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Abstract

The article explores child participation from the perspective of the sociology of action. Despite the important literature on child participation following adoption of the UNCRC, a consistent theory of child participation is still missing. The distinction between the child as a subject of rights and the child as a social actor draws attention to the cumulative and systemic nature of action. Applications of a new model going in this direction are presented. They foster discussion on children's agency and give insights for assessing implicit theories of action lying behind child participation.

Keywords

Action, agency, children, participation, rights

Participation rights contained in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter UNCRC) challenge traditional and tokenistic conceptions of childhood. They consider the child as a social actor, able to reflexively act in an evolving way as a subject of rights. In the two decades following adoption of the most ratified international legal instrument, a wealth of literature has been produced on child participation. Yet, as Percy-Smith and Thomas underline (2010: 3), practice has outstripped theory, and despite the wide range of theoretical sources informing practice there is still a lack of child-centred theories. The literature on child participation mostly focuses on several dimensions, namely goals, types, levels, means of participation, as well as participation rights (Matthews, 2003; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010; Sinclair and Franklin 2000; Thomas, 2007). The debate mainly focuses on the degree to which children are integrated in the decision-making process and it has generated several models, referred to as 'ladders of participation' (Franklin, 1997; Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001; Thoburn et al., 1995; Thomas, 2002; Treseder, 1997).

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It seems that the dimensions of child participation addressed in the literature (goals, types, levels, means, rights) are rarely put together in what would form a coherent body of analysis and a correspondent theory of participation (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010). In the action-oriented manuals for intervention, the focus is on means and levels of participation. Besides, there is a general assumption that agency is a notion that speaks for itself. This is maybe due to the fact that most scholars do not explicitly refer to the theories of action lying behind their use of this notion. The working definition of agency used here is: ‘an individual’s or a group’s capacity to make decisions, act, and interact with other people in a socially competent way’ (Nibell et al., 2009: 264).

But this capacity is not acquired by the simple fact that the child is given the status of subject of rights by the UNCRC. One has therefore to understand children’s agency through empirical observation of children’s evolving capacities (Lansdown, 2010). It is argued here that the child’s capacity to influence social dynamics, such as participation processes, is non-linear, context-specific and bound to individual reflexivity. Agency is therefore grasped through a systemic theory acknowledging the cumulative and recursive nature of action.

The article begins by untangling the ‘child as a subject of rights’ and the ‘child as a social actor’. These notions are often equated and this actually obscures the debate over child participation. The child’s evolving capacities to actively exert one’s participation rights is then highlighted by a new model addressing the systemic nature of action. Applications of a corresponding child-friendly tool are presented. They foster new developments about agency. The need for an assessment of the theories of action lying behind child participation is eventually discussed with some insights along the main sociological paradigms.

The child as ‘subject of rights’

Interpretations of the ‘participation rights’ contained in the UNCRC (art. 12–17 and 31) depend on the viewpoints people have about childhood. The children’s rights movement is not uniform and competing and even opposed positions, based on different normative and ideological perspectives, are at play (Hanson, 2012: 63). Hanson identifies four schools of thought:

1. The paternalistic view on children considers them only with regards to what they will become as adults. Along this traditional viewpoint, children are seen as ‘*becomings*’, not yet as ‘*beings*’.
2. The welfare approach, closer to protection rights than to participation rights, is still dominating today’s sector of child welfare, both at national and international levels (Hanson, 2012: 76).
3. The emancipation or empowerment approach, more directed towards participation rights, considers the child as being competent as long as the contrary is not evidenced (the burden of proof lies with the adult).
4. The liberationists consider children as independent actual citizens (‘*beings*’) who make competent and rational decisions, and therefore claim for equal rights to those of adults (Hanson, 2012: 74).

