Chapter 5
Youth Participation and Mediation Practices: Issues of Social Learning

Alessandro Martelli and Stella Volturo

Abstract During the last years, studies coming from different disciplines have shed light on the multiple forms and meanings of youth participation. If we focus on the relationship between practices of participation and learning, it is observable that a relevant part of the learning that occurs when young people participate goes beyond the achievement of prescribed goals; it is rather about pursuing self-realisation, self-efficacy and learning from the 'journey'. In other words, young people's participation is essentially an experience of self-discovery and self-empowering where they 'actively' try to (re)define their individual and social identities and skills. However, the study of youth participation cannot be separated from a more general understanding of contemporary society and its complex dynamics affecting different social life spheres and the relationship between individuals and their social environment. The chapter explores this relationship presenting the results of an empirical study on youth participation in the field of cultural-artistic practices. The study is an illustrative case of youth participation in everyday life arenas with focus on sociability and building of social bonds. The findings from the fieldwork are analysed through a conceptual framework which interprets youth participation as a process of mediation and a 'laboratory' of social learning.

Keywords Youth · Participation · Mediation · Social learning · Social bonds

A. Martelli · S. Volturo (✉)
Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
e-mail: a.martelli@unibo.it; stella.volturo2@unibo.it

Z. Bečević, B. Andersson (eds.), *Youth Participation and Learning*, Young People and Learning Processes in School and Everyday Life 7,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92514-7_5

Introduction

The study of youth participation cannot be separated from a more general understanding of contemporary society and its complex dynamics affecting different social life spheres, such as education, labour market participation, family life, adulthood transition processes and, in more general terms, the relationship between individual and their social environment. This relationship seems more and more marked by individualisation processes, which imply the weakening or the rupture of social ties (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 2002; Giddens, 2013). Therefore, sociality and solidarity forms are less predictable than in the early modernity; the construction and maintaining of social bonds represent a challenge for the cohesion of our societies. As highlighted by Serge Paugam (2018), and as we will illustrate in this chapter, social bonds depend on two main dimensions: protection (from principal social risks) and recognition. In this sense, the fragility of social ties implies a lack of protection and/or recognition which can severely affect individual and social well-being. When it comes to young people, these effects are even more severe in terms of inequality reproduction and potential obstacles to their life trajectories and self-realisation.

Starting from this theoretical background, the chapter explores youth participation as a dynamic process developing in daily life arenas, according to a vision which conceives participation as a learning laboratory in social situated activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first one introduces the theoretical framework and conceptual issues related to the topic by focusing on three analytical dimensions: youth participation as a phenomenon concerning everyday life arenas; the process of individualisation and the fragility of social bonds as ambiguous signs of social change analysed through the lens of mediation theory; and learning as a social process and its relation to participation and mediation.

The second section aims at presenting the results of an empirical study on youth participation in the field of cultural-artistic practices. The study is an illustrative case of youth participation in everyday life arenas with focus on sociability and building of social bonds. The findings from the fieldwork are analysed through a conceptual framework which focuses on connections between meanings and forms of youth participation, social learning and mediation practices.

Finally, the third section summarises the chapter and highlights the emerging issues from both a theoretical and empirical perspective, aiming at systematisation and general reflection regarding youth participation and learning.

Theoretical Framework

Youth Participation in Everyday Life Arenas

Participation is a central phenomenon in young people's everyday lives. Participatory practices are underpinned by *interactions* embedded in specific structural conditions. If, for example, the youth condition, in a general sense, is associated with high unemployment rates and fragmentation of biographical carriers, young people are simultaneously protagonists of participatory instances both within the sphere of cultural practices and participation activities (Furlong, 2009; Leccardi & Ruspini, 2006; Loncle et al., 2012; Walther, 2012). In relation to the widespread idea of a resigned decline of youth protagonism, cultural practices and actions of young people represent a relevant observatory where changes in young people's participation can be seen and analysed (Bennett, 2003). In fact, while traditional political youth participation in the sphere of party-politics is clearly on the decline, forms of *personalisation* of political action – in terms of behaviours, lifestyles and consumption (Harris et al., 2010) – become more and more important. Besides their role as 'standby citizens'[1] (Amnå & Ekman, 2014), research on the topic has revealed interesting experiences of active involvement and unconventional forms of participation (Alteri & Raffini, 2014; Percy-Smith, 2015; Pickard & Bessant, 2018; Pitti, 2018; Walther et al., 2020).

Despite the persistence of growing social inequalities, or maybe precisely because of these, young people do not seem to cease exercising their subjectivity (Cuzzocrea & Collins, 2015). Recent research has shown several forms of social youth protagonism, such as volunteering, street art and neighbourhood cultural activities (Walther et al., 2020). Through these activities young people try to build a dialogue with the community, which can in turn be interpreted as a strategy for recomposing social ties. Within the current social and economic order, youth coping strategies to risks and uncertainties become expressions understandable as forms of negotiation, re-composition and re-signification (Loncle et al., 2020), that is, concrete acts of creation and sense making. Therefore, even leisure practices can represent relevant dimensions to (re)define individual and collective identity. When these kinds of activities are realised in highly collaborative contexts, they have the potential of creating real 'participation laboratories' where collective processes are valued even in the absence of rigidly structured exchanges and interactions. Participatory expressions of this kind can be understood as forms of civic engagement (Sherrod et al., 2010; Levine, 2011), assuming that this notion is extended beyond the political sphere stricto sensu and that involvement in group activities – whether political or not – promotes social cohesion which is a value and a goal in itself. This perspective

[1] We refer to the analytical category introduced by Amnå (2010) regarding the diverse faces and meanings of political passivity and their different implications for democracy.

presupposes a commitment to collective ideals in the construction of a shared horizon. If we understand civic engagement as a form of connection that nourishes social life, then it is possible to read forms of youth participation as a possible way to (re)build social ties (Putnam, 2000).

