

# Participation Biographies: Routes and relevancies of young people's participation

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## **Abstract**

Starting from a critical perspective of the dominant participation discourse which draws on a narrow and institutionalised concept of participation to ascribe young people a lack of interest in participation, this article focusses on the participation biographies of young people in European countries. The analysis reveals that participatory activities emerge differently where they become biographically meaningful. They can be expressions of the search for recognition and for feelings of self-efficacy, of coping with biographical challenges as well as with experiences in institutional contexts and of how young people position themselves between youth and adults. Thus, this article underscores that participation is not just a question of formal information but one of responses to and experiences of societal recognition.

*Keywords:* biography, biographical research, participation biography, participation, youth

*Partizipationsbiographien: Verläufe und Bedeutungen von Partizipation junger Menschen*

## **Zusammenfassung**

Ausgehend von einer Kritik am dominanten Partizipationsdiskurs, der auf einem engen und institutionalisierten Partizipationsbegriff beruht und jungen Menschen ein mangelndes Interesse an Partizipation zuschreibt, fokussiert der vorliegende Artikel Partizipationsbiographien junger Menschen aus unterschiedlichen europäischen Ländern. Die Analyse zeigt, dass Partizipation dort subjektive Bedeutung erlangt, wo sie sich als biographisch sinnvoll erweist und dementsprechend unterschiedliche Ausdrucksformen findet. Partizipationshandeln erweist sich als Ausdruck der Suche nach Anerkennung und dem Gefühl von Selbstwirksamkeit, der Bewältigung biografischer Herausforderung und Erfahrungen in institutionellen Kontexten sowie der Positionierung zwischen Jugend und Erwachsenenwelt. Damit wird deutlich, dass Partizipation nicht nur eine Frage formaler Information ist, sondern vor allem eine der Erfahrung gesellschaftlicher Anerkennung und biografischen Sinns.

*Schlagwörter:* Biographie, Biographieforschung, Partizipationsbiographie. Partizipation, Jugend

# 1 Introduction

In recent decades, youth research and public discourses have become increasingly concerned with young people's political, social and civic participation. Debates at both the national and international level question whether involvement in elections, membership in parties and associations or in mechanisms of representation such as youth or student councils are decreasing and whether such a decline signals that young people's integration in, and identification with, changing modern societies is at risk. When researchers, policy makers or practitioners acknowledge such decline as well as young people's growing distrust of public institutions, they tend to ascribe them to young people themselves, especially to a lack of education and information regarding possibilities of participation and to their common alienation from the political sphere (cf. *Grasso* 2018; *Picot* 2012; *Eurobarometer* 2014). These interpretations, however, refer to studies that measure young people's participation according to a rather narrow understanding of participation in terms of involvement in formally organised forms of consultation, decision-making or engagement and which conceptualise young people as 'citizens in the making' (*Hall/Coffey/Williamson* 1999). Although quantitative surveys focus on young people's subjective orientations towards such forms of (political) participation such as voting, they are limited to questions of quantitative and normative assumptions pertaining instead to 'in what ways' and 'how much' young people engage. Thus, young people's motivation and knowledge have become increasingly subjected to concern, suspicion and the ascription of individual deficits (cf. *Fahmy* 2006; *Spannring/Ogris/Gaiser* 2008; *Picot* 2012; *Eurobarometer* 2014; *Gille/de Rijke/Gaiser* 2017).

*Walther* (cf. 2012) has questioned the legitimacy and adequacy of dominant distinctions and boundaries between participation and non-participation, suggesting that young people's everyday life activities in public spaces such as youth cultural practices should also be understood as participation. However, there has been little research to date that has focussed on young people's subjective views and actual practices of participation. For example, *Smith et al.* (2005) explored young people's connection to and perception of being a citizen and found that although young people do not identify with the term 'citizenship', they indeed position themselves towards society and are involved in the rights and responsibilities that define being a citizen, such as engaging in voluntary activities for common welfare in a wider sense (see also *Kallio/Häkli/Bäcklund* 2015). *Spannring* (2008, p. 55), in reference to the lesser recognition of non-conventional or informal forms of participation, emphasised that 'it is, indeed, young people's own views on participation [...] that highlight the complexities of ambivalence, doubt and distrust that characterises the tension field between participation and non-participation'. She found that 'non-participation' in formal politics results from a lack of fit between public debate and policies on the one hand, and young people's life worlds, living conditions and moral concerns on the other.