The debate over children's agency can certainly make good use of Hanson's framework, especially when one is ready to abandon essentialist positions whereby children are defined in absolute terms, regardless of the context, age and the matter at stake. There is a need to specify concepts like actor and agency, which sometimes sound like slogans rather than notions grounded on empirical evidence. Besides, in the children's rights industry, children's 'participation rights' are mainly seen as individual rights for the child as a person, but they should also apply for children as a group (Zermatten, 2009: 38). This individualistic perspective focusing on personal well-being is probably linked to the dominant welfare approach. Therefore, child participation is often equated to rather individualized forms of self-realization through social engagement (Lansdown, 2010: 11). Meanwhile, a step towards a more collective viewpoint, and including decision-making rather than just consultation, is taken in the recently adopted Council of Europe's Recommendation on the Participation of Children and Young People under the Age of 18:

Participation is about individuals and groups of individuals having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support to freely express their views, to be heard and to contribute to decision making on matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. (COE, 2012)

This progressive step is certainly positive, but a main problem rests with the public understanding of child participation which is largely contained within the limits of tradition. As Mason and Bolzan (2010) suggest, there is a huge difference between child participation in the minority and in the majority worlds. On the one hand, there is an individualistic conception whereby children are encouraged to participate in activities that allow them to acquire useful skills for their future lives as adults. This conception would fall within the welfarist school of thought discussed by Hanson (2012). On the other hand, there is a collectivist conception that views participation in terms of a social obligation to share the duties that contribute to the immediate well-being of the group. This would lie behind the liberationist argument that considers participation in a communal sense and including forms of cooperation that are disputed, like for instance children's 'right to work in dignity' (Hanson, 2012).

The welfare approach to childhood fosters selective social engagement, whereby one would choose among different memberships to fully realize one's potential, the top-end 'self-actualization' in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). But this mainly western, or 'minority world', ideal is spreading also in the 'majority world' regardless of the structural conditions that make such a normative requirement quite difficult to reach. Consequently, social obligations linked to survival strategies are assessed as 'child labour' rather than 'child participation'. But this tells more about the people who make the assessment than about the people being assessed. Radical dichotomies should not be made, as the real freedom of children in the so-called 'minority world' is rather limited as we move from individual to collective decision-making. Children and young people's participation in collective decision-making processes in the political arena has low impact (Thomas, 2007) as it is constrained by top-down and adult-centred conflicting priorities (Badham, 2004).

As Thomas (2007) has shown, child participation is more concerned with local services than with strategic development and policy. Tisdall and Davis (2004) also suggest that structured channels of consultation such as youth forums or youth councils only grasp a part of what children and young people are actually able to do, and their filtering effect increases the representational problem linked to the difficulty of reaching a diversity of voices. There are powerful social and economic forces limiting children's voice, and invisible networks perpetuate a culture of non-participation where children and young people feel that decisions are always taken elsewhere and end up frustrated or cynical (Matthews, 2003). Inclusive democracy cannot be reduced to rational arguments and should include more child-friendly modes of communication (Young, 2000). The dominant modes of communication with children tell a lot about how childhood is constructed and how, consequently, processes of participation remain adult-oriented. We can therefore say that the child, although declared a subject of rights, remains an actor with rather limited agency. The social and personal factors influencing children's agency are intertwined but they depend also on the actor's reflexivity, which is the point we now turn to.

The child as a reflexive social actor

Participation involves much more than just having participation rights. While the UNCRC acclaims the child as the holder of all the rights enshrined in its articles, any child is nevertheless exerting his/her rights in quite different ways. This diversity is the outcome of a complex set of capabilities. While the subject of rights is a concept with universal scope, the child is a social actor with relative and localized agency. Thus, being declared a 'subject of rights' by internationally recognized standards does not necessarily mean that the child's social status will evolve consequently. This leads to a series of questions regarding the distance between the child's lawful status and the child's actual agency. How transformative of children's lives are the rights contained in the CRC? How can we assess a child's agency? How does it evolve with the influence of children's rights? These are central questions requiring more explicit theories of action.

