

Chapter 1

Participation in Organizations and Institutions Across the Life Course



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Abstract This introductory chapter provides an overview of the different meanings of participation and locates this concept in the context of the life course. Parallel to and intertwined with learning, participation is a lifelong and life-wide phenomenon, framed by life-course regimes and institutions. While participation has become a widely used catchword that promises personal, organizational, and community development, as well as the strengthening of empowerment and democracy, a continuous engagement with critical questions concerning the underlying motives, contexts, conditions, and effects of participation is essential for democratic societies. Organizations and institutions being vital subsystems of any society, this book's chapters scrutinize the potentials and limits of some of these as learning environments. The introduction concludes with a “guided tour” through the chapters and the concerns the authors raise, each representing institutions through which many of us move in the course of our lives.

Keywords Participation · Democracy · Life course · Learning · Organizations

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1.1 The Meaning of Participation

The concept of participation is heterogeneous and multidimensional. Participation can be interpreted in many ways. At the individual level, it can refer to access to and membership in an organization, to being part of and having a voice in an organization, and to ownership and autonomy within a social context. At the collective level, participation implies social integration and activation, civic engagement and codetermination, democratic governance and legitimation, and social and political transformation (e.g., Verba & Nie, 1972). The term has come to signify openness and transparency, inclusion and diversity, voice and empowerment, and equality and democracy in all life spheres, including more recently developed domains such as citizen science, open-source technology, peer production, and online participation (e.g., Kelty et al., 2015).

Participation has significance for individual, organization, and society. It is a decisive factor for personal growth, identity formation, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and self-determination (Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Responding to a universal human need to interact effectively with one's environment and to influence decisions concerning one's life participation is considered the critical condition of intrinsic motivation, well-being, learning, and development (Wilpert, 1998). Furthermore, participation is deemed an essentially collective experience that is shared by individuals and characterized by affective and communicational qualities. It contrasts with the anonymous, disconnected, or mechanistic interaction in some spheres of life, such as markets (Kelty et al., 2015) or unresponsive institutions (e.g., Walther et al., 2008).

Participation is also associated with benefits at the organizational and institutional level, where individual satisfaction, aspirations, and self-reliance contribute to increased efficiency, for example, to the more successful integration of young people in education and work by youth transition institutions (Walther et al., 2008) or to companies' stronger organizational commitment, lower turnover rate, and reduced absenteeism, which leads to increased productivity, efficiency, innovation, or profitability (Batstone, 1983; Janssen, 2005).

At the societal level, individual self-determination is considered a fundamental value and an inalienable human right that needs to be realized not only in institutions of political democracy but also in all spheres of social life (Pateman, 1970). Participatory approaches thus seek to promote social and political inclusion and the remodeling of society toward justice, equality, and well-being for all. While "allow[ing] exploited and alienated workers to become active agents in the processes of remodelling society" was a central socialist tenet (Wilpert, 2000, p. 356), participation is now more generally used to bring the voices of marginalized and disadvantaged groups to bear on the aims, structures, and processes within institutions, organizations, and communities. This approach is tied to participatory theory, which posits a causal relationship between a lack of participatory opportunities on the one hand and apathy and lacks of engagement, motivation, and competence on the other hand. Dismantling the "patterns of authority" (Pateman, 1970) across

society is therefore understood to foster the development of civic virtues, “opening new possibilities and life chances for the individual” while increasing “participation as a collective effort for the benefit of all” (Kelty et al., 2015, p. 479f).

1.2 Participation and Life Course

Participation accompanies us throughout the life course—“from the cradle to the grave”—in various meanings and settings. It is not only an activity, experience, and competence that is transferred from one life stage to another (socialization) and from one life sphere to another (spillover effect) but also something that may change between life stages and with the biological cycle of maturation and decline. Similar to the life course itself, participation is structured by social institutions, economic and political contexts, and historical conditions.

1.2.1 *Lifelong and Life-Wide Participation*

Socialization for participation takes place throughout the lifetime. In the course of one’s socialization, social norms, values, and behavior patterns are internalized. In primary socialization, the family plays the most important role. Politicization in the family has a lasting effect on the political values of children (Youniss, 1982). However, individual attitudes and behavior may change during secondary socialization, when peers become more influential, and during tertiary socialization through political and social institutions such as schools, workplaces, voluntary organizations, political parties, and trade unions. Schools not only impact cognitive knowledge but also the possibility of experiencing “lived democracy.” Participatory activities in school boost political participation outside school and after leaving school. Similarly, political engagement in the workplace is associated with political participation outside work and volunteering with other forms of social and political participation (Westphal et al., 2008; Pateman, 1970; Weber et al., 2020). Furthermore, the socialization process is not a one-way street: research has identified “trickle-up socialization” where children’s engagement in participation has an effect on their parents’ values and behaviors (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2011; Hooghe & Stiers, 2020) and “spillover” effects of mobilization extend from one family member to another (McDevitt, 2006).