While definitions of participation used in youth research appear to be widening, the discussion of the 'myth or inconvenient fact' of youth apathy towards both politics and participation is ongoing (cf. *Pilkington/Pollock* 2015, p. 3). In fact, there is little knowledge about the processes through which young people get and stay involved in different forms of participation and how these become subjectively meaningful in the construction of their biographies. Nevertheless, some studies explore the relevance of political or social

engagement in the biographies of adults (see for example *Kontos/Ruokonen-Engler/Siouti* 2014; *Ruokonen-Engler* 2016; *Aner* 2005). In terms of the youth perspective, *Schwanenflügel's* (cf. 2015) analysis of 'participation biographies' of disadvantaged young people in Germany is an exception. In her biographical analysis, she reconstructs the trajectories of young people attending youth centres and later take on small responsibilities as volunteer centre workers until they eventually begin to engage in more formal contexts such as youth councils.

This article draws on such work on understanding participation from the youth perspective. It aims to reconstruct young people's biographical constructions of their processes of involvement in different participatory activities. It explores the biographical experiences and orientations young people express by engaging in participatory activities and how these activities become subjectively meaningful in their lives. Starting from a wider conceptualisation of participation which draws upon *Gerhardt* (cf. 2007) and *Walther* (cf. 2012), the activities young people undertake in different public spaces are understood as expressions of dynamic interactions between self-determination and co-determination and, thus, claims of being part of and taking part in society, in albeit different ways. The analysis draws on data from the European research project, 'Spaces and Styles of Participation' (PARTISPACE), funded as part of the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme, which comparatively analysed young people's practices in the public and the ways in which such practices are recognised as participation (or not) by other societal actors across eight European cities: Bologna (IT), Eskisehir (TR), Frankfurt (DE), Gothenburg (SE), Manchester (GB), Plovdiv (BG), Rennes (FR) and Zurich (CH) (see also *Andersson et al.* 2019; *Pohl et al.* 2019; *Walther et al.* 2019).

The article first explores the relevance of a biographical perspective for understanding youth participation through the concept of participation biographies as developed by *Schwanenflügel* (2015) and further expanded in the course of the PARTISPACE project. This is followed by an overview of the methodological approach. The empirical section begins by presenting three exemplary biographies of young people involved in different forms of participation and then elaborates dimensions and figurations of biographies and participation. The article concludes with a discussion of the relation between these dimensions and their relevance for differences between participation biographies.

## 2 Participation biographies: on the subjective meaning of participation in young people's life stories

The term 'participation biographies' refers to how young people situate and relate their involvement in various participatory activities – understood in a wider sense as activities and experiences in public spaces – in constructing their biographies (cf. *Schwanenflügel* 2015). Biographies are subjective constructions of a life-story, an identity process over time that links the personal past, present and future in terms of subjective meaning and continuity. Here, we follow *Alheit* and *Dausien's* (2000), whose understanding of biography as a dialectic relationship of sociality and biographicity in people's lives remains – despite debates and development in the field of biographical studies – a valid and viable approach to biographical analysis (cf. *Rosenthal* 2004; *Lutz et al.* 2018). *Alheit* (2018) defines biographies as sequences of figurations, as moments in which structure and agency

are interrelated and articulated. They express accumulated experiences of agency embedded in social relationships, social structures and socially constructed meaning. They evolve in the interplay with the institutionalised life course structured by education, welfare and the work and citizenship status that confronts individuals with the expectation to position themselves in relation to age-specific roles. Understanding biography as identity over time implies a fluid and dynamic concept of identity across the lifespan and the analysis of how young people present themselves, how they relate where they are coming from with where they are heading and to current situations and demands.