Concepts like 'social actor' and 'agency' are often used as taken for granted. Since the rise of the 'new paradigm' in childhood studies, the social construction of childhood and the necessity to observe their agency have been underlined (Archard, 1993; Corsaro, 1997; James and Prout, 1990; Qvortrup et al., 1994; Sirota, 2006). While children are considered as 'social actors who are not only shaped by their circumstances but also, and most importantly, help shape them' (James et al., 1998: 123), few studies actually respond to the crucial question of how children of different ages and in different settings shape their environments. The new paradigm criticizes 'proto-adult' conceptions of children (Matthews, 2003), by which only small forms of adult maturity are recognized in children. In emancipating from the psychological dominance in childhood studies, the 'social turn' mainly saw the limitations of children's agency in the social constraints and in the power structures. But development and limitation of children's agency cannot be explained only by looking at the individual or at the social side of the coin, and therefore an interdisciplinary construction with an open-minded process of enquiry is needed (Prout, 2005: 4).

The concept of social actor should include sufficient consideration for the cognitive aspects which undoubtedly shape one's line of conduct in interdependency with social surroundings. The child has evolving capacities to learn how to behave socially and consequently increased agency. The agency of a baby expressing feelings and needs mainly with body language is still limited by the adult's benevolence. Children only progressively develop their capacities to use more complex strategies in order to orient the interaction, and in some cases direct it. Moreover, the child's social acting is embedded in complex social processes along differential balances among tradition, affection and rationality (Weber, 1978). The links between social configurations and reflexive control of one's line of conduct are complex and evolving processes (Elias, 1991). The overgeneralization of the 'competent child' discourse tends to erase such very important nuances.

Empirical evidence of children's evolving capacities is very important if we want to deconstruct cultural conceptions of maturity. To be considered eligible (subject) to article 12, the child must be recognized competent ('The child who is capable of forming his or her own views'). What is generally overlooked is that 'to have one's own views' is socially defined and also socially recognized and therefore, and paradoxically, the 'competent child' discourse falls into the trap it wanted to escape: because 'being competent' equates to being competent in the ways that are recognized as competence, maturity, rational thinking, etc. All these notions are social constructs, and the 'competent child' is another construction which is both stemming from and strengthening the false equivalency between 'subject of rights' and 'social actor'.

The UNCRC considers the evolving capacities of children and gives them special attention (Lansdown, 2005). Children have different levels of autonomy as '[they] act as agents in various ways at any one time in the course of their development; and certainly the range of sophistication of their agency changes over time' (Pufall and Unsworth, 2004: 9). Important differences linked to children's evolving capacity and to dynamic contexts are to be addressed if we want to document the range of children's agency. Assessments of participation remain fragile and possibly ethnocentric as long as we do not have a clearer understanding of the participants' subjective sense of reality. Children develop their capacities to build and voice their own views through social networks. We could say that children actually participate *through* rather than *in* activities. But participation to the outside world, through the mediating effect of a group, first implies a subjective internalization of the outside world as it appears to oneself and also as others make it appear to be (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Therefore two central issues must be addressed: the mediating role of social groups through which one experiences the world, and the role of personal reflexivity through which one gives meaning to these social activities.

These considerations show that there is a necessity to come closer to the interaction between contexts and people, and specifically the recursive and systemic nature of action should be more accurately addressed. The model presented hereafter goes in this direction.

Participation as a system of action

The literature on child participation contains a wealth of best practices and recommendations on the ways to help children participate. Especially more inclusive modes of

communication (Young, 2000) should help adapt participative processes to the cognitive capacities of children. However, there are still many obstacles in the way children can participate and these are also linked to conceptual weaknesses or even blindness. This has echoes of Morin (1984: 164) who makes a correlation between empirical difficulties and theoretical problems. The main problem, it appears, is the assumption that participation can be specified with notions such as 'active participation' or 'taking part in', whereby 'action' (in the sense of *praxis*) is reduced to an 'activity' producing an object separate from the subject (in the sense of *poiesis*). This way of evaluating participation focuses only on immediate visible outcomes and forgets inner and longer term changes. The cumulative and recursive nature of action should be more documented because action (*praxis*) cannot be reduced to only concrete activities. It also implies symbolic dimensions. Participation therefore should be viewed as a general system of action made up of several dimensions.

