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HOW THE PARTICIPATION STYLE IN LOCAL YOUTH COUNCILS CONTRIBUTES TO THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE

ABSTRACT

**How the participation style in local youth councils contributes to the civic engagement
of young people**

Local youth councils are increasingly seen as suitable places for young people to come together
and act on issues of public concern. However, little is known about the style of young people's
participation in councils and whether they do indeed focus on young people during their
discussions and activities. To discover this, a multiple case study (n=6) was used to identify the style
in which young people participate in these councils. Meetings were observed (n=58), members,
supervisors and policymakers interviewed (n=77), documents collected and a content analysis
was carried out. In youth councils studied, the style of participation can be characterized as being

"internally focused" and emphasizing "responsibilization". This style makes local youth councils a place for bonding rather than for bridging social ties.

Keywords

Local youth councils, style of participation, civic engagement

SAMENVATTING

Hoe de participatiestijl in lokale jongerenraden bijdraagt aan sociale betrokkenheid van jongeren

Lokale jongerenraden worden door de gemeenten in toenemende mate gezien als een passende vorm voor jongeren om zich betrokken te tonen bij lokale kwesties die henzelf en andere jongeren aangaan binnen een gemeente. Er is tot op heden echter nog weinig bekend over hoe jongeren in deze raden participeren. Tevens weten we niet of de leden van een raad andere jongeren die zij vertegenwoordigen in lokale besluitvorming in gedachten houden tijdens de gesprekken die ze voeren en de activiteiten die ze doen. Via een meervoudige casusstudie is deze participatiestijl binnen jongerenraden nader onderzocht. Bij zes jongerenraden verspreid over het land werden 58 bijeenkomsten geobserveerd en 77 jongeren, begeleiders en betrokken beleidsambtenaren geïnterviewd. Daarnaast zijn relevante documenten verzameld en aan de dataset toegevoegd, waarna een inhoudsanalyse is uitgevoerd. Op basis van deze analyses constateren we dat de participatiestijl in jongerenraden zich laat kenmerken door een "interne focus" en nadruk op "individuele vrijheid en verantwoordelijkheid". Een stijl die jongerenraden maakt tot een plaats waar sociale relaties binnen een raad worden versterkt, maar waar nog weinig aandacht uitgaat naar anderen buiten een jongerenraad.

Trefwoorden

Jongerenraden, participatiestijl, sociale betrokkenheid

INTRODUCTION

Young people in Western countries are being raised during a period of economic prosperity with a growing emphasis on individual autonomy and self-expressive values (Harris, Wyn & Younes, 2007; Hustinx, Meijs, Handy & Cnaan, 2012). At the same time, there are increasing concerns

about the degree to which young people come together and act on issues of public concern (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Shiller, 2013; Youniss, 2009; Youniss *et al*., 2002). Governments, for instance, often see young people as citizens of the future: citizens who should be helping to build and maintain local communities in which people care about each other and support each other, and local communities where people can rely on support from others when life gets rough and public financial support runs out.

Concerns about civic engagement do not apply to young people alone. Researchers have concerns about the civic engagement of adults as well. Putnam (2000), for instance, states that citizens have less meaningful relations than they had in the past. Meanwhile, Wuthnow (2002) and Duyvendak & Hurenkamp (2004) argue not that we have less meaningful relations but that we are shaping our relations differently to how we once did. Wuthnow, for instance, speaks about "loose connections" that are short term, pragmatic and not limited to a certain demographic setting. Lichterman (2005) observes new forms of relationships between citizens too. He also states that in order to be able to connect as a group with other people in a meaningful way, group members need to create a type of conversation that he calls "social reflexivity". During such a conversation, members talk and interact about how they are related to each other, how they are related to the context they are participating in, and how they are related to other people that do not belong to their group.