Relying on the analysis of young people's biographies, *Keupp* et al. (cf. 1999) developed a concept of 'identity work' which is highly fruitful for biographical analysis. This concept purports that individuals relate to the social positions and the experiences of recognition from which their lives have evolved in the past. These experiences of recognition influence whether they develop feelings of self-efficacy (cf. *Bandura* 1997), that is, the degree to which they ascribe their control over their life situation to their own or external agency. Experiences of recognition and self-efficacy also contribute to how young people imagine their personal futures, which are articulated in life plans as well as in the 'imaginary solutions' of youth cultural practices (cf. *Hall/Jefferson* 1976). For the present, *coping with everyday life* is important ('Lebensbewältigung', cf. *Böhnisch* 2008). In contrast to psychological concepts of coping that ask how individuals cope with critical life events in a socially acceptable and productive way, this concept refers to all means of coping in which individuals, against the backdrop of the horizon of their personal past and future, might seek to assure themselves of their agency. Depending on the social conditions and the availability of resources, this can also include actions categorised as deviant, risky or as a failure from an institutional life course perspective.

The concept of participation biographies means starting from the assumption that the biographical is interwoven with the *how*, *where* and *when* of participatory activities and that there is a connection between biographies and different styles of participation, including, for example, such activities as doing graffiti or being a youth council member. This means accepting that young people do not necessarily intentionally engage in an activity because they realise some specific values but because these activities prove to be helpful in dealing with specific biographical constellations (which of course does not exclude the development and reassurance of values in the process of participation).

### 3 Methodological framework

The analysis documented in this article draws on biographical interviews conducted with young people in the PARTISPACE study.<sup>1</sup> In each of the eight cities, in-depth case studies of different settings of youth participation were carried out ranging from highly formalised forms of representation to very informal groups. In each of these settings, narrative interviews (cf. *Rosenthal* 2004) with two young people selected for their different roles within the respective setting were conducted (contributing to an overall sample of 96 interviews). The sampling process was guided by the aim to achieve a sample of diverse participation settings, roles of young people in these settings as well as social background, gender, ethnicity and education. The interviews started with an open stimulus asking young people to tell their life story from the beginning by recounting anything they found

relevant. The researcher would then ask questions aimed at clarifying the narrative and questions regarding the development and the subjective meaning of the respective participatory activity followed (*Rosenthal* 2018). The interviews were conducted in different places chosen by the young people and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. From these 96 interviews, English summaries were produced and clustered with regard to different modes of participation (cf. *Batsleer et al.* 2017). In a next step, 16 of the 96 interviews were selected according to country, mode of participation and gender and translated into English for joint in-depth analysis. This evolved in two steps, the first of which being the biographical case reconstruction (*Rosenthal* 2004), characterised by the hermeneutic analysis of the relation between biographical events and the way in which interviewees present themselves, which offers a micro-perspective that can then be contextualised within a wider socio-historical and discursive context. In a second step, a coding process inspired by Grounded Theory (*Strauss* 1991) and based on sensitising concepts emerging from the biographical case reconstruction was conducted. This dual approach, also used by *Schwanenflügel* (2015, see also *Müller/Skide* 2018), made it possible to combine sensitivity for emerging motives, subjective meaning-making and the reflexive agency in individual biographies with comparative analysis across settings and cities.

The following section documents the findings of this in-depth analysis with an exemplary focus on three biographies. Elaborating on *what* these young people recounted and *how* they presented themselves allows for a critical approach to the dialectic relationship between the subjective (meaning-making, motives, self-presentation) and the objective (institutional and societal frameworks of the life trajectory).

## 4 Reconstructing young people's participation biographies

This section documents the findings of the biographic analysis, beginning with a presentation of the three exemplary young people's life stories to give an impression of the diverse ways in which young people get involved in participatory activities and how they present themselves and their engagement in different ways. The biographical case reconstruction is followed by the elaboration of the dimensions that emerge from the comparative analysis of how young people make meaning from their experience and involvement in activities in public space in their life stories.

### 4.1 Young people's life stories and self-presentation with regard to participation

*Mario*<sup>2</sup>, 24, has lived with his mother and his stepfather in Plovdiv (Bulgaria) since his parents separated. Although he was a good pupil in primary school, he failed the entrance examinations into high school and was forced to go to a school which was some distance away from his home. At the age of 13, *Mario* started orienting himself outside school. For example, he became active in a graffiti crew and, he formed his first band at 16. He later founded and subsequently managed a band widely known in Bulgaria. Together with some of his bandmates, he began organising an alternative cultural and music space in the basement of a club. This space quickly became popular in the city for its alternative at-

mosphere and music concerts while also offering an alternative information space for political activism. After graduating from school, he began studying law.