The model called the 'actor's system' (Stoecklin, 2009a) offers insights in this direction (see Figure 1). It stems from former research with children in street situations in several countries showing that they develop pragmatically their own ways according merely to subjective assessments (Lucchini, 2007; Stoecklin, 2007). It allows reconstruction of how the actor makes sense of his/her situation by using common notions, linked together in a systemic way, namely: activities, relations, values, images of self and motivations.

The model is called the 'actor's system' because it is assumed that one's own system of action is the constantly evolving outcome of the links among these components of personal experience. Action (*praxis*) is not reduced to activity but encompasses the

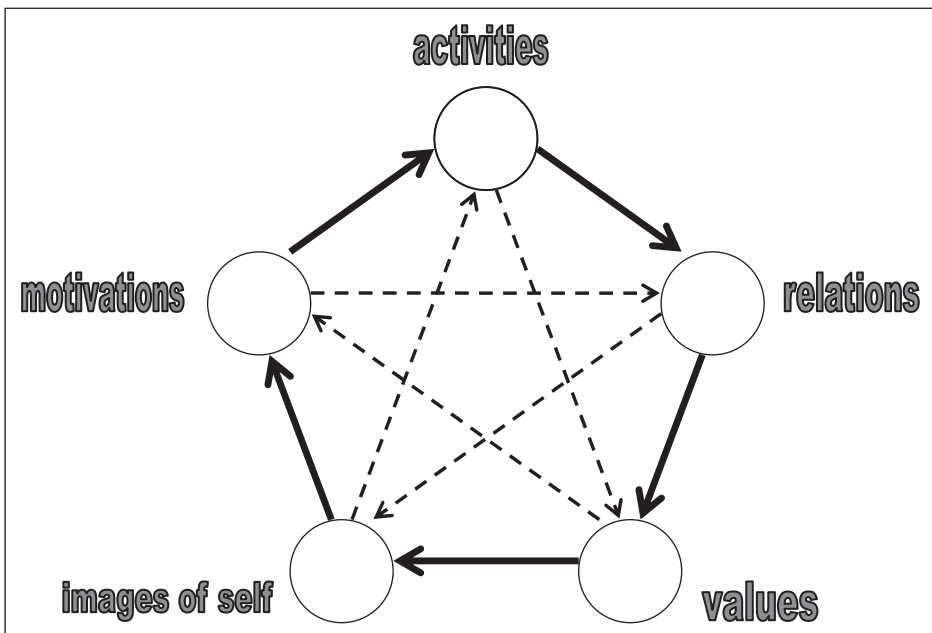


Figure 1. The actor's system (Stoecklin, 2009a).

whole system. The five dimensions are what Blumer (1969) calls ‘sensitizing concepts’, open to be defined by the respondents, suggesting only directions to look at and therefore acting as lenses through which the actors may read and give meaning to reality. The way one defines any of the five dimensions will influence the definition of the other elements of one’s system of action. With its recursive chain of causality, this model tries to capture and reflect the cumulative nature of experience (Dewey, 1910).

As we may see in Figure 1, each dimension is at the same time structured by former dimensions and structuring the following ones. As the actor accumulates experience, new elements reinforce the system of action in a systemic way. This model therefore gives a more concrete image of Giddens’s theory of double structuration (Giddens, 1984) whereby the actor and the structure shape each other. The actor’s system helps address the complex social processes whereby one’s views are built through experience. These social dynamics cannot be addressed in the formulation of participation rights, because it is not their purpose (they focus on principles not on assessments of reality). In the UNCRC, the structures of power can only remain hidden. To uncover them, one needs analytical frameworks and practical tools. The framework presented here has been translated into a concrete tool called the ‘kaleidoscope of experience’ (see Figure 2), that is a disc made out of paper (format of a CD) with a child-friendly and playful shape (it is reproduced here in its only existing language which is French).