Social Bonds Through the Lens of Mediation

In contemporary European societies, the fragility of social bonds has become a permanent feature and characteristic of social life. This fragility can be interpreted in several ways and refer to different dynamics. For our purposes, it is interesting to observe that the weakening of social bonds can be related to macro-societal processes affecting young people lives, as a result of a general transformation of intergenerational relationships dating back to at least the 1970s (Ascoli & Sgritta, 2020). The question of generation is linked to complex and interconnected macro-social dynamics such as the demographic revolution, mainly characterised by the ageing process, the decline of welfare systems and the crisis of the social-democratic compromise following the decades after the Second World War, the development of mass education, the increasing participation of women in the labour market, the gradual dissolution of nuclear family and the transformation of family forms and the transformation of the labour market. These changes are perceived as particularly intense and risky in those countries, mainly concentrated in the Mediterranean area, where the 'core' of social protection has been mainly in charge of family responsibilities, as a result of fragmented and ungenerous social policies addressed to the youngest generations (Masson, 2017; Sgritta & Raitano, 2018). The increasing imbalances and inequalities descending from these processes have a strong socio-economic and cultural impact, above all on young people. The impact is even more severe as continuous individualisation of society seems to be one of the prevailing – even if ambivalent – 'codes' of late modernity. The ambivalence of a 'new individualism' (Leccardi & Volonté, 2018) is marked by two apparently different processes: individual's emphasis on their own 'singularity' (Martuccelli, 2010) and, in parallel, the constant tension individuals show towards forms of mutual (social) recognition of their uniqueness and originality. In relation to the worlds of young people, the concurrence of the individuals' importance and the openness towards others can be seen as a sort of 'moral individualism' (Beck, 2002), which stands behind the daily construction of social bonds and collective responsibilities without neglecting the search for personal gratification. In this sense, a process of individualism and collectivism occur simultaneously, as distinctive features of the contemporary way to intend to the reproduction of social ties and sociability, together with the cultivation of singularity. In this perspective, in times marked by social isolation emblematically defined by Laurent (2018) as the 'pandemic of loneliness', the social dimension becomes even more crucial.

In this context, the mediation perspective allows us to shed light on connections, solidarities and proximity forms, where social ties and mechanisms of recognition seem to be weakened. The potentialities of this perspective have not yet been fully explored and practiced by contemporary social scientists. Indeed, mediation theory has so far been mainly used to interpret and to justify its applicative side in the management of social conflicts or, at most, to focus on the regulatory aspects of mediation practices (Bonafé-Schmitt, 2020). However, already in the classical sociological thought, we can find fragments of theory which has much in common with mediation. In *De la division du travail social*, Durkheim (1997, original edition 1893) asks: how is it possible to keep society together through solidarity in a world where we are more and more differentiated, and what is the nature of the social bond in this changed context? Nowadays, given the rapid development and the diffusion of the individualisation process, the need for a theory to interpret and explain these variations of social life and social change becomes even more urgent. In this perspective, we adopt *mediation* as a conceptual lens through which we analyse mechanisms that enhance and promote social bonds building.

Regarding the more practical implications of the mediation approach, it can be said that it tries to cope with the fragilities of social bonds through a large spectrum of social activities and practices which actively involve citizens. In our perspective, by following the seminal approach of Baruch and Folger (1994), mediation is mainly based on a transformative process which ideally enhances dynamics of recognition (Honneth, 1996) and empowerment of individuals involved in the process.

The concepts of mediation and participation share many similarities, both theoretically and practically, as they are based and rely on questions of relation and recognition as key aspects of social life. If we assume that '(participation) stands for relational practices or practical relationships of addressing and being addressed, positioning and being positioned, recognising and being recognised' (Partispace, 2018), mediation is, in its essence, *the art of relation* because its ultimate goal is to (re)build social ties and relations.

Furthermore, both participation and mediation focus on processes of *recognition* and *misrecognition*. According to recent analysis, recognition is the concept which explains most of the relationality of (youth) participation (cf. Walther et al., 2020). Especially during the last years, inequalities grounded upon various modes of misrecognition (based on class, race/ethnicity, gender, age, etc.) have become central within the social science debate as well as in the public arena, due to their crucial impact on the living conditions of individuals and groups. In this sense, social inequalities are conceived not only as material deprivation (where the economic dimension plays a central role) but also as misrecognition and lack of respect. Richard Sennett (2003), for example, discusses the importance of promoting social interactions between 'strangers'. By 'strangers' Sennett refers to people who do not share relationships of intimate proximity, friendship or kinship, but who – despite their unfamiliarity – learn to live together, to respect and to socially recognise each other as inhabitants of the same space. These kinds of social interactions have the potential to give shape to collective forms of coexistence while maintaining diversity.

