note the crucial role of the facilitators who were sensitive to the participants' views, replied to all posts and encouraged the discussants to reflect further on the issues they raised in the Council. We noticed that during the discussion, participants started reflecting on their own experiences in relation to other participants' posts and offered peer support with each other, which indicates that a dialogical exchange of ideas also took place. Judging by the participants' feedback, many appreciated learning about others' experiences and realising that they are not alone with their ordeals. In reflecting back, we consider it important for a smooth and stimulating flow of online communication to ensure that everyone's contribution is visibly registered

and appreciated, that the conversation proceeds without unnecessary gaps and that when a need for moderation emerges, it is quickly responded to.

In contrast to the Action Plan case, where the concluding statement was drawn by the discussants themselves, the Pandemic case statement was written jointly by researchers and the FRC volunteers. This choice was made among the facilitators, taking it as the most flexible way of producing the text – which is not always easy, considering that the final statement is supposed to summarise all the views expressed during the discussion. Retrospectively, we feel that this was not an ideal solution, and that engaging the young participants in the writing process would have better supported the intended youth-centredness of the process. However, preparing the statement collectively might have proved to be a time-consuming effort without the guarantee that the participants would have enjoyed taking part in it.

The concluding statement (a seven-page document) brought out many issues the participants found important about the pandemic, for example, regarding the crucial significance of social relationships in difficult times, feelings about one's job or school-work being disrupted for long periods of time and problems with the availability and accessibility of public support measures. The statement was then forwarded to several relevant institutions, such as the Finnish Student Health Service and a Children's Ombudsman. A summary of the concluding statement was published on the ALL-YOUTH website (Kallio, Valtonen & Honkatukia 2021), and its key points were rehearsed on several social media outlets, such as the FRC's Twitter and Instagram accounts. The discussions have also been reported in scientific articles (e.g., Kallio, Honkatukia & Valtonen 2022).

In the Pandemic case, nine young people (out of 13) gave their consent to be interviewed about their experiences of participating in the Council. This differs significantly from the first case, where none of the young people agreed to be interviewed. We think this difference can be explained by at least three factors. First, the participants were already informed about the research when registering in the service and asked for their permission to be contacted later about the interview. Even if they chose to decline, they were still able to participate in the Council freely. This proved to be a simple and convenient way to inform participants about the study and recruit interviewees. In the Action Plan case, the registration was handled by the involved institutions, and information on the research was sent to the participants as a separate document before the Council commenced, asking their interest to participate in research and willingness to be interviewed, which eventually none of them did. Another point is that in the Pandemic case, the researchers actively communicated with the participants, allowing everyone to get acquainted with them during the process, which may have made the idea of being interviewed more comfortable for the participants. Third, in the Pandemic case, the topic of the Council was one that young people themselves had wished for, signalling that they found it meaningful and had something important to say about it to the authorities. This, together with the convivial atmosphere of the discussion, probably made the participants eager to continue the conversation in the interviews, which turned out very lively and rich in substance.

As it can be seen from the case descriptions, the Virtual Council may be implemented in various ways, depending, for instance, on the organiser's interests and their previous experience of engaging young people successfully. It is quite possible to include young people in the planning of the Council, like in the Pandemic case. The authorities, however, tend to prefer implementing the Councils in a pre-arranged way to enable a quick and flexible gathering of young people's opinions about a desired topic. From our own research, we can initially infer that young people's participation in a Virtual Council is more active and committed if they have been able to influence its topic and arrangements, and if they feel that their views are acknowledged in a vicarious and supporting manner. Nevertheless, each Council is unique with its potential and challenges, and their success cannot really be guaranteed in advance.

To conclude, we would like to present two more reflections: the first points to a challenge in this form of participation and the other to its potential in fostering the societal impact of youth participation.

First, about the obvious problem. In its current form, the Virtual Council service works with written communication and only in Finnish, which ipso facto entails that participation in the Councils requires rather proficient Finnish language skills. This prerequisite may exclude some groups from participating, such as immigrant youth or people with visual impairments. Also, participation in this kind of context requires courage to express one's opinions in writing, which can be too much for some young people, even if they have good language skills. For example, in the Action Plan case, the topic of the Council (racism) was socially and politically sensitive. It is possible that some of the participants had difficulties in expressing their views on it, or were reluctant to do so, even if the discussion was anonymous. In the Pandemic case, the discussion in the Council was lively, but keeping it so required special effort from the facilitators. It is not easy to conclude from the discussions how well this form of participation generally helps to bring out young people's views. Much depends on whether the organisers succeed in recruiting young people, whether the participants feel confident with their language and expressive skills, whether they consider the topic interesting, whether the facilitators are committed to keep the discussion going and whether the participants feel that the (virtual) space is safe.

The societal impact of the Virtual Council as a tool of participation is somewhat complicated to assess. As a reminder, the service is designed to promote dialogue between young people, along with discussions between them and decision makers, to make young people's participation meaningful and effective. In principle, the service can be considered promising, especially now that it has been transferred under the control of the Ministry of Justice (see Chapter 2), and the Ministry takes it seriously as an opportunity to develop the democratic participation of young people. The final statements prepared in the Councils are regularly delivered to the Ministry and/or other relevant decision-making bodies. Yet, it is not clear how or if the final statements and young people's views expressed in these statements are taken into account. In the two cases we investigated, the impact of the closing

statements was structured differently: in the Action Plan case, the impact was rather direct, considering that the Council was organised by the Ministry's initiative, and the closing statements were truly noted in the final anti-racism plan. In the Pandemic case, the societal impact was sought through the final statement being brought to the attention of the relevant organisations and through writing scientific articles. Yet, there is no information on whether these measures led to any actions.

In hindsight, we regard ourselves as some sort of "activist researchers" (Wright, Hadley & Burke 2020) in a sense that through our research project we have managed to enhance, even if modestly, the dialogue between young people and policymakers. Still, from the perspective of critical research, the Virtual Council as an arena and tool for youth participation raises some complex questions. On the one hand, it is possible to claim that researchers should support and actively study this kind of participation, which directly promotes young people's engagement in policy processes. On the other hand, it can be critically inquired, whose and what interests this kind of official, pre-organised participation ultimately serves and what kind of truths about youth participation and citizenship it produces. As our own experiences show, we have not been able to avoid unpleasant doubts on whether the Councils have been supportive of our initial aim to prioritise young people's opportunities to express their views.

### **Conclusion: lessons learned**

In this chapter we have described and critically reflected our research strategies and knowledge production in the context of studying the use of the Virtual Council as a participatory platform. By practising "strong objectivity", we have attempted to situate ourselves within the dominant public and research discourses on youth participation, attempting also to take a critical distance to them. Our view is that it is crucial for critical youth researchers to remain sensitive to what kind of discourses they take part in with their knowledge production, and what kind of perception of young people's social participation they promote (cf. Kelly 2018; Sukarieh & Tannock 2016). In our reflection, we have become aware that at times our own critical thinking and ethical principles have been overshadowed when we have conducted research starting from institutions' knowledge interests and pre-arranged forms of participation. However, our critical stance is complicated by the fact that we are working in a government-funded project which is tasked to present solutions for the integration of young people into society; even ones that we as critical youth researchers do not find altogether justified.

We have looked at youth participation from a particular perspective, that of the official, institutionalised participation, and based the discussion on findings from two experiments with the Virtual Council e-participation service, critically evaluating the opportunities and challenges it offers for youth participation. In contrast, in our previous studies we have emphasised the heterogeneity of young people's participation and that there are many ways of belonging to and acting in society outside of formal, adult-centred structures and practices. When we



think about our previous observations, such as the criticism expressed by many young people towards the hegemony of labour market citizenship (Ågren, 2023; Honkatukia et al., 2020; see also Chapter 5), and consider them in the context of this study, we can conclude that there is a generational gap in how youth participation is understood and realised. This gap appears at least in two ways. First, there is the danger that the new tools of participation will merely become another means of the adult society to control young people's relationship to society if they are not invited along to plan, test and study them. Even when adults and experts often mean well, the pre-arranged institutional participation can end up producing defunct structures and practices that are of no interest to anyone and have no practical effect. Second, the new means of participation will have little meaning unless they touch upon the issues that young people consider important for their lives and futures (Bessant, Farthing & Watts 2017; Huttunen & Albrecht 2021).

Our position is that instead of offering young people separate arenas of participation, the making of sustainable society requires more of intergenerational dialogue (Gough 2017, 53), especially if we wish to avoid underestimating young people's views simply because of their age (Anttila 2010; Bessant 2020, 239). As Bessant, Farthing and Watts (2017) state, and as is argued in Chapter 3, a truly intergenerational appreciation requires that the older generation overcomes its "self-centredness" and engages in an open dialogue with the younger generation, a dialogue that is marked by mutual learning and active listening, enabling both the consensus and disagreements in a constructive atmosphere. Achieving this kind of supportive interaction is a challenge for decision makers and researchers alike. Indeed, as Bessant (2020, 258) has stressed, it is the responsibility of youth researchers and the adults working and encountering young people to ensure that they are not left alone in their efforts to build a vital and just future.

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## Part II

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# Critical views from the margins

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### Introduction

Decision-makers often treat young climate activists paternally as pets. “How wonderful that you participate!” they say and clap encouragingly on the activist’s shoulder. This is annoying. The activists would rather have decision-makers listen seriously to what they have to say.

(Heta Elena Heiskanen, a former researcher of the ALL-YOUTH project, and herself a climate activist, sums up how adult society treats young climate activists and how they themselves experience it)

Whereas the previous section of the book examines the structures and institutional frameworks of youth participation, this section looks at how public, political and research discourses position young people in society and how the young people themselves relate to and feel about such positionings. The above quote is a timely example of what kinds of positions society can place young people in. Young climate activists, for example, have often struggled with how they are perceived by adults and experts. As it often goes, young people are thought of as citizens-in-the-making who lack the interest and capacity to be active members of society, which is why their views are not taken seriously. This kind of thinking easily positions not only those young people who are usually thought of as (self-)marginalised but young people in the margins in general.

The three chapters of the section bring up repeating discourses that define desired and discarded youth participation and citizenship in society. The authors report their observations of how young people partly adapt to these discourses, but also how they criticise and resist the pressures they bring. One of the main arguments of this section is that the commonly applied binaries (political/apolitical, active/passive, inside/outside society) do not adequately describe the realities of young people’s participation and relationship to society. Altogether, the chapters highlight the potential of looking at the world from young people’s perspectives. The authors remind us that, if we only pay attention, it is possible to see a myriad of often unacknowledged ways young people are active in society, for example, how

young people discuss politics and societal issues spiritedly with their peers, help each other out in smaller or larger everyday troubles and share their expertise of the institutional system to assist others to cope better. All these are meaningful forms of societal participation, even if young people's everyday engagements easily risk being labelled negatively or bypassed by the sensibilities their actions often entail.

Chapter 5 engages in a discussion on youth citizenship, especially from the point of view of young adults' participation in the labour market. Following a critical and deconstructive approach, the authors, Jenni Kallio and Susanna Ågren, ask what kind of opportunities for societal participation the current ideal of labour market citizenship provides young people and what kind of participation it excludes. The authors argue that the dominant neoliberal model is too narrow to guarantee well-being for all young people or help in building the conditions for sustainable well-being in the future. In the course of the discussion, they present an alternative conception of citizenship as lived well-being, where young people's citizenship is approached as membership and activity in their everyday environments. The authors' discussion is based on studies in which they examine the demands and expectations that young people struggle with in relation to their societal participation. Their research makes visible how young people today relate to, negotiate, adapt and sometimes resist the ideal of labour market citizenship as a norm of the good life. The authors conclude that to enhance sustainable well-being for future generations, closer attention should be paid in research and political discourses to accepting, innovating and experimenting with other forms of citizenship besides young people's inclusion in the labour market.

Chapter 6 discusses young people's political participation from a perspective that deviates from common assumptions. In the chapter, the authors, Reetta Mietola, Pekka Koskinen, Anna Suni and Jenni Mõlkänen, argue partly with and partly against the mainstream views of how young people's political participation is understood and how it should be encouraged. On the one hand, they concur with research findings that point to young people finding institutional politics alien or difficult to understand, preferring other, noninstitutional ways of engaging politically in their everyday life contexts and spaces. On the other hand, based on their own research findings, they contest the general validity of this interpretation, arguing that young people have not entirely turned their backs to institutional politics. Rather, many young people move actively between different arenas and forms of political engagement from everyday life settings to (at least the fringes of) institutional ones, building along the way an understanding of the required skills and dispositions in each field and of their own political interests, standings and preferred styles of participation. The chapter's discussion makes visible how young people often long to be taken seriously by adults in the field of formal politics but feel hesitant as to whether they dare to enter it or not. However, while being hesitant, young people readily and eagerly discuss politics and individual politicians, their accomplishments and perceived failures. In the authors' interpretation, young people's political cultures take shape in a dynamic dialogue with the normative and institutionalised forms of political participation.

Chapter 7 addresses a phenomenon that is a recurring theme throughout the book, with all its social-political-ecological repercussions: young people's climate activism, which, at the turn of 2020, took the world by surprise because of its global nature, public visibility and political influence. The authors, Mikko Piispa, Tomi Kiilakoski and Anni Ojajarvi, provide a general background on the phenomenon but focus more closely on the development and effects of the climate movement in Finland before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors are particularly interested in the effects of youth activism on the climate debate and policies drawn in various democratic decision-making arenas. They note the tensions that exist between young activists, who have stressed the importance of science for climate decisions, and the adult-centred society, which often ignore or altogether dismiss young people's arguments and activism. As the authors conclude, in the debate and research on youth, the idea of how to "make the voice of young people heard" has long been alive. The climate movement of young people has intriguingly reversed these roles. Now, young people are the ones who make the voices of science and research heard. Science provides a backbone for the demands of young people, but it also bridges societal debates.



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# Young adults' perceptions of citizenship outside and beyond labour market citizenship

*Susanna Ågren and Jenni Kallio<sup>1</sup>*

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## Introduction

This chapter engages in a critical debate on youth citizenship, looking into young adults' perceptions of their future as citizens, especially in terms of participation in the labour market. Our approach is deconstructive. We ask what kind of opportunities to belong and participate in society the current labour market citizenship provides for young adults, and what kinds of participation it excludes. We agree with the arguments claiming that the dominant neoliberal model where people are expected to participate in society as “active”, “efficient”, “responsible” and “entrepreneurial” individuals largely ignores how young adults themselves understand their needs and well-being and the (diverse) forms their societal participation can take (Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021; Kelly 2006, 2017; Smith et al., 2005).

In the chapter, we make the argument that the challenges and complexities today's young adults encounter when trying to position themselves as citizens relate not only to the breakages and insecurities in the labour market but importantly also to the hardened and unsustainable demands of the neoliberal work society (Bessant, Farthing & Watts 2017). We recognise that currently waged work holds a virtually unquestionable moral position in society as a determinant of people's identity and citizenship (Weeks 2011, 109), and young adults learn to interpret their value in society through their relationship with work (Farrugia 2021). However, as the labour market and adulthood have become more complex for today's youth in comparison to previous generations (Cuervo & Wyn 2016; Standing 2011), many scholars have highlighted how the demands of the labour market fail to meet the young adults' own values and perceptions of well-being and societal belonging, especially when these values and perceptions fall outside the prevailing norms of labour market citizenship (cf. Helne & Hirvilammi 2022; Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021, 97).

In this chapter, we seek for a broader way to conceptualise young adults' attachment to society. We take part in this debate from the perspective of the theory of citizenship. Traditionally, citizenship has been seen as a status linked to the formal membership of society, where citizens achieve their rights as citizens by fulfilling their basic obligations to the nation-state. However, understanding citizenship more broadly as a lived, everyday membership in society opens the possibility



of seeing the more mundane aspects of citizenship, including the ways in which young adults negotiate their relationship with society in their daily lives (e.g., Lister 2007). In this chapter, we supplement and empirically demonstrate the idea of a lived, everyday citizenship as part of well-being and construction of sustainable society. In our thinking, citizenship, participation and well-being are intrinsically interlinked in young adults' everyday membership, agency and influencing in society (Isin 2008; Harris, Wyn & Younes 2010). In here, we are inspired by the theory of sustainable well-being and its relational understanding of well-being (see Helne & Hirvilammi 2017, 2022).

The chapter is based on studies in which we have examined the demands and expectations that young adults struggle with when building their relationship to society (Kallio & Honkatukia 2022; Kallio 2022; Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren 2021, 2023). By young adults, we refer to young people aged 17–25 going through a phase of life where they are negotiating their belonging to the labour market as a way of being included and respected as members of society. We, however, argue for a wider understanding of young adults' citizenship as a fundamentally social and intersubjective process taking place within different sites of belonging, connections and institutions, which structure their everyday life (Kallio, Wood & Häkli 2020; Moensted 2020, 247). Approaching citizenship in this sense opens up space for recognising different forms of citizenship outside and beyond working life (Smith et al., 2005). By “beyond”, we would like to convey the idea that the traditional understanding of being “inside” or “outside” the labour market poses a problematic dichotomy, predominantly created by the hegemonic narrative regarding the meaning of work in society (cf. Cuervo & Wyn 2014). Our argument is that also alternative (yet equally valuable) ways of societal participation that exist on the fringes and beyond the social norms of labour market citizenship should be acknowledged (cf. Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021). Therefore, we are interested in looking beyond the existing model of labour market citizenship by analysing the various forms in which young adults envision their participation and belonging in society.

### **Debating youth citizenship in the labour market**

Critical youth scholars have debated the citizenship of young adults for a long time. Recently, many researchers have been concerned about the growing demands and pressures placed on young adults by labour market citizenship, and how they are (or are not) able to respond to those pressures (e.g., Kelly 2017; France 2016). In brief, labour market citizenship refers to the normative model where people are expected to engage in society first and foremost through waged work (cf. Suikkanen & Viinamäki 1999). Respectively, “good citizens” are defined as autonomous, responsible individuals, and as healthy, resilient, entrepreneurial workers and social actors (e.g., Walsh 2017; Duffy 2017; Kelly 2006, 2017; Nikunen 2017; Rikala 2020). Such “self-making citizens” (Walsh & Black 2020) are expected to actively personalise the project of citizenship, and at the same time function effectively in the labour market, while adapting to its changes and developing their personal abilities

and skills accordingly (Lewis & Flink 2004; cf. Isopahkala-Bouret, Lappalainen & Lahelma 2014). Young labour market citizens are also seen responsible for filling the dependency gap left by older generations to sustain the economic growth and continuity of the welfare society (Bessant, Farthing & Watts 2017, 71–73; Nikunen 2017; see also Chapter 3). The expectations to adopt labour market citizenship as a major moral responsibility in turn shape how young adults see themselves and their value in society (Farrugia 2021).

Critical scholars have detected several problems in this way of thinking about citizenship. First, problems arise when the expectations linked to this view collide with the ongoing changes in the labour market. According to some research, there is less full-time work available for young adults, while part-time work, zero-hour contracts and periods of no (paid) work are increasing (Standing 2011, 112–113). Other researchers have claimed that the amount of waged work in general is decreasing, which challenges how the wage-based society operates (Gorz 1999). From the intergenerational point of view, this means that young adults have poorer opportunities than previous generations for stable careers, economic independence, home ownership – and ultimately, achieving a safe and independent adulthood (Walsh & Black 2020; Cuervo & Wyn 2016). Second, researchers have been concerned about the effects of labour market citizenship on young adults' well-being, including whether it meets young adults' own values and expectations (Helne & Hirvilammi 2022, 166). Several studies have highlighted young people's frustration with the increasing pressures stemming from the current labour market, which they find difficult to respond to (e.g., Kelly 2017; Rikala 2020; Farrugia 2021; also, Ågren 2023). Hence, it can be argued that adopting individualised measures – emphasised in neoliberal policies – to promote young people's participation in the labour market, such as seeking to increase young people's resilience and adversity capital, is neither effective nor socially sustainable. Along with many other researchers, we are concerned about how the normative expectations of labour market citizenship affect the abilities of both contemporary young adults and future generations to function in society. We think that young adults' societal participation should be based on their values, well-being and future expectations (Walsh 2017). In our own discussion, we are interested in what kind of experiences and critical ideas young adults have about their societal participation and belonging in relation to (the ideals of) labour market citizenship, especially outside and beyond it.

In order to develop our argument, we will utilise the theory of sustainable well-being developed by Tuula Helne and Tuuli Hirvilammi (2017), in which they conceptualise well-being as something built upon the satisfaction of people's basic needs. To them, well-being is a thoroughly relational construct where alongside adequate living conditions (*having*), the individual also needs love and relationships (*loving*), acceptance and appreciation as persons in their own right (*being*) and opportunities to act on issues they deem important in society (*doing*) to be able to live good meaningful lives (Helne & Hirvilammi 2017, 44–47; see also Introduction and Chapter 3). We will use this conceptualisation when analysing young adults' experiences of working life and their ideas of societal participation.

### **Critical voices and visions – introducing the data**

The discussion of the chapter is based on 68 interviews of young adults (including 22 follow-up interviews) and 12 group interviews (altogether, 104 different interviewees aged 17–25) conducted in Finland in three different contexts: among vocational education students and graduates, young adults who have sought support to their concerns related to becoming independent<sup>2</sup> and young customers of one-stop guidance centres.<sup>3</sup> We regard it important to listen carefully the critical voices in these interviews which are often bypassed in research. In this chapter we make visible how these accounts can interestingly challenge many implicit and normative assumptions in how transitions to adulthood are viewed in society. All interviews included themes related to young adults' relationship and belonging to society, inquiring also about their expectations and experiences of participation in the labour market. We have previously published several independent papers on these data sets, where we especially focus on young adults' internalisation of the ideal labour market citizenship and the problems that have followed when or if their attempts to achieve this fail (Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren 2021; Honkatukia et al., 2020). Interestingly, we have detected that not all young adults take the norms of labour market citizenship for granted; some also criticise those norms and aim to transform them to make them more in sync with their own values and aspirations (Kallio & Honkatukia 2022; Ågren 2023).

In the following discussion, we focus on these kinds of “transformative voices” in the data, highlighting how the interviewees negotiate their relationship with the norms of the working life and society in alternative and occasionally disruptive ways. We use the term transformative to describe the aspirations of the young adult respondents to reform the labour market and make it more socially sustainable (see Helne & Hirvilammi 2022). We pose two questions: (1) what kind of (critical) ideas about social participation emerge from the data, in relation to or apart from the prevailing ideals of labour market-centred citizenship? (2) How can young adults' thoughts and experiences of societal participation be interpreted by using the concepts of the theory of sustainable well-being?

In our analysis, we approach the interviews as stories, which express young adults' everyday experiences of participation and citizenship, and which are intertwined with other narratives about their lives. The stories enter in a dialogue with surrounding cultural and societal discourses – variably called “master narratives”, “plot lines”, “master plots”, “dominant discourses” or simply “cultural texts” (Bamberg 2004, 136) – which we understand as socially, historically and locally constructed beliefs and preconceptions about how individuals should operate in society (Atkinson & Delamont 2006). The objective is to analyse what kinds of everyday citizenship young adults are building with their stories, and how they construct themselves as citizens in relation to the hegemonic discourse of labour market citizenship (Bamberg 2004). Moreover, we understand these cultural and societal discourses as important ingredients of young adults' self-definitions (Cahill & Davdand 2018, 249). Our thought is that while the prevailing cultural discourses

in society affect and define young adults' citizenship, we should also see them as agents who actively negotiate their position in relation to such discourses (also Bamberg 2004, 153).

We use citations from the interviews to illustrate our analysis. However, we do not reveal the interviewees' working life status, their educational background, their needs of support or other related identifiers. The purpose of this strategy is to give greater weight to their messages and thoughts, rather than to categorise their opinions based on their background and current labour market position. We regard this as an ethical choice and as a key premise of our critical approach.

### **Recognising the diversity of belonging in society outside labour market citizenship**

When we talk about the possibility of belonging to society outside of the labour market citizenship, we primarily refer to a phenomenon where that kind of a citizenship is unattainable to young adults no matter how hard they try. Yet, we agree with Bessant, Farthing and Watts (2017), who make the important point that young adults who are not engaged in the labour market are not simply victims; instead, they actively reflect on and negotiate their position in relation to the existing education and employment policies. Talking from such "outside position", some interviewees in our data expressed strong counter-speech against the hegemony of labour market citizenship, with a few even stressing their right to refuse any obligations associated with it. We consider such voices as evidence of how some young adults in society feel the need to critically evaluate the "risk talk" aimed at them by an adult-centred society and defend their right to be treated as valuable and respected members of society, even when they are unable to fulfil the norms of labour market citizenship (Kallio & Honkatukia 2022; Kallio 2022; Ågren 2023).

In Helne and Hirvilammi's (2022) theory of well-being, the dimension of "being" refers to human beings' right to be met and accepted as what they are. In the context of our analysis, this means acknowledging young adults' different experiences and ideas about belonging to society as well as the fact that there are structural inequalities defining their opportunities, or lack thereof, to fulfil the ideals of societal participation (cf. Honkatukia et. al., 2020; Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021). According to the interviews there are many reasons why some young adults in society find it difficult to meet the criteria of labour market citizenship. For example, the requirement to be socially active and engage in networking to enter and succeed in working life is simply too demanding for some. Others feel that they are forced to perform a role they do not feel comfortable with, such as when they are expected to impress employers in job interviews (also Nikunen 2021). Moreover, some feel that their current life situations or work histories are not adequately acknowledged in the institutional system, and that the society only values education and participation in the labour market as a legitimate means to achieve well-being (see Kallio 2022). Similarly to the interviewee below, instead of being forced to waged work, many young adults would appreciate the acknowledgement of their needs:

I think we should first focus on how people are doing, whether things are okay in their life, and only after that see how they can be employed. Instead, we focus on how people can be employed; and only if they won't, we start to wonder if they have other issues in their lives. In my opinion, this order is wrong. It's very hard to get excited about work training if you, for instance, come from a family with problems with alcohol and if you yourself have started to use [substances]. Still, the social service or KELA [The Social Insurance Institution of Finland] states that you must go to work trainings, or otherwise you won't get any money [social security]. It's not the kind of help the person needs; they are forced into the working life when what they really need is something different.<sup>4</sup>

Based on the data, it is evident that young adults wish to be treated humanely in the labour market. If they do not foresee that the labour market would guarantee them decent treatment and livelihood, they might lose motivation to commit to such a form of citizenship. The quote below expresses strong frustration by some interviewees for being forced to mould themselves into the requirements of labour market citizenship:

Well, I don't know. I somehow hate society. Or how could I say it ... It's like, despite being born here, you feel that you cannot cope by just living. You are supposed to do many kinds of things to manage [in life].

Moreover, many young adults have lost their faith in participating in working life as a provider for their interests and dreams. In contrast, they feel as if working life deprives them and reduces them to a mere taxpayer, as the following quote illustrates:

Currently, [work] means that I haven't found anything I would enjoy doing. If I'd find something I enjoy, it would be like a hobby or having fun, from which I'm also paid for. However, currently, [work] means only that the government wants to get taxes from me. I don't personally like being forced to do anything, but I understand that in society, it's your duty to work.

Some interviewees refuse to follow the expectations of labour market citizenship. The first excerpt below brings out an ironic tone with which some young adults in our data value free time more than work, while the second makes visible how some do not want to do stressful work if it does not pay enough to get by:

You waste the best time of your life working. You spend all your well-being for work and don't have time for anything else. [So], social bum, here I come! The society doesn't like it, but I don't care what others think about me.

[Seasonal work] takes all your zest in life. You won't get a proper salary from it and it's so repugnant that you lose your nerves. You just repeat the same process

just like in a factory. I could never work there [again]. You only lose your health. So why the hell would I work there! I wouldn't work there unless I was absolutely compelled, if I wouldn't otherwise survive [financially].

Some young adults in our study feel strongly that they are unfit for the labour market with its demands and norms, which makes them consider the possibility of withdrawing to the fringes of work-centred society or even outside of it. They are not willing to sacrifice their free time, social relationships and intimate life ("being", "loving"), which they value as part of their well-being and coping, for work. Labour market citizenship is therefore not a viable option for all young adults to build their relationship and belonging to society, at least in every phase of life. This kind of sentiment is keenly expressed by the following interviewee:

Well, I don't think it's every person's duty to work. [I say that] because some people don't want to work, and if some people are not capable [of working], then there's nothing to do about it. If someone is against working, they shouldn't be chained and forced to work. That's because I feel that a bad working life oppresses people. Some people prefer being unemployed and enjoying their life [to working in an eight-hour office job].

In a nutshell, the above stories demonstrate how for some young adults who are outside of the labour market can secure their well-being better than being inside of it. Some interviewees persuasively ask which is more expensive for society: to maintain expensive mental health services for young adults wounded by the demands of working life and society or to treat those with respect who cannot or do not want to integrate into the normative and burdensome labour market. The interviewees highlight that despite being unable to work, their need to be accepted and respected in society will not vanish. This important message from young adults should be adequately acknowledged in policymaking.

### **Beyond the normative labour market citizenship**

The interviewed young adults describe their attempts to change the prevailing ideals of labour market citizenship, imagining what working life could exceed its current confines. Instead of positioning themselves as outsiders, they wish to reshape society into being more approving of diversity and adaptive to various needs and aspirations (see Ågren 2023). According to these views, young adults should be allowed to participate in working life more on their own terms, as expressed in an almost surrendering tone by one of the interviewees:

Mostly, I hope that I will find an employment possibility that works for me. [Trying to get employed] has meant for me [several] attempts and failures, and after that, new attempts and failures. I wish that I could find an option that wouldn't be the most important thing in my life but that goes on with its own

weight, and I can concentrate on other things. The fear is that it won't work. My fear is that there won't be jobs that suit me.