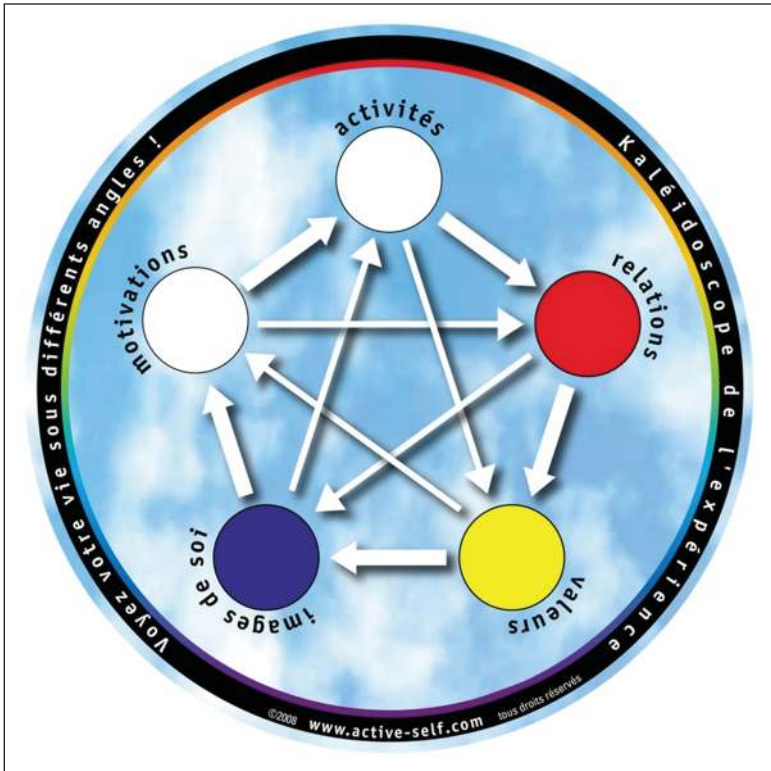


Figure 2. The kaleidoscope of experience (Stoecklin, 2009b).

One can turn the colours (red, yellow and blue) and place them alternatively on the five dimensions in order to use the disc in a prospective way (what if?) or in a retrospective way (what explains?). The tool uses common language concepts so that respondents can easily reflect on how they are (re)structuring their own experience. In simple terms and ludic display, the tool stimulates the child's reflexivity and thereby the child also exercises some of his/her fundamental rights: to express one's view (art. 13 CRC) and to be heard (art. 12 CRC).

The kaleidoscope of experience has first been used in a small-size empirical test in 2009 with 34 adolescents, aged from 12 to 18, in the French-speaking part of Switzerland (Stoecklin, 2009b). The tool helped reflect the way a given child thinks and gave value to the child's reflexivity. These are important preconditions for a tool to become a means for the effective development of child's participation, and hence agency. All respondents have been able to learn something new about their own experience. The heuristic value of the method has been confirmed. Respondents used different dimensions to describe similar experiences. For instance, travelling was attached to 'activities' by one respondent whereas another would put this experience under 'relations'. Conversely, rather different daily experiences can be caught under the same dimension. Differential indexing of experience therefore drew attention to 'conceptual permeability', confirming the importance of having methodologies that stimulate rather than direct one's reflexivity. This reduces the risk of using ethnocentric or adult-centred categories.

Further applications in focus-group discussions have been made to assess child and youth participation in Finland (2010) in Slovakia (2011) and in Moldova (2011) for the Council of Europe's project 'Building a Europe for and with children' (COE, 2009). The discussions were held with a group of nine girls and nine boys from different parts of Finland, aged between 10 and 21, including six children involved in children's parliaments or NGOs. In Slovakia, the group was composed of eight girls and seven boys, aged 9–18 but with the majority (8) aged 17 and above, and coming from different regions and backgrounds. In Moldova, 14 girls and eight boys between the age of 11 and 17 took part. They were from different regions, including children with parents working abroad, a child living in a boarding school, a disabled child and children coming from poor families, and children from minority groups like Roma (3), Russian (2) and Gagauz (2).

This diversity of age, gender, regions and backgrounds among the 55 children and young people involved indicates a potential cross-cultural applicability of the method. The kaleidoscope's five elements have been used to conduct the discussions. As a first task, the participants were asked to write down activities they usually do. Then they were asked to specify the persons (relations) with whom they connect during these activities. Next, the participants were asked to underline those people whom they consider do not take into account their opinions when making decisions concerning them. Eventually, they were asked to think of the reasons why these people do not listen to them (values), what feelings they have about it (image of self) and what could be done (motivation) to change the situation.