The current debate on recognition starts from the well-known work of Axel Honneth (1996) who identifies three main modes of intersubjective recognition:

1. *Love*, which refers to family, friendship and romantic relationships.
2. *Right*, which refers to reciprocal recognition of rights.
3. *Solidarity*, which is supportive approval of alternative lifestyles; solidarity gives rise to ethical recognition and highlights the equal dignity of different cultures and intersubjective awareness of the unicity and irreplaceability of individual in his/her autonomy.

Within the first form of recognition – love – the opportunity for self-confidence is implicitly contained; it is a crucial form of recognition for the development of individual personality.

In the experience of legal recognition (the domain of right), the reciprocity of the relationship is fundamental too: in the act of recognising the rights of others, the subject also recognizes as legitimate his/her own claim that others respect his/her rights. Recognition thus guarantees the protection of the other's equal dignity and their right to be treated with respect. Even though the outcome of this form of recognition is *self*-respect, the collective dimension is constitutive of this process, and it is as important as the individual dimension.

Finally, thanks to solidarity, a form of ethical recognition is promoted. In this case, recognition concerns the particular qualities that characterise people as unique individuals: the other is not only 'tolerated' because of the principle of pluralism and respect for different lifestyles but is also 'appreciated' for his/her abilities and actions.

Turning to youth participation, Thomas (2012) argues that all three modes of recognition are essential in guaranteeing full participation. Young people, indeed:

> do not engage fully if they do not feel a sense of warmth and affection; they cannot participate equally if they are not respected as rights-holders; and they will not have a real impact unless there is mutual esteem and solidarity, and a sense of shared purpose. (Thomas, 2012, 12)

When forms of misrecognition occur with regard to youth participation, young people are conceptualised in terms of a general category and viewed as trivial, irrelevant or even deviant. As a consequence, they may experience feelings of misrecognition and a loss of individual value. However, experiences of misrecognition can be used 'creatively' and give rise to processes of social learning and actions moved by the struggle for recognition (Honneth, 1996). It is often an ambivalent struggle, where individual needs for self-achievement go hand in hand with the search for meaning and building of social bonds.

With Serge Paugam (2018) we can identify four types of social bonds: the *lineal bond*, related to family relationships; the *elective participation bond*, related to 'chosen' proximity relationships; the *organic participation bond*, related to relations and functions within the labour market; and the *citizenship bond*, related to the sphere of belonging to the same political community. According to Paugam, the four types of social bonds simultaneously provide *protection* and *recognition* necessary

for social existence. In this perspective, protection is associated with the spectrum of support (family, community, institutional and professional resources) that an individual can mobilise in order to cope with social risks. Recognition, as discussed before, is linked to that social interaction from which the individual finds a confirmation of his/her existence and value, through the 'eyes' of the other.

The four types of social bonds are linked together, meaning that social identity is made up of a complex mosaic of different forms of belonging, which can also have different intensity and meanings from the subjective perspective of the individual. From our point of view, even though we do not neglect the importance and presence of the other types of bonds, we mainly refer to the *elective participation bond*, related to extra-family socialisation through which the individual makes connections with others and learns how to construct relations with various groups and institutions. The *places* of this socialisation are many: the neighbourhood, friendship groups, local community and religious, sports and cultural institutions. Across these differentiated *relational places*, individuals start that process of *social learning* which will last over the entire life cycle and which will occur through multiple activities.

Social Learning as Situated Social Activity

Close connections can be traced between youth participation and learning (Walther et al., 2020). Indeed, if we focus on the relationship between practices of participation and learning, it is observable that a relevant part of the learning that occurs when young people participate goes beyond the achievement of prescribed goals; it is rather about pursuing self-realisation, self-efficacy and learning from the 'journey' (McMahon et al., 2018). In other words, young people's participation is essentially an experience of self-discovery and self-empowering where they actively try to (re)define their individual and social identities and skills.

Social learning theory, in relation to young people, has been generally associated with the problems of deviance and to behaviourist approaches (Ward, 2007). Wildemeersch et al. (1998) extend the point of view by defining social learning as the:

> learning taking place in groups, communities, networks and social systems that operate in new, unexpected, uncertain and unpredictable circumstances; it is directed at the solution of unexpected context problems and it is characterised by an optimal use of the problem-solving capacity which is available within this group or community. (Wildemeersch, 2007, 100)

Following John Dewey, it is interesting to note the experiential side of learning, which gives it the characteristic of learning *by doing*. While experiential learning in the past has mainly been conceptualised regarding individuals, Wildemeersch et al. (1998) conceive a kind of experiential learning taking place within group interactions.

Social learning develops across four basic dimensions: action, reflection, communication and cooperation. The *action dimension*, as driver of participatory activity, recognises the need or the desire to change a specific situation. In this sense, action comes from the discrepancy between an initial condition and the tension towards the change. The *reflection dimension* is fundamental for improving the action, above all in terms of *critical reflection* aimed at questioning ideas, judgements, emotions and feelings. The *communication dimension* is another fundamental ingredient for enhancing the participatory process, and it is closely connected with the *cooperative dimension* where the dialogue and the interaction between actors are crucial, as they are constantly involved in implicit and explicit processes of negotiation (Wildemeersch et al., 1998).