*Mario's* experience of failing the transition to high school was connected to a feeling of being a 'loser' and not fitting in his new school's social context: 'I could not quickly fit into the mode of communication, [...] interests of people [...] some of them rejected me [...] in the end I fit somehow, but only very partially'. This experience of insecurity and harm can be interpreted as a turning point in *Mario's* life story: he started orienting himself outside school, investing in youth cultural spaces, which served as a counter-world where he felt accepted and appreciated and where he could realise his interests better than with his school peers. *Mario* describes graffiti as a 'kind of rebellion' and the alternative cultural and music space he founded with his friends as a place for free speech and political discussion and thereby as a space of real democracy: 'There are other opinions too [...] that's [what] democracy is'. At the same time, *Mario* has not broken with education completely and, despite his negative experiences at school, he decided to study law because of his interest in understanding the social world through the lenses of the legal system, although he distances himself from the community of law students: 'they're too pragmatic [...] soulless'. *Mario* seems to inhabit two 'worlds' and he orients himself in both youth culture and the world of adults represented by education. However, the experience of failing to meet educational expectations and of not fitting in at times seems to be one important factor behind his scepticism towards institutional and formal spaces. This scepticism is expressed in how he maintains his participation in alternative space and pushing his musical career, both of which were his main participatory foci at the time of the interview.

*Paula*, 17, grew up in a middle-class family with four siblings in Frankfurt (Germany). In primary school, *Paula* was identified as highly intellectually gifted. She skipped one grade and then started having school problems. She struggled especially with peer-relations, as she was bullied for not being 'normal'. When she was 12 years old, the Youth and Welfare Office intervened because she was missing school and sent her to a boarding school for highly-gifted students. Three years later, the measure ended because youth welfare assessed that she had improved and she had to return, reluctantly, to her old school. Through her first boyfriend, who was politically active, she joined an ecological-political association and took on a leading role rather quickly. Through this engagement, she got to know young political activists in the 'left scene' and in the Youth and Student Representation, a city-wide student representation body related to school issues, and began to get involved in these contexts as well.

The attribution as highly intellectually gifted seems to have been the starting point for her struggle with school and peer relations and becoming an outsider, to which *Paula* reacts with increasing absences. Her positive experiences at the boarding school allowed her to overcome her damaged self-image and her distance in peer contexts; it also helped her to find self-efficacy in the project-based activities they did in lessons, as they were output-oriented, framed in a meaningful way and adult-led. In such activities, *Paula* found safety, recognition and power. She evaluates her return from boarding school to regular school saying, 'I'm loved by the teachers [...], I do a lot during lessons and help keep the lessons going'. *Paula* feels that she needed this constant reassurance as she still had difficulties maintaining stable peer relationships. In political activities outside school, she seems to feel at ease. A reason for this could be that her political engagement might

feel similar to the projects she completed in boarding school. Youth cultural practice combined with formal organisation and clearly defined tasks seem to have helped her compensate for her lack of self-esteem with peers. Doing something concrete with people seems to help her to come into contact with other (young) people: 'you become friends faster [...], especially with the people who you will be working with', which helps her to develop a positive self-image. Furthermore, she describes positive relationships, mostly to young adults, who respect her for her knowledge and competence.

*Vanessa (Nassine)*, 24, grew up in a well-situated though fraught family near Bologna (Italy). Her father was frequently abroad on business trips accompanied by her mother and Vanessa was left in care of a Moroccan nanny whom she liked very much. When she was around ten years old, her nanny moved and disappeared from her life, while her father started having love affairs and her mother became depressed. Years later, her parents separated, and her mother was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. At around 13, she started her first relationship with a boy, and at 17, she had another relationship and even got engaged, but separated three years later. After high school, Vanessa began studying at university only to leave before she finished. Instead, she spent most of her time clubbing, where she met a group of young men of Moroccan origin. She started relationships with some of them but also encountered Islam. After a severe car accident which she referred to as a turning point in her life, she got into contact with her former nanny again and started attending Koran school. When she started a new relationship with a Muslim man, she converted to Islam in order to marry him and changed her name to '*Nassine*'. Subsequently, she has recently begun to participate in an Islamic Youth Association.