Likewise, some of the interviewees emphasise that they wish to be encountered in society as who and what they are, with their values and needs and sometimes limited resources. In such accounts, young adults appear as critical citizens who – by engaging in “doing” – claim justice, rights and responsibilities (Isin 2008, 18) and contest the hegemony of labour market citizenship which rejects diversity and heterogeneity of societal participation. Some young adults in our data describe their struggles in trying to follow the normative transitioning paths to adulthood, and in their efforts to build a career to their own liking (cf. Farrugia 2020). Some interviewees picture themselves as creative or artistic, stating they would enjoy passionate things as part of their work, and this would also support their well-being (cf. Farrugia 2021). They express disappointment at how little support they have received from adult society for such wishes. On the other hand, some admit being supported by their peers, as the following extract shows:

When I'm aiming for [professional] fields that may sound tricky, and others fear whether anything will ever come of it, I hear a lot of not-so-supporting comments and tense feedback from adults. For example, they frighten me that I would never get a job in that field, and that I would fail. But that does scare me. [...] [However] people of my own age see my aims and goals as possible, so their comments are very different.

The transformative voices in the data claim that society should better understand and support the link between work and well-being. Some interviewees point out that their participation in working life depends on whether it will become more humane and equal as compared to what it currently is. Echoing the following interviewee, some of them contemplate whether more alternative ways to integrate in the working life will exist in the future:

I don't know if it is possible that everyone could do something they regard important, but at least there could be more possibilities for flexible working hours. [...] Because currently, all people are forced to the same “box of work”. In my opinion, there should be more alternatives. Much more alternatives.

Young adults try to avoid the narrow model of an active labour market citizenship by lowering their own expectations of success in working life and letting themselves to settle for less in life in terms of work. This desire, however, collapses with the normative ideals of labour market citizenship, directing young adults to proceed along the path sanctioned by society (Ågren 2021; Honkatukia et al., 2020; cf. Cuervo & Chesters 2019). Settling for less is a personalised struggle for many young adults, as they must accept their failures regarding the required norms and career paths, as the next quote highlights (cf. Farrugia 2021, 868):

Finally, I realised that I just don't have that kind of drive. Some people know what they would like to be when they grow up, and for some people, it is not that big of a deal at any level. For me, it's hard to accept it because I had my goals. But now I'm starting to accept the idea that maybe I will never have any vocation, and that I just do the kind of work I can and happen to get. And it is also okay. Because when I was younger, I never thought that would be okay.

Moreover, many young adults who choose a non-normative path position themselves as citizens who act in ways that are meaningful for them in other areas of life than work. The interviews bring out numerous examples of how young adults attempt to realise their citizenship through various ways of “doing”, “being” and “loving”. They have, for example, been active members in their communities, sought to make a difference in their social relationships, experienced success in their hobbies or in volunteering, and some have sought to influence societal issues through their own lifestyle. In these sites of “being” and “doing”, young adults acquire and develop communication skills, critical thinking and knowledge of society's institutions – all important citizenship capabilities (Kallio 2022). One interviewee describes an activity meaningful to themselves in the following way:

I'm there [Youth Shelter run by Finnish Red Cross] as a volunteer, now from time to time due to COVID and my work. But I've been there in the emergency housing and in the evenings, and I cook for the young people there and help the staff. I'm there overnight, and then I leave the next day. And then, a year ago, they started this solidarity project, and I've been a volunteer there.

By engaging in what can be called everyday activism, these young adults act as citizens in ways that override the normative nature of labour market citizenship (cf. Helne & Hirvilammi 2022). However, rather few of them position themselves as citizens who reflexively and actively turn their critical insights into political actions (cf. Rinne 2011, 11). Our understanding is that this may be due to the normative understanding of societal participation mainly as inclusion to the labour market to which all the other activities are subordinate (cf. Smith et al., 2005; Walsh & Black 2020).

As judged by our data, citizenship can mean for young adults “loving” in the sphere of intimate relationships. Citizenship in this sense relates to mutual sharing and feelings of belonging and safety. Moreover, young adults often choose to relate with their peers rather than authorities or professionals, which means that everyday life social relations provide them with important information and support (Bennett, Wells & Freelon 2011). They also highlight the crucial meaning of social relations for one's success in work. Friends and family support in “pinning” the difficulties in the labour market and help if working life becomes too burdensome; one interviewee, for example, was taken to the hospital by their friend because of a burnout. Furthermore, social relationships allow young adults to care for others and



be responsible for them, which allows them to feel valuable and important despite having difficulties in meeting the demands of labour market citizenship.

Indeed, for many young adults, “loving” is an important dimension of societal participation (cf. Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021, 132). It manifests a responsible citizenship, which (outside of intimate relations) relates to issues such as environmental citizenship, solidarity and caring for the future of humanity (for a similar argument, see Chapter 3). As Smith and others (2005, 437–438) state, this kind of socially constructive citizenship refers to people caring for their community and contributing to it by helping others in vulnerable positions. In our data, some young adults seek to realise such ideals through their own way of life, and some demand more extensive actions from the state in social and ecological issues. Through making sense of their own and other young adults’ difficulties in the labour market, they have come up with ideas on how to reduce mental health problems, which they believe have root causes in society. Moreover, they argue for more sensitivity to young adults’ needs from society’ institutions (also Kallio & Honkatukia 2022). For them, being a respected citizen should not be about “having” in terms of material resources, or about acquiring the standards of living enabled by having a certain status in the labour market. The idea that everyone should have an equal right to realise themselves and receive support as needed to be able to do so is well expressed in the following quote:

There should be many more hobbies that don’t cost that much. Because those people who don’t work ... they don’t necessarily have the money to have a hobby. But they should also have a community to attend to and do things, but which wouldn’t cost that much. In a way, even though you don’t work, because you haven’t got any job, you would have the money to do free-time activities. That would prevent your mental health from breaking down. Because if it’s not possible to have a hobby, it’s very easy to get depressed and have your mental health to collapse. And then, at least, you can’t get a job when you’re depressed.

To summarise our argument, while many young adults have internalised the model of labour market citizenship and want to stay “inside” of it, there are also many who criticise its narrow normativity and express transformative ideas. They wish to reformulate the existing expectations related to work to better suit their abilities, values and needs (cf. Ågren 2023; Helne & Hirvilammi 2022). In addition, they try to carve space for realising citizenship in more diverse ways. It is notable that while not occupying a normative place in the working life, they still develop citizenship capabilities that are important for sensible societal participation (Kallio 2022). As is reflected in the current master narrative of labour market citizenship and the ideology of economic growth, the ideas and aspirations of young adults for alternative forms of citizenship are at risk of being bypassed. This should be avoided. A genuinely sustainable society takes seriously the critical views presented by young adults about their position and participation in society, whether they’re expressed from inside, outside or beyond the labour market.

## Conclusion – towards citizenship as lived well-being

In this chapter, we have examined young adults' considerations about their position and participation in society in relation to the hegemonic discourse of labour market citizenship. We have focused on what we have called “transformative voices” in our interview data, analysing young adults' critical views and alternative ways of understanding and living citizenship. Theoretically, we have looked at young adults' societal participation as a dimension of sustainable well-being and identified problematic assumptions in labour market citizenship. According to our observations, it can be claimed that for some young adults, labour market citizenship appears as too narrow, unjust and burdensome model of societal participation which devours other valuable aspects in young adults' lives and citizenship (Ågren 2023; Honkatukia et al., 2020).

The transformative voices outlined above call for rethinking the relationship between work and citizenship. They remind us how important it is to support young adults' societal participation regardless of their position in the labour market and in ways that holistically recognise the importance of societal belonging for their well-being. In our discussion, we take distance from the neoliberal view which places the responsibility of participation and well-being on young adults individually and ties it to their role in the labour market (e.g., Rikala 2020; Duffy 2017; Walsh 2017; France 2016). We also problematise the traditional understanding of welfare citizenship based on the state-financed social services and labour market citizenship as the (tax-paying) guarantor of the system (e.g., Newman & Tonkens 2011). Moreover, we have emphasised young adults' right for well-being and the need to belong and participate in society (Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021, 72, 92). Altogether, we wish to emphasise that young adults' citizenship and well-being cannot be resolved individually, but it requires collective decisions and critical discussions at the societal level.

Instead of merely labour market citizenship, we propose that the inclusion of young adults in society should be understood through the idea of citizenship as lived well-being. With this concept, we want to highlight the relationship between societal participation and well-being as a fundamental basic need (Helne & Hirvilammi 2017, 2022); being an active citizen requires the opportunity for a person to live and act in ways that they find significant for their relationship to society. This would support their experience of dignity, thereby allowing them to have a meaningful agency not only individually, but also from the perspective of a sustainable society (Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021, 154; Ågren 2023).

Our conceptualisation of citizenship as lived well-being problematises the mainstream youth policies, which direct young adults towards labour market in ways that end up pushing some of them to the fringes of the work-centred society (Ågren 2023). Taking our cue from Weeks (2011, 106–107), we propose focusing on young adults' well-being instead of on their effective integration into working life. This could address many problems caused by the hegemony of labour market citizenship, which portrays young adults in the margins as passive, problematic or risky

(also Kallio & Honkatukia 2022). Instead of emphasising young adults' individual coping skills, it is imperative to consider how society and working life can be made more sustainable and inclusive (Madsen 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi 2022).

The conceptualisation of citizenship as lived well-being helps to acknowledge young adults as actors who have a right to participate in society as who they are and whose diverse ways of societal participation must be recognised and supported. At the same time, our findings may have more general significance in that the transformative voices we identified may indicate broader trends and shifts in societies, needed from the perspective of sustainable transformation of society. For example, our findings call for the realisation that many forms of agency can contribute to society's sustainability. Therefore, participation outside and beyond the labour market citizenship (such as voluntary or advocacy work, hobbies, arts and other forms of self-initiated participation) should not be turned into another institutionalised path to paid employment, which would lead to the creation of a new system based on control and guidance around work. As some researchers have suggested, such alternative activities should also be supported financially, for example, through basic income (cf. Weeks 2011; Bessant, Farthing & Watts 2017, 182; Gorz 1999, 83). In this, the basic income experiment in Finland in 2017–2018 is an encouraging example. The monthly basic income (560 euros) was found to increase the experienced well-being of the recipients, although it did not directly increase their employment (see Kangas et al., 2020, 188–189).

In a society that relies on waged employment, young adults' critique of the labour market citizenship can be easily refuted as idealistic and utopian (Weeks 2011, 255). However, according to the recent Finnish youth barometer, 86% of the respondents aged 15–29 regarded human rights, democracy, biodiversity and animal rights as more important than economic growth (Kiilakoski 2022). In the light of such results, critique towards the economic growth-based labour market citizenship can be seen as a major transformative voice coming from the younger generation (Helne & Hirvilammi 2022). There is a need for new conceptualisations and discourses to re-evaluate the meaning and value of waged work in society and other aspects of life, as stated by Weeks (2011, 35–36):

The problem with work is not just that it monopolizes so much time and energy, but that it also dominates the social and political imaginaries. What might we name the variety of times and spaces outside waged work, and what might we wish to do with and in them? How might we conceive the content and parameters of our obligations to one another outside the currency of work?

From this contention follows a crucial challenge for educational, social and employment institutions: are they ready to acknowledge the value of societal participation outside and beyond labour market citizenship? Are they willing to seriously consider the critical, transformative voices of young adults as to the meaning of waged work in society?

## Notes

- 1 Names are in alphabetical order. Both are first/corresponding authors.
- 2 These young adults were reached from the Youth Shelters run by the Finnish Red Cross, where they had sought support for issues related to independence, such as independent housing, economic livelihood or their family relationships.
- 3 One-stop guidance centres (“Ohjaamo”) are multi-agency service points situated across Finland, offering guidance for employment and education matters for people under 30. The original data from the centres were collected by a research project led by Mirja Määttä (2018, 2019).
- 4 All citations have been translated from Finnish by the authors.

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## **“Am I not a lovely green-and-red, a watermelon?”**

Young people negotiating political  
participation from marginalised positions

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Jenni Mölkänen*

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### **Introduction**

In this chapter we approach youth political participation in a new way, departing from familiar views and assumptions. We argue both with and against two popular views of how young people’s political participation should be studied and encouraged. In one view, democracy and youth policies aim at empowering young people as “active citizens”. This model of citizenship presumes an individual with the right kind of knowledge, skills, values and dispositions: a good democratic citizen puts these into practice by voting or otherwise acting to support traditional democratic institutions (Kiilakoski 2021; Boldt 2021; Eliasoph 2011; Rapeli & Koskimaa 2011). This activation perspective typically deploys a narrow, institutional definition of politics and assumes that young people lack interest in, or even feel apathetic towards, it (Rytioja & Kallio 2018; Farthing 2010). More critically tuned research has pointed out that this conception of citizenship does not resonate with young people who consider institutional politics as alien or difficult to understand (Harris, Wyn & Younes 2010; Bastedo 2015). Such researchers challenge the commonplace notion that young people are passive by showing how they engage with political issues today (Honkatukia et al., 2020; Farthing 2010). This line of research turns to the everyday contexts of young people’s agency, tackling the inability of many societal actors to recognise young people as truly politically active (see Stenvall 2018; Suni & Mietola 2021).

Building on our own qualitative research on how young people in marginalised or minority positions participate in politics, our examination turns a new page in the debate. While we recognise the importance of non-institutional arenas and styles of societal engagement for young people, we argue that they have not entirely turned their backs on institutional politics. Rather, as we have observed, many of them move between different arenas and forms of political engagement, building their understanding of the required skills and dispositions in each field, as well as of their own political interests, standings and preferred styles of participating. This intertwining is exemplified by the citation from our data in the present chapter’s title. The speaker comes from a language minority in Finland and positions themselves

politically as a “watermelon”, that is, with a left-leaning and green ideology. To us, the extract not only captures the interest many young people show in “old-style” institutional politics, but also how in politics one can deal with big personal questions concerning values and standings also in playful, even joyful ways, as also argued in Chapter 10.

Our discussion demonstrates how young people long to be taken seriously in formal politics but are unsure whether they have the knowledge and capacity to enter it. Our young research participants repeatedly expressed that one should be an expert and be able to perform as such to be taken as a credible discussant. “Politics” was not considered as a safe and comfortable space for action. Despite being hesitant, our participants actively discussed and took a stand on political issues and individual politicians, often from the perspective of their personal experiences and observations (“reflexively”, as conceptualised in the Introduction). There is a need, then, to examine young people’s desired and enacted political participation in ways that challenge existing simplifying dichotomies. For young people, political participation can be both mundane and institutional, personal and societal, serious and playful, and it can signify moving between different spheres and forms of politics.

### **Bridging different views on youth political participation**

In recent decades, political participation has been a strong focus of youth policies throughout the Western world (Bessant 2021; Farthing 2010; Eliasoph 2011). Finnish democracy and youth policy have also systematically developed new structures and practices to support the societal participation of young people. Following the “participatory turn” of the last two decades, numerous national and local projects have been launched, offering young people opportunities to influence issues both in their immediate environment and in wider policy planning and decision making. Many of these new structures, practices and bodies are rapidly becoming established, with some of them being required by law, such as student councils in primary and secondary education or youth councils in local decision-making structures (Kiilakoski 2021).

These policies encouraging young people’s active citizenship have been researched from at least two perspectives. First, some of the research literature advocates efforts to empower young people to take control of their own lives, well-being and futures, in particular, by working and participating in key social institutions (see Chapter 5 of this book). In this mindset, young people are “citizens-in-the-making” who, through education and training, gradually develop into mature, responsible citizens with the knowledge and ability to function smoothly within the traditional norms of existing democratic institutions (Bessant 2021; Biesta 2011). Young people who do not adapt to such a model of citizenship are viewed with suspicion. Specific activation policies and campaigns have been created to counter concern about young people’s disinterest in voting and their risk of social exclusion (see Chapters 4 and 5).



Second, empirical studies show that this ideal of active citizenship does not resonate with a lot of young people for whom institutional politics appears alien and difficult to understand (e.g., Harris, Wyn & Younes 2010; Bastedo 2015). While young people are not very willing to participate institutionally, this does not mean that they are socially passive. Critical scholars have strongly challenged the notion of passive youth by making visible the diverse ways, styles, arenas and movements in which young people engage in political debate and advocacy, as in the global climate movement (see Chapter 7). This strand of research has also highlighted the structural conditions that enhance or restrict young people's participation (Honkatukia et al., 2020; Farthing 2010; Bastedo 2015; Boldt 2021), as discussed throughout this book.

We make two new contributions to this debate. First, our partially critical response to the second perspective above is that many young people are interested in institutional politics. This is evident when one listens to young people's way of speaking about politics carefully and observes their activities closely in the field, as in our ethnographic research. Many young people judge their own knowledge and skills to be insufficient to dare to enter an adult-dominated political field. Still, some of them do so, as will be shown later. Researchers still have a lot to learn about how young people experience "official politics" and what problems, relevance and potential they see in it. We aim to show how young people are not completely disconnected from the institutional politics but rather move between different spheres of participation.

Second, our critical response to the first perspective is that democracy policies and research largely ignore young people from marginalised or minority backgrounds. We have suggested elsewhere (Koskinen & Mietola 2021) that one key reason for this lack of academic interest is the specific approach to these young people's social positioning. Timo Harrikari (2008, 133) introduces the concept of "risk lens" to describe the shifting modes of governing all childhood and youth through risk prevention. Young people's assumed risk of marginalisation legitimises a variety of preventive measures (see the Introduction). We see Harrikari's concept as especially illustrative of the public discourse around marginalised young people's societal participation.

In order to address the gap in research, we strategically approach young people in marginalised or minority positions through a "democracy lens". Our starting point in looking at these groups is to recognise how difficult it is to lose the risk lens. Even when the explicit objective is to support disabled or multicultural youth participation in politics, projects and practices can be compromised by a hidden agenda of social inclusion or integration (Koskinen & Mietola 2021; Suni & Mietola 2021). Furthermore, marginalised young people are commonly assumed to act as representatives of their marginalised position (determined from outside) who are defined by this characteristic, such as their disability. Our data show how this assumption frustrates many young people who are interested in and would like to take a stand on a variety of societal issues.

Often both policies and research maintain fixed ideals about what a (young) participating citizen looks like, and when, where and how they should participate

in politics (Kallio 2019; see also Biesta 2011; Bessant 2021). Rather than recognising and dismantling existing barriers, the policies and studies keep reproducing the idea that some young people are fit to participate, and others are not. We show below how marginalised young people negotiate and struggle with such a mindset.

### **Data and methods: politics of/from minority positions**

In this chapter we utilise data from four research processes. While executed separately, each one is a part of the ALL-YOUTH project's research framework, and each engages young people from marginalised or minority backgrounds. From the outset, two qualifications should be made. First, even if the datasets are here discussed in the same analytical context, we are not suggesting that in each case the participants come from identical social positions. We do not assume that their experiences and agency are similar. Second, we avoid interpreting our research participants as "representatives" of any specific minority or marginalised group. We find it important to recognise the basic fact that individuals rarely fit into only one (social) group but usually identify with multiple groups, as some participants in our studies do, or actively resist categorisation based on pre-defined identity groups (see Mietola et al., 2021). However, taken together in an analytically sensitive way, the data provide valuable insights into how political participation looks and feels from the perspective(s) of marginalised young people.

The data can be summarised as follows:

- The first dataset (Study 1; e.g., Honkatukia et al., 2020), gathered by a research team including Jenni, stems from 17 thematic life course interviews with young adults aged 18–24, who have received support from NGO in their transition to independent living. One key theme discussed in the interviews was societal (including political) participation.
- The second dataset (Study 2; e.g., Koskinen 2020) consists of life history interviews, conducted by Pekka, with five disability activists aged 22–26. In the interviews, the young disabled people reflected on their personal paths to political activism, how they enact their activism and how they view their future in terms of activism.
- The third dataset (Study 3; e.g., Suni & Mietola 2021) consists of the ethnographic fieldnotes and interviews carried out by Anna and Reetta in relation to a civics course organised by a Finnish NGO for young people aged 16–25 with different ethnic and language minority backgrounds. The course was designed to enhance young people's understanding of Finnish policy processes and political institutions. Researchers participated in all arranged activities (2–6 h each) over 20 days during spring and summer 2019.
- The fourth dataset (Study 4; e.g., Mietola et al., 2021) comes from Reetta's ethnographic fieldwork around a participatory project organised by another Finnish NGO for young people aged 18–30 from different ethnic, language, sexual, gender and disability minorities. In workshops over five days, the ten

young participants developed and executed a public awareness campaign about the harassment and discrimination young people face in public spaces. The data consist of fieldnotes from workshops and interviews with two participants.

Our analytical strategy can be described as collaborative analysis through discussion (see Lahelma et al., 2014) aiming to “trace related, parallel stories” (Gordon et al., 2006, 7) in the data. Our collaborative writing process was initially inspired by a realisation that many (unintentionally) shared themes point to like interpretations in our respective data sources. We first identified such common themes (e.g., stories about how one became interested in politics, descriptions of one’s relationship to and understanding of politics, and vivid expressions of how one feels about politics), then discussed what they mean, after which each author went back to their own data to look for extracts that manifested such experiences, views and sentiments. Finally, we reconvened to discuss the findings and set them in dialogue with earlier research. The purpose of this analytical strategy was not to reduce the data to single, unified perspective, but to show the complex, sometimes contradictory, ways in which our participants talked and felt about politics.

### **Barriers to political participation: “I feel that I might not understand enough”**

The institutionalised, normative image of a politically active, participating citizen produces barriers to participation, as can be seen in how the young people talk about their relationship to politics. For example, Nikki refrained from active participation in politics not out of a lack of interest, but a lack of knowledge to do so:

I’m like really interested in politics, studying societal issues and such, but the problem is that I’ve never been good at them. [Laughs.] And that is actually why I’ve never voted or really wanted to form any personal opinion, since I feel like I might not really understand enough. It’s like a feeling that you don’t understand enough and thus you really don’t really know how to find out [about these topics].

(Study 1, interview)<sup>1</sup>

The extract reveals how a specific understanding of political participation has a double effect on young people’s relationship to politics. First, political knowledge is understood as strictly defined and unchanging, something you learn early on and either do or do not have. Possessing this knowledge, if you are interested, allows you to form credible political opinions and acquire even more knowledge. Those who do not have such knowledge and capacity are excluded. Second, in agreement with many previous studies, the account highlights how many young people see voting the “correct” form of participation (e.g., Myllyniemi & Kiilakoski 2019). However, even to vote, one needs to feel capable of stepping into this position of participating citizen, something that so far has remained out of reach for Nikki cited above.

This way of thinking constitutes politics as formal, distant and complex (Honkatukia et al., 2020), a sphere where agency – decision making and societal impact – lies with the parliament and other institutional bodies. All ordinary citizens can do is to influence who gets a seat in the parliament. Yet even this form of participation is out of the question for many young people who have not reached the voting age. Lowering the voting age would not help remove this obstacle to capacity, as Greta points out:

[...] there has been lots of discussion about lowering the voting age to sixteen, which would in principle be a good idea. But then again if you don't have this kind of a mature opinion on the matter [of the vote], then it is a bit trickier question, like if you don't know how to familiarise yourself with and think about things properly.  
(Study 3, interview)

What is striking in young people's understanding of politics across our data is the persistent talk about capacity. While the political interest is there, many feel that they lack the capacity to understand and act in politics (see also Chapter 2). As Nora phrases it:

I think that people [in general] are interested [in politics]. But one of the biggest reasons [for not engaging with politics] is that somehow [the politicians'] way of talking is so difficult. Even for me, who is really into politics and knows quite a lot, it is sometimes really difficult to understand things. [Interviewer asks whether politicians make their talk difficult on purpose.] In my opinion, it is kind of on purpose. It is just that when you ask something they answer beating about the bush, since they pretend to know everything and are so wise, and they just explain everything in such a difficult way.

(Study 3, interview)

Nora, reflecting on the question of capacity from an insider position, still considers understanding politics as demanding. As an active participant in party politics, she is able to recognise and reflect critically on cultural practices that hinder young people's participation, like using complicated political vocabulary. Other barriers, which our research participants highlight, include both direct discrimination like physical inaccessibility or negative public attitudes towards specific minority groups, and more subtle exclusion, like lack of access to the right resources and capacities. Nina reflects on the obstacles disabled young people face when trying to fit into youth councils and other forums intended for young people:

All of these institutions that I just mentioned, they are totally inaccessible for disabled young people. The activities are non-accessible, requiring specific kinds of cognitive abilities and specific social abilities and specific kind of language and so ... quite impossible.

(Study 2, interview)

Many of our participants considered political participation as a sign of maturity and youth as a period when you develop your political understanding, skills and opinions. However, many also deplored the fact that even entering arenas designed for young people to participate requires mastery of the right kind of cultural code, without any opportunity to practice it first (see also Boldt 2021). Thus, our participants argued that interest is only a starting point to entering politics, after which there are still multiple barriers to tackle. This is something mainstream research on youth political participation does not properly recognise.

### **Moving between different arenas and forms of participation**

Scholars studying young people's societal participation and political engagement have often separated formal from informal participation (see the book's Introduction). The formal sphere is taken to refer to institutional practices which are specifically established to channel young people's voices and interest in policy processes and decision making. Informal participation is understood as less system-oriented and outside institutional processes, like grassroots organising, direct action, demonstrations and online mobilisation. While we see the importance of broadening the concept of political participation to capture this diverse range of activities (see also Bessant 2021), we still argue that these distinctions do not necessarily reflect how young people themselves experience their participation.

Even if they faced implicit or explicit structural barriers to institutional politics, some of our participants had fought their way into institutional arenas. Interestingly, in their narration, the line of division between political participation in everyday contexts and institutional politics gets rather blurred. It seems that some young people are able to move smoothly between the different spheres and sometimes accidentally find themselves engaged in institutional politics, as the next extract by Sonja shows:

I was around 14 years old when I went to this event [organised by disability organisation] all by myself and it felt important because suddenly I realised I was no longer the child passively participating, but in a way I was “the adult” who could act as a role model for others [...] Quite soon after those experiences I became a member of different youth organisations.

(Study 2, interview)

Sara, who otherwise spoke about school mostly in a negative tone, reflects her role as vice-chairperson of a student association as a positive, even encouraging experience:

I really liked to organise different nice things [...] For example on All Saint's Day we [the whole school] bought candles and took them to the graves next to

our school. So we were able to mobilise the whole school. And then we organised basic things such as a sports day, and on Valentine's Day we shared some candy [...] I really liked being in the association. The chairperson asked me to join, and I went along and then I joined the activities. I was there one year, and I really relished it.

(Study 1, interview)

As Sonja's comment illustrates, some participants narrated their paths as a natural development through peer groups to membership in youth organisations. Similarly, in Sara's account, what started out as "organising nice things" on a school level becomes mobilising the whole school, leading to a membership in the school student association and involvement in a student movement.

Despite having carved their way into institutional politics, these young people were not downplaying their personal feelings of misfitting and criticism of barriers to participation. They not only called for specific support to enable marginalised young people to participate, but also reflected on the unintended consequences of being included as representatives of their (minority) group. Even when they had proved themselves as capable political actors in general, the decision-making adults continued to assume that they could only represent one narrow issue or perspective at a time, whether based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity or disability. This kind of thinking strengthens stereotypical expectations concerning the groups and their interests. Julius, a young disability activist, points this out:

People aren't used to seeing disabled people in such roles. And if they are, they always think it is disability that we want to talk about. But I have always wanted to talk about other issues too. Disability politics is of course important, but it is not the only one.

(Study 2, interview)

Many disability studies scholars have analysed how society and its institutions treat disability as a master status, leaving little or no room for disabled people to sustain their multiple and intersectional identities (Shah & Priestley 2011, 152). Despite well-meaning intentions, participatory practices that revolve around a single-issue representation might end up reinforcing disability as a master status.

In the following extract, Daniel, who took the civics course run by a multicultural NGO, argues that simplifying categorisations like "multicultural youth" fail to grasp the heterogeneity of young people, their social positionings and political interests:

The thing is that as this is a societal course and we discuss societal issues, so we too, when we are gathered from different places [...] in my opinion, we are also a mini society here. Some people find talking about some topics intimidating but at the same time others don't and really want to talk about them a lot.

(Study 3, interview)

In the interview, Daniel discussed at length the course participants' differences of opinion. For him, these differences were more telling about the participants' social and political positionings than their assumed "multiculturalism" (see Ronkainen 2009).

### **Demanding yet playful politics**

As pointed out above, many young people in our data see institutional politics as an arena that requires a certain kind of agency and capacity which, in their own understanding, they might lack. Still, they see political participation not only as tempting but necessary for representative democracy; they are preoccupied with the question how well decision makers from older generations are able to understand (or not) the current realities of young people's lives. This generational gap and its impact on democracy in institutional politics is raised by Nora:

In the last parliament there was one [parliament member who was] under 30 and then someone who was 27 [...] Our life situations are so different and the stuff in my life is just not so interesting, because the people there, they are old, and they are promoting things important to them, and they get all the votes, since it's the middle-aged people who are the active voters.

(Study 3, interview)

In the data, some young people ponder the question of how well political representation works from perspectives other than age. For example, we noticed how the young women participating in Study 3 talked about middle-aged male politicians dominating the (then active) discussion on declining birth rates in Finland. For these young women, this topic felt highly personal, to do with their bodies and very private choices about the course of their lives. They paid particular attention to how the debate was framed in public as a national concern. This framing resonated badly with their perspective on their own futures, which included grieving over issues that were completely absent in the male-dominated discourse, like climate change and global overpopulation. For these young women, the discussion on birth rates and how it is framed was a highly political issue.