The socialization thesis put forward by Almond and Verba (1965), Barnes and Kaase (1979), and Putnam (1993) assumes a causal order where participation in civic and political life leads to greater civic-mindedness, trust in civic and political collaboration and institutions, and active engagement. Civic engagement is thought to not only enhance the capability for empathy, altruism, solidarity, and reciprocity but to also transcend the limits of one’s own private sphere, widening one’s social identification with and interest in the lives of others. In institutions and

organizations, beyond socialization effects, self-selection and organizational selection effects are also plausible. A self-selection process is thus assumed; people who have developed prosocial behavior in previous settings search for work in institutions and organizations that fit their values. Additionally, organizations select newcomers whose values and aspirations correspond to organizational values and goals (Schneider, 1987). However, selection and socialization effects may occur simultaneously. Adopting a corresponding role in organizations will therefore tend to lead to the development of congruent value patterns and of even more intensive participation (Quintelier & Hooghe, 2012). From a learning perspective, practice leads to more self-efficacy, improved skills, better social recognition, and enhanced motivation to pursue further participation (Wenger, 1999).

A focus of the life course also encompasses life cycle effects, i.e., the physical, psychological, and social changes implied in an individual's maturation and aging process. Life cycle events such as entering or leaving school, entering the labor market, starting a family, or retiring have implications for participation. Not only is the workplace an agent of politicization, but marriage and parenthood can also create incentives for participation (e.g., Stoker & Jennings, 1995). However, these implications are not uniform; they depend on additional factors, such as age, gender, and social class. Marriage and having children, e.g., entail lower political participation rates among individuals under 30 and women. This finding regarding young parents may be related to the fact that they have lower educational attainment and thus lower participatory skills and motivation. Mothers with children at home may in turn lack the work-based opportunities to develop participatory skills and become involved in political activities (Erkulwater, 2012). However, these groups may also have a lower "biographic availability" (McAdam, 1986) due to their family responsibilities and possibly inadequate support by the welfare state.

Beyond these (gendered and classed) life cycle-specific participation patterns, research has revealed highly personalized and subtle changes in participation as people move from one life stage to another (e.g., when older political activists step back from power positions or find new meaning in their involvement) and inverse dynamics when trajectories of participation affect the life course, e.g., when intensive political involvement leads to dismissal or divorce (Serrat & Villar, 2020).

The life cycle and its implications for participation must always be viewed against the backdrop of social structure and historical change. The combination of life cycle and historical period produces generational or cohort effects based on the collective social and historical experiences of those born in the same era. Hence, Mannheim's notion of generation (1952) builds on the formation of a generational unit, similar to a social class, with a worldview that is specific to its social and historical context and differs from those among generations raised in a different time and social space. Generational effects are often associated with major sociopolitical events, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s, World War II, and the Velvet Revolution in Eastern Europe, but need not be limited to these. Digital communication technology has heralded a new area, and we are excited to observe what effects the Fridays for Future movement and the COVID-19 pandemic will have on today's

younger generations. However, disentangling life cycle effects from generational effects remains a constant challenge for any analysis (e.g., Blais et al., 2004).

1.2.2 Life-Course Regimes and Institutions

With their corresponding positions and roles in society, life-course regimes and institutions link individual biographies and social life-course patterns and create social integration. Beyond biological and psychological maturation and decline, the life course is predominantly structured by an age-related institutional ordering (Mayer, 2004). Due to this ordering, life courses follow more or less certain empirical and normative sequences, i.e., normal biographies or standard life courses, which are usually differentiated by specific social categories, such as gender and social class. While some authors call the normal biography itself an institution (e.g., Kohli, 1985), other authors (e.g., Schütz & Luckmann, 1973) refer to organizational forms as institutions. Obviously, the education system organizes a large part of the life course through its age-specific ordering. Economic institutions, social security, and public welfare also produce age stratifications via their demands regarding education, work experience, and years of tax contributions.