Vanessa's life story is characterised by a persistent search for 'stability', which is related to the longing for a safe space and a sustainable place of belonging and sense of purpose that she did not find in her own family. As she says about herself: 'I'm obsessed with relationships, I have lived, live for that'. This need seems to be rooted in her family story which is characterised by her parent's difficult relationship and some harmful breakdowns of central relationships. The accident was a turning point that made her question her life so far, a starting point where she could seek her fortune in the Muslim context she knows, and which is also connected with good memories of her former nanny. Her conversion to and engagement in the Islamic Youth Association sealed her new identity: Vanessa transforms to *Nassine*, a young Muslim who seems to have found her place in the world. Both marriage and becoming a board member of the association are visible expressions of this identity. *Nassine* states that conversion made her a 'blank sheet of paper', which facilitated her re-invention. Her first steps in the informal group of young Muslim men whom she describes as 'street Islam' were characterised by her struggle to be accepted as a girlfriend and potential wife and by experiences of being silenced. Official institutions like the mosque and the Koran school provide her the possibility to demonstrate her commitment to being a real 'authentic Muslim woman'. The institutional framework of marriage seems to have been effective in helping her find a safe space of belonging. Additionally, the non-formally organised Islamic Youth Association seems to be both an official but liberal Muslim organisation that provides her a suitable frame for her identity work. The security of finding a place in the world seems to correlate with growing self-confidence and the idea of having an impact on the world: *Nassine* wants to show people the 'real Islam' and to spread the message of a joyful community and not the picture of 'street Islam, [where] women must keep quiet, they can't have opinions'.

## 4.2 Meanings and relevancies: dimensions of participatory biographies

The three exemplary biographies presented above reveal that young people present different life stories in diverse ways. Their varied forms of participation are attributed different meaning and relevance. In the following, we focus on five dimensions of meaning and relevancies of participation that emerged from the analysed biographical narratives. These dimensions of meaning and relevance of participation apply in different ways to all analysed biographies, and we refer to such variations as the figurations representing moments of the dialectic between structure and agency and accumulations of experience in dynamic biographies as expressed in participation activities.

### *Securing recognition*

The reconstruction of the biographies illustrates the ways in which young people present their involvement in different activities and reflects their search for recognition from others and how they secure their personal identities in the sense of a constructive process of self-positioning in the world over time (cf. *Keupp* et al. 1999). Such self-positioning marks attempts to create a subjective and consistent fit between internal and external experiences, to integrate different elements of identity into a meaningful ‘whole’ and to become visible as an individual person. For all three young people, the starting point of their participatory activities was the active search for recognition and belonging, which implied disconnecting from previous spaces and places.

*Mario* presents the creation of the graffiti group and the alternative music scene as a step towards living his ideas and parts of his identity while also detaching (at least partially) from a school context where he did not feel accepted. In those self-created spaces, *Mario* no longer feels that he is seen as a ‘loser’ but is recognised instead as he is. In comparison to *Vanessa*, who wants to break with her former life, he does not sever himself from his previous life completely, but creates another, alternative world instead where he can experiment with a different lifestyle. His search for recognition is characterised by the figuration, ‘identity diversification’, which means experiencing and living different aspects of identity. Conversely, *Vanessa*’s attempt to discard the insecure *Vanessa* and to start anew and transform herself into the strong, self-confident *Nassine* is interpreted as ‘identity transformation’. *Paula* is an example of the ‘identity-compensation’ figuration, where participation activities are connected to a search for a positive self-image against the backdrop of a self-perceived ‘damaged identity’, grounded in experiences of being disrespected in primary school. A fourth figuration found in other biographies is ‘identity stabilisation’. Here, young people use experience and secure a participation context as a space in which they are accepted and appreciated for ‘who they are’.