While our research participants criticised practices where their political interests were reduced to their background, their specific position and experiences motivated many to engage in politics. Some explained feeling that they needed to take part: if they did not make noise, who would defend their interests? This necessity drove them to attempt to take part, even while they remained sceptical about how much difference young people can make when they are not recognised as relevant political agents (Suni & Mietola 2021). For example, Viivi's political interests and need to influence were motivated by her personal experiences of using social support services and her worry about the future availability of these services (Mölkänen & Honkatukia 2022):

And even in that outreach youth work [...] my counsellor had to quit in the middle of things because the project funding had ended. And then they told me that this came so suddenly and that they did not even know themselves. This is the bad side, that there are no stable jobs but just some funding. I think that those are such good services, that they should be made into more secure jobs for people who do that kind of work.

(Study 1, interview)

Besides taking participation as a necessity, many of our research participants also saw it as potentially playful and fun (for a similar observation, see Chapter 10). This sentiment is reflected in the following extract from fieldnotes on the civics course:

We are sitting in an auditorium where the group has just met two very distinguished Finnish journalists to discuss how the media works and how it is changing. After the discussion some of the young people gather together in one end of the benches to chat. They start from the ongoing public debate concerning the seating order of the parliament with the young people trying to figure out what elements in the parties made them more right-wing or left-wing, and how many parties actually have multiple agendas when looked at closely – for example the Swedish People’s Party of Finland causes lots of talk where many find them attractive due to their stand in human rights and immigration. Soon the discussion moves to the upcoming election, and many of the young people tell their results on the election candidate selector they did online before the elections. Frida says that the candidate selector gave them male candidates from the liberal conservative National Coalition Party, and the Centre Party, an agrarian party. As Nora tells the others that she got the Green Party and Feminist Party, Frida bursts out that they too thought that those were their parties and continues: “but then I started to read the party programmes and I was like wait! Am I not a lovely green-and-red, a watermelon?”

(Study 3, fieldnotes)

This extract is quite typical for our ethnographic study where the young participants kept having these kinds of informal discussions in between the activities. They seemed to enjoy talking about party politics, particularly the differences between parties and how these resonated with their personal views and aims. There was a certain lightness and joyfulness in these discussions, especially when compared to the situations where young people discussed societal problems from their personal experience.

Considering arguments that party politics is alienating for young people (Harris, Wyn & Yunes 2010; Henn, Weinstein & Forrest 2005), this enjoyment is interesting. Formal politics seemed to constitute a natural part of these participants’ lives. They followed it daily through various media, as illustrated in this fieldnote extract:



Nora stands in the middle of the room, fiddling with her phone, and says out loud “Li Andersson [minister of education] was so great today”, referring to a panel discussion that Nora had followed earlier on. “She’s the best minister of education there is”, she continues and repeats many times that “she listens to young people”. When I ask Nora what she means she explains that Li understands young people as she has lived a normal youth and drunk alcohol, to which Amalia laughs and asks, “she understands because she has drunk alcohol?” Someone comments that maybe other people have had a similar youth but haven’t just brought it up. Jade tells others she has started to follow a female politician of the National Coalition Party on Instagram “because she has such a nice feed”. Everybody laughs and people gather around Jade who shows pictures that the female politician has shared. In one picture she stands in front of an empty vegan dessert shelf. According to Jade, the politician had shared Jade’s post. “She acts like a young person on Insta [Instagram], begging for likes” and “please like my posts”.

(Study 3, fieldnotes)

The young women above are explaining to each other (and to the middle-aged researcher) their media usage and motives for following particular politicians on social media. It seems that a key reason for them to keep tracking a politician is their relatability, whether they feel that the politician understands young people’s lives or perform well on social media. This is intriguingly contrary to the way politicians’ obscure language was commented on earlier. Based on our data, it is possible to conclude that for young people, not all political topics and politicians are automatically distant and unrelatable. Much depends on whether the politicians discuss topics relevant to young people, and in what style.

While many young people engage with politics, it is crucial to note that it does not remove the participation barriers that they regularly experience. In the discussions with our research participants, it became clear that mastering political procedures and content is not the biggest challenge. Rather, the young people highlighted challenges related to societal atmosphere. For them, being politically active simultaneously meant exposing oneself to hate speech, harsh criticism and unsafe environments, both physical and virtual. Some had negative personal experiences of expressing their political aspirations and views when they were dismissed or even harassed.

Safety of political participation was repeatedly raised by the young people, occasionally also in a positive light. In both the civics course and the campaign group (Study 4), participants openly addressed how those environments provided them space to share, bond and discuss matters which they usually did not feel safe doing in public. In their feedback to the organisers, participants found discussions with their peers the most important outcome of the activities. Moreover, both projects provided participants new networks that they could later potentially use to organise politically. Our interpretation is that both safe space and new social networks are especially valuable for young people who are in a more insecure and

challenged position than young members of the majority population (see Mietola et al., 2021). Leisure activity groups, which are not focused on politics, can also provide safe space for fostering affective solidarity (see Krivonos 2016; Suni & Mietola 2021) and relationships that are essential for forming political agency (Kennelly 2009).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed how young people, especially those in marginalised and minority positions, understand political participation, and how they talk about their own relationship to politics in terms of possibilities, motivation and barriers. Our research data show that for most young people, politics continues to signify decision making in formal democratic institutions. According to this conception, participating in official politics requires specific knowledge and skills that young people usually lack. Still a clear majority of our research participants expressed interest in politics and the desire to take part. Some research participants had found their way into institutional arenas, but not without reflective criticism. A lot of barriers to participation were highlighted, yet they had not prevented young people from engaging in political debates and activities on some level and in some arenas, especially when they had been offered meaningful opportunities and safe space to do so.

While many of our research participants had experienced obstacles to their participation, the data are also filled with episodes and expressions of affective and joyful engagement. As recent research has begun to understand, affective aspects are an essential (if not definitive) aspect of political participation (e.g., Krivonos 2016; Eliasoph 2011). There are many reasons for this, like the fact that positive affect is important for fostering and sustaining political interest and engagement – and vice versa. For example, intimidating affects may drive young people completely out of politics (Kennelly 2009). Our research participants referred repeatedly to such fears and experiences when they emphasised that they felt participation unsafe in the contemporary political climate. For some, such concerns constructed a major obstacle to public self-expression and political participation.

So, contrary to the commonplace discourse, “decline” in political participation cannot be resolved by raising young people’s interest or “activating” them. We would argue, alongside many other youth researchers, that the diagnosis of apathy has failed (e.g., Bessant 2021; Farthing 2010). When young people interested in politics face multiple structural and cultural barriers, considering only their actual participation is highly problematic. Instead, young people’s participation might be lower due to limited resources or due to exclusive participatory structures and practices. This is also to say that politics is not a separate reality from the rest of society. Gert Biesta (2011) uses the phrase “actual condition of citizenship” to describe the process by which children and young people build understanding about their position and opportunities in everyday encounters with society. To understand differences in political participation, it is necessary to examine the processes through

which young people experience themselves as capable political agents and politics as meaningful (Martikainen 2021).

However, we would caution researchers against prioritising everyday contexts and participation outside of institutional politics. While widening the definition of political participation allows us to recognise the variety of ways in which young people nowadays engage in society, we do not find this definitional turn entirely unproblematic. First, it might further sharpen the division between institutional and non-institutional politics, which is counterfactual to the evidence of our data (see also Kiilakoski & Gretschel 2014). Second, when the focus moves away from institutional politics to non-institutionalised action, the structural obstacles to young people's societal participation remain. This can hardly be the desired goal.

To conclude, while young people's creative ways of engaging with societal issues should indeed be celebrated, we must not leave the inclusive or exclusive characteristics of political institutions unaccounted for. Since formal modes of participation enjoy a special role in participatory democracies, scholars should interrogate whether they are equally welcoming to all young people. If we merely accept that young people's interests and means of participation lie "elsewhere", there is no incentive to make democratic structures and practices more accessible and inviting. This reinforces the idea that only those young people who already "feel at home" in the social world of formal politics should occupy those places (Bäcklund & Kallio 2012), which excludes others, such as young people coming from marginalised or minority positions.

## Note

- 1 All mentioned names are pseudonyms, and the authors have translated citations from Finnish.

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# Young people's climate activism on the move

## Case Finland

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### Introduction

Young people in Finland are increasingly concerned about the climate crisis (Myllyniemi & Kiilakoski 2019; Piispa & Myllyniemi 2019). This has been highlighted by the strong voice of young climate activists who have demanded that decision makers hear what they have to say about the crisis. The climate issue has an obvious generational nature, as also argued in Chapter 3. Young people will experience the severe consequences of global warming in their lifetimes if humanity fails to tackle the crisis in a sustainable manner. In their view, there is no time to wait for young people to come to power themselves. Therefore, they expect rapid climate measures.

Recently, there has also been an interest in looking for more positive tones in the discussion and seeing how society can be made more just when responding to the crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified this situation and stimulated reflections on a more ecologically sustainable world (Gills 2020). At the same time, it has become increasingly clear that civil society agents, with young people at the forefront, are demanding rapid policy decisions and actions to address the climate crisis (Holmberg & Alvinus 2020).

In this chapter,<sup>1</sup> we discuss the impact of the youth climate movement in Finland on climate-related societal debate and decision making and describe how this debate, in turn, has motivated young people to take action. We also analyse the activities of the youth climate movement and the impact of these activities as seen by the young activists.

### Climate activism of young people as a social movement

The climate movement of the young has gained a lot of media attention and has also been studied by youth researchers and other scholars. According to a recent literature review of climate movement research, the themes studied include the composition of the young activists' groups, how young people come to climate activism, the outcomes of activism, how young people understand climate change, how they are acting on climate change and how they are represented in the media

(Neas et al., 2022). Our chapter analyses how young people act on climate change and their motivation to engage in public debate. We are also interested in how activism is connected to wider societal debates and how these debates have shaped young people's activism.

According to Rasimus (2006, 58), a social movement is an organised effort for change (or resistance to change) in a certain sector of society, supported by a significant number of people. Movements are a form of collective action that is value-based and uninstitutional. Social movements use framing strategies to articulate alternative descriptions or frameworks of developments that impact society (Zaman 2018). For example, the climate movement of young people criticises the current eco-social order and utilises climate science, as well as the debate on ecological reconstruction, in its alternative framework (Piispa, Ojajärvi & Kiilakoski 2020).

An important basis for motivation is the perceived failure of older generations to respond to the most urgent problems young generations will face. Looking at the climate movement from a narrative perspective, Han and Ahn (2020) point out that the central backbone of the climate movement and a kind of hero of the story is the science that describes the severity of the climate crisis. The villains of the story, in turn, are the incapacitated decision makers and the fossil industry as well as, in a collective sense, previous generations. The core message of young people is that climate change must be treated as a crisis that requires urgent and fair solutions. In the past, climate justice has been a key requirement for the climate and environmental movement and at the same time a unifying factor (Brulle & Norgaard 2019; Piispa & Kiilakoski 2021).

Research on the youth movement has distinguished between activities that are youth-led, entirely youth-generated, adult-owned or intergenerational (Bertuzzi 2019, 1558). In the 2010s, before the emergence of the climate movement, youth activism was already considered to be the young people's own social movement (Laine 2012). One of the explanations offered for the rapid occurrence of the new climate movement has been the emotional burden on the young caused by climate change. According to the Finnish Youth Barometer, published in 2020 (Myllyniemi & Kiilakoski 2019), 67% of young people in Finland experienced either very much or fairly much concern or uncertainty about climate change. This theme worried young people the most, and its share was higher than ever. The importance of climate for young people has been highlighted in international surveys (Flash Eurobarometer 2018; Hickman et al., 2021). Moreover, and interestingly, according to the Barometer, young people's interest in influencing society has increased. Young people who are concerned about the climate crisis are also more likely to be active societal actors than their peers. Personal emotions are connected to activism in indirect ways. Taking action provides a means of relieving the anxiety and hopelessness caused by the climate crisis (Nairn 2019). However, optimism is not necessary, as many climate activists feel obligated to act anyway (Cassegård & Thörn 2018).

Studies show that the new climate movement is youth-led and even youth-generated. Han and Ahn (2020) stated that one of the key achievements of the

climate movement has been to engage young people around the world. A study by Wahlström and others (2019) on Fridays for Future protests among young people in Europe in spring 2019 analysed the social composition, mobilisation and motivational factors of the climate movement. The analysis revealed that young school-children participated in the protests largely with, and encouraged by, their peers. Also central was the observation that many first-timers were involved in the protests, indicating that a new generation of activists are joining in the environmental and climate movements. It is estimated, for example, that at least 6,000,000 people took part in the global climate demonstrations in September 2019 (Taylor, Watts & Bartlett 2019), including a total of 20,000 people across Finland. Of course, not all the protesters were young. Some scholars have spoken of a special planetary moment (Milstein, McGaurr & Lester 2020; Szolucha 2020) in which forms of new and old climate activism operate in mutually beneficial political situations.

### **Research design, material and methods**

Climate activism is more than a protest; it is an effort to build the world of the future. In public, the message of young people is often reduced to “listen to the science”, but in reality, there are many other requirements for eco-social transformation in the demands and aspirations of young people (Bowman 2019; Holmberg & Alvinus 2020). In our research, we start from the premise that youth political climate action seeks to influence society and politics on a broad scale, not just through the obvious demands of climate goals. Thus, we need to look at the trajectory of the movement and its implications for the climate policy debate in recent years.

Our research questions are as follows: (1) regarding the relationship of young people to the climate debate, what impact have young people had on the debate, what has been their role in it and how has it motivated young people to take action? (2) What forms of activities have young people taken in the climate movement? How successful have these activities been according to the young who are involved?

The debate on climate emerged quickly and extensively in the Finnish media in 2019 (Lyytimäki 2020). However, there is a need to look more closely at how the climate debate has changed and how young people have contributed to it. In this context, the climate debate refers not only to the public debate on the climate crisis but, more broadly, to the political space and the field of deliberative democracy. Through the research questions, we look at the factors that unite the climate movement and the different orientations of young people. Their motivations are not the same, and their choice of means, political styles, democratic influence and social ideals differ. There is, however, a dynamic or dialectical relationship between the factors that unite and differentiate young people.

The material for the study was collected in the “Utopias of young people in the age of climate change” (NUTOPIA) project, funded by the Finnish Association for the Celebration of Independence (SITRA). The project was launched in early February 2020, and the material was gathered until July 2020. Our primary data consist of 18 individual interviews. Prior to the COVID-19 lockdown period,



interviews were conducted face-to-face and after that using digital tools. Our secondary data are based on multi-sited ethnographic data. Young activists were observed in the situations and environments in which they were actively operating (i.e., in climate-related events, demonstrations and so on). Due to the exceptional situation caused by the pandemic, ethnography has been carried out online since March 2020 using the methods of so-called netnography (Kozinets 2015).

Interviews were conducted during February–June 2020. The interviewees were, on average, approximately 23 years old at the time of the interviews. Young people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and from different positions within and around the climate movement all over Finland were recruited. Climate activism has been found to focus on (assumed) women/girls (Wahlström et al., 2019), a finding which was corroborated in our study with only six of the interviewees being (assumed) men/boys. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The average duration of the interviews was 120 minutes. The analysis of the interviews was based on thematic content analysis.

The collection of research data was well underway when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Finland. The pandemic caused widespread social disruption, which also affected the data collection and social framework of this research project. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis diverted attention from other issues on the agenda and shook the sphere of democratic politics, including climate activism. As the crisis has gradually waned, however, youth climate activism has strongly reappeared on public agenda, for example, in Finland through the recurring actions and public performances of the Extinction Rebellion movement.

In this chapter, we use the concepts of activism and climate activism, although we recognise that not all respondents share a climate activist identity and that not all consider the connotations of the activist concept appropriate for themselves. We follow the distinction presented by Stern (2000), who divides pro-environmental behaviour into environmental activism, nonactivist behaviour in public space, private-sphere environmentalism and other environmentally significant behaviour. Activism in this conception is a social activity that takes place in a public sphere and seeks to bring about change – or at least slow down climate change. We use the term climate activism because the climate perspective is a key entry point for political activity for the young people we interviewed. Climate activism, which we studied, is quite close to the definitions of environmental activism as organised participation in environmental issues expressed in specific activities that reflect a commitment to the environment channelled through formal settings (Marquart-Pyatt 2012, 684).

### **The climate debate flares up**

At the surface level, the change in how young people influenced environmental debate was rapid. Youth researchers Piispa and Myllyniemi (2019) wrote in the conclusions of their article, which was drafted during the autumn of 2018 and published in February 2019, the following: “[Y]oung people have not (at least not yet)

risen to the barricades for the sake of the climate”, and “it is therefore appropriate to ask whether young people are in a waiting mode, so to speak”. These sentences became obsolete within a couple of months when climate strikes and demonstrations started. This can be used as an illustrative example of how young people suddenly became active and how quickly the social space of action changed. However, if the authors had already been doing ethnographic research in the field when youth climate action was taking shape at the end of 2018, they might have noticed that something had begun to happen. A special report on global warming by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2018), published in early October 2018, awakened people around the world. The mobilisation of young people was also fuelled by the climate school strike “Skolstrejk för klimatet” started by the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg in August 2018.

Most of the young climate activists interviewed for this study cited autumn 2018 as an important turning point for their involvement in climate action. The IPCC report *Global Warming of 1.5°C* (2018), and the extensive news coverage associated with it gave rise to a sense of urgency. The relatively modest amount of news on climate rapidly increased, and from 2018 to 2019 in Finland, there was a lot of news coverage on climate change from both national and international perspectives (Lyytimäki 2020). The peak of the news on climate change in Finland was in March 2019, before the parliamentary elections were held in April.

Many interviewees said that the seriousness of the situation became more acute and concrete for them, causing concern and fear for their own futures. At the same time, young people felt strongly that the political system had been reckless towards future generations and that the older generations had betrayed them socioecologically (della Porta 2019). An interesting aspect of the mobilisation was that there was no obvious route for young people to become climate activists. Some of the young activists had been active in political parties or NGOs, but many had not. The spark for engaging in action arose through various arenas and social mechanisms. It is noteworthy, however, that this did not happen so much through traditional civil society organisations. Voluntary groups of young people, virtual spaces, civic movements, networked transnational encounters and arenas of civil disobedience have been important channels for getting organised or otherwise active.

The mobilisation of young people from different backgrounds on a broad front suggests that the social situation was favourable for the emergence of activism (Milstein, McGaurr & Lester 2020). The climate movement developed and intensified specifically at a certain social moment and in the atmosphere to which it responded. Therefore, addressing the social and political landscape and analysing the position of young people in this landscape are central to exploring why and how this particular movement emerged. It was influenced not only by the publication of the IPCC report and the much-publicised example provided by Greta Thunberg but also by many other factors, such as the record-breaking heat wave in Finland during the summer of 2018, international influences, the upcoming Finnish parliamentary elections and the inspiration of other young people becoming active.

At the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, young people either set up their own civic movements to address climate issues or were involved in bringing branches of international movements to Finland (e.g., Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion). In addition, individual events were held, such as the Youth Climate Summit (March 2, 2019). At the same time, the Youth Barometer (Pekkarinen & Myllyniemi 2019) was published, the results of which showed that young people's feelings of uncertainty and insecurity related to climate change were at record levels.

The parliamentary elections in Finland were held in April 2019. Climate change and coping with it became key themes of the election. The Greens and Left Alliance called for societal transformation, while the Finns Party, a populist party in Finland, talked about climate hysteria (Borg, Kestilä-Kekkonen & Wass 2020). The three most important themes for voters in 2019 were health care, employment and climate change. Among the voters, climate was most important for the supporters of the Greens, the Social Democratic Party and Left Alliance (Borg & Paloheimo 2020).

Prior to the mobilisation of the climate movement, young people's political apathy had been lamented by researchers and political decision makers for years, and political silence on climate issues was perhaps taken as the status quo, even though young people's climate concerns had been noted in research. The events of early 2019 prompted a rapid turnaround in which young people's views were suddenly pursued both in public and by decision-making cabinets. One young person interviewed for this study said they were asked for daily comments by the media, parties and ministries. Another interviewee confirmed this experience and even expressed surprise that politicians would come and ask young people for their views and opinions as if to quote them in election campaigns. Young people also faced a wide range of public disparagement, and school strikes, for example, were condemned on various grounds.

Young people helped create a network that raised the issue of climate on the public agenda. The activities of young people articulated climate-related concerns, connecting the emphasis on climate science with emotional expression (Piispa, Ojajärvi & Kiilakoski 2020). A political space of opportunity opened up, giving space to both young people's messages and the way they were expressed. The different ways and styles of "doing democracy" adopted by the movement helped spread the message. Thus, the climate movement, which is easily perceived as a generational phenomenon, has also acted as a stimulus for intergenerational activity.

In May 2019, a new government was formed in Finland. The written governmental programme even began with the word climate change: "Climate change, globalisation, urbanisation, the ageing of the population and technological development are all transforming Finland and the world perhaps faster than ever before" (Prime Minister's Office 2019). The respondents of our study felt that this would hardly have happened without the political pressure of the youth climate movement.

After the formation of the cabinet, there was momentary optimism among young activists. Some of those interviewed said how the government programme briefly made them feel like this was it, “we did what we had to do”. When the significance of Finland’s six-month EU presidency in 2019 finally turned out to be weaker in its accomplishments than expected and, for example, the promised climate summit did not materialise, and when concrete decisions to reduce carbon emissions were delayed, disappointment and frustration began to spread among young people. Some of the interviewed activists were still hopeful, while others commented on the situation in the spirit of “if not even this government, then who?”.

However, the climate movement continued. At the end of February 2020, just before the Finnish government’s declaration of the COVID-19 emergency, we recorded in our research diary that “the situation has changed a lot from, for example, a couple of years ago”. Climate events or actions, often organised by young people themselves, could be encountered almost daily. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and Finland, however, pushed the climate crisis into the background of public debate and political airspace, and the state of emergency narrowed the scope for democratic influence. In March 2020, protests linked to the international climate strike were cancelled, and protests moved online. On social media, including Twitter, young people around the world gathered under the hashtags #climatestrikeonline and #digitalstrike, among others, sharing pictures of themselves with protest signs. During the spring 2020, means of the movement expanded, and creative action was taken, for example, against the Finnish energy company Fortum, which opened the new Datteln 4 coal-fired power plant in Germany. Climate letters were sent to members of parliament, and webinars and discussion events were held online. As the initial shock of the pandemic began to ease, outdoor demonstrations slowly resumed on a small scale. Yet, the streets fell silent, and casual citizens no longer ran into climate protests in the same way as they did before the pandemic. The echo chambers of social media were probably even more closed than before because of the dominance of the COVID-19 issue, and climate activism and discourse did not hold the same public visibility as they did before the pandemic.

In addition to influencing the media through publicity, it is essential for the climate movement to have a peer impact and to expand and develop climate issues through publicity. One of the interviewees talked about the “undertone of incon-solability” among young people regarding climate and the future. Frustration and the experience of being deceived by decision makers have been seen as societal reactions that fuel youth activism (della Porta 2019). Our early research memoir from the period just before the COVID-19 emergency raised key questions about the relationship between the peer group dimension and climate action: “Events would often seem to be fun as well. [...] After that, we network, get to know each other and talk. What if it’s not nice anymore? Or on the other hand: is it good to have fun?” The question of whether activism is or should be nice returned to the social context of action (see Chapter 10 for a discussion on this in another research

context). At the same time, however, the activists of the movement were deeply aware of the seriousness and urgency of the climate crisis and of the disappointing generational policy. In the future, this may be more pronounced in the forms of action. For example, from autumn 2020 to spring 2022, protests utilising civil disobedience, hunger strikes and street demonstrations made headlines, which partly abandoned the conflict-avoidance and even technical style of Finnish civil society activities (Luhtakallio 2019, 1162).

### **The impact of youth on the climate debate**

Young people have participated in the climate policy debate in ways and in spaces, which they have obviously not been given freely. For example, climate school strikes are a powerful way of destabilising young people's share of the existing social contract. By refusing to participate in the activities of an educational institution, young people question the future orientation of society, or at least emphasise the primacy of planetary threats. Part of the movement has used the means of counter-democracy, in which distrust of the political system's ability to function is channelled into political activity that seeks to influence the functioning of the system from the outside (Rosanvallon 2008). The action has manifested in demonstrations, other actions, strikes and social media activism, but also as communication about traditional media and representative democracy. In addition to working outside the political system, young people collaborated, for example, by participating in various official hearings and discussions.

The action of young people and its strong publicity provided opportunities for them to participate in political planning with politicians and officials. A prominent example of such an opportunity is the round table discussion convened by three government ministers in November 2019. However, the mere right to speak and be present or to be able to articulate one's own views is not enough. The young people interviewed were critical of the idea that young people are now "included" or "involved" in the debate. It is not enough if young people are consulted only for the sake of consultation, as "mascots" or "quota young people". The most critical issue is whether young people's concerns and demands translate into political action.

Despite their frustration, young people have brought new dimensions to the climate debate. According to many interviewees, the key contribution of young people has been to emphasise urgency. At the same time, they have brought more values and feelings into the discussion than before (Piispa, Ojajärvi & Kiilakoski 2020). These effects are significant, as climate debates have traditionally been arenas for experts and politicians who discuss facts and technical-rational issues. This can be summed up in a situation in which a researcher or other expert explains, on a factual basis, the consequences of not curbing global warming to 1.5°C, while the young person points out that we have a moral and existential duty to curb global warming to 1.5°C and that we must act immediately. Young people have also made their feelings of fear, anxiety and hopelessness visible, which in turn has taken the

climate debate to new heights and forced political actors to take a stand. Young people have not only supported the framework of experts but also have added moral and emotional dimensions to it. Although the movement itself can be seen as being self-regulated, it is highly influenced by environmental science.

Framing young people only as emotional mediators can also be problematic. Many interviewees reported frustrating experiences in which a young person is taken to have been “heard” (by decision makers) by just being asked if they are “anxious” or “how they feel”. In these cases, there is a high risk that the young person will only be involved as a mannequin for an individual’s anxiety so that adults can then continue the “serious” discussion. Another common pitfall in supposedly involving young people in climate debates is that young people are reduced to the position of consumer citizens. They are asked, for example, about diet or flying, while the rest of the discussion is done by adults at the policy and system levels. Young climate activists are reluctant to submit to this role of quota youth or “experience expert” and would prefer to assume the role of an active player in climate debate and policy. As our interviews highlighted, deeper participatory processes emerged when young people were given the opportunity to influence the terms of the discussion. The young people’s own agency came to the fore, especially at events organised by the young people themselves. The importance of ownership was often repeated in the interviews.

One of the main goals of the climate movement is to pay attention to scientific information and demand stricter climate policies based on it. This was mentioned in numerous interviews. Although the requirements, contents and theoretical considerations of the climate movement are not limited to this, listening to science in public has perhaps been the movement’s most demonstrated message. In any case, young people have been able to articulate and publicise scientific knowledge about the climate crisis and bring it to the fore.

The youth climate movement both popularised scientific vocabulary and helped establish a new vocabulary for public debate. These include, for example, “climate strike”, “climate emergency”, “carbon neutrality”, “ecological reconstruction” and so on. In the interviews, many young people stated that their goals were largely linked to their ability to communicate and that they master the things they communicate. This was illustrated by how climate activism captured the space for societal debate in spring 2019. It should also be noted that young people have influenced climate issues on several different fronts and through a variety of means. We can therefore ask what kind of mobilisations and activities and which actors actually fit under the umbrella of the “climate movement”?

### **What climate movement?**

There was a lot of talk in the interviews about whether there is such a phenomenon as a climate movement, and if there is, who belongs to it. While many identified themselves as climate activists and part of the climate movement, others identified themselves as being on the fringes and some found their relationship to be

ambivalent. This was due, for example, to the fact that the movement was perceived to be personified or limited to a certain type of youth or a certain kind of activism, in which case, it was not necessarily perceived as one's own.

Climate movement is a global phenomenon under which various groupings have gained a prominent foothold in Finland. The branches that landed in Finland include Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future. Among the domestic manifestations under the umbrella of the movement are, for example, "Ilmastoveivi" ("Climate Wave") and "Suomanifesti" ("Marsh Manifesto"), as well as many climate groups operating in connection with established environmental organisations. The movement includes many youth-generated and youth-led activities. Still, not all climate movements are organised or founded by young people alone, and groupings have different histories, practices and ideas about social change, connections to institutional power and so on. The interviews showed that, in general, all movements are linked by a few clear demands, such as curbing the climate crisis, limiting global warming to 1.5°C and making a socially just and controlled transition (Piispa & Kiilakoski 2021) to carbon neutrality and carbon negativity. These shared goals were seen as an advantage because they made it easy to work together.

International research has shown on many occasions that, despite the goals shared at the general level, there are major differences within the movement regarding what kind of social change is required by different groups and actors (Brulle & Norgaard 2019). Simply put, these approaches can be divided into moderate ones, those emphasising sustainable development and those pushing for more radical systemic change. Interviewees also perceived the strength of the broad internal variance of the movement to encompass a lower threshold for participation regardless of, for example, age, other socio-demographic background factors, political views, prior knowledge or preferred behaviours (see also Gunningham 2019). Under the climate movement, there is a wide range of activities, from influencing the government to climate strikes and promoting a culture of debate to non-violent civil disobedience. In this way, anyone involved in the movement has their own fraction or ecological compartment from which to influence the debate and climate policy. Or one can set up one's own action group or be identified outside the climate movement yet share its key goals. In this way, a shared movement and goal can have different expressions appropriate to an individual's identity and lifestyle; it is a loose coalition on many fronts, with multiple flags.