In our perspective, young people learn 'through' and 'about' participation, meaning that learning and participation are inextricably intertwined. How can learning through participation or, in more processual terms, a *learning participation* be developed? As highlighted by the Council of Europe (2014), learning participation is facilitated when opportunities for participation are available, when there is support to develop skills for participation and when obstacles to participation are reduced. However, even the presence of obstacles to participation or to a full access to resources can produce mobilisation and forms of participation.

Contexts where young people learn about participation are several: formal education (such as schools) and non-formal education, in local youth clubs and civic organisations and through participation in local and regional youth councils and parliaments. Moreover, they also learn to participate informally while experiencing participation in diverse youth work settings and practices: this last form of learning is probably more 'fluid' and internally differentiated, as it refers to different activities and contexts.

As pointed out by findings in this field, 'understanding learning as active processes of appropriating the world implies that the spaces and situations in which young people learn influence but do not determine what and how they learn' (Partispace, 2018). So, the activities of young people in public spaces reveal different and perhaps contrasting scenarios, such as experiences of power and powerlessness, of self-efficacy and disrespect, of inclusion and exclusion. This aspect is particularly interesting because it demonstrates the non-deterministic nature of context and implies the importance of *agency* of young people. The combination and interplay of structural elements with subjective ones can thus create unexpected, innovative outputs and practices.

Given the interconnection between participation and learning, we can state that every participatory process produces learning while simultaneously including forms of mediation, even when the motivation behind participation is mainly related to conflictual/antagonist stances.

As social learning and participation are about the need to transform the relationship between the self and the world by considering the complex interplay between individual needs and the tension towards the collective dimension, mediation aims at making a step forward by focusing on social mechanisms that promote cooperation and solidarity. To this concern, our view of mediation does not imply a pacified world or nostalgia towards communitarian social systems. Conflictual relationship

forms are not seen as destructive with regard to social bonds; they are rather conceived as a great opportunity for young people's learning about themselves and their relations with the world.

Emerging Issues from a Case Study: Cultural-Artistic Practices in a Medium-Size Town in Northern Italy

Following the analytical framework on social learning and mediation, the adopted perspective for the analysis of our case starts from a conception of cultural-artistic practices as a sort of 'yeast' in the creation and maintenance of social ties within the local community. Within this perspective, the 'art worlds' (Becker, 1982) are interpreted as contexts of action where young people express necessities and individual needs in relation to a wider, collective sphere of daily life arenas. The local context of the case study is Forlì, a city of approximately 120,000 inhabitants situated in the Emilia-Romagna Region in Northern Italy. The empirical fieldwork focused on observing forms of artistic-cultural expressions with emphasis on three main fields: (1) leisure consumption, (2) participation and cultural (co)production and (3) cultural sector as occupational field. For the sake of our analysis, we single out three main questions from the larger study:

1. Which are the forms of youth participation mainly associated with dynamics of social bonds construction and, therefore, mediation?
2. What does participation mean from the subjective experiences of the young people involved?
3. How are participation activities intertwined with processes of social learning?

In order to answer these questions, we explore the subjective worlds of young people. More precisely, the analysis is based on 47 semi-structured interviews with young people and experts. In addition, participant observations of cultural events and activities were carried out in the Forlì city and are also a part of the empirical material which grounds the analysis. The interviewee sample is divided into two main categories: young people (aged from 18 to 35) involved in participatory activities[2] mainly within the sector of cultural-artistic practices and the 'experts', individuals who, although belonging to the adult world, have a well-informed point of view regarding young people's participation.[3]

[2] Regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of young people, the sampling has been informed by gender (14 males and 13 females) and by type of artistic activity according to both the specific sector (theater, music, dance) and the role of the interviewee (differentiating between those who work in the sector and those who participate voluntarily). Almost all of the interviewees have a bachelor's degree or are in tertiary education.

[3] Among these we find, for example, artistic directors of theaters, experts in artistic training and educators working at youth centers.

Learning to Participate In-Between Spontaneous Processes and Structured Contexts

Based on the findings from the case study, we propose three instances of youth cultural participation as examples of practices aimed at (re)constructing social bonds.

(Re)signifying Urban Space Through Performative Arts

One of the ways in which young people's participation is displayed in the city is by giving new meaning to abandoned spaces which become the scenography of artistic performance like dancing, playing music, singing and painting. Besides the artistic product, another interesting aspect is the process that animated the participation of youth involved in these experiences and the reasons that led them to express their voice in the city. This is illustrated through the experience of the 'semi-interrati'[4] cultural association, a collective of young artists driven by the goal of revitalising the city. Below is an excerpt from an interview with Barbara,[5] a 26-year-old dancer and one of the founders, who tells us about the origins and development of the project:

> *It all started with an idea of a friend of mine, who decided to make a video inside the former sugar factory in Forlì. It is an emblematic place of the city: it is an object that everyone considers 'dead' and absolutely useless, but which actually hides infinite beauty. In fact, it is not only the set of a thousand photo shoots by various artists, but it is also a place where we find street art, or murales. And it's also an interesting place for kids who do parkourParkour.*
>
> *We are all part of the same dance school, so we called our friends who do contemporary dance, ballet, some of us do hip-hop and breakdance. We then called a friend who is a photographer, a friend who paints and a friend who does aerial dance and plays with fire. The creator said: "good! I want to take you back inside this space, I want to make a provocative video". It all started basically like this: saying "look, Forlì is not dead, Forlì is alive and has many beautiful places". You just need to know and find out. So we were not born with the aim of building something new, but with the aim of showing to the city what already existed, demonstrating that it is absolutely not true that there is nothing in Forlì and that young people do nothing and that Forlì is boring.*

Thanks to experiences like these, young people learn how to feel and be protagonists in their daily contexts. Initiating a process of social change is highly empowering for their sense of self-efficacy, encouraging them to be pro-active. Fun is combined with a 'sense of place', revealing an inter-generational process

[4] In Italian, the name indicates a word pun: "semi" means seeds and "interrati" means submerged, but the whole word (seminterrati without the hyphen) means 'undergrounds'.

