

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

Larissa von Schwanenflügel, Jessica Lütgens, Gráinne McMahon, Susanne Liljeholm Hansson

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