Life-course regimes have changed historically from traditional (ca. 1900), industrial (1900–1955), Fordist/Welfare State (1955–1973), to post-Fordist/postindustrial (1973–) regimes, thereby altering the specific possibilities for and demands on participation. During the Fordist regime, life-course transitions were linear and clearly outlined with respect to the (class- and gender-specific) order and timing of life events, such as finishing education, entering the labor market, starting a family, and retirement. In the post-Fordist regime, life courses have become partially deinstitutionalized, losing their compulsory sequence and becoming somewhat reversible, e.g., when young adults return to live with their parents to pursue tertiary education (Biggart & Walther, 2006). Education careers have become prolonged, interrupted, and lifelong, labor market integration protracted and precarious; work careers are characterized by high mobility between firms and occupations, flat income trajectories, and repeated unemployment; and old age is accompanied by early retirement, decreasing pensions, and increasing longevity (Mayer, 2004).

Under these conditions, the significance of human agency and development returns to the fore: children are perceived to be (co-)producers of their relationships and development (e.g., Qvortrup, 1993), parent–child relationships and socialization processes are considered mutual interactions rather than one-directional influences (Mayer, 2004), and life decisions and lifestyles are individually fabricated in patchwork biographies (Beck, 1986). The postmodern and post-Fordist era, with its deinstitutionalization and individualization, has promoted lifelong learning (e.g., European Commission, 2001) and emphasized participatory and nonformal learning (e.g., Walther et al., 2008).

The shift from Fordist to post-Fordist employee participation has changed such participation's form and popularity. While industrial democracy and worker

representation through trade unions were en vogue during the 1970s, they yielded to the increasing focus on the organizations' objectives and benefits of the 1980s and 1990s. Competition pressures and the increasing demand for worker flexibility compromised direct participation and employee involvement. Deregulation and the accompanying precarization of workplaces and "high-commitment" work environments do not harmonize with "rights-based" employee participation (Wilkinson et al., 2010). Similarly, traditional forms and characteristics of political participation have changed as class-based ideologies and loyalties to authorities have lost significance. As life courses have been destructured and pluralized, participation has taken on more individualized forms, such as lifestyle politics (Giddens, 1991; Stolle et al., 2005), engagement in new movements and single-issue campaigns that cut across the traditional left-right cleavage, and creative forms of public action (Micheletti & McFarland, 2011; Norris, 2007). At the structural level, mass membership organizations have experienced a professionalization that mirrors reductions in mass mobilization, in the recruitment functions of these organizations' youth sections, and in the possibilities for their members to become actively engaged (Skocpol, 2003; Hooghe & Stolle, 2005).

1.3 Challenges to Participation

Participation has become a catchword, mainstream rhetoric that is used by politicians and organizations. While the notion has a fundamentally positive connotation, one often observes shortcomings in its theorization and operationalization, with very different interests and intentions informing these including manipulation, tokenism, and a range of counterproductive systemic factors (Reid et al., 2008). Some authors even point to a dark side of participation, where participation has become a politically and economically attractive slogan, an instrument for greater efficiency, a new source of investment, and a fund-raising device (Rahnema, 1992); consequently, participation has the potential to foster tyranny by facilitating an unjust and illegitimate exercise of power (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). This may be the case, for example, when participation is used as a social technology to increase worker commitment and output (Wilpert, 2000) or for developmental and governance purposes (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mendes & Hammett, 2020). The effects of these abusive forms of participation or "pseudoparticipation" (Heller, 2003) can be disillusionment, future resistance, and cynicism regarding participation projects (Strauss, 2006), as well as depoliticization (Mendes & Hammett, 2020).

In recent decades, a number of authors have sought to develop a deeper conceptual understanding of participation, e.g., Arnstein's "ladder" of citizen participation in urban redevelopment (1979) and Hart's ladder of participation for children and young people (Hart, 1992). Hart's ladder locates manipulation, decoration, and tokenism on the lowest three rungs; "assigned but informed," "consulted and informed," and "adult-initiated, shared decisions with children" on the middle rungs; and "child-initiated and directed" and "child-initiated, shared decisions with

adults” on the top two rungs. The model was initially intended to help professional groups and institutions rethink their work with children and young people and has since been extended and modified (Hart, 2008, p. 21). Additionally, Marchington and Wilkinson (2005) provide a more complex analysis of worker participation, exploring whether such participation can influence decisions (informed, consulted, actually making decisions), elaborating the forms that it takes (direct communication, representatives, “online participation”), discussing the available levels of such participation (tasks, departmental, establishment, corporate HQ), and identifying a range of salient issues (from relatively insignificant matters, such as the quality of a canteen, to substantial decisions, such as strategic investment).