In response to these concerns, the governments of various countries have developed policies that aim to increase the civic engagement of young people (Harris *et al*., 2007; Program Ministry of Youth and Family, 2007). Three international documents provide a further incentive for this: a) The United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child, especially Article 12 which states that children and young people have the right to participate in the decision-making processes that influence their lives (Arches & Fleming, 2006; Hill, 2006; MacNaughton, Hughes & Smith, 2007); b) The World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1995) which presents goals for creating and maintaining representative youth participation; and c) A New Elan for Europe's Youth (COM, 2001), in which one goal is particularly relevant: stimulating and supporting young people as active citizens and reinforcing young people's participation in democratic life (COM, 2003, p. 5–6). The concept of participation refers to many activities in policy, including acting, talking, giving advice or making decisions. These activities are ordered using so-called participation ladders (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992), which are rankings of the significance of participation in terms of the influence exerted, with acting and talking having less influence than giving advice and making decisions, for instance.

Governments not only encourage young people to participate when it comes to building and maintaining local communities in which people care for each other during times of decreasing governmental support. Governments also want to give young people a voice in the decisions that affect their lives, because they want to be sure that the facilities they create for young people are used by them in practice (Feringa, 2014). In order to give young people a voice in local decision-making, governments frequently establish youth councils. These are groups of 5 to 20 people between the ages of 15 to 30 who meet on a weekly or monthly basis. Members are appointed by supervisors – who are social professionals or policy makers – or apply for these positions. Youth councils are meant to represent all young people living in the area covered by the youth council. Members discuss local issues such as housing for young people, waiting lists in youth care, the city's lightning plan, etc., and advise local authorities accordingly. Most youth councils are an official part of the governmental structure and meetings take place at the city hall once a week or once a month.

Researchers generally agree that youth councils are a suitable place for young people to come together and act on issues of public concern (Martin, Pittman, Ferber & McMahon, 2007; Matthews, 2001; Taft & Gordon, 2013). However, various studies indicate that youth councils face a number of problems. These problems are related to the so-called participation paradox: creating opportunities for participation results not only in inclusion but also in exclusion. The first problem of youth councils is that members of these councils are not always representative of the people they are supposed to represent (Cavet & Sloper, 2004; Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Oliff, 2003; Perkins et al., 2007; Wyness, 2001). Members frequently appear to be aged 20 years and above, and are highly educated young people with a Western cultural background. A second problem concerns the accessibility of youth councils (Horgan & Rodgers, 2000; Perkins et al., 2007). Young people living in a municipality often do not know that such a council exists, and even if they do know, it is difficult to find out how to become a member. Time and location are a third problem (Freeman, Nairn & Sligo, 2003). Meetings are held far from the places where young people live and may clash with other activities such as school, sports or music practice. A fourth problem is related to the ad hoc establishment of these councils (Matthews & Limb, 1998). Local governments create their own council without consulting other parts of government to learn from their experiences.

These problems lead to the question of to what extent youth councils are actually places where young people can come together to discuss and interact about issues that concern them and other young people living in the municipality and to advise local government accordingly. At present,

there are no studies regarding how young people participate in councils or whether they seek to represent other young people. Therefore, the central question of this study is: what participation style is adopted by young people in local youth councils? By style, we refer to the way in which members shape their roles, tasks, responsibilities, discussions with each other and with other young people outside the council. By finding out more about the style adopted, we can understand whether they include the other young people whose voices they are supposed to represent in the local decision-making process. We can then draw a conclusion about the value of youth councils for young people's civic engagement.

As local youth councils are active in many Western countries as a result of the participation targets in international policy mentioned previously, this study could have been conducted in many countries. It has, however, been carried out in the Netherlands, which is a particularly interesting setting because of the changing relationship between the (local) government and citizens in this country. Since 2007, a decentralization process has been underway in the Netherlands and as a consequence of this, the responsibility for a significant part of the healthcare system has been transferred from central government to local government (the municipalities). In 2015, this decentralization process was reinforced even further because municipalities also became responsible for some parts of the youth care system and tackling unemployment. This transition has gone hand in hand with a transformation in the way (local) governments work with their citizens. For many years, the national government took responsibility for the well-being of Dutch citizens "from cradle to grave". The decentralization process has made citizens more responsible for their own well-being. Care related to health, youth or re-employment is no longer automatically provided by the government. Instead, citizens are asked to mobilize their social network first, and only if these attempts fail can they turn to their local municipality for support.