### *Searching for and expressing a feeling of self-efficacy*

Involvement in participatory activities also appears as articulations of searching for and expressing self-efficacy where it has been fragile and fragmented in the biography to date. The desire to ‘change the world’ can be an expression of both the search for experiences of self-efficacy and reassuring an existing feeling of self-efficacy. In this respect – in certain cases – involvement in participatory activities, especially political ones, has a high potential to provide a feeling of self-efficacy due to the large dimension and the positive moral impetus of the challenge. Self-efficacy emerges from the reciprocal effects of being



able to successfully cope with one's life and through making a (political) claim of being part of society. The figuration of 'achieved personal and political self-efficacy' describes young people who make claims about changes in society or the world often by being politically active and confident in their abilities. For *Mario*, the creation of alternative spaces is a way to change things in his own life as well as in the world. Through his understanding of graffiti as rebellion and the alternative space as a place for real democracy, he classifies his activities as political. The figuration, 'struggling with personal self-efficacy', includes young people who have only partially managed to integrate their life stories within a political framework and who seem to focus more on a personal life plan and its opportunities (or lack thereof). In this figuration, the participation context is one that allows young people to develop and find themselves as they experiment in different social and personal roles. For *Paula*, her involvement in the ecological-political association and the youth and student representation are primarily important as activities which secure experiences of self-efficacy that overcome her damaged self-image. *Vanessa/Nassine* seems to develop from one to the other. Her biography may be described as a struggle to change her life and realize personal self-efficacy, while presenting herself as the 'new *Nassine*' seems to allow her to perform self-confidence by showing the world the 'real Islam' and to claim an impact on her wider environment.

### *Coping with harmful experiences*

In many cases, involvement in participatory activities is interrelated with ways of coping with harmful, challenging biographical experiences. The activities that become relevant and meaningful for young people reflect the life conditions and life events with which they have to cope. From a coping perspective, participative contexts are spaces and activities in which young people find possibilities to work on the demands of everyday life while also dealing with critical life events. In the analysis, four figurations of varying expressions of coping with harmful experiences revealed a fundamental biographical function of participatory activity.

*Paula* and *Nassine* are examples for the figuration of 'coping through institutionalised participation'. For *Paula*, the institutionalized, clearly framed and adult-led contexts of the student council and the adult-dominated ecological-political association are appropriate for securing belonging and recognition through common activities. In such formal environments, *Paula*'s knowledge and competences are appreciated, while the informal peer-context requires other sorts of resources. For *Nassine*, the club and 'street Islam' scenes were too informal to provide her security, orientation and a reliable romantic relationship. Her involvement in the Muslim community and association provided her a platform to perform her new identity as a Muslim woman. *Mario*, by contrast, is an example for the figuration of 'coping through creating or looking for an alternative place'. Through the foundation of an informal arts network, he created alternative space allowing for different and self-determined activities and experiences compared to the formal context of school. The figurations of 'coping through political participation' and the figuration of 'coping through participation-hopping' are not represented in the three exemplary biographies but in others. The first refers to young people who frame their issues politically and in political terms, because they, for example, have realised that discrimination is not (only) a personal but a systemic problem. Coping through 'participation-hopping' refers to young people who in their process of searching for a reliable and safe place have been

involved in many participatory spaces but have left them as soon as they realised they did not fit into them, and vice-versa. This figuration reveals the processual and tentative character of participation biographies as young people in many cases require several tries before finding a suitable space, group and activity.

### *Positioning between youth and adults*

In the process of getting involved in practices in public spaces, young people expose themselves to expectations of both other young people and of adults. These expectations of positioning oneself in relation to youth cultural practice as well as to adults' representations of 'citizens in the making' (Hall et al. 1999) often contradict and imply either/or decisions even if young people feel much more ambivalent. Many of the young people described themselves as some sort of outsiders within compulsory contexts (e.g., with regard to peers in school), and tried to become insiders by participating in alternative, freely chosen contexts some of which are more peer- while others more adult-orientated.

The 'orientation towards youth' figuration in and through participatory activities applies especially to *Mario* for whom informal youth cultural scenes represent contexts in which he can mobilise recognition and self-efficacy with like-minded peers, something he seems unable to do in contexts like school and university dominated by pragmatic rationalism from which he clearly distances himself. The figuration, 'orientation towards adults', describes young people attracted to adult-organised and formalised institutions, like formal participation in politics or other adult-led participation structures and projects. *Paula* moves between both: while the youth and student representation is initiated and institutionalised by adults according to an adult citizenship habitus, the ecological-political association and left scene integrates aspects of youth culture. Regardless of the orientation, however, her engagement is related to previous and formative biographical experiences. The same applies for *Nassine*, who, after her period of experimenting with youth cultural practice, married and sought to become a 'proper' Muslim woman. However, it is the non-formal Islamic Youth Association that provides her a platform for performing her new identity and being part of a peer community. Both *Paula* and *Nassine* have positively experienced recognition in adult-led contexts while experiences within peer contexts were ambivalent.