[5] All names are fictive.

while generating a sort of mediation effect. The territorial dimension is central in this re-negotiation of meaning by young people. As illustrated by the excerpt, the mission of semi-interrati is to ascribe new meaning to abandoned locations in urban space.

The primary group has gradually expanded to involve about 80 young people (aged from 16 to 30 years), who, departing from different skills and artistic modes of expression, have acted 'chorally' in order to ascribe fresh meaning to neglected and forgotten locations in the city. A video film produced by the semi-interrati association in which young members showcase their talents ends with these quite emblematic words pronounced by one of the members:

> *I've always been told that this city is like an arid land from which beauty cannot arise. But I wonder: if this land hides some buried seeds, wouldn't it be reckless, and perhaps illogical, to call it dead?*

In addition to the importance of the territorial dimension, another strongly emergent theme is the openness towards the construction of social ties, solidarity and friendship through learning and artistic expression. As illustrated by Barbara:

> *The nice thing about this Association is that we are friends. In my opinion there are some people, within the Association, who represent its spirit. For example, there is the guy who helped to edit the video and who had a passion for skateboarding, then, staying with us and seeing us dance, he decided to do hip-hop and became very good! I think he is the greatest Semi-interrati 'conquest'. This is the result of the mutual influence that we have been able to exert on each other. [. . .] The nice thing about us is that we are so varied [meaning that we have different artistic interests and skills] that we share a lot of ideas and we learn from each other.*

In these words, there's a reference to learning which obviously does not only have to do with learning to dance or play an instrument. These are just tools in a larger process of social learning in which personal growth and collaboration are implicated.

The reason for the success of this initiative, which thanks to the online dissemination of the video has become well known and appreciated in the city, consists in the simplicity of the project, in being young and loving the city. Barbara explains:

> *In my opinion it is such a trivial thing: looking at the beautiful things that are in the city. Starting with the guys who breakdance under the post office, which is a wonderful thing. That is, they have their own 'theater', and everyone sees them there. They do beautiful things and no one has noticed. The idea for the new video goes in the direction of enhancing the artistic and cultural heritage of Forlì: framing various places, some hidden, other clearly visible, but not considered by local inhabitants. Like a sort of a moving photograph [. . .] The key to success also lies in the fact that we are young, we are energized and we are the only ones in this sense. . . there are not so many young people who love the city so much.*

Young people's visibility in the city relates to the aspects of recognition discussed earlier. Feelings of friendship (or 'love', in Honneth's words) represent the social base for a restored and creative sense of belonging to their city.

(Re)discovering Urban Space: The Cultural Valorisation 'From Below'

Another participative action puts emphasis on the (re)discovery of space from a perspective of urban regeneration. Also in this case the focus is on abandoned city-spaces, but the way in which these spaces are conceived and experienced relates to a different methodology, which relies even more clearly on direct action of citizens. This is the case of 'Spazi Indecisi',[6] a cultural association which since 2010 has been experimenting and designing processes of urban regeneration. Their work is based on cultural activities that transform abandoned places into fields of research for photographers, landscape architects, urban planners and citizens in general.

We interviewed one of the founders of the association, Giacomo (35 years old), who told us about the idea behind the project:

> *We started in a very simple way, with a bike ride around the abandoned places in the city.7 The goal was to 'enter' these places. For this purpose, it was necessary to establish relationships with the local administration, which did not believe in it, did not believe that this was the right way to talk about these places. Personally, I have always been convinced that this is the way to talk about places, do not go to the same old boring conferences, where there are always the usual ten people, nor by writing theses. . . So we wanted to unhinge this logic: first of all we try to visit these places and then we see what will happen. The intent was to show a new 'face' of these places, which are seen as a 'problem', as hidden. Instead we wanted to overturn this perspective by showing them, understanding whether they still had a value or not. After the first ride we created another event, we realized that the approach was right, it was inclusive, in a good sense of the word.*

These words clearly suggest the urgency to implement more effective and more attractive ways of displaying and experiencing the city. Further, in the process of rediscovering abandoned places, emotions seem to acquire particular importance. This dimension is characterised by a subjective sphere (people choose to take care of a certain place because they 'feel attached') and also by a collective sphere related to the larger community (the place is also chosen because it is the product of social interaction). Giacomo, again, expressed:

> The only goal is to show this place, to make people empathize with this place. In doing so it can make something vibrate and can stimulate the fact that some of these people who will come into contact with it, may think to bring it forward and to save it from total abandonment. This is the basic vision. You can't do it for all places, because there are so many abandoned places, but how do you choose? How does a community choose places? One chooses them because he/she is fond of them. Because the place suggests a common vision. Make a place manifest so that, if the community *sees* it again, it can have an interest in taking care of it.