Since 2007, municipalities in the Netherlands have established many councils to give citizens a voice in decision-making processes that influence their lives. Some councils focus specifically on topics such as healthcare, youth care or re-employment. Others are meant for certain target groups, such as seniors or young people. Municipalities see councils as a tool for establishing contact with citizens, getting their advice in relation to specific policy areas and monitoring how citizens perceive the care that they receive. This also applies to youth councils. The percentage of municipalities that have established a youth council increased from 4.4% in 1997 (Stichting Alexander, 1997) to 27.8% in 2008 (Feringa, 2014). It remains unclear, however, whether these youth councils are living up to the expectations. This study is a first step in identifying whether they are.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

In order to answer the central question of this article, a multiple case study was conducted to collect data. This type of research design lends itself to the analysis of multiple relationships within and between cases (Swanborn, 1996; Yin, 2003). Cases were selected using the snowball method (Maso & Smaling, 2004; Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). The first step was to ask 11 experts in the field of youth participation in the Netherlands which youth councils, in their opinion, should be studied and whether they knew other people who could be asked the same question. The snowball method initially resulted in 85 youth councils. This number was then reduced to 24 by applying the following four inclusion criteria: a) the youth council was mentioned twice by respondents, b) the youth council is active, c) the youth council is located within a municipality, and d) the youth council has been established by a municipality. An interview was conducted with a stakeholder from each of these 24 youth councils, during which we spoke about the daily work of the councils. We focused particularly on the themes that had emerged from exploratory talks with participation experts held before the start of the multiple case study. These themes were representation, influence, competence, responsibility and policy involvement. After these interviews, we used a content analysis (Boeije, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to search for cases that differed from each other in relation to these five concepts (Geddes, 2003). Ultimately, six cases were selected.

> *Case A:* 16 members, aged 17–25 years, different educational and cultural backgrounds, who meet once a week. The council was started in 2006 and is located in a large municipality in the central western area of the Netherlands.
> *Case B:* 7 members, aged 17–20 years, different educational backgrounds, all with a Dutch cultural background, who meet once a month. The council was started in 2006 and is located in a medium-sized municipality in the north-west of the Netherlands.
> *Case C:* 7 members, aged 19–29 years, different educational and cultural backgrounds, who meet once a month. The council was started in 2008 and is located in a large municipality in the central western area of the Netherlands.
> *Case D:* 15 members, aged 15–20 years, different educational and cultural backgrounds, who meet once a week. The council was started in 2007 and is located in a medium-sized municipality in the south-east of the Netherlands.

Case E: 3 members, aged 17–20 years, different educational background, all with a Dutch cultural background, who meet a couple of times per year. The council was started in 1998 and is located in a small municipality in the north-east of the Netherlands.

Case F: 6 members, aged 19–28 years, different educational and cultural backgrounds, who meet a couple of times per week. The council was started in 1997 and is located in a large municipality in the central western area of the Netherlands.

Data collection

Each of the six councils was followed for six months. During these months, meetings were observed (n=58) and young people, supervisors and policymakers were interviewed (n=77). We chose a combination of observations and interviews because this allowed us to a) see during observations whether the respondents do what they said they did at the interviews, and b) ask during interviews why respondents did what we had seen them doing during observations (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Spradley, 1980). Furthermore, relevant policy documents were collected in relation to the six councils.