### *Expression of experiences with institutions*

This dimension is rather a factor than an expression of different participation biographies inasmuch as it refers to the connection between different participatory activities and – or their reflection of – experiences with formal institutions like school, youth welfare or political organisations. The analysis of the exemplary cases suggests that the varying experiences that the young people have with institutions influence their motivations to engage in and their level of comfort with different forms of participation. Formal institutions require the young people to adopt social roles and meet expectations that do not always correspond with subjective needs and self-conceptions of individuals. If a young person is successful in fulfilling them and experiences them as a means to achieve mid- or long-term personal goals, then being active in such settings can be perceived as empowering and formal engagement is more likely. If the experiences are fraught and conflicted, it is more likely that the young person will feel alienated and orient themselves instead towards informal, self-chosen settings. This dimension is connected to social inequality, as formal

institutions are infused by middle class values and styles of practice wherein young people from disadvantaged contexts may feel less familiar and less self-efficacious. These experiences were reflected in three figurations.

*Mario* is an example of the figuration of ‘orientation towards informal structures’. The experience of failing educational expectations and enduring detachment from his peers in school is related to a disconnection with formal institutions and an orientation towards informal, self-created spaces. *Paula* is an example of the figuration of ‘orientation towards formal structures’: her experience with the formal and adult-led context of the boarding school helped her to secure recognition of and validation for her gifts. After her return to her old school, she drew upon these positive experiences and began her engagement in the youth and student representation and the ecological-political association which compared to informal peer contexts are structured around formalised tasks and roles. This also applies to *Nassine* who does not refer to experiences with formal institutions but to the insecurity experienced in informal scenes. The third figuration, ‘ambivalent orientation’, which is not present in the three exemplary biographies, marks participation biographies in which young people have had both positive and negative experiences in institutions. Here, a general mistrust towards formal institutions is mixed with fluctuating usage of different social contexts and institutions.

## 5 Conclusions: Participation biography as a relational model of ‘going public’

In this concluding part, we move towards an abstraction and theoretical generalisation of our findings. The five dimensions and the figurations they correspond to in the individual biographies are related to each other in diverse ways and result in different participation biographies. The analysis shows that participatory activities can be understood as part of young people’s individual searches for recognition, belonging, self-efficacy, coping and orientation. Where young people looked for and eventually found recognition reflects earlier experiences of (mis)recognition by representatives of wider society, such as in formal institutions, or in smaller, informal communities or groups. Thus, searching for recognition may also be expressed by deviant practice such as violence and delinquency (cf. *Sutterlüty* 2017). Many of the analysed life stories referenced biographical constellations of not fulfilling normative expectations, of not ‘fitting in’, of being excluded by peers or feeling lost, in short, of lacking recognition and belonging. Partly, these experiences were related to contexts that young people had not freely chosen, like school and family. Thus, participation activities seem to be connected to leaving these contexts and to looking for alternative spaces and experiences. These processes of leaving and searching necessarily implied moving into or through public spaces, exposing and engaging in new and unfamiliar situations of which the young persons were more or less conscious at the beginning. The diversity of forms of participation in which young people engage reflects the different starting positions and processes of these movements until young people encountered subjectively meaningful spaces where they experienced recognition and belonging. Participation as ‘going public’ therefore appears as an element and sometimes unintended aspect of coping with unsatisfying and harmful situations; perhaps even more crucial, it allows young people to change aspects of their lives and their environments personally,

socially and politically which in itself can be a source of self-efficacy. Having ambitions to change things in the (smaller or bigger) world (like showing the 'real Islam' or living democracy) in many cases is rewarded with recognition for showing concern and responsibility. In this way, it is plausible that young people who find spaces and activities of recognition, belonging and orientation develop self-efficacy and 'surpass themselves'.