A common feature was the participants' feeling that there is often a big divide between children's rights principles and people's real attitudes towards them. Along with the surveys conducted in the three countries, the focus-group discussions confirmed that the majority of children felt their views were taken seriously in familiar structures and that

they were less likely to be listened to at community and administrative level. This also confirms what has already been observed by other researchers regarding participation in community development (Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008). But the focus-group discussions and the method used were especially helpful to uncover explaining factors that are more difficult to address by respondents in a questionnaire, even when not filled in at school, namely their relationships with teachers. Their appraisal of the attitudes of professionals, especially teachers, reveals a dilemma of competence: hierarchy might prevent professionals from being more participatory. They are trapped in a double-bind relationship because they are asked to establish their authority and at the same time to listen to children, while the latter is still interpreted in many spheres as proof of professional incompetence. In contrast to this, non-professionals do not have this dilemma: they can listen to children without any risk for their professional status.

The kaleidoscope of experience thus uncovered a general issue that is that the value attached to professional status in a highly competitive world is hardly compatible with listening to children (COE, 2011: 35). This issue of status proximity arose in the three countries (Finland, Slovakia and Moldova). Actually, the method used in these focus-group discussions helped keep open considerations for a large range of relationships, values, images of self and motivations, before (or instead of) reducing participation to 'activities'. In so doing, it was possible to include a key concern for children, namely the necessity to link teaching (and generally speaking all professions linked to childhood) not solely to expertise in specific fields but also to skills in listening to all stakeholders, including children (COE, 2011: 38). Along with the surveys, the kaleidoscope of experience was therefore a tool that contributed to include reflections of children and young people in the Recommendation on the Participation of Children and Young People under the Age of 18 (COE, 2012). It is to be noted that it was the first time that the Council of Europe directly involved children and young people in the elaboration of a recommendation.

The importance of behaviours, attitudes and relationships was also clearer in further applications of the tool. In September 2011, some 80 young people in the County of Valais, in Switzerland, have used the tool to prepare the claims they expressed to the political authorities. The tool helped open these claims to a variety of concerns, from environment to public security, thanks to playful stimulation of children's reflexivity and reduced adult assistance in the preparation phase.

A recent research on the right to be heard in leisure activities also confirms the importance of relationships in the experience of young people. The tool made it possible for 20 respondents in Switzerland and in France to reflect on concrete aspects of their participation in a collective project like, for instance, a library for children, a hip-hop club or an organized journey to Senegal (Stoecklin et al., 2012). The playful shape of the tool helped integrate questions on their knowledge about their right to be heard in a rather discrete way. The method allowed discussions and proxy questions that helped avoid the side-effect of social desirability which is the tendency to answer in a way thought to be socially acceptable and desirable (McBurney, 1994).

This research suggests that child participation is mainly induced by professional adults working in youth associations and leisure centres while knowledge of 'participation rights' is rather low. Respondents do very seldom use the narrative of 'children's

rights' to reflect upon their praxis. This typical line of conduct, or 'system of action', indicates that social relations play a greater role than children's rights in their subjective evaluation of participatory projects. Conversely, experience shapes children's knowledge of their rights which they roughly know, without needing to quote the articles contained in the UNCRC. The actor doesn't need to be clearly informed about his/her rights before acting in a rightful way. This is due to the complex set of peer influences in the elaboration of one's preferences. Hence, the child's 'own views' are pragmatically formed when the child is able to actively participate in social life. Participation rights become real only through the exercise of participation, which may eventually contribute to gradual capacities gained by children as social actors having voice and agency. The holistic approach of children's rights should therefore favour participative experiences as they contribute to the consciousness of rights.