Data analysis

We performed a content analysis to analyse the data using Atlas-Ti software. We structured this content analysis using the phases of Miles & Huberman (1994), Boeije (2006), and Saldana (2009). First, a code list was developed using open coding. Second, code families were identified by axial and selective coding. Third, patterns within and between code families were identified and put into a matrix. We ensured the reliability and validity of this qualitative research by using the criteria of Maso & Smaling (2004). Specifically, we aimed to conduct this research in such a way that others would be able to repeat it in the future, i.e. using an archive, logbook and software. Moreover, we built in some opportunities for intersubjectivity: conversations with fellow researchers to reflect on the processes of data collecting, analysis and interpretation.

RESULTS: PARTICIPATION STYLE IN LOCAL YOUTH COUNCILS

This section aims to present the participation style adopted by members of local youth councils. We present our findings in two parts. The first part shows which style young people use to participate in youth councils. We do this by considering their roles, activities and discussions inside

the council. The second part describes how members relate to the young people whom they represent. We look at how they communicate with young people outside the council to collect input for their advice. The empirical examples presented in this section are representative of the more general patterns found in our analysis.

Roles, tasks and responsibilities

In five of the six councils (Case A, B, C, E and F), members fulfil a specific role when participating. In Case D the members participate randomly in meetings, which are guided by supervisors. Each role covers specific tasks and responsibilities, which are fulfilled by individual members. For example, the chairperson leads the meetings, the treasurer looks after the finances, and there are members who draft recommendations, members who organize activities, and so on. One of the members in Case B, John, is responsible for collecting news items for the newspaper that the youth council distributes within the municipality. John had not managed to collect these items, so the newspaper could not be distributed.

> John: "I didn't find any news about young people. I did find news about a big fire near here." He starts talking about the details of that fire.
> Amber interrupts: "John, we are talking about the newspaper now, not about the fire. Last time we talked about cancelling the newspaper because it has never been a success."
> John: "The newspaper is not the problem. The problem is the lack of available news to present."
> During this meeting a supervisor is also present.
> Supervisor: "Cancelling the newspaper is not an option. John, maybe you can write an article about the lack of accommodation for young people within the municipality?"
> John: "I will look into it."

A few weeks later, the next meeting took place. The members ask John about his progress with writing the article. He says that he has not looked for information about the lack of accommodation yet. The supervisor offers John the names and contact details of some people who can tell him more about this topic and asks him to send an email to them.

> John: "Is it me who should send the emails?"
> Supervisor: "Yes John, you should be the one who sends the emails because you are responsible for the newspaper."

> John: "Oh, I thought we cancelled the newspaper."
> Amber: "The newspaper has not been cancelled."
> John: "Oh, I will try to send the emails."

After John said he would try to send the emails, the conversation about the newspaper was closed. In the subsequent months, when more meetings of this council were observed, John was absent. His absence meant that the newspaper disappeared from the agenda as well. Collecting items for the newspaper was John's responsibility and the other members did not seek to take over.

This is an example of a situation we saw in all five councils. Members focus on their individual tasks and responsibilities, which relate to their specific role, and do not involve themselves in other members' tasks. At the meetings, they share their positive and negative experiences. If a member is failing to fulfil his role, he/she does not ask for help, nor do the other members offer help. Taking care of one's role as an individual is what matters, rather than sharing with or supporting others.

Discussions

In the six councils included in this study, members talked mainly about internal matters. For instance, they discussed the degree to which they could fulfil their tasks and responsibilities, themes that they find interesting to advise the municipality about, events they would like to organize in their municipality and the annual daytrip they go on together. For example, in Case C, at several meetings the members discussed attendance.

> Gina (chairperson) opens the meeting later than the formal starting time.
> Gina: "Welcome. We are starting late again. Because this has been happening a lot lately, I've made a working schedule. We will be using this schedule for our activities in the council from now on."
> Fatima raises her hand and Gina lets her know that she can speak.
> Fatima: "I would like to talk about arriving on time as well. I make a lot of effort to be on time for these meetings myself and it is frustrating to see that some of you do not."

During the rest of this meeting, the members talk about this schedule and formulate the house rules they want to implement from now on.