It is also useful to look at the differences and similarities between the climate movement and previous environmental and civil movements (see also Szolucha 2020). In the interviews we conducted, it was pointed out on several occasions that the current movement is, according to activists, "something else" compared to the past. In our discussion, we relied on the interviewees' own views of their actions. It is noteworthy that activists do not describe the paths from previous movements to the new ones or consciously adopt their means of action from the history of activism. Through more detailed research, it would be possible to consider whether the image of the "new movement" produced in the narratives of the interviews is correct, but for us, the essential point is that young people themselves perceive

the movement as something new. We stated earlier that the movement originated and developed in a certain favourable historical or planetary situation that was not “empty” as a result of previous movements, but which, nevertheless, appeared exceptional and perhaps was something new.

Furthermore, we cannot assume that young activists would know and recognise all the traditions of previous movements. For example, it has been observed internationally that a significant proportion of participants in climate strikes in recent years are first-timers (Wahlström et al., 2019). Instead of traditions, the participation of young people is determined by a sense of urgency, which in a way also drives participation here and now, without thinking about what a tradition is or whether it should be drawn from. It can already be considered an interesting observation that young activists do not raise the actors or practices of the previous climate or environmental movement as a benchmark against which to reflect on their own activities.

A key distinguishing factor mentioned in several interviews was that the activists were trying to protect their own lives and the lives and futures of their descendants, not something outside themselves. Their starting point is anthropocentric climate concern. It is not nature that is sought to be protected as much as sheltering humankind from itself while at the same time protecting nature from man-made destruction. The efforts of the movement are thus at the level of existential survival and preservation.

Under the umbrella of the climate movement, there is a wide range of ways to act and make a political impact. Even shared experiences lead to different reactions in different people and groups. The diverse reactions also appear as variations in political activity. The movement can be understood as a social continuum, within which one can act both inside the political system, take part in civil disobedience and become active in many other arenas of democracy. Such different career paths for activism are also familiar based on the history of previous civil movements.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has probed into the climate activism and movement of young people through ethnographic research and interview material. Attention has been drawn to the recent increase in climate action, which started around the turn of 2018–2019. We have broken down the political activism of young climate activists, how the movement and its members operate in the various fields of democracy and the effects of the movement on the climate debate. The results show that the starting point shared by the movement is the impact of climate science and the reports that demonstrate it, the disappointment with climate policy and the need for an urgent response. The young people surveyed share an existential experience of socio-ecological concern and generational political disappointment. The action logic of climate activism combines action in traditional forums, using counter-democracy through demonstrations, and participation in public debate in political deliberative arenas (e.g., hearings) as well as in social and face-to-face social interactions. In



addition to the sense of urgency and political demands, they have brought into the debate values and feelings, the experience that the climate crisis is frightening and that it is a concrete threat to people.

The young people interviewed felt that their voices had been heard to some extent. However, the fact that young people are consulted does not mean that they are really listened to or that their demands are taken into account in political decisions. This is also reflected in the role that young people are prone to inhabit in the debate; the terms “mascot” and “quota youth” were mentioned several times in the interviews. Where the threat images of the climate crisis may have, in the past, been a kind of “elephant in the room” that people were aware of but were unwilling to talk about out loud, the elephant has now been replaced by a “young person in the seminar room”. According to our interpretation, the existence of this young sufferer is recognised and the concerns associated with climate change are reflected and embodied in them, although they may not be shared or genuinely confronted.

The climate movement of young people is defined and owned by today’s young people. The movement communicates intergenerationally and participates in an age-independent social debate. Therefore, it cannot be reduced to just a youth cultural movement. The climate movement has strongly relied on scientific knowledge. In the rhetoric of the climate movement, the heroes of the story are scientists, at least in providing information about the climate crisis and suggesting solutions to it (Han & Ahn 2020). In this context, it is probably worth asking whether scientists should also take on the heroic cloak as active citizens. In the debate and research on youth, the idea of how to “make the voice of young people heard” through research, by other adults and by their institutions has long been alive. The climate movement of young people has reversed these roles. Now, young people are the ones who make the voices of science and research heard. Science provides a backbone for the demands of young people, but it also bridges societal debates.

Our research data show that climate activists are given hope by “what they see around them”, other young people, the shared movement and its power. This probably also means that we have only just seen the beginning of the movement and that key struggles still loom ahead. It is also a possibility that activists will experience ever-increasing frustration in the face of slowly advancing climate measures and can thus resort to even more radical means of action.

## Note

- 1 An earlier, abbreviated version of this chapter was originally published in Finnish, as: “Mikä ilmastoilike? Nuorten ilmastoaktivistien poliittinen toimijuus ja ilmastokeskustelut”. In: *Nuorisotutkimus* 39(2): 8–26.

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## Part III

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# To be(come) seen and heard

## But how and how to study it?

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### Introduction

In the Playback Theatre performance, one of the attending young men tells the story of a friend of his, a young man who had come to Finland as an asylum seeker and lived in a reception centre. The guy had smoked in his room, at which point the fire alarm on the ceiling went on, howling loudly and flashing a red light. The man got frightened and thought the alarm was a surveillance camera. Will the police arrest him now and send him back to his homeland? The man had thrown a shoe at the alarm, and when it had dropped to the floor, he grabbed it and tried to hide it under the bed blankets.

(An excerpt from the volume “Tutkien ja tarinoiden”, edited by Tiina Rättilä and Päivi Honkatukia, which discusses refugee youths’ lives in Finnish society)

We, the researchers, the youth workers and the young people, who were present in the above Playback Theatre performance, will most likely never forget the experience. In a memorable way, the young man who told the story laughed so hard that he almost dropped from the couch to the floor. We, too, laughed, but only for a moment. Laughter was soon followed by an emotional reaction, grief and troubling questions: what had really happened to the young man in the story? What kind of horrors had he experienced in his home country, on the escape journey and when he came to Finland? How will he manage, and will he be accepted into Finnish society? We were also compelled to ask whether we, as researchers, would ever be able to truly understand the stories and experiences of these young people who have had such a hard life. How can we make their stories visible so that their experiences, worries and wishes can be seen, heard and addressed by society?

This section intersects with the theme of the previous one, which looks at how young people, especially those from marginalised positions, are talked about in their relationship to society. It resumes the discussion but adds an inspirational methodological dimension to it. Three of the chapters focus on research processes among and with young adults with a refugee background and one on research among and with students in diverse educational institutions. In the section’s

discussions, substantive questions, such as how young people perceive their involvement in society and what kinds of hopes and concerns they have for the future, are closely entwined with self-reflective methodological queries. The chapters describe how science meets art and other creative methods in ALL-YOUTH's explorative research processes, how they went (not always smoothly), how the research partners experienced the collaboration and what kinds of knowledge were co-created. The experiments were significant learning experiences for both the researchers and research partners. Together, they learned to challenge the ways research is usually conducted by a distant researcher, who disappears from the field after having finished the data collection and will never be heard from again. The researchers also picked up difficult but important lessons about engaging in participatory research, which aims to build on equal and fair research relationships between researchers and participants but that can occasionally turn out very differently. Furthermore, researchers became increasingly aware of the complex affective and relational dimensions that their encounters with the research participants entailed, which resisted being put in words (and, therefore, conceptualised knowledge) in any simple way.

Chapter 8 describes three participatory research processes carried out in ALL-YOUTH, which involved young refugee women and men as co-researchers. It opens critically and self-reflectively the methodological underpinnings, research styles and experiences of these research collaborations. In their discussion, the authors, Nina Tokola, Tiina Rättilä, Päivi Honkatukia, Fath E Mubeen and Olli Sillanpää, respond to two types of criticism that have been expressed in youth research towards participatory research methods: that, despite all efforts, participatory studies tend to remain adult-centred and that participatory methods are still often uncritically and naively seen to give access to authentic realities of youth. While acknowledging both arguments as useful points for critical reflection, the authors see great potential in the practices of knowledge co-construction. By collectively reflecting their experiences and collaboration with young refugee people, they wish to contribute to the ongoing lively discussion on participatory methodologies within youth research. Moreover, based on the idea presented in the book's Introduction, according to which research collaboration can be considered as a type of societal participation, the chapter scrutinises what kind of potential participation in a co-research process can have for promoting the sustainable well-being of young people. The authors end up defending participatory and co-research methodologies with young people but with a strong commitment to researcher reflexivity and willingness to involve young co-researchers' views in evaluating the research process.

Chapter 9 recounts and critically reflects on a research process carried out as a cooperative effort between researchers, young men with a refugee background, a local NGO and arts professionals. The aim was to explore young refugee men's views and experiences of belonging to Finnish society. Mixing in their methodology elements from co-research and arts-based methods of storytelling, the

research group set out to carefully listen to the life stories of the young refugee men and engage in experiments that were hoped to increase their sense of belonging to society. The discussion of the chapter is structured around four accounts of what happened in the process in terms of knowledge construction. The authors, Tiina Rättilä, Minna Hokkanen and Olli Sillanpää, make use of ideas from critical epistemology, distinguishing knowledge from knowing and arguing that the former concept is too static to grasp the dynamic process of knowledge production in a context that is defined by creative participatory methods and an open, undefined research process. In this type of research constellation, what is being epistemically generated is not necessarily a specifiable body of knowledge but a constellation of different kinds of subjectively sensed, constructed and constantly evolving “knowings” that the participants endow with unique meanings and purposes.

Chapter 10 begins by observing that making sense of the future is a challenging task because it is entangled with social and power relations that deeply shape people’s images of it. Yet it is an important endeavour when we want to learn how young people imagine the future and contemplate how they can contribute to sustainable future horizons, which has been one of the main goals of the ALL-YOUTH project. In the chapter, the authors, Päivi Honkatukia, Susanna Ågren and Miia Lähde, describe how they engaged in these imaginings by working together with diverse youth groups in explorative and creative ways. The chapter discusses their fieldwork experiences, building on the idea of play and creative thinking as the key capacities that construct young people’s well-being and a sense of being valued in society. Their argument is that play and humour can be very useful when dealing with difficult and frightening scenarios about the future. The authors describe how they have utilised participatory methods, such as World Cafés, collage creation and theatre-based methods, to create a supportive atmosphere and give space for imagination and playfulness as a comfortable way for young people to participate and question the adult-centred understanding of society or the future. The authors also encourage other researchers to be more courageous, yet also reflexive, in giving young people opportunities to participate in research processes in funny, playful and humorous ways.

Chapter 11 discusses an exceptional research project using documentary film as a form of participatory research collaboration with refugee youth. The authors, Henri Onodera and Ahmed Zaidan, pose two related methodological questions: why make a documentary film as part of social science research? When compared with traditional participatory research, what is the added value of producing data based on cinematic narration as part of social science research? Substantially, the objective was to find out what experiences and views young asylum seekers hold of their chances to participate in the Finnish labour market and working life. The project intentionally departed from prior research, which typically focuses on refugee youth’s vulnerable position in the labour market or in Finnish society more generally. The authors especially highlight positive experiences, the

“success stories”, and bring up the everyday resources that refugee youth rely on when participating in working life. In the chapter, they describe the starting points of the film project, their personal motivations to embark on it and the actual process, with many difficult technical and research ethical choices, of making the documentary.

# Participatory research among youth – too little, too much, too romanticised?

Reflections on co-research with young refugees

*Nina Tokola, Tiina Rättilä, Päivi Honkatukia,  
Fath E Mubeen, and Olli Sillanpää*

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## Introduction

In this chapter we describe the research experiments conducted in ALL-YOUTH in which we involved young refugees as co-researchers. The participants were young women and men who explored their own and their peers' relationship to working life as well as their possibilities of acquiring a respectable position in society. We, the authors of this chapter, are a collective and have been involved in three different research processes.<sup>1</sup> We wish to contribute to the ongoing, lively discussion on participatory methods in youth research by reflecting on our experiences together and contemplating the potential of co-research participation to enhance sustainable well-being among youth. The introduction to the book points out that we think societal participation is an important part of human well-being and taking part in research can be seen as one form of participation.

We present and critically discuss our methodological underpinnings, research styles and experiences. In this way we wish to respond to the two major criticisms presented to participatory methods in youth research: first, that often they are not participatory enough but tend to remain researcher-centred; and second, that they are still often uncritically and naively seen to give access to the authentic realities of youth (Dadich 2017). We partly agree with and partly depart from these positions, but we see potential in knowledge co-creation practices that can be useful not only in understanding young people's realities more deeply but also in conveying their views to public discussions and decision-making processes. Co-research participation is, thus, a possibility for young people to be heard and respected as valuable persons with their own expertise, which are important elements of sustainable well-being.

We use co-research to refer to an approach in which participants are thought of as experts on their own lives who are invited to participate in all phases of the research process as equal partners according to their own interests and resources (Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021). In this spirit, we approach co-research with young people as a dialogical mode of collaboration between professional researchers and young participants, one that draws on their complementary perspectives, interests, skills



and knowledge bases (Smith, Monaghan & Broad 2002, 198). Like many other youth researchers, we are interested in co-research because it promises to fix at least some of the power asymmetries between researchers and research participants that have been identified in traditional science (Clark 2004; Pyyry 2012; Mubeen & Tokola 2021). Co-research can also be regarded as a critical and even emancipatory research paradigm that especially helps marginalised young people to explore and understand the structures and conditions that determine their ability to function in society (Trajber et al., 2019; Boylorn 2008). This is an important promise in which we have been inspired by epistemic ideas developed, for example, in gender studies (Harding 1993; Smith 2005).

Moreover, we regard co-research as a dialectical process in which critical researcher reflexivity is essential to reflect on and possibly avoid the just-mentioned pitfalls (McCartan, Schubotz & Murphy 2012). We deconstruct the tensions and uncomfortable recollections we occasionally faced in the field by engaging in critical reflections on our own experiences. We describe them as situations in which different parties' understandings and expectations did not meet. We relate to these experiences not as failures but as important critical moments in the research and, hence, as possibilities for critical self-reflection and learning. We end up defending participatory and co-research methodologies with young people but with a strong commitment to researcher reflexivity and a willingness to involve young co-researchers' views in evaluating the research process (Watson & Fox 2017).

### **Critical debates on participatory research with young people**

The starting point of the chapter is the observation that youth research as a body of knowledge is becoming increasingly inclusive (Dadich 2017). This means at least two things: first, that it addresses the lives of a growing number of young people while its research topics have simultaneously diversified. Second, a growing number of scholars studying youth issues have sought to engage more young people in the processes of knowledge production. Indeed, participation has become a powerful buzzword in the research practice, and the participatory research style has become a norm rather than an exception (Smith, Monaghan & Broad 2002; Watson & Fox 2017). The pull of participatory methodology in youth research is understandable, considering that it seems to imply only positive outcomes for all parties: for young people themselves (at least being consulted, or, in the best scenario, taken seriously as experts on their own lives), for researchers (gaining deeper insights into young people's everyday lives, benefiting from research funding and publication merits) and for decision makers (gaining knowledge needed for youth policies; cf. Conolly 2008). In fact, we are also motivated to take part in this participatory movement, looking forward to its potency to alleviate, at least in part, the well-known power differentials between old-style, adult-centred research and young people. However, some important criticisms have been levelled at participatory methods that we find

worth serious consideration, especially when performing co-research with youth in marginalised positions in society.

We address two lines of critique. The first argument states that youth participatory research is often still not participatory enough but is, rather, typically adult- and researcher-driven (Dadich 2017; Hart 1997). For example, co-researchers are commonly neither involved in the initial design of the study nor given a real role in the publishing phase. Moreover, if the researcher, who also benefits from the publication merits, designs the key concepts, the research questions and the writing process, not much is left in the research process for the young participants to engage in and influence (Clark 2004; Coad & Evans 2008; Kellett 2011; McCartan, Schubotz & Murphy 2012). Young people's participation in research may thus remain tokenistic, similar to the context of involving young people in political decision making (e.g., Hart 1992). However, critics have also rightly asked whether young people who have been recruited to the research, especially those who are disengaged from social, cultural and institutional settings, always have a real chance to say "no" to the power that the researchers represent (see Fine 2009).

The second argument claims that the significance of young people's participation in research is exaggerated, and the notion that young people have valid knowledge of their own world and their place in society is too romanticised and over-assumed (Dadich 2017). Such a position can be considered somewhat naive, at least if we accept the notion that youth is always a social, political and epistemic construct that is produced and subjectified in the discourses of power (Kamp & Kelly 2017). Young people are, hence, surrounded by these very same discourses of power and adopt them in making sense of their everyday lives or issues that they regard important. A similar argument has been made in studies on youth well-being in which subjective approaches have been criticised on the grounds that people's own assessment of their well-being cannot comprehend all the social, economic and political determinants that influence it (Madsen 2021). According to this line of thinking, it is the researchers' responsibility and within their expertise to take into consideration factors such as society's power relations, which contextualise young people's societal positions, while not forgetting to reflect critically on how researchers themselves make sense of such issues (Kamp & Kelly 2017).

We next describe how we have taken the preceding arguments into account in our research processes. We engage in self-critical discussion on where we have succeeded well and where less well to meet the challenge those arguments posed. The discussion is based on three separate research processes in which we examined the social inclusion of young men and women with a refugee background in Finnish society, particularly the obstacles related to their inclusion in the labour market. Two of the processes were carried out in the Tampere urban area within the framework of a local multicultural NGO, Refugee Youth Support Finland, commonly known as "Kölvi" (the word is local dialect and means young man). One process was carried out in the Joensuu urban area; it included altogether six interviews conducted among Muslim women living in various parts of the country. Young people were approached in both regions through local multicultural NGOs.

The research framework was structured differently in each case. In Joensuu, Fath, who lived in a reception centre at the time, committed much of her time and resources to the research project. One of the processes in Tampere was carried out in the context of Kõlvi's civic education activities. A joint research group was established there that was open to all regular 18+ year-old visitors of the Kõlvi youth centre. About ten young men participated in the group with varying levels of activity. The second process in Tampere was implemented as part of the NGO's coaching programme for young adult refugees outside of education and work, called Valomo. This process involved five young men. All processes started in the spring–summer of 2018 and went into full action in early fall of that year. Data collection, analysis and writing of publications occurred between 2018 and 2021.

The following discussion is divided into two themes according to the preceding two arguments. Under the first theme, we describe how we addressed, in each research context, the range and level of young people's participation in the process. We revisit the early design phase, the later execution phase and the analysis and publication phase of the processes. Within the second theme, we respond to the challenge of whether young people, in this case young refugees, have valid knowledge of their own world and their role in society and how we as researchers position ourselves vis-à-vis this question.

## **Theme I: reflections on young people's participation in research**

### ***Involving young people in the study's design***

Dorothy Smith's (1987, 2005) ideas concerning "sociology for people", on the one hand, and feminist standpoint epistemology (e.g., Harding 1993), on the other hand, have inspired our approach to co-research with marginalised young people. This means in practice that we set off openly in our research processes and had a genuine interest in learning from the young people's lived experiences without a predetermined agenda. We also acknowledged our own ignorance about their lives, yet we attempted to be self-critically aware of the potential impact of the adult-centred ideas in how we approached them as young people (Kelly & Kamp 2017). We sought to remain sensitive to the possibility, discovered by other researchers working with co-research methodology, that when researchers relinquish their position as a knowledge authority and remain sensitive to the experiences and thoughts of co-researchers, topics and problematics may arise that might otherwise have gone unnoticed (e.g., Dentith, Measor & O'Malley 2012). Such openness and sensitivity are particularly important when collaborating with marginalised groups (Halilovich 2019). This meant that we did not decide the research topics and questions in advance. Instead, they were formulated in discussions on what was important to the young people themselves and what they wished to study with us. The research in Joensuu subsequently came to address the experiences and thoughts of Muslim women about working life in Finland, and in Tampere, the

reasons for immigrants' difficulties in finding jobs in Finland and the possibilities for enhancing refugees' well-being through arts-based methods (the latter project is described in detail in Chapter 9). The young people were able to influence the research from the start in each case in this way.

We faced the challenge from the very beginning of how to relax our presumed position as knowledge authorities to clear space for the young co-researchers' input and influence on the research design (see McCartan, Schubotz & Murphy 2012; Mubeen & Tokola 2021). None of us had prior experience with co-research methodology; therefore, we contemplated at length whether and how we could lay aside our own presumptions and throw ourselves into doing something new and unknown. It quickly became clear that tolerating uncertainty is an essential aspect of conducting co-research, because co-research processes are always unpredictable as open-design studies (Smith, Monaghan & Broad 2002). It is also worth noting that our young research partners had no previous experience of co-research and thus could not judge the value of research in which they had the possibility to be involved from the outset. Indeed, the questions of at which point young people should become engaged in research, in what capacity and to what degree, may be more relevant to the researchers interested in this methodology and its epistemology than to the young people themselves.

However, we were able to see how important it was for the young people to be seen and taken seriously by professional researchers. For example, in Kõlvi, this was reflected in how eagerly the young men accepted the opportunity to scrutinise the discriminatory practices of Finnish society by challenging us to make sense of phenomena they regarded as unfair based on their own experiences. They questioned us about why it is so difficult to get a job in Finland without official degree papers, what the level of Finnish language proficiency required for jobs is, why getting a job is difficult even if you know the language well already and why people with foreign-sounding names get so few job interview opportunities? They also wanted to talk about issues related to social belonging, such as why is it so difficult for immigrants to make friends with native Finns and what should they do to be accepted by society. The research team, Tiina, Päivi and Jarmo, found these questions justified and touching and had great difficulty in responding to them in any satisfactory way, but they did their best to discuss the questions earnestly with the youths.

### ***Research participation in diverse ways***

One of the ideals of co-research methodology is that co-researchers have the chance to participate in all phases of the research (Boylorn 2008). However, reports of co-research studies show that participation is organised and lived in many different ways, and the research intertwines complexly with diverse and constantly evolving group processes (e.g., Nind 2011; Pope 2020). One or more individuals sometimes emerge from a larger group of co-researchers who take on an active and even leading role (Kilpatrick et al., 2007; McCartan, Schubotz & Murphy 2012).

Other participants may remain silent partners, and some may opt out of collaboration altogether. Our own experiences verify that participation takes place in multiple ways and that it is, moreover, important to allow and value such variety, both because participation in research is always voluntary and because participants are individuals who have diverse interests and motivations to be involved or to opt out.

There was much variation in our research processes in this respect. In Joensuu, Fath had the basic skills for doing research to start with (having previously studied in the university), and she was motivated to advance in her university studies to make a career in professional research. She also had the time resources to invest in her engagement in the study. The cooperation and dialogue between Fath and Nina were close, although consensus was initially sought in their working methods because they came from different backgrounds and had distinct knowledges and skill sets. Fath took charge of the process as the research advanced. She was also the primary analyst of the research data, yet she regularly discussed the analysis with Nina, and both participated in writing research publications.

The two processes in Tampere were carried out in a very different environment. Both were done in groups in which the young men involved had scarcely any prior knowledge of academic research (see McCartan, Schubotz & Murphy 2012). The research also occurred in conditions in which time resources were limited. The Kølvi research group met approximately once a month for a duration of ten months and a few times after the active phase was over, while the researchers and the five young men in Valomo met six times during a four-month coaching period. The meeting place also mattered for how the young people's participation was enabled or, in part, disabled. The Valomo meetings were organised on the programme's premises, were peaceful and the young men's engagement in the discussions was polite but often rather sparse. The venue in Kølvi (the youth centre) was typically crowded, with many young boys and young men visiting the centre during the evening hours. People moved freely from room to room, engaging in warm, lively and often loud social interactions, popping in and out of the room where the research group gathered. Having the research group meet in such a lively environment set limits on how the researchers and the young men were able to focus on the discussions. However, this was still the best solution for enabling research participation, because the young men did not feel good about leaving the youth centre and holding the meetings, for example, in the university. That was tried, but the researchers received feedback from the young men stating that they had not felt comfortable in the university's premises. The researchers did their best to accommodate to the existing circumstances and in time came to appreciate that young people's participation in research can be versatile, animated and embodied – not always as “discursively inclined” as researchers might expect as a rule.

Furthermore, given that the young men were busy with school, internships, occasional work, family, friends and participating in other Kølvi activities, it was unjustified to expect them to be able to commit strongly to the research collaboration (which by rule occurred in the evenings). Rather, the researchers found it

important for the success of the process that it be open to everyone's participation according to their own interests and resources. However, all key decisions related to the study were made transparently in the research team, after which the researchers took the decisions forward, proceeding with the research step by step as agreed to in the meetings. There were only a few regulars among the participants, one of whom enthusiastically conducted several interviews among his peer young Somali friends. In addition, Päivi and Tiina conducted several interviews among experts. The young men in Kølvi were not personally involved with those interviews, but their themes and the bulk of the questions were designed in the research group's discussions.

The research collaboration in Valomo was coordinated with the programme's other coaching activities, which were predominantly art-focused in the autumn of 2018. Several art forms, such as photography and visual arts, were experimented with under the guidance of arts professionals. The goal was to provide opportunities for the young men to use art to reflect on their identity, life courses and dreams for the future. The Playback Theatre project, which was introduced as part of the research, was integrated into this context, bringing a societal dimension (the question of their belonging and participation in Finnish society) to what the young men were accomplishing with their artwork. Their participation in the research was therefore defined from the beginning by being part of the overall coaching programme with a full schedule. However, their participation in the process was advanced by the coaches who regularly discussed the research with the young men while the researchers were not present.

One issue should be particularly mentioned. The researchers in Valomo, in contrast to the other two processes, were left with a slight uncertainty as to whether the participation of young people in the process was entirely voluntary and whether they had a true opportunity to say "no" to us (cf. Fine 2009). Refusal to participate did emerge to a small extent. For instance, from time to time, young people demonstrated their freedom of agency by answering the researchers' questions politely but tersely, which was an indication that the researchers had to step back and let them be. However, Tiina, Päivi and Jarmo later found that their interpretation of the young men's participation, if based on such encounters and interviews alone, would have been incomplete and even misleading. The coaches told them how enthusiastically, for example, the Playback Theatre had been received and discussed among the young men when the researchers were not present, and how important it had been for them that the researchers had shown true interest in their lives and helped them make their experiences visible through the research collaboration.

The preceding discussion shows that there was great variation in the participation of the young co-researchers in the three processes. The interest, commitment and academic skills of Fath in Joensuu produced important insider insights into the lives and working life experiences of Muslim women in Finland (Tokola et al., 2019). For her, the opportunity to act as a respected co-researcher in the project turned into a life-changing experience, creating hope of a better and more socially inclusive life in Finland, and eventually landing her a job as a professional

researcher in a Finnish research institution. Participation in co-research usually is a positive experience for participants, yet Fath's path as a co-researcher can be considered exceptional in many ways (cf. McCartan, Schubotz & Murphy 2012, paragraphs 34–36).

In contrast, the participation of the young men in Kølvi and Valomo was tied to a very different research constellation. Their participation can be described as “light” in terms of commitment and intensity when compared to Fath's, yet their contribution was also highly valuable and produced new knowledge about the conditions of young refugees' sense of belonging in Finnish society. Moreover, the opportunity to take part in the research was clearly an important experience for many of the young men, giving them new inspiration to pursue their dreams in life, which included things like running as a candidate in the local elections for one young man and gaining a place to study at university for some others.

### ***Doing analysis together in multivarious ways***

Co-research studies commonly involve teaching participants basic research skills such as data collection and analysis methods (e.g., Lushey & Munro 2015). Furthermore, the professional researcher and co-researcher(s) ideally analyse and interpret the data together and formulate the results of the analysis into joint publications. Publications can take many forms, from traditional scientific articles and popular blogs to, for instance, artistic creations and performances.

We can once again highlight differences in how co-research methodology can be adopted to different contexts when we reflect on our three research processes from the perspective of analysis and publishing. Fath took the main responsibility for collecting and analysing the interview material in Joensuu, which was then used as data in her master's thesis. One young man conducted several peer interviews in Kølvi, while Tiina and Päivi did several expert interviews among local businesses (about their recruitment policies), public employment services (about services provided, or not, specifically for immigrant youth) and vocational counselors (about the practices of career counselling for refugee youth). The young men were also invited to be interviewers, but this was not possible due to their other daytime commitments. The interviews were transcribed, summarised and put in an approachable form as a few key points that were then presented and discussed in the research group.

The Valomo research data were composed of the stories the young men shared with the researchers during the Playback Theatre project, their artworks, the two group interviews conducted by the researchers during the process and the data about the Valomo clients' well-being collected by the coaches as part of the programme's regular work. The researchers, the coaches and some of the Playback Theatre actors later collectively analysed and discussed this collection of data. Valomo's young men did not take part in the analysis, because the group had already dispersed after the four-month coaching period, and the researchers had no contact with them after that. (Due to research ethical reasons, no personal and

contact data of the participants were gathered during the process.) This troubled the researchers after the project. Their sentiment now is that the process remained incomplete without a proper debriefing of it together with the young men (see the critical discussion on this in Chapter 9).

Our attempt has been to publish our findings together with young people when it has been practically possible. The COVID-19 pandemic unfortunately interrupted especially this phase, and we were unable to finalise all our plans. We have, however, produced theatre plays in collaboration with theatre professionals and a multimedia web site with diverse contents, written popularised blogs and given presentations in conferences and other events in addition to publishing conventional scientific articles. We have, moreover, asked some of the young co-researchers to join us in these events when possible. We dare to evaluate that our publication efforts have been rather successful. We have been able to document and convey young people's stories, knowledge and experiences to diverse audiences in creative and multifaceted ways. The publications have been acknowledged in the media and, for example, cited in the editorial of the biggest broadsheet in Finland (Helsingin Sanomat 2021). We have also been able to include young people in the production of publications, even if less than we had anticipated. Yet, as has often been documented in the reports on co-research, writing joint publications has by no means been easy or straightforward. Even if we had wanted to bring out young people's ownership of the knowledge in all contexts, it has not always been possible due, for example, to the need to protect their anonymity. These decisions have involved tricky research ethical dilemmas that are not easy to solve.