Taking participation seriously requires considering a multitude of prerequisites and conditions. Individuals need to have a certain motivational basis and specific participation competencies. These are both a requirement for and a consequence of participation. Therefore, beyond learning *about* democracy and *for* (future) citizenship, it is necessary to facilitate democratic and participatory practice, i.e., articulating and balancing personal and collective needs, cocreating community, and strengthening the feeling of belonging and social identity (e.g., Hart, 2009). With respect to the close interconnection between learning and participation, the concept of participatory learning is relevant. In the philosophy of education, this concept is associated, for instance, with Paulo Freire (1970) and Ivan Illich (1970), who stress the counterhegemonic potential of participatory (learning) processes (see also Smidt & Roßbach, 2021). In terms of learning theories, there are three mainstream approaches to learning—behaviorist, cognitive, and situative—with different implications for participation. While the behaviorist approach focuses on the acquisition and application of associations and behavioral and attitudinal change, the cognitive perspective defines learning as an “active, constructive, cumulative, and goal-oriented process” and the learner as the “key agent” in the construction of his or her own learning and decision-making (Reid & Nickel, 2008, p. 41). With the learner’s active participation as the necessary condition for learning to take place, this theoretical perspective clearly suggests that neither pseudoforms of participation nor reproductions of imposed knowledge are sufficient. On the other hand, situative approaches focus on the embeddedness of the individual’s learning process in social relations and communities and are therefore often referred to as “communities of practice” (e.g., Wenger, 1999). Despite the differences between these approaches, they share the view that participatory competence is learned rather than inherent; it can be fostered or hindered by teachers, communities, and organizations (Reid & Nickel, 2008).

This insight, in turn, is apropos at the organizational level, where organizational aims, structures, technologies, participatory processes, relationships, and organizational culture, environment, and sociocultural realities facilitate the possibilities of learning and participating. In this complex, questions such as what works, for whom, and how it does or does not work arise. Specifically, where power issues and hegemonic ideologies and cultures are still in force and/or vulnerabilities and special needs account for a “dependent agency” (Francis & Silvers, 2007), protection

of the participant's ownership of his or her learning and participation process is needed.

Accordingly, we have assembled the chapters of this book to shed light on these questions regarding the range of institutions and organizations that are relevant in the course of our lives. While questions of participation are often bracketed in specialized discourses, such as participation in education, workplace, or community development, we sought to assemble them to highlight the width and complexity of the issue. The chapters thus provide examples of specific life phases with their respective institutions and organizations. They explore a range of different questions, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approaches, yet they share our concern with the positive, negative, and changing conditions of participation. Given the multidimensionality of this issue, the book is, unsurprisingly, incapable of covering all the institutions and aspects of participation. Important gaps remain to be filled regarding questions of not only migration and disability and culture and ideology but also digitalization and sustainability, which have begun to impinge on institutions and organizations. Last, as we finalize this manuscript, we are confronted with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and a renewed conflict between an authoritarian and a democratic political and social order, emphasizing the importance of constant and critical engagement with the issue of participation and democracy across both the life course and academic disciplines.

1.4 Structure of the Book

This volume is structured in accord with the life phases of early childhood, middle childhood and youth, young adulthood, adulthood, advanced adulthood, and old age. Most of the institutions discussed in its chapters are age specific, such as kindergartens, schools, workplaces, and homes for senior citizens. Others, such as political and social organizations, are not inherently age-specific but are discussed from the perspective of a particular age group.

Starting with *early childhood*, part I contains two chapters on children's participation in kindergarten. In Chap. 2, *Elmar Drieschner and Wilfried Smidt* critique the agency concept in childhood studies and early childhood education and care with a specific eye toward the justification of children's participation opportunities. They discuss the epistemological, psychological, pedagogical, and ethical premises of the underlying concept of agency and the educational responsibility of older generations for the development and education of children. Chapter 3 by *Elisabeth Richter, Teresa Lehmann, and Benedikt Sturzenhecker* is based on a 3-year qualitative study of six nurseries that structured their democratic practice through "constitutions" according to "the nursery of democracy." The authors thus investigate how democratic participation was implemented in these nurseries, how their children practice democracy, and how satisfied they are with the democratic practices.