The next meeting takes place five weeks later and it becomes clear that some members are not respecting the rules that were agreed on previously. For instance, the meeting starts late again and some of them enter after the meeting has already started. This meeting, too, is devoted to discussing the house rules, which members have failed to respect the rules, the reasons the rules were violated and what these members can do to respect the rules in the future.

This fragment is an example of a pattern that we saw at all six councils. Members talked a lot about subjects that concerned themselves as a group, or which they are interested in. Their discussions rarely focused on themes that matter to other young people as well. As such, the discussions were relevant to the members of the council but less so for the young people they represent.

Engagement with others outside a council: face to face

Because the discussions that take place during meetings seemed to be of little importance to young people outside councils, we also looked at how members seek contact with the young people they represent. We focused both on face-to-face contact between members and young people outside councils and the use of social media.

Members have little face-to-face contact with the young people whom they represent. The 43 members that were interviewed go to school, participate in sports, make music and/or have friends, but the council is separate from these other contexts: members do not talk about their activity in council with friends or at school, sports or music clubs and vice versa.

Furthermore, in three of the six cases (Cases A, D and F; in Cases B, C and E no advice was given during the six months of observation) policymakers come to council meetings, introduce a specific topic, ask members for their personal reaction and leave the meeting before it ends. Young people outside the council are not consulted by its members.

For instance, in Case A, prior to the council meeting two policymakers made a PowerPoint presentation about climate change including some specific questions about this topic. During the meeting they presented the information and asked members for their personal answers every time a question came up.

Another example occurred in Case D. During a meeting a policymaker came by to tell the members that she would like their advice about the way she and her colleagues should create leisure facilities

for young people in that municipality. She then wrote three questions on three large pieces of paper and asked the members to write their answers to each question on the same paper. One by one the members write down their answers. When they had finished, the papers were collected by the policymaker who thanked them and left the meeting before it ended.

Consultation of other young people about their interests in relation to a specific topic rarely took place in the councils. This was partly because members focused on internal matters during the meetings, but also because supervisors and policymakers did not ask members to speak with other young people about their interests before they give advice.

Engagement with others outside a council: social media

Face-to-face contact is not the only way members can collect input from those whom they represent. Social media can be used as well. Research shows that young people use the internet, and particularly social media, more frequently than older people (Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2011). And indeed, the members use WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube frequently during the day. However, they use this for private communication, not to contact adherents to collect input for their advice to the municipalities, and they want their conversations with other council members to remain private. Amber (Case D) says, for instance, that she uses social media to stay in touch with friends. She does not use her private accounts to collect input from other young people for the advices she gives in the council:

> I use Hyves [a Dutch medium similar to Facebook] and Twitter almost every hour. Even if it is only to see if I have received a new message or tweet. I only use YouTube when I am at home. And I use Hyves and Twitter to stay in contact with friends. I also use Twitter to share nice pictures or texts or to tell others what I am doing. I listen to music on YouTube. I have never used social media in relation to my participation in the council. But I do think it could be useful for recruiting new members or announcing events.

John (Case B) also uses social media just to stay in contact with friends.

> I use YouTube and Wikipedia and Facebook and sometimes Hyves. I check these sites fre-quently throughout the day to communicate with friends, family and acquaintances. On YouTube, I watch clips and I use Wikipedia for school assignments. I use Hotmail for my work for the council, because communication by mail is easier than by messenger in Hyves and the

content is protected by a password. Sending documents using Hyves makes them accessible for others as well, and that is not desirable, I think.

Nora (Case A), like other members of this council, also uses social media for private contacts only and wants her conversations with other members to remain private.

I use Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. I also used to use Hyves but not anymore because Facebook is international and Hyves only national. Using Facebook, I am able to communicate with friends and family abroad and I find it too much work to keep two accounts up to date. I look at these pages at least ten times a day to see what friends are doing and to share things with them. It is an easy way to stay in touch with other people. We also use Twitter and Hyves in our council. That did not go very well because members prefer their conversations to be private. Conversations become less personal when you add other people or groups so we stopped using these accounts.