## **Theme 2: acknowledging young people's knowledge**

In this section we reflect on the question of the romanticisation of young people's participation in research. We consider particularly how researchers should view and position themselves regarding the question of young people's knowledge of their own world (Smith, Monaghan & Broad 2002). This question became acute as we occasionally encountered situations in the field in which the young people's and our interpretation of the issue at hand differed. Such collisions between different understandings made us wonder whether we as researchers have the means to access the experiences and perspectives of young people. How much are their own accounts conditioned by the general ways of making sense of their positions in society? How do these different understandings affect the goal and possibility of co-producing knowledge together? As in the previous theme, we think there is no simple answer to these questions (see Borg et al., 2012). However, we suggest that the romanticisation argument is based partly on an overly narrow and formal understanding of how young people's knowledge of their world is understood.

Considering, first, the "life knowledge" of young men at Valomo, we should note that most of them are refugees, live under painfully vulnerable conditions outside of education and work, often with traumatic experiences, and many are dealing with mental health issues. Consequently, their identity is fragile, which also has to



do with being obliged to negotiate between their past experiences, family pressures and the demands stemming from the Finnish culture and society. Having difficulty with adapting to the new circumstances, these young men need support to return to everyday routines and find their own study and work path or other meaningful way to connect with society, which is paramount to their well-being. At the same time, many of them struggle with the Finnish service system and need help to cope with it. Their energy is mostly expended in daily struggle. Thus, they lack the strength to make decisive plans for their future, not to mention having the potency and motivation to take part in societal activities, even though they have many opinions about it. However, while their experiences are true to them and provide valuable information for research, these young men have only a limited view of their place in society and understanding of the factors that affect their well-being. In this respect, we were able to observe a rather rapid change in their self-understanding and orientation towards their future while taking part in the coaching programme, including our research collaboration. The coaching period was relatively short, yet the young men had the opportunity to reflect on their past life course with their experiences of war and violence, their choice to leave their home and embark upon an unpredictable flight, and their experiences of settling in a new place and culture to live. They gained new perspectives to interpret their past and make plans for their future while they were engaged in the coaching programme and its art-filled activities, including our Playback Theatre project. However, due to, for example, time and language constraints, we did not manage to create enough space for in-depth collective discussions with the young men in which sharing of private troubles would have led to a broader understanding of these troubles as public issues in need of collective solutions instead of only individual agency.

Many of the research group's participants in Kõlvi already had first-hand experiences of how difficult it is to get a job in Finland and wanted to learn more about it through the co-research project. These young men, coming predominantly from the Middle East and North Africa, belong to a racialised minority that suffers most from structural discrimination and everyday racism, as Henri Onodera and Ahmed Zaidan document in Chapter 11. The young men regularly challenged the researchers in the group's meetings about issues related to the structural discrimination embedded in Finnish society, asking them to explain its rationale. Tiina, Päivi and Jarmo often struggled with their responses, trying to offer a range of cultural-social-political explanations to the phenomenon while not justifying the apparent inequalities. However, what struck the researchers as odd was that the young men were reluctant to see Finland as a racist society even though various kinds of inequalities were addressed openly in the group. Their self-understanding was that it is up to the migrants themselves to work hard to gain a place in education and get a job or to move forward in life in general, thereby to mitigate Finns' prejudices. In other words, these young people self-responsibilised their lives and actions (cf. discussion in Chapter 5 on such self-absorbed ideals of labour market citizenship).

This discourse was confusing and even disturbing to the researchers, and they did not find a suitable way to deepen the debate with the group at the time (cf. McCartan, Schubotz & Murphy 2012). They were worried that it might take something away from the young men's right to their own experiences and knowledge if they openly presented their own research-based critical perspectives on racism (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). These kinds of situations and conflicting understandings can arise when professional researchers work with lay participants, and they can be tricky to address in ethically sound ways. Researchers might want to elicit an open debate about some contested issue, but they should be able to do so without themselves posing as knowledge authorities with the power to annihilate young people's own knowledge. This is, indeed, easier said than done.

The question of racism turned out differently in Joensuu. Fath's own experiences as a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf were important to understanding how other Muslim women experience their involvement in the Finnish working life. Fath learned in her interviews that many Muslim women are familiar with work-related discrimination and prejudices. They have, for instance, been reminded by the employers that a headscarf is impractical, inappropriate and/or not allowed on the job. The women who used the burqa did not even agree to be interviewed. Women who wear hijab have, in turn, both positive and negative experiences of the Finnish working life. The women spoke in the interviews about their experiences of prejudices especially when there has been a terrorist attack reported in the media. They stated that the workplace atmosphere becomes suspicious towards them in those situations, at least for a while, until the tensions are negotiated away through skilful "coffee table diplomacy". All in all, the interviewed women had a clearly articulated knowledge of the conditions under which they are accepted in Finnish society and as what kind of persons and social actors they are taken by native Finns.

Nevertheless, we can also look at the life knowledge question from a different angle and note that Muslim women who use the burqa and hijab may be excluded from the society's support measures (there are some available in Finland) because they are unaware of them, do not know how to access the services or because they do not trust the authorities. The Finnish authorities generally operate accountably, but a relationship of trust between these women and the authorities cannot be established if they have no contact. In this sense, just as in the case of the young refugee men in Tampere, the knowledge of the Muslim women about the Finnish society and their action possibilities in it is only partial. It is possible to argue that young people in vulnerable positions could especially benefit from taking part in co-research or action research projects to learn more about the conditions that affect their lives, including learning about ways to take part in societal debates and influence political decision making, as happened in our projects (Halilovich 2019).

To conclude our reflections on the second theme, we have learned to understand that young people's knowledge of their world is not complete and finished,

something the researcher can grasp or judge as valid or invalid through research. Rather, young people's knowledge of their world and understanding of their place in it, just like the researcher's knowledge, can be explored, reflected, developed and deepened. This is something young people can do by themselves, especially with the help of supporting adults, but it can also be carried out as a collective enterprise, such as in an inclusive co-research project. Here, academic researchers can play an important role as facilitators of new perspectives and new kinds of agency for the young people by taking them seriously as co-researchers, experts and societal participants. This may not be easy and will not always work, as we have noticed, but it is possible, and the effort is valuable.

## **Conclusion**

In the chapter we have described and critically discussed our experiments with co-research methodology with young men and women with refugee backgrounds. We began by pointing out that youth research as a field of study is increasingly inclusive in terms of wanting to engage more young people in their processes of knowledge production. However, there has also been criticism of participatory research, which is, in the end, claimed to remain mostly researcher-centred and not truly inclusive of young people. We have responded to this criticism by highlighting how we have sought to ensure that the participation of young people is genuine and effective in our own research processes. The focus has been on describing and discussing our methodological solutions, although we have also been interested in monitoring the impact of research participation on the refugee youths' well-being. We saw many positive effects in this regard. There were several ways in which taking part in co-research benefited and empowered our young research partners, such as developing their basic research skills and capabilities for critical thinking on social issues and research practices, increasing their self-confidence and contributing to their knowledge of Finnish society. Additionally, not only the young people but also their mentors and coaches benefited from the research collaboration. The latter's feedback to the researchers states that they have gained new inspiration and tools to develop ways of working with refugee youth due to the collaboration, taking into deeper consideration their relationship to and belonging in Finnish society.

Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that co-research and other participatory approaches do not guarantee positive and empowering experiences or automatically enhance the well-being of the research participants (Dona 2007). As described earlier, there are numerous factors in the research environment and setting that need to fall into place to provide young people an inviting, inclusive, safe and meaningful participation experience. The chances increase that misunderstandings, false expectations and discontinuations appear in the process if some elements are missing or out of place (McCartan, Schubotz & Murphy 2012). We, for one, have not always succeeded in our own processes and have sometimes encountered awkward silences and refusals by the participants. However, we have constantly attempted to identify our mistakes and mishaps, discuss them with the

young people and their mentors and tried to make corrective moves. In this sense, we regard it as important that co-research be conducted in collectives. The possibility to ponder together with the collective the diverse dilemmas that are bound to arise in multi-party collaborative research processes not only alleviates the pain of being forced to make difficult decisions under uncertain conditions, but it also helps to find the best possible solutions in their respective contexts.

We have also discussed how researchers should position themselves on the question of young people's knowledge of their own world and its validity. We previously pointed out that our stance here is that it is important to take young people's knowledge seriously, but it neither needs to be approached as the final truth nor do we naively think that we can have a straightforward access to the genuine voice of young people. That knowledge can, however, be explored, reflected on, deepened and developed through research collaboration. It is always situation specific, and as researchers, we too have contributed to how it is formulated in our interactions with the research participants. Our objective has been to produce new knowledge together with young people accepting that we do so from different yet equal epistemic grounds. However, this does not mean that we have neglected critical reflections on how to set young people's experiences in a larger social and political context. In doing so, we have at times faced discrepancies between our own and young people's knowledges and struggled with how to deal with these differing understandings. We have avoided thinking or presenting ourselves as knowledge authorities in these discussions, but we have had to simultaneously accept that our knowledges and understandings are not always reconcilable, a point that Chapter 9 discusses further.

To conclude our reflective journey, we would like to defend participatory and co-research methodologies with young people but with a strong commitment to researcher reflexivity. Our argument has been that there is no one model of co-research or one way of organising participation in it. Instead, the process needs to be designed to respond to the conditions of each context, taking into account how young people feel about the collaboration and when and how they are willing to become involved in it. In relation to this, we find it important that scholars interested in co-research think carefully about how they expect young people to participate with what level of skills in order not to build too high a threshold for their participation. It is important for researchers to consider the conditions of applying the methodology in each context and to accept that young people's participation in research can be diverse (Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021).

## Note

- 1 The roles of the collective are as follows: three of us have worked as researchers in the ALL-YOUTH project, Tiina and Päivi in Tampere University (in southern Finland), Nina in the University of Eastern Finland. The three research processes discussed in this chapter were carried out independently in the two universities, two in Tampere and one in Joensuu, yet all three followed the same methodological guidelines. Fath joined Nina as the co-researcher in Joensuu, and Olli acted as the main collaborator in the Valomo

research process in Tampere, representing a local NGO working with refugee youth. The original research group in Tampere also included researcher Jarmo Rinne and Olli's coaching colleague Kaisla Koskelainen. They are not part of the author collective, but they are occasionally referred to by name in the text.

In this chapter, we speak collectively as “we” when referring to common features, experiences and interpretations of the research processes. We use the general term “researchers” or mention the actors in question by name when the text refers to a particular process.

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# Co-constructing knowledge of young refugees' lives in Finland

## Epistemological notes

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### Introduction

This chapter recounts and reflects a research process carried out as a cooperative effort between a group of researchers, a group of young men with a refugee background participating in a special coaching programme, their coaches and a group of arts professionals. The research was a part of ALL-YOUTH studies reaching out to diverse groups of young people who included young men with a refugee background, with the recognition that they were, from many accounts, the most marginalised group in Finnish society. The group we worked with can be considered particularly marginalised. Most had come to Finland as asylum seekers in connection with the 2015–2016 wave of refugees, and they had had rough experiences from their country of origin, the flight and settling in Finland, which has been found to be one of the most discriminatory countries in Europe (YLE NEWS 29.11.2018). Mixing elements in our methodology from participatory research, co-research and arts-based research, we set out to carefully listen to the life stories of these young people (Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021a).

The research project originally focused on collecting and studying the young refugees' life stories; this chapter structures its discussion around four separate accounts of what happened in the process in terms of knowledge co-construction. We start by introducing the background of the research and describing the radical epistemological openness of how we proceeded by having no ready-made plan, research questions, specified objectives or preconception of how the research should proceed. We then walk through the process, discussing along the way some key epistemological points about the conditions for co-constructing knowledge in research settings that are characterised by the participants' diversity and the openness of the research process.

The chapter's discussion utilises ideas from critical epistemology and critical reflexivity (Berger 2015), especially from feminist theories of situated and embodied knowledge and strong objectivity (e.g., Harding 1993; Smith 1987). It is, moreover, inspired by Rosi Braidotti's (2019) conception of "a nomadic subject"



who acknowledges that their knowing is always in the state of becoming and never final and fixed. Such ideas are not widely used in the epistemological debates of youth research, but we believe they have much to offer, especially for participatory research on marginalised youth. We make a related distinction between the concepts of knowledge and knowing (Wasik 2016), arguing that the concept of knowledge is too fixed to be able to capture the diversity and fluidity of knowledges (the plural form intended) typically emerging from participatory research processes. In our experience, the concept of knowing (Kuhn & Porter 2010), which implies an element of “cognition-in-motion”, sometimes better conveys how research participants feel about and understand the dynamically evolving knowledges and skills they learn while engaging in research collaboration.

Our aspiration in the project was to balance the power relationship between the researchers and the other participants (Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021a), so we started from the principle that the researchers’ knowledge cannot be privileged over the others’. Moreover, the collaboration produced different knowledges to which each participant assigned distinctive meanings; thus, it is not ethically justifiable to present the researcher’s knowledge as final. In this text, this commitment to knowledge equality is reflected by all authors in the collective having their own account of how they understand the concept of knowledge and what kind of knowledges they experienced emerging from the research process.

Epistemic issues are debated regularly within participatory research on youth (e.g., Caraballo et al., 2017; Lozenski, Casey & McManimon 2013; Porter, Townsend & Hamsphire 2012; Watson & Fox 2018), but epistemological challenges related specifically to knowledge co-construction within participatory research settings like co-research are still a rather uncharted territory. This text brings up new perspectives to this area by concretely describing one research process and raising through it some key points about the conditions of knowledge production in the context of collectively designed research involving multiple parties.

### **What and whose knowledge? Critical epistemology for knowledge co-construction**

The paradigmatic participatory turn in youth research has brought a significant change in the way the relationship is conceived between the researcher and the research participants. Along with this change, youth researchers have been increasingly interested in redressing those power differentials that have long characterised doing “normal (social) science” (Caraballo et al., 2017; Fine 2008; Lohmeyer 2020; Mubeen & Tokola 2021; Pyyry 2012). Researchers interested in participatory methodology have particularly striven to see young people as competent and capable actors who have knowledge of their own world and the capability to express it in various communicative and creative ways (e.g., Cuevas-Parra 2020; Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021b). In this context, researchers have critiqued expert-led research constellations and stressed that engaging young people in knowledge production is central to really understand their life-world and experiences (Dentith, Measor &

O'Malley 2012). The ethical premise that young people have the right to participate in knowledge production about themselves and thereby also influence policies that affect them has been widely accepted in youth research (e.g., Alderson 2008).

At the same time, the participatory turn has posed a challenge to rethink basic epistemological questions, given that participatory research is by its nature a multi-party enterprise. The aspiration to produce knowledge together with many participants who come from different backgrounds and have distinct knowledges, experiences and interests raises important questions that have not been addressed with enough insight. Lay participants in research cannot be required to master skills that academically trained researchers are often accustomed to articulate, such as knowledge of the philosophy of science. We are then justified to ask: on what epistemological grounds does participatory research rely? Whose and what kind of knowledge is accepted as part of the research results? Can researchers decide on the epistemology of the research by themselves without asking the participants? We address these questions by way of describing and reflecting on our own experiences of how knowledge can be co-constructed in a context defined by a diversity of participants. Our discussion is further complicated by elements of a co-research approach without pre-planned research questions, a research design or an idea of how the research process should proceed.

The discussion draws on a few key ideas that have been inspired by feminist social research and critical feminist epistemology. First, we accept Dorothy Smith's (1987, 2005) suggestion that the topics of (sociological) research should connect with people's daily lives by asking people themselves what is important to them, what they want to talk about, what they see as problems in their lives and what their position is in society. This is what we did when we approached the young refugees and asked them to join our research. We spent some time together, getting to know them over casual coffees and conversations. We talked about their life in Finland and other issues important to them (and us), including family, work and hobbies. We asked them to tell us about their lives by means of applied theatre, and they consented, though perhaps with slight hesitation, as none had previous experience of theatre in any form.

Our second point arises from feminist critical epistemology, especially from ideas of situated and embodied knowledge and strong objectivity (e.g., Harding 1993). As Ronkainen (2000, 182, our translation) crystallises it, situatedness refers to knowledge always being "part of the local system of knowledge, way of knowing and interests". To become "better knowers" and understand the limits of our knowing, "we need to have courage to commit, position ourselves and settle". Smith (1987, 177) likewise states that "[w]e must begin with some position in the world", and the specification of that "somewhere" and the explication of the relations to which it is articulated are the aim of inquiry. The principle of strong objectivity refers, in turn, to the idea that science that openly acknowledges its interests and epistemological commitments is less biased compared to knowledge production that does not critically reflect on its assumptions. Strong objectivity entails strong reflexivity, "knowing about your knowing" (Ronkainen 2000, 172).

Again, these ideas capture the social context of our research and the way we (inter)acted with the participants. We started from the explicit recognition that “we know nothing about the lives of these young people” and that we can learn about them only by discussing and acting together – all the while reflexively accepting that we occupy different positions in life and society, which affect our ability to understand each other. This was one of the key reasons why we adopted applied theatre as a method of collaboration, believing that it allows expressing experience that is, by its nature, embodied and visceral, hard to verbalise and discuss rationally. We also recognised the need to reflect critically on our own presuppositions (Berger 2015). For instance, we were aware of the linguistic and cultural differences between us and the refugee youth, and we stressed over whether our cooperation would work in Finnish. Following Harding’s argument about strong objectivity, we will describe what happened in the process and what kind of knowledges we ended up co-constructing.

The third starting point we want to single out here concerns the concept of knowledge itself. We find it useful to apply a distinction between knowledge and knowing, which captures nicely an intrinsic aspect of our experience of co-constructing knowledge in a diverse research collective. Our argument is that knowledge can be too static a concept (something already there, possessable and exploitable) to grasp the process of knowledge formation in research constellations defined by creative participatory methods and an open, undefined research process. In such contexts, what is being generated epistemically is not necessarily a specifiable “body of knowledge” that can be unproblematically conceptualised and represented. Instead, such knowledge can constitute a bundle of different kinds of subjectively sensed, embodied, constructed and dynamically evolving knowing(s) that the participants endow with unique meanings and purposes and that move not only on the realm of knowing but also on the realm of “otherwise than knowing” (Varto 2013). This is especially typical for artistic expressions but is hard to put in the language of epistemology, or language in general.

However, it needs to be pointed out that these epistemological commitments concerned only the researchers during the project. No pressure or specific requirements were placed on other participants (including Olli and Minna) regarding their role in and contribution to the research process.

### **Research collaboration in Valomo**

The research project recounted in this chapter was carried out in cooperation with a local NGO “Pakolaisnuorten tuki” (Refugee Support Finland) working with young boys and men with a refugee background. The NGO hosts several programmes that support young refugee men in their everyday lives, offering a range of recreational, educative and civic activities. One of the programmes, Valomo, offers coaching for young men aged 18–29 aiming to help them gain a place in education, working life or some other societal activity the young person is interested in. These young men have gone through the statutory integration phase after arriving in Finland but have

special support needs that the Finnish service system is unable to recognise or meet. Most of the young men in the programme have some form of trauma background, damaging experiences of discrimination and racism, difficulties with the Finnish language and a variety of life management problems (Rättilä et al., 2021). The young men largely come from the Middle East and North Africa, having arrived in Finland in the wake of the 2015–2016 “refugee crisis”. This racialised group faces more discrimination and social marginalisation than other immigrant groups (YLE NEWS 26.8.2019). Their life context is fragile, because they are building their identity and seeking to establish their place in society, balancing between different cultures and social pressures.

We (the researchers) discussed with the coaches the kind of research collaboration that we could engage the young men in who were enrolled in the autumn 2018.<sup>1</sup> We ended up suggesting applied theatre as a possible method that would complement other arts-based activities already planned for the programme. Our thinking was that applied theatre offers a safe and easily approachable art form for people in a difficult life situation to express their experiences, thoughts and feelings (Glover et al., 2016). We then introduced to the group the idea of doing a Playback Theatre performance. The group discussed and accepted the idea, the young men showing some enthusiasm for the chance to meet actors, tell their stories and see them performed “back” to them. This was the start of our theatre project, which lasted for the duration of the programme from September to December. At the same time, we collected research materials, including interviews, video recordings of the theatre performances, photographs, minutes of discussions between coaches, researchers and actors, researchers’ field notes and surveys on the young men’s well-being. We shared much of the material among us (researchers, coaches, actors) and analysed it collectively. As it turned out, we gained a lot of data, but for some time it remained obscure, debatable and variously interpretable as to what was the “knowledge” we thus produced together.

#### **Four accounts of the knowledge construction process**

This subchapter explores, through four individual accounts, three personal and one collectively constructed, how the knowledge co-construction was experienced by the authors and the young men in Valomo. Each account has its own story to tell about what was learned in the process. The stories are unique, yet they also share some common features. The shared features do not, however, represent the “final knowledge” gained as the result of the collaboration because none of the parties’ knowledges can be discarded.

#### ***Constantly evolving knowledge (Olli Sillanpää, director and head coach, Valomo programme)***

I immediately started to think about what and whose knowledge can be trusted in the contemporary world when the researcher asked me to reflect on how I understand

the meaning of knowledge and knowing. There are many claims and stories circulating in the media that are presented as knowledge but whose truthfulness is difficult to substantiate. This critical reflection is directly related to my work with refugee youth and thus to our research collaboration. I am well familiar with what kind of “knowledge” about immigrants and refugees is (re)presented in public. It often involves deliberate disinformation based on undemocratic and xenophobic political motives. In my work with young refugee men, I see how such a media environment, involving prejudices, social marginalisation and everyday racism, affects their well-being and social inclusion in society.

For me as the Valomo programme leader, becoming involved in a research collaboration with the ALL-YOUTH project was an easy choice. The final decision to participate, however, depended on how the young men in the 2018 programme felt about the proposal. It was actively discussed with the group, and all five members agreed to take part. The research interest of the ALL-YOUTH project – the desire to listen to a diversity of young people, including immigrants and young people with a refugee background, and to make their experiences and views visible in society – matched well with Valomo’s goals and values, and the research raised interest and excitement in the group. My motivation for the collaboration related to the prospect that it would provide these young men a rare chance to raise important issues on the public agenda and provide them with new knowledge about Finnish society.

From the beginning, the lack of a ready-made research design and, hence, a set of guidelines to be followed was both intriguing and confusing. On the one hand, this method of doing research allowed us (the young men and the coaches) to influence the process from the start. On the other hand, I was not at all concerned, despite the peculiarities of the project. I was rather enthused, believed that everything would go well, and I trusted the professionalism of the researchers and the artists. We, the coaches, also appreciated how diligently the researchers worked with the young people and took them into account at all stages of the project.

I would like to point out that when I replied to the researcher’s question about what kind of knowledge our research collaboration produced, my reflections were not confined to that time period only. My memories and interpretations of our collaboration in 2018 are intertwined with experiences throughout the time I have coached young refugee men. I knew a lot about the background, life situation and problems of these young people to start with. Most of the young men in Valomo programmes have difficulties in managing their lives and experience various physical and mental disorders. Many also foster feelings of hopelessness about their future. Most of them also have a traumatic background from war and violence in their home country. The identities of these young men are fragile in the midst of different cultures and social pressures. Our research collaboration did not add much to my existing knowledge, even though it needs to be kept in mind that each group and each individual are always unique, and we constantly learn something new about each other while working together. I was not at all sure what kind of knowledge the researchers felt they had achieved at the end of the project, and

I often inquired about it in our joint discussions. I was easily able to relate my own perceptions of refugee youth to that framework later when the researchers began conceptualising their research findings in terms of well-being theory. That theory especially aided in understanding the experiences of the young refugees' (non) belonging in Finnish society.

I feel that I learned a lot from our collaboration, although I may not be able to articulate exactly what it means in terms of research knowledge. Here I assume that learning means acquiring new knowledge and skills that can be used later as competence when engaging in some activity. For example, I picked up a lot about conducting academic research when following the activities of researchers and discussing our observations together. At the same time, the research collaboration provided an opportunity to reflect critically on our work in Valomo. In fact, the research collaboration has had a major influence on how we have later developed our coaching methods. Last, I would also like to mention that – even if this is also difficult to put in terms of an argument – our collaboration produced positive feelings and close collegiality, and it is my understanding that such (affective, empathic, embodied) experiences are important for the development of knowledge. It felt good working together, and we have continued to cooperate to this day.

***“Everything fell into place – but how did I ‘know’ it would?”  
(Minna Hokkanen, actor, teacher of acting skills, Playback  
Theatre professional)***

Responding to the researcher's question about how I understand knowledge and knowing, I see knowledge most importantly as a relational phenomenon, something born out of interaction and cooperation between people. Knowledge in this sense means learning new things by doing and acting together with others. On the other hand, it is not easy to distinguish knowledge from ongoing processes of thinking, interacting, understanding and learning – or sensing, feeling, embodying, that is, to separate “knowledge” from all sense-making activities that we constantly engage in. From a daily life perspective, knowledge is “attached” to everything we do and to how we operate. Knowing, instead, is a more personally and viscerally felt “I know what I am doing, and I am aware of it” kind of experience. I presume this sense and interaction-focused understanding of knowledge and knowing is related to the fact that I am a professional actor and teach acting skills in the university. Human interaction is the starting point for everything we, actors and acting teachers, do in both positions. Moreover, for the actor's profession, corporeality is the most essential tool for internalising, processing and producing knowledge, and it also helps to make it visible to the audiences. For example, my own white, middle-aged woman's body can convey its own kind of knowledge when placed on stage in active relationships with other actors.

For me, joining the research collaboration with ALL-YOUTH and Valomo as the artistic coordinator and director of the Playback Theatre project was an easy decision. I jumped in eagerly, even though the starting point for the cooperation

was somewhat peculiar. As already pointed out, the researchers did not have a pre-prepared research set-up that would have provided a precise framework for the project. I understood that the objective of the research was to listen to the stories of the young men through using storytelling techniques such as applied theatre, but how the research process should proceed and what kind of knowledge was expected to emerge from it was not predefined. Rather, the researchers had decided on a more “learning by doing” type of approach. This is a familiar technique to me as a performing artist, but I wondered how it would work in the context of academic research.

My orientation to the project was aided by the fact that I had some previous experience of artistic collaboration with refugee youth. Still, in the beginning I was concerned about whether we would be able to communicate and understand each other enough in Finnish. I also did not know beforehand whether the young men would be familiar with the culture of theatre, and if not, would I be able to explain its meaning and the actor’s profession to them understandably. Not to mention, how to explain the relationship between the theatre project and the research process (when I did not really understand it myself)? However, after meeting with the young men and the whole research group, my worries evaporated. It turned out that we understood each other quite well despite the partial language barrier, and the young men were clearly interested in theatre and the opportunity to tell us their stories.

The theatre project lasted four months, including planning the project with the researchers and the coaches; getting to know the Valomo group; a Playback Theatre performance for the young men, which I directed; and a tour in the largest local theatre house, my working place. The process culminated in a closing performance, where the Playback Theatre group I also work with brought a short play on the stage based on the young men’s stories as a summary of our project. The play was followed by an on-site Playback Theatre performance, in which actors created snapshots of the thoughts and feelings evoked by the performance in the audience (Hokkanen 2021).

Reflecting back on what I learned from our collaborative project, the first point I would like to make is that I was surprised by how everything seemed to fall into place in the process. It felt like I just “knew”, artistically speaking, what to do and how. In hindsight, I am unable to justify where that “knowledge” came from, and I wonder about it now, but I found the process an overall success. Second, regarding the stories the young men told us about their lives, there was nothing new about them as such. I had encountered similar heartfelt stories of refugees’ experiences many times in the media over the past years, and they were familiar to me through my profession as an actor. It was easy to identify with them and feel empathy.

Third, as an experienced Playback Theatre maker, I was not surprised at how the young people reacted when actors “returned” their stories to them. The young men had no previous experience of theatre, yet they quickly understood what the idea was about. It was a joy to observe how exhilarated and impressed they were when their stories were made visible and brought on stage. This initial observation

was confirmed later when the Valomo coaches told us that the theatre performances were discussed by the young men spiritedly for weeks afterwards.

Last, I would like to mention the affective and emotional aspects of the project. We were swayed by a wealth of emotions on many occasions while listening to the young men's stories and watching the actors playing them. Some stories made us laugh, others made us feel very sad. This emotional dimension was an important part of the collaboration and fortified its significance to us all. It is a well-known fact in both everyday life and in art-related research that the making and experiencing of art is bodily conveyed and includes dimensions that reach towards an "otherwise than knowing" kind of experiencing that is difficult to express in terms of research knowledge.

I feel a strong sense of gratitude when I think about our collaboration in 2018 for being given an opportunity to be part of a project that was meaningful and relevant to the young men in Valomo. I find that the short play produced in the project succeeded in crystallising their (anonymised) life stories and made them visible not only in all their pain but also in their hopes. This was clearly important to many, as the coaches later told us.