The association has grown in recent years. It is increasingly recognised in the city and beyond, and new projects have been launched. Through these different projects and artistic languages, young people try to build a dialogue with the local

[6] In Italian 'Spazi indecisi' means 'undecided spaces'.

community where the association is based. The community in question is characterised by social marginalisation and issues of coexistence, as explained by Giacomo:

> *In addition to the rediscovery of abandoned spaces, we are interested in the people who live in this neighborhood, which is made up mainly of families who live in council housing buildings. [. . .]. The inhabitants involved were asked "simply" to open their homes to a stranger (an artist), who moved freely inside for 15 minutes and took photos of the interior of the apartment. It was a very complex project, because it is not easy to open your home to a stranger. So it took us months to get people to do it. 13, 14 families joined, but in order to create these relationships, I met many other people.*
>
> *This year we repeated it, doing dance inside the condominium courtyards. So there is this attention 'towards the outside' (of the Association), towards social situations, where art is an activator of dynamics of social inclusion, an answer to situations of social marginalization. The project, in order to have an incisiveness, must consolidate a 'practice': either you invest in situated interactions or you cannot make a difference.*

Promotion and Reproduction of Social Ties: Culture as the Vehicle of Inclusion

The Youth Centre Mandalà, whose main target group are young asylum seekers, is an illustration of a third type of participative action. The richness of the activities and the participatory ferment that nourishes the relationships in the centre have made this place a meeting point between asylum seekers and young people from Forlì. The centre is a space for coming together, sharing experiences and cultivating relationships. Various courses are promoted at the centre, for example, in Italian language, history of art and computer use.

Among the case studies analysed here, this is the one that most responds to explicit aims of social integration. At first glance, it would seem not to have much to do with the themes of art and culture. However, looking more closely at the activities given at the centre, the role of arts for the purpose of social integration becomes evident. Activities such as concerts, theatre performances, public readings of poems and stories (flashreading) and production of music videos are natural features. These activities involved many of the young asylum seekers (particularly from the regions of sub-Saharan Africa) as well as young people from Forlì, as either volunteers or visitors to the centre. In addition to direct observations of the activities carried out at the centre, a series of interviews with volunteers were conducted.

The participatory spirit at the centre clearly emerges through the voice of Giulia 28 years old, one of the volunteers:

> My job is another one and I do it to earn, not for passion. But here, at the Mandalà, I feel I am doing something good both for me and for them (young asylum seekers), and for the citizens of Forlì. That is, for the first time I feel like an active citizen. Before now, I have never felt like an active citizen. When I was a Scout leader I didn't feel it was my active choice. While now I am choosing to stay here, to do activities with African guys, I choose the interaction, I

> choose to work for a more open, tolerant and human society. Until a few years ago I wasn't even going to vote, just to make you understand how detached I felt from my country. Now I am attached to Italy, but above all to help foreign citizens, because I want a chance for them to live in a more inclusive society.

This quote is emblematic of a transformative process which comes from social interactions in daily activities. Everyday life becomes the main arena of social learning carrying along aspirations for active involvement and direct action aimed at a wider social change.

For Giulia, a year-long volunteering experience in Zambia served as a biographical turning point which made her realise what she wanted her life project to be:

> *Returning home (from Zambia), I changed my way of seeing the world, of living my daily life. When people ask me: what do you want to do when you grow up? I do not know! I know I need relationships, culture. Even now, the poetry workshop we did, it is a joy for the heart! I come from classical studies. Everything has already been thought and said. I have studied for years and I have always been afraid that my studies were not consistent with the actual reality, but I realize that my gaze on the world is also nourished by this awareness. When I say I have a degree in Ancient Greek [said emphatically], people laugh in my face! It's not nice at all! At the time I had chosen it out of passion, because I had gone to classical high school. But even there, I don't like he idea that it must be a courageous choice if you enroll in humanities. We are getting ugly, for me we are going towards the end! Because it is not possible for people to enroll in a degree in science just to have better job chances. Now, there is this component of African culture, which, however, I have not yet started studying. I said to myself: if I find a more stable job, whatever it is, it is only to enroll in anthropology! And my family and other people tell me: you cannot study all your life! I would like to do anthropology to better understand their culture (referring to the boys who attend the Center).*

The Mandalà experience is an illustrative case of the complex interplay between participation, social learning (which clearly occurs by sharing biographies in a multicultural context) and mediation practices, enhancing that *togetherness* (Amin, 2012) that can be seen as antidote to processes of social distancing and indifference.

Conclusions

The cases presented in this chapter talk about youth participation in an urban context in three slightly different ways, according to the issue in focus and the form of action taken. However, all cases testify how closely participation and learning are intertwined while simultaneously illustrating that participative action has a socially oriented behaviour. Actually, the emphasis on participation as agency in times of diffused individualisation of social life does not deny the importance of social relationships and engagement (Tisdall & Davis, 2006; Alteri et al., 2016; Cuzzocrea et al., 2020). When acting as a generational group, even when appearing as self-referential like in the case of semi-interrati and their aim of revitalising the city through artistic performances in abandoned sites, young people's semantic frame is

that of general community. In this way, young people's participation is strongly linked to a collective dimension of crucial importance, embedded in their community of belonging (Percy-Smith, 2012; Forkby & Batsleer, 2020; Shildrik, 2006). So, actions developed in these youth organisations have in common a movement towards adults and institutions in the city, aiming at both recognition and dialogue.