In the six councils studied, all or some members preferred their conversations and documents to remain private. Because of this, members do not use social media to discuss common interests with the young people they represent.

DISCUSSION

Based on this study, two findings can be presented in relation to young people's style of participation in youth councils. Firstly, participation can be characterized as being predominantly "internally focused". At meetings, members talk about matters such as the degree to which individual members are fulfilling their tasks and responsibilities. There is little discussion or deliberation regarding civic issues or issues that specifically affect other young people living in the municipality.

This internal focus makes youth councils a place for bonding social ties (Putnam, 2000). Being a member of a council provides common topics to talk about. Youth councils appear to be a core network (Hampton, Sessions & Ja Her, 2011; Lin, Cook & Burt, 2001; Marin & Hampton 2007) and members see each other as core confidants (Hampton, 2011). This is illustrated by the scenarios described, where members talk about their use of social media and their preference to keep their conversations accessible for members only.

At the same time, this internal focus of conversations and the absence of social reflection on the relations between members, the context and other young people outside the council (Lichterman, 2005) prevent youth councils from being a place for bridging social ties (Putnam, 2000). Members are active outside the council in education, sports and music, but do not use these contacts for their activities on the youth councils, nor do they talk about these contexts and other young people outside the council.

Secondly, members have developed a style of participation that can be termed as "responsibilization" – a concept derived from governmentality studies and closely linked to (neo) liberal forms of governing, being "[…] a body of ideas and corresponding practices that revolves around deregulation, privatization, individual freedom of choice and a strong belief in the dynamics of the market" (Biebricher, 2011, p. 471). This way, individuals become subjects that consider themselves free agents, responsible for their own actions and the outcome produced (Biebricher, 2011). For instance, members of the youth councils have their own tasks and responsibilities for which they alone are accountable.

Although the youth councils are a place for bonding social ties through the internally focused conversations that take place, they fail to achieve this when it comes to the actions taken by members. This is because discussing internal common interests does not result in members acting accordingly. This also illustrates that councils do not at present meet the purposes of international policy – namely increasing young people's participation in democracy and the processes of decision-making that affect the lives of other young people (Hill, 2006; Hill, Davis, Prout & Tisdall, 2004; Pinkerton, 2004; Stafford, Laybourn, Hill & Walker, 2003).

However, based on Lichterman's concept of social reflexivity (2005) – a type of conversation between members of a group that contributes to bridging social ties between members of different groups – youth councils could serve as a place for both bonding and bridging relations. In order to achieve this, members should create a social reflexive conversation that not only focuses on internal matters and relations, but also on how they as a group are related to the young people they represent and the context that they participate in, e.g. processes, deadlines and dominant topics on the agenda of the specific municipality. Further research is necessary to clarify the possible ways of achieving this. Based on this study we can, however, assume that external matters are not discussed because internal discussions remain unresolved. Facilitating members to resolve internal matters and creating an infrastructure for exchanging ideas about different topics

between members and adherents could be the key to changing councils into a place for bridging social ties as well.

Limitations and future studies

Although this multiple case study provides insights into the extent to which youth councils promote civic engagement of young people and how they do this, it has some limitations as well. First, the scope of this research is limited in terms of number, place and time. Only six cases were included, all located in the Netherlands, and each case was followed for a period of six months. A longer period would be preferable because not all six cases were able to advise the relevant municipality within this period. Secondly, only the members of youth councils, supervisors and policymakers were interviewed and observed during meetings; adherents were not included in this study, so we do not know what they think about youth councils and the relevance of these councils for themselves and the local community. Thirdly, only qualitative methods were used to collect and analyse data. Therefore we are cautious not to overgeneralize our findings. Future research should explore if these findings apply in other countries as well, by using a longitudinal international multiple case study, for instance.

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