### **Wrestling with (fascinating) epistemological uncertainty (Tiina Rättilä, the responsible researcher in the Valomo project)**

My interest in the nature of co-constructed knowledge relates to the observation that the concept of knowledge itself is often left obscure in accounts of participatory research. The participatory process is usually described vividly and informatively, but the authors do not say much about what exactly the "knowledge" is that was produced as a result. My thought is that this is no coincidence and that articulating and representing co-constructed knowledge can be challenging for participatory research because the process involves many parties, each approaching the studied matter and the collaboration from their own backgrounds, positions and understandings. I am interested in the diverse knowledges and knowings that participatory research produces and how the knowledge co-construction comes about in practical terms. My suggestion is that participatory processes may not necessarily produce knowledge compatible with everyone's understandings, that sometimes negotiation over different understandings of what is regarded as the "end-product knowledge", especially as formulated by researchers, may in fact displace important participant experiences and knowledges. I think it is important to probe whether and why negotiating and seeking interpretive compromises between diverse knowledges is justified epistemologically: why would this kind of knowledge be more valuable or "better" than knowledge that leaves the differences visible?

Based on this epistemological interest, I asked the other two authors of this text to contemplate their understanding of knowledge and knowing and to share from their own perspective what kind of knowledge they felt our research collaboration produced. I reflect here on the same question from my own perspective. It should



be mentioned that our research team in Valomo consisted of three researchers; in addition to me, there was another female researcher and one male researcher (see Chapter 8). We are all white and middle-aged with a middle-class background, and we represent the position of intellectual authority in society, whether we like it or not. This is, however, my personal account of the project and the collaboration. It would be a different story if it was written by one of the other researchers or if we had produced it collectively (see Berger 2015).

First, in line with the participatory and co-research epistemology, we wanted to approach the young men in Valomo as experts in their own lives and avoid presenting ourselves as knowledge authorities. This entailed, for example, that we avoided using academic terminology in our interactions, considering also that some of the young men in Valomo had lived in Finland only for a short time and did not know the language very well, certainly not well enough to engage in theory-informed discussions facilitated by the researchers. Our meetings were very informal; we discussed various subjects over coffee; and when we asked the young people about, for instance, the meaning of a good life, we (the researchers and coaches) also disclosed our own lives, values and professional choices. I can conclude, when reflecting back these discussions, that despite our good intentions, we did not succeed very well in creating equality of knowledge and communication. The young men were too respectful of us, which showed in that they did not dare to ask us if they did not understand something, as the coaches later told us. The coaches occasionally asked us to talk to the young people more simply, but my feeling is that we were unable to do that. Such factors – the flow of communication and mutual understanding in linguistic, cultural and professional terms – are of great importance when considering the (pre)conditions of knowledge co-construction and when reflecting on how the process went and what was achieved together.

Second, returning to the question of what was the “knowledge” we ended up creating in and through the theatre project and research collaboration, my response is that I can’t be quite sure or that I am unable to explicate the results of our project very well. On the one hand, the radical epistemological openness applied in our collaboration made it possible to get to know the young men in Valomo and hear their stories without our having a limited agenda or a preset theoretical framework. On the other hand, such a design later proved problematic precisely for the conceptual articulation of the research findings. In the end, my personal and our shared experiences in the research collaboration were so multidimensional that it proved very challenging to separate the bits of “knowledge” from everything else. We (the researchers) did articulate our findings and formulated our knowledge claims, but processing the data and our experiences into representable knowledge was by no means easy. We had avoided theory-laden language and thinking while actively engaging in collaboration and started asking knowledge-producing questions only later when meeting with coaches and actors for collective discussion and reflection. Even after we had developed our findings into a theoretical argument, I felt that much of what we had experienced and learned during the project went beyond what

can be articulated as research knowledge. Here, I concur wholeheartedly with Olli and Minna's similar reflections.

In this text we make a distinction, as noted earlier, between knowledge and knowing. When I think about the project through this distinction, I can conclude that our collaboration generated a bundle of knowledge claims on the well-being of young refugees that we were able to compare and link with previous research on the subject. Our results here were, for the most part, consistent with earlier findings related, for example, to the importance of belonging for young refugees' well-being and how that can be supported through art. On the other hand, the project developed into something that I think can be better described as knowing in the sense of "learning how to live and act in concert with others" (Arendt 1958) while simultaneously acknowledging and appreciating the participants' personal experiences and knowledges.

Finally, my feeling (but not my knowledge) is that, in the end, the young men in Valomo had only a vague idea of how the theatre project and the research process were related. We did not realise this shortcoming during the project and missed the opportunity to explicate to them that their life stories provided meaningful information not only for research but also for important data for political decision making. In retrospect, it would have been important to end the process with a meeting with the young men to share and discuss our findings together. Instead, we conducted a final interview in which we asked the young men about their thoughts and feelings about the project. Their comments to us on that occasion were polite but scant, leaving us uncertain about "how they really felt" about our collaboration, even when they had talked to the coaches about the project in positive and appreciative terms.

### **The story of the youth – important contributors to the knowledge construction, but did they see it? (*The author collective*)**

We find it essential to also reflect on the project from the perspective of the young men involved. This account has been reconstructed by the author collective because, at its writing, we no longer had direct access to the 2018 group. We cannot claim to be representing their "voice", yet, we assume that, as the result of our collective memory work and analysis, we will be able to bring up some relevant points about what the young men gained from the project knowledge-wise and how they felt about it overall. Olli's reflections particularly play an important role here, because he was in daily contact with the young people throughout the collaboration.

The starting point of the study was to approach these young men as the experts in their own lives and experiences. The researchers sought to even out the power differentials between the participants and interact with the group in such a way that they would not themselves pose as knowledge authorities. However, despite their good intentions, this did not always work out very well. In retrospect, we think that it was probably difficult for the young men to grasp what academic research means and what was supposed to happen in the project. This hiatus stems mainly from

the project including elements of co-research methodology, which meant that the researchers were unable to clearly explain the objectives of both the research and the process to the group when the project started. Some participants' limited language skills also set their own limitations on the interactions. The coaches sometimes commented on the researchers' "difficult language" and occasionally ended up "translating" their speech to the group to explain the matters more simply.

Despite having some problems understanding what the research project was about, the young men seemed to appreciate that the researchers wanted to listen seriously to their thoughts and experiences. They were also interested in the theatre project. None of the young men had been to the theatre before nor were they familiar with what kind of cultural institution it represented, which makes it understandable why their visit later to the local theatre house and the visit of the Playback Theatre group in Valomo was an inspiring experience for many. Seeing their stories acted out in front of their eyes clearly amazed and delighted them. Some reflected on the played-back stories verbally by stating, for example, that "that's exactly what I felt in that situation, but now I think I could have acted differently". It was interesting to see how the young men were able to quickly embrace the idea of storytelling, the importance of sharing stories and utilising Playback Theatre as a means of looking back at their lives from a different perspective (Vettrainoa, Linds & Jindal-Snape 2017). It was, moreover, an empowering experience for many of them to see their stories presented on stage, as they later commented to the coaches. These young men who are used to living in a socially and societally marginalised position became at least momentarily visible through our project.

It is difficult to say anything exact regarding what we can conclude about the kind of knowledge the young men gained through the project. It needs to be pointed out that the research project was part of the overall programme at Valomo, which makes it difficult to distinguish its meaning and impact for those young people from the other programme activities. However, we can still propose that they learned something about, for example, the institution of the university and its meaning for Finnish society, as well as about the meanings of theatre as an art form and a cultural institution. They also acquired new perspectives on their life course, past choices and future possibilities through the theatre project.

We in the author collective also have different emphases in our interpretations of how the young men experienced the project. As Tiina sees it (and worries), the young men were hardly able to properly grasp what their significance and contribution to the research ultimately was. From Olli's perspective, the theatre project and the discussions with the researchers brought new elements to their lives and provided useful knowledge about Finnish society. He also stresses that it was important for the young men to be treated respectfully by the researchers because they usually suffer from structural marginalisation and everyday racism.

Minna would like to draw attention to the meaning of the closing performance. The short play made the young men's stories visceral and tangible to the audience, while it simultaneously justified their past experiences of conflict, violence

and flight, as well as the hardships involved in settling in Finland. They were able to feel that “I too matter, I am a valuable human being” from the respectful and sensitive portrayal of their experiences on stage. This was possible to sense and partly hear from the young men as they watched the final play and later verbally commented on it.

## Conclusion

Our experiences of research collaboration in the context of the Valomo programme support the argument that the results of co-constructed research are not easy to put into conceptual findings. We think that participatory research should be very careful when engaging in collective knowledge work not to marginalise or tune out different voices for the sake of producing knowledge and research publications that the scientific community sanctions as “proper”. In fact, we might apply here the same principle that participatory research ethics employs in which all research participants have an equal right to be heard and taken into account and no one’s contribution is “wrong”. Perhaps it is equally important to accept that all participants have the right to their own knowledge and to (re)present it in public.

The requirement for conceptually representable knowledge is also problematic in another sense. Think, for example, about young research participants like the young men in Valomo. We were in no position to require them to have previous or conceptualised knowledge of the theme of the study or to engage them in the formation of theoretical knowledge after the project. Theory-building was also demanding for us (the researchers), and it took time. It is important to recognise the possibility, when collaborating on research with young people, that the collaboration may produce a wide range of experiences, learnings and outcomes that even researchers may not be able to put into argumentative knowledge. Sometimes it happens that the young people and researchers are able to analyse data together and build joint research presentations based on it. However, not only is this not the kind of outcome that research involving young people can require in principle, but it is also not the case that young people could be easily converted to “semi-professional” researchers who would replicate similar scientific practices that we as academics have trained ourselves in. Experienced researchers using participatory and co-research methods are well aware that each process is unique, depending on both the objectives of the research and on the background, characteristics and expectations of the research participants, which then means that each project and process needs to be tailored to suit the context. In the Valomo case, we asked the young men to tell us stories about their lives and hoped that we could all learn something important through them. We did not demand anything else, and even when telling stories was voluntary, as research ethics states, everyone in the group seized the opportunity with some degree of enthusiasm.

We have been surprised by how far our research collaboration that occurred years ago has taken us and by the kinds of new initiatives it has engendered. We have continued to reflect on our collaboration within the collective, and we feel that

our knowledge, knowing and understanding of the 2018 project continue to evolve, with ever new layers of understanding added each time we meet and reflect on our experiences.

## Note

- 1 The group of researchers included Päivi Honkatukia and Jarmo Rinne, in addition to Rättilä.

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# Exploring the future together with young people

## Methodological considerations on playfulness, joy and silence as forms of participation

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### Introduction

One of ALL-YOUTH's aims has been to understand how young people imagine the future and how they would like to contribute to its sustainability. To achieve this, we have explored young people's ideas of the future of working lives, well-being and sustainable societies (Honkatukia et al., 2020; Honkatukia & Lähde 2020; Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren 2021). Making sense of these issues can be challenging in many ways. Future horizons and possibilities are entangled with social and power relations, which deeply shape people's imageries of the future. Individuals' backgrounds, experiences and aspirations affect how far they can or want to plan their future and how clear or ambiguous the future appears to them (Mische 2009). One can imagine how tricky the question of the future can be for young people from diverse backgrounds; while some view the future with enthusiasm and excitement, for others it can be daunting to think about it. However, we align with Mische (2009), who claims that even if the future does not often materialise as visioned, the imageries of it still have a significant impact on what kind of future we are building.

The overwhelming aim underpinning knowledge production in ALL-YOUTH has been to challenge what youth researchers have referred to as intergenerational pass-talking (Anttila 2010) or adult-centred approaches (e.g., Tilley & Taylor 2018). These conceptualisations attempt to capture the communicational processes in which some people's views are regarded as less valuable or remain unattended to because of their age. This situation reflects age-related societal power relations that give some groups an entitlement to dominate discussions without sensitivity to other groups' views or voices. In ALL-YOUTH, we have sought to avoid pass-talking through our methodological choices. This has meant that, in addition to using traditional data collection methods (interviews, questionnaires and observation), we have sought to increase young participants' involvement in knowledge production and establish a respectful interaction with them through exploratory fieldwork experiments (see Tilley & Taylor 2018).

In this chapter, we evaluate our knowledge production that arose through participatory and group-based methods, such as World Cafés (Honkatukia & Lähde 2020), collage creation in workshops (Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren 2021) and group activities online. As youth researchers our aim has been to make the research encounters safe and convivial for young people, provide them with space for imagination in a supportive and comfortable atmosphere and enable the questioning of adult-centred understandings of society (cf. Hokkanen 2014; Lyon & Carabelli 2016; Janhonen 2017; Pasek et al., 2008). In planning these research activities, we have been motivated by earlier research findings, according to which open discussions and a supportive atmosphere can encourage young people to express their opinions, stimulate their creative thinking and help them reflect on their possibilities to impact the issues important to them (e.g., Pasek et al., 2008; Katainen & Heikkilä 2020; Davidson 2017; Hokkanen 2014).

In this chapter, we engage in a critical reflexive assessment of the realisation of our aims regarding these participatory and youth-centred methods, especially in studying questions related to the future and sustainability. We begin the chapter by discussing the challenges related to the future as a youth research topic and by presenting our methodological commitments. Thereafter, we reflect on some fieldwork experiences and lessons learned, especially those related to issues such as play, creativity, humour, but also to silence and withdrawal.

### **Studying young people's visions of the future**

Even if the future is unknown, as a topic it touches young people in more concrete ways than other generations, as they are going through their transitions to adulthood and making significant choices concerning their future lives. For many young people, the future involves simultaneously hope, optimism and uncertainty (e.g., Franceschelli & Keating 2018; Cahill & Cook 2020; Leccardi 2005). Moreover, youth research scholars have for long analysed the fragmentation of traditions and collective identities from young people's perspectives, as well as criticised education and employment policies for their narrow focus on individual responsibility in finding one's path in an unpredictable world (Mertanen, Mäkelä & Brunila 2020; Brunila & Lundahl 2020; Wyn 2017; Nikunen 2017; Furlong & Cartmel 2007). In other words, these policies are maintaining a discourse of labour market citizenship that aims to activate and push young people towards taking responsibility for staying on the "right" route, as defined by the adult society (see Chapter 5).

These societal expectations can be a source of great insecurity for young people in their dynamic life stage. In recent years, the relationship between young people's increased mental health problems and intensified pressures has been debated especially in the Global North, even if unambiguous evidence of interlinks between pressures and mental health problems has proven difficult to establish (e.g., Madsen 2021). Also, young people's diverging social environments, which are greatly shaped by increasing inequality, significantly impact their imageries of the future,



opening horizons of opportunities for some while limiting others' imagination of their possible future trajectories (see Mische 2009; Moensted 2021).

Furthermore, it is important to note that despite the abundance of studies and interest in young people, there exists a less genuine willingness in society to include them in decision making, especially on issues that are regarded as important in society (see e.g., Chapter 4). Therefore, young people as a social group often experience intergenerational pass-talking in the discussions and decision making concerning the future (Mietola, Kallio & Honkatukia 2022). This situation seriously hampers the realisation of intergenerational justice, especially from the perspective of current young generations, as is argued elsewhere in this book (see Chapters 1 and 3).

Hence, it can be argued that both the future and youth are contentious research topics, let alone when they are studied together. Despite this, we believe that exploring the future in collaboration with young people can be meaningful, both for them and research. At best, discussions about young people's future visions can increase their trust in sustainable future horizons, helping them make sense of their possibilities. In terms of knowledge production, including young people's views democratises the research process and improves the quality of knowledge when the participants are motivated to explore the questions under study (see Chapters 4 and 6).

### **Playfulness as a methodological guideline**

In engaging young people in research concerning the future, we have highlighted the importance of the conviviality of collective interactions, such as offering them possibilities for play and creativity in research situations. These features are visible, for example, in the creative renewal seen in the meme culture (Mortensen & Neumayer 2021) or in the recent youth protests against climate change, during which young people have been organised globally in unprecedented ways to demand political decisions for safeguarding the future for children and young people, as well as for future generations (Bowman 2019, 297). Besides serious demands, the protests have involved a cheerful and excited atmosphere and have made visible how excitement, play, laughter and fun are integral parts of resistance. Similarly, we have sought to inspire creativity and playfulness in our fieldwork and experiments to awaken young people's imaginations about the future. In research, these features have been documented to have the potential to break boundaries and stimulate discussion, as well as aid in dealing with the difficult and frightening scenarios the future might bring about (Lyon & Carabelli 2016, 442; also, Pyyry 2015; Wright 2020).

Our starting point has been that meaningful collaboration with young people in research requires a respectful approach and genuine desire to understand young people's lives and thoughts from their perspective. In this, informal, youth-oriented and creative group methods are useful because, apart from the sensation of joy, they have the potential to increase a sense of communality within the study participants. More traditional methods, such as thematic interviews with prepared scenarios and

question layouts, would not necessarily allow the playful use of imagination in the same way, and the young people's descriptions of their understandings of the future can remain more formal and guided by the researchers' questions; also, the participating young people may align with what they think they are supposed to respond (Lyon & Carabelli 2016; Pyyry 2015; Davidson 2017; cf. Holland et al., 2010).

It is possible to find support for our approach besides in empirical studies, also in more theoretically tuned research discussions, such as those related to sustainable well-being, where it has been argued that a sense of belonging through positive and meaningful engagements with others are important elements of individual well-being and societal participation (Helne & Hirvilammi 2017). Hence, interactional elements such as playfulness and fun should be regarded as the fundamental elements of well-being, and young people should be provided with situations that involve these elements. This is particularly important amid the individualistic pressures that many young people face in the society today.

Moreover, we have been inspired by the idea of play and joy as capabilities that construct human well-being and a sense of being valued in society, as argued by Martha Nussbaum in her renowned Capabilities Approach. Nussbaum (2011, 29–32, 169) views these activities as an example of key capabilities that should be provided to everyone so that they can live a life worth of human dignity.<sup>1</sup> Another key capability she identifies, that of senses, imagination and thought, relates to the freedom to use imagination and express oneself freely in creative ways (Nussbaum 2011, 33–34). According to Nussbaum, a creative and playful orientation to activities in communities and society are constitutive parts of a trustful, relaxed and accessible environment where the threshold for participation is as low as possible.

We have followed these contentions in our empirical experiments and attempted to offer the young participants possibilities for genuinely joyful activities and engagement. In the workshops we conducted, we wanted to break everyday routines in a safe and free space, where young people could build trust and reflect the research themes together with others and build new meanings through, for example, role-playing, that is, by absorbing different roles in a playful manner (Tuuva-Hongisto 2021, 81). We strove to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere with appropriate rhythm and time use, emphasised the voluntary nature of working and highlighted the participants' important contributions to research. We hoped that our efforts would create an accepting atmosphere, increase young people's sense of communality and encourage them to voice their views, and meticulously observed whether or not this occurred in the activities we organised.

### **Group-based participation in research**

During our fieldwork, especially when experimenting with participatory and playful methods with young people, we became aware of the central importance of the communicative aspects in the research process, both in terms of young participants' experiences of inclusion versus exclusion in knowledge production and in terms of the nature of knowledge produced itself. We organised many group-based activities

with young people but report here those experiences that were derived from three particular settings, which we describe next more closely.

We analyse the meanings of humour in envisioning the future and sustainability based on two kinds of workshops. First, we collaborated with vocational education students, with whom we ran workshops by applying an empathy-based stories method (Wallin, Koro-Ljunberg & Eskola 2019). The study participants were given a short narrative to which they were asked to imagine in small groups a continuing storyline. They were given a task to imagine either a “successful” or “unsuccessful” transition from education to working life and then create a visual collage of magazine cuts (pictures, words, etc.) that would reflect their ideas (Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren 2021). This method was used as an icebreaker for consecutive group interviews. Each small group first presented their collages to the researcher(s) and then engaged in a discussion based on the researchers’ questions that related to their visions of their future working life.

Second, we analyse how humour became visible in the virtual workshops we organised together with the “JÄLKES” research project, as part of the Researchers’ Night event during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ågren, Meriläinen & Järvinen 2021).<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the workshop was to inspire discussion on young people’s well-being and societal participation and offer them the opportunity to take part in interpreting the views produced during the workshop. The workshop gathered approximately 300 young people aged 15–17 in different educational settings. The participants operated in workshops behind pseudonyms and were guided by their teachers. The researchers communicated with them via a one-way stream service, and the participant groups had no direct connection to each other.

Finally, we contemplate the meanings of silence and withdrawal by analysing a specific chain of events in one of the World Café workshops we organised for young people in diverse educational settings (Honkatukia & Lähde 2020). In the series of workshops, the participants discussed topics related to, for example, the future of work and the ramifications of climate change on our way of life. The classrooms were transformed into a café-like environment by moving tables and chairs into separate groups and providing refreshments. For this chapter, we have chosen an example from our World Cafés for tenth grade, which was, at the time, a voluntary extra year of comprehensive school. As a group of five researcher facilitators, we regularly visited a group of 12 students aged 15–17 during their school year, over a period of nine months. We ran World Café workshops with them to produce different types of data, such as group discussions, fieldnotes and products of workshops. During the World Cafés, we also showed short films concerning the future to inspire discussions.

### **Conviviality as a means to explore the future with young people**

When planning for the workshops with empathy-based stories, we were guided by the idea that a playful crafting task would help break the ice between young people

and us researchers at the beginning of the workshop (e.g., Lyon & Carabelli 2016; Pyyry 2015). In many groups, this task indeed brought enthusiasm. The reasons behind this may vary, but the young people seemed to engage more easily in a playful crafting task with a familiar group or friends, suggesting that the “naturally” formed groups were experienced as supportive and safe environment for addressing uncomfortable feelings and even expressing disagreements (Warr 2005). In these groups playfulness indeed helped the participants deal with the ambivalent aspects of the future and inspired them in a way we had planned (cf. Cameron et al., 2010; Johannessen 2021; Hewer, Smith & Fergie 2019; Wright 2020). After one group interview, for example, the participants stated that the workshop had been an important opportunity for them to talk about the forthcoming working life transition. For them, the icebreaker task had enabled playing with the idea of an unknown future and helped them discuss the future in meaningful ways (also, Lyon & Carabelli 2016).

On the other hand, in groups to which a teacher had gathered the participants from different classes, the atmosphere became relaxed more slowly. Moreover, we noticed that not all the students were immediately ready to start working after we had introduced the task. For example, two students hesitated to join the collage workshops because they regarded the collage task too difficult and were worried about the recording of the interviews (Ågren et al., 2020). They agreed to participate only after we promised not to record their interview. During the workshop, their hesitation gradually turned into enthusiasm, as they realised that the study provided them with a chance to be heard on their own terms (e.g., Wright 2020; Davidson 2017; Lyon & Carabelli 2016). During the interview, these at first shy and reluctant students ended up presenting their thoughts vividly and telling us that they found the research subject very important and relevant.

Joking and humour were common interactional features when the workshop participants prepared their collage works and presented them to the researcher(s). The light and joyful sociability that characterised these situations may depart from the common idea of research, which is often presumed to be serious-spirited activity where the researcher adopts a neutral role, and young people, through various forms of research bureaucracy, are positioned as obedient informants. Humour has, however, been documented to be an important element of research situations, having diverse functions. Humour can, for example, help address injustices, enable handling or challenging power relations and stereotypes or aid in processing unpleasant or troublesome experiences or difficult emotions (Wright 2020, 43; Hewer, Smith & Fergie 2019; Laakkonen & Juntunen 2019). In some situations, humour can create a friendly atmosphere and increase a sense of communality and belonging (Lahelma 2002). Moreover, through joking, it is possible for some participants to avoid or bypass difficult and too personal topics (Janhonen 2017, 1138). On the other hand, using humour may also have negative consequences. It can contribute to formation of unsafe spaces for some participants and prevent them from expressing their views. In the worst case, it can cause some participants' feelings to be ridiculed or discriminated against (Hewer, Smith & Fergie 2019, 441).

In our study, especially the preparation of the collage on “unsuccessful” transitions to working life triggered a lot of joking and joyful interaction. One group, for example, depicted a failing working life transition through an image of a forest-dwelling hermit. In the interview, the participants presented the collage with giggling and bursts of laughter. Eventually, however, they engaged passionately in detailed discussions on what the failure to integrate into working life would mean for them. In the collage story, the hermit had not found employment after graduation, was kicked out from the childhood home and lived alone in the forest, spending his time fishing, hunting and consuming alcohol. When discussing this collage, the participants emphasised its exaggerated nature, how they did not wish this kind of a lifestyle for themselves in the future and how neither society nor “the taxman” would appreciate such a lifestyle. In this case, laughing and humorous imagination provoked important thoughts, conceivably leading the participants to a more in-depth discussion on the subject than would otherwise have happened.

Similarly, another group prepared a collage where they placed scant pictures and words, for example, the text “dead-honest demons drilled a hole in Jaakko [a male name]”. The collage was clearly meant to be funny – a joke. While analysing the transcript of the discussion, we realised how relevant the researcher’s ability to throw themselves into the discussion was in this case. Instead of bypassing the collage as a joke, the researcher asked the participants detailed questions of it and actively inspired their discussion on how failures at work can cause self-blame and low self-esteem; hence, with attentive listening and concrete questions the researcher enabled a possibility for the participants to explain the idea of “dead-honest demons” in the collage more closely. The participants might not have presented their critical ideas on transitions to working life at all had the researcher intervened in their collage preparation guided it in a more serious direction or shrugged it off as being insignificant (cf. Walters 2020, 374). In general, the combination of collage works and group interviews made it possible for the young people to unfold and collectively voice the meanings of the images and words of their own choosing in a group situation (also, Lyon & Carabelli 2016; Davidson 2017; Tilley & Taylor 2018, 2197).

### **Expressing belonging in a group setting**

In the above examples, joy, humour, laughter and art making acted as inspirations for young people to express their views of a challenging topic: the future of work. In addition, our fieldwork included examples of the meaning of these elements in relation to belonging, here understood as an individual’s emotional attachment to a group or community (Anthias 2006, 21). As for all human beings, for young people, being accepted is important, and they may attempt to find meaningful ways to belong when they encounter contextual boundaries that they experience as preventing this basic need (Vesikansa 1988). In these situations, humour can be used as an attempt to find a legitimate position in a group or seek approval from

others, similar to how Paul Willis (1997, 29–43) has famously analysed the practice of “having a laff” as a form of young working-class lads’ defiant conduct, as an attempt to secure one’s position in the masculine peer hierarchies and a means to criticise and oppose the conceptions of the formal expectations and rules created by adults (also, Janhonen 2017, 1135–1139).

At times, the question of belonging became apparent in the workshops we organised exploring the future or the nature of sustainable well-being. An illuminating example of this is from the “Researcher’s Night” workshop. Simultaneously guaranteeing a sense of belonging and being heard for a large number of participants proved to be extremely challenging for the researchers in this remotely conducted event. In the workshop, the participants’ anonymity, along with the complexities in organising the workshop virtually, to some extent, compromised our aim to offer young people a meaningful participation experience (Ågren, Meriläinen & Järvinen 2021). Even if many participants followed the instructions, some took advantage of posting humorous memes and images to the joint platform, some of which were tacky and even discriminatory in style.

According to our interpretation, this kind of trolling may have signalled some participants’ frustration with the given workshop assignment and embedded power relations between the participants, as well as between the participants and researchers (cf. Hollander 2004). Being together in a virtual space with unknown young people and adults discussing a somewhat abstract theme – well-being, societal participation and the future – was probably confusing for some, and they decided to act defiantly, perhaps in the hope of receiving acceptance from their peers (e.g., Vesikansa 1988, 57–59). Their conduct, which they most probably knew would cause disapproval, can also be interpreted as resistance towards the roles that they were assigned to (Hokkanen 2014; Janhonen 2017) or towards the form of participation that they did not regard as comfortable or sensible (cf. Davidson 2017, 233). Moreover, they might have reacted to hierarchies between them and other young people in different educational tracks (the participants were in the ninth grade in comprehensive school and in general or vocational track in upper secondary education) or those between them and the researchers organising the workshop (cf. Davidson 2017, 235).

This example of a group engagement which was not successful in all its aspects shows that humour as a dimension of participation is a much more complex question than it appears at first glance. Instead of framing the above-described conduct only as senseless misbehaviour, joking or trolling memes, it can be interpreted as an attempt to have an impact. Such “unruliness” can be interpreted as critical comments on the topics under discussion (Mortensen & Neumayer 2021) or attempts to change the course of the workshop. Therefore, young people’s defiant acts should not be ignored or bypassed as mere nonsense or disruptiveness (Katainen & Heikkilä 2020, 661), as it would dismiss the meanings of these acts, position young people as inappropriate citizens who lack the skills to participate and influence in a meaningful way and risk strengthening their sense of inferiority in the (adult-centred) society (e.g., Bessant 2020).

The topics of trolling were often related to race, gender, sexuality and other societal divisions, which are all important dimensions in terms of the workshop's general theme of well-being and societal participation. Had this particular workshop lasted longer (than the assigned 75 minutes), it might have been possible to deal with the humour posts and memes together with young people, connecting them more firmly to the discussion on sustainable well-being, the future and participation.

### **Silence and withdrawal as participation**

In terms of knowledge production, it is important to acknowledge young people's different voices and agency in group-based research activities. Scholars have reminded that accounts arising in group discussions should not be treated as factual knowledge in and of themselves, but instead, products of the interactive circumstances in which they are produced (e.g., Holland et al., 2010; Hollander 2004). Some young people can adopt a dominating role, while others may just nod or otherwise show that they comply with others' opinions; and there can be participants who appear quiet and inattentive (Katainen & Heikkilä 2020). What is said aloud in the group interview depends on many factors, such as the social relations between the participants, the nature of the research environment and the goals, visions, desires or prejudices young people have regarding group participation or research as a practice in general. Some topics may be too difficult to deal with collectively, and some participants may seek to please the researcher(s). It might also be challenging to get young people to openly reflect difficult issues, since as a kind of survival strategy, some may choose to talk about their circumstances in ways that do not threaten their sense of security (Kaukko 2015; Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021).