Research results demonstrate the undeniable prevalence of participation as direct social action (Zamponi, 2019), interpreted by young people as the most authentic, meaningful and concrete form of participation. This aspect recollects Sennett's (2012) considerations about the rituals of cooperation. According to Sennett, the contemporary (re)composition of social bonds develops through collaborative practices aimed at 'doing' together. As emerging in our analysis, the 'collaborative practices' in focus concern social abilities that are at the same time performed and learnt through participation (Cuzzocrea & Collins, 2015; De Luigi et al., 2018).

Through their actions young people develop and promote social learning. Their practices of participation therefore imply social learning as both a tool and a result. At the same time, these actions produce mediation effects: they reduce distances between urban sites, contextualise their historical heritage and raise citizens' awareness about their contemporary potential. In this way, participation promotes renewed and enlarged points of view on the city and its inhabitants. Youth participation can thus be appreciated in its combined nature: as containing elements of both learning *and* mediation.

Looking at the potential of these kinds of initiatives, an interesting and more general point emerges in relation to the impact of participative actions on the wider urban community. All three cases express the reality of 'active minorities' (Moscovici, 1973) in relation both to the larger population of young people and to the inhabitants of the city. Representative of these active minorities is the effort to practice a sort of alternative and inclusive way of living in the city. Public exteriorisation has the aim of testifying the agency of young people in struggling for recognition, and it also suggests the possibility of a wider, renovate and solidaristic idea of everyday life in the urban space. Moreover, it is an attempt of affecting the crystallised dynamics of behaviours and relations in the local community through the proposal of new sources of influence, of legitimisation and of social communication (Lalli, 1999). Even if these actions will not have immediate and visible impact on consolidated cultural, political and economic powers and structures, it does not mean that they will be forgotten nor re-entered as system 'noise' (ibidem). In this perspective, the social (intra- and inter-generational) relevance of these practices of participation seems to be strictly connected to the general conditions experienced from youth 'as a whole' in contemporary society and to the (mis)recognition they receive; its meaning and its effects have to do with the potential of social influence embedded in everyday life and in social movements.

References

Alteri, L., & Raffini, L. (a cura di) (2014). *La nuova politica. Mobilitazioni, movimenti e conflitti in Italia*. EdiSes.

Alteri, L., Leccardi, C., & Raffini, L. (2016). Youth and the reinvention of politics: New forms of participation in the age of individualization and presentification. *PACO, 9*(3), 717–747.

Amin, A. (2012). *Land of strangers*. Polity Press.

Amnå, E. (2010). Active, passive, or standby citizens? Latent and manifest political participation. In E. Amnå (Ed.), *New forms of citizen participation: Normative implications* (pp. 191–203). Baden-Baden.

Amnå, E., & Ekman, J. (2014). Standby citizens: Diverse faces of political passivity. *European Political Science Review, 6*(2), 261–281.

Ascoli, U., & Sgritta, G. B. (2020). Logoramento dei legami sociali, sistemi di welfare e solidarietà di base. *La Rivista delle Politiche Sociali*, 19–42.

Baruch Bush, R. A., & Folger, J. B. (1994). *The promise of mediation: Responding to conflict through empowerment and recognition*. Jossey-Bass.

Bauman, Z. (2001). *The individualized society*. Polity Press.

Beck, U. (2002). *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences* (Vol. 13). Sage.

Becker, H. (1982). *Art worlds*. University of California Press.

Bennett, W. L. (2003). Civic learning in changing democracies. In *Young citizens and new media: Learning for democratic participation* (pp. 59–78).

Bonafé-Schmitt, J. P. (2020). Le renouveau de la médiation. *Les cahiers de la justice, 3*, 535–545.

Council of Europe. (2014). *Revisiting youth participation: Current challenges, priorities and recommendations*. Available at the link: https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261980/Consolidated+papers_reflection+group.pdf/5d365dac-4ba0-4fd9-85bf-0785e09e3631

Cuzzocrea, V., & Collins, R. (2015). Collaborative individualization? Peer-to-peer action in youth transitions. *Young, 2*, 136–153.

Cuzzocrea, V., Bello, B. G., & Kazepov, Y. (Eds.). (2020). *Italian youth in international context. Belonging, constraints and opportunities*. Routledge.

De Luigi, N., Martelli, A., & Pitti, I. (2018). New forms of solidarity and young people: An ethnography of youth participation in Italy. In *Young people re-generating politics in times of crises* (pp. 253–271). Palgrave Macmillan.

Durkheim, E. (1997). *The division of labour in society* [original edition 1893]. Free Press.

Forkby, T., & Batsleer, J. (2020). In search of the beloved community: Dancing to a different tune of youth participation. *Ethnography and Education, 15*, 493–508.

Furlong, A. (2009). *Handbook of youth and young adulthood. New perspectives and agendas*. Routledge.

Giddens, A. (2013). *The consequences of modernity*. Polity Press.

Harris, A., Wyn, J., & Younes, S. (2010). Beyond apathetic or activist youth. 'Ordinary' young people and contemporary forms of participation. *Young Nordic Journal of Youth Research, 18*(1), 9–32.