Part II focuses on *middle childhood and youth*, comprising three contributions to the discussion of schools as places for democratic and participatory practice within

and beyond the institution. In Chap. 4, *Garth Stahl* takes up the debate on the institutional practices of the expanding charter school networks in the United States, which follow a very specific model of schooling and typically serve low-income students of color. Drawing on an ethnographic investigation of one middle-school site, he explores how institutional practices effectively construct a neoliberal conception of citizenship among disadvantaged populations and the implications of this for the dedemocratization of education. Chapter 5 by *Anna Jarkiewicz and Joanna Leek* discusses the potentials and limits of civic participation in school settings in four European countries (the UK, Italy, Lithuania, and Cyprus) based on a study that accompanied a project offering extracurricular opportunities for young people's engagement. The results emphasize the importance of educational aspects, such as continuous professional development for teachers, a shift from traditional learning models to participatory learning, and the relational aspects of participation. In Chap. 6, *Florian C. Feucht, M. Kate Michaelson, Regina Rotshtein, Sarah Bargardi, Rebecca Bush, and Julia McBride* present a case study of two high schools in the United States that implemented a curriculum called "Thinking Pro," which used local news media to promote civic engagement and teach critical thinking, reading, and news media literacy. The findings demonstrate the advantages of a localized curriculum for fostering civic engagement and illustrate strategies for implementing collaborative, teacher-centered professional development across grades and disciplines.

Part III, concerning *young adulthood*, elaborates how vocational education, professional training, and political organizations are contexts of participation. Chapter 7 by *Gabriela Höhns* explores the possibilities and boundaries of learners' participation in institutions by comparing upper secondary schools in Sweden and companies in Germany's dual system of vocational education. Since participation is one of several pedagogic rights, she concludes that education for living in a modern democratic society should offer enhancement and participation to vocational and academic learners within the relative structural limitations of educational contexts. In Chap. 8, *Romain Jammal-Abboud* studies the retrospective experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of Palestinian-Arab social work students in Israel in the context of the development of their professional identity. Her findings underline the importance of a critical, multicultural learning environment, which can help shape an integrative professional identity that is sensitive to the intercultural context of Israeli society. In Chap. 9, *Paul Eisewicht and Nico Maximilian Steinmann* critically examine the argument that young people are increasingly apolitical. Based on a review of German surveys, they demonstrate that while youth political participation is conceptually and empirically difficult to grasp, there seems to be a transformation of political action within civil society that is becoming more dynamic, more fragile, and less culturally stable, challenging organizations to create low-threshold opportunities for participation.

Part IV addresses *adulthood* in two chapters. The first offers an empirical perspective on participation in workplaces, and the second elaborates theoretical perspectives on the relationship between organizations and participation. Thus, Chap. 10 by *Christine Unterrainer, Wolfgang G. Weber, Thomas Höge, and Bettina*

Lampert investigates whether learning environments in organizations that offer participative practices for their employees are positively related to employees' solidarity at work and moral and democratic orientations/behaviors. In Chap. 11, *Thomas Wendt and Sebastian Manhart* draw attention to the fact that modern society depends on organizations that simultaneously constrain and enable opportunities for individuals through order-forming procedures. The mutual dependence between the organization and the individual and the tension between the functionalist logic and normative ideas of participation are thus defined as a fundamental educational problem as well as a teaching task of organizational education.

Finally, part V contains two contributions to the research on the life phase of *advanced adulthood and old age*. Chap. 12 by *Lorna Philip, Andrew Maclaren, Claire Wallace, and Krzysztof Adamczyk* explores participation in the voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) sector among older people in Scotland. It provides an overview of the types of participation across urban and rural Scotland based on the Scottish Household Survey and discusses these trends by drawing upon qualitative data generated during fieldwork carried out in contrasting communities across rural Scotland over the last decade, including island and mainland areas. In Chap. 13, *Marleen D.W. Dohmen, Johanna M. Huijg, Susan M.W. Woelders, and Tineke A. Abma* present the results of an evaluation of a training program developed to address the difficulties experienced when providing democratic care in nursing homes. They suggest that the participation of residents and significant others in the care process can lead to a mutual understanding of what is deemed "good" in a specific situation; however, such participation requires a particular culture that facilitates engagement in dialogues.

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