The dimensions and figurations analysed above are relevant components of young people's identity work over time. In that sense, participatory activities may be seen as expressions and elements of processes of biographical construction. 'Going public', as a general element of coping with and making sense of one's life, implies the possibility that young people appropriate public spaces, get involved in public social issues and eventually even develop trust in responding to public institutions. In these processes, young people may develop a feeling of being a citizen in the sense of citizenship as 'lived practice' (Kallio/Häckli/Bäcklund 2015), provided that 'going public' is subjectively assessed as being meaningful and successful and also accompanied by experiences of recognition. Whether involvement in participatory activities supports identity transformation or diversification, whether young people are involved in political, formal or more informal places, whether they orient themselves towards an adult-citizenship habitus or youth cultural practice, depends on their resources and their biographical experiences.

The findings show the interrelation between participation and biographies in terms of elaborating the role of participation for subjective meaning-making over time. From this perspective, the analysis results in exemplifying the concept 'participation biographies' as the interrelation between biographical experiences, available resources, subjective meaning-making in and through going public and respective experiences of recognition and belonging expressed in narratives of involvement in different forms of participation. In other words, everyone has a participation biography in which activities and experiences of being active in the public space are articulated.

The findings also suggest that the starting point for participatory activities is not the abstract idea of becoming a member of an organisation or participating because it is 'good' and a central part of democracy and citizenship. Instead, participation emerges from young people's biographical experiences, experiences of self-efficacy (or their lack) inside and outside institutions, their search for recognition and belonging, their coping with their personal lives and their attempts to make an impact and to change things in their lives and life-worlds, even when their concerns might be neglected by public institutions. When they experience belonging, recognition and being able to change something, they possibly can expand their participation to a wider world and society. Seeing participation from a subject-orientated and non-normative perspective offers insights into how young people struggle and cope with their attempts to find their place in complex, individualised and transforming societies. Participation results from the dialectic between the life-course and biographical construction and, thus, from a sequence of figurations of structure and agency across their lifetime. It fosters awareness of the 'participatory' in young people's lives and their practices in public spaces. The concept of participation biographies allows for the replacement of the prevailing deficit-oriented view towards young people in relation to a narrow and institutionalised model of youth participation with one that asks how activities and experiences in public spaces become subjectively relevant and lead to either different forms of involvement in different activities or to various styles of participation even if many are not officially recognised as such.

In contrast to the assumption that young people do not participate or do not participate in the 'right' way, the article concludes with the insight that young people actually participate but do so differently in ways they find subjectively meaningful. Participation, then, is much more complex and relational than is suggested by a normative concept that reduces participation to individual involvement in formally organised and officially recognised activities of political participation, formal representation or social engagement. Finally, the analysis underscores that participation is much less a question of training, instruction and information, as studies and policy discourses often suggest (cf. *Grasso* 2018), than of experiences of recognition and the resonance of these experiences in the identity process over time. Accordingly, the individualised distinction between 'participation' and 'non-participation' and the causal ascriptions of participation to certain people in certain spaces at specific times for particular reasons does not reflect the complexity of participation in its relation to individual biographies. The findings show that experiences that lead to different styles of participation are not mono-causal or linear but are instead dynamic, interrelated, complex, branched and rooted in biographies as vividly lived lives that exist between normative assumptions of life courses and how individuals appropriate their own lives. Thus, participation is not an individual act, but a relational practice between members of a community or society.

## Notes

- 1 The design of the PARTISPACE project relied on a multilevel and mixed-methods-approach, which included national research literature reviews across eight countries, discourse analyses of youth policy, analysis of European Social Survey data on young people's participation, participatory action research projects with young people and qualitative local studies in one major city per country. The latter consisted of expert interviews, group discussions and in-depth case studies into different forms of participation. These involved the biographical interviews on which the analysis documented in this article relies. The project was funded from 2015 to 2018 under the EU programme HORIZON 2020 (contract No. 649416). The views expressed in this article are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.
- 2 All names have been changed for anonymisation. Also for reasons of anonymisation, as set down in an internal ethics protocol of the PARTISPACE project, quotes from the interview transcripts do not include time and place of the interviews.

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