Honneth, A. (1996). *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. Mit Press.

Lalli, P. (1999). The experience of an active minority: Cultural and communicative aspects. In A. Martelli, M. T. Tagliaventi, & P. Zurla (Eds.), *"Piazza Grande's laboratories" between work and social action*. FrancoAngeli.

Laurent, É. (2018). *L'impasse collaborative. Pour une véritable économie de la coopération*. Les Liens qui Libèrent.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.

Leccardi, C., & Ruspini, E. (2006). *A new youth? Young people, generations and family life*. Routledge.

Leccardi, C., & Volontè, P. (Eds.). (2018). *Un nuovo individualismo? Individualizzazione, soggettiva e legame sociale*. Egea.

Levine, P. D. (2011). *The capacity for civic engagement. Public and private worlds of the self*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Loncle, P., Cuconato, M., Muniglia, V., & Walther, A. (Eds.). (2012). *Beyond discourses, practices and realities of youth participation in Europe*. Policy Press.

Loncle, A., Martelli, Y., & Mengilli, I. P. (2020). Participation and everyday life: Emerging meanings in youth cultures. In A. Walther, J. Batsleer, P. Loncle, & A. Pohl (Eds.), *Young people and the struggle for participation. Contested practices, power and pedagogies of young people in public* (pp. 130–145). Routledge.

Martuccelli, D. (2010). *La société singulariste*. Armand Colin.

Masson, A. (2017). Protection sociale et privée contre l'inflation inédite des vieux jours. In Guillemard A.-M. e Moscova E. (a cura di), *Allongement de la vie. Quels défis? Quelles politiques?* Ed. La Découverte.

McMahon, G., Percy-Smith, B., Thomas, N., Bečević, Z., Hansson, S. L., & Forkby T. (2018). *Young people's participation: Learning from action research in eight European cities* (Partispace Working Papers).

Moscovici, S. (1973). *Social influence and social change*. Academic.

Partispace. (2018). *Re-thinking youth participation – Contributions of PARTISPACE* (Partispace Working Paper Series). Available at the link: http://partispace.eu/cms/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/PARTISPACE-Working-paper-re-thinking-youth-participation.pdf

Paugam, S. (2018). *Le lien social*. PUF.

Percy-Smith, B. (2012). Participation as mediation and social learning: Empowering children as actors in social contexts. In C. Baraldi & V. Iervese (Eds.), *Participation, facilitation and mediation. Children and young people in their social contexts*. Routledge.

Percy-Smith, B. (2015). Negotiating active citizenship: Young people's participation in everyday spaces. In K. P. Kallio, S. Mills, & T. Skelton (Eds.), *Politics, citizenship and right*. Springer.

Percy-Smith, et al. (2018) Partispace deliverable 7.2: Youth Participation Training Module. https://zenodo.org/record/1240342#.Ycr7TRPMJD0.

Pickard, S., & Bessant, J. (Eds.). (2018). *Young people re-generating politics in times of crisis*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Pitti, I. (2018). *Youth and unconventional political participation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.

Sennett, R. (2003). *Respect in a world of inequality*. Norton & Co.

Sennett, R. (2012). *Together. The rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation*. Yale University Press.

Sgritta, G. B., & Raitano M. (2018). Generazioni: dal conflitto alla sostenibilità. *La Rivista delle politiche sociali/Italian Journal of Social Policy, 3*, 11–32.

Sherrod, R. L., Torney-Purta, J., & Flanagan, A. C. (Eds.). (2010). *Handbook of research on civic engagement in youth*. Wiley.

Shildrick, T. (2006). Youth culture, subculture and the importance of neighbourhood. *Young, 14*(1), 61–74.

Thomas, N. (2012). Love, rights and solidarity: Studying children's participation using Honneth's theory of recognition. *Childhood, 19*(4), 453–466.

Tisdall, K., & Davis, J. (Eds.). (2006). *Children, young people and social inclusion: Participation for what?* Policy Press.

Walther, A. (2012). Participation or non-participation? Getting beyond dichotomies by applying an ideology-critical, a comparative and a biographical perspective. In P. Loncle et al. (Eds.), *Young people and the struggle for participation. Beyond discourses, practices and realities of youth participation in Europe*. Policy Press.

Walther, A., Batsleer, J., Loncle, P., & Pohl, A. (Eds.). (2020). *Young people and the struggle for participation. Contested practices, power and pedagogies of young people in public*. Routledge.

Ward, C. L. (2007). Young people's violent behaviour: Social learning in context. In P. Burton (Ed.), *Someone stole my smile: An exploration into the causes of youth violence in South Africa*. Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.

Wildemeersch, D. (2007). Social learning revisited: Lessons learned from north and south. In A. J. Wals (Ed.), *Social learning towards a more sustainable world* (pp. 99–116).

Wildemeersch, D., Jansen, T., Vandenabeele, J., & Jans, M. (1998). Social learning: A new perspective on learning in participatory systems. *Studies in Continuing Education, 20*(2), 251–265.

Zamponi, L. (2019). Direct social action, welfare retrenchment and political identities. Coping with the crisis and pursuing change in Italy. *Partecipazione e conflitto, 12*(2), 382–409.

Alessandro Martelli is Full Professor of Sociology at the Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna, Italy.

Stella Volturo is PhD in Sociology, Post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna, Italy.