These pilot attempts to explore the usefulness of the tool in practice have led to some early findings that have the potential for further empirical exploration. These include the hypothesis that agency is bound to a recursive system of action, reflecting subjective assessments of situations that help reconstruct specific social configurations (Elias, 1991) that are more or less conducive to children's active participation. So far, the applications of the kaleidoscope of experience helped identify a cross-cultural trend regarding agency, namely that the child does not conceive participative rights in a rational-choice oriented way but rather through the double mediation of group sociability and their own reflexivity about concrete experiences (Stoecklin et al., 2012). The metaphor of stage and backstage (Goffman, 1959) indicates that there may be large discrepancies between the presentation of self in everyday life (rational and socially desirable discourses) and subjective understandings or feelings about such a socially constructed notion like 'children's rights'. It is assumed that the tool gives a possibility to overcome the bias, so often encountered, of linking competence with rational discourse. It is however too early to speak of a real theory of the 'actor's system' and further research is needed to reconstruct how children, in different settings and with different capacities, develop their agency through participation.

The need to uncover implicit theories of action

Pilot applications of the kaleidoscope of experience show that child-friendly tools contribute to a theory of participation when they open spaces for a multidimensional concept of action. Reflexivity appears central and the 'actor's system' helps illustrate how actors make sense of reality with different dimensions that are commonly used to describe experience. Children's experience of their rights, as it seems, is mostly described in terms of relations with others (peers and adults), and not reducing children's rights to abstract values. Observation of children's reflexive diversity leads to question the deterministic theories of action that largely remain hidden in the schools of thought (Hanson, 2012). This section outlines these underlying and implicit paradigms.

According to the cultural paradigm, the child would learn to act according to the norms and values transported by his/her culture in order to integrate the community. The paternalistic and welfare approaches are based on this premise, with well-intentioned efforts to promote a 'culture of participation'. This is the dominant narrative when

implementation of the UNCRC is being discussed. The discrepancy between the ratified legal instrument and concrete implementation is then mainly analysed in terms of insufficient education on children's rights. Remedies would be to put in more financial resources and more human capital, which are actually advocated in the UNCRC itself (art. 4). It is therefore implied that structures would evolve accordingly, but this hardly appears to be as simple as expected.

The liberation approach, closer to a Marxist perspective, denounces the domination of the elites who have the monopoly of symbolic power through which they control institutions. This structural paradigm sees the reproduction of inequalities in the alienation of people, and children especially, who don't perceive the domination and reproduce it, conceiving it as being the 'normal world'. What people tend to believe as being their culture is already the outcome of an imposition process, which determines the way people tend to feel and think, or what Bourdieu (1992) calls the 'habitus'. Domination is exerted when people adopt this arbitrary justification as legitimate and natural (Bourdieu, 1992; Bourdieu et al., 1999). Forced insertion in the existing social structure is the outcome of this domination. In terms of child participation, this sheds light on the fact that child consultation rather than decision-making reinforces dominant forms of socialization that are considered as natural and appropriate for children. This has also been observed notably in programmes for runaways and street children where it is still mainly according to adult intervention agendas that children's views are taken into consideration (Parazelli, 2002; Rizzini et al., 2007; Stoecklin, 2007).

The emancipation school of thought (Hanson, 2012) is probably closer to the paradigm of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Dewey, 1910; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934; Weber, 1978). This paradigm conceives the actor as a structured set of social roles that are learnt and expressed through interactions in daily life and in different contexts (family, work, school, leisure, etc.). Conflicts in the role set are reflections of power relations among institutions that make up the 'social structure'. How the child develops agency within this structure depends on the social and cultural norms (among which children's rights) on the one hand, and the child's ability to make use of them on the other hand. The person's reflexivity is therefore a central element, making the individual a constant constructor and negotiator of norms and values. Reflexivity refers to the capacity to perceive oneself as an object, seen from the eyes of others (Mead, 1934), and therefore to negotiate assigned and acquired statuses. A newborn possesses an assigned status conferred by others, according to their normative sociocultural framework. The inclusion of children's rights into this framework is just an example of the fact that an assigned status (in this case the legal status) is always conferred by others. Yet, the newborn is able neither to recognize nor to practise complex social roles, because a baby does not yet have the competence to actively use such abstract normative frameworks.

