

*Meriluoto Taina: Turning Experience into Expertise – Interpretations of Legitimate Participation in Finnish Participatory Social Policy*

In the course of the last 30 years, most of the Western democracies have adopted participation and citizen engagement as their governance norm (Saurugger 2010). This new participatory agenda has received a warm welcome particularly among the organisations working with the ‘marginalized’ citizens. There are high hopes that through these participatory projects, the voices of the hitherto (unjustly) marginalized people will be heard in public decision-making, and that active, contributing citizens are produced in the process (Eliasoph 2016; Newman & Clarke 2010; Barnes & Prior 2009; Cornwall & Coelho 2007).

However, as the democratic capacity of these initiatives have been widely called to question (e.g. Gourgues, Rui & Topçu 2013; Warren 2009; Bevir 2006; Newman 2005), it becomes increasingly important to study them empirically, and to ask, who is allowed to participate in these initiatives and how is their active role legitimized. This paper serves as a case study on one such participatory initiative, taking place in public and third sector organisations in the Finnish social welfare sector. The initiative, expertise-by-experience, signifies the creation of a new actor category in the field of social welfare. The experts-by-experience – former beneficiaries – are invited to co-operate in tasks like service planning, evaluation, and project co-ordination.

The paper analyses interview data of Finnish experts-by-experience and professionals developing it. It bridges a governmentality perspective with sociology of engagements when it sets out to make visible how the new actor category is being negotiated and constructed vis-à-vis the other actors in the field. It asks, how is the need for new voices justified, and *as what* are the new actors invited to take part?

The paper concludes first that that in the seven initiatives studied, the participants’ expertise comes to be defined in two distinct ways: The first interpretation perceives of experts-by-experience as precisely experts, lifting them above the ‘emotion-filled, self-absorbed public’. This view connects participation with a technocratic view on governance, centred around neutral decision-making among experts, hence potentially limiting the right to take part. The second view questions both this exclusive view on expertise and technocratic view on governance. Instead of constructing a small minority as experts, it proposes the inclusion of everyone’s experiential knowledge in decision-making. By doing so, it attempts to open up the possibilities to take part for everyone, regardless of their capabilities to deliberate according to the field’s expert discourse.

The uses of these different interpretations are then contextualised by conceptualising the projects as ‘plans’, and connecting the different objectives set for the projects with the form of engagement expected from the participants. The projects’ three objectives: empowerment, co-production and civic advocacy, all make use of the notion of expertise in distinct ways, revealing their different underlying value-attachments, and translating to different governmental projects in constructing their participants’ subjectivities.

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