As researchers, we easily get carried away with the research methods that inspire us. Hence, we might forget that the methods we choose to use are not suitable for everyone. It should be admitted that creative and arts-based methods, for example, may limit the participation of those not interested in such engagements or of those who might experience these methods as threatening or difficult (cf. Lyon & Carabelli 2016, 432, 442). Therefore, the researcher should be attentive to one's assumptions that relate to the appropriateness of methods for each research group and its members, their capabilities and preferences and to knowledge production in general (cf. Walters 2020, 364).

From this perspective, it is important to pay attention to withdrawal and silence when evaluating group-based research participation (Hollander 2004). Remaining silent can be rational agency, drawing the line regarding what feels safe to say aloud (cf. Daley 2015; Hollander 2004, 615). Instead of signalling passivity or like-mindedness with others, silence can be a young person's active choice to, for example, resist, express disagreement, challenge or stand above the comments and opinions of others (cf. Katainen & Heikkilä 2020, 658–659). In some of our workshops, we encountered situations in which the young participants' reactions could be interpreted as a signal of frustration or anxiety towards the research situation,

for example, if a young person had previously had adverse experiences with the authorities or if the researchers had failed to clarify and justify the research in understandable ways (also, Pakkanen 2006). Yet we also noticed that silence may mark attentiveness or an attempt to listen carefully, learn and memorise what is being said or to discover the nature of the event and contemplate one's relation to it. During our fieldwork, some young people expressed afterwards their gratitude towards our efforts, even if we had found ourselves in awkwardly silent situations in the group activities they referred to.

As an example of the meanings of silence, we bring forth a research situation – reflecting back on our fieldnotes on it – with the tenth-graders, where the assignment of the workshop was to write opinion pieces in groups (young people and researchers working together; Lähde & Honkatukia 2019). After getting an assignment, one of the groups was particularly silent. The researchers collaborating with this group attempted in numerous ways to find out how to continue, but the group remained silent for a long time, which the researchers found difficult to bear. Eventually, however, the facilitating researchers managed to create some discussion. This led to the writing of a powerful opinion piece about the reasons behind silence, which related to their distrust of being heard and being taken seriously. The following fieldwork note describes the atmosphere and the course of events in this group:

The researchers [M & J] are facilitating a group discussion with three students on a teacher-initiated exercise: “Choose a subject for an opinion piece and give justifications for it”. The start is uneasy; the students seem reluctant to talk/play a part. None of them makes an effort to choose a subject for the opinion piece; one of the students withdraws and moves to the couch. Silence. M & J are “testing” ideas with the two students remaining in the table: trying to promote discussion and collaborative take on the exercise and facilitate the group to pick up a topic for the opinion piece. The students are quiet and do not respond. M & J end up “talking alone”, exchanging uncertain looks with each other. Finally, after a long uncomfortable silence, one of the students says quietly, “I don't want to say my opinion, as it's worthless anyway. It makes no difference what I say or think ... and it may just cause trouble”. M & J take up the idea and suggest: “Why don't we take this as an opinion to write about?” The students at the table agree. This marks a change in the course of interaction. Little by little, M & J are able to elicit ideas, arguments and examples from the students. We have only five minutes left. J takes his laptop and puts together an opinion piece based on the ideas and arguments the students bring up as we chat. Finally, we ask them to check if they can “own”/accept the piece. At the end of the discussion, all groups read aloud their opinion pieces. Each piece is applauded. The class ends with the teacher asking, “Who felt your voice was heard today? Please, raise hands”. Both “I” and “E” [students in the group] raise their hands.

The fieldnote illustrates how silence can be an active choice for young people to express their feelings and experiences. Even if the group work involves awkward



silence – and it can be claimed this was needed here – they were able to express a view that their opinions were not valued and, therefore, that they considered it better to stay silent. The way young people participate in a research situation, whether they are talkative, quiet, seek to change or rebel against the course or topics of conversation, is indication of how young people interpret the situation and their own position in it (Katainen & Heikkilä 2020). In the same way as humour and trolling, this example shows how silence can be an expression of political opinion or a manifestation of young people’s disapproval of how they interpret adults’ opinions of them and their role as societal actors (cf. Hokkanen 2014).

Acknowledging silence, giving it space, dealing with it and understanding it, requires attention from the researcher, both in the research situation and when analysing, for example, group interviews. In the above example, the researchers were alert in the situation and managed to deal with silence so that the young people could eventually experience that they had been heard. Walters (2020, 374) has similarly pointed out that researchers are inclined to intervene and interrupt situations considered irrelevant or uncomfortable. However, as the above example shows, nonessentials may turn out to be very important for the participants and the research alike. In the above case, an attempt to do away with silence could have led to bypassing essential observations. The case also makes visible how young people may participate in research in ways that differ from the researcher’s plans and understandings, and these ways should be allowed if the researcher is seriously interested in young people’s thoughts (cf. Davidson 2017; see also the book’s Introduction and Chapter 8).

## **Conclusion**

During our research journeys, we have become aware of various forms of and meanings of interactional features such as humour or silence when encountering youth groups. From the beginning, we have attempted to make the research situations comfortable for young people, but along the way, we have learned a great deal about possible obstacles to this. Acknowledging these interactional features adequately in the knowledge creation processes is crucial if one wishes to avoid intergenerational pass-talking, where young people are placed in an inferior position as citizens and knowers (Anttila 2010). According to our observations, playfulness and humour have potential; they can make the research situation easy-going, convivial and productive, but likewise, analysing research interaction carefully can reveal ambivalences – even flaws, as well as reveal significant research ethical dilemmas.

Our observations support the earlier research findings, according to which appreciating young people’s choices of their preferred form of participation – be it silence, boundary making or complying with the given instructions – is one important means to equalise the research relationship. This can occur if the researcher can keep the research situation flexible and secure so that young participants find pleasant and comfortable ways to engage (Davidson 2017). At the same

time, it is important to bear in mind that even the most participatory research constellations do not completely eradicate the power imbalances between researchers and participating young people or ensure that all young people have equal possibilities to participate or that they feel that their voices are heard and valued (Davidson 2017; Holland et al., 2010).

Therefore, asking young people to engage in research activities requires responsibility and skills from the researcher. Conducting group-based participatory research demands constant sensitivity, self-reflection and understanding of the research environment as a living communal space that is constantly changing (Goessling & Wager 2021). Moreover, in participatory research with young people, the nature of interaction is as much an ethical question as it is one of the choices of the research method (Tilley & Taylor 2018). Therefore, it is an ethical duty of the researcher to observe the development of the research interaction and do one's best to ensure that each participant feels safe and comfortable.

Furthermore, researchers conducting participatory research with youth groups should be constantly alert to identify and acknowledge the different ways in which young people's participation manifests itself not only as verbal accounts, but also as silence, withdrawal, acts of humorous troublemaking, rebellion or defiant conduct. From the researcher's perspective, encountering such interaction can be uncomfortable and may require interventions because of research ethics (cf. Walters 2020). While recognising this, we wish to emphasise that, from the point of view of knowledge construction, all participation is valuable. Ignoring or suppressing some forms of it may lead to bypassing important critical voices in relation to the topic of the research.

Therefore, the data produced in participatory settings also require epistemological reflection. It has been pointed out that young people's accounts may not be automatically compatible with the researcher's framework and require genuine sensitivity to the complexities of young people's avowals and agency in research situations (Lyon & Carabelli 2016). Participatory research tools can aid in making visible such young people's ideas that adult researchers are not aware of. At the same time, young people's sometimes intermittent ideas risk being overridden by the researcher's interpretation, and critical self-reflection is necessary here, too (Tilley & Taylor 2018, 2197; also, Holland et al., 2010, 373; Walters 2020). In addition to the fact that we, as researchers ourselves, already make assumptions about research methods that appreciate young people or meet their needs, the interrelations between young people participating in the study, the context of the research, young people's assumptions and opinions concerning the research and the activities they are asked to engage in, all entail complex power relations and may delineate, hinder or make invisible some young people's views and actions in the research (cf. Hollander 2004; Katainen & Heikkilä 2020; Walters 2020).

In conclusion, we would like to encourage researchers to give young people the space and opportunities to participate in the research process in the way they find comfortable – be it joking, playful or humorous engagements. In the same way as Nussbaum (2011) has determined that enabling joyful and meaningful experiences

to the individual is a duty of society, we see that guaranteeing joy to young people is a duty the researcher should aim to fulfil. This means that a researcher working with young people should acknowledge the situational communicational features arising in a research encounter from the perspective of well-being (e.g., Cameron et al., 2010). We claim that a convivial, safe and respectful research atmosphere, along with being an avenue to high-quality knowledge, can also be an important possibility to value young participants as who they are, that is, to strengthen their sense of belonging and sense of being acknowledged as important (Anthias 2006). To genuinely achieve these aims requires acknowledging the diversity of participants and sensitivity to how their needs can be fulfilled in research encounters. This challenges the researcher to constant critical self-reflection, attentiveness, flexibility and high tolerance of discomfort. Young people may experience the research situation quite differently from what researchers expect and can participate in ways that, without attentiveness, may remain unnoticed and unacknowledged as participation and a valuable source of knowledge.

## Notes

- 1 Nussbaum (2011, 29–32, 169) lists ten capabilities that must be secured by society to guarantee its citizens opportunities to live a life worth of human dignity: (1) life, (2) bodily health, (3) bodily integrity, (4) senses, imagination and thought, (5) emotions, (6) practical reason, (7) affiliation, (8) other species, (9) play and (10) control over one's environment. All capabilities must be guaranteed at a minimum level, and the capabilities of affiliation and practical reason create a basis for all the other capabilities (Nussbaum 2011, 39).
- 2 Researchers' Night is a European-wide science event celebrated annually on the last weekend of September where researchers present their work to a wider audience through workshops, science lectures, researcher meetings and laboratory visits.

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## “How on Earth does one find a job in Finland?”

Reflections on using documentary film as a research method to study young asylum seekers' employment prospects

*Henri Onodera and Ahmed Zaidan*

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### Introduction

*Z: He sells good ice cream here.*

*Henri: What do you think about Finnish ice cream?*

*Z: It's international ice cream, not Finnish.*

*Henri: Certainly ice cream is tastier in Iraq.*

*Z: No, it's the same.*

We had this half-hearted conversation with “Z” while we were standing on Pyynikinharju, a high esker and scenic recreation area in Tampere, Finland, in May 2019. We were interviewing “Z” on camera in one of his favourite places, which he had frequented after moving to the Tampere region in southern Finland. Local delicacies had already risen on the agenda when Henri (one of the authors) asked in the car what things had surprised “Z” positively about Finland. “Mämmi!”, “Z” had muttered, referring to a traditional Finnish dessert that divides popular taste, causing us all to burst out laughing. After a moment of reflection, however, “Z” replied that he had been surprised, for example, by the extent of the freedom of expression and the press in Finland, which he greatly appreciated. He had been amazed that virtually anyone, including top-level politicians, could be discussed critically on television and in the press and no one would have problems with it. This experience stood in stark contrast to Iraq, his country of origin, and the other Middle Eastern countries he had lived in before seeking asylum in Finland.

In this chapter, we discuss the use of documentary film as a method for social science research.<sup>1</sup> With regard to youth research, the chapter presents a reflexive discussion on the processes and possibilities of using film in the study of young people in vulnerable positions. It is based on our own experiences of making short portrait documentary films about the employment prospects and experiences of young Iraqi men who have arrived in Finland as asylum seekers, under the shared title *Nahu al 'amal fi Finlanda: Turuq wa ahlam* (“Towards a job in Finland: Pathways and dreams”). As several chapters in this book attest, Finland is a notoriously difficult place for foreigners to find work, particularly those who are racialised as

“non-white” and come from the Middle East or North and sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, the young Iraqi “Z” managed to find a permanent job and shared with us his views about how newcomers could reach towards the same goal. In our research project, we wanted to discover the views young asylum seekers hold of their chances to participate in the Finnish labour market and working life, and the steps they believe bring success in finding a job. At the centre of their experiences were the issues, challenges and opportunities that they themselves raised and consider important for their employment.

When using documentary as a research method, many of the complex decisions and choices inherent in doing academic research are present, as well as a number of new ones. For example, the above exchanges with “Z” about ice cream and “määmi” represent two scenes which were difficult to decide whether to leave in the final documentary. We took the ice cream scene out of the final version but left the conversation about “määmi”. This decision was not taken because the latter would somehow have been more amusing or to show how great it is when a person who has moved to Finland from Iraq might like Finland’s unique national delicacy. More essential here was to convey the presence of a researcher and a film-maker through the soundtrack, and to point out a dialogic process in the making of the documentary. In another portrait documentary, a similar situation emerges when “K”, who lives in the southern city of Turku, suddenly interrupts the interview and wants us to film a blackbird singing in a tree. Ahmed (another of the authors) states in the video that it is not possible. The bird is too far away, and the necessary remote lens is not available. This scene, too, was selected to remain in the final version. In the name of critical reflexivity (where we are aware of our own assumptions and methodological choices), we have decided that such situations should also be reflected in the outcome.

With such choices, we have highlighted that we did not want to create a cinematic illusion by fading the actual filming process and its factors into the background. On the other hand, we (as researchers and film-makers) do not want to be too much on display, as the document is intended to highlight young people’s experiences. In addition, we had to consider what it means that ultimately our research material consists only of moving images and sound. How can we communicate our interpretations and understanding to viewers through them when we do not talk or say anything in the documentary’s soundtrack?

In what follows, we argue that collaborative documentary film complements the more traditional research projects on youth in vulnerable and marginal positions; it can convey the lived experiences and personal narratives in a more authentic way to different kinds of audiences. Yet as a process it provides academic research with new kinds of dilemmas with regard to the issues of representation, power asymmetries and ownership. Ultimately, the use of documentary film provides academic research with multiple possibilities, which leads us to conclude that not only collaborative but also participatory video methods could be more widely used in this context.



### **Why documentary as a research method?**

Why make documentary films as part of a social science research project? In comparison with more conventional interviews and participatory methods, what is the added value of producing research materials based on cinematic narration and moving image? Documentary film belongs to the broad category of visual methods in social scientific research that include, among others, the use of photographs, video, drawings and other visual illustrations in data gathering, analysis and science communication (Pink 2003; Mitchell 2012). Visual methods have been promoted especially for their participatory potential in knowledge-making: research subjects not only can participate in the research project as co-creators of knowledge (Gruber 2016), but visual materials overcome the dominance of textual format over other ways of knowing and understanding the social world (Hughes 2019).

Although documentary film has been long used, especially in anthropology and sociology, it is an up-and-coming area of participatory research methodology across social science disciplines (Borish et al., 2021; Vecchio, Dhillon & Ulmer 2017; Pink 2012). When it comes to youth, and young people in vulnerable positions especially, visual methods may open up ways to explore the nuances of their lived experiences and to communicate complex realities in ways that textual format cannot capture nor convey (Hughes 2021). The use of filmed audiovisual materials is considered beneficial for analysis as well, as they convey not only verbal but also non-verbal communication, thus advancing the quality and depth of data. In contrast to textual format, however, the authorship of audiovisual materials is more complex, and finalising a documentary film involves different types of ethical and technical choices – for example, what is appropriate to show and what scenes are included or excluded in the final documentary and why (Hughes 2019; Fitzgerald & Lowe 2020). Despite these challenges, as reflexive practice, documentary film also has the propensity to balance the power asymmetries between the researcher and the subjects of research. This refers especially to collaborative film-making as a way of conceiving an interpersonal process and a space for dialogue, or

a space for filmmakers to learn to pose the questions they do not originally know how to ask, a place where film subjects select the fragments of their reality, and a moral place where subjects and image makers can mediate their own representation.

(Elder 1995, 94; see also Hughes 2019, 160)

Despite our different and multilayered motivations for film-making, which are described in more detail below, we shared this ethos of collaboration to be as open as possible for the research participants' experiences. In addition, it was very much present in the lateral collaboration we – a researcher and a young Iraqi refugee – pursued in the process of film-making. We were both strongly motivated to try to overcome some of the misrepresentation that young refugees and asylum seekers face in the public debates in Finland. For us, the main issue and guiding idea of the

project was clear from the outset. We wanted to find out how young people who had come to Finland as asylum seekers experienced and viewed their opportunities to get employed. This research interest arose from the personal experiences of one of us (Ahmed) and of many young people we know with migrant and refugee backgrounds, as to the very practical dilemma of finding a job in Finland. Racialisation and ethnic discrimination as well as everyday racism are commonplace in Finnish working life, and it is difficult for people with a foreign background to access that life. The situation was exacerbated by the rapid influx of asylum seekers in 2015, in the context of wider migration movement to Europe, when over 32,000 asylum seekers arrived in Finland, the majority from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, and over 80% of them under 35 years of age (Honkasalo et al., 2018). The public debate became increasingly polarised between those wishing to close borders to the “invasive newcomers” and those defending Finland’s responsibility to welcome refugees from war-torn areas and provide them with abodes, while at the same time acknowledging the need for new labour in an aging society.

In her article on working with film and former refugees, researcher and filmmaker Mandy Hughes describes a rise of conservative politics in Australia that corresponds conspicuously well to Finland, where a similar trend was coupled with the rise of right-wing populism in the 2010s:

Asylum seekers and refugees are often portrayed sensationally in the tabloid media as faceless and dehumanised groups that threaten national security. Representations of people in extreme transition in mainstream media do not provide agency for these people to speak for themselves, while not showing peoples’ faces creates an emotional disconnect.

(Hughes 2019, 161)

Contrary to the typical public portrayals of asylum seekers in Finland as either victims or villains, we wanted to focus on positive experiences and showcase young people who have succeeded in finding education and work and, in this regard, done well in Finland. We hoped to question the prevailing negative attitudes towards asylum seekers of Middle Eastern origin, who are often portrayed in the public debate as a social problem, and to produce elements for a counter-discourse (Blomfield & Lenette 2018; Hughes 2019). We especially aimed to highlight the everyday resources these young people have and to explore the personal and social factors that support their employability and future dreams. We wanted to interview them about what things, situations and choices in their lives had led them to landing a job. The aim of the project was therefore to bring a different, brighter perspective to the fact that many young people also can find work and do well in society, juxtaposed against the plethora of concerns typically raised in the public debate on asylum seekers (Honkatukia & Myllylä 2018).

Our collaboration was driven by our previous acquaintance and the enthusiasm we shared for the idea of making documentary films. The topic of the documentary was set in motion by the “Young Muslims and Resilience” (NUMUR) research

project in which Henri previously worked and where Ahmed worked as an intern in organising an art exhibition (Hämäläinen & Elfadl 2019).<sup>2</sup> The project examined the experiences of young Finnish men and women with immigrant and Muslim backgrounds, particularly their ways of coping and succeeding in life when growing up in Finland. In the project, a group of researchers and young people worked together to examine what everyday resources the latter have and what personal and social factors strengthen their well-being and support their future dreams. The project sought to dispel negative attitudes and language that present young people with immigrant and Muslim backgrounds as a social problem. The individual identities of young Muslim immigrants are overshadowed by prejudices and public concerns over security threats, social problems or even radicalisation in the “multicultural” suburbs, and (mis)perceptions of Islam. As a result, young people with immigrant and Muslim backgrounds are commonly approached as representatives of their presumed backgrounds, not as individuals with their own strengths and dreams (Oikarinen-Jabai 2018, 2020).

### **Experiences of working with film**

The line of research described above inspired both of us, albeit for different reasons. The experiences of Ahmed’s acquaintances in Turku and elsewhere in Finland confirmed our beliefs that getting a job in Finland presented a difficult challenge for many immigrants, which impacted their lives in many ways.

**Ahmed:** I came to Finland in 2013. I too encountered prejudice against immigrants, especially those with a refugee background. Through the documentary, I wanted to question the prevailing stereotypes and to challenge the assumptions made by some people in Finland that immigrants from places like the Middle East move to Finland only to exploit its social security benefits. I wanted to show them and the wider public the other side of the refugee’s life – one in which people who had fled the difficult conditions of their homeland have started to question if the dangerous trip to Finland, away from family and loved ones, was worthwhile in the end. I also wanted to show how, contrary to expectations, asylum seekers who came to the country during the 2015 “refugee crisis” have also managed to build a life here for themselves, to get an education and a permanent job, and to work themselves into a situation where they can plan to buy their own apartment and start their own business. I think it would be only fair to highlight these successes as well, or the fact that asylum seekers are happy to contribute to Finnish society if they are only given the opportunity to do so.

Getting started with a documentary project was supported by my previous experience working in television in Iraq. I had worked on a television channel while living in Mosul, and the various aspects and stages of television production were thus already familiar to me. I ran a poetry program in Mosul at a time when the Al Qaeda (and later ISIS) insurgents were gaining strength throughout

Iraq and much of the country was practically at war. In my TV show, I tried to highlight the city's poets and the rich but war-torn cultural life. After settling in Turku, Finland, I continued to work on poetry. I am also an active photographer and have filmed YouTube videos of poets with an immigrant background, participated in poetry events around Finland and Europe, and volunteered for an English radio program for a local community radio channel.

**Henri:** Before starting the documentary project, I had talked to many Finnish young people with a Muslim background about their experiences of growing up in Finland in the midst of prejudice. As half-Japanese, and having moved to Finland after being born in the late 1970s, I had also faced mild forms of racism and prejudice as a youngster but nothing compared to those racialised as non-white “Arabs” or “Black Africans”. Because of their migrant backgrounds, they often had to prove to the white majority that they were good citizens, to defend their own position and to try to prove to others that the images of violent Islam in mainstream media were gross misrepresentations of Islam and Muslim-majority countries (Tokola et al., 2019). Based on the previous research project, I knew that young people with an immigrant background, born or raised in Finland, had experienced many forms of discrimination, but I wanted to find out how young asylum seekers who came to Finland in recent years have managed all this. I had previously participated in a research and volunteer project with young asylum seekers, which examined, among other things, their efforts and challenges to build friendships and confidential relationships with Finns (Honkasalo et al., 2018). I was interested in what kinds of meanings getting a job represents for these young people, not only from the point of view of reaching economic independence, but as a watershed experience that strongly determines their social inclusion, belonging, and opportunities to build relationships with Finns.

I had previously conducted qualitative research on issues related to youth inclusion and youth participation, first in Egypt and later in Finland. I was used to conducting ethnographic observation and personal interviews and had experimented with arts-based methods with young co-researchers in the NUMUR project. In the past, I also had actively done traditional photography. Before embarking on the project discussed in this chapter, I had been considering the interfaces between documentary film and academic research for some time. In the background was the frustration I had occasionally felt towards conventional forms of science publication as the audiences for peer-reviewed scientific articles remain very limited, especially if they are located behind subscription fees and payment walls. I was inspired by the fact that an exploratory documentary would not only allow visual expression to complement verbal expression, but also to reach different audiences.

Our common interests led us to discuss the possibilities for collaboration, and we were both excited about the idea of making a documentary film. However, we had little experience of film-making in practice. Enthusiasm was a great motivator, but

our lack of experience brought with it a wide range of challenges. At first, it took time to acquire practical skills and equipment, such as a camera and appropriate lenses, and to get acquainted with a suitable video-editing programme. At the same time, Ahmed mapped out potential interviewees through his own networks. We were looking for young people who had sought asylum and found work in Finland. For the project, we asked them to agree to be interviewed on film and share their own identities. We also met with and/or interviewed young people participating in the activities of the Refugee Youth Support group in Tampere (see Chapters 8 and 9).

Together and separately, we conducted interviews with seven young people (six men, one woman) about their education and employment paths in the Turku, Helsinki and Tampere regions. Four of the young people interviewed were from Iraq and three others from Yemen, Egypt and Somalia. All of them had prior experience of temporary jobs in various fields. They had worked as cleaners, waiters, magazine distributors, translators, journalists, illustrators, salespeople and laboratory workers, among other occupations. Initially, we hoped to include an equal number of female and male interviewees in the film, but we could not find any women who had come to Finland as asylum seekers who would agree to appear in a documentary with their own identities (cf. Tokola et al., 2019). After many stages and reflected choices, instead of one longer documentary, we opted for making two shorter portraits of young men from Iraq, one (“Z”) who had gotten a job in Finland through many twists and the other (“K”) who was earning his vocational qualification as a metal worker during the filming process. The two portraits were filmed in 2019 and used as material in university courses for the first time in 2023.

The making of the films was also defined by our diverse and changing job descriptions. Ahmed was working at the same time as a part-time research assistant on another research project, writing poems and attending Poetry Slam events across Finland. Henri’s work in various research projects also brought challenges to committing to long-term film work. During the five months, originally set aside for the project, we only got off to a good start, and the process of editing and finalising the documentaries took much longer than anticipated.

### **Preparing for a job with a refugee background: what did we learn?**

Although the young people we met cannot be said to “represent” young asylum seekers in a scientific sense, the discussions we had with them reflect many of the employment issues that have been addressed and studied in the past (Nieminen & Kivijärvi 2015; Lyytinen & Toom 2019). All interviewees emphasised that paid employment was of central importance in their lives. They did not want to live on social benefits and considered that getting a job was an important step towards being included in Finnish society. Work guarantees them a livelihood and thus better opportunities to participate in society and make the choices they want (see

the discussion on labour market citizenship in Chapter 5). Moreover, for young men, self-sufficiency and economic stability are linked to their ability to support a family, which for many is both a practical condition of life and a matter of honour.

The young people we met also emphasised the importance of Finnish language. They considered language skills to be the key to living and inclusion in Finland, and they were well aware of its importance for both education and employment. At the same time, they saw clear structural challenges that hindered their chances to find work. It is difficult, for example, to get previous education and work experience from other countries accredited in Finland, where job seekers are required to present a formal degree document and written work certificates to employers. Furthermore, even if job seekers with immigrant backgrounds are formally qualified, research has shown that merely a foreign-sounding name has negative effects on their chances of getting a job. Job seekers with Arabic or Somali names are particularly discriminated against and rarely invited to job interviews based on written applications (e.g., Akhlaq 2019).

Our interviewees therefore found it difficult to find employment in Finland based on their previous merits or education. For them, this implies that getting a job requires flexibility and the suspension of one's own career aspirations, at least temporarily. Some pointed out that social networks and confidential relationships are crucial for those foreigners who want to find a job in Finland that matches their vocation. In this context, they used the Arabic term *wasta*, which refers to useful contacts and relationships and the exchange of favours. In literature focusing on the Middle East, *wasta* often appears to young people as a lifeline to find pathways to the job market (Singerman 2007, 32–34; Barsoum 2016, 440–441). It refers to the relationships (or social capital) maintained through family and friends, which give young people access to the educational institutions they want, the labour market or, for example, public services. The term also has a negative meaning in the sense that educational qualifications and personal merit are not enough to secure the chances of living, but rather, what matters most is who one knows and doesn't know. A desired job can be found, for example, through a relative or friend. In this light, it is interesting how at least some young Iraqis conceptualised the lack of *wasta* as a significant barrier to employment in Finland as well. Language skills and education do help them move forward, but their experience is that social networks and relationships are still needed to find meaningful work.

In interviews with young people, we often came across stories about how applying for and getting a job require not only formal education but also personal motivation, perseverance and determined pursuit of one's own goals. In addition, as job seekers with an asylum background, they must be prepared to be flexible about their own career aspirations, because access to the labour market may depend on consciously accepting, or at least performing, a subordinate position in society. "Z" says in his portrait, as a key take-away message to those who came to the country later, that when one is applying for a job, one must internalise that "in Finland, you are number two". This attitude has helped him cope in an unequal job market.

After arriving in the country, “Z” emphasised that he studied Finnish diligently and learned it quickly. After mastering the Finnish language, he studied for a vocational degree in sales and got a job at a local food store. While working in the store, he finished a long-distance learning programme to become a business interpreter, after which he worked part-time in the police and reception centres until he got a permanent job from the City of Tampere. From time to time, the everyday life of “Z” has been only work. However, he says the Finnish language and vocational qualifications have been necessary to advance his career, so he has been ready to work from morning to night.

In interviews and informal discussions, the young research participants confirmed that, in their experience, what matters is one’s attitude towards structural inequalities and how one learns to cope with them. In addition, they also consider it important to challenge the stereotypical imagery that circulates in Finland of Arab or Muslim refugees. One simply has to learn to live with the prejudices that exist in society. While making the documentary, Ahmed was at times frustrated with the negative publicity and xenophobia that emerged after news reports of crimes, such as sexual offences committed by asylum seekers; the backlash affected all men with a refugee background. In such circumstances, some local people abhorred refugees, including Ahmed himself, in places where they lived. “M”, who arrived from Baghdad in 2015, said in an interview that the most difficult thing has been to build trust with Finns. For him, constant insecurity and fear, and his personal effort to overcome them, have also represented significant issues in his experiences of working in Finland. “M” expressed his fears further by saying, “I can’t be here in the future. My future is quite unknown. I am an outsider”. Although his residence permit was still in progress at the time of the interview, he was trying to build his life in Finland in one way or another. While living at the reception centre, he had initially gotten a job with his friends from a catering company and later a better job in the Helsinki region after managing to get his previous university studies accredited. Although his current job does not fully match his educational qualifications, it is a close match and secures him a regular livelihood. He had made a conscious choice to study Swedish because he lived in the Swedish-speaking area after arriving in Finland and because, according to him, mastering Swedish opens up better opportunities to look for work in other Nordic countries in the future. In the interview, he also pointed out that Swedish-speaking people are able to understand his experience of otherness among the Finnish-speaking population, which has helped him to cope.