We have now come to the point where it is possible to link emancipation with experience. As has been suggested in this article, experience is a precondition to learn about one's rights (Stoecklin et al., 2012). To define oneself as a subject of rights, and act consequently, is therefore bound to one's reflexivity. This is consistent with the sociology of knowledge whereby a child becomes able to actively exert a right only once he/she has a capacity to subjectively make sense of what appears to him/her as the objective 'outward

world' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This happens when the child has reflexively elaborated some notion of the 'self' and of the 'generalized other' (Mead, 1934). This tremendous change is necessary for children to begin acting as 'subjects of rights', that is to be able to reflexively use abstract notions such as 'children's rights' in their daily lives. Symbolic interactionism fits best to explain the child's evolving capacities (Lansdown, 2005), as this paradigm sees the norms, including children's rights, as embedded in the social construction of reality.

There will always be some gap between the status ascribed to a child and the corresponding roles attached to this status. The child is considered a 'subject of rights' as soon as the child is born. But the child's ability to obtain respect for personal rights is only progressively elaborated. The extent to which individuals develop their agency depends on the interaction between their evolving capacities and dynamic contexts they live in, and this is actually a non-linear life-long process. The social system is both constraining and liberating for the individual who is able to modify, reorient and constantly resituate his/her own position within specific configurations. This perspective approaches participation in a relational way, like does Woodhead (2010: xxii) when showing that norms and values are constantly negotiated:

... participation isn't just about adults 'allowing' children to offer their perspectives according to adults' view of their 'evolving capacities', their 'age and maturity' or their 'best interests'. It can also involve young people confronting adult authority, challenging adult assumptions about their competence to speak and to make decisions about issues that concern them.

Meaning is constitutive of people's actions and therefore agency is embedded in reflexivity and interactions. The capability approach (Nussbaum, 1997; Sen, 1999) applied to children (Biggeri et al., 2011) is a promising path. It focuses on the potential set of functionings that emerge from the interaction among individuals in specific configurations. One's capability is the outcome of the interplay between individual competences and social opportunities. Children's rights are entitlements that contribute to the development of personal autonomy according to the actor's own reflexive use of these rights. This approach can contribute to highlight child participation in new ways, if personal factors are given more weight in the analysis. So far, most authors seem to focus on the social factors that convert a formal right into a real freedom, like legal entitlements, systematic provision of information on rights for children of all ages and abilities, sensitization and awareness raising of adults, systemic mechanisms for influencing public decisions at all levels, and mechanisms for remedy and redress (Lansdown, 2010: 14).

Nevertheless, all these provisions should also be seen as reflexively evaluated. How and why the actor makes (constrained) choices has to do with both sociocultural influences and subjective perceptions. A child's functioning, showing a certain amount of agency, is the result of the child's choices, constrained by his/her own evolving capacities and the social context. Attention must therefore be paid to how children 'make sense' of everyday life. Therefore, a shift towards more consideration for individual reflexivity would be relevant. It would also be conducive to more child-friendly methodologies.

Conclusion

Participation is a concept in need of an explicit theory of action. The legacies of the different schools of thought identified by Hanson (2012) have diversely impacted today's debate, with a concentration of the majority of researchers between the two medium approaches (welfare and emancipation), leaving the two extremes to a minority of scholars (paternalism and liberation). Hanson suggests that these schools of thought are to be considered as ideal-typical stances, and that researchers in childhood studies could be situated along this roadmap (Hanson, 2012: 78). The position taken in this article is that the child is simultaneously a subject of rights from birth onward *and* becoming a social actor with evolving capacities that are constructed through reflexivity and interactions.

A step towards an interdisciplinary exploration of action is necessary to better understand the very nature of children's agency and hence respect and foster their distinctive personality. A more systematic review of the literature on child participation should highlight the different theories of action, whether implied or explicit. As long as organizations remain unaware of – or unwilling to work on – the hidden frameworks used in intervention, their capacities to develop a more bottom-up line will not improve. Low child empowerment has also to do with low elaboration of the theories of action.

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