Although “Z” and “M” have found jobs in Finland that more or less match their education, they both feel that it is best for asylum seekers to leave their personal career aspirations aside, at least initially, and be content with the lesser jobs available to them. In his portrait documentary, “K”, who studied fine arts in Iraq, dreams of being a visual arts teacher, but it is clear to him that he will not be able to support himself or his future family in Finland with art, so he intends to obtain a vocational degree in metal work.

During the filming, and inspired by other interviews with asylum seekers, Ahmed also began to reflect on his own future and career choices. After coming to Finland, his acquaintances in both Iraq and Finland have asked what he has “achieved” while living in the country. Ahmed interprets the question as referring to whether he has gotten a job and how much money he has earned. Ahmed finds questions like this alienating because he thinks achievements cannot be measured in money. After all, he has published poems and actively participated in cultural and artistic events (Zaidan 2018, 2020). He has also worked as a part-time research assistant on migration-related research projects, such as the project mentioned earlier. However, Ahmed was encouraged by the experiences of those we met. After experiencing how precarious jobs can be, he began to consider that vocational training, where the host institution is looking for employment opportunities for students together with employers, could be a good option for him. Ahmed decided to apply for retraining and took on studying for a vocational degree in building engineering. In this way, he took a break from his career as a poet and artist and aimed to build a second, more secure career path and strengthen his chances of economic stability in Finland in the long run.

### **On the potential of documentary film as a research method**

When creating the documentary, we (especially Henri) considered the dialogue between traditional academic literary expression and non-academic visual expression as a means of science communication. In the two portraits we filmed, different themes emerge that are linked to both the protagonists’ stories and previous background interviews and research literature. The first (“K”) highlights the tensions between one’s career aspirations and realistic employment opportunities, while the second (“Z”) highlights the multifaceted and persistent path between sites of education and employment in the life of a refugee youth. In the more established and traditional studies, researchers can write and articulate the analytical findings in the terms and terminologies they wish, while the expression through documentary is qualitatively different. On one hand, the medium limits expression, as only a select collection of moving images and sounds is available. On the other hand, it allows for a wider repertoire of ways to express lived realities than written narratives do. This raises an interesting, yet difficult, question: if the researcher has arrived at a particular analytical perspective and understanding based on doing interviews and shooting the film, how can they bring those out using the limited amount of visual and audio material already produced?

This question was on our minds when we discussed the format of our documentary and whether or not to include a narrator’s voice. On the one hand, adding a narrator would have allowed for the presentation of a carefully weighed, analytical interpretation. But as we pointed out earlier, we initially had more enthusiasm than skill – and ended up making two portraits instead of one film as a result of a lengthy



learning process. Along the way, we considered various options to bring the narrator's interpretive role and voice into the final output, but eventually gave up on them. The narrator's voice can also create power relations in the film that guide and limit the viewer's interpretation. We therefore decided that there should be no narrator in the portrait documentaries; instead, the interviews with the protagonists, either on film or a sound recorder, were the primary audio material.

However, references to the making of the film and its authors were left to the point where viewers were allowed to catch the problematic relationship between the film and "reality". As mentioned earlier, different situations emerge in the portraits in which we refer to the actual process of documentary production through brief discussions and dialogue. The fleeting moments of questions posed from behind the camera can have the important function to steer the viewer's interpretation: "It is in this internal relation of on/off camera interaction that embodies a mobile reality rather than simply representing a fixed state of affairs" (Wood & Brown 2012, 133). In other words, as Mandy Hughes notes, documentary film is always "subjective and contested" and, as a cultural product, it requires film-makers to decide on different strategies and make stylistic choices to convey this meaning in the documentary itself (Hughes 2019, 165–166).

How freely viewers can interpret what they see and hear, and to what extent we, as authors, want to convey a certain perspective and research-based argument to the audience, is a fruitful dilemma. Especially in the editing phase, we had to think carefully about which interviews and narratives were relevant to the film, and from what elements their relevance is constructed. Of course, we made written agreements with the protagonists that the documentaries will not be published without their consent, but this does not relieve the authors of their responsibility for what kind of story will eventually emerge from the process. We agreed not to release the portrait documents online but rather, to show them in private or invited screenings or as part of educational programmes, such as courses at schools and universities, as a way to stir discussion in the audiences.

Another related question is how much weight can be given to aesthetic values and preferences as part of the expression and communication of a research-based documentary. One can argue that all documentaries, whether or not the authors are social scientists, are research outcomes. Documentaries always require background research and familiarity with the subject and the phenomena surrounding it. The researchers, especially when the documentary is integrated into a larger research project, can benefit from the more established methods of analysis. In this context, the filmed materials have the advantage of conveying both verbal and non-verbal communication during interviews, which themselves can be analysed (Borish et al., 2021, 9). It is then for the film-makers to negotiate with the participants about the stylistic choices of meaning-making through different artistic, aesthetic and editorial choices. In comparison with written texts, science communication, however, always remains more open and dialogical through documentary film as the viewers participate in the meaning-making and interpretation in a much more substantial way than in the context of carefully constructed written texts (Radnofsky 1996).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored our experiences of collaborative film-making and the potential of using documentary film as a research method in studying the experiences of young asylum seekers and refugees and their views about employment prospects in Finland. The process has involved many twists and turns, and not everything has gone according to the original plans. For us, it presented a steep learning curve as to film-making, yet our precarious and project-based work positions did not allow for a longer-term immersion in the film. In terms of the research question, the experiences and thoughts of the young people we interviewed for the film create a gloomy, yet partially hopeful, picture of how young asylum seekers and refugees are doing in a work-oriented Finnish society. In their experience, finding a job is difficult but not impossible, and a lot depends on the perseverance of each individual to find a gradual route to paid employment. The young people we met maintained that if their career aspirations can be put aside (at least for a while) and they focus on securing their livelihoods, it will be easier to position themselves as “underdogs” and build working careers through the “bottom-up” path. Although the young asylum seekers and refugees have experienced structural challenges and discrimination in the Finnish labour market, their own long-term and determined action for employment can still produce the desired results. Training and formal qualifications, as well as various relationships and networks, can best help a young person to find work. In this scenario, it is possible to return to one’s personal vocations and career aspirations later, once a stable income and livelihood have been secured.

On the other hand, we have had some interesting discussions about how problematic it is to focus on employment prospects with a direct reference to succeeding or making a life in Finland. Who determines what success in the job market, or more generally in life, means? If the research outcome emphasises that young asylum seekers and refugees can succeed and advance their position in Finnish society through finding work, it may well partake in promoting official state discourses that highlight employment as the most important – if not the only – way to integrate into society in a socially acceptable way. In the end, work is only one thing among other measures to promote social inclusion and well-being (Heikkilä & Lyytinen 2019). The interviews we conducted for the documentary film support the view that although young people want to get a job, their well-being and success in life are also determined by other factors, such as proficiency in the Finnish language, good friends, hobbies and a place they live and can call home (for a similar argument in a different context, see Chapter 5).

In addition, collaborative documentary film can complement the more traditional qualitative research on youth in vulnerable and marginal positions in different ways. First, it may involve epistemic collaboration between a researcher and research subject as a co-researcher and co-film-maker. We arrived at the guiding question “How on Earth does one find a job in Finland?” through dialogue and shared observation that it was not only a practical but an existential question

for many young asylum seekers and refugees soon after they arrived in Finland. Second, in comparison with text, documentary film can convey the lived experiences and personal narratives in a more authentic way, as video shows the protagonists talking and reflecting on their lives in places where they live their everyday lives. Finally, the documentary film has the potential of conveying research-based interpretation to audiences that academic books and articles do not normally reach. Yet, as a process, collaborative documentary film implies new kinds of dilemmas for representation, power asymmetries and ownership. In our experience, it was challenging to find people who agreed to be filmed with their own identities in the first place, and the editing process was in large part shaped by the researchers' aim to balance between the wider analytical research findings and the personal narratives of the protagonists.

For future research, we believe it would be important to provide young asylum seekers and refugees with more opportunities and forums to express themselves through cinematic means. While civic associations in Finland could play a leading role in this regard, this kind of work should not be outsourced to them only; researchers and public authorities could also incorporate aspects of participatory video-making into their work. Furthermore, if the protagonists were given the means and opportunity to make their own documentaries from start to finish, they would be better positioned to convey their lived experiences more in their own terms and conditions (Gruber 2016). Doing so in a self-directed way would not only deepen existing research knowledge about the lives of people with refugee backgrounds but also promote their social inclusion.

## Notes

- 1 An earlier, abbreviated version of this chapter was originally published in Finnish, as: "Miten ihmeessä Suomesta löytää töitä?" Kokemuksia tutkimuksellisen dokumenttielokuvan tekemisestä turvapaikanhakijoiden parissa". In: Rättilä T and Honkatukia (2021 eds) *Tutkien ja tarinoiden kohti pakolaistaustaisten nuorten kestäväää hyvinvointia*. Finnish Youth Research Network Publications 231, pp. 124–138. Helsinki: Finnish Youth Research Network.
- 2 The project "Young Muslims and Resilience: Participatory Research" was funded by Kone Foundation and implemented at the University of Helsinki in 2016–2018 in collaboration with young co-researchers. In addition to Henri Onodera, the project's employees included Marja Tiilikainen (PI), Adam Adam, Wisam Elfadl, Tuulia Hämäläinen and Helena Oikarinen-Jabai.

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# Conclusion

*Päivi Honkatukia and Tiina Rättilä*

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## Introduction

We began this book with two basic starting points. First, we brought up the necessity for a profound change in existing societies and way of life to avoid the complete destruction of human and non-human life on the planet. We highlighted how the current ecological crisis entangles in complex ways with social inequalities, political unrest and health-related crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic in different parts of the globe, affecting the lives of both humans and nature. Ending this destructive development requires contributions from all, including prominently young people, many of whom are concerned about the current state of affairs and worried about their own futures. Therefore, our main mission in this book has been to inspire and enhance young people's societal participation, intergenerational dialogue and, ultimately, intergenerational justice from the perspectives of both contemporary young people and the generations to come.

Second, we have claimed that the adult-centred paradigm of youth policies and the study of youth participation has paid too little attention to the link between participation and overall well-being of young people. The discussions in the book paint a picture of this paradigmatic understanding of participation as too narrow and unnuanced. Despite that the notions of young people's active citizenship and their societal participation have become more prevalent during recent decades, public and political debates still tend to approach young people through worry speech revolving around social problems and risks, which include marginalisation, victimisation, radicalisation or worries about young people's deteriorating mental health. In developing the tools to address these problems, society has attempted to guide young people towards citizenship that is acceptable according to the hegemonic norms of society, regardless of how young people themselves understand and experience their social inclusion and participation and how they would like to develop it. In this book, we have critically assessed such approaches and the structural barriers they create to young people's engagement and participation in society. The view of the authors is that although there has been much discussion on youth participation in recent decades and new forms of participation have been innovated, adult society still does not take young people's own voices and actions

seriously. Currently young people's "active citizenship" is promoted by society without considering its implications for their overall well-being. To truly promote young people's participation in a significant and impactful way, a deeper change in the participation structures, practices and the whole participation discourse is needed.

To offer means to better understand this dilemma and find ways forward, the book develops a theoretical approach to youth participation that is ingrained in universal human needs and the subsequent dimensions of well-being. We have used the concept of societal participation to capture the multiplicity of young people's social and political engagements, viewing participation as one of the basic human needs. Moreover, participation, along with other aspects of well-being, is conceptualised as an inherently relational phenomenon and holistically embedded in people's social, political and ecological conditions.

The chapters of this book have presented and discussed studies in which we have sought to develop more youth-oriented ways to explore and understand youth participation. To do so, we have collaborated with a wide variety of young people, youth groups and professionals working with young people. We have found that, contrary to popular belief, most young people are interested in societal issues, and many move reflexively in a skilful and smooth manner between the different arenas of societal activities from mundane and personal to political and institutional levels (see Chapter 6). Young people are also constantly developing new styles of activity, making use of playfulness and humour, as well as engaging in intergenerational interactions to make participation meaningful. This can be seen, for example, in the action styles of young people's climate movement(s) or in campaigns to forward human rights.

Moreover, the empirical work done for the book has made visible the various forms of transitional voices by young people, in which they imagine a society where people's dignity and good life are not determined by the currently existing too narrow norms but that acknowledges and respects diverse ways of belonging to society and acting in and for it (see Chapter 5). As our studies show, a large proportion of young people perceive their own existence not only in relation to other people but also to the environment, other living beings and nature at large, and to them, this relationship is considered important. In the minds of young people, a sustainable future is not built on economic growth and competition; instead, they seem to believe that society should provide adequate conditions for a good life for all (Kiilakoski & Laine 2022). This means that everyone should have the opportunity to live and realise themselves as valued members of their community.

The book is unique in the sense that it studies the questions of sustainable well-being and the future from a thoroughly multidisciplinary perspective, involving researchers from the fields of social and political science, youth research, sociology, law, forest sciences, anthropology, educational science and human technology. Such wide multidisciplinary interaction is rare in the context of one research project, as well as in youth research in general. Another original element in the book is that it has introduced a variety of innovative participatory research

methodologies like co-research and various art- and group-based methods such as Playback Theatre or World Cafés to study young people’s societal participation, identify its obstacles and develop more affective and effective models that allow young people to be active citizens in meaningful ways. The book documents the research processes in which these methodologies were put into practice in collaboration with young people and adult stakeholders.

At the same time, as the authors of this book, we have engaged in thoughtful methodological problematisation and researcher reflexivity when recounting our research processes. We acknowledge that we should not be naïve or (pretend to be) innocent when we engage young people and ourselves in participatory research, an argument particularly addressed in Chapters 5 and 9. We have had to come to terms with that we have not always understood young participants in our studies or been understood by them in turn, and we have taken many methodological and ethical missteps along the way. In the chapters, we have openly described these challenges. However, we still believe that it is our responsibility as researchers interested in participatory methods to contribute to developing innovative methodologies that enable youth engagement and participation from young people’s own perspectives.

To conclude, we present a few final remarks and further reflections on some of the book’s key themes related to the nexus of young people’s societal participation and well-being that we have become aware of over the course of the ALL-YOUTH project.

### **Lessons learned in challenging narrow understandings of youth participation**

The studies reported in this book have been inspired by the recurring observations from earlier studies showing that even if young people’s societal participation and notions such as active citizenship are nowadays well acknowledged and even prioritised in political discussions, many young people continue to feel that they are not taken seriously when they try to express their views in public. We have argued that one reason behind this situation is the limited understanding of youth societal participation in the scientific discussion as well as in public and political debates. Youth participation is often represented and analysed as being detached from young people’s everyday lives and well-being. It is seen to occur in distant, adult-controlled places and spaces and as requiring special knowledge and skills, as the authors of Chapter 6 argue. Although some young people do take part in the “official” participation opportunities provided by society and adjust to the expectations involved, many more do not feel comfortable or safe to act under such circumstances, preferring other ways to be part of and impact society. Unfortunately, adult society still has serious difficulties in recognising – not to mention valuing – the multifaceted nature of young people’s agency as “proper” societal participation, as, for example, young people’s climate activism has highlighted (see Chapter 7).



We have searched for more youth-centred ways to acknowledge, understand and inspire young people's societal participation. As discussed throughout this book, we have done this by linking participation with the idea of sustainable well-being. We have argued that this link has been, to a great extent, missing in earlier research, despite the existence of extensive bodies of research literature on both youth participation and well-being. If there is one message that we wish the readers to take with them after having read this book, it would be the following: being active in society on one's own terms is an integral part of well-being, and to participate fully in society, everyone needs to have secured well-being in a holistic and relational way. As explicated in the Introduction, with the notion of holistic, we refer to securing both the objective dimensions of well-being (such as subsistence or security) and subjective aspects (such as sense of belonging, being valued or having meaningful doing). In turn, relationality implies that people's well-being depends on their social relationship to their loved ones, their communities and society, but it also relates to non-human nature and, ultimately, the entire planet. Linking participation and well-being together in this way as well as understanding the profound relationality and co-dependency of human and non-human life and the whole eco-system is crucial, especially now when the world is struggling with ongoing and intertwined social, political, climatic and environmental crises.

The ideas of relationality and co-dependency have directed our researcher gaze to the everyday, which has greatly increased our understanding of the pivotal entanglement of the mundane, everyday life as a critical context of participation. If we do not understand this, we do not understand much about the possibilities or obstacles to participation, either. Besides realising this, the framework of sustainable well-being has guided us to make sense of the societal context defining young people's everyday lives. The significance of the societal context depends on young people's respective positionalities and, hence, is an empirical question and not something we know beforehand. In producing knowledge about it, a researcher needs to be sensitive to how young people are located within the political and institutional contexts where their positions are defined situationally, besides by their age, also by their gendered, classed, generational and racialised positions and power relations (Hearn 2018, 45; Hill Collins & Bilge 2020). This deep and intersectional entanglement of all humans with their surrounding world is a universal phenomenon. At the same time, the web of power relations is different for different young people, hence the need to define the elements of holistic well-being and, consequently, the possibilities for participation in a situationally specific way. Getting insights into this from young people's perspectives has spurred us to contemplate participation simultaneously as a mundane and a deeply societal question and phenomenon. Understanding participation in this way has serious consequences: instead of trying to impact or change young people, it is crucial to consider what changes are needed in society so that young people from diverse backgrounds can have experiences of being valuable and knowledgeable members of their communities and society.

Let us add a few further self-reflections from our research journeys to this discussion of lessons learned. In the beginning of the ALL-YOUTH project, we found ourselves often contemplating whether all about youth participation has already been studied, said and written. We felt uncertain about whether we were able to bring anything new to the table. These suspicions, however, faded quickly away once we proceeded to the field to do our experiments and engage in discussions with young people and professionals. As our respective studies proceeded, we encountered many phenomena that forced us to critically reflect on the mainstream discussion on youth participation and its underpinnings and to look for alternative ways of thinking. Already in the beginning, we realised that the concept of participation itself was unfamiliar for many young people, or they were baffled when we raised this issue with them. A related observation was that many young people do not conceptualise their everyday agency in terms of participation, or political participation, for that matter. Party politics, in particular, had mainly negative connotations for many of the youth. Consequently, raising the issue of political participation with young people often appeared awkward and did not lead to the kind of deeper reflections we had anticipated. This did not, however, mean that young people did not value politics or find political questions important. To the contrary, many were interested in societal questions and talked about them actively with us and with their peers, even if not by using the vocabulary we offered them. A third observation we made in the beginning was the lively multiplicity of young people's ways of participation. In our research encounters in the field, we learned that their participation appears and sounds manifold, depending on what else is going on in their lives. As argued in Chapters 8 and 10, we learned that to genuinely capture the meanings participation carries for young people as part of their everyday lives, we should not define it beforehand or guide it tightly to conform to the normative and analytical ideas we as researchers might have. These early experiences initially led us to our critical reflections of the societal discourses defining youth participation, which tend to bypass the entanglement of participation and well-being.

### **Intergenerational collaboration and justice around sustainability**

In addition to critically appraising the current understandings and forms of youth participation from young people's perspectives, the chapters of the book present and discuss our attempts to develop more youth-centred models of participation. The framework of sustainable well-being has more or less explicitly figured behind these undertakings. We have, for example, created an experiment to forward intergenerational justice in relation to law making (Chapter 1), developed an e-participation tool for youth participation in close collaboration with young people (Chapter 2) and engaged young people and adults in collective and joint knowledge sharing across generations (Chapter 3). These experiments are based on the idea that society bears the main responsibility for the well-being of younger

generations and that one of these responsibilities is the active creation of possibilities for intergenerational dialogues.

An important idea that has been strengthened in our minds is the need to broaden the scope of intergenerational justice to engage more firmly those who are currently children and young people. For many young people, the future is already here, and many feel it is right now that actions are needed to make the future the best it can be under the current circumstances. In relation to this, we have considered how – and what kind of – participation contributes to the well-being of young people now and how to promote intergenerational dialogue so that the well-being and justice of future generations can be safeguarded. Offering support and expertise to young people that we as adults already possess, because of our professional or other experiences, can lead to remarkable acts that benefit both the participating young people, the current generation of young people and the generations to come. Multiple court cases around the world on climate change issues have powerfully testified to the sensibility and effectiveness of this kind of intergenerational collaboration, as discussed in Chapter 1. Moreover, the chapters have made visible how intergenerational cooperation, dialogue and learning are effective tools for active listening of young people and for challenging the still common undermining of their views (see Chapter 3, in particular). Again, it should be emphasised that critical self-reflection and sensitivity to hegemonic adult-centred narratives and practices are constantly needed because, without reflection, the adult-centrism easily lurks into the interaction.

Furthermore, detecting young people’s critical and transformative voices in research, as the authors of Chapter 5 have done, is a means to forward intergenerational justice as well. This may inspire researchers’ critical reflections concerning participation structures and cultures. This kind of listening to the voices from the margins and being inspired by them is, however, not enough, but young people themselves need to be acknowledged as important parties in public discussions. Because young people are differently positioned in the societal structures depending on their intersecting features, such as gender, race, class or ability, there is no single model that fits all, and the introduction of one or two effective models does not solve the problems of youth participation. Instead, new participation models should be constantly designed (see e.g., Chapters 1 and 10) and the existing ones should be evaluated and redesigned, when needed, to respond to the participatory needs of young people coming from diverse backgrounds so that they can all have access to safe and meaningful, even joyful, spaces for participation.

That being said, we would like to add a few reflections. Namely, we have gradually come to be cautious – like in the case of youth participation – about the meaningfulness of the popular “generational discourse”, in which generations are routinely departed from each other and are relegated to different features or interests. The ramifications of such generation-based discourse can be debated, as the authors of Chapter 3 hint at, when they argue for approaching intergenerational issues through “age-integrated collaboration”. Relatedly, we find merit in

the argument of Haynes and Murriss (2017, 971), who point out in the context of thinking what “postage pedagogy” can mean: “Across the entire lifespan, linearity and ageism give rise to stereotypical and prejudicial ideas about age-related needs, interests and achievements, and lead to over-segregated provision, and increasingly to competition for resources to be allocated to particular generational causes”. Haynes and Murriss sketch an alternative, intragenerational pedagogy where adults and adulthood would not be the accepted and valued norm but where learning would be more of an ageless and childlike playful researching and pondering together. We agree with their notion of the benefits of these kinds of loosening of age-based boundaries and align with their conclusion that imagining ageless practice does not mean ignoring the multiple meanings of age but instead continuous sensitivity towards and readiness to problematise policies and practices that rest on the rigid assumptions of age-ability (Haynes & Murriss 2017, 976).

Furthermore, in our critical reflections, the question of age-based categorising carries over to those discussions on the meanings of sustainability. In the book, we have premised that the idea of sustainability includes a generational dimension so that the building of a sustainable society presupposes taking into account the universal human and non-human needs and involves young people in the discussions and decision making over sustainability. However, we have not defined in exact terms what sustainability is because we believe it is a context- and situation-specific phenomenon, one dependent on local, historical, political, social and ecological conditions. If we think about it in terms of a sufficient level of need satisfaction, it should always be defined collectively and in joint discussions both at the global and local levels (Gough 2017) and be based on meticulous intersectional analyses to find out how well each context functions in terms of need satisfaction.

Simultaneously, it is important to note that the hegemonic discourse of sustainability, reflected, for example, in the United Nations Sustainable Developmental Goals, involves power relations that need to be critically contemplated in terms of what and whose interests they eventually serve. In parallel to the normative (even if often implicit) position of adulthood as a marker of human beings, sustainability thinking is based on, as Fox and Alldred (2020) point out, humanist and anthropocentric sentiments. For example, the 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland et al., 1987, cited in Fox & Alldred 2020, 123). This definition is reiterated in the United Nations 2030 *Agenda for Sustainable Development*, which argues that economic growth, social justice and environmental protection are “integrated and indivisible goals” (Fox & Alldred 2020, 123).

Abundant criticism has been presented against sustainable development from the perspective of the Global South, but also from the perspective of anti- and posthumanism. Especially in the latter discussions, it has been argued that the notions entangled with human-centrism have had seriously adverse consequences

for people in the margins, for poorer nations and for nature and the whole planet, as Fox and Alldred point out, building on Donna Haraway's (1991) and Rosi Braidotti's (2019) arguments:

[S]exism, colonialism and anthropocentrism have sustained the privilege of some (predominantly male, white, rich and Western) humans over others and over non-human animate and inanimate matter. In this analysis, a supremacist politics of sexualisation, racialisation and naturalisation of the West's Others has led to the despoliation of the environment, the current environmental crisis of climate change and the inequalities between global North and South. The category of "human" and the concept of "humanity" are revealed as humanist aggregations that obscure the diversity and inequalities between genders, races, incomes, abilities, nationalities and other stratifications.

(Fox & Alldred 2020, 124)

As we understand it, these powerful critiques are compatible with our thinking in the book, even if we have not explicitly and systematically analysed young people's participation or our methodology through them. In the book, we have sketched some principles for criticising the mainstream discussions on young people's societal participation and developing alternative visions of it that would seriously consider young people's everyday lives and well-being in the context of present-day crises. In theorising these underpinnings, we have not, however, proceeded as far as it would be possible, mainly because the aims of ALL-YOUTH have been very concrete and the project has focused on achieving a high practical societal impact (a further notion on this emphasis will follow in the final words).

### **Methodological reflexivity in/as knowledge production**

Throughout the book, we have engaged in thoughtful methodological problematisation and researcher reflexivity when evaluating the research processes to which we have invited young people and, sometimes, professionals and other adults as knowledgeable and valuable subjects. Based on our experiences, we acknowledge that conducting participatory research such as co-research, especially in contexts defined by social inequalities, can be challenging yet very rewarding. While carrying out the research, we have sought to be constantly aware of adult hegemonies and ready to challenge them if needed. In this sense, our understanding of knowledge production can be termed, rephrasing Braidotti (2019), as that of "nomadic researcher-subjects" who acknowledge that their knowing is always in the state of becoming and never final and fixed, as alluded to in Chapter 9. At the same time, it has to be admitted that, during our research journey, we have experienced misunderstandings and research ethical dilemmas. In several chapters of the book (Chapters 3, 4 and 8–11), we have openly described these challenges and our agency in finding ethically sound solutions both before the fieldwork, during it and afterwards when analysing and reporting the findings.

As the book makes visible, for the most part, our work has been collective and collaborative. As an extensive research group, we come from different disciplines, and as individual researchers, we are equipped with diverging ideas of our roles as researchers, so it is no surprise that we have positioned ourselves differently in the epistemological questions. Although some of ALL-YOUTH's researchers regard themselves as more neutral observers, others consider themselves to be activist researchers with an explicit mission to support and engage young people in the research and in society (Côté 2017, 20–24). Because of this diversity, the collaboration has challenged the members to engage in interdisciplinary and epistemological discussions to find a comfortable place for each. This has involved asking difficult questions and looking together for appropriate answers that would clarify our respective positions in knowledge production. Throughout this process, we have discussed our aims and shared our thoughts while engaging in self-critical reflections together or in smaller subteams. We believe that, in this way, we have been able to identify, become collectively aware and problematise many ideas and power relations related to youth participation or unmarked adulthood (Hearn 2018). We have not avoided tensions in doing this, but we have managed to overcome them collegially. However, this does not mean that there would not be any blind spots left or stereotypical underpinnings in our thinking.

ALL-YOUTH has also been an exceptional research project in the sense that, throughout its existence, it has actively taken part in public and societal discussions. From the beginning, we have had both the possibility and obligation to raise critical issues and have had access to decision-making processes at various levels of government. Although this has been a great privilege, it has also been problematic. On the one hand, the framework of sustainable well-being has enabled the authors to address and advance youth participation in collaboration with powerful stakeholders. On the other hand, despite all the good intentions and ethical commitments, we have sometimes found ourselves in situations where we had to pose to ourselves the tricky question, “Whose dirty linens get aired here?” (Kelly & Kamp 2017, 526; see Chapter 4), referring to contemplation on whose interests finally get served in the research and why. The book makes visible how the authors have attempted to dismantle their difficult feelings related to this awkward question. At the same time, it should be recognised that research can be – like it was to us – a means to identify and analyse good practices that genuinely advance young people's possibilities to be heard in society on their own terms. Hence, being involved as a researcher in this kind of multi-stakeholder collaboration offers a unique standpoint to identify and document both the obstacles to and possibilities for participation.

### **Final note**

We would like to conclude with this final note. ALL-YOUTH has been a pragmatic project in terms of its nature and aims. We have studied and collaborated with young people and professionals in the youth field, including policymakers. One of

the key principles of our explorative and often co-research-based methodology has been that we produce, publish and own the research knowledge together with our collaborators. This kind of hands-on research approach has led us to search for theoretical standpoints and conceptual tools that would be possible to communicate in sensible ways both to our research partners and the wider public. In this endeavour, we have sometimes succeeded well, other times less so. In this book, we have aimed at similar kinds of approachability and transparency. However, even if the discussions of the book are mainly based on empirical analyses by using empirical concepts (and not systematic social theory or philosophy), the book nevertheless carries a philosophical undertone, as our argumentation around holistic and relational understanding of youth well-being in the Introduction and many of the chapters illustrates. In the future, we feel that by combining feminist, new materialist and posthumanist conceptualisations, it is possible to strengthen a focused, contextualised and self-reflexive youth research strategy, one that can take a critical distance from the prevailing norms and mainstream discourses concerning childhood, youth and adulthood, as well as take seriously the interconnectedness of the human and non-human world. We feel that youth research interested in questions on sustainability, participation and well-being should carefully study and attempt to understand what these concepts mean in the everyday lives of young people and what kinds of horizons they can offer when they are building their future together